

LECTURE XXI.

ON THE RELATION OF MASTER AND SERVANT.

CONTENTS.

The true origin of the relation of servant, and master.— Various ways of becoming subject to service—reciprocal duties of master and servant.—At the beginning of the Christian era, the only servants were slaves.—The difference between them—The question, whether slavery be lawful.—The causes which have been alledged for slavery,—crimes,—debt,—captivity. Their insufficiency.—The iniquity of the African commerce for slaves : Of slavery in despotic, and in free countries.—The question, whether justice now requires the universal emancipation of the slaves in the United States ; or, whether it can be effected consistently with the public safety. The importance of attempting it, if it be now possible.—The obstacles, however, hardly to be surmounted.

THE next domestic relation which occurs to be considered is that of master and servant.

In the progress of society, and under the operation of laws which secure to every citizen the fruits of his own in-

dustry and skill, distinctions in property will necessarily arise. Some, by a well-directed, or fortunate industry, will accumulate wealth, which will enable them to purchase the services of others, who, by mismanagement, misfortune, or the want of address, having fallen into poverty, will be obliged to sell their labors. This is originally the only reasonable ground on which the relation of master and servant can be founded. It is bottomed upon the principles of all fair and equitable commerce. Labor is a commodity brought into the market; and the price of it must depend on the number of those, on the one hand, who desire to purchase, and of those, on the other, who are obliged to sell. In a contract thus formed, under the supreme guardianship of the laws, the servant is always secured against injustice and oppression.

A man, through the pressure of poverty, may not only be obliged to give his own services for hire; but he may reasonably subject his children to a temporary servitude for their benefit. At the same time, he has it always in his power, of which a prudent and humane parent will doubtless avail himself, to secure for them by contract, comfortable provision, and equitable treatment; and to provide for them such an education as will enable them honestly, and decently, in their station, to obtain their own living, after they shall be restored to their freedom.—If the children of the poor, are neglected by their pa-

rents, or if they have early become orphans, and are likely to fall into want, and, by the infelicity of their situation, to be led into profligate habits, and thus become a charge, or a nuisance to society, society may enter into the rights of parents, or rather, may exert a right inherent in itself, and necessary to its own preservation, and happiness, of disposing, for a limited period, of the service of these children, under equitable conditions, calculated for the mutual benefit of the master, and of the child so bound to service.

These various ways of forming the relation of master and servant, may all be considered as being founded in contract, in which an adequate price is paid by the master for the labor of the servant, and the servant repays, by his labor, the benefits he receives.

The duties of masters and servants may all be summed up in equity on the one hand, and fidelity on the other. If it be asked what equity, or fidelity requires in these relations respectively, I answer, the fulfilment of whatever lawful engagements are expressly stipulated in the contract, or are reasonably presumed to be implied in it: and these reasonable implications are always to be judged of according to the general and known customs of the country.—I say the fulfilment of all *lawful* engagements; because no contract for the performance of things in

themselves unlawful, is obligatory. It contradicts an antecedent, and superior obligation. No power can justifiably impose a command which requires the violation of any moral, or religious duty; and no subordination in rank can justify obedience.

Servants, notwithstanding the humility of their state, are susceptible of the common feelings of human nature. And although they are secured by the laws against extreme oppression, yet their dependence, which may often expose them to the insults of pride and caprice, puts their happiness very much in the power of their superiors. Hence arises a duty on the part of the master, springing out of the general obligations of humanity, to avoid all unnecessary harshness; all haughtiness and insolence of treatment and demeanor towards his domestics, and to address them, at all times, with such kindness of speech and courtesy of manner, as shall make them, as little as possible, sensible of the disadvantages of their situation in society.

Another obligation of still superior importance lies on every master, arising out of the universal law of piety and virtue; and that is, to employ the influence which his station gives him in promoting the good morals of his domestics, and to afford them such means of instruction, and to establish such a prudent discipline in his family,

as will tend to preserve them from the vices, and the temptations to which, by their state, they are peculiarly exposed. The highest duty which religion and humanity exact of a man whom Providence has placed in such a superior relation, is to protect and promote their virtue; and in this benevolent and most reasonable case he will find also his own interest. No service is so faithful as that which is governed by strict principles of morality, and religion.

When Christianity first appeared in the world, the relation of servant, as it is here explained, nowhere existed. We find in that age only masters and slaves. The mild genius of the christian religion early ameliorated the condition of that unfortunate class of men; and its benevolent influence, concurring with other causes in the progress of society in Europe, has at length entirely banished slavery from that highly civilized portion of the globe.

This abject state of human nature still exists over all the continents of Asia and Africa, and has unhappily been suffered to mingle itself with the original institutions of our own country. A slave is not, like a servant, bound by contract for a limited time, and under specified and reasonable conditions, to perform particular services; but is the absolute property of his master; and the kind and degree of his services have no other limit than his master's will.

On this subject a most important moral question presents itself : Is slavery on any ground consistent with the natural laws of justice and humanity ? Three causes have been stated by different moral and political writers as sufficient to justify this degradation of human nature :— crimes,—debt,—and captivity.—Criminals of certain grades, it is true, may justly be confined to hard labor under the authority of the public magistrate, in order to repair the injuries committed by their crimes, or to inflict a salutary punishment for such as cannot be repaired. Fraudulent debtors may well be subjected to a similar correction. But it would be cruel to inflict on misfortune a penalty which should be reserved only for crime. Criminals of this grade, however, should be regarded only as servants of the public, and never subjected to the power of injured individuals. If creditors were to be constituted the masters, it would be necessary to confer on them such rigorous rights as could not fail to offend against humanity, and would afford the most dangerous examples in a free country. It was a barbarous law of the Romans which subjected the person of the debtor to the absolute power and will of the angry creditor. The enormous abuses to which it gave rise produced its repeal among a people by no means distinguished, at that period, for the humanity of their character.

Captivity, which has, in all ages, and in all countries, except among the modern nations of Europe, been the most universal cause of slavery, is the most unjust title of all to the servile subjection of the human species. It is cruel to avenge on individuals the injuries of their nation, or rather of its government. In civilized warfare generous foes will inflict no other evils on an enemy than such as they conceive to be necessary to bring the public hostilities to a just and successful termination. It is even good policy to treat prisoners with the greatest lenity which is consistent with their safe-keeping. An enemy will fight with less obstinacy against a humane nation. And captives, when permitted to labor for hire in their respective arts, or in the cultivation of the ground, may supply, in some measure, the deficiency of hands created by enlistments in the army. But to reduce them to slavery is contrary both to justice and humanity. Yet captivity in war was almost the sole ground of that extensive slavery which disgraced the policy of the Greeks and Romans, and of the barbarous rights exercised over their slaves. It was a principle with them that the conqueror had always the cruel right of putting an enemy to death; whence they concluded, with stronger reason, that he possessed the milder right of reducing him to slavery. The principle is false, and the conclusion inhuman. No law of just and generous warfare

authorizes the victor to put to death a disarmed and unresisting enemy.

Still more iniquitous is that barbarous policy which excites wars among the ignorant and savage tribes of Africa, with the view of purchasing for slaves the wretched captives. Indeed the whole of the African trade for slaves, in its principles, in its conduct, in the miseries it has introduced into an extensive region already too miserable; and in the cruel mode in which these unhappy wretches, after being torn from their country, are pinioned down in the holds of the vessels which convey them to the remotest parts of the earth, to be sold like brutes to perpetual bondage, is among the most atrocious inroads upon justice and humanity which have ever been practised in any age, or by any nation. The pretences which are made to justify it are as impudent, as the traffic is inhuman—that a civilized people have a right to compel such ignorant savages to labor for their convenience and pleasure*—that a people possessing the knowledge of the true religion may lawfully seize such gross and stupid idolaters, and transport them

* Such were the imperfect ideas of morality which prevailed among the most enlightened nations of antiquity, that Aristotle maintained that *a civilized people has a natural right to make war upon barbarians*, and, consequently, to reduce them to slavery.

to a country where they may be better instructed;* when, God knows, even this hypocritical pretence never enters into the views either of the slave-merchant, or the purchaser.—But a more plausible palliative for the practice is the idea that many of these unhappy men were slaves in their native country; and that all must have been more miserable at home, half-famished amidst their burning and barren sands, and subjected to a dark and bloody despotism, than they can be in a mild and plentiful region, among a people of polished manners. This is making the prejudices of our self-love the judge of their happiness, while at the same time, our own interest is the advocate.—There is no country, however severe the climate, and however barren the soil, from which a native is not unhappy to be exiled. The ideas, the habits, the pleasures of men, are all inseparably blended with the scenes, with the society, with all the objects which have been familiarized to them in the country which gave them birth. A Laplander prefers his snows and rocks to the most cultivated landscapes of France or England. An American savage perceives more delight in his solitary wilds, and even in the ashes of his

* This was a principle of the Romish Church in the grossest ages of her superstition : and on the pretence of this detestable principle, the Spaniards exterminated, or reduced to the most abject condition of servitude, the miserable natives of Mexico and Peru.

wigwam, than he would in the most splendid apartments of a palace.—Men deceive themselves continually by false pretences, in order to justify the slavery which is convenient for them.

There are countries, indeed, in which the very corruption of the government has rendered slavery necessary; and where it is so congenial with all the political and civil institutions and habits of the people, that it seems to lose the injustice of its nature. In a despotism, every grade of the community is already enslaved, and the prince himself is the slave of his slaves. Slaves here are not relatively that degraded race of beings which they necessarily must be in free states. They attain a degree of consequence from their utility to indolent and voluptuous lords, all whose affairs they are accustomed to manage; whose interest and pleasures are almost wholly in their power. The poorer classes of the people, in these countries, often rush to slavery with eagerness as their protection from worse evils. No condition is so oppressed and abject among them as that of a poor freeman in the vicinity of a rich lord. He is liable, from the insolence of power, to the most unjust encroachments on his rights, and the most humiliating insults in his person. But, when he foregoes his wretched freedom, for the privilege of slavery to some wealthy

satrap, interest often leads his mercenary master to protect him.

In a free country, on the other hand, the poorest man is protected by the laws; and between a freeman and a slave, there is such a wide distinction, that the slave, by comparing his state with that of a citizen, a comparison which continually meets his view, must feel his condition to be peculiarly humiliating and degraded.

The cruel and mercenary policy of those commercial nations in Europe who planted colonies in the new world, gave birth to that trade in African slaves, which, on the score of its injustice and inhumanity, merits the strongest reprobation. Hence the origin of that extensive system of slavery which exists in several of the United States.—But here our enquiries must receive a new direction. Is that slavery which was unjust in its origin, equally unjust in its continuance? All men condemn the barbarity of dragging the simple Africans from their native country. But America is the country of their descendents, and it would now be equally cruel to tear them from the soil in which they have grown up, and to send them back to Africa.* Servitude is undoubtedly a hard lot to the sen-

* And their general and indiscriminate emancipation, as we shall shew in the progress of the lecture, would be attended with many, and almost insuperable difficulties.

sibilities of freemen ; but the habits and ideas of these people being accommodated to it from their infancy, it does not press with the same severity upon their feelings. And hard as their lot appears to be, it cannot be denied to be preferable in every thing, except the sense of liberty, to what it would have been, born of the same parents in the original country of their race. But that precious sense of liberty, renders tolerable to the savage poverty and wretchedness, the most barren sands, and the most howling wilderness. To confer on our American slaves, therefore, a privilege so dear to human nature ; and otherwise, as far as possible, to ameliorate their condition, are certainly objects worthy a humane legislation. But our generous feelings may sometimes rush too precipitately to their end, as well as worse passions. And, in accomplishing this benevolent work, if it can be accomplished at all, in those states into the constitution and manners of which slavery is most deeply incorporated, great precaution must be used not to render their emancipation a worse evil than their servitude.—But, in the first place, private justice on the one hand, and on the other that natural selfishness which infallibly regulates the councils and decisions of the great bodies and communities of mankind,* will oppose insuperable difficulties to its exe-

* Individuals may frequently be found who are capable of rising above every selfish consideration. This is seldom the

eution.—The citizens of those states hold a property in slaves to a very large amount, acquired under the sanction of the laws. The laws, therefore, could not equitably compel them to make a sacrifice of so great value, to the convenience and comfort of any class of men. And neither justice nor humanity requires that the master, who has become the innocent possessor of that property, should impoverish himself for the benefit of his slave. On the ground of compassion for this degraded race, I do not know that the present holders are exclusively called upon to suffer the loss which must be incurred by a general emancipation.—One mode, indeed, has been suggested, in which it is conceived that the demands of justice on the part of the master, may be reconciled with the wishes of benevolence with regard to the slave; and that is, by making an equitable estimate of the value of each slave, and of the value of his labor for a year, in consequence of which, the state might bind these slaves to their present masters, as in other cases of bound servants, for a term of years, to be calculated from the preceding estimates; after which they would naturally pass to the enjoyment of liberty. To this might be added a law declaring all who should be born in a servile condition after

case of men acting together in a mass. Therefore we so often see the hardest and most cruel things done by such bodies without any compunction.

the passing of that act, free after a certain age ; only allowing sufficient time by their labor to recompence their masters for the expense of their maintenance in childhood.—All that could be said of such a law would be that it would be less unjust than one proclaiming an immediate and universal emancipation. What free people would allow their legislators to dispose, in the same manner, of any other portion of their property?—But if it were free from every objection on that head, great and numerous difficulties would oppose themselves to its execution : difficulties which will not readily suggest themselves, perhaps can hardly be conceived by men who have not, at some time, been familiar with the institutions of slavery, and witnessed their effects on the habits, ideas, and whole state of society. One difficulty only I will mention, which a prudent policy, always attentive to the public safety and tranquility, will naturally oppose to such a general manumission as is here contemplated. No event can be more dangerous to a community than the sudden introduction into it of vast multitudes of persons, free in their condition, but without property, and possessing only the habits and vices of slavery. Theft, plunder, and violence, would become common modes of supplying their wants, among a people who had been used to labor only through compulsion, and whose servile principles would take off the shame of the basest actions. Delivered from their

former restraints, they would become idle and profligate. Few of them willing to labor, and fewer finding regular and constant employment, or receiving wages sufficient to support them and their children;* they would often seek their provision by plunder, and often by corrupting the fidelity of the slaves. In the natural progress of events, therefore, we should soon see property every where invaded, public safety disturbed, and even domestic peace and security constantly endangered.

From these, and many other causes, it will be evident that the emancipation of the African race in the United States, if it ever be accomplished, must necessarily be the slow and gradual work of time; but as it is an event ardently desired by the friends of humanity and liberty, the laws perhaps ought to attempt it. Yet in this attempt they will certainly have a most delicate and arduous task to perform; to facilitate manumission, and yet guard against the evils to which it is exposed; to encourage the ideas of universal liberty, and yet check the indiscreet benevolence of certain owners of slaves who, either during their life, or at their death, may be disposed to emancipate them, as an act of extraordinary merit, without having made provision to render that liberty useful to the slave,

* This would necessarily be the case, as long as slavery still subsisted; the free would seldom be employed while the master could be served by his slaves.

or safe to the public ; that is, indeed, to throw on society a multitude of idle dependents, with a mass of servile vices, which no citizen has a right to do, either for the mistaken relief of his conscience, or the display of his vanity. In a word, the laws ought, perhaps, to hold out the hope, and the means of freedom to all, yet so as, if possible, to admit those only to a participation of its privileges who shall have previously qualified themselves by good moral and industrious habits, to enjoy it in such a manner as to be beneficial to themselves, and to the state.

For this end might not the laws favor the granting of a certain *peculium** to slaves, to be employed wholly for their own benefit, which might be sufficient to produce, in a course of years, longer or shorter according to the industry and skill of each slave, a revenue, adequate to the purchase of his own freedom? In order to impose a proper check upon the avarice of masters, a certain method might be fixed by law, by which the price of any slave should be determined. This sum the most rigorous master should be obliged to accept. A benevolent master would often forego it in consideration of the former

* By this *peculium* is intended a certain portion of ground allotted to the slave for his own exclusive labor, and a reasonable portion of time allowed him each day, or each week, to cultivate it, and to bring into the market the product of his industry for his own benefit.

services rendered by his slave. It would then become a small, but valuable fund on which to commence a new course of industry, and with which to animate and assist his opening hopes. In this way liberty would be within the reach of all who possessed health, and a proper disposition to labor. Those who should be too indolent to purchase it, would not deserve it; and if it were bestowed on them, would abuse it. This seems to be the most probable means by which slaves can be introduced to the possession of freedom with such good habits as shall be at once useful to themselves, and not dangerous to the public order and safety. On this principle the claims of justice, and of a wise benevolence might be equally satisfied. None would be excluded from the reasonable hope of liberty, but the idle and undeserving; and they, no longer than till they should render themselves worthy to possess it.*

* Such an institution might be the more easily carried into effect in many of the southern states; because, so mild is the form of slavery there at present, that it is customary to exact of any field slave only a definite portion of labor in the day, called a *task*. This task is a small square of ground marked out by the overseer in the morning, which is equal for each slave, and is usually calculated according to the strength of the weakest hand in the field. To cultivate this is all that is required in the day. The strongest hands often finish their tasks before the middle of the afternoon. They then voluntarily help the weaker, if they have any particular friendships. If not, the

One danger would probably arise from liberty obtained even in this way. The prejudices which exist against a union of the whites with the blacks, would render it impossible to amalgamate the two races. The free blacks, retaining that habitual sense of inferiority acquired in servitude, and nourished by the supercilious contempt of the whites, would naturally throw themselves into the society of the slaves. Such an association would be injurious to both. It would impair the motives which should prompt the freedman to aspire to respectability by his property and his virtue ; it would weaken the subordination, and corrupt the submissive duty of the slave.—One provision alone occurs to me to prevent this evil ; and that is, assigning a large district out of the unappropriated lands of the United States, in which each black freedman, or freed woman, shall receive a certain portion of land in absolute property, together with such privileges as would induce them to prefer a settlement in the new territory to remaining in the vicinity of their former servitude. In order to bring the two races nearer together, and, in a course of time, to obliterate those wide distinctions which are now created by diversity of complexion, and which

overseer, or the master demands no more of them till the next morning. What an admirable opportunity, together with other portions of time which are already allowed them, for relaxation or amusement, to improve a peculium !

might be improved by prejudice, or intrigue, to nourish sentiments of mutual hostility, every white man who should marry a black woman, and every white woman who should marry a black man, and reside within the territory, might be entitled to a double portion of land. And the magistrates, for a considerable period, ought all to be appointed from the white nation.

But, other regulations upon this subject, and other advantages to be derived from the institution, it is not, perhaps, necessary to endeavor further to point out. I fear that neither the general government, nor the governments of the individual states, will feel themselves under any obligation to make great sacrifices in order to deliver this humiliated race of men from the bondage which at present degrades them, and to raise them in time to the true dignity of human nature, in a state of liberty, and self-government.

It is of high public concern that slavery should be gradually corrected, and, at length, if possible, entirely extinguished : for wherever it is incorporated with the institutions of a republic, it will be productive of many moral, and political evils. And where the citizens are not constantly occupied in the industrious pursuits of agriculture, or the exercise of arms, as was the case at Sparta, and at Rome, it tends to introduce general habits of indo-

lence and indulgence, the fruitful source of a thousand other vices, which corrupt the energies of society, and enfeeble its defensive force.

There is another view in which good policy requires that those states, in which the number of slaves greatly exceeds the free population, should adopt measures to diminish that disproportioned excrescence so dangerous to the political body. The time must come when these slaves will feel their force ; and there will not be wanting among them men of a daring and enterprising genius to rouse it into action, to the great hazard of the public safety. Every revolt, and even every appearance of an insurgent and seditious spirit among the slaves, must subject them to new severities ; and severity will multiply revolts. Slavery is preparing at some future period, much individual misery, and frequent and dangerous convulsions for the republic. It is a volcano which sleeps for a time only to burst at last upon the unsuspecting tranquility of the country with a more terrible destruction.*

O masters ! treat your slaves, while slavery is suffered to exist, with all the mildness of which the necessary state of servitude admits ; attach them to you by love ; imbue

* The servile war at Rome was one of the most dangerous which ever agitated that republic ; and we have lately seen with horror the convulsions of St. Domingo.

their minds in earliest youth with the principles of good morals ; admit freely to instruct them those teachers of religion, of whatever denomination, who will take pains to adapt religious ideas to their measure of understanding, and impress them on their hearts. The more of religious principle and feeling can be introduced among them, the greater security will you have for your own safety, and the safety of the republic.