

## SERMONS

### I. FLATTERY

I. Thess. ii. 5. *Neither at any time used we flattering words.*

There is a good deal of life and conduct which comes more under the head of manners than religion, at least in common estimation. And yet it is really all of it more or less in connexion with Christian principle and motives. That is the source from which it is to be renewed and purified when it becomes tainted from the world without. Such things as respect for our superiors in age and position, or freedom from self-consciousness and egotism, may appear to be simply good manners. But even allowing, which we do not, that this is all that can be said of them, are not good manners themselves a part of Christian life? It is when they come out of that source that they are most genuine, and then they please, even if they have not had that guidance and development which experience and contact with society can give.

Now there is a fault in personal intercourse which St Paul disclaims in the text, and one on which people generally look rather indulgently. In its lesser forms it is regarded merely as a fault of manners, or a want of good taste. But it is a fault which St Paul thinks serious enough to deny very emphatically, even when

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he is engaged with what appear to us charges of quite a different kind, charges of uncleanness, deceit, and covetousness. It is the sin of flattery which he disclaims. "Neither at any time used we flattering words." This is the only mention of flattery in the New Testament. But it is spoken of several times in the Old Testament. Its dangers did not escape the notice of those acute observers of life and character to whom we owe the sayings which form the Book of Proverbs. I will be content to quote one passage: "A flattering mouth worketh ruin".

It appears at first to be a very venial fault. There is so much to be said for it. It comes out of kindly feeling. It seems as if it would be harsh and ungrateful to condemn it. Yes, it is sometimes the overflowing of kindly feeling, but not always. However, allow that this is its source and character. It is not justified by that. In the first place it not seldom goes beyond truthfulness; it is not your candid, honest estimate of the person to whom you speak. You say more than you can say with truth. It may be quite unpremeditated untruth. You did not mean to go so far. But when once you begin, you are inevitably carried on. The sentence must be finished, and finished gracefully.

Again, granting this kindly intention in flattery, there is another point which may be noticed in it. It is meant to please, and that is to be its excuse. But does not the flatterer, whether consciously or not, look a little farther than that? Does he not try to please for the sake of being himself considered pleasant? If it be so, there is after all something of a personal aim in

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his flattery, when he appears to be merely saying kind things out of the kindness of his heart.

There is yet another accusation to bring against the fault, and it is much the most serious one. It is this: that it may do serious harm to the person flattered. I do not say that much harm will be done by it, when it only comes once and again. But when it comes often, when it comes from someone near at hand, when there are not one or two but many who flatter; then any man who is not thoroughly on his guard will be likely to suffer. You feed people again and again with this unwholesome food, and you create a desire for it where it never existed before. They come in some measure to accept your estimate of them. The conviction which they had of their own folly and weakness becomes obscured. Their very sense of sin as before God is damaged, and becomes a dogma rather than a present conviction. Different language, such as they hear from others, sounds ill-natured, and is so considered and treated by them. The work of honest friends, who used to help them by frank conversation, is made impossible. It is thus that a flatterer worketh, not ruin indeed, but damage, even serious damage, to good men. And yet nothing was farther from the intention of those whose fault it is, and if they were at all able to realise the consequences, they would be sincerely grieved.

It will perhaps be said that it is a person's own fault if he is affected by flattery, and that no good man or woman would be affected by it, because they know themselves too well. Unfortunately this is not the

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case. We are almost all susceptible to it in some degree. For instance, let someone appeal to what he calls our well-known philanthropy, generosity, and interest in good works. We are conscious that this is flattery, but we find, with a certain inward amusement, that we are more disposed to consider such an appeal. Some susceptibility to flattery on some side of our nature is true of almost all of us. There is some particular form of it which will succeed, if other and commoner forms repel and even disgust us.

Are we then never to praise others? Will not this strictness be the means of checking two good genuine human impulses—one of them, natural enthusiasm for human worth, and the other, natural gratitude for services received? No, for to praise and thank is not flattery, if praise be not to a man's face, and if it keep within the limits of truth. Flattery goes beyond the limits of truth, and disregards the modesty of those to whom it is addressed. Let us continue to speak warmly and heartily of human worth, let us show our thankfulness to those who have helped or served us. But let us remember that there is a modesty in good men which is to be considered and revered, and which indeed should be treated as if it existed, even where it does not. And let us not forget the constant danger of being carried by our feelings over the boundary of truth into the perilous realm of flattery.

Hitherto we have been considering what may by comparison be called disinterested flattery. But this is not flattery as understood by the authors of the Book of Proverbs, or by the old Greek philosophers, Plato,

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Aristotle, and the rest, who have something to say on this matter. The proper idea of flattery is flattery with an object in view. It is spoken to get or gain something, influence, power, or gifts. Such flattery as that would be far from the minds of those whom we have hitherto been thinking of. It might seem unnecessary even to mention it to you. But it is not unnecessary. There is this sort of flattery, not in novels only, but in real life. These things actually happen. A woman attaches herself to another woman weaker and richer than herself. She does it for her own advantage. By flattery she obtains such a control over her, that her friend or her mistress, as the case may be, puts her means at her disposal, and is really in her hands. Or, again, a man uses such flattery to a woman that she is ensnared, and in his power. It is not likely that persons engaged in schemes so base would attend to any appeal that could be addressed to them here. But there is an initial stage in all these things, in which a person is just beginning to be led by Satan into a course of action which will develop into such schemes, and is hardly aware what he or she is meditating. To such persons I do appeal; and it is of use to do so. Are you using flattery to gain ends with such or such a friend, however small the matters may be which you are at present trying to get? If so, you are entering on a downward course. It is a course in which sensitiveness to truth and honour disappears, selfishness and cruelty begin to grow apace, and Conscience sleeps as if it were dead.

It would be easy to extend what has been said above,

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and to apply it in other ways. There is flattery in politics. This was the sphere in which the Greek philosophers especially observed it. And it must always be one of the great dangers of a democratic government, whether at Athens or in England. Political leaders will flatter the electors in order to get place and power for themselves. There is flattery in the world of letters and art. No doubt there is plenty of severe, unkindly criticism, but there is also a good deal of the opposite kind, utterly unwarrantable and exaggerated praise, given in the spirit of flattery, because the writer or artist belongs to the critic's own school or coterie, or because there are personal ends to be gained by it.

But let me return to that disinterested and less culpable flattery which we were considering at first. We as Christians want to go to the root of the matter. Whatever is amiss in our lives, we want to deal with it, not superficially, by removing blemishes and improving our character externally. No, we set before ourselves afresh the likeness of Christ, and endeavour to grow up into Him in all things, to the measure of His stature. There has, we can see, been some neglect here and there of the balance of the Christian character. The love, kindness, and gentleness which the Gospel breathes everywhere have had their effect. But the strong sense of truth which is no less inherent in the Gospel story, the fearless expression of it, which we read of, the courage to speak words which will offend and disappoint, these features have perhaps not affected us enough. How clear they are to see in Jesus in His converse with the multitude and with His disciples!