

THE WORKS

OF

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WITH A

MEMOIR OF HIS LIFE AND CHARACTER,

BY

TRYON EDWARDS.

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IN TWO VOLUMES.

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SERMON XIV

SUBMISSION TO RULERS.*

ROMANS 13:1, 2.—*Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God. Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God.*

THE nature of civil government, and the extent and limits of the authority of magistrates, have been so frequently and largely discussed, especially in later times, that scarce anything new concerning them can be said. Still, to be reminded of what is old and has often been said, especially on such important subjects, is by no means without its use. If therefore this shall be all that is done in my present discourse, it will not be in vain.

The sources of argument for the exhibition and confirmation of the truth as to civil government are two, reason and scripture. And of the passages of scripture referred to by writers on the subject, the text is probably the chief. Now it is of great importance that we know the scriptural doctrine on these points. For if God has revealed his mind concerning the nature, extent, and end of civil government, we may be sure that such a revelation is a perfect and infallible rule for us. And as our text is supposed by many to be *the* passage in which above all others God *has* made known his will concerning these things, so we are under peculiar obligation, in our inquiries after truth on these subjects, to attend to it, and to endeavor by all means to possess ourselves of its true meaning and import. This we now propose to do.

The text has been understood very differently by different persons. Some suppose that in it we have a very plain precept, requiring passive obedience and non-resistance to our rulers in all cases, and especially to those in supreme authority. And though such rulers may do what they will; though they oppress us ever so much, and break through all law, and overturn the very foundations of our constitution, and tear from us every right and lib-

* Preached at the annual Freemen's Meeting for voting, etc. 1775. It is published, as being in many respects a curious and interesting "sign of the times" in which it was preached.

erty whether civil or religious ; though they plunder our estates, and sport themselves with our very lives, still these persons suppose that we ought not in the least degree to oppose this the wantonness of their tyranny and cruelty, but patiently to submit, and endure it all. Such persons further suppose that the words of the text have a particular reference to those who held civil power in the time of the apostle ; that he especially enjoins submission to *them*, though they were some of the most unjust and tyrannical rulers that ever lived ; and that, consequently, if christians were then obliged to submit and not resist, they must be obliged to do the same in every other case, as it will rarely happen that they will live under rulers more tyrannical than were the Roman emperors and their subordinate magistrates ; and that as even these were ordained of God, and therefore their subjects were obliged to submit to them ; so, for the same reason, must all subjects, in all cases, do the same.

On the other hand, it is supposed by some that these words are well capable of another construction, and will not bear this which has been mentioned. They hold that they refer to those civil rulers who rule justly, and according to the laws and constitution of the state ; and that the apostle meant to limit what he here says by what follows, where he tells us “ that rulers are the ministers of God to us for good ; that they are not a terror to good works, but to evil ; and that if we do well, we shall have praise of them.” It is such rulers only, say they, that the apostle forbids us to resist.

Whether this be the true sense or not, I have not time now to argue. I would only say that it does not appear to me to be the true sense ; for I cannot but think these words were intended to teach us the *general* duty of obedience to civil magistrates, without reference to any particular rulers whether Roman emperors or others, and that they were never written with a view to determine the particular bounds and extent of that obedience. It is doubtless true, and is conceded on all hands, that it is our general duty to be subject to the higher powers ; for there is no power but of God, and the powers that be are ordained of him. He not only expressly ordained civil magistracy among his ancient people the Jews ; but by his providence, and the light of nature, and reason, he has led mankind in general to form themselves into civil societies, under proper rulers, both supreme and subordinate. Whosoever, therefore, shall in ordinary cases resist the established supreme authority, resists the ordinance of God, and is guilty before him.

All must grant that to justify resistance and rebellion against

the ruling powers in any state, there must be some extraordinary reason. So long as the established powers rule according to law, justice, and the constitution, none can pretend that it is lawful to resist them. Nor is *every* violation of law, justice, or the constitution, a sufficient reason of resistance. It must always be considered whether the evil consequences of resistance be not likely to overbalance the good; and then only is resistance justifiable, when the rulers rule tyrannically, and there is also a good prospect that the public good will be promoted, more than injured, by resistance. But whether, even in this case, resistance be justifiable or not, the apostle did not mean expressly to determine. He only gives *the general rules of obedience and submission*, and does not touch, one way or the other, the question I have now presented.

We are to understand this passage in the very same manner as we would any other passages on other subjects, expressed as this is, in general and absolute terms. For instance in Matt. 5: 39, etc. it is said, "But I say unto you that ye resist not evil; but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if any man will sue thee at the law, and take away thy coat, let him have thy cloak also. And whosoever shall compel thee to go a mile, go with him twain." Here our Lord, in express and absolute terms, forbids all resistance to any private person whatsoever, however injuriously and abusively he may treat us, just as the apostle in the text forbids all resistance of the civil powers. But who ever understood these words in the most literal and extensive sense? Who ever supposed that they make it our duty to suffer every ruffian to beat and mangle us as much as he may please? Who ever imagined that our Savior intended to forbid our using means to protect our property from thieves and robbers, or to make us the dupes of every impertinent and assuming villain who should take it into his head to command us to go with him a mile, or to give up our garment to him? I know, indeed, that the Quakers rest upon this passage their doctrine of abstaining from all violence. Yet I question whether there is a soul among them, who, if he were violently smitten on the one cheek, would patiently turn the other to receive a second blow, or who would think he was in duty bound so to do.

The truth is, that in this passage, all resistance in case of private assault or injury, is as much forbidden, as all resistance of the supreme power is forbidden in the text. Nor is there anything left on record, in any other part of the New Testament, to justify such resistance in the one case more than in the other.

Yet the words quoted, you will all grant, are not to be taken in the literal sense. You all hold that they only contain the general rules of patience and gentleness under the greatest private abuses, and teach us that we should not be forward to resist and retaliate injuries, but should rather, as a general rule, patiently suffer wrong. And why may we not—why ought we not, to put the same construction on these words of the apostle? Plainly we may; for there is no more difficulty attending the construction in the one case than the other.

In the same universal terms the apostle enjoins upon servants obedience to their masters. Col. 3: 22, "Servants, obey in all things your masters according to the flesh." What words could be more comprehensive and universal? Yet no man will hold that they are to be taken in their most extensive and literal sense. For in some cases we know, and the apostles have taught us that we ought to obey God rather than man. Nor will any hold that servants are obliged to obey their masters in all things which are not of a religious nature, and wherein the rights of conscience are not immediately concerned. Suppose any of you were taken captive by our neighboring savages, and by them held in a state of servitude, and that by resisting your master you might regain your liberty and return to your family and friends; would you in this case feel yourself conscientiously bound by this precept, still to continue to obey your master in all things, and to forego the opportunity to escape? No; never! And yet there is no more reason why we should put such a construction upon our text than upon this passage.

Another instance that I would mention is recorded in Matt. 5: 34, etc., "But I say unto you, swear not at all; neither by heaven for it is God's throne; nor by the earth, for it is his footstool; neither by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great king. Neither shalt thou swear by thy head, because thou canst not make one hair white or black. But let your communication be yea, yea; nay, nay; for whatsoever is more than these cometh of evil." And to the same effect is James 5: 12, "But above all things, my brethren, swear not, neither by heaven, neither by the earth, neither by any other oath; but let your yea, be yea, and your nay, nay, lest ye fall into condemnation." Now in these passages, all swearing is peremptorily and absolutely forbidden, as all resistance of the higher powers is in the text. Yet we all understand the former with some limitation; and for aught that appears the same limitation may as reasonably be put on the text, as upon these passages. As in these passages we suppose our Lord and the apostles only meant to teach us that in general we ought to

be cautious of swearing; that we ought never to use an oath on common and trivial occasions; and especially that we ought never to swear profanely, as was so frequently done both among the Jews and the heathen; so, with the same reason, we may suppose that the apostle, in our text, only meant to teach the general duty of submission, and the sin of resistance in ordinary cases, without at all intending to touch the question whether resistance may not, in some cases, be lawful.

That the interpretation thus given of the text is the true one, I think we may gather from the immediate context. "For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil. Wilt thou then not be afraid of the power? Do that which is good, and thou shalt have praise of the same. For he is a minister of God to thee for good, but a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil." They who suppose that these words contain an absolute prohibition of all resistance of the supreme power, must, at the same time, hold that the character here given of civil rulers applies to all rulers without exception; for no reason can be given why the word "rulers" in the third verse should be less extensive than the words "higher powers" in the first. And such persons actually do hold, that what is said in the first and second verses, had a special and direct reference to the rulers who were in power when the apostle wrote; and therefore they must also hold that what is said in the third and fourth verses, has the same reference to these rulers. But this is impossible, because with reference to them it was not true. It was by no means the true character of those rulers, that they were a terror to evil works, and not to good; and that if a man did that which was good, he should certainly have praise of them, or that they were the ministers of God to christians for good, or that they were revengers to execute wrath upon the evil. Their true character, in general, was quite the reverse of all this. Whereas if we understand the words in the sense that has now been given, no such difficulty occurs. The apostle lays down the general duty of submission and obedience; and as a reason of it states the end of the institution of civil government and of the appointment of civil rulers, which is, to be a terror to evil doers, and a praise and a recompense to those that do well.

There are several other things that make it still further plain that such must be the true construction of this passage. It seems very evident from the whole New Testament, that neither Christ nor his apostles intended to intermeddle in any curious questions or disputes upon politics. Our Lord with indignation rejected the thought of being a judge and a divider over the people. And

agreeably to this, he ever conducted himself in his teaching and his conversation, both in public and private. While in general terms he taught mankind their duty, he ever very carefully avoided any nice disquisitions on political topics; and even when the Jews, with all their craft endeavored to draw out his opinion concerning the paying of tribute, he utterly evaded the question, merely telling them, in general, to “render unto Caesar, the things that are Caesar’s, and unto God, the things that are God’s.” He might easily have told them in express terms, whether they were in duty bound to pay tribute, and to submit to such a tyrannical prince as Caesar; and so the apostle might easily have told us, in the text, whether in any case, it is lawful to resist the higher powers. With the same ease, too, he might have told us whether it be lawful ever to resist any private person who shall assault us, or rob us of our property; or whether it ever be lawful to protect our property and seek satisfaction for injuries in a legal way. But for wise reasons, no doubt, Christ and his spirit have passed over these matters in silence, only teaching us our *general* duty, and leaving particular cases, which are endless in their variety of circumstances, to be determined by the light of these general rules, and of natural reason.

That the apostle did not mean to teach that it is *never* lawful to resist the higher powers, is further manifest from various things mentioned in the scriptures, to one or two of which I would briefly advert. Barely alluding to the army that David raised to resist Saul if it should be needful, and which he did, so far as we know, with God’s approbation, I pass to notice more particularly the revolt of the ten tribes from Rehoboam. The people of Israel having suffered much under the grievous yoke of Solomon, determined to effect a reformation in the government. For this purpose they made proposals to Rehoboam. And when he rejected them with disdain, and treating them with contempt even threatened them with more grievous burdens than they had borne under Solomon, the ten tribes, with one consent revolted, and set up another king Jeroboam. Yet they are never once blamed for this conduct. On the contrary, when Rehoboam was about to make war upon them to recover his dominion, God utterly forbade him, saying, “*This thing is from me.*” Yet I know not that *this* was any more from God than any other rebellion against a tyrannical prince whom God in his providence may permit and prosper; for though in this case by a prophet he had foretold the event, yet he had given the ten tribes no permission in this way to accomplish the prediction; and a mere prediction never justifies any action which otherwise would have been criminal. Now

can we suppose that the scriptures are so inconsistent with themselves as to teach in one place that resistance to rulers is never lawful, while in other cases they contain those plain facts which so evidently of themselves justify resistance in some cases, and that without an intimation that it was not pleasing to God?

I might further argue the same thing from the people's resistance of Saul when determined to destroy Jonathan; from his servants' refusing to obey in slaying the priests of the Lord; from the case of the Egyptian midwives; from David's war with Ishbosheth; from his joining the Philistines against Saul; from the conspiracies against Joash and Amaziah, which seem to be mentioned with approbation, or at least without disapprobation; from the frequent revolts of the Israelites from under the dominion of the Philistines and other nations, by whom they had been as really conquered as by the Romans in the times of our Savior; and also from the brave and vigorous resistance of the Maccabees and their adherents, to Antiochus Epiphanes and the other kings of Syria, which is spoken of approvingly by the prophets.

But passing by these things in the Old Testament, I would mention one or two things in the New which are worthy of our notice. The first is the direction of our Lord to his disciples, when they were persecuted in one city to flee to another. Now fleeing from under the government of a prince is one kind of resistance; for if the generality of his subjects or all of them should flee, this would as effectually break up his government and dethrone him as a universal rebellion. The other case is where the apostle Peter says, in his first epistle, "submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake; whether it be to the king, as supreme; or unto governors, as unto those that are sent by him." It ought to have been translated, "submit yourselves to every *creature of man*;" for so it is in the original—the words being "*ἀνθρωπίνῃ κτίσει.*" So that the apostle here declares all civil rulers, whether supreme or subordinate to be "creatures of men." But if they be the creatures of men, surely men have a right to resist or even to unmake and annihilate them, if they rule not according to the will of God and the good of the subject.

Thus I have endeavored briefly to lay before you the scriptural views concerning resistance of civil rulers. The arguments from reason respecting the matter I have not even hinted at, as this was beside my present purpose.

Upon the whole I think we may justly infer that the doctrines of passive obedience and non-resistance are not the doctrines of the Bible, and that non-resistance to the supreme powers is no

more taught in the scriptures, than non-resistance to our fellow men, and even to thieves, robbers, and those who use the most abusive violence. I hope, therefore, that our text, and some other passages of scripture, all of which are to be taken in the same sense, will no more be quoted to prove and sustain the doctrines of passive obedience and non-resistance, especially in times like these. The truth is, and the whole spirit of scripture sustains it, that rulers are bound to rule in the fear of God and for the good of the people; and if they do not, then in resisting them we are doing God service.

Having now finished what it was proposed to say directly upon this subject, I shall be expected to say something to the freemen present, with respect to the immediate business of the day. And since it has become customary upon this occasion to point out to the freemen what should be the character of the men for whom they shall vote, and whom they shall now choose for rulers, I am willing to comply with the custom, and also to show mine opinion.

1. In the first place, then, as you ought always on this anniversary to make choice of those only to rule over you, who are real friends to your country and its constitution, so you ought to be especially careful in this day when the rights, the liberty, and the peace of our country are so immediately threatened. One man who is not a friend to the rights and liberty of his country, now chosen to any office in the civil government, may do more harm than ten good men in the same office can do good. Now in the light of enemies to our country I think we may fairly consider those who themselves reject the result of the late Continental Congress, and the similar votes and proceedings of our own House of Representatives, and who not only do this, but also endeavor to stir up a party to oppose them. Agreeably to this general rule, you ought by no means to choose a man who says that the plan adopted by the Congress is altogether wrong, and that if we ever obtain relief, it must be in a way entirely different, viz. by barely petitioning the king and parliament. Brethren, you have reason to resent such speeches as these, not only as they tend to divide the country in this critical juncture, and thereby make us an easy prey to our enemies, but also as they are utterly contradictory to your own sentiments expressed in your public votes. You have almost unanimously voted your approbation of the result of the late Congress, a result which we doubt not time will show was most wisely ordered and brought about by Divine Providence for his own glory and the freedom and prosperity of this people. For you therefore to promote men to civil

rule, who publicly declare their disapprobation of that result, is to act a part very inconsistent and very unwise.

2. For the same reason you ought by no means to vote for a man who declares "that he considers the citizens of Boston not as suffering in the common cause of American liberty, but as suffering the fruits of their own folly and rashness." Such speeches have been made, and by some who would like to be chosen to office. But you ought to mark such men, and show your disapprobation of their sentiments and your love for your country, by refusing to give them your votes. Our Congress have abundantly declared that they consider Boston as suffering in the common cause of American rights and liberty; and so it most manifestly is. He therefore, that declares the contrary, does not agree with the Congress, nor with the manifest interests of the country; nor can you vote for such a man without declaring your disagreement with that same Congress, whose result you have publicly and solemnly adopted as your own, and your disregard for the best interests of your country.

3. Nor ought you to vote for those who speak contemptuously of the late law of our Assembly so necessary to put us in a posture of self-defence; who either say, that it was foolish to make any such law, and that it is the most easy thing in the world for Great Britain to subdue this country; or who say, that they never were for these armings and trainings of the soldiers; that all the burden comes upon the farmers; that they must pay the expenses of the soldiers' training, and also must train themselves; and that they must go to Boston, and expose their lives in battle, for that gentlemen, and particularly the gentlemen of the Assembly never expected to go there or anywhere else to fight. Of such persons I might observe, that he that is not willing, if need be, to defend his liberty, deserves to be a slave. But without dwelling on this, I would especially say, that the manifest tendency of all such speeches is to disaffect the minds of the people towards our General Assembly, and to raise in them a spirit of jealousy towards those whom these men call gentlemen; and such a sower of discord among the people, especially in such a day as this, when so much depends upon our unanimity, ought to be frowned upon with indignation by every friend to the people and the country.

4. Once more, let me caution you against giving your votes for a man who being a farmer himself, and a known candidate for office, goes round among the farmers and tells them that it is by all means best for them to send a farmer to the Assembly, and not one that lives in the town or city. Such bare-faced impudence is intolerable! I am astonished at it! And he must be short-

sighted indeed, who cannot see through it. As well might such a one say, "gentlemen, I would have you vote for me. I am the fittest one in town to be sent as your representative. Let *me* have your votes." Again I say, I am astonished at such impudence; and those who are guilty of it ought to be ashamed of it! This, I know, is plain speaking; but the occasion calls for it. And if any should think I have spoken too plainly, I would only say, that it is the business of ministers to tell men their sins; and he is unworthy of his office who has not the firmness to do it.

5. Finally; I would observe that we of this town, by some means or other, are become the objects of suspicion to many of our neighbors of the other towns about us. They suspect that we are not sincere and hearty friends to the cause of American liberty. This day we have a fair opportunity to remove this suspicion, by unanimously choosing men to represent us in the next legislature, who are known, and who on all occasions have appeared themselves to be, not only men of integrity and ability, but also hearty friends of the rights and liberties of their country, and steady opposers of every encroachment on these rights. But if we shall this day make choice of men, who are known either now to be, or to have been, in time past, opposed to the rights and liberty of their country, and advocates for the rights of the British parliament to tax us; or if we even choose men whose characters in this respect are doubtful, we shall, in either of these cases, confirm the suspicions of our neighbors, and fix upon ourselves the character which many have already, without sufficient reason, attributed to us, of being friends to parliamentary taxation, and enemies to our country. Let us bear in mind what may be our influence, and what are our high responsibilities, and so act as to endeavor to meet them, whether in relation to God, our country, or our fellow men.

SERMON XV

MERE REPENTANCE NO GROUND OF PARDON.*

ACTS 3: 19. — *Repent therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out.*

WHETHER God will pardon our sins, is a most important question. And if he will pardon at all, the next question is, in what way and on what conditions will he do it? The scriptures assure us that on our repentance and faith he will pardon us for Christ's sake. But what is the doctrine of reason, or of the light of nature? If we may believe infidels, it is that we shall be pardoned *on our bare repentance*, without a mediator and without any atonement. This is a main principle of infidelity, on which the whole system, so far as it is allowed that we are sinners, depends. Therefore let us consider it attentively, and inquire whether it be indeed the voice of reason that we shall be pardoned on our repentance barely.

Several eminent infidels, as Hume and Bolingbroke, deny that there is any evidence of the moral perfections of God, or that he is a good being. On this principle there cannot possibly be evidence that he will pardon at all, either in consequence of repentance, or without it. For unless we have evidence of his goodness, it is impossible that we should know but that he will take pleasure in torturing his creatures, whether it answer any good purpose or not, or whether they deserve it or not. When infidels say that God will pardon on bare repentance, they must believe either that *justice* requires such pardon, or that mere *goodness* and *grace* require it; either that pardon is no more than strict justice requires, or that though it is indeed beyond the requirement of strict justice, it *is* required by divine goodness and grace. Let us consider the proposition on both these grounds.

I. *That the pardon of the penitent is a mere act of JUSTICE, and that if he be not pardoned, he suffers injustice.* Concerning this I observe,

1. If this be the case, *it is no pardon at all*, and it is absurd

* No date.