

The Touchstone of Regeneration

BY RICHARD SIBBES

The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid: and the calf, and the young lion, and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall feed; their young ones shall lie down together: and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. And the sucking child shall play upon the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put his hand upon the cockatrice's den. They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain, &c.—ISAIAH 11:6–9.

I HAVE formerly, in divers sermons upon this scripture,* declared that it, by way of prophecy, foretelleth what shall be the fruits of Christ's kingdom under the gospel, shewing that miraculous change Christ should make upon men, shadowed out in this scripture under the similitude of beasts, as lions, wolves, bears, leopards, &c. The sum whereof is, that God will take from us that fierceness, malignity, and bitterness of nature in us, and bring us, in place thereof, to a loving, sweet, mild, and meek society together.

Many things already have been particularly handled out of this text; as,

1. First, from the condition and natural estate of men, wherein they may be called beasts, lions, serpents, &c.
2. And secondly, of that change Christ thereafter makes in us, which indeed is a miraculous change. This was the first thing handled.

First, That in every soul which shall come to heaven there must be a change.

Secondly, You have heard whereof the change must be; not of the substantial parts of a man's body, but of the corrupt qualities of the mind; or, if you will have it so, of the soul, and all the powers thereof.

Thirdly, I shewed upon whom this change was made—look verse 9; it is made upon the church of God in this world, which in my text is called God's holy mountain. So also, Heb. 12:22, the church is called the mountain of God.

The fourth thing considered was, by whom this change was made; even by the spring-head of all. From the God of grace it cometh, and floweth to us by Jesus Christ our Lord, who was 'God manifested in the flesh.'

Fifthly, We inquired then by what means this change is wrought. This we shewed to be by the knowledge of the law, &c. And this is the reason which is added why there shall be no hurt nor destroying in all this holy mountain, because the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea; meaning there shall then be an abundant knowledge, a deep knowledge, and a well-seasoned permanent knowledge, which shall keep every one within their limits, every one knowing his duty, so maintaining a mutual peace in all this holy mountain.

Next, now sixthly and lastly, for ending of this text, I am to speak of the marks of this change; or rather, I may call them, the effects of this change, the certain and infallible signs of the same. Yet look not that here I will undertake to handle a commonplace, and shew unto you all the signs of regeneration; only I will contain myself within this text, contented to shew you those which this scripture affordeth, which whosoever hath, may assure themselves of the rest. Wherein, ere we proceed further in particular, let us first make the general; that is, a taming, a subduing, a taking away of the fierceness and cruelty of our corrupt nature. This throughout the text is the main mark of the change; which will yet be more evident by the particulars.

What meaneth this, 'that the lion shall lie down with the calf, that the leopard shall lie down with the kid,' when they shall come from their own kind to another strange generation, as it were? What meaneth this, that they shall trust one another with their young ones? that the lion shall no

more prey upon blood, as in times past, but eat straw with the ox? that the serpent shall let the little child play upon the hole of his den? and all these to be so tamed that a little child should lead them, take them, and rule them? What meaneth all this but this,

That it is an eminent and infallible mark of regeneration to have the violence and fierceness of our cruel nature taken away. This is a sure sign; for this look Rom. 1:29, how naturally the heart is filled with all maliciousness and sinful cruelty, which to be subdued and tamed is a special grace; so Gal. 6:7–9, and Eph. 4:17, et seq. There you may see the fruits of the old man to be idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, variance, wrath, strife, sedition, &c.; there you may also read of a change, of a renewing of the new man in love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance, against whom there is no law. There you may see what a great alteration this change maketh, and what the marks of corruption are.

But yet there it is worth the marking, that here in these places the Holy Ghost calleth for works of mercy, to perform duties to men, meekness, temperance, patience, &c., not mentioning duties directly due unto God. Why are these duties towards men so much urged, but to shew that our corruption is not so much manifested in the worship of God as in works of mercy to men? Therefore it is that all the prophets do so call for works of mercy, that Christ himself so inviteth thereunto, because men may deceive the world with a counterfeit show of outward justice to God, but in works of mercy there is no means to escape, Micah 6:7. 'If the first-born, or ten thousand rivers of oil,' with a number of the like sacrifices, might please God, all would be given for the sin of the soul; but the Lord calleth for works of mercy, meekness, and to walk humbly with God.

Now the cause why men are so hardly brought to be merciful to others, and more easily to works of piety towards God's worship, I take to be, because, as it is John 8:44, 'the devil is a liar and a murderer from the beginning.' Now his prime quality being to be a murderer, he worketh so in the children of disobedience, that, like unto him, they have a murderous disposition to shew no mercy, to relieve none, which sheweth that such are poisoned with the same sorts of poison wherewith he is infected. Thus you see there must be a general meekness in all who are heavenly wise, far from this murderous disposition. So James 3:13, he saith, 'Who is a wise man, and endued with knowledge among you? let him shew out of a good conversation his works, with meekness of wisdom.' There he speaks of a devilish wisdom, which comes not from above, 'which is full of envying and strife; but the wisdom which is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, and easy to be entreated, full of mercy and good fruits,' &c. Thus he shews by what coat-armour* a Christian must be known; how the sons of God must be discerned. This is the general mark: if that natural cruelty and bitterness bred in us be taken away, and meekness, gentleness, and the like, put in place thereof, this for the general is a sure sign that the change is made, regeneration is begun. Now I come to speak of these marks and infallible signs of regeneration contained in this text, which must be in some measure in the party regenerate. The first is,

1. Harmlessness.

Which, though it be a thing that runs along the body of my text, and is last named, yet here I bring it first, because it is partly implied in all; for in this, that it is said 'the little child shall play upon the hole of the asp,' and take no hurt, what doth this imply but a mild and harmless disposition, contrary to our natural fierceness and cruelty? It is written, Prov. 3:27, 'Withhold not good from them to whom it is due, though it be in thy power to do it.' As I take it, by good in that place is meant works of mercy; that we must be so like God as may be in works of charity. He that refuseth works of mercy to those in need, he is a murderer. How can a man say he is renewed, unless in some sort he be like unto God in mercifulness? We see the wicked, it is a prime quality in them to do mischief; they delight in evil; it is meat and drink to them to do wickedly; they are still musing on some cursed deed or other. But it is a property of God's child to be harmless. Yet for further trial of this grace note we two signs of this sign.

First, If we would not do evil, though we might do it unseen of any creature: as, when a little child shall lay his hand on the cockatrice's den, the serpent might sting, and yet, unseen of any, pull in the head again. This, likewise, is a true sign of harmlessness—when, though a man may do

some hurt unseen, yet he will not. Thus was not Herod; he abstained a-while from beheading of John Baptist, but it was more for fear of the people, than any other cause. Therefore, Christ, in another place, calleth him a fox, Luke 13:32, so far was he from this harmlessness we speak of. Thus we see the doctrine of Christ may be preached to a-many, but the power of the same extendeth but to a few.

Beloved, I would have all of us to consider this. We live, all of us, in the kingdom of Christ; but where is the man that, though he might do evil unseen, yet would not do it? We have a worthy pattern of this grace in Joseph, Gen. 39:9, who, though he might have done evil unseen, yet would not, 'Oh,' saith he, 'how shall I do this evil, and sin against God?' and offend God. Oh, how many are there which withhold the passions of their tongues, and the violence of their hands, only because they are not able to work mischief! How many men now smooth the hands of God's people, and say as they say, only because they dare not, and cannot do them mischief, who, if that opportunity served, would sting them! This will shew a change to be made, and we to be harmless, if, when opportunity of doing evil is offered, yet we can abstain.

A second sign of this sign is, when, though a man hath provocation to do evil, yet he will abstain. This is a sound trial. We see it is said, that the little child shall play upon the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall lay his hand upon the cockatrice's den. Is not here provocation, and yet no hurt done? In this the Holy Ghost would give us a sure sign indeed. Many men are of a mild natural disposition, and so may, perhaps, forbear mischief when it is in their power. And so, many men, which are merely natural, may bear with religion for some by-respects. But, provoke them, and then you shall have them all of a fire, ready to fly in your face. What religion is there in this? For to do good for good, and evil for evil,—this, Christ says, even publicans may do: there is no thank in this; but if, when we are provoked, we can forbear to revenge, this is a blessed thing. If there be true love in our hearts, the apostle says, 1 Cor. 13:5, that it is not 'provoked.' And it is written, Isa. 53:7, that Christ 'he was afflicted, oppressed, yet opened he not his mouth: he is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so opened not he his mouth.' This he did, thus holy men have done, and this, if we would see life, we must do. Yet we see, though we should be like sheep, even they will now and then push at one another; but this is not with much violence; besides that, it doth not endure. The apostle wills us to forbear, forgive one another; so this strife hath an end. Therefore, if I cannot forgive in a small matter, but that either my tongue must fly out in words, or the heart be set on mischief, this is a woeful estate. If this be all our goodness, surely it is miserable goodness; here is no harmlessness: suspect thy estate. But the true goodness and blessed estate is to follow that counsel of our Saviour Christ, 'Bless them that curse and persecute you,' &c., Mat. 5:44. This, then, is harmlessness, when there is afforded unto us both secret occasion and provocation to do evil, and yet we abstain. So much for the first.

Now I pass to the second, which is

2. Sociableness.

Which is set out in the whole body of my text. But with whom is it that this society holdeth? Not of lions with lions, or wild beasts with wild beasts; and yet many of these cannot endure one another: for the rhinoceros and the unicorn, when they meet, they fight; so doth the wild horse and the bear; but if at length they agree, this sociableness of theirs is of wicked beasts one with another. But this is more, that the wolf and the lamb, the cow and the bear, the leopard and the kid, the calf and the young lion, shall lie down together, and that the little child shall play upon the hole of the asp. This implies, not only a simple society, as among wild beasts, but a sociableness, as it were, among those of another generation.*

To apply this unto ourselves: there be good bands of our sociableness one with another, both reason and speech; for, naturally, all of us have been lions, bears, and wolves, and unsociable haters of goodness in others. Now, then, this sociableness with those former servants of God, who have been called, this is a very sure mark of this change in us; so the apostle speaks, 1 John 4:14, 'By this we know we are translated from death to life, because we love the brethren.' And so Christ; our master, speaketh, 'By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye love one another.' This nearness imports consanguinity. It is common, in the Scripture, to call the children

of God brethren.

[1.] No man can love a saint, as a saint, but a saint. This is a sure sign of this sign. For this cause, the apostle to Philemon, he rejoiceth for his faith to God, and love to the brethren, ver. 5. And so again, ver. 7, it was his joy that the brethren were comforted. The reason hereof is, because, as there is a natural enmity among us by sin, to shew a difference, the children of God must rejoice in unity.

Further, a true trial of sociableness is, when men will joy to sort themselves with those with whom formerly they have been most unsociable, and whose company they most loathed: as, first, we see the wolf doth lie down with the lamb, which is a slow beast; secondly, the leopard with the kid; thirdly, the young lion and the calf, for these fat beasts are, for the most part, a prey to the lion; fourthly, the cow and the bear, for the cow is a prey to the bear; fifthly, the serpent is especially an enemy to mankind, as, Gen. 3:15, God said, 'I will put enmity betwixt thy seed and that of the woman.' This, I confess, is chiefly meant of the devil, yet the extent thereof reacheth thus far unto us, who naturally loathe serpents, that so great shall this sociableness be, that even a little child shall play upon the hole of the asp, and receive no harm. Now, when all these are reconciled thus, where formerly was special envy, this is a true trial of sociableness. For further proof hereof, note an idolater when he is converted, none are so dear unto him as God's servants. The voluptuous man, having left his lust, loves none so well as Christ's people; the riotous man, having left his excess, loveth none so well as the sober; the atheistical, profane man delighteth, being changed, so much in none as the truest worshippers: so, we see, though before conversion men may roar like bears, as Isa. 59:11, yet, being tamed, it is said, Jer. 31:9, that then they shall come weeping, &c., and draw into sociableness with others formerly hated. When some men come to be of our religion, and yet keep such about them as are not sincere, this is no good sign. But, take this for a sure rule, that no man is truly turned unto God, but he that loveth the society he formerly hated.

[2.] A second sign of this sign is, to love every brother, yea, though it were to lay down our life for a brother. But how is this implied?—'The calf and the young lion shall lie down together.' If the young lion can endure not to raven on the calf, then it can endure any other of that kind. Beloved, it is a special grace to love all the brethren, without respect of persons. So the prophet David, Ps. 119:63, says, 'I am a companion of all those that fear thee.' Here is implied, not to love some one brother, but the brethren. I confess, for some special cause a man may rejoice and delight more in the company of some, than of others; as David, Ps. 16:2, 'But to the saints that are in the earth, and to the excellent, all my delight is in them.' So that, I say, for some special grace, or graces, one may love one better than another. Thus Christ loved John best, being called the beloved disciple, which was not for any special grace in John, but from a kind of sympathy in natures, which many times, from a hidden cause, produceth much love. But, if we have respect of persons, as it is, James 2:3, we are to blame. If we respect a great rich man, with a little grace, more than a poor man with a great deal; or, if we respect not a poor man as a rich, with alike graces. We see, Acts 8:14, et seq., when Philip preached at Samaria, Simon Magus did cleave also to him; but it seems he did not stick so close to Philip for his graces, as it appeareth he did for somewhat in his person. Brethren, if partially we admire some for their persons, it is suspicious. It is dangerous too much to admire fleshly excellency, for those gifts of goodness in the same. If I do truly love goodness in rich apparel, why do I not also love it in rags? Beloved, if we love not thus, we love with the parrot, our love is not true; there ought ever to be the like love in kind, though not in measure.

Now I come to the third mark, which is,

3. Constancy.

How is this implied? By dwelling and lying together. You shall have beasts meet together, by chance, yet part asunder quickly again; but when they lie and dwell together in constant abode, this is a sure sign. You shall have many companions go with a man, for fashion's sake, to the church, and yet leave going ere it be long; you shall have some men sick, and then, like a serpent frozen in winter, which casts his skin, you shall have them cast their skin a little, that is, send for a

preacher, or such a man, make confession of their sins, saying, Oh, if God will spare me, I will become a new man, I will never do as I have done, I will never any more haunt such company; but yet, when he is well, within a month after, where shall you find him? Not with the lambs, but with the bears, and wolves, and lions. Thus, when we can constantly hold on with an unmoved, constant affection, to the children of God, this is a sure sign.

But I hasten to the next. The fourth is,

4. Inwardness.

How is this implied? Their little ones shall lie down together. There is nothing so dear unto all creatures as their young ones, of which they are most jealous. There are no creatures which are not jealous and tender of their young ones, chiefly the bear, which is most of all tender, fighting sometimes, even to the death, in defence of her young ones. But this, that the little ones of the bear, and of the cow, shall lie together, this implies an inwardness together, such an inwardness as I think is meant, Acts 4:32, where it is said, 'These dwelt together, and possessed all things in common use.' Yet not losing that title they had unto the same as their own; and, ver. 34, their charity is described, that 'no man lacked anything which another had, but in necessity all things were common.' This, their united charity to help others, was their little ones which did lie together. And this, also, must be our trial, if whatsoever is dear and near unto us, even our young little ones, if they be ready to lie down together with the necessities of others, this is inwardness. Think of this also, that this dwelling and lying together is a thing free, not any way constrained. This is a trial of our sociableness, not when we are tied together in a cage, but at liberty, and then we dwell together; for many keep company now together, both in dwelling and lying together, which would fly out if time served. We read in the book of Esther, that when the Jews had the better hand, many of their enemies joined with them, but not of love, but because they had the better hand of their enemies, Esther 10:3; and so, when the people of God came from Egypt, many of the people, because of their prosperity, did join with them; and now also, in the time of the gospel, I appeal to the consciences of many among us, whether they do not lie down with us for fear now. Let no man think amiss of me for that I thus speak, for now such join with us, who, if they had another day, would shew other strange tricks unto us; and, as it is, Jer. 18:18, 'let us smite him with our tongues;' so many of these are ready to smite us with their tongues now, who seem to be inward with us. What would these do if the day were their own? Beloved, such men cannot be of God, who thus do malign the servants of God. You may couple beasts together in a chain, but, being loose, they run asunder again; so many now, like such beasts among us, are tied with chains for a while, but untie them once, and all is gone. Many of these, when once they are loose, keep company with bears and wolves.

But I hasten to the fifth, which is,

5. Tractableness.

How is this implied? A little child shall lead them and rule them. It is a true sign of grace when we become easy to be ruled and brought in compass. We read of lions to have been tamed to draw in chariots; this is tractableness. So when a poor servant of God hath nothing but his simplicity to bring us in, this is tractableness, when we can be content to be brought in even by men inferior to us, that are simple and of mean gifts. So when the husband can endure to be brought home by the wife, being wiser and of more knowledge than she; when the wife can be content to be brought home by the daughter or maid-servant, like Job, who despised not the counsel of his own servants, Job 31:13; this is tractableness. To be brief, when men can be content to come to their old, ancient food.

6. Simplicity,

Which is the sixth and last sign of this change. This is a sure trial of regeneration. But how is this implied? That the lion shall eat straw like the ox. Beasts at the beginning were not thus cruel as since the fall of man, but did feed on grass, &c.; so the Holy Ghost doth imply, that when our state is come back to that it was at the beginning, as near as may be, that is to say, when the lost image of God is so restored in us that a man is come to his former food again, that as then, so now, he feeds on the contemplation of the wisdom of God, the justice of God, the mercy of God, the greatness and power of God, the abundant goodness and truth of God, &c., this is a sure sign of regeneration. Cain he was bloody, and fed upon blood; therefore, as it is John 4:32, when a

man is come thus far, that he hath meat which one seeth not, whereupon he feedeth, holy thoughts, holy meditations, &c., when he can suck the breasts of God's consolations, whereon his children feed, to draw virtue from the same unto himself, this is a sure sign that a man is most happy, and born again. In a word, as the apostle speaks, when thus striving for masteries, he becomes temperate in all things, 2 Tim. 2:5, this is a sure mark and infallible. Now, I come to the uses, which are two:

1, For consolation; 2, for exhortation.

Use 1. The first thing is, for the place. But how shall this be brought in? What of the place? I say a trial by the place, where all shall be in: 'In my holy mountain.' It shall be therefore for trial of religion. Where the mountain is, there is the true religion, there is the church; look where you will, still it is in the mountain. Many now-a-days cry out and keep a stir to know where the true church is, and I affirm, it is in the mountain. So that in this I may say of the church, as sometime Elijah did speak of the true God, 1 Kings 18:24, 'Let him which answereth by fire be the true God;' so I say of the church and of true religion, Let that be the true religion that hath most fire in it, that which sheweth forth most piety and holiness. The papists they say they are the true church; but look on God's mountain, look which religion makes a man most mild, and tames his fierce nature, which takes away a man's dogged disposition, for a dog barks and then he bites, so the barking and biting of the Romish Church shews them net to be in the mountain; their church doth allow biting. Was there ever any doctrine like theirs, which teaches a man to murder his own king, to keep no faith, &c.? Was there ever any religion like theirs, that set poisoning afoot? which also set princes at variance? The last sacrament of theirs will never be forgotten, when that peace was proclaimed between both religions, then one would have thought all was well and ended, there were ten thousand massacred at one place called Labius, eighty slain with one sword, with many other of their cruelties; and the gunpowder treason, so odious and monstrous as the like hath not been heard (a). The like I may say of Garnet's part, who must not reveal this treason, because it was done in confession (b). Oh monstrous times, that confession should be so abused to barbarous, inhuman, matchless cruelty! If ever you take our religion to teach such things, though popery should prevail against us, as God forbid, we will claim no more right of the mountain. Never did, nor never will, our religion teach taking up of arms against our king, cruelty against superiors and others; but, by the contrary, our religion teacheth a man to suffer with and for Christ. It may be some cruel men may be among us, but we look what we profess, and teach that men with meekness must suffer; all this that I have said much concerneth us. If God will have no cruelty to be taught nor reign where he loveth, see what a thing it is to be thus cruel. If we be thus fierce and savage, let us not deceive ourselves, we are not yet come to the mountain of God; for, saith the prophet, 'They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain.'

Use 2. Now I come to the second use, for exhortation. There is yet a little of the lion and the bear remaining in every one of us, which shews us to be not thoroughly renewed, yet I do not say that those who are angry are not regenerate; but I say, if this do rage and rule with us, all is not safe and well. A good tree sometimes may have some bare or crab stock on some side of the tree, that bears crabs, and yet the tree be good; but this must not be predominant. The apostle says, 'If there be divisions and dissensions among you, are you not carnal?' 1 Cor. 3:3. I speak not of some little faults,—God help us! in all our natures there is much frailty,—but of such that rule in us. It is a wonder to see how uncharitable many men are to censure others for every little fault, when they themselves swallow down camels, I mean gross sins. Some man, for refusal of riotous excess, though he be full of excellent parts, yet say they, Such a one is a Puritan; and so again, if an honest man or woman fall by infirmity into some sin, Oh, say some, lo, now his hypocrisy discovers itself. Shall men be thus censured, as though perfection were on earth? This is far from covering thy brother's nakedness, this is far from St Paul's rule, 'to restore such a one with the spirit of meekness,' Gal. 6:1. Beloved, God forbid that I should harden any man in sin; I speak these things only that since a little of the bear and the lion will still be in every one of us so long as we shall live in this world, let us learn to bear one another's infirmities, otherwise if thou chafe, censure, brawl, and chide still, I can give thee no comfort of thy state. Can such a one be regenerate? What! is the bear, and the lion, and the wolf come among us again? To conclude, as abroad, so look to thy conversation at home, among thy servants and friends; take heed thy authority deceive thee not, to think thou mayest set thy heart to raging and plotting envy and

strife, to be angry and chafing still. If such raging be at home in thy house, I can give thee no comfort; as thou wouldest look for the evidences of thy lands, as certainly must thou look for this mildness, meekness, and this change in thyself. Mark this still, when a good man hath found out his sins, he is bound and doth lament for them; when he hath offended, he turneth the stream of his anger that way. So that, I say, if a man be thus bitter of his tongue, look what St James saith of such a one: 'That man's religion is in vain that cannot bridle his tongue,' James 1:26. 'Be not,' saith he, 'my brethren, many masters; for we have one Master,' &c., James 3:1. If these contentions remain still among us, our stock yet bears crabs; we may suspect ourselves. But withal take with you this caution, let not men think it cruelty to execute the justice of God upon malefactors; but if magistrates do it cruelly, let them look to it, they shall dearly pay for it. The prophet David saith, Ps. 101:1, 'I will sing of mercy and judgment,' &c. So for war, I call not that cruelty to fight God's battles; but if any man without a commission will take up the sword, he shall perish by the sword; so Christ saith unto Peter, Mat. 26:52. This point is needful to be pressed still, because men cry Mercy, mercy; but, I say, judgment must be mingled; for as there may be a cruel justice, so there may be a cruel mercy, to suffer the lions to devour the sheep. We must, like God, temper them together, and make justice and mercy go hand in hand, that so the God of mercy may deal with us as we with others.

Thus you see what minds we must have if we look for an habitation in God's holy mountain. God, for his Christ's sake, grant unto us this tamedness and meekness, this thorough change of our cruel nature, that so we may come unto the assurance to be of that number for whom Christ died, seeing his Spirit hath wrought such an effectual, thorough change in us.