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DISCOURSE

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ON

THE SINS OF THE TONGUE,

DELIVERED IN

THE CHURCH ON CHURCH GREEN.

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By ALEXANDER YOUNG.

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THIRD EDITION.

BOSTON:  
CHARLES C. LITTLE AND JAMES BROWN.

1845.

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"I must confess I am so wonderfully charmed with the music of this little instrument, that I would by no means discourage it. All that I aim at is, to cure it of several disagreeable notes, and in particular of those little jarrings and dissonances which arise from anger, censoriousness, and gossiping. In short, I would always have it tuned by good nature, truth, discretion, and sincerity."—ADDISON.

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June 15, 1819

BOSTON:  
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## DISCOURSE.

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JAMES I. 26.

IF ANY MAN AMONG YOU SEEM TO BE RELIGIOUS, AND BRIDLETH NOT HIS TONGUE, BUT DECEIVETH HIS OWN HEART, THIS MAN'S RELIGION IS VAIN.

THE faculty of speech is one of the noblest and most valuable gifts which a bountiful providence has bestowed on us. It is the appropriate endowment of man; that which, more than any other, distinguishes him from the rest of God's creatures. It is a curious and wonderful contrivance this, by which the fleeting breath becomes the index of the soul, the divulger and interpreter of the invisible thought, and the great bond and medium of social intercourse. We emit a few simple sounds, and those about us are instantly apprized of what is passing within us; they know our thoughts, our desires, our purposes. We listen to the voice of another, and from the accents floating on the air we imbibe intelligence, advice, consolation. We see multitudes gathered together for grave debate on matters of common interest, and their conflicting views are reconciled, their

diverging efforts concentrated, by the words of wisdom and eloquence uttered by a solitary and unaided individual. We enter the retired circle, and we behold an enlightened company hanging with ecstasy on the lips of some gifted one, who possesses the power of communicating an interest to every topic on which he discourses. He touches nothing that he does not illustrate and adorn. By the melody of his tones and the fascination of his manner, the most barren subject is made fruitful of instruction and entertainment. By this enchanting faculty he exercises an unlimited, though unacknowledged control over the minds of his hearers, and while he imparts delight and knowledge he bends their flexible wills to an accordance with his own, and stamps on their intellectual and moral characters his peculiar sentiments and biases. He throws the coloring of his thought and temper on every subject which becomes the theme of conversation, and through the channel of an insinuating address instils principles and views which may have an influence far beyond the little hour or circle in which they were uttered.

The exercise of a faculty so noble, so delightful, so powerful as this, should be guarded with extreme jealousy and care. In proportion to its dignity, and the variety and extent of its influence, should be your solicitude, my brethren, that it be not degraded nor abused. You are aware that it is a faculty peculiarly liable to be perverted. "The tongue," it is true,



“is a little member ;” but it is a voluble and unruly one. You are called upon, every hour and every moment, to employ it, for business or pleasure, for instruction or amusement. “Speech,” I adopt the language of the profound Barrow, “speech is the rudder that steereth human affairs, the spring that setteth the wheels of action on going. It is the profession and trade of many, it is the practice of all men, to be in a manner continually talking. Whatever great or small is done in the court or in the hall, in the church, or at the exchange, in the school, or in the shop, it is the tongue alone that doeth it ; it is the force of this little machine that turneth all the human world about.” Now, as the province of speech is so large, and the tongue is so versatile a member, vibrating with the least breath of thought, it must needs be, that unless kept under a watchful and habitual restraint, it will sometimes speak amiss. Not to sin, is difficult ; not to trifle with idle words, is next to impossible. Every day’s observation confirms this fact, and assures you that the management of the tongue is an important branch of self-government. In no way, indeed, are the diversities of character among men more strikingly exhibited, than in their various uses of this instrument. If any man offend not in word, the same is a perfect man.

I appeal, my hearers, to your personal experience whether you are not often conscious of offending in this particular. I would not insinuate that there are

any present so hardened in guilt, that they have deliberately borne false witness against their neighbors, and now wear on their foreheads, though seen only by an omniscient God, the brand of *perjury*. I would fain believe that these consecrated walls contain few, if any, who either habitually, or in the moments of thoughtlessness, or the paroxysms of passion, are guilty of that sin of the tongue, which is alike disgraceful and impious, injurious to man and insulting to God;— I mean *profaneness*. But if, by any strange inadvertence, there has come up to this holy place an individual who is addicted to this debasing sin, and who here professes to worship that God, whose name he daily takes in vain, whose vengeance he defies, and whose condemnation he imprecates, to him I say that this habit of profane swearing is as cowardly as it is wicked. I appeal to his courage whether he dare stand up in the midst of this Christian assembly, or in the presence of a few worthy and virtuous men, and deliberately pronounce those shocking blasphemies which he scruples not to repeat with a dreadful fluency when encouraged by the example of his profligate associates, and when he thinks there is no one near whose good opinion he values. As a minister of Christ, as a fellow-creature, I would affectionately and solemnly conjure him to forsake this degrading, this soul-destroying practice. “Swear not at all,” is the express prohibition of my Master and yours. “Nothing,” says Jeremy Tay-

lor, "is a greater sacrilege than to prostitute the great name of God to the petulancy of an idle tongue, and blend it as an expletive to fill up the emptiness of a weak discourse." God, Christ, Heaven, Hell, are words not to be sported with. If they be significant of realities, or if there be but a bare possibility of this, how shall we describe the madness of that man, who not only regards these subjects with indifference, but treats them with disdain and contempt? Let the habitual swearer restrain his irreverent tongue, if by no higher motive, at least by the selfish consideration of his estimation and standing in respectable society, which has branded this practice with its merited reproach, and pronounced it to be a vulgar vice. Thanks to the prevailing spirit of Christianity, it is no longer deemed, as in the time of Barrow, "a genteel and graceful quality, a special accomplishment, a mark of fine breeding, and a point of high gallantry, for gentlemen to lard every sentence with an oath or a curse; making bold at every turn to salute God, fetching him down from heaven to avouch any idle prattle, to second any giddy passion, to concern himself in any trivial affair of theirs; yea, calling and challenging the Almighty to damn and destroy them!"

I trust that it is likewise unnecessary to denounce before this audience that shameful abuse of the tongue which consists in offending the ear of delicacy with *gross and obscene language*. A sense of decorum,

when other considerations have failed, should close those lips which are hackneyed in the vocabulary of licentiousness. The blush of shame which suffuses the cheek of one addicted to this practice, when his corrupt expressions have unconsciously escaped him in the presence of virtuous and endeared relatives, should remind him how unnatural and odious must be a habit which not only stains the purity of his mind, but is continually exposing him to mortification and disgrace.

I come now to speak of another very serious sin of the tongue ;— *lying*. I have said that the great purpose of speech is to serve as a medium of intercourse among men. It is designed to be the image of the invisible thought, the transcript of the unseen emotion. You will admit, then, that its value consists in furnishing a correct image, and an exact transcript. The portrait is good for nothing if it do not reflect the air and features of the original ; the transcript is a vain labor, if it do not accurately represent the instrument it professes to copy. The currency of language is founded upon the tacit promise which every individual is supposed to make, when he converses with another, that he will speak the truth. It is only upon this supposed assurance, that any sensible man would listen for a moment to your conversation. He might as well hearken to the wind, as attend to words which he has reason to suspect do not express your real thoughts and feel-

ings. Destroy the confiding, the credulous disposition, which seems to be a part of our very nature, and you may as well destroy language too. Let the number of liars so increase as to bear any considerable proportion to the number of those who speak the truth, and farewell to the joys of social communion; farewell to the sweet courtesies of life; farewell to the occupations of this busy scene! The cement of society is gone. The golden chain, which bound man to his brother man by such strong though invisible links, is broken. In the place of an implicit faith and a secure credence, will spring up the odious spirit of suspicion and distrust, throwing its gloomy shadows over the bright and happy countenances of men. Suppose the mutual confidence of mankind to be utterly destroyed, and a habit of deceit and falsehood to become universally prevalent, and what state of things can you imagine more thoroughly deplorable and hopeless? The business of the world would immediately come to a stand; for what is the life and soul of business but good faith and credit? Love, friendship, and brotherhood would be outcasts on the earth, for where could they find a shelter, when Truth, their parent and protector, had been driven with contumely from the abodes of men? You accost your neighbour in the street, and you are forced to turn an incredulous ear to every word which he utters, for his changing countenance and faltering tongue confirm the testi-

mony of your better knowledge, and prove him to be a wilful liar. Your children cling about you with filial endearment, and tell you in lispings accents of a thousand things which it would once have gladdened your heart to hear, but which now can afford you no pleasure ; for the experience of frequent deceit has filled your mind with doubt, and rendered you suspicious even of their infantile prattle.

There would be no end should I attempt to portray the appalling and heart-rending scenes, which the general violation of truth would bring before you, on the stage of common life. Suffice it to say, that when Truth left the earth, she would not leave it alone. Justice and Honesty, her first-born, would forsake it too. The kindly feelings of our nature would wither and droop. The broad face of this beautiful earth would be converted into one vast arena, where men, with passions more inflamed than those of the hunted lion, would prowl and prey upon each other without mercy and without end. The populous city would become a desert place. Man would flee from the likeness of his own form. His abode would be as vacant as the hermit's cell, and as still as the dwellings of the dead. The quick step would no more be heard upon the pavement ; the busy hum would be hushed ; the voice of gladness be no longer heard ; and deserted, desponding man, a stranger in his native place, an exile in his own land, would wend his lonely way among for-

saken tenements and dilapidated walls, and weep in vain over the ruins of virtue and truth.

Do not say that this is a fanciful and improbable picture ; that fear and exaggeration have amplified and distorted the figures, and given them a coloring which nature never knew. For my own part, my friends, I can truly say, that I believe the total and absolute expulsion of truth from the conversation and the transactions of men would be followed by a rapid and wide-spread desolation. I would not take upon me to say that our race would be clean swept from the earth ; for it is impossible to determine how little virtue is sufficient to enable men to breathe and vegetate upon its surface. But I deem it neither presumptuous nor hazardous to predict that the dissolution of society would be coincident with the complete establishment of deceit and falsehood. Were there no faith in man, the misanthrope and the recluse would be as common as they are now infrequent. Each individual would find it to be the safest policy to treasure up his thoughts and purposes in the secrecy of his bosom, and to abjure all sympathy and intercourse with those whose assertions could not be credited, and who would not hesitate to betray any trust reposed in them. The race of men might, indeed, be perpetuated ; but it would be a race of secluded, solitary, unsocial men.

These general considerations of the pernicious tendency of the vice we are exposing, seem to me

of paramount importance, and to merit a prominent place among the motives which should be presented to persuade the habitual liar to stop in his perilous course, and to deter the innocent and principled from contributing even in the smallest degree to the increase of so terrible an evil. The liar should be taught, and made to feel, that he is doing what in him lies, to root up the very foundations of society, — that society to which he is mainly indebted for the comfort and happiness he enjoys ; that he is laboring in the most effectual way to break down into a heap of shapeless ruins that beautiful structure, to the erection of which successive ages have contributed the strength of their efforts and the skill of their experience. The youth yet unpractised in the ways of deceit and falsehood, should be exhorted, by every consideration of religion, honor, and interest, not to sully the purity of his character, and violate the integrity of his heart, by surrendering himself a slave to this despicable vice. Let no fancied pleasure or advantage tempt him to deviate a single step from the strait path of truth. Never let him swerve from his duty as an honest and faithful man.

If I urge the virtue of veracity particularly upon the young, upon the tender heart and the unformed character, as yet unhackneyed in the ways of artifice and deceit, it is because their exposed situation renders a warning voice and a friendly exhortation



peculiarly necessary and serviceable. The credulous disposition of childhood, which believes everything because it is itself unconscious of repressing or varnishing the simple truth which starts involuntarily to the lips, will be trifled with and imposed upon, if it has not been already, in its intercourse with the world. How important is it, then, that their simple minds should be deeply impressed with a sense of the value of truth, and that they should be more and more confirmed in their native sincerity. Let them consider that though they may be deluded by the false statements of the designing, it would be derogatory to their nature as the children of God, dishonorable to their character as Christians, to retaliate the injury they have sustained, by deceiving others. Let it be their constant and earnest endeavour to lay fast hold on veracity and integrity, and never to let them go. The fact, too, that habits of every kind are generally formed in early life, and, when once acquired, are with great difficulty shaken off, is another and very powerful reason why the young especially should be entreated to abhor and shun the base sin of lying. It is not from the confirmed and hardened sinner that we are encouraged to look for the best fruits of Christian instruction and advice. Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots? Then may they also do good who are accustomed to do evil. No, my hearers, it is not often that we can reclaim an

old and habitual offender from the error of his ways. Where the exhortations and warnings of the Gospel have long been heard, and long been disregarded, it is to be feared that the ruggedness of age has closed the avenue to the sere and callous heart. But from the susceptible and ingenuous mind of youth we may look for better things. The novel appeal may enter the open heart, and be welcomed with a joyful reception, and take up its abode there forever. Let the young, then, be affectionately warned of the insidious advances of that enemy of the soul and of society, a deceitful and lying spirit.

Lying is an unnatural and acquired vice. The credulity of children is proverbial. They believe everything which they hear, and it is not till their confidence is often abused, that they begin to be suspicious and skeptical. It is a vice, too, which is acquired much in the same way with the other less criminal abuses of speech. Like other sins it creeps upon us gradually ; first presenting itself to our view with an innocent air and agreeable address, and slowly tempting us forward, with a siren's voice, till we have reached the very brink of depravity and ruin.

The novice in falsehood usually enters upon his perilous course by lying for the *entertainment* of those with whom he associates. He is ambitious of rendering himself acceptable by his lively and original remarks. His purpose is merely to divert his

companions and friends. He has no selfish object to compass, no malicious passion to indulge ; and yet, with all his innocent and honest purposes, he is betrayed, step by step, into an utter carelessness and neglect of truth. To be sure, he would revolt as much as any of us, at being called a liar. In the circle where he moves, that harsh appellation is never employed to designate the person who lies merely for amusement. Oh no ! this would be a very ungrateful return for his complaisant behaviour and obliging disposition. It is only said that in him the inventive faculty is very prominently developed. The gross and heinous offence of lying is softened down by polite language into an agreeable exaggeration, an elegant embellishment, or a striking originality.

My friends, if you would do anything to stop the growth of this vice, you must commence your attack here. The axe must be laid at the root of the tree. You must have that blunt and homely independence, which dares to call things by their right names. If you should not deem it prudent, or serviceable to the cause of truth, openly to denounce as a liar, the man who professes a thorough contempt for veracity, and who daily proves the sincerity of his profession by his wanton and shameless falsehoods, you will at least think it your duty to regard and avoid him as such. You will consider yourselves bound by your benevolent interest in the

permanence of society and the happiness of your fellow-men, to check in every possible way the growth of that pernicious sentiment which looks upon falsehood as a light and trivial thing.

But the great evil of a habit of careless and wanton lying, is, that it leads on rapidly to the grosser species of this vice. The person who has formed the habit of violating the truth for the amusement of others, will soon and easily be tempted to lie for his own *convenience* and *interest*. A thousand occasions will come in his way, in which, by only a slight deviation from the strictest veracity, he may think he can secure to himself some great advantage. And what is there to restrain him from grasping at the very first opportunity which offers, of promoting in this way his personal interest and aggrandizement? He has not the fear of God before his eyes. His moral sense is utterly deadened by being so often resisted and silenced, and his religious principle and native preference of truth have disappeared before the blighting influence of falsehood. He is not restrained by the fear of detection, nor by any apprehension of the censure of the world; for the world, he hopes, will be as indulgent as it always has been, and he relies with confidence upon his talent and his practice, to screen himself from exposure. Can you predict, my hearers, where that man will stop? Will he not follow wherever temptation leads? Will he not lie to defraud his neigh-

bour, to gratify his passions, to indulge his appetites, and even to accomplish the most insignificant and frivolous purpose? Will he not come by habit, to look upon lying as one of the appointed and lawful means of getting along in the world, and will not his sense of truth and right at last become so blunted that he will no longer be able to distinguish them from falsehood and wrong? Ah! I tremble for the fate of one who has thus gradually been seduced from the path of truth. It may need the power of a miracle to reclaim him. And what right have we to expect that God will work a miracle to rescue any of us from our sins? He has given us the testimony of nature and experience, the voice of reason and conscience, the gospel and the example of his Son; and if we will not hear them, neither should we be convinced though one rose from the dead.

The last species of lying which I shall mention, to which the two former are the mere preparations and incentives, is *malicious* lying; lying from pure *ill-will* and *spite*. I unite with you, my friends, in sincerely hoping that there is not much of this in the world. Yet while there remains a single individual, who, after having been satiated with the lie of wantonness and convenience, is now practising this crowning and desperate species of falsehood, it should be registered and denounced. But, my hearers, is it really true, that the malicious liar is so very uncommon a character? In the whole circle of

your acquaintance can you call to mind no individual who gives the reins to his tongue, and invents falsehoods to rob his brother man of his property or his good name? Does your own conscience entirely exculpate you from having ever uttered a word that was designed to injure the character of another? God grant that you may be able to answer this question to your own satisfaction; and in time to come, may he inspire you with a desire, and aid you in your endeavour, to keep your tongue from evil, and your lips from speaking guile. Lying lips are an abomination to the Lord. Wherefore, putting away lying, speak every man truth with his neighbour.

I pass gladly from the consideration of these palpable and disgraceful abuses of speech, to one more common and reputable, and which, from this very circumstance, needs to be pointed out, and to be held up to general reprobation. A folly or vice, which takes shelter under the covert of numbers, and arrogates to itself respectability from the company it keeps, is a much more dangerous enemy than those against which the moral sense of individuals, and the general opinion and practice of the community, are arrayed. If, then, by devoting the residue of this discourse to the consideration of the causes and the consequences of *slander*, I can dissuade any from persisting in a practice at once so pitiful and injurious, I shall be satisfied that our time has not been unprofitably employed.

Let us ascertain, first, the *causes* and *occasions* of this vicious habit. I believe that a slanderous disposition, or any particular tale of scandal, may usually be traced back to two causes, which in themselves may be perfectly innocent; these are *talkativeness* and *curiosity*. I say, *may be* innocent. I would not be understood to assert that they generally *are* so; for their frequent excess and abuse I conceive to be the sources of most of the slander that is afloat on the current of popular rumor.

Now as to *talkativeness*, it may be observed, that it is a common and prevailing infirmity. There seems to be an innate and invincible propensity in some men, and in some women too, to talk, from the mere love of talking; not that they have anything to say; anything, I mean, which is either instructive or interesting; but they talk, because they have acquired a habit of talking, which habit, like some worse ones, it is very difficult to break off. Or they fear the suspicion will get abroad, that they have nothing to say for themselves; they dread the imputation of having a sluggish intellect or an unstored memory. Or they are ambitious of the equivocal reputation of being very entertaining company; and their vanity is flattered by the homage of a listening assembly. Or they are of that sensitive class who abhor nothing so much as the vacuum of a silent circle, and whose benevolence prompts them to do their part, and sometimes a

little more than their part, to fill it. Go into any social meeting, or into any family, and you will probably find one individual at least, who believes and exemplifies the first part of the Wise Man's declaration, that "there is a time to speak, and a time to keep silence," but who seems to have forgotten that the latter part of the sentence is equally true, and was pronounced by the same wisdom and authority. It is the quaint satire of old Fuller, that "some persons are so talkative, one may as well command the echo as them not to speak last."

The most charitable remark that can be made about this inordinate volubility of tongue, is, that it is impertinent and useless. There is truth, too, in the assertion of Solomon, that, "in the multitude of words there wanteth not sin." I apprehend that much of that which proceeds from the lips of garrulity, and bears the name and character of pleasant and innocent chat, has not even the negative and cheap merit of doing no harm. "At every corner of the mouth a folly peeps out or a mischief creeps in." For the person who is always talking, cannot always be talking about nothing. After he has long been gossiping about the veriest trifles and the most indifferent matters in the world, he finds the attention of his hearers flag. What shall he do to revive it, and maintain his waning importance? Why, he must have recourse to more lively and exciting topics. When he has exhausted all true narrative,



and all real adventure, (and it will not take the perpetual talker long to do this,) he must then multiply the incidents, and exaggerate the details, of some interesting chapter of family history. Fancy and invention will readily supply the particulars which observation and memory refuse to furnish.

Here the spirit of *curiosity* comes in, to encourage him, and to urge him on in his agreeable avocation. There is a good deal of that spirit still existing and operating among men, which prompted the Athenians, as St. Luke tells us, "to spend their time in nothing else but either to tell or to hear some new thing." There is a general proneness to converse about persons rather than about things, to examine other men's affairs and to look after other men's characters rather than after our own. There is a kind of small pride and competition, to be the first to learn, and the first to communicate, the latest piece of private intelligence. "There are many men who have a strong curiosity to know what is *said*, who have no curiosity to know what is *true*."

Now, where there is such an eagerness on the one side to tell, and such an inquisitiveness on the other side to hear, about the concerns and characters of one's neighbours, it is impossible to predict how far the flippant tongue will proceed, or what reports may be invented and circulated to the prejudice of the most upright and worthy. Where conversation of this kind is tolerated and encouraged, will it not

generally be found, that every topic is deemed dull and insipid, which is not enlivened by a stroke of satire, and seasoned with a spice of scandal ; and in such society, is not he usually welcomed as the most agreeable companion, who knows the least of his neighbour's virtues, and the most of his failings ? It is in such circles that the novice first tastes and acquires a relish for scandal ; and "as the tiger seldom desists from pursuing man after having once preyed upon human flesh, so the hearer, who has once gratified his appetite with calumny, makes ever after the most agreeable feast on murdered reputation."

When this spirit of slander has thus been generated by the combined influence of talkativeness and curiosity, it will daily grow and gather strength, creating the food it lives on, and spreading itself like a contagion from individual to individual, and from family to family. You will see it always on the alert, hunting for flaws and blemishes in character ; raising and propagating injurious reports on slight grounds and frivolous pretences ; questioning the virtues of one, disparaging the good deeds of another, and aggravating the faults of a third. Sometimes it accomplishes its purpose by giving a person's good qualities a bad name, and ascribing what every one admits to be virtuous actions to base motives and selfish considerations. "Doth Job serve God for nought ?" was the malicious insinuation of an ancient slanderer. With an uncharitable disposition, it always looks at

the dark side of characters, and puts the worst construction on doubtful cases. With a merciless spirit of justice it calls back to public remembrance the errors and misdeeds, over which oblivion had dropped her pall, and the very traces of which the tears of repentance may have quite washed away.

The manner, too, in which the slanderer performs his cruel and wicked work, is oftentimes as offensive as the deed itself. The levity and recklessness with which he trifles with the reputation of others, are truly shocking. Like the madman, he casts about firebrands, arrows, and death, and then coolly asks, "Am I not in sport?" Sometimes a person's good name is disposed of by a mysterious hint, a distrustful look, a sly surmise, or an ingenious insinuation. The tale of scandal is occasionally whispered into the ear, and a strict secrecy enjoined; with the understanding, however, that as soon as it is convenient and safe, it may be proclaimed upon the house-top. Not unfrequently you will hear the confirmed and practised defamer, pretending a great deal of tenderness for the victim whose reputation is bleeding under his hands. And how often is the love of truth assigned as a reason for giving currency to a slanderous report.

It would be amusing, were it not so serious a matter, to mark the various expedients which the tale-bearer devises to escape the responsibility of his oft-repeated story. Now what I have told you,

he says, I sincerely hope is not true ; indeed, I am quite, or almost, sure that it is not ; but then I have it from such excellent authority. One would hardly have suspected such a thing of such a man ; but then you know there is nothing like perfection on earth ; every one has his weak place. If this story be true, it ought to be known ; and if it be not true, it ought to be circulated, that it may reach the ear of the accused, and stand some chance of being contradicted. I think, however, there must be some foundation for the story, otherwise it never would have got about. If I had time, I certainly would trace this report to its origin ; and yet there is no particular reason why I should do it more than any one else. If you think fit to repeat the story, you will have the goodness not to mention from whom you heard it. This, let it be observed, is the language, not of the bold principal, but of the prudent accomplice. And yet, as Barrow justly observes, “ there is no vast difference between the great devil, that frameth scandalous reports, and the little imps that run about and disperse them.”

My friends, I do not say that slanderous reports may generally be traced back to envy or jealousy. I do not say that they are usually invented or circulated maliciously. But I do say, that they are almost always propagated recklessly, with an utter indifference to the injury they may do. The person who repeats a rumor, seems to think that there is

no such thing as responsibility in the case. He has heard it, and therefore he has a right to tell it. He adopts the principle, if not the language, of the gossips in the time of the Psalmist; "With our tongue will we prevail; our lips are our own; who is lord over us?" But I maintain that he has no right to repeat the evil rumor, not only for the plain reason which Solomon gives, that "where there is no tale-bearer, the strife ceaseth," but chiefly because of the evil consequences of defamation and calumny; and this brings us to another topic of discourse.

In speaking of the *evil consequences* of the vice we are considering, it would be impossible, within the limits of a discourse, to enumerate them all, and portray them as they ought to be portrayed. I can merely allude to a few of them. This slander, then, of which I have been speaking, is the mother of discord, the source of numberless dissensions and endless feuds. Many of you have witnessed, and some of you have felt, its effects. Towns have been set in an uproar, families divided, and fast friends severed, by the tale of scandal which nobody invented, and everybody repeated. "The whisperer and the double-tongued have destroyed them that were at peace. A backbiting tongue hath disquieted many; virtuous women hath it cast out, and deprived them of their labors." You know, my hearers, how much the comfort and happiness of social life depend upon tranquillity and quiet; upon the confident feeling of

security with respect to life, property, and reputation. Now the last of these, which no one surely will say is the least valuable of the three, the slanderer's tongue is perpetually assailing and rendering insecure. And to aggravate the evil, there is neither preventive nor remedy. You are wounded by an invisible arm. Your reputation is gradually undermined by the secret agency of a tale, which passes rapidly from mouth to mouth, and from family to family, while you are unable to discover its origin, or to fix upon the individual who has done you this wrong. "The slanderer, it is true, draweth no blood nor breaketh any bones, nor impresseth any remarkable scar ; 't is only a slight character that he stampeth on the fancy, 't is only an imaginary stain that he daubeth his neighbour with ; yet it is an injustice not to be corrected or cured. Thefts may be restored, wounds may be cured ; but there is no restitution or cure of a lost good name ; it is an irreparable injury."

Did I suppose there was one in this assembly who is meditating a tale of calumny, I would say to him, in the language of solemn entreaty, Slanderer ! stop ; think on what you are about to do. You are on the point of tarnishing the fair fame of one who, perhaps, has nothing else in the wide world that he can call his own. It may be, he had wealth ; but it has vanished ; the flames of midnight made his dwelling a ruin ; the winds left his vessel a wreck,

and the waves engulfed her rich merchandise. He had friends ; but the faithful, Providence has taken, and the faithless fled at the approach of misfortune and poverty. He had children ; but they too are gone ; the cold grave contains their ashes. From the wreck of family, of friendship, and of property, he has saved what he deems more precious than all these — an unsullied reputation, a good name among his brethren. Will you rob him of this, his last, his best, his only treasure ? My brother, I know you will not. Your generous heart revolts at an act so inhuman. You cannot plant a thorn in that quiet bosom, and bring down the gray hairs of that innocent man in sorrow to the grave.

Or if there be one here of the gentler sex that has ever forged or propagated a slanderous report, to her I would merely say, in addition to what has already been uttered, that this cruel practice is peculiarly unbecoming the kind spirit of woman, and wholly unsuited to the delicacy of the female character.

And now, perhaps, you will ask, what are the *preventives* and *cautions* to be attended to in the case. I answer, —

In the first place, a timely and judicious *silence*. One of the old philosophers, doubtless for good reasons, imposed on his pupils a noviciate of five years' silence. The advantages of silence are neither few nor small ; and if by it we are merely saved from

the danger of venting much foolish and impertinent tattle, and of gradually acquiring the pernicious habit of slander, we ought to be willing, I think, to submit occasionally to this wholesome restraint, however difficult and painful it may at first be. “For seldom or never,” says South, “is there much spoke, but something or other had better been not spoke.” “The conversation of great talkers,” according to bishop Butler, “is merely an exercise of the tongue ; no other human faculty has any share in it. It is strange these persons can help reflecting, that unless they have in truth a superior capacity, and are in an extraordinary manner furnished for conversation, if they are entertaining, it is at their own expense. ‘O that you would altogether hold your peace, and it should be your wisdom.’ Remember, likewise, there are persons who love fewer words, an inoffensive sort of people, and who deserve some regard, though of too still and composed tempers for you. Of this number was the son of Sirach ; for he plainly speaks from experience when he says, ‘As hills of sand are to the steps of the aged, so is one of many words to a quiet man.’ The occasions of silence are obvious, and easily distinguished by everybody ; namely, when a man has nothing to say, or nothing but what is better unsaid. ‘A wise man will hold his tongue, till he see opportunity ; but a babbler will regard no time. The lips of talkers will be telling such things as pertain not unto them ; but the



words of such as have understanding are weighed in the balance. Rehearse not unto another that which is told unto thee, and thou shalt fare never the worse. If thou hast heard a word, let it die with thee ; and be bold, it will not burst thee.’ ”

In the second place, let us resolve and endeavour to converse as little as possible about other persons’ affairs and characters. “ Whether it be to a friend or a foe, talk not of other men’s lives,” says the wise imitator of Solomon. To say the least of it, it is a dangerous subject of discourse ; and an unnecessary one too. There are always innumerable topics of general interest, to furnish an innocent, agreeable, improving conversation ; and I wish it might be understood, that when for want of materials to supply the void places in discourse, a person has recourse to calumny or scandal, it is from a deplorable lack of knowledge, and a very contracted understanding. “ If scandal arise in a great measure from poverty of conversation, it will diminish in proportion as minds become more cultivated, so as not to have every subject exhausted, when the health of the visitor and of the visited having once been ascertained, cannot again with any decency be made a subject of inquiry, and when the meteorology of the day and of the season has, after a little debate, been settled in all its physical exactness. The only true and permanent source of peace and amity with the faults of the absent, is that interest in better sub-

jects which enables the present to animate their conversation, and to sustain it in rich variety, without the necessity of wandering to that resource which marks the folly of the head still more than the uncharitableness of the heart.”

In the third place, whenever we find ourselves obliged to speak of the characters of others, let us be religiously careful to say nothing but what we know to be strictly true. Let us speak as if we were upon our oath, for God sees and hears us. If the choice is left us, let us mention their virtues rather than their failings, their excellences rather than their defects.

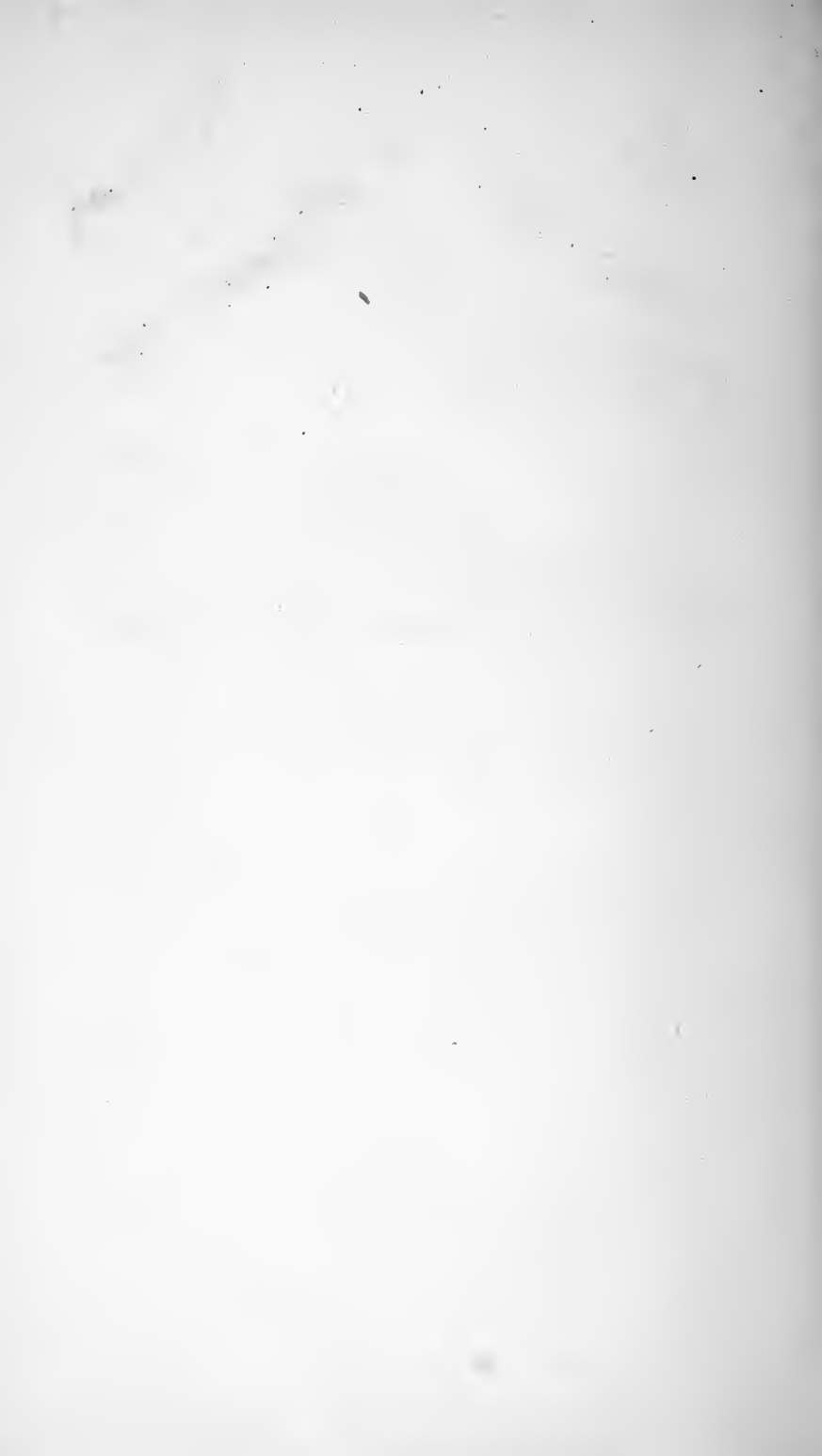
In the last place, let us always discountenance by our example, and in every other proper and effectual way, the prevailing practice of canvassing the private character of absent individuals. It is a custom which would soon die of itself, if those who excel in this department were not so much listened to and applauded. “There are not only slanderous throats, but slanderous ears also ; if we would stop our ears, we should stop the slanderer’s mouth.” “Whenever we hear any man evil spoken of, if we know any good of him, let us say *that*,” is the generous advice of Tillotson. Let us consider it a part of our duty to vindicate the cause of aspersed innocence, and to disprove and to repel from the reputation of others the rumors which we know to be gross libels and calumnies.

I have now finished what I had to offer on the Sins of the Tongue. “I foresee what will be said, because I have heard it so often said in the like case, that there is not one word of Jesus Christ in all this. No more is there in the text. And yet I hope that Jesus Christ is truly preached, whenever his will and laws, and the duties enjoined by the Christian religion, are inculcated upon us. But some men are pleased to say that this is mere morality. I answer that this is Scripture morality, and Christian morality; and who hath anything to say against that?”

Before concluding, I have one favor to ask of you, my hearers; and as it is not an unreasonable one, I trust it will not be refused. If you have at this time heard anything that is true; if you admit that any sketch which has been attempted bears a resemblance to nature and reality, I beseech you, instead of looking round among your acquaintances, to determine whom the portrait resembles, sincerely and candidly to put it to your consciences, whether some of the features do not correspond to those of your own disposition and conduct. And if you find this to be the case, I solemnly conjure you to abandon your abuse of this noble gift of Heaven, and to resolve that as long as you live, you will take heed that you sin not with your tongue. Remember, that for every idle word you will have to give account at

the day of judgment. Thus, verily, life and death are in the power of the tongue. For by thy words thou shalt be justified, and by thy words thou shalt be condemned.





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