



THE SPIRIT OF
CHARITY

OPPOSITE OF A CENSORIOUS SPIRIT

JONATHAN EDWARDS

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CHARITY AND ITS FRUITS • JONATHAN EDWARDS • CHAPTER 10

“Charity... thinketh no evil.” —1 Corinthians 13:5

HAVING remarked how charity, or Christian love, is opposed not only to pride and selfishness, but to the ordinary fruits of these evil dispositions, viz. an angry spirit and a censorious spirit, and having already spoken as to the former, I come now to the latter. And in respect to this, the apostle declares, that charity “thinketh no evil.” The doctrine set forth in these words is clearly this:

that the spirit of charity, or Christian love, is the opposite of a censorious spirit

or, in other words, it is contrary to a disposition to think or judge uncharitably of others.

Charity, in one of the common uses of the expression, signifies a disposition to think the best of others that the case will allow. This, however, as I have shown before, is not the scriptural meaning of the word charity, but only one way of its exercise, or one of its many and rich fruits. Charity is of vastly larger extent than this. It signifies, as we have already seen, the same as Christian or divine love, and so is the same as the Christian spirit. And, in accordance with this view, we here find the spirit of charitable judging mentioned among many other good fruits of charity, and here expressed, as the other fruits of charity are in the context, negatively, or by denying the contrary fruit, viz. censoriousness, or a disposition uncharitably to judge or censure others. And in speaking to this point, I would, first, show the nature of censoriousness, or wherein it consists; and then mention some things wherein it appears to be contrary to a Christian spirit. I would show,

I. The nature of censoriousness, or wherein a censorious spirit, or a disposition uncharitably to judge others, consists. — It consists in a disposition to think evil of oth-

¹Censorious is an archaic word used often in this message. It means “critical” or “faultfinding.”

ers, or to judge evil of them, with respect to three things: their state, their qualities, their actions. And,

1. A censorious spirit appears in a forwardness to judge evil of the state of others. It often shows itself in a disposition to think the worst of those about us, whether they are men of the world or professing Christians. In respect to the latter class, it often leads persons to pass censure on those who are professors of religion, and to condemn them as being hypocrites. Here, however, extremes are to be avoided. Some persons are very apt to be positive, from little things that they observe in others, in determining that they are godly men; and others are forward, from just as little things, to be positive in condemning others as not having the least degree of grace in their hearts, and as being strangers to vital and experimental religion. But all positiveness in an affair of this nature seems to be without warrant from the Word of God. God seems there to have reserved the positive determination of men's state to himself, as a thing to be kept in his own hands, as the great and only searcher of the hearts of the children of men.

Persons are guilty of censoriousness in condemning the state of others, when they will do it from things that are no evidence of their being in a bad estate, or when they will condemn others as hypocrites because of God's providential dealings with them, as Job's three friends condemned him as a hypocrite on account of his uncommon and severe afflictions. And the same is true when they condemn them for the failings they may see in them, and which are no greater than are often incident to God's children, and it may be no greater, or not so great as their own, though, notwithstanding just such things, they think well of themselves as Christians.

And so persons are censorious when they condemn others as being unconverted and carnal men because they differ from them in opinion on some points that are not fundamental, or when they judge ill of their state from what they observe in them, for want of making due allowances for their natural temperament, or for their manner or want of education, or other peculiar disadvantages under which they labor, — or when they are ready to reject all as irreligious and unconverted men, because their experiences do not in everything quadrature with their own; setting up themselves, and their own experience, as a standard and rule to all others; not being sensible of that vast variety and liberty which the Spirit of God permits and uses in his saving work on the hearts of men, and how mysterious and inscrutable his ways often are, and especially in this great work of making men new creatures in Christ Jesus.

In all these ways, men often act, not only censoriously, but as unreasonably (in not allowing any to be Christians who have not their own experiences) as if they would not allow any to be men who had not just their own stature, and the same strength, or temperament of body, and the very same features of countenance with themselves. In the next place,

2. A censorious spirit appears in a forwardness to judge evil of the qualities of others.

It appears in a disposition to overlook their good qualities, or to think them destitute of such qualities when they are not, or to make very little of them; or to magnify their ill qualities, and make more of them than is just; or to charge them with those ill qualities that they have not. Some are very apt to charge others with ignorance and folly, and other contemptible qualities, when they in no sense deserve to be esteemed thus by them. Some seem very apt to entertain a very low and despicable opinion of others, and so to represent them to their associates and friends, when a charitable disposition would discern many good things in them, to balance or more than balance the evil, and would frankly own them to be persons not to be despised. And some are ready to charge others with those morally evil qualities that they are free from, or to charge them with such qualities in a much higher degree than they at all deserve.

Thus some have such a prejudice against some of their neighbors, that they regard them as a great deal more proud sort of persons, more selfish, or spiteful, or malicious, than they really are. Through some deep prejudice they have imbibed against them, they are ready to conceive that they have all manner of bad qualities, and no good ones. They seem to them to be an exceeding proud, or covetous, or selfish, or in some way bad, sort of men, when it may be that to others they appear well. Others see their many good qualities, and see, perhaps, many palliations of the qualities that are not good; but the censorious see only that which is evil, and speak only that which is unjust and disparaging as to the qualities of others. And,

3. A censorious spirit appears in a forwardness to judge evil of the actions of others.

By actions, here, I would be understood to mean all the external voluntary acts of men, whether consisting in words or deeds. And a censorious spirit in judging evil of others' actions discovers itself in two things: —

First, in judging them to be guilty of evil actions without any evidence that constrains them to such a judgment. A suspicious spirit, which leads persons to be jealous of others, and ready to suspect them of being guilty of evil things when they have no evidence of it whatever, is an uncharitable spirit, and contrary to Christianity.

Some persons are very free in passing their censures on others with respect to those things that they suppose they do out of their sight. They are ready to believe that they commit this, and that, and the other evil deed, in secret, and away from the eyes of men, or that they have done or said thus and so among their associates, and in the circle of their friends, and that, from some design or motive, they keep these things hid from others that are not in the same interest with themselves.

These are the persons chargeable with the “evil surmisings” spoken of and condemned by the apostle (1 Tim. 6:4), and which are connected with “envy, strife, and railings.” Very often, again, persons show an uncharitable and censorious spirit with

respect to the actions of others, by being forward to take up and circulate evil reports about them. Merely hearing a flying and evil rumor about an individual, in such a thoughtless and lying world as this is, is far from being sufficient evidence against anyone, to make us believe he has been guilty of that which is reported; for the devil, who is called “the god of this world,” is said to be “a liar, and the father of it,” and too many, alas! of his children are like him in their speaking of falsehoods.

And yet it is a very common thing for persons to pass a judgment on others, on no better ground or foundation than that they have heard that somebody has said this, or that, or the other thing, though they have no evidence that what is said is true. When they hear that another has done or said so and so, they seem at once to conclude that it is so, without making any further inquiry, though nothing is more uncertain, or more likely to prove false, than the mutterings or whispers of common fame. And some are always so ready to catch up an ill report, that it seems to be pleasing to them to hear evil of others. Their spirit seems greedy of it; and it is, as it were, food to the hunger of their depraved hearts, and they feed on it, as carrion birds do on the worst of flesh. They easily and greedily take it in as true, without examination, thus showing how contrary they are in character and conduct to him of whom the Psalmist speaks (Psa. 15:1-3) as dwelling in God’s tabernacle, and abiding in his holy hill, and of whom he declares, that “he taketh not up a reproach against his neighbour;” and showing, also, that they are rather like “the wicked doer,” that “giveth heed to false lips,” and as the “liar,” who “giveth ear to a naughty tongue” Prov. 17:4). A censorious spirit in judging evil of the actions of others, also discovers itself

Second, in a disposition to put the worst constructions on their actions. The censorious are not only apt to judge others guilty of evil actions without sufficient evidence, but they are also prone to put a bad construction on their actions, when they will just as well, and perhaps better, admit of a good construction. Very often, the moving design and end in the action is secret, confined to the recesses of the actor’s own bosom; and yet persons are commonly very forward to pass their censure upon the act, without reference to these: and this is a kind of censoriousness and uncharitable judging, as common, or more common, than any other.

Thus, it is very common with men, when they are prejudiced against others, to put bad constructions on their actions or words that are seemingly good, as though they were performed in hypocrisy; and this is especially true in reference to public offices and affairs. If anything be said or done by persons wherein there is a show of concern for the public good, or the good of a neighbor, or the honor of God, or the interest of religion, some will always be ready to say that all this is in hypocrisy, and that the design really is, only to promote their own interest, and to advance themselves; and that they are only flattering and deluding others, having all the time some evil design in their hearts.

But here it may be inquired, "Wherein lies the evil of judging ill of others, since it is not true that all judging ill of others is unlawful? And where are the lines to be drawn?" To this I reply,

First, there are some persons that are appointed on purpose to be judges, in civil societies, and in churches, who are impartially to judge of others that properly fall under their cognizance, whether good or bad, and to pass sentence according to what they are; to approve the good, and condemn the bad, according to the evidence, and the nature of the act done, and its agreement or disagreement with the law which is the judges' rule.

Second, particular persons, in their private judgments of others; are not obliged to divest themselves of reason, that they may thus judge well of all. This would be plainly against reason; for Christian charity is not a thing founded on the ruins of reason, but there is the most sweet harmony between reason and charity. And therefore we are not forbidden to judge all persons when there is plain and clear evidence that they are justly chargeable with evil. We are not to blame, when we judge those to be wicked men, and poor Christless wretches, who give flagrant proof that they are so by a course of wicked action. "Some men's sins," says the apostle, "are open beforehand, going before to judgment; and some men they follow after." That is, some men's sins are such plain testimony against them, that they are sufficient to condemn them as wicked men in full sight of the world, even before the coming of that final day of judgment that shall disclose the secrets of the heart to all. And so some men's actions give such clear evidence of the evil of their intentions, that it is no judging the secrets of the heart, to judge that their designs and ends are wicked. And therefore it is plain, that all judging as to others' state, or qualifications, or actions, is not an uncharitable censoriousness. But the evil of that judging wherein censoriousness consists, lies in two things: —

It lies, first, in judging evil of others when evidence does not oblige to it, or in thinking ill of them when the case very well allows of thinking well of them; when those things that seem to be in their favor are overlooked, and only those that are against them are regarded, and when the latter are magnified, and too great stress laid on them. And the same is the case when persons are hasty and rash in judging and condemning others, though both prudence and charity oblige them to suspend their judgment till they know more of the matter, and all the circumstances are plain before them. Persons may often show a great deal of uncharitableness and rashness, in freely censuring others before they have heard what they have to say in their defense. And hence it is said, "He that answereth a matter before he heareth it, it is folly and shame unto him" (Prov. 18:13).

And the evil of that judging which is censorious, lies, in the second place, in a well-pleasedness in judging ill of others. Persons may judge ill of others, from clear and plain evidence that compels them to it, and yet it may be to their grief that they are obliged to judge as they do; just as when a tender parent hears of some great crime of a child with

such evidence that he cannot but think it true. But very often judgment is passed against others, in such a manner as shows that the individual is well pleased in passing it. He is so forward in judging evil, and judges on such slight evidence, and carries his judgment to such extremes, as shows that his inclination is in it, and that he loves to think the worst of others.

Such a well-pleasèdness in judging ill of others is also manifested in our being forward to declare our judgment, and to speak as well as think evil of others. It may be in speaking of them with ridicule, or an air of contempt, or in bitterness or maliciousness of spirit, or with manifest pleasure in their deficiencies or errors. When to judge ill of others is against the inclination of persons, they will be very cautious in doing it, and will go no further in it than evidence obliges them, and will think the best that the nature of the case will admit, and will put the best possible construction on the words and actions of others. And when they are obliged, against their inclination, to think evil of another, it will be no pleasure to declare it, but they will be backward to speak of it to any, and will do so only when a sense of duty leads them to it.

Having thus shown the nature of censoriousness, I pass, as proposed,

II. To show how a censorious spirit is contrary to the spirit of charity, or Christian love. And,

1. It is contrary to love to our neighbor. — And this appears by three things.

First, we see that persons are very backward to judge evil of themselves. They are very ready to think well of their own qualifications; and so they are forward to think the best of their own state. If there be anything in them that resembles grace, they are exceeding apt to think that their state is good; and so they are ready to think well of their own words and deeds, and very backward to think evil of themselves in any of these respects. And the reason is, that they have a great love to themselves. And, therefore, if they loved their neighbor as themselves, love would have the same tendency with respect to him.

Second, we see that persons are very backward to judge evil of those they love. Thus we see it is in men toward those that are their personal friends, and thus it is in parents toward their children. They are very ready to think well of them, and to think the best of their qualifications, whether natural or moral. They are much more backward than others to take up evil reports of them, and slow to believe what is said against them. They are forward to put the most favorable constructions on their actions. And the reason is, because they love them.

Third, we see, also, that it is universally the case, that where hatred and ill-will toward others most prevail, there a censorious spirit does most prevail also. When persons fall out, and there is a difficulty between them, and anger and prejudice arise, and ill-will is contracted, there is always a forwardness to judge the worst of each other; an aptness to think meanly of each other's qualifications, and to imagine they discover in

each other a great many evil qualities, and some that are very evil indeed. And each is apt to entertain jealousies of what the other may do when absent and out of sight; and is forward to listen to evil reports respecting him, and to believe every word of them, and apt to put the worst construction on all that he may say or do. And very commonly there is a forwardness to think ill of the condition he is in, and to censure him as a graceless person. And as it is in cases like this, of difficulty between particular persons, so it is apt to be the like in cases of difference between two parties. And these things show plainly that it is want of Christian love to our neighbor, and the indulgence of a contrary spirit, from which censoriousness arises. I will only add,

2. *That a censorious spirit manifests a proud spirit.* — And this, the context declares, is contrary to the spirit of charity, or Christian love. A forwardness to judge and censure others shows a proud disposition, as though the censorious person thought himself free from such faults and blemishes, and therefore felt justified in being busy and bitter in charging others with them, and censuring and condemning them for them. This is implied in the language of the Savior, in the seventh chapter of Matthew, “Judge not, that ye be not judged... And why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother’s eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye? Or how wilt thou say to thy brother, Let me pull out the mote out of thine eye; and, behold, a beam is in thine own eye? Thou hypocrite!” And the same is implied in the declaration of the apostle, “Therefore thou art inexcusable, O man, whosoever thou art that judgest: for wherein thou judgest another, thou condemnest thyself; for thou that judgest doest the same things” (Rom. 2:1).

If men were humbly sensible of their own failings, they would not be very forward or pleased in judging others, for the censure passed upon others would but rest on themselves. There are the same kinds of corruption in one man’s heart as in another’s; and if those persons that are most busy in censuring others would but look within, and seriously examine their own hearts and lives, they might generally see the same dispositions and behavior in themselves, at one time or another, which they see and judge in others, or at least something as much deserving of censure. And a disposition to judge and condemn shows a conceited and arrogant disposition. It has the appearance of a person’s setting himself up above others, as though he were fit to be the lord and judge of his fellow-servants, and he supposed they were to stand or fall according to his sentence.

This seems implied in the language of the apostle — “He that speaketh evil of his brother, and judgeth his brother, speaketh evil of the law, and judgeth the law; but if thou judge the law, thou art not a doer of the law, but a judge” (Jam. 4:11). That is, you do not act as a fellow-servant to him that you judge, or as one that is under the same law with him, but as the giver of the law, and the judge whose province it is to pass sentence under it. And therefore it is added, in the next verse, “There is one lawgiver, who is able

to save and to destroy. Who art thou that judgest another?" And so in Rom. 14:4, "Who art thou that judgest another man's servant? to his own master he standeth or falleth." God is the only rightful judge, and the thought of his sovereignty and dominion should hold us back from daring to judge or censure our fellow-beings.

In the application of this subject I remark,

1. It sternly reproves those who commonly take to themselves the liberty of speaking evil of others. — If to think evil be so much to be condemned, surely they are still more to be condemned who not only allow themselves in thinking, but also in speaking evil of others, and backbiting them with their tongues. The evil-speaking that is against neighbors behind their backs does very much consist in censuring them, or in the expression of uncharitable thoughts and judgments of their persons and behavior. And, therefore, speaking evil of others, and judging others, are sometimes put for the same thing in the Bible, as in the passage just quoted from the apostle James.

How often does the Scripture condemn backbiting and evil-speaking! The Psalmist declares of the wicked, "Thou givest thy mouth to evil, and thy tongue frameth deceit. Thou sittest and speakest against thy brother; thou slanderest thine own mother's son" (Psa. 50:19, 20). And, says the apostle, to Titus, "Put them in mind... to speak evil of no man, to be no brawlers, but gentle, showing all meekness unto all men" (Tit. 3:1, 2); and again, it is written, "Wherefore, laying aside all malice, and all guile, and hypocrisies, and envies, and all evil-speakings" (1 Pet. 2:1). And it is mentioned, as part of the character of everyone that is a citizen of Zion, and that shall stand on God's holy hill, that he "backbiteth not with his tongue" (Psa. 15:3). Inquire, therefore, whether you have not been often guilty of this; whether you have not frequently censured others, and expressed your hard thoughts of them, especially of those with whom you may have had some difficulty, or that have been of a different party from yourself. And is it not a practice in which you more or less allow yourself now, from day to day? And if so, consider how contrary it is to the spirit of Christianity, and to the solemn profession which, it may be, you have made as Christians; and be admonished entirely and at once to forsake it. The subject,

2. Warns all against censoriousness, either by thinking or speaking evil of others, as they would be worthy of the name of Christians. — And here, in addition to the thoughts already suggested, let two or three things be considered. And,

First, how often, when the truth comes fully out, do things appear far better concerning others than at first we were ready to judge. — There are many instances in the Scriptures to this point. When the children of Reuben, and of Gad, and the half tribe of Manasseh had built an altar by Jordan, the rest of Israel heard of it, and presently concluded that they had turned away from the Lord, and rashly resolved to go to war against them. But when the truth came to light, it appeared, on the contrary, that they

had erected their altar for a good end, even for the worship of God, as may be seen in the twenty-second chapter of Joshua.

Eli thought Hannah was drunk, when she came up to the temple; but when the truth came to light, he was satisfied that she was full of grief, and was praying and pouring out her soul before God (1 Sam. 1:12-16).

David concluded, from what Ziba told him, that Mephibosheth had manifested a rebellious and treasonable spirit against his crown, and so acted on his censorious judgment, greatly to the injury of the latter; but when the truth came to appear, he saw it was quite otherwise.

Elijah judged ill of the state of Israel, that none were true worshippers of God but himself; but when God told him the truth, it appeared that there were seven thousand who had not bowed the knee to Baal.

And how commonly are things very much the same now-a-days! How often, on thorough examination, have we found things better of others than we have heard, and than at first we were ready to judge! There are always two sides to every story, and it is generally wise, and safe, and charitable to take the best; and yet there is probably no one way in which persons are so liable to be wrong, as in presuming the worst is true, and in forming and expressing their judgment of others, and of their actions, without waiting till all the truth is known.

Second, how little occasion is there for us to pass our sentence on others with respect to their state, qualification or actions that do not concern us. Our great concern is with ourselves. It is of infinite consequence to us that we have a good estate before God; that we are possessed of good qualities and principles; and that we behave ourselves well, and act with right aims, and for right ends. But it is a minor matter to us how it is with others. And there is little need of our censure being passed, even if it were deserved, which we cannot be sure of; for the business is in the hands of God, who is infinitely more fit to see to it than we can be.

And there is a day appointed for his decision. So that, if we assume to judge others, we shall not only take upon ourselves a work that does not belong to us, but we shall be doing it before the time. "Therefore," says the apostle, "judge nothing before the time, until the Lord come, who both will bring to light the hidden things of darkness, and will make manifest the counsels of the hearts; and then shall every man have praise of God" (1 Cor. 4:5).

Third, God has threatened, that if we are found censoriously judging and condemning others, we shall be condemned ourselves. — "Judge not," he says, "that ye be not judged; for with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged." And again, the apostle asks, "And thinkest thou this, O man, that judgest them which do such things, and doest the same, that thou shalt escape the judgment of God?" (Rom. 2:3). These are

awful threatenings from the lips of that great Being who is to be our judge at the final day, by whom it infinitely concerns us to be acquitted, and from whom a sentence of condemnation will be unspeakably dreadful to us, if at last we sink forever under it. Therefore, as we would not ourselves receive condemnation from him, let us not mete out such measure to others.

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