





CONSIDERATIONS

ON THE

KEEPING OF NEGROES;

RECOMMENDED TO THE

PROFESSORS OF CHRISTIANITY OF EVERY
DENOMINATION.

“Forasmuch as ye did it to the least of these my brethren, ye did it unto me.”—
MATT. XXV. 40.

BY JOHN WOOLMAN.

FIRST PRINTED IN THE YEAR 1754.



PHILADELPHIA:

PUBLISHED BY THE TRACT ASSOCIATION OF FRIENDS,
AND TO BE HAD AT THEIR DEPOSITORY,
No. 84, MULBERRY STREET.
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INTRODUCTORY REMARKS, BY THE AUTHOR.

WHAT I write on this subject is with reluctance, and the hints given are in as general terms as my concern would allow. I know it is a point about which, in all its branches, men that appear to aim well are not generally agreed; and for that reason I chose to avoid being very particular. If I may happily let drop any thing that may excite such as are concerned in the practice to a close thinking on the subject treated of, the candid amongst them may easily do the subject such further justice, as on an impartial inquiry it may appear to deserve; and such an inquiry I would earnestly recommend.

[Tract No. 1, of this Series, is a Memoir of John Woolman.]

CONSIDERATIONS

ON

THE KEEPING OF NEGROES.



As many times there are different motives to the same action ; and one does that from a generous heart, which another does for selfish ends ; the like may be said in this case.

There are various circumstances among those that keep negroes, and different ways by which they fall under their care ; and I doubt not, there are many well disposed persons amongst them who desire rather to manage wisely and justly in this difficult matter, than to make gain of it.

But the general disadvantage which these poor negroes lie under in an enlightened Christian country, having often filled me with real sadness, I now think it my duty, through Divine aid, to offer some thoughts thereon to the consideration of others.

When we remember that all nations are of one blood, (Gen. iii. 20,) that in this world we are but sojourners, that we are subject to the like afflictions and infirmities of body, the like disorders and frailties in mind, the like temptations, the same death, and the same judgment, and that the all-wise Being is Judge and Lord over us all, it seems to raise an idea of general brotherhood, and a disposition easy to be touched with a feeling of each other's afflictions : but when we forget those things, and look chiefly at our outward circumstances, in this and some ages past, constantly retaining in our minds the distinction between us and them, with respect to our knowledge and improvement in things Divine, natural and artificial, our breasts being apt to be filled with fond notions of superiority, there is danger of erring in our conduct toward them.

We allow them to be of the same species with ourselves ; on odds is, we are in a higher station, and enjoy greater favour than they. And when it is thus that our heavenly Father endoweth some of his children with distinguished gifts, they are intended for good ends ; but if those thus gifted are thereby lifted up above their brethren, not considering themselves as debtors to the weak, nor behaving themselves as faithful stewards, none who judge impartially can suppose them free from ingratitude.

When a people dwell under the liberal distribution of favours from heaven, it behoves them carefully to inspect their ways, and consider the purposes for which those favours are bestowed, lest, through forgetfulness of God and misusing his gifts, they incur his heavy displeasure, whose judgments are just and equal, who exalteth and humbleth to the dust, as he seeth meet.

It appears, by Holy Record, that men under high favours have been apt to err in their opinions concerning others. Thus Israel, according to the description of the prophet, Isa. lxxv. 5, when exceedingly corrupted and degenerated, yet remembered they were the chosen people of God ; and could say, "Stand by thyself, come not near me, for I am holier than thou." That this was no chance language, but their common opinion of other people, more fully appears, by considering the circumstances which attended when God was beginning to fulfil his precious promises concerning the gathering of the Gentiles.

The Most High, in a vision, undeceived Peter, first prepared his heart to believe, and at the house of Cornelius showed him of a certainty that God is no respecter of persons.

The effusion of the Holy Ghost upon a people, with whom they, the Jewish Christians, would not so much as eat, was strange to them. All they of the circumcision were astonished to see it ; and the apostles and brethren of Judea contended with Peter about it, till he having rehearsed the whole matter, and fully shown that the Father's love was unlimited, they are thereat struck with admiration, and cry out, "Then hath God also to the Gentiles granted repentance unto life."

The opinion of peculiar favours being confined to them, was deeply rooted, or else the above instance had been less strange to them, for these reasons : First, They were generally acquainted with the writings of the prophets, by whom this time was repeatedly spoken of, and pointed at. Secondly, Our blessed Lord shortly before expressly said, "I have other sheep, not of this fold, them also must I bring," &c. Lastly, His words to them after his resurrection, at the very time of his ascension, "Ye shall

be witnesses to me, not only in Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria, but to the uttermost parts of the earth."

These concurring circumstances, one would think, might have raised a strong expectation of seeing such a time; yet when it came, it proved matter of offence and astonishment.

To consider mankind otherwise than brethren, to think favours are peculiar to one nation, and to exclude others, plainly supposes a darkness in the understanding: for as God's love is universal, so where the mind is sufficiently influenced by it, it begets a likeness of itself, and the heart is enlarged towards all men. Again, to conclude a people froward, perverse, and worse by nature than others, who ungratefully receive favours, and apply them to bad ends, will excite a behaviour toward them unbecoming the excellence of true religion.

To prevent such an error, let us calmly consider their circumstance: and the better to do it, make their case ours. Suppose then that our ancestors and we had been exposed to constant servitude, in the more servile and inferior employments of life; that we had been destitute of the help of reading and good company; that amongst ourselves we had had but few wise and pious instructors; that the religious amongst our superiors seldom took notice of us; that while others in ease had plentifully heaped up the fruit of our labour, we had received barely enough to relieve nature; and being wholly at the command of others, had generally been treated as a contemptible, ignorant part of mankind; should we, in that case, be less abject than they now are? Again, if oppression be so hard to bear, that a wise man is made mad by it, Eccl. vii. 7, then a series of oppressions, altering the behaviour and manners of a people, is what may reasonably be expected.

When our property is taken contrary to our mind, by means appearing to us unjust, it is only through Divine influence, and the enlargement of heart from thence proceeding, that we can love our reputed oppressors. If the negroes fall short in this, an uneasy, if not a disconsolate disposition will be awakened, and remain like seeds in their minds, producing sloth and other habits which appear odious to us; and with which, had they been free men, they would not perhaps have been chargeable. These, and other circumstances, rightly considered, will lessen the too great disparity which some make between us and them.

Integrity of heart has appeared in some of them; so that if we continue in the word of Christ, and our conduct towards them be seasoned with his love, we may hope to see the good effect of it.

This, in a good degree, is the case with some into whose hands they have fallen ; but that too many treat them otherwise, not seeming conscious of any neglect, is, alas ! too evident.

When self-love presides in our minds, our opinions are biassed in our own favour ; and in this condition, being concerned with a people so situated that they have no voice to plead their own cause, there is danger of using ourselves to an undisturbed partiality, until, by long custom, the mind becomes reconciled with it, and the judgment itself infected.

To apply humbly to God for wisdom, that we may thereby be enabled to see things as they are, and as they ought to be, is very needful. Hereby the hidden things of darkness may be brought to light, and the judgment made clear : we shall then consider mankind as brethren. Though different degrees and a variety of qualifications and abilities, one dependent on another, be admitted, yet high thoughts will be laid aside, and all men treated as becometh the sons of one father, agreeably to the doctrine of Christ Jesus.

“He hath laid down the best criterion, by which mankind ought to judge of their own conduct, and others judge for them of theirs, one towards another, viz. ‘Whatsoever ye would that men should do unto you, do ye even so to them.’ I take it, that all men by nature are equally entitled to the equity of this rule, and under the indispensable obligations of it. One man ought not to look upon another man or society of men as so far beneath him that he should not put himself in their place, in all his actions towards them, and bring all to this test, viz. How should I approve of this conduct, were I in their circumstance, and they in mine ?”

This doctrine being of a moral unchangeable nature, hath been likewise inculcated in the former dispensation ; “If a stranger sojourn with thee in your land, ye shall not vex him ; but the stranger that dwelleth with you shall be as one born amongst you, and thou shalt love him as thyself.” Had these people come voluntarily and dwelt amongst us, to call them strangers would be proper ; and their being brought by force, with regret and a languishing mind, may well raise compassion in a heart rightly disposed : but there is nothing in such treatment which, upon a wise and judicious consideration, will in any way lessen their right to be treated as strangers. If the treatment which many of them meet with be rightly examined, and compared with those precepts, “Thou shalt not vex him nor oppress him ; he shall be as one born amongst you, and thou shalt love him as

thyself," there will appear an important difference between them.

It may be objected that there is the cost of purchase, and risk of their lives to them who possess them, and therefore it is needful that they make the best use of their time. In a practice just and reasonable, such objections may have weight; but if the work be wrong from the beginning, there is little or no force in them. If I purchase a man who has never forfeited his liberty, the natural right of freedom is in him; and shall I keep him and his posterity in servitude and ignorance? "How should I approve of this conduct, were I in his circumstances, and he in mine?" It may be thought, that to treat them as we would willingly be treated, our gain by them would be inconsiderable; and it were, in divers respects, better that there were none in our country.

We may further consider, that they are now amongst us, and people of our nation were the cause of their being here; that whatsoever difficulty accrues thereon, we are justly chargeable with, and to bear all inconveniences attending it with a serious and weighty concern of mind to do our duty by them, is the best we can do. To seek a remedy by continuing the oppression, because we have power to do it, and see others do it, will, I apprehend, not be doing as we would be done by.

How deeply soever men are involved in difficulties, sincerity of heart, and upright walking before God, freely submitting to his providence, is the most sure remedy. He only is able to relieve, not only persons, but nations in their greatest calamities.

To act continually with integrity of heart, above all narrow or selfish motives, is a sure token of our being partakers of that salvation which "God hath appointed for walls and bulwarks," and is, beyond all contradiction, a more happy situation than can ever be promised by the utmost reach of art and power united, not proceeding from heavenly wisdom.

A supply to nature's lawful wants, joined with a peaceful, humble mind, is the truest happiness in this life; and if we arrive at this, and continue to walk in the path of the just, our case will be truly happy. Though herein we may part with, or miss of the glaring show of riches, and leave our children little else but wise instructions, a good example, and the knowledge of some honest employment; these, with the blessing of Providence, are sufficient for their happiness, and are more likely to prove so, than laying up treasures for them, which are often rather a snare than any real benefit; especially to those who, instead of being

exampled to temperance, are in all things taught to prefer the getting of riches, and to eye the temporal distinctions they give, as the principal business of this life. These readily overlook the true happiness of man, which results from the enjoyment of all things in the fear of God, and miserably substituting an inferior good, dangerous in the acquiring and uncertain in the fruition, they are subject to many disappointments, and every sweet carries its sting.

It is the conclusion of our blessed Lord and his apostles, as appears by their lives and doctrines, that the highest delights of sense, or most pleasing objects visible, ought ever to be accounted infinitely inferior to that real intellectual happiness, suited to man in his primitive innocence, and now to be found in true renovation of mind; and that the comforts of our present life, the things most grateful to us, ought always to be received with temperance, and never made the chief objects of our desire, hope, or love; but that our whole heart and affections be principally looking to that "city, which hath foundations, whose maker and builder is God." Did we so improve the gifts bestowed on us, that our children might have an education suited to these doctrines, and our example to confirm it, we might rejoice in hope of their being heirs of an inheritance incorruptible.

This inheritance, as Christians, we esteem the most valuable; and how then can we fail to desire it for our children? O that we were consistent with ourselves, in pursuing the means necessary to obtain it!

It appears by experience, that where children are educated in fulness, ease, and idleness, evil habits are more prevalent than is common amongst such who are prudently employed in the necessary affairs of life. If children are not only educated in the way of so great temptation, but have also the opportunity of lording it over their fellow-creatures, and being masters of men in their childhood, how can we expect otherwise than that their tender minds will be possessed with thoughts too high for them; which gaining strength by continuance, will prove like a slow current, gradually separating them from or keeping from acquaintance with that humility and meekness in which alone lasting happiness can be enjoyed.

Man is born to labour, and experience abundantly showeth, that it is for our good: but where the powerful lay the burden on the inferior, without affording a Christian education, and suitable opportunity of improving the mind, and a treatment which we, in their case, should approve, in order that themselves may

live at ease, and fare sumptuously, and lay up riches for their posterity; this seems to contradict the design of Providence, and, I doubt not, is sometimes the effect of a perverted mind; for while the life of one is made grievous by the rigour of another, it entails misery on both.

Amongst the manifold works of Providence, displayed in the different ages of the world, these which follow, with many others, may afford instruction.

Abraham was called of God to leave his country and kindred, to sojourn amongst strangers. Through famine, and danger of death, he was forced to flee from one kingdom to another; yet, at length, he not only had assurance of being the father of many nations, but became a mighty prince. (Gen. xxiii. 6.)

Remarkable were the dealings of God with Jacob in a low estate; the just sense he retained of them after his advancement, appears by his words: "I am not worthy of the least of all thy mercies."

The numerous afflictions of Joseph are very singular; the particular providence of God therein, no less manifest: he at length became governor of Egypt, and famous for wisdom and virtue.

The series of troubles which David passed through, few amongst us are ignorant of; and yet he afterwards became as one of the great men of the earth.

Some evidences of the Divine wisdom appear in those things, in that such who are intended for high stations, have first been very low and dejected, that Truth might be sealed on their hearts; and that the characters there imprinted by bitterness and adversity, might in after years remain, suggesting compassionate ideas, and, in their prosperity, quicken their regard to those in the like condition. This yet further appears in the case of Israel; who were well acquainted with grievous sufferings, a long and rigorous servitude; and then, through many notable events, were made chief amongst the nations. To them we find a repetition of precepts to the purpose abovesaid: though, for ends agreeable to infinite wisdom, they were chosen as a peculiar people for a time; yet the Most High acquaints them, that his love is not confined, but extends to the stranger; and to excite their compassion, reminds them of times past, "Ye were strangers in the land of Egypt." Again, "Thou shalt not oppress a stranger, for ye know the heart of a stranger, seeing ye were strangers in the land of Egypt."

If we call to mind our beginning, some of us may find a time,

wherein our fathers were under afflictions, reproaches, and manifold sufferings.

Respecting our progress in this land, the time is short since our beginning was small and number few, compared with the native inhabitants. He that sleeps not by day nor night, hath watched over us, and kept us as the apple of his eye. His Almighty arm hath been round about us, and saved us from dangers.

The wilderness and solitary deserts in which our fathers passed the days of their pilgrimage, are now turned into pleasant fields; and while many parts of the world have groaned under the heavy calamities of war, our habitation remains quiet, and our land fruitful.

When we trace back the steps we have trodden, and see how the Lord hath opened a way in the wilderness for us, to the wise it will easily appear, that all this was not done to be buried in oblivion, but to prepare a people for more fruitful returns; and the remembrance thereof ought to humble us in prosperity, and excite in us a Christian benevolence towards our inferiors.

If we do not consider these things aright, but through a stupid indolence, conceive views of interest separate from the general good of the great brotherhood, and, in pursuance thereof, treat our inferiors with rigour, to increase our wealth and gain riches for our children; "What then shall we do when God riseth up? and when he visiteth, what shall we answer him? did not he that made us, make them? and did not one fashion us?"

To our great Master we stand or fall, to judge or condemn us as is most suitable to his wisdom or authority; my inclination is to persuade, and entreat, and simply give hints of my way of thinking.

If the Christian religion be considered, both respecting its doctrines and the happy influence which it hath on the minds and manners of all real Christians, it looks reasonable to think, that the miraculous manifestation thereof to the world is a kindness beyond expression.

Are we the people thus favoured? Are we they whose minds are opened, influenced, and governed by the Spirit of Christ, and thereby made sons of God? Is it not a fair conclusion, that we, like our heavenly Father, ought in our degree to be active in the same great cause of the eternal happiness of, at least, our whole families, and more, if thereto capacitated?

If we, by the operation of the Spirit of Christ, become heirs with him in the kingdom of his Father, and are redeemed from the alluring counterfeit joys of this world, and the joy of Christ

remain in us; to suppose that one in this happy condition can, for the sake of earthly riches, not only deprive his fellow-creatures of the sweetness of freedom, which, rightly used, is one of the greatest temporal blessings, but therewith neglect using proper means for their acquaintance with the Holy Scriptures, and the advantage of true religion, seems at least a contradiction to reason.

Whoever rightly advocates the cause of some, thereby promotes the good of all. The state of mankind was harmonious in the beginning, and though sin hath introduced discord, yet through the wonderful love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord, the way is open for our redemption, and means appointed to restore us to primitive harmony. That if one suffer by the unfaithfulness of another, the mind, the most noble part of him that occasions the discord, is thereby alienated from its true and real happiness.

Our duty and interest are inseparably united, and when we neglect or misuse our talents, we necessarily depart from the heavenly fellowship, and are in the way to the greatest of evils.

Therefore to examine and prove ourselves, to find what harmony the power presiding in us bears with the Divine nature, is a duty not more incumbent and necessary, than it would be beneficial.

In Holy Writ the Divine Being saith of himself, "I am the Lord, which exercise loving-kindness, judgment and righteousness in the earth; for in these things I delight, saith the Lord." Again, speaking in the way of man, to show his compassion to Israel, whose wickedness had occasioned a calamity, and then being humbled under it, it is said, "His soul was grieved for their miseries." If we consider the life of our blessed Saviour, when on earth, as it is recorded by his followers, we shall find that one uniform desire for the eternal and temporal good of mankind, discovered itself in all his actions.

If we observe men, both apostles and others, in many different ages, who have really come to the unity of the Spirit, and the fellowship of the saints, there still appears the like disposition; and in them the desire for the real happiness of mankind has out-balanced the desire of ease, liberty, and, many times, of life itself.

If, upon a true search, we find that our natures are so far renewed, that to exercise righteousness and loving-kindness, according to our ability, towards all men, without respect of persons, is easy to us, or is our delight; if our love be so orderly and regu-

lar, that he who doeth the will of our Father who is in heaven, appears in our view to be our nearest relation, our brother, and sister, and mother ; if this be our case, there is a good foundation to hope, that the blessing of God will sweeten our treasures during our stay in this life, and that our memory will be savoury, when we are entered into rest.

To conclude, It is a truth most certain, that a life guided by wisdom from above, agreeably with justice, equity and mercy, is throughout consistent and amiable, and truly beneficial to society; the serenity and calmness of mind in it, affords an unparalleled comfort in this life, and the end of it is blessed.

And it is no less true, that they who in the midst of high favours remain ungrateful, and under all the advantages that a Christian can desire, are selfish, earthly and sensual, do miss the true fountain of happiness, and wander in a maze of dark anxiety, where all their treasures are insufficient to quiet their minds : hence, from an insatiable craving, they neglect doing good with what they have acquired, and too often add oppression to vanity, that they may compass more.

“O that they were wise, that they understood this, that they would consider their latter end !”

T H E E N D .



