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MISCHIEFS OF SLANDER.

WHEN the celebrated Bernard was about to die, he declared that there were three things for which he felt bound to render thanks to God, one of which was, "that he had never willingly slandered another, and if any one had fallen, he had hidden it as much as possible." It would be well for religion, and happy for the world, if every professed Christian were able, at the close of life, to bear a similar testimony. How much hatred and strife would be prevented. How many of the offences which disturb the church would be for ever unknown. It is proposed to consider some of the *more specious forms* of this odious sin, *its malignity*, and the *means of avoiding it*.

Slander often consists merely in *signs or significant actions*. There may be calumny in an expression of the countenance; in a hint or inuendo; in an altered course of conduct; in *not* doing what you have been wont to do, staying away from a neighbor's house, or withholding some accustomed civility. You may both give pain to the heart of your brother, and awaken strong prejudice against him, by a lofty air, a nod of the head, a turning out of the way, a glance of the eye, a shrug, a smile, or a frown. This method of slander the Psalmist appears to have deprecated when he prayed, "Let not them that are mine enemies wrongfully rejoice over me; neither let them *wink with the eye* that hate me without a cause." You may avoid committing yourself by words which might be quoted to your disadvantage, and, perhaps, subject you to the discipline of the church, and yet slander your brother grievously in the sight of God. You may *insinuate* more to his injury, by a mysterious or distrustful look, or by silence when you ought to speak, than you could have done in a prolonged conversation. Nay, you may be aware of this, and it may be your purpose to convey by *signs* more than you dare express in *words*.

Another covert method of slander is, by *listening to the calumnies of others, without expressing your disapprobation*. "There are," says one, "not only slanderous *throats*, but slanderous *ears* also; not only wicked *inventions*, which engender and brood lies, but wicked *assents*, which hatch and foster them." It was a maxim of the Emperor Domitian, that such as give ear to slanderers are worse than slanderers themselves. No retailer of scandal ever tells his story without watching to discover, either in your countenance or your remarks, how you receive it. Hence, it is often in your power to arrest it before it proceeds any farther. In many cases this may be done simply by a look of disapprobation, and surely ought to be done, at whatever sacrifice. "The north wind," says Solomon, "driveth away rain; so doth an angry countenance a backbiting tongue." Austin, it is said, had an inscription on his table, the import of which was, that no one should ever have a seat there who would be guilty of detraction.

Again, if you may incur this guilt by listening to the calumnies of others, much more may you do it by *repeating* them. Your sin, in this way, may be greater than the original offence. Your station may be more prominent, and your means of rendering a false report injurious, far greater. It may originate, perhaps, with a discarded and angry servant, whom few or no one would believe. But when taken up by you, and reported, it goes out endorsed with your authority; and for the mischiefs which result from it *you* are justly responsible. "Where no wood is," says the wise man, "the fire goeth out; so, where there is no tale-bearer, the strife ceaseth."

Nor does it certainly palliate your guilt, that you report it with an air of regret: you "hope it is not so;" you "do not tell it for truth;" "it is only what you have heard." This may be but a device to shield your own reputation, while you hurl a poisoned arrow at your brother's.

Nor does it render you less criminal, that the malignant tale be substantially true. By the canons of Christ, it is lawful to "speak evil of no man." And it is no less slan-

derous in his sight to proclaim your brother's faults injuriously and uncalled for, than to *charge* him with faults of which he is not guilty. It is not enough that you speak the truth of others; you are required to speak it "*in love.*"

An adroit method of some for propagating calumny is, *by asking questions.* "Have you heard," say they, of this or that fault in one whom it is their purpose to malign? "Is it true," that he has done this or that? Their design in making these inquiries is malevolent, and so far, slanderous. They wish to originate a train of thought, to the injury of the person of whom they speak; to give a hint which shall awaken curiosity, and occasion further inquiry. It is a base method employed for drawing out and making public, through the agency of another, what they are afraid or ashamed to be considered the authors of themselves.

Akin to this cowardly expedient is that of *bestowing hypocritical praise.* You commend a man, perhaps, in the presence of a known enemy, for qualities to which his pretensions are very doubtful. You extol, it may be, his benevolence and liberality, before those who you know will not believe you, and who will be prompted by your insidious praise to speak of his parsimony. How often is this done for no other purpose than to elicit expressions of dislike in the hearing of others, at once to injure another in their opinion, and gratify the enmity of one's own heart.

Another method of slandering others, which is lamentably common, is, the *misconstruction of their language.* This may be done by a misplaced emphasis, or by exaggeration, or by drawing false or disallowed inferences. It is also done by lame and garbled quotations, of which the prince of slanderers gave a specimen worthy of himself, when he would have induced the Son of God to cast himself from the temple. Matt. 4 : 6. The text from David, Ps. 91 : 11, was wholly inapplicable; but was made to suit his purpose, by abridging it. The omission, by the tempter, of the words, "to keep thee in all thy ways," was a slight one in appearance, yet it was the pivot on which the meaning of the passage turned.

The same thing is virtually done when you *intentionally*, or through a *culpable carelessness*, misinterpret the conduct of others. "Men's actions," as one observes, "have two aspects: one, in which candor and charity *will*, another in which disingenuity and spite *may* view them;" and in such cases to misapprehend is calumnious. It is lamentable that so many illustrations of this species of slander may be found even among the professed friends of religion, in their jealousies and animosities; the "hard speeches" arising out of their differences of doctrine or policy, modes of administering ordinances, or governing the church; when, instead of exercising that charity which "hopeth all things," they nurture that jealousy which creates beams from motes, and makes a brother "an offender for a word;" when the extravagances of an individual are visited on the head of the whole party; when some word or phrase in a discourse is susceptible of two interpretations, and the more erroneous is given, and at once blazoned abroad as convicting the author of heresy; in short, when the mantle of charity is so narrow that it cannot hide a single error in opinion or conduct, no matter how trifling, which lies without the circumference of our own school or denomination. And is it strange, that out of the abundance of such a heart the mouth should often speak words which come within the prohibition of the command, "Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor?"

Such are some of the more specious modes of propagating calumny, and for which the occasions and incitements are occurring daily.

Sometimes it proceeds from a *narrowness of soul*, which cannot brook another's superiority; or from excessive *self-love* or *vanity*. Sometimes it is done to *be esteemed witty*, and to *raise a laugh*, at no matter what expense. Again, it is the offspring of *pure malignity*, which takes delight in satire; very frequently of *envy and jealousy*. The slanderer may be of the same trade or profession, and a less favored rival for public patronage. Despairing of success by honorable competition, he endeavors to help his *own* credit by injuring

that of his *rival*. He resorts to misrepresentation. Not unfrequently his invidious remark is made with the injunction of secrecy, which is too generally disregarded; and the slander is eventually whispered as widely as if it had been proclaimed in the market-place, or upon the house-tops.

At another time it proceeds from resentment. In the intercourse of trade, or as master and servant, employer and laborer, the one party has become displeased. There is, it may be, a misunderstanding about the contract, or the manner in which it has been fulfilled. And how exceedingly common to *conceal* all dissatisfaction in *making* a settlement, yet afterwards to go away and slanderously *whisper* it. He accuses the other of covetousness, or of double-dealing, of "grinding the face of the poor," of being a bad paymaster, and a hypocrite in religion. The slander goes abroad, producing an unfavorable impression upon the minds of those who do not know the injured individual, which may not be effaced to the end of *his* or of *their* life. Indeed, he may never know that such a calumnious report exists, nor the reproach to which he is subjected on account of it.

But let us turn for a moment to some of the EVILS resulting from this hateful and debasing sin. *And what havoc has it made upon private character.* How many persons of long-established integrity, with endowments suited to render them eminently useful, have been made the objects of suspicion, then shunned, then traduced, and ultimately ruined.

Thus it was an evil tongue which first set Naboth on high, and then murdered him. It was Ziba's slander which robbed Mephibosheth at once of his reputation and of his property. 2 Sam., ch. 16. This cast Jeremiah into a dungeon, and Daniel into a den of lions. "*The whisperer separateth chief friends,*" says Solomon; and the hearts that have been divided by this "sharp sword," the intimacies which have been sundered, who can enumerate?

Again, the *domestic* evils that follow it. What language can adequately set forth the desolation that an evil tongue has spread in households? The base insinuation against perhaps a virtuous and affectionate wife, or a kind and faith-

ful husband, has kindled a spark of jealousy, producing an explosion which has scattered the once-united family into fragments that could never be gathered again. In how many cases has it severed parent from child, brother from brother, and made irreconcilable foes of those who were before most tenderly attached.

But look yonder. Survey a scene at which the heart bleeds. That melancholy father without employment, was not long ago an enterprising man of business. A benignant Providence smiled on his industry; his affairs were prosperous; his means of meeting all just demands against him were ample, and his prospect of affluence was morally certain. But the breath of scandal whispers an insinuation to his prejudice, and his credit is brought into suspicion. A panic commences; his creditors rally, and in a single hour he is plundered. In their merciless strife to secure themselves, he is stripped at once of his *past* gains, and of the means of gain in future. His large and helpless family, from present abundance and prospective independence, are reduced to penury. A little while ago it was his happiness to minister to every rational want of his children—*now*, he has no home for them, and knows not where he shall find their daily bread. Such a picture may seem overwrought, but it is the faithful history of thousands.

But of all the disturbers of the *peace of neighborhoods and villages*, what agent half so successful as a tale-bearing, slanderous *tongue*? Its influence is pestiferous, and, like a moral sirocco, blasts every thing that lies within the field over which it sweeps. To the harmony, reciprocation of kind offices, and happiness that had hitherto prevailed, “succeeds a train of grovelling and base hostilities; depraving all who practise them, and distressing all against whom they are practised. Anxiety and dismay haunt every fire-side; and a funeral gloom settles upon every prospect, and broods over every hope.”

But when the victim of slander is a disciple of Christ, an officer of the church, or a minister of the Gospel, what skill in numbers can compute the extent of injury done by

the wound inflicted directly upon the cause of religion ; or of good prevented by crippling his ability to be useful ?

The affecting story of *Boerhaave*, so distinguished in the medical profession, is well known. With piety, and learning, and gifts, and an ardent zeal to glorify his divine Master, his heart was fixed upon consecrating his life to the sacred ministry. The preliminary steps had been so far taken, that he had gone to Leyden to obtain his license to preach—when, to his utter astonishment, he found the way completely hedged up. An insinuation was dispersed through the University, that made him suspected of error no less shocking than Atheism itself. It was in vain that his friends plead his published sentiments, which contained unanswerable confutations of the very heresies with which he was charged : the torrent of popular prejudice was irresistible ; and thus this preëminently great and good man was utterly frustrated in his pious purpose by the slander of an insignificant person, who had become his enemy from mortified pride. So true it is, as his biographer well observes, that no merit, however exalted, is exempt from being not only attacked, but wounded by the most contemptible whispers. Those who cannot strike with force, can *poison* their weapon, and, weak as they are, give mortal wounds, and bring a hero to the grave. This is but one example of *good prevented* which heads a long catalogue.

But the sins committed by Christians in their angry *disputes*, which have been engendered by a viperous tongue, admit of no rehearsal. How has the spectacle of such militant professors gladdened the hearts of the wicked, who, as they have looked on, have said to themselves, “ Ah, so would we have it ;” while the general result of these anti-Christian quarrels has been, not only to confirm the infidel in his unbelief, and render him more daring and blasphemous, but to add incalculable numbers to his party. Is not the tongue, then, well defined by James to be “ a world of iniquity ?” And when we take into view the variety and amount of wickedness in which the *grand adversary* and the *slanderer* coöperate, is it not very apparent why, in the sacred writings, the same word should be used to signify them both ?

From contemplating such pictures of ruin as have been presented, is it too much to hope that one and another hitherto heedless on this subject, will direct his attention to himself, and inquire, HOW SHALL I KEEP MY "TONGUE FROM EVIL, AND MY LIPS FROM SPEAKING GUILE?"

First of all, remember that *the preparation of the heart, and the answer of the tongue, are both from God*; and go to him, in humble believing prayer, for that aid which he alone can give, and which it is equally your privilege and duty to seek. It was one petition in the daily prayer of Jeremy Taylor, both for himself and his friends, that they might be delivered from the spirit of slander.

Again, would you cease to *speak* ill of others, you must cease to *think* ill of them. And I know of no means of attaining this so effectually, as to *study faithfully your own character*. "There are no souls so fearful to judge *others* as those who most judge *themselves*. They give a favorable interpretation to what others do, because they are acquainted with their own frailties; just as in the Olympic games, the wrestlers did not put the crown upon their *own* heads, but upon the heads of others." It is an excellent rule of some, never to speak evil of their enemies: it is a better rule of a singular few, to speak evil of none.

It is recorded of Peter the Great, that when one was speaking ill of another in his presence, he first listened attentively, but soon interrupted him with the question, "Is there not a *fair* side to his character? Come, tell me what *good* qualities you can remember." This is admirable. Here is true greatness, and an example which it would improve many professed Christians to copy.

When I behold a member of the church of Christ ready to animadvert on the faults of others, always discovering much to censure, but nothing to commend, I feel constrained to say to him, Go and learn a lesson of charity, not of Solomon, nor of Paul, nor of James, nor of Christ, but in the school of that wise Milesian, whose maxim, afterwards consecrated at the Delphic Oracle, was, "*Know thyself*."

How slow should you be to *hear*, and how much slower

to *believe* the evil that is whispered abroad concerning your brethren. It should be, moreover, your invariable rule, never to let your mind be decided by the representation of one party, until you have heard the other. "He that is first in his own cause seemeth just, but his neighbor cometh and searcheth him."

Again, if this is a sin which "so easily besets us," we should *never cease to watch against it*. There is a story of one Pambus, an unlettered man, in the early ages of the church, who came to another that was versed in the Scriptures, and desired to be taught a psalm. Upon his turning to the 39th, and reading the 1st verse, "I said, I will take heed to my ways, that I *sin not with my tongue*," "Hold!" exclaimed his grave pupil, "read no further; this verse will be enough, if I can practise it."

Especially should we be on our guard in times of temptation. It was sage advice given to Cæsar by an old Roman, not to speak or act when he was angry, until he had repeated the letters of the alphabet. At such seasons should we "keep our mouth as with a bridle;" and in most cases, no check will be more prompt and effectual than the question put to our conscience, What is my motive for speaking? Is it to be avenged? Then it is a hateful one, and I ought to hate myself on account of it, and repent. Is it to entertain the circle around me with a tale of scandal? Then I expose my own depravity, and have much more reason to speak evil of myself, than of him whom I am about to vilify. Or is it to discharge my Christian obligations, and do the person good? Why not then pursue the method enjoined by Christ? "Go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone, and if he hear thee, thou" hast made a noble conquest, thou "hast *gained thy brother*. But if he will not hear thee," then, as a matter of solemn duty, not of pique, "tell it to the church," the tribunal ordained by Christ to correct it.

In connection with this, we offer another remark, by way of caution, against an infirmity of many, who, by *reporting* in your ears the ill-natured speeches of others, often do

you a greater unkindness than they did by *inventing* them. For while, in some few cases, the information may serve a valuable end, by putting you on your guard, yet, in far more, it operates only to wound, without doing you any possible good: and it is proof of no ordinary grace in exercise, if, after hearing the tale of such a *slanderer*, and of such a *talebearer*, you do not think far less favorably of them *both*.

But what dissuasive from this sin should have such an abiding influence over a professor of religion, as the *precepts and examples of our blessed Redeemer*? Of all beings in the universe, who was ever slandered so cruelly and so causelessly? Yet "when he was reviled, he reviled not again." When his enemies called for curses on *him*, he sought for blessings to come down on *them*. And are you a professed disciple of such a Master? with what consistency, then, can you retain your name or your relation, if, when the language of love to his enemies was on *his* lips, "the poison of asps" is so often under *yours*?

Remember, moreover, how repugnant is your conduct to his "golden rule." Put yourself, calumniator, in the place of your injured brother, and imagine the tale to be told of yourself, which you are now telling of him. Would you think it kind, or Christian? Imagine that it is your own father, or mother, or brother, or sister, who is the subject of the slanderous story which you are reporting; and how do you view your conduct then? Do not forget, that reputation, peace of mind, and domestic happiness, are as dear to others as they are to you. Their sense of mortification and of ridicule is as keen, and their sensibilities no better fitted to endure the buffeting of public scorn.

Again, would you be *spared a thorny pillow for your death-bed*, begin in due season to govern your tongue. "Whoso keepeth his mouth and his tongue, keepeth his soul from troubles." And what great troubles in life, and how much greater in death, can in this way be prevented. How severe are the reproaches of that conscience which, in the last "honest hours" of life, begins to recount the mischiefs of a slanderous tongue.

I happened, says Cotton Mather, to be present in the room of a dying man, who could not leave the world in peace, until he had lamented to a Christian acquaintance, whom he had sent for on this account, the unjust calumnies which he had often cast upon him. And when asked what was the occasion of his abusive conduct, whether he had been imposed upon by false reports, he made, says Mather, this horrible reply: "No; it was merely this: I thought you were a good man, and that you did much good in the world, and therefore I hated you." And having made this confession, he added, Now is it possible for such a wretch as I am to find pardon?

And how large a proportion of the slanders of the world concerning the church, are the offspring of *malignity against the truth*. How careful then should they be, who love the truth, "to keep the door of their lips" so vigilantly as to cut off all occasion of reproach from those who desire and seek it.

In conclusion, let us prize more and more highly that *abounding grace* which is able to cleanse even the polluted heart of man, and render it pure and holy. Such are the power, the promise, and the effect of the Gospel. In the incarnation and sufferings of Christ we have ample atonement made to take away the guilt of sin; and in the gift of the Spirit, an influence which is able to separate us from its defilement. Here is provision made for the two-fold work of our pardon and sanctification. By this every corrupt passion and unhallowed desire may be eradicated, and this depraved creature restored to the image of God. Let it be the immediate concern of every reader, to examine this subject with reference to himself. How far am I guilty? What sins of the tongue have I contracted, which call for this blood of cleansing?

Are you a *minister of the Gospel*, who have often rebuked the sin of slander in others? let the question be put to your conscience, how far you have set them the example? What agency have *you* had, either by your tongue or your pen, in producing those commotions in the church,

or in the world, by which the mantle of charity has been so often rent, Christian fellowship interrupted, and the ministry blasphemed?

Are you a *member of the church*? What part have you had in creating those family divisions and alienations among brethren; and in procuring that reproach of the ungodly, through which the Saviour is so often wounded? Be entreated to examine your life, with a special view to your sins of speech. "If any man seem to be religious, and bridleth not his tongue, this man's religion is vain." A licentious tongue, habitually indulged, is presumptive evidence of an unregenerate heart. If this is *your* besetting sin, be persuaded either to restrain and bring it into subjection at once, or renounce your Christian hope. Indulging it, your religion is only *seeming*. To retain a sarcastic, bitter, reviling, slanderous tongue, is as inconsistent with your professed hope in Christ, as is drunkenness, or blasphemy, or murder.

Are you connected with an unbelieving husband or wife, or are you a member of an unbelieving household? be assured that your ungoverned tongue is doing more to quiet them in sin, to vilify the church and her ordinances, and all things sacred, than can be effected by any efforts of open blasphemers. From a regard to *their* souls, as well as your *own*, resolve at once to reform. Remember, that the love which you profess to bear towards others, not only *worketh* no ill to them, but it *thinketh* none. It does not blaze abroad their sins, but it covers them. It *weeps* over them, *prays* over them, endeavors to "convert the sinner from the error of his way," and so to save him.

As you would honor Christ, who has taught us this lesson of divine charity, "let this mind be in you that was in him;" be moved by the same benevolent spirit, and "let your speech be always with grace, seasoned with salt." "*If any man offend not in word, the same is a perfect man, and able also to bridle the whole body.*"