

The Case of Reason Impartially Considered

By John Wesley

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Sermon Number Sermon 70

Sermon Title The Case of Reason Impartially Considered

Sermon Footnote (text of the 1872 edition)

Sermon Scripture "Brethren, be not children in understanding:
Howbeit in malice be ye children, but in understanding be men." 1 Cor.
14:20.

Intro

1. It is the true remark of an eminent man, who had made many observations on human nature, "If reason be against a man, a man will always be against reason." This has been confirmed by the experience of all ages. Very many have been the instances of it in the Christian as well as the heathen world; yea, and that in the earliest times. Even then there were not wanting well-meaning men who, not having much reason themselves, imagined that reason was of no use in religion; yea, rather, that it was a hinderance to it. And there has not been wanting a succession of men who have believed and asserted the same thing. But never was there a greater number of these in the Christian Church, at least in Britain, than at this day.

2. Among them that despise and vilify reason, you may always expect to find those enthusiasts who suppose the dreams of their own imagination to be revelations from God. We cannot expect that men of this turn will pay much regard to reason. Having an infallible guide, they are very little moved by the reasonings of fallible men. In the foremost of these we commonly find the whole herd of Antinomians; all that, however they may differ in other respects, agree in "making void the law through

faith." If you oppose reason to these, when they are asserting propositions ever so full of absurdity and blasphemy, they will probably think it a sufficient answer to say, "O, this is your reason;" or "your carnal reason:" So that all arguments are lost upon them: They regard them no more than stubble or rotten wood.

3. How natural is it for those who observe this extreme, to run into the contrary! While they are strongly impressed with the absurdity of undervaluing reason, how apt are they to overvalue it! Accordingly, we are surrounded with those (we find them on every side) who lay it down as an undoubted principle, that reason is the highest gift of God. They paint it in the fairest colours; they extol it to the skies. They are fond of expatiating in its praise; they make it little less than divine. They are wont to describe it as very near, if not quite, infallible. They look upon it as the all-sufficient director of all the children of men; able, by its native light, to guide them into all truth, and lead them into all virtue.

4. They that are prejudiced against the Christian revelation, who do not receive the Scriptures as the oracles of God, almost universally run into this extreme: I have scarce known any exception: So do all, by whatever name they are called, who deny the Godhead of Christ. (Indeed some of these say they do not deny his Godhead; but only his supreme Godhead. Nay, this is the same thing; for in denying him to be the supreme God, they deny him to be any God at all: Unless they will assert that there are two Gods, a great one and a little one!) All these are vehement applauders of reason, as the great unerring guide. To these over-valuers of reason we may generally add men of eminently strong understanding; who, because they do know more than most other men, suppose they can know all things. But we may likewise add many who are in the other extreme; men of eminently weak understanding; men in whom pride (a very common case) supplies the void of sense; who do not suspect themselves to be blind, because they were always so.

5. Is there, then, no medium between these extremes, -- undervaluing and overvaluing reason? Certainly there is. But who is there to point it out? -- to mark down the middle way? That great master of reason, Mr. Locke, has done something of the kind, something applicable to it, in

one chapter of his Essay concerning Human Understanding. But it is only remotely applicable to this: He does not come home to the point. The good and great Dr. Watts has wrote admirably well, both concerning reason and faith. But neither does anything he has written point out the medium between valuing it too little and too much.

6. I would gladly endeavor in some degree to supply this grand defect; to point out, First, to the under-valuers of it, what reason can do; and then to the over-valuers of it, what reason cannot do. But before either the one or the other can be done, it is absolutely necessary to define the term, to fix the precise meaning of the word in question. Unless this is done, men may dispute to the end of the world without coming to any good conclusion. This is one great cause of the numberless altercations which have been on the subject. Very few of the disputants thought of this; of defining the word they were disputing about. The natural consequence was, they were just as far from an agreement at the end as at the beginning.

I

I. 1. First, then, reason is sometimes taken for argument. So, "Give me a reason for your assertion." So in Isaiah: "Bring forth your strong reasons;" that is, your strong arguments. We use the word nearly in the same sense, when we say, "He has good reasons for what he does." It seems here to mean, He has sufficient motives; such as ought to influence a wise man. But how is the word to be understood in the celebrated question concerning the "reasons of things?" particularly when it is asked, An rationes rerum sint aeternae? "Whether the reasons of things are eternal?" Do not the "reasons of things" here mean the relations of things to each other? But what are the eternal relations of temporal things? of things which did not exist till yesterday? Could the relations of these things exist before the things themselves had any existence? Is not then, the talking of such relations a flat contradiction? Yea, as palpable a one as can be put into words.

2. In another acceptation of the word, reason is much the same with understanding. It means a faculty of the human soul; that faculty which exerts itself in three ways; -- by simple apprehension, by judgement,

and by discourse. Simple apprehension is barely conceiving a thing in the mind; the first and most simple act of understanding. Judgment is the determining that the things before conceived either agree with or differ from each other. Discourse, strictly speaking, is the motion or progress of the mind from one judgment to another. The faculty of the soul which includes these three operations I here mean by the term reason.

3. Taking the word in this sense, let us now impartially consider, First, What is it that reason can do? And who can deny that it can do much, very much, in the affairs of common life? To begin at the lowest point: It can direct servants how to perform the various works wherein they are employed; to discharge their duty, either in the meanest offices or in any of a higher nature. It can direct the husbandman at what time, and in what manner, to cultivate his ground; to plough, to sow, to reap, to bring in his corn, to breed and manage his cattle, and to act with prudence and propriety in every part of his employment. It can direct artificers how to prepare the various sorts of apparel, and a thousand necessities and conveniences of life, not only for themselves and their households, but for their neighbours, whether nigh or afar off. It can direct those of higher abilities to plan and execute works of a more elegant kind. It can direct the painter, the statuary, the musician, to excel in the stations wherein Providence has placed them. It can direct the mariner to steer his course over the bosom of the great deep. It enables those who study the laws of their country to defend the property or life of their fellow-subjects; and those who study the art of healing to cure most of the maladies to which we are exposed in our present state.

4. To ascend higher still: It is certain reason can assist us in going through the whole circle of arts and sciences; of grammar, rhetoric, logic, natural and moral philosophy, mathematics, algebra, metaphysics. It can teach whatever the skill or industry of man has invented for some thousand years. It is absolutely necessary for the due discharge of the most important offices; such as are those of Magistrates, whether of an inferior or superior rank; and those of subordinate or supreme Governors, whether of states, provinces, or kingdoms.

5. All this few men in their senses will deny. No thinking man can doubt but reason is of considerable service in all things relating to the present world. But suppose we speak of higher things, -- the things of another world; what can reason do here? Is it a help or a hinderance of religion? It may do much in the affairs of men; but what can it do in the things of God?

6. This is a point that deserves to be deeply considered. If you ask, What can reason do in religion? I answer, It can do exceeding much, both with regard to the foundation of it, and the superstructure. The foundation of true religion stands upon the oracles of God. It is built upon the Prophets and Apostles, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner-stone. Now, of what excellent use is reason, if we would either understand ourselves, or explain to others, those living oracles! And how is it possible without it to understand the essential truths contained therein? a beautiful summary of which we have in that which is called the Apostles' Creed. Is it not reason (assisted by the Holy Ghost) which enables us to understand what the Holy Scriptures declare concerning the being and attributes of God? -- concerning his eternity and immensity; his power, wisdom, and holiness? It is by reason that God enables us in some measure to comprehend his method of dealing with the children of men; the nature of his various dispensations, of the old and new covenant, of the law and the gospel. It is by this we understand (his Spirit opening and enlightening the eyes of our understanding) what that repentance is, not to be repented of; what is that faith whereby we are saved; what is the nature and the condition of justification; what are the immediate and what the subsequent fruits of it. By reason we learn what is that new birth, without which we cannot enter into the kingdom of heaven; and what that holiness is without which no man shall see the Lord. By the due use of reason we come to know what are the tempers implied in inward holiness; and what it is to be outwardly holy -- holy in all manner of conversation: In other words, what is the mind that was in Christ; and what it is to walk as Christ walked.

7. Many particular cases will occur with respect to several of the foregoing articles, in which we shall have occasion for all our understanding, if we would keep a conscience void of offence. Many cases of conscience are not to be solved without the utmost exercise of

our reason. The same is requisite in order to understand and to discharge our ordinary relative duties; -- the duties of parents and children, of husbands and wives, and (to name no more) of masters and servants. In all these respects, and in all the duties of common life, God has given us our reason for a guide. And it is only by acting up to the dictates of it, by using all the understanding which God hath given us, that we can have a conscience void of offense towards God and towards man.

8. Here, then, there is a large field indeed, wherein reason may expatiate and exercise all its powers. And if reason can do all this, both in civil and religious things, what is it that it cannot do? We have hitherto endeavoured to lay aside all prejudice, and to weigh the matter calmly and impartially. The same course let us take still: Let us now coolly consider, without prepossession on any side, what it is, according to the best light we have, that reason cannot do.

II

II. 1. And, First, reason cannot produce faith. Although it is always consistent with reason, yet reason cannot produce faith, in the scriptural sense of the word. Faith, according to Scripture, is "an evidence," or conviction, "of things not seen." It is a divine evidence, bringing a full conviction of an invisible eternal world. It is true, there was a kind of shadowy persuasion of this, even among the wiser Heathens; probably from tradition, or from some gleams of light reflected from the Israelites. Hence many hundred years before our Lord was born, the Greek Poet uttered that great truth, -- Millions of spiritual creatures walk the earth Unseen, whether we wake, or if we sleep. But this was little more than faint conjecture: It was far from a firm conviction; which reason, in its highest state of improvement, could never produce in any child of man.

2. Many years ago I found the truth of this by sad experience. After carefully heaping up the strongest arguments which I could find, either in ancient or modern authors, for the very being of a God, and (which is nearly connected with it) the existence of an invisible world, I have wandered up and down, musing with myself: "What, if all these things

which I see around me, this earth and heaven, this universal frame, has existed from eternity? What, if that melancholy supposition of the old Poet be the real case, -- oie per phullon genee, toiede kai andron; What, if the generation of men be exactly parallel with the generation of leaves? " if the earth drops its successive inhabitants, just as the tree drops its leaves? What, if that saying of a great man be really true, -- Post mortem nihil est; ipsaque mors nihil? Death is nothing, and nothing is after death? How am I sure that this is not the case; that I have not followed cunningly devised fables?" -- And I have pursued the thought, till there was no spirit in me, and I was ready to choose strangling rather than life.

3. But in a point of so unspeakable importance, do not depend upon the word of another; but retire for awhile from the busy world, and make the experiment yourself. Try whether your reason will give you a clear satisfactory evidence of the invisible world. After the prejudices of education are laid aside, produce your strong reasons for the existence of this. Set them all in array; silence all objections; and put all your doubts to flight. alas! you cannot, with all your understanding. You may repress them for a season. But how quickly will they rally again, and attack you with redoubled violence! And what can poor reason do for your deliverance? The more vehemently you struggle, the more deeply you are entangled in the toils; and you find no way to escape.

4. How was the case with that great admirer of reason, the author of the maxim above cited? I mean the famous Mr. Hobbes. None will deny that he had a strong understanding. But did it produce in him a full and satisfactory conviction of an invisible world? Did it open the eyes of his understanding, to see Beyond the bounds of this diurnal sphere? O no! far from it! His dying words ought never to be forgotten. "Where are you going, Sir?" said one of his friends. He answered, "I am taking a leap in the dark!" and died. Just such an evidence of the invisible world can bare reason give to the wisest of men!

5. Secondly. Reason alone cannot produce hope in any child of man: I mean scriptural hope, whereby we "rejoice in hope of the glory of God:" That hope which St. Paul in one place terms, "tasting the powers of the world to come;" in another, the "sitting in heavenly places in Christ

Jesus:" That which enables us to say, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath begotten us again unto a lively hope; -- to an inheritance incorruptible, undefiled, and that fadeth not away; which is reserved in heaven for us." This hope can only spring from Christian faith: Therefore, where there is not faith, there is not hope. Consequently, reason, being unable to produce faith, must be equally unable to produce hope. Experience confirms this likewise. How often have I laboured, and that with my might, to beget this hope in myself! But it was lost labour: I could no more acquire this hope of heaven, than I could touch heaven with my hand. And whoever of you makes the same attempt will find it attended with the same success. I do not deny, that a self-deceiving enthusiast may work in himself a kind of hope: He may work himself up into a lively imagination; into a sort of pleasing dream: He may "compass himself about, "as the Prophet speaks, "with sparks of his own kindling:" But this cannot be of long continuance; in a little while the bubble will surely break. And what will follow? "This shall ye have at my hand, saith the Lord, ye shall lie down in sorrow."

6. If reason could have produced a hope full of immortality in any child of man, it might have produced it in that great man whom Justin Martyr scruples not to call "a Christian before Christ." For who that was not favoured with the written word of God, ever excelled, yea, or equalled, Socrates? In what other Heathen can we find so strong an understanding, joined with so consummate virtue? But had he really this hope? Let him answer for himself. What is the conclusion of that noble apology which he made before his unrighteous judges? "And now, O judges! ye are going hence to live; and I am going hence to die: Which of these is best, the gods know; but, I suppose, no man does." No man knows! How far is this from the language of the little Benjamite: "I desire to depart, and to be with Christ; which is far better!" And how many thousands are there at this day, even in our own nation, young men and maidens, old men and children, who are able to witness the same good confession!

7. But who is able to do this, by the force of his reason, be it ever so highly improved? One of the most sensible and most amiable Heathens that have lived since our Lord died, even though he governed the greatest empire in the world, was the Emperor Adrian. It is his

well-known saying, "A prince ought to resemble the sun: He ought to shine on every part of his dominion, and to diffuse his salutary rays in every place where he comes." And his life was a comment upon his word: Wherever he went, he was executing justice, and showing mercy. Was not he then, at the close of a long life, full of immortal hope? We are able to answer this from unquestionable authority, -- from his own dying words. How inimitably pathetic! ADRANI MORIENTIS AD ANIMAM SUAM. "DYING ADRIAN TO HIS SOUL." Animula, vagula, blandula, Hospes, comesque corporis, Quae nunc abibis in loca, Pallidula, rigida, nudula, Nec, ut soles, dabis jocos! Which to the English reader may see translated into our own language, with all the spirit of the original: -- Poor, little, pretty, fluttering thing, Must we no longer live together? And dost thou prune thy trembling wing, To take they flight, thou know'st not whither? Thy pleasing vein, thy humorous folly, Lies all neglected, all forgot! And pensive, wavering, melancholy, Thou hop'st, and fear'st, thou know'st not what.

8. Thirdly. Reason, however cultivated and improved, cannot produce the love of God; which is plain from hence: It cannot produce either faith or hope; from which alone this love can flow. It is then only, when we "behold" by faith "what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us," in giving his only Son, that we might not perish, but have everlasting life, that "the love of God is shed abroad in our heart by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us." It is only then, when we "rejoice in hope of the glory of God," that "we love Him because he first loved us." But what can cold reason do in this matter? It may present us with fair ideas; it can draw a fine picture of love: But this is only a painted fire. And farther than this reason cannot go. I made the trial for many years. I collected the finest hymns, prayers, and meditations which I could find in any language; and I said, sung, or read them over and over, with all possible seriousness and attention. But still I was like the bones in Ezekiel's vision: "The skin covered them above; but there was no breath in them."

9. And as reason cannot produce the love of God, so neither can it produce the love of our neighbour; a calm, generous, disinterested benevolence to every child of man. This earnest, steady good-will to our fellow-creatures never flowed from any fountain but gratitude to our

Creator. And if this be (as a very ingenious man supposes) the very essence of virtue, it follows that virtue can have no being, unless it spring from the love of God. Therefore, as reason cannot produce this love, so neither can it produce virtue.

10. And as it cannot give either faith, hope, love, or virtue, so it cannot give happiness; since, separate from these, there can be no happiness for any intelligent creature. It is true, those who are void of all virtue may have pleasures, such as they are; but happiness they have not, cannot have. No: Their joy is all sadness; their mirth is all vain; Their laughter is madness; their pleasure is pain! Pleasures? Shadows! dreams! fleeting as the wind! unsubstantial as the rainbow! as unsatisfying to the poor gasping soul, As the gay colours of an eastern cloud. None of these will stand the test of reflection: If thought comes, the bubble breaks! Suffer me now to add a few plain words, first to you who under-value reason. Never more declaim in that wild, loose, ranting manner, against this precious gift of God. Acknowledge "the candle of the Lord," which he hath fixed in our souls for excellent purposes. You see how many admirable ends it answers, were it only in the things of this life: Of what unspeakable use is even a moderate share of reason in all our worldly employments, from the lowest and meanest offices of life, through all the intermediate branches of business; till we ascend to those that are of the highest importance and the greatest difficulty! When therefore you despise or depreciate reason, you must not imagine you are doing God service: Least of all, are you promoting the cause of God when you are endeavouring to exclude reason out of religion. Unless you wilfully shut your eyes, you cannot but see of what service it is both in laying the foundation of true religion, under the guidance of the Spirit of God, and in raising the superstructure. You see it directs us in every point both of faith and practice: It guides us with regard to every branch both of inward and outward holiness. Do we not glory in this, that the whole of our religion is a "reasonable service?" yea, and that every part of it, when it is duly performed, is the highest exercise of our understanding? Permit me to add a few words to you, likewise, who over-value reason. Why should you run from one extreme to the other? Is not the middle way best? Let reason do all that reason can: Employ it as far as it will go. But, at the same time, acknowledge it is utterly incapable of giving either faith, or hope, or love; and, consequently, of

producing either real virtue, or substantial happiness. Expect these from a higher source, even from the Father of the spirits of all flesh. Seek and receive them, not as your own acquisition, but as the gifts of God. Lift up your hearts to Him who "giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not." He alone can give that faith, which is "the evidence" and conviction "of things not seen." He alone can "beget you unto a lively hope" of an inheritance eternal in the heavens; and He alone can "shed his love abroad in your heart by the Holy Ghost given unto you." Ask, therefore, and it shall be given you! Cry unto him, and you shall not cry in vain! How can you doubt? "If ye, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your Father who is in heaven give the Holy Ghost unto them that ask him!" So shall you be living witnesses, that wisdom, holiness, and happiness are one; are inseparably united; and are, indeed, the beginning of that eternal life which God hath given us in his Son.

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