

# Bishop Wilson's Meditations on His Sacred Office, No. 5.-- Thursday--(Continued)

by J.H. Newman

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*Church discipline is essential for the honour of God, the safety of religion, and the good of sinners, and involves the use of excommunication as a means to bring the sinner to repentance.*

**Scripture:** Matthew 18:15, Mark 5:4, John 8:7, Acts 8:3, 2 Corinthians 10:8, Galatians 5:12, 2 Thessalonians 3:14, 1 Timothy 5:20, 2 Timothy 2:25

**Topics:** "Church Discipline", "Repentance"

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## Description

J.H. Newman preaches on the importance of Church discipline, emphasizing the authority given by Jesus Christ to His ministers to judge and discipline according to His Word. Excommunication is highlighted as a necessary punishment to reform the wicked and remove scandals, with the goal of preserving the honor of religion. The sermon stresses the need for true repentance, the dangers of false penitence, and the importance of pastors in guiding sinners back to the right path. It also addresses the balance between severity and compassion in discipline, the power of repentance, and the role of the Church in forgiving sins and restoring the fallen.

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## Transcript

CHURCH DISCIPLINE.

(Continued.)

There is a public absolution, which is no more than a relaxation of a censure. There is no relation betwixt that and the absolution of sins.

GOD ratifies in heaven the judgments of His ministers on earth, when they judge by the rules prescribed by His Word.

Whenever Church discipline meets with discountenance, impieties of all kinds are sure to get head and abound. And impieties, unpunished, do always draw down judgments.

The same JESUS CHRIST who appointed baptism, for the receiving men into His Church and family, has appointed excommunication to shut such out as are judged unworthy to continue in it.

Matt. xviii. 15, &c. "If thy brother shall trespass against thee, go tell him his fault between thee and him alone. If he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the Church; but if he neglect to hear the Church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican. Verily I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth, shall be bound in heaven; and what soever ye shall loose on earth, shall be loosed in heaven." So that if baptism be a blessing, excommunication is a real punishment: there being the same authority for excommunication as for baptism. And if men ridicule it, they do it at the peril of their souls.

In short, this authority is necessary, if it is necessary to preserve the honour of religion. It is appointed by JESUS CHRIST. The ends proposed by it are, to reform wicked men, and to remove scandals. If the sentence is duly executed, the offender is really deprived of the ordinary means of salvation. It is in deed a sentence passed by men, but by men commissioned by GOD Himself; that is, by the HOLY GHOST.

The authority of CHRIST is to be respected in the meanest of His ministers.

#### Excommunication

, the most dreadful punishment which a Christian can suffer, becomes less feared than it ought to be, through the countenance which excommunicated persons meet with, contrary to the express command of GOD, "With such a one, no not to eat."

A true penitent will be willing to bear the shame of his sins (where he has given offence) before men, that he may escape the confusion of them hereafter. But then he ought to know, that to submit to the outward part of penance, is not to submit to GOD, unless it proceed from the fear and love of GOD.

A man may see his sin, confess it, abhor it, and yet be a false penitent. Judas did all this. What he wanted was the grace of GOD, to see the mercy of GOD, as well as His justice.

Those who are first to lead men into sinful courses, seldom trouble themselves to recover them out of them. The ministers of CHRIST must do it, or they must die in their sin.

Mark v. 4. "And they laughed him to scorn." O, my Lord and Master! let me not be driven from my duty, by the infidelity and scoffs of the world.

How desperate soever the condition of a sinner may appear, we must neither insult over it, nor despair of his conversion.

A person who has offended and scandalized others by his sins, ought, before he be admitted to the peace of the Church, and to receive the Sacrament, to give some good ground of assurance, by a sober life, that he is a true penitent.

Mark vi. 1. "Shake off the dust under your feet, for a testimony against them." Jesus CHRIST permits not His Apostles to avenge themselves by their Apostolical power, nor even to desire that He should do it; but to leave their cause to GOD, with full confidence in Him.

Luke xix. 8. "And if I have taken any thing from any man by false accusation, I restore him fourfold." The judgment, which, of his own accord, this penitent passes upon himself, will condemn those who reject all the remedies offered, and all methods made use of, for their conversion, and who will not make the least

atonement for their crimes. Men show very plainly that they love sin, when they will not suffer any one to put a stop to it, to remove the occasions thereof; and to shame, to reprove, and to punish the sinner. This is a sin which draws after it great judgments.

If a pastor hopes to do his duty without reproofing the world, (without testifying that the works thereof are evil; John vii. 7.) or to reprove it without being hated by it, he will deceive himself; he may carry it fair with men, but will be condemned by JESUS CHRIST.

John viii. 7. "He that is without sin among you, let him cast the first stone." They whose duty it is to punish offenders, should take great care not to be influenced by pride, hypocrisy, passion, false zeal, or malice; but to punish with reluctance; with compassion, as having a sense of their own misery and weakness, which, perhaps, render them more guilty in the sight of GOD. Let Ecclesiastical Judges always remember, that the HOLY GHOST, to whom it belongs to bind and loose, never makes Himself the minister of the passions of men.

John xii. 43. "They loved the praise of men more than the glory of GOD." And this is the cause that men count it more shameful to acknowledge their crimes than it was to be guilty of them.

We must never insult a sinner; but, without extenuating his sin, we must comfort him, by showing him the good which GOD may bring out of it.

Acts viii. 3. "As for Saul, he made havock of the Church." The designs of GOD toward Saul should teach us not to despair of any man's conversion, but to pray for it, and to use our best endeavours, instead of being angry, and using them ill.

Acts ix. 9. "And Saul was three days without sight, and neither did eat nor drink." JESUS CHRIST Himself, in this instance, teaches His ministers not to be too hasty in receiving penitents, but to let them fast and pray, and bear the sense of their sin, and of their bad condition, before they be reconciled. It teaches penitents to fast and pray, and to bear with patience the fruit of their own doings,

Acts xix. 18. "Many that believed, came and confessed their deeds," &c. The Spirit of Grace always inclines men to confess their evil deeds, and humble themselves for their sins. There could not be a more shameful one than dealing with the devil, &c. yet this did not hinder them,--or from sacrificing the most valuable things that had been instruments in their wickedness. This is a proof of a true conversion, &c.

The fall of others, is for us a great instruction, and a lesson which we ought to study, not in order to insult our neighbour, but to fear for, and amend, ourselves.

Let us not despise any sinner. GOD has sometimes very great designs in relation to those who are at present most opposite to Him.

To reprove, when persons are not in a proper disposition for amendment, would be to give both them and ourselves trouble without any prospect of advantage. To make reproof beneficial, they to whom it is given should see that it does not proceed from humour, or from a design to vex them, but from a true zeal and love for their souls.

A true charity will never insult those that are gone astray, but will use the greatest sinners mildly, lest they should be driven to despair by too great severity.

The Church forgives sins "in the person of CHRIST" (2 Cor. ii. 10.) She remits the temporal punishment of them also, because CHRIST is the Sovereign High Priest, and because it belongs to GOD alone to recede from the strictness of His justice, in what manner He thinks fit. An ecclesiastical governor should endeavour to preserve discipline, and the esteem of his people, at the same time, by acts of tenderness, &c.

2 Cor. x. 8. "For though I should boast of my authority, (which the LORD hath given us for edification, and not for destruction,) I should not be ashamed." It is necessary, sometimes, to extol the dignity of our office. N. B. Pastors are appointed by CHRIST to edify the Church; they must, therefore, be honoured and obeyed.

The disorders which a good pastor observes in his flock, will always be matter of humiliation to him, because he will always impute them to himself. A pastor, a priest, who does not, with tears and supplications, bewail the sins of his people, cannot call himself their mediator with GOD.

It is the greatest comfort of a good pastor, to feel himself obliged to use nothing but good advice, and the mild part only of his authority; but when that will not do, he must "use sharpness;" but still, with this view, that it be for their edification, not for their destruction.

It seldom happens that great men, whether clergy or laity, reform their lives, because they seldom meet with persons of courage to oppose them, or to tell them of their faults. A Bishop who is not restrained by any earthly engagements, will not spare any man whose conduct is prejudicial to the faith.

Gal. v. 12. "I would they were even cut off which trouble you." To wish shame, or some temporal evil, for the salvation of our neighbour's soul, is not contrary to charity. It seems, matters were come to a great height of evil, when St. Paul was forced to wish that to be done, which he did not, in prudence, think fit to do.

Ecclus. viii. 5. "Reproach not a man that turneth from sin, but remember that we are all worthy of punishment."

2 Thess. iii. 6. "Now we command you," (and the same authority subsists still in the governors of the Church,) "in the name of our LORD JESUS CHRIST, that ye withdraw yourselves from every brother that walketh disorderly," &c. Nothing is there which the faithful ought more carefully to avoid, than disorderly livers,--nothing which pastors ought more earnestly to warn their flocks of.

May I ever observe the rules of an holy and charitable severity.

2 Thess. iii. 14. "And if any man obey not our word, note that man, and have no company with him, that he may be ashamed; yet count him not as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother." Excommunication is only for the contumacious,--not to insult, but to cure.

1 Tim. v. 19. "Against an elder receive not an accusation, but before two or three witnesses." A pastor ought not lightly to be exposed to the revenge of those, whom it is probable he has, or shall have, occasion to reprove.

1 Tim. v. 20. "Them that sin rebuke before all, that others also may fear." That is, who sin grievously and are convinced before two or three witnesses--let such be censured, before, or by the consent of, all the congregation.

2 Tim. ii. 25. "In meekness instructing," (reproving) " those that oppose themselves, if GOD peradventure will give them repentance," &c. When we consider that repentance is the gift of GOD--that the wiles of the devil are many, and corruption of nature very strong, we shall compassionate instead of insulting a sinner. We shall adore the mercy of GOD towards ourselves, and hope for it for others. We shall tear for ourselves, and pray for them. They may recover, and be saved. We may fall, and be lost for ever.

When men will not take care of their own salvation, the Church owes this care to her children, to hinder them as much as possible from ruining others.

If excommunication is perpetual, it is caused by the obstinacy of the offender, not by the laws of CHRIST, or His Church, which only deprives wicked men of the benefit of communion for a time, to bring them to a sense of their duty. Church discipline is for the honour of GOD, for the safety of religion, the good of sinners, and for the public weal--that Christians may not run headlong to ruin without being made sensible of their danger,--that others may see, and fear, and not go on presumptuously in their evil ways,--that the house of GOD may not become a den of thieves, --and that judgments may not be poured down upon the whole community. Josh. xxii. 20. Did not Achan commit a trespass, and wrath fell on all the congregation?

The most effectual way of answering these ends is, to exercise strict impartial discipline. First, to withhold from Christians the benefit of the Holy Sacrament, till they behave themselves so as to be worthy of so great a blessing. And, secondly, if they continue obstinate, (all proper methods being used to reclaim them,) to excommunicate them; and to oblige all sober Christians not to hold familiar conversation with them. But first of all, Christians should be made sensible of what blessings they are deprived, when they are debarred the communion,--even the greatest on earth; without which they can have no hopes of salvation, but must perish eternally, John vi. 53.

He that understands and believes this, will submit to any hardships, rather than incur, rather than continue under, a sentence so full of terror; and a sentence passed by one commissioned by GOD; and bound, at the peril of his soul, to pass it, it being the greatest indignity to CHRIST and the divine ordinance, to prostitute the body and blood of CHRIST, to notorious evil livers. GOD has therefore lodged a power in the pastors of His Church, to repel all such; and it is a mercy even to them to be hindered from increasing their guilt and their damnation.

Nor can any prince, governor, nor human law, hinder a Christian Bishop from exercising this power, because he is under an obligation to the KING of kings and LORD of lords to do his duty in this respect.

Nor must it be pretended, that the punishment which Christian Magistrates inflict may supersede this discipline. Those punishments only affect the body, and keep the outward man in order. These are designed to purify the soul, and to save that from destruction. Excommunication, as St. Paul tells us, (1 Cor. v. 5.) is "for the destruction of the flesh, that the soul may be saved;" that is, to mortify the corruption of nature, lust, pride, intemperance, &c.; this being the only way to save the soul of the sinner, and to bring him to reason, that is, to repentance.

For upon a sinner's repentance, (unless where he has incurred the sentence more than once,) the Church is ready to receive him into her bosom, with open arms. But then by repentance must be understood, not a bare change of mind; not an acknowledgment of the sin and scandal; not a serious behaviour for a few days;--all which may soon wear off; but, a course of public trial of sincerity, such as

may satisfy a man's self, and all sober Christians, that the sinner is a true penitent: that he has forsaken all his evil ways, evil company, evil habits; that he is grown habitually serious, devout and religious,--and that by fasting and prayer, he has, in some good measure, got the mastery of his corrupt nature, and has begun a repentance not to be repented of.

For want of this care and method, many Christians are ruined eternally. They sin and repent, and sin again, and think all is safe, because they have repented, as they think, and are pardoned.

There are people who are in the same sad case with those that stand excommunicated, though no sentence has passed upon them, namely, such as live in a contempt of the public worship of GOD. They cannot properly be turned out of the Church, who never come into it, but they keep themselves out of the ark, and consequently must perish.

Excommunication, in the primitive times, was pronounced in the congregation to which the offender belonged. After which, they gave notice to all other Churches; namely, 'let no temple of GOD be open to him, let none converse with him, &c.

2 Sam. xii. 13, 14. "And David said unto Nathan, I have sinned against the LORD. And Nathan said, the LORD also hath put away thy sin, thou shalt not die. Howbeit, because by this deed thou hast given occasion to the enemies of the LORD to blaspheme, the child that is born unto thee shall surely die." The divine justice punisheth every sin, either in this world or in the next. A sinner's willingness to undergo any punishment which shall be appointed by the minister of GOD, in order to make proof of, and to establish his repentance, is a sure sign that GOD has not withdrawn his grace, notwithstanding his sin.

(To be continued.)

OXFORD,

The Feast of the Annunciation.

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