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The Cure of Evil-speaking.

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S E R M O N

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MATT. xviii. 15, 16, 17.



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MATT. xviii. 15, 16, 17.

If thy brother shall sin against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he will hear thee thou hast gained thy brother.

But if he will not hear, take with thee one or two more, that by the mouth of two or three witnesses, every word may be established.

And if he will not hear them, tell it to the church: but if he will not hear the church, let him be to thee as an Heathen Man and a Publican.

SPEAK evil of no man, says the great Apostle; as plain a command as, Thou shalt do no murder. But who, even among Christians, regards this command? Yea, how few are there that so much as understand it?—What is evil-speaking? It is not, (as some suppose) the same with lying or slandering. All a man says, may be as true as the Bible; and yet the saying of it is evil-speaking. For evil-speaking is neither more nor less, than speaking evil of an absent person: relating something evil which was really done, or said, by one that is not present when it is related. Suppose, having seen a man drunk, or heard him curse or swear, I tell this when he is absent, it is evil-speaking. In our language this is also by an extremely proper name termed *backbiting*. Nor is there any material difference between this, and what we usually stile *tale-bearing*. If the tale be delivered in a soft and quiet manner, (perhaps with expressions of good-will to the person, and of hope,

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that things may not be quite so bad) then we call it *whispering*. But in whatever manner it be done, the thing is the same; the same in substance, if not in circumstance. Still it is evil-speaking; still this command, *Speak evil of no man*, is trampled under foot, if we relate to another the fault of a third person, when he is not present to answer for himself.

2. And how extremely common is this sin, among all orders and degrees of men? How do high and low, rich and poor, wise and foolish, learned and unlearned, run into it continually? Persons who differ from each other in all things else, nevertheless agree in this. How few are there that can testify before God, "I am clear in this matter: I have always set a watch before my mouth, and kept the door of my lips?" What conversation do you hear, of any considerable length, whereof evil-speaking is not one ingredient? And that, even among persons, who in the general have the fear of God before their eyes, and do really desire to have a conscience void of offence towards God and towards man.

3. And the very commonness of this sin, makes it difficult to be avoided. As we are encompassed with it on every side, so if we are not deeply sensible of the danger, and continually guarding against it, we are liable to be carried away by the torrent. In this instance, almost the whole of mankind is, as it were, in a conspiracy against us. And their example steals upon us we know not how; so that we insensibly slide into the imitation of it. Besides, it is recommended from within as well as from without. There is scarce any wrong temper in the mind of man, which may not be occasionally gratified by it, and consequently incline us to it. It gratifies our *pride*, to relate those faults of others, whereof we think ourselves not to be guilty. *Anger, resentment*, and all unkind tempers are indulged, by speaking against those with whom we are displeas'd. And in many cases,

eases, by reciting the sins of their neighbours, men indulge their own *foolish and hurtful desires*.

4. Evil-speaking is the more difficult to be avoided, because it frequently attacks us in disguise. We speak thus, out of a noble, generous ('tis well if we do not say, *holy*) indignation against these vile creatures! We commit sin, from mere hatred of sin! We serve the devil, out of pure zeal for God! It is merely in order to punish the wicked, that we run into this wickedness. So do "the passions (as one speaks) all justify themselves," and palm sin upon us, under the veil of holiness!

5. But is there no way to avoid the snare? Unquestionably there is. Our blessed Lord has marked out a plain way for his followers, in the words above recited. None who warily and steadily walk in this path, will ever fall into evil-speaking. This rule is either an infallible preventive, or a certain cure of it. In the preceding verses our Lord had said, *Woe to the world because of offences*. Unspeakable misery will arise in the world from this baleful fountain. (*Offences* are, all things whereby any one is turned out of, or hindered in the ways of God.) *For it must be that offences come*. Such is the nature of things: such the weakness, folly, and wickedness of mankind. *But woe to that man*, miserable is that man, *by whom the offence cometh*. *Wherefore, if thy hand, thy foot, thine eye cause thee to offend*—If the most dear enjoyment, the most beloved and useful person, turn thee out of, or hinder thee in the way, *pluck it out, cut them off, and cast them from thee*. But how can we avoid giving offence to some, and being offended at others? Especially suppose they are quite in the wrong, and we see it with our own eyes? Our Lord here teaches us how: he lays down a sure method of avoiding offences and evil-speaking together. *If thy brother shall sin against thee, go and tell him of his fault, between thee and him alone*—

if he will hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. But if he will not hear thee, take with thee one or two more, that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. And if he will not hear them, tell it to the church; but if he will not hear the church, let him be to thee as an Heathen man and a Publican.

I. 1. First, *If thy brother shall sin against thee, go and tell him of his fault, between thee and him alone.* The most literal way of following this first rule, where it is practicable, is the best. Therefore if thou seest with thine own eyes, a brother, a fellow-christian commit undeniable sin, or hearest it with thine own ears, so that it is impossible for thee to doubt the fact, then thy part is plain: take the very first opportunity of going to him: and if thou canst have access, *tell him of his fault between thee and him alone.* Indeed great care is to be taken, that this is done in a right *spirit*, and in a right *manner*. The success of a reproof greatly depends on the spirit wherein it is given. Be not therefore wanting in earnest prayer to God, that it may be given in a lowly spirit: with a deep, piercing conviction, that it is God alone, who maketh thee to differ, and that if any good be done by what is now spoken, God doth it himself. Pray, that he would guard thy heart, enlighten thy mind, and direct thy tongue to such words as he may please to bless. See that thou speak in a meek as well as a lowly spirit: for *the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God.* If he be overtaken in a fault, he can no otherwise be restored than *in the spirit of meekness.* If he opposes the truth he cannot be brought to the knowledge thereof, but by *gentleness.* Still speak in a spirit of tender love, *which many waters cannot quench.* If love is not conquered, it conquers all things: who can tell the force of love?

Love

Love can bow down the stubborn neck,
 The stone to flesh convert;
 Soften, and melt, and pierce, and break
 An adamantine heart.

Confirm then your love towards him, and you will
 thereby *heap coals of fire upon his head.*

2. But see that the *manner* also wherein you speak, be according to the gospel of Christ. Avoid every thing in look, gesture, word and tone of voice, that savours of *pride* or self-sufficiency. Studiously avoid every thing magisterial or dogmatical, every thing that looks like arrogance or assuming. Beware of the most distant approach to disdain. Overbearing, or *contempt*. With equal care avoid all appearance of *anger*, and though you use great plainness of speech, yet let there be no reproach, no railing accusation, no token of any warmth, but that of love. Above all, let there be no shadow of *hate*, or ill-will, no bitterness or sourness of expression; but use the air and language of sweetness as well as gentleness, that all may appear to flow from love in the heart. And yet this sweetness need not hinder your speaking in the most serious and solemn manner: as far as may be, in the very words of the oracle of God, (for there are none like them) and as under the eye of him who is coming to judge the quick and the dead.

3. If you have not an opportunity of speaking to him in person, or cannot have access, you may do it by a messenger, by a common friend, in whose prudence, as well as uprightness, you can thoroughly confide. Such a person, speaking in your name, and in the spirit and manner above described, may answer the same end, and in a good degree supply your lack of service. Only beware you do not *feign* the want of opportunity, in order to shun the cross: neither take it for granted, that you cannot
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have access, without ever making the trial. Whenever you can speak in your own person, it is far better. But you should rather do it by another than not at all: this way is better than none.

4. But what if you can neither speak yourself, nor find such a messenger as you can confide in? If this be really the case, it then only remains, to write. And there may be some circumstances, which make this the most adviseable way of speaking. One of these circumstances is, when the person with whom we have to do, is of so warm and impetuous a temper, as does not easily bear reproof, especially from an equal or inferior. But it may be so introduced and softened in writing, as to make it far more tolerable. Besides many will read the very same words, which they could not bear to hear. It does not give so violent a shock to their pride, nor so sensibly touch their honour. And suppose it makes a little impression at first, they will perhaps give it a second reading, and upon farther consideration, lay it to heart, what before they disregarded. If you add your name, this is nearly the same thing, as going to him and speaking in person. And this should always be done, unless it be rendered improper by some very particular reason.

5. It should be well observed, not only that this is a step which our Lord absolutely commands us to take, but that he commands us to take this step first, before we attempt any other. No alternative is allowed, no choice of any thing else: this is the way; walk thou in it. It is true, he enjoins us, if need require, to take two other steps. But they are to be taken successively *after* this step, and neither of them *before* it. Much less are we to take any other step, either before, or beside this. To do any thing else, or not to do this, is therefore equally inexcusable.

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6. Do not think to excuse yourself for taking an entirely different step, by saying, "Why, I did not speak to any one, till I was so *burdened* that I could not refrain." You was burdened! It was no wonder you should; unless your conscience was scared. For you was under the guilt of sin, of disobeying a plain commandment of God. You ought immediately to have gone and *told your brother of his fault between you and him alone*. If you did not, how should you be other than burdened (unless your heart was utterly hardened, while you was trampling the command of God under foot, and *hating your brother in your heart*? And what a way have you found to *unburden* yourself? God reproves you for a sin of omission, for not telling your brother of his fault; and you comfort yourself under his reproof, by a sin of commission, by telling your brother's fault to another person! Ease bought by sin is a dear purchase: I trust in God you will have no ease, but will be burdened so much the more till you *go to your brother, and tell him, and no one else*.

7. I know but of one exception to this rule. There may be a peculiar case, wherein it is necessary to accuse the guilty tho' absent in order to preserve the innocent. For instance: you are acquainted with the design which a man has against the property or life of his neighbour. Now the case may be so circumstanced, that there is no other way of hindering that design from taking effect, but the making it known without delay, to him against whom it is laid. In this case therefore this rule is set aside, as is that of the Apostle, *Speak evil of no man*: and it is lawful, yea, it is our bounden duty, to speak evil of an absent person, in order to prevent his doing evil, to others and himself at the same time. But remember mean while, that all evil-speaking is, in its own nature deadly poison. Therefore if you are sometimes constrained to use it

it as a medicine, yet use it with fear and trembling; seeing it is so dangerous a medicine, that nothing but absolute necessity can excuse your using it at all. Accordingly use it as seldom as possible; never but when there is such a necessity: and even then use as little of it as is possible; only so much as is necessary for the end proposed. At all other times, *go and tell him of his fault between thee and him alone.*

II. 1. But what if he will not hear? If he repay evil for good? If he be enraged rather than convinced? What if he hear to no purpose, and go on still in the evil of his way? We must expect this will frequently be the case; the mildest and tenderest reproof will have no effect, but the blessing we wished for another, will return into our own bosom. And what are we to do then? Our Lord has given us a clear and full direction. Then take with thee one or two more: this is the second step. Take one or two whom you know to be of a loving spirit, lovers of God and of their neighbour. See likewise that they be of a lowly spirit, and clothed with humility. Let them also be such as are meek and gentle, patient and long-suffering; not apt to return evil for evil, or railing for railing, but contrariwise blessing. Let them be men of understanding, such as are endued with wisdom from above; and men unbiassed, free from partiality, free from prejudice of any kind. Care should likewise be taken, that both the persons and their characters be well known to him. And let those that are acceptable to him be chosen, preferable to any others.

2. Love will dictate the manner wherein they should proceed, according to the nature of the case. Nor can any one particular manner be prescribed for all cases. But perhaps in general one might advise, before they enter upon the thing itself, let them

them mildly and affectionately declare, that they have no anger or prejudice toward him, and that it is merely from a principle of good-will, that they now come, or at all concern themselves with his affairs. To make this the more apparent, they might then calmly attend to your repetition of your former conversation with him, and to what he now said in his own defence, before they attempted to determine any thing. After this they would be better able to judge in what manner to proceed, *that by the mouth of two or three witnesses, every word might be established*: that whatever you have said, may have its full force, by the additional weight of their authority.

3. In order to this, may they not, 1. Briefly repeat what you spoke, and what he answered. 2. Enlarge upon, open and confirm the reason which you had given? 3. Give weight to your reproof, shewing how just, how kind, and how reasonable it was; and lastly, Enforce the advices and persuasions which you had annexed to it? And these may likewise hereafter, if need should require, bear witness of what was spoken.

4. With regard to this, as well as the preceding rule we may observe, that our Lord gives us no choice, leaves us no alternative, but expressly commands us, To do this, and nothing else in the place of it. He likewise directs us, When to do this? Neither sooner, nor later. Namely, *after* we have taken the first, and *before* we have taken the third step. It is then only that we are authorized to relate the evil another has done, to those whom we desire to bear a part with us, in this great instance of brotherly love. But let us have a care, how we relate it to any other person, till both of these steps have been taken. If we neglect to take these, or if we take any others, what wonder if we are burdened still? For we are sinners against God and
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against our neighbour. And how fairly soever we may colour it, yet if we have any conscience, our sin will find us out, and bring a burden upon our soul.

III. 1. That we may be thoroughly instructed in this weighty affair, our Lord has given us a still farther direction. *If he will not hear them, then, and not till then, tell it to the church.* This is the third step. All the question is, How this word, *the church*, is here to be understood? But the very nature of the thing will determine this beyond all reasonable doubt. You cannot tell it to *the national church*, the whole body of men termed *the church of England*. Neither would it answer any christian end, if you could: this therefore is not the meaning of the word. Neither can you tell it to that whole body of people in *England*, with whom you have a more immediate connexion. Nor indeed would this answer any good end: the word therefore is not to be understood thus. It would not answer any valuable end, to tell the faults of every particular member to *the church* (if you would so term it) the congregation or *society* united together in *London*. It remains that you tell to the elder or elders of the church, to those who are overseers of that flock of Christ, to which you both belong, who watch over your's and his soul, *as they that must give account*. And this should be done, if it conveniently can, in the presence of the person concerned, and tho' plainly, yet with all the tenderness, and love, which the nature of the thing will admit. It properly belongs to their office, to determine concerning the behaviour of those under their care, and to *rebuke* according to the demerit of their offence, *with all authority*. When therefore you have done this, you have done all which the word of God, or the law of love requireth of you. You are not now partaker of his sin, but if he perish, his blood is on his own head.

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2. Here also let it be observed, that this, and no other, is the third step which we are to take: and that we are to take it in its order, after the other two; not before the second, much less the first; unless in some very particular circumstance. Indeed in one case, the second step may coincide with this: they may be in a manner, one and the same. The elder or elders of the church, may be so connected with the offending brother, that they may set aside the necessity, and supply the place of the *one or two witnesses*. So that it may suffice to tell it to them, after you have told it to your brother, *between you and him alone.*

3. When you have done this, you have delivered your own soul. *If he will not hear the church, if he persist in his sin, let him be to thee as an heathen man and a Publican.* You are under no obligation to think of him any more: only when you commend him to God in prayer. You need not speak of him any more, but leave him to his own Master. Indeed you still owe to him, as to all other Heathens, earnest, tender good-will. You owe him courtesy, and as occasion offers, all the offices of humanity. But have no friendship, no familiarity with him; no other intercourse than with an open Heathen.

4. But if this be the rule by which Christians walk, which is the land where the Christians live? A few you may possibly find scattered-up and down, who make a conscience of observing it. But how very few? How thinly scattered upon the face of the earth? And where is there any body of men, that universally walk thereby? Can we find them in *Europe*? Or, to go no farther, in *Great-Britain* or *Ireland*? I fear not: I fear we may search these kingdoms throughout, and yet search in vain. Alas for the Christian world! Alas for Protestants, for reformed Christians! *O who will rise up with me against the wicked? Who will take God's part against*

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the evil-speakers? Art thou the man: by the grace of God wilt thou be one, who art not carried away by the torrent? Art thou fully determined, God being thy helper, from this very hour, to set a watch, a continual watch before thy mouth, and keep the door of thy lips? From this hour wilt thou walk by this rule, speaking evil of no man? If thou seest thy brother do evil, wilt thou tell him of his fault between thee and him alone? Afterwards take on, or two witnesses, and then only tell it to the church? If this be the full purpose of thy heart, then learn one lesson well. Hear evil of no man: if there were no hearers, there would be no speakers of evil. And is not (according to the vulgar proverb) the receiver as bad as the thief? If then any begin to speak evil in thy hearing, check him immediately. Refuse to hear the voice of the charmer, charm he never so sweetly: let him use ever so soft a manner, so mild an accent, ever so many professions of goodwill, for him whom he is stabbing in the dark, whom he smiteth under the fifth rib. Resolutely refuse to hear, though the whisperer complain of being burdened till he speak. Burdened: thou fool! dost thou travail with thy cursed secret, as a woman travaileth with child? Go then and be delivered of thy burden, in the way the Lord hath ordained. First, Go and tell thy brother of his fault between thee and him alone. Next, Take with thee one or two common friends, and tell him in their presence. If neither of these steps take effect, then tell it to the church. But at the peril of thy soul, tell it to no one else, either before or after. Unless in that one exempt case, when it is absolutely needful, to preserve the innocent. Why shouldst thou burden another as well as thyself, by making him partaker of thy sin?

5. O that all you who bear the reproach of Christ, who are in derision called *Methodists*, would set an example to the Christian world, so called, at least

least in this one instance! Put ye away evil-speaking, tale-bearing, whispering: let none of them proceed out of your mouth. See that you *speake evil of no man*: of the absent nothing but good. If ye must be distinguished, whether ye will or no, let this be the distinguishing mark of a *Methodist*, "He censures no man behind his back: by this fruit ye may know him." What a blessed effect of this self-denial should we quickly feel in our hearts? How would our *peace flow as a river*, when we thus followed peace with all men? How would the love of God abound in our own souls, while we thus confirmed our love to our brethren? And what an effect would it have on all that were united together in the name of the Lord Jesus? How would brotherly love continually increase, when this grand hinderance of it was removed? All the members of Christ's mystical body would then *naturally care for each other*? If one member suffered, all would suffer with it: if one was honoured, all would rejoice with it: and every one would love his brother with a pure heart fervently. Nor is this all: but what an effect might this have, even on the wild, unthinking world? How soon would they descry in us, what they could not find among all the thousands of their brethren, and cry (as *Julian the apostate* to his Heathen courtiers) "See how these Christians love one another!" By this chiefly would God convince the world, and prepare them also for his kingdom: as we may easily learn from those remarkable words in our Lord's last solemn prayer. *I pray for them who will believe in me, that they all may be one, as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee—That the world may believe that thou hast sent me!* The Lord hasten the time! The Lord enable us, thus to love one another, not only in word and in tongue, but in deed and in truth, even as Christ hath loved us.

F I N I S

