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A
S E R M O N
ON THE
IMPETUOSITY
AND
Bad Effects
OF
PASSION.

AND THE MOST LIKELY MEANS OF SUBDUING IT.

BY
JOHN D. BLAIR.

*“The discretion of a man deferreth his Anger, and it is his glory
to pass over a Transgression.”* PROV. xix, 11.



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A SERMON.

PROVERBS XIX, II.

*“ The Discretion of a Man deferreth his Anger, and it is his
Glory to pass over a Transgression.”*

THE experience of almost every man will no doubt, have evinced the error and inconvenience of a hasty spirit. Anger and passion are ever evil counsellors. Often perverting, and always aggravating the truth, (if I may so speak) they urge men on to unreasonble and excessive resentments, which often prove ruinous to others beyond the power of remedy, and to themselves the inexhaustible source of the most painful sensations. Incompetent judges of the measure of injury received, and overlooking the rational means of redress, their effects are seldom such as escape the censure of regret and of cool reflection. Hence it is the part of discretion in a man to defer his anger. “ Anger” is said to “ rest in the bosom of fools ;” but he that is wise, will by all means endeavour to suppress its emotions; will listen with caution and distrust to its suggestions, and will at any rate defer the execution of its plans,

To enumerate some of its baneful effects, and propose some considerations which may have a tendency to overcome it, are the objects which I

have in view at present. Perhaps it is proper first to observe, that anger in a certain degree is not considered as criminal. God himself is represented in Scripture as being angry : and this direction is given even to us, "*Be ye angry and sin not.*" By this we are to understand probably, the marked displeasure with which God beholds iniquity, and which it ought also to excite in us. But the sense in which I am now to consider it, and in which I suppose it is intended in the Text, is the same that we generally understand by quick resentments, or hasty passion,

I. If it were attended with no other effect than the perturbation and distraction of mind which it occasions, it would, in this view demand our serious attention. If it be true that the countenance is an index of the mind, which is pretty generally the case, we may be assured that he is in a state of wildness, disorder and uneasiness in whom anger is permitted to bear the sway. The representation of the Furies, in Heathen Mythology, must have been taken, one would imagine, from the countenance of a choleric man. Reason and judgment are dethroned, the reins are thrown upon the neck of passion, and the man is carried away into every absurdity and extravagance through its resistless impetuosity. It gives no time for reflection ; it has no prudence as its guide. It discards the ties of nature : it is an out-law against the rules of politeness : it violently outrages the laws of society. The rational character is degraded and the judgment is impaired

by the dominion of passionate anger, which is emphatically said in the book of Proverbs to be outrageous. It distorts all the features of the face, and gives to the eye a terrible aspect. It is justly said of anger, that it is a transient madness. He that is under its influence is not at his own command, but at the mercy of every blind and violent impulse. A man in the heat of passion is not open to the conviction of Truth, except it be only to increase his rage. Hence he is deaf to the remonstrances of reason: and in debate he answers argument with invectives. When his anger is once kindled, he is no longer master of himself, but unhappily is made a wretched slave to his irascible temper. This growing upon him by every indulgence, soon acquires an absolute controul, and sets every reasonable consideration at defiance. It is often not to be soothed even by concession; but yields only to the fatigues of nature, when its victim sinks down into an unhappy debility both of body and mind. It resembles the fury of an angry tempest, which is not to be appeased but by being exhausted.

2. AGAIN, the feuds and animosities which frequently obtain amongst neighbours and friends: and all their mischievous effects, originate for the most part, from hasty and uncontrouled anger. It magnifies every trivial offence, and precludes at the same time all reasonable accomodation. There is a sympathy in human nature in almost every instance. A soft answer turneth away wrath: but hasty resentments commonly provoke the

fame. Hence while violence and passion exaggerate every trifling offence, or perhaps, create them where none were intended, they impart the same spirit also to the real or supposed aggressor, and prevent such concessions as his faults might demand, or reason would accept. Hence are men hurried on to extremities at once, without prudence or discretion. To this cause almost all the petty strifes and quarrels which obtain amongst men, owe their original. Hence frequently wars arise amongst nations : and hence, the boastful sons of courage take the field for single combat. They call it Honour : but if you examine it narrowly and trace it to its source, you will find it to proceed from the impetuosity and madness of a quick and inflammable temper. If you enquire why the doughty champions are equipped with the implements of death and thirst for each other's blood, you will find, perhaps, that but the day before they were cordial friends, and that the unhappy difference arose from some unguarded, or misconstrued expression, or from some innocent jocularly, over the intoxicating bowl. Did they take time to reflect, or defer their anger for a moment, all would be well. But intoxicated at once with the liquor and with rage : taking fire at the phantom of an heated imagination : too blind to distinguish, too impatient to deliberate, and too hasty to admit of defence or palliation, they provoke each other to the last extremity, from which their honour, as they imagine, forbids them to recede. The last conclusion is neither judicious nor rational, but it leads me to ob-

serve how often it happens, that men under the influence of passion will utter reproaches, or commit acts of violence which are not to be remedied or atoned for through the whole course of their lives. Many a friend has been estranged for ever by a hasty, intemperate and groundless invective. A neighbour in a gust of passion will destroy both the life of his neighbour and the support and happiness of his family. A choleric master will often maim or slay a servant by an unlucky blow; and by the same means a parent through the instigation of passion will destroy the intellects of an innocent and promising child. Indeed when anger is indulged without discretion or controul, no man can tell where it will end, or what tragical events will not ensue. He cannot say to the raging tide, thus far shalt thou go and no farther. The consequences with which it is often attended are such as is not in our power to redress as long as we live. We may feel indeed the most lively regret, and profess or experience a great deal of sorrow, but all our compunctions will be insufficient to dry up the sorrows of the widow or orphan, or restore to life a deceased friend, whom our violence has brought low. We may wish we had deferred our anger, and be convinced that it would have been our glory to pass over a transgression, but this is all too late after we have vented our passion in fury and destruction.

No serious person can reflect on the growing practice of duelling, but with sincere regret. It is a sad mark of the prevalence of infidelity in the

rising generation, who seem unhappily to discard the influence of religion, disown its authority, and remove the fear of God from before their eyes. At the same time, it is one of those vices which almost every body condemns, yet it is one which almost nobody has the magnanimity to discountenance by his own example. Surely no man has a right to dispose, as he pleases, of the life which God has given him : and his commandment is "*Thou shalt not kill.*" The laws of civil society, too, forbid a man to be his own avenger. But then, the world will call you *coward* if you refuse to give or to accept a challenge, and as long as you are in the world you must conform to the laws of honour. Indeed ! and is it come to this, that a decree of Heaven's High Chancery is to be reversed by an appeal to your petty court of honour !! O ! thoughtless, desperate young man. You are not afraid of offending God, but you are afraid of incurring the displeasure, or exciting the ridicule of a fantastic, sinful world. I pray you, can your court protect you against the sentence of that High Tribunal, at which you must at last appear, and against the vengeance of the Almighty which "*burns hotter than an oven.*"

It is at best a serious, solemn thing to die, but surely it must be the height of madness, guilt and desperation to rush into the presence of your Great Judge, with your guilty hands reeking with your own blood, by an act, the very perpetration of which might preclude all possibility of repentance.

IN every point of view this practice is wholly unjustifiable and inexcusable in the young. But when an amiable man advanced in years, falls unhappily a victim to this wretched point of honour, who can sufficiently reprobate it, or bewail its consequences? An instance of this kind lately occurred in Hanover, where you may indeed behold a house of mourning. Go now then, ye honourable men, go view the melancholy feat your valour has achieved. Go, feast on carnage. Go, enjoy the pleasure; nay, revel in the luxury of beholding the widow whose husband you have slain, at once frantic and dumb with grief, and a large number of unoffending children, sons and daughters, in a moment rendered fatherless by one hasty, wicked, cruel, irrevocable deed. If this be honour, "*O my soul, come not thou into the secret.*"

BUT what is to be said of these subordinate champions who are called seconds. The law of the land, I believe, considers them equally guilty with their principals, and has ordained for them the same ignominious punishments; yet all things considered, they appear, in reality, to be far the most culpable. A second has no offence to complain of: no irritation to plead in his excuse; and on this account he may probably be pronounced more a murderer than the principal himself. But I must return from this digression.

3. ANOTHER certain effect of intemperate anger is the self-condemnation and regret with which

it is always succeeded. Like all other vices, it leaves a sting behind it. When the violent agitation of mind subsides and calm reflection takes place, we recollect what has passed with the most uneasy sensations. We review with mortification and abhorrence the spectacle we exhibited while under the dominion of passion. We are sensible that we have degraded the rational character, that we have exposed ourselves to the pity of our friends, the scoffs of our enemies, and the contempt of the wise and temperate. We recollect the wildness of our looks, and the childish extravagance of our words and actions. When in the moment of cool reflection we consider the cause of all this disorder, we find the offence which the heat of passion had magnified so much, is dwindled into a very trifle; or perhaps there was none at all but what was occasioned by our own mistakes. Yet we are mortified to find that we suffered ourselves to be transported with rage: and very probably to our utter confusion, that we have vented it indiscriminately on friend and foe: on the offending and inoffensive: on the innocent and guilty. We have traduced the character and estranged the affections of a steadfast friend by hasty insinuations which anger suggested, and at the same time discredited. We have wounded the feelings, or abused the person of a faithful servant, who had been guilty of no wilful offence, who had toiled for us many years, and was grown grey in our service. And what was the offence? Why perhaps no other than the natural slowness or decrepitude of advanced years. We forgot the respect

and denied the indulgence which are due to age; and were lost to every sense of gratitude for the fidelity and services of youthful days. In our families we have acted the tyrant and have made our helpless and unoffending children feel the fierceness of our anger. It is a painful task which is devolved on parents to inflict the rod upon their children when reason and duty make it necessary. What then must be the sensations of a man when after a fit of rage he casts his eye upon a dutiful and affectionate child, smarting under the undeserved or excessive correction of an angry father. In short, we are obliged to condemn almost every thing we said and every thing we did. All that we can say is we hope to be forgiven, because we were in a passion: when if the plea were admitted, we could not forgive our own folly and madness. Thus is the choleric man successively at variance, at first with others and at last with himself.

2. I come now to offer some considerations that may assist us in our endeavours to correct this dangerous evil,

I. THE cultivation of humility is specially calculated to effect this purpose. We are extremely prone to entertain a fond and partial opinion of ourselves, and to look for such indications of respect and obeisance as we may consider as an acknowledgment of it from others. Hence we are vulnerable from every quarter. Our sensibility is tender to the smallest indignity, and the least neglect is tortured into an indirect affront. Every

instance of this kind is aggravated far beyond the demerit of the thing itself, by the high sense we entertain of our own importance. Humility, on the other hand is slow to anger: it is modest and unassuming. If overlooked by others, it is not discomposed, because it exacts nothing from them. It is contented with a little, and is not suspicious. And as it is least affected by neglect or injury, so it is also our surest defence against both.

ALL seem rather concerned to honour than reproach; to exalt than depress the meek and lowly man. They say to him in their hearts, "*Friend, come up higher.*" It is therefore an excellent advice which is given us in Scripture, not to be high-minded, nor to think more highly of ourselves than we ought to think.

2. It will also prove a security against the fallies of intemperate anger, to accustom ourselves to meditate frequently on its dangerous tendency and its extreme inutility. It is generally productive of the most serious evils, and on the other hand, it answers no good purpose whatever. It does not increase but diminish the dignity of our character; it does not increase but diminish the weight of our authority. If any purpose is to be accomplished; if differences are to be accommodated, or redress obtained, to be calm and temperate promises the most certain and complete success. Outrageous anger on the other hand, is sure to defeat its own intentions, and makes matters infinitely worse than they were before. At the same time it exposes us

to the ridicule and contempt of the world. When a man has once established his character as peevish and passionate, he meets with a thousand wanton provocations from others who practise upon his temper for their own amusement. They will "use him for their mirth, yea, for their laughter, when he is waspish." On the other hand, a command of temper, which is more or less in every person's power, adds a dignity to his character and procures very general esteem.

3. It will contribute much to the acquiring of a dominion over passion, to fix a resolution that we will not be under its controul. If on former occasions we have been in a ferment of temper, we no doubt have recollected afterwards many extravagances both in words and actions which we must candidly condemn. It is the part of a sensible and prudent man to determine in future to be more upon his guard. Nor is it so difficult a matter as some would imagine. Experience in many instances has evinced that the most hasty and refractory temper will yield to resolute and steady discipline. By the mere aid of Philosophy, men who were naturally quick and vehement have by habit and restraint acquired such an evenness of mind, that their natural temper has not been known but by their own confession. To say we cannot help it is to invent an excuse to encourage and defend it. Men who have habituated themselves to swearing profanely, have often said the same, yet we know that many, from a consideration of its folly and wickedness, in their cooler moments, have desisted from it entirely.

With respect to passion we know that we can restrain it, in the company of those whose good opinion we count upon having obtained, and would wish to preserve. This shows then that it is not invincible, but that it yields to the empire of reason and good sense. By a little discipline and fortitude, we may become in private what we would appear in public; for by these the most refractory spirit will become tame and manageable. It is most certain that the more we indulge or excuse our anger, the more it will increase upon us. It grows the more outrageous the oftener it is kindled, and upon every fresh occasion it will be the more easily excited. Let us only indulge it a little, and it will soon bring us to that pass, that we shall fume and fret at every trifle. In this view it may be compared to tinder, which is the more inflammable, for having once been burnt, If then, when anger begins to rise, we fix a resolution to suppress it, we shall find to our satisfaction that the work is already more than half accomplished. And indeed it is so troublesome and tormenting, that it is worth a little pains to overcome it.

4. It will be of singular benefit also to reflect on the infirmities of human nature, and especially to entertain a due sense of our own. Many things that we call offences proceed oftener from the weakness of others than from any malevolent design. How often do we offer it as an apology for our own indiscretions, that we meant no harm? Ought we not then, in all reason and justice to ex-

tend to others the same indulgence that we claim to ourselves? But the passionate and angry man sees no imperfections in himself. He is always in the right, and his wrath often rises to a most excessive degree from this very mistaken notion; when at the same time perhaps he is the greatest aggressor. My brethren, are any of us without our faults? Do we never do any thing that appears unfriendly? Do we never say any thing that seems disrespectful? Do we never act amiss through mere ignorance or inattention? And this may often be the case with others. The thing which we resent with violence and outrage may have been said or done without the least intention to injury or offend us. Surely, if we would but consider our own numberless imperfections we would not let our anger burn so fiercely against the failings of our neighbors and friends.

5. I shall propose one other consideration, and then conclude. It is to fix our eyes upon those examples of patience and moderation which others have exhibited. Amidst all the infirmities of man we now and then find some whose calm and steady temper we cannot but admire. They have been falsely accused, or received much reproachful and abusive language; yet they bore it with great coolness: they vindicated their innocence with great firmness, but with great coolness: they did not suffer their temper to be ruffled, nor one indecent expression to escape their lips. Such characters rise high in our esteem. We say they acted much better than we should have done. We

wish we had the same command of our passions. Well, they very probably acquired the command of theirs by the very considerations which I have been suggesting. And it is not impracticable. With a little pains and prudence we might do the same. But above all, let professing Christians turn their eyes to that great Pattern of all excellence the Lord Jesus Christ. He has left an example after which we should follow. His temper was tried by the most frequent provocations, the most repeated disappointments, the most flagrant injuries, and the most severe distress; yet with what patience did he endure the contradictions of sinners? He returned not evil for evil, nor railing for railing. When he was reviled, he reviled not again. With such a bright example then before our eyes, let us all endeavour to learn of him, for he was meek and lowly. Let us implore the assistance of his grace, so needful for us in all cases, that we may be enabled also to defer our anger and account it our glory to pass over transgression. *AMEN.*



