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Mr. M·K E E N's

F A S T S E R M O N,

APRIL 9th, 1801.

A
DISCOURSE

AGAINST

SPEAKING EVIL OF RULERS:

DELIVERED ON THE

Anniversary Fast

IN

MASSACHUSETTS,

APRIL 9th, 1801.

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1801.

A
DISCOURSE.

ACTS xxiii. 5.

Then said Paul, I wist not, brethren, that he was the high priest; for it is written, Thou shalt not speak evil of the ruler of thy people.

PAUL, being brought before the Sanhedrim, or Jewish council, to be examined, was beginning a justification of himself touching the matters of which the Jews accused him. And having made a solemn declaration of his innocence, Ananias, who presided as high priest in that court, interrupted him by commanding some who stood near to smite him on the mouth. "Then said Paul, God will smite thee, thou whited wall; for sittest thou to judge me after the law, and commandest me to be smitten contrary to the law?" From other accounts given us of this Ananias, it appears that he was a very bad man, though for some time he carried it very plausibly toward the citizens, and possessed a considerable share of popular favour. This might be the reason why Paul called him a "whited wall," denoting that, however fair his outward appearance was, he was full of iniquity within, like the pharisees, whom our Saviour compared

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compared to whited sepulchres. In this address to Ananias, Paul seems to have been moved by a prophetic spirit to pronounce sentence upon him ; for he was slain a few years afterwards in a tumult of the people, excited by his son. But some who were present were much offended at Paul's manner of addressing him, and they said, "Revilest thou God's high priest?" To which he replied, "I wist not, brethren, that he was the high priest ; for it is written, Thou shalt not speak evil of the ruler of thy people."

It has been often inquired, how Paul could say with truth that he did not know Ananias was the high priest. Some have answered, "He had been absent from Jerusalem about fourteen years ; and therefore it is very supposeable he did not know who sustained the office at that time." Others, considering that Paul must have known by his habit, and the place in which he sat, that he was the high priest, understand his declaration thus—"Indeed, brethren, in the sudden transport of my mind, I was not aware, or I did not consider, that he was the high priest." But a writer, who has carefully examined the history of that age, relates this remarkable fact, that Ananias was in truth not the high priest, though he was sitting in judgment in that assumed capacity. The case was this : "He had formerly holden the office,
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and had been deposed ; the person who succeeded him was murdered, and, before another was appointed, Ananias, of his own authority, took upon himself the discharge of the office. This singular situation of the highpriesthood took place during the interval between the death of Jonathan, and the accession of Ismael ; and precisely in this interval it happened that Saint Paul was apprehended and brought before the Jewish council to be tried." Paul, therefore, without choosing to enter into any discussion of the question, whether Ananias was legally and really the high priest or not, might answer with strict truth as he did, "I wist not, or I did not know, brethren, that he was the high priest ; for it is written, Thou shalt not speak evil of the ruler of thy people." By answering in this manner, he avoided a controversy which did not concern him, and took effectual care that what he had said should not be drawn into a precedent to weaken the obligation of that law which he acknowledged to be still in full force. The law of which he spoke is found in the 22d chapter of Exodus, at the 28th verse, where it is said, in our translation, "*Thou shalt not revile the gods, nor curse the ruler, of thy people.*" The latter part of the verse only is quoted by the Apostle, and it is accurately quoted from the translation of the Septuagint.

It is proposed—

I. To shew what is meant by speaking evil, in the text.

II. To mention some of the reasons of this command, “Thou shalt not speak evil of the ruler of thy people.”

III. Make a few reflections on the subject.

I. What is meant by speaking evil, in the text?

We are expressly forbidden in Scripture to speak evil of any man, that is, to defame him, to hurt his reputation, or to bring reproach upon him. When a person makes and propagates a false report to injure another, he acts a part so contrary to the plainest principles of right, that he must be condemned by his own conscience, unless his moral sense be so completely extinguished that he perceives no difference between right and wrong. The same observation will apply to the spreading of a report which one knows or believes to be false. And giving currency to a doubtful report, which may injure the reputation of another, is so evidently wrong, that few persons can be ignorant of it.

But these are not the only kinds of evil speaking that are unlawful. The commandment is
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still much broader. A person may be guilty of evil speaking, when the thing which he reports is true, and even when he knows it to be true ; though this is not so generally felt to be wrong as the other. Many persons, who would not propagate a known falsehood, would without scruple report what they know to be truth, though the consequences might be very injurious to their neighbours.

Every person wishes to have mankind think favourably of him. No one wishes to expose his own faults or follies. Reputation is to many the most precious treasure which they possess, and they do not hesitate to sacrifice their property, or to hazard their lives, in its defence. We feel ourselves injured, when others without good reason expose our faults to the world. And we ought not to do that to others, which we should think unjust, or ungenerous, if it were done to ourselves. Every man living is probably conscious of having done some things with which he does not wish the world to be acquainted. If any of them are known to a friend, he will not think him friendly if he divulges them unnecessarily. He reasonably expects, if that person is worthy of being called a friend, that he will be tender of his reputation as he would be of his own. Doubtless there are many truths reported every day, which would never
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be heard, if the persons who report them would lay their hands on their breasts before they open their lips, and ask their own hearts whether, in reporting them, they shall do as they desire others to do to them in like circumstances. Every report that violates this golden rule is a species of evil speaking.

It must be admitted, however, that there are occasions and circumstances which make it lawful and right to utter truths that will destroy the credit or reputation of another : as, when he is endeavouring to avail himself of the reputation which he unworthily possesses, to injure others. Charity to those whom he would injure requires us to make his true character known, if we can thereby prevent his doing evil. If we do not, we make ourselves in some measure accomplices with him in his guilt. Speaking truth, which will in this way disconcert and frustrate the wicked designs of another, is not that evil speaking which the Scriptures forbid : it is a duty enjoined by charity ; but it ought not to be done in such a manner as will tend to make him appear more odious than is necessary for the good of others.

This is the rule which every person ought to observe, when he speaks any thing that may affect the reputation of another, whether that other be in a public or a private station. The law of charity should govern our conduct in all our intercourse with mankind. But

But it may be observed farther, that a becoming deference to a ruler will impose a peculiar caution, when we have occasion to speak of any part of his conduct which we disapprove. A civil ruler stands in a relation to the STATE somewhat resembling that in which a father stands to his family. For this reason we often call our rulers our civil fathers. And the fifth commandment of the Decalogue, which is, "*Honour thy father and thy mother,*" is considered by all commentators as extending to other relations, civil, as well as natural, and as enjoining servants to obey their masters, and subjects their lawful rulers. Now nature itself teaches us that a child ought to feel a peculiar tenderness for the reputation of a parent. And we should think him deficient in a sense of filial duty, if he spoke as freely of the improper conduct of a parent, or remarked as severely upon it, as he lawfully might on the like conduct of another person.

Cases may happen when it is the duty of a child to remonstrate with a parent, to tell him his faults, or to tell others of them; but the manner of doing it should be such as to make it appear that he does not forget the relation which he sustains to him, nor the duties which it imposes.

So cases may occur, when it is the duty of private persons to point out the improper conduct of their rulers. Their country's good requires it, and their country's good should be their motive for doing it. But in performing this duty, which they owe to society, they should address the understandings, rather than the passions and prejudices, of their fellow-citizens, or fellow-subjects : they should reason, not rail : they should aim to give useful information, not to vilify the persons of their rulers. If their rulers be the patrons of principles that are pernicious to society, or adopt measures of a dangerous tendency, their errors may be pointed out, and demonstrated, in decent and respectful language, without violating the precept which says, "Thou shalt not speak evil of the ruler of thy people." But addresses which are calculated to render the persons of rulers odious, and to bring their authority into contempt, are offensive to God, and contrary to the precepts of our holy religion, and as such they ought to be discountenanced by all good men, by all friends of the peace and order of society.

Civil government is a divine institution, though its particular forms are human. And the Scriptures frequently enjoin obedience to the lawful commands of the magistrate, and they forbid, on severe penalties, disobedience, and speaking

speaking evil of dignities. They require us to be subject, not only for wrath, but also for conscience sake ; that is, not only for fear of being punished by the magistrate for disobedience, but from a principle of duty.

It is true that obedience and subjection have their limits. If the commands of a magistrate are absolutely unlawful, we ought to obey God rather than man. And if a government degenerates into an insupportable tyranny, resistance may be lawfully made to it, when the evils that will probably result from it to the community are less than the evils that will result from submission.

As submission then is a duty, except in the cases now mentioned, a person is guilty of speaking evil of the ruler, when he endeavours to weaken in others their sense of that duty, to excite unreasonable jealousies in their minds, and to make them hate or despise him, and the authority with which he is vested for the common good.

II. It was proposed to mention some of the reasons of this command, "Thou shalt not speak evil of the ruler of thy people."

Order is so essential to the well-being of society, that without government mankind must be miserable. And we can hardly conceive of any government

government so bad as none at all. The greatest political curse that could befall a people would be a dissolution of government, that should leave every one at liberty to do what was right in his own eyes. However plain and evident this truth appears to the thinking part of mankind, there are probably many, in every country, who view that restraint which government lays upon them as an evil. They have not such a conviction of its usefulness and necessity as to be led merely by their reason to submit to it. When their inclinations are checked by law, they are ready to wish the law and the government were abolished, that they might do as they pleased ; but they do not consider the consequences of having every body else, as well as themselves, set at liberty to rob or murder them without fear of punishment. Were there no considerations to induce people to obey their rulers, but a persuasion of its being conducive to the general good, it is to be feared that the number of peaceable subjects under any government on earth would be very small. None would be subject but the wise and the good. And such a government would be useless. It could not protect the good, nor be a terror to evil-doers. It is necessary, therefore, that the wicked should be restrained by fear from transgressing the laws ; but they will not be
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afraid, unless they believe that the government has power to punish them. It is probably an opinion of the power of government to punish offenders, more than any other consideration, that restrains the vicious from disturbing the peace of society. Take from any people this opinion, and you dissolve the government. Whatever therefore tends to destroy this opinion, tends to destroy the government.

Now a little consideration may convince any person of reflection, that speaking evil of the rulers has a direct tendency to destroy this opinion. When many people freely and publicly censure and condemn their rulers, the factious, the discontented and the unprincipled are encouraged to transgress the laws, and set the government at defiance. When licentious tongues and licentious presses are constantly calumniating the rulers, many honest and well-disposed people will be led to believe that they must be very bad ; and those who wish to be freed from the restraints of law will lose their fears of the government, thinking that the number of the disaffected is so great, it has not power, and will not dare, to punish them. Hence arise tumults, riots, opposition to the execution of the laws, insurrections, rebellions and civil wars ; and the very end or design of government is frustrated and defeated.

On the contrary, were the practice of speaking evil of rulers discountenanced and punished, and
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were the errors or faults of rulers pointed out in decent, respectful language, they might be corrected without endangering the existence of the government. The discontented, the vicious, and the profligate, who are impatient under the restraints of the law, would be afraid to disturb the peace of society, because they could not know that others would join them, and they would know that without the assistance of *many* they could not resist the power of the government. Though such men do not respect their rulers, nor submit to authority from principle, yet so long as they believe that others do, they expect the government to be supported, and they will be subject, not for conscience sake, but because they are afraid of the power.

In some countries the people have an opinion that their rulers have an absolute right given them immediately by God to reign over them, and to do what they please ; and that it would be as profane and wicked to find fault with their administration, as to censure the ways of Providence. They think there is something supernatural and divine in their persons, and they are kept in subjection by their superstitious fears. Opinions of this sort are effectually exploded among us. We know that our rulers are men like ourselves. But if this knowledge emboldens us to revile and calumniate them, to bring
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their authority into contempt, and to produce confusion and every evil work, we have not gained much by it.

We cannot now go back to that state of ignorance and superstition. We must be induced by other considerations to treat our rulers with deference and respect, or we shall run into a state of anarchy, out of which will naturally arise a government that will be maintained by the sword, and that will easily find ways and means to restrain the licentious tongues and pens, which at present are not afraid to speak evil of dignities.

III. Make a few reflections on the subject.

I have wished, my hearers, to turn your thoughts at this time to this subject, because it appears to me that the vice condemned in our text has already made a very alarming progress in our country.

It may well be supposed that it was very disgusting to us, when it was directed against those rulers who possessed our full confidence. The administration of our General Government has already passed, and that of this Commonwealth may perhaps soon pass, into the hands of other men, in whom we generally have not so much confidence : but let us not imagine that we may innocently speak evil of our rulers because they are not the men whom we wished to bring into office.

office. Are we afraid that the government will not be so well administered in future, as it has been in times past? Possibly our fears may be disappointed. We ought not to determine beforehand that we will be displeas'd with the measures of our new rulers. If they wisely and faithfully endeavour to promote the welfare of our country, we should be willing to give them full credit for it, and not endeavour to weaken their hands by exciting discontent, and raising clamours against them.

No one, who is really a friend to good order and government, thinks it of so much importance *who* does the business of the state, as *how* it is done. He will never employ scurrility and abuse to displace those who are in office, whether they conduct well or ill.

If they conduct well, it is of little consequence who they are. And if they conduct ill, it is better to endure that ill than to employ scandalous and malicious falsehoods to displace them. And I freely confess that in my opinion we have less to fear from the men who do or may administer the government, than from the prevalence of a licentious spirit among the people, which makes them impatient of the most wholesome and necessary restraints.

For twelve years past our country has enjoyed, with little interruption, a state of uncommon prosperity. Our population and wealth have been rapidly increasing, while other nations have been wasting their blood and treasure, and have been afflicted with great and sore calamities. For the prosperity we have enjoyed, we are indebted, under God, to the wisdom and virtue of the men who have administered our government; yet it is probable that our rulers have been more vilified and abused than those of any other country.

Is it impossible for a people to be free without suffering their liberty to degenerate into licentiousness? We are making the experiment. The issue will be highly interesting to ourselves, and to the human race.

But vain are our expectations of long enjoying liberty and happiness, if we provoke God, by our ingratitude and licentiousness, to give us rulers, in his wrath, who will teach us not to speak evil, as the men of Succoth were taught, with briars and thorns.