

1 "Rebuking Sin"
2 *Parochial and Plain Sermons* vol. II sermon 24
3 Saint John Henry Newman
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5

6 "John had said unto Herod, It is not lawful for thee to have thy brother's wife." Mark vi.
7 18.

8 IN the Collect of this day, we pray God to enable us "boldly to rebuke vice" after the
9 example of St. John the Baptist, who died a Martyr in the faithful discharge of this duty.

10 Herod the Tetrarch had taken his brother's wife. John the Baptist protested against so
11 heinous a sin; and the guilty king, though he could not bring himself to forsake it, yet
12 respected the prophet, and tried to please him in other ways; but Herodias, the proud
13 and cruel woman whom he had married, resented his interference, and at length
14 effected his death. I need not go through the details of this atrocious history, which are
15 well known to every reader of the Gospels.

16 St. John the Baptist had a most difficult office to fulfil; that of rebuking a king. Not that it
17 is difficult for a man of rude arrogant mind to say a harsh thing to men in power,—nay,
18 rather, it is a gratification to such a one; but it is difficult to rebuke *well*, that is, at a right
19 time, in a right spirit, and a right manner. The Holy Baptist rebuked Herod without
20 making him angry; therefore he must have rebuked him with gravity, temper, sincerity,
21 and an evident good-will towards him. On the other hand, he spoke so firmly, sharply,
22 and faithfully, that his rebuke cost him his life.

23 We who now live have not that extreme duty put upon us with which St. John was
24 laden; yet every one of us has a share in his office, inasmuch as we are all bound "to
25 rebuke vice boldly," when we have fit opportunities for so doing. I proceed then to make
26 some remarks upon the duty, as enforced upon us by today's Festival.

27 Now, it is plain that there are two sorts of men in the world; those who put themselves
28 forward, and speak much; and those who retire, and from indolence, timidity, or
29 fastidiousness, do not care to express an opinion on what comes before them. Neither
30 of these classes will act the part of St. John the Baptist in their intercourse with others:
31 the retiring will not rebuke vice at all; the bold and ill-mannered will take a pleasure in
32 giving their judgment, whether they are fit judges or not, whether they ought to speak or
33 not, and at all times proper and improper.

34 These self-appointed censors of vice are not to be countenanced or tolerated by any
35 serious Christian. The subjects of their attacks are often open to censure, it is true; and
36 should be censured, but not by them. Yet these men take upon them, on their own
37 authority, to blame them; often, because those whose duty it is, neglect to do so; and
38 then they flatter themselves with the notion that they are energetic champions of virtue,
39 strenuous and useful guardians of public morals or popular rights. There is a multitude
40 of such men in these days, who succeed the better, because they conceal their names;

41 and are thus relieved of the trouble of observing delicacy in their manner of rebuking,
42 escape the retaliation which the assailed party may inflict on an open assailant, and are
43 able to dispense with such requisites of personal character and deportment as are
44 ordinarily expected from those who assume the office of the Baptist. And, by speaking
45 against men of note, they gratify the bad passions of the multitude; fond, as it ever is, of
46 tales of crime, and malevolent towards the great; and thus they increase their influence,
47 and come to be looked up to and feared.

48 Now such officious accusers of vice are, I say, to be disowned by all who wish to be
49 really Christians. Every one has his place, one to obey, another to rule, a third to
50 rebuke. It is not religious to undertake an office without a commission. John the Baptist
51 was miraculously called to the duties of a reformer and teacher. Afterwards, an order of
52 men was appointed for the performance of the same services; and this order remains to
53 this day in an uninterrupted succession. Those who take upon them to rebuke vice
54 without producing credentials of their authority, are intruding upon the office of God's
55 Ministers. They may indeed succeed in their usurpation, they may become popular, be
56 supported by the many, and be recognised even by the persons whom they attack; still
57 the function of censor is from God, whose final judgment it precedes and shadows forth;
58 and not a whole generation of self-willed men can bestow on their organ the powers of a
59 divine ambassador. It is our part, then, anxiously to guard against the guilt of
60 acquiescing in the claims of such false prophets, lest we fall under the severity of our
61 Lord's prediction: "I am come in My Father's name," He says, "and ye receive Me not. If
62 another shall come in his own name, him ye will receive." [John v. 43.]

63 I notice this peculiarity of the Reprover's office, as founded on a Divine Commission,
64 and the consequent sin of undertaking it without a call, for another reason. Besides
65 these bad men, who clamour against vice for gain and envy's sake, I know there are
66 others of a better stamp, who imagine that they ought to rebuke, when in truth they
67 ought not; and who, on finding that they cannot do the office well, or on getting into
68 trouble in attempting it, are perplexed and discouraged, or consider that they suffer for
69 righteousness' sake. But our duty is commonly a far more straightforward matter than
70 excited and over-sensitive minds are apt to suppose, that is, as far as concerns
71 our *knowing* it; and, when we find ourselves perplexed to ascertain it, we should ask
72 ourselves, whether we have not embarrassed our course by some unnecessary or self-
73 willed conduct of our own. For instance, when men imagine it to be their duty to rebuke
74 their superiors, they get into difficulties, for the simple reason, that it is and ever will be
75 difficult to do another man's duty. When the young take upon them to set right their
76 elders, private Christians speak against the Clergy, the Clergy attempt to direct their
77 Bishops, or servants their masters, they will find that, generally speaking, the attempt
78 does not succeed; and perhaps they will impute their failure to circumstances,—
79 whereas, the real reason is, that there was no call on them to rebuke at all. There is
80 ever, indeed, a call on them to keep from sin themselves in all things, which itself is a
81 silent protest against whatever is wrong in high places,—and this they cannot avoid,
82 and need not wish to avoid; but very seldom, only in extreme cases, for instance, as,
83 when the Faith is in jeopardy, or in order to protect or rescue the simple-minded, is a
84 man called upon in the way of duty, directly to blame or denounce his superiors.

85 And in truth we have quite enough to do in the way of rebuking vice, if we confine our
86 censure to those who are the lawful subjects of it. These are our equals and our
87 inferiors. Here, again, it is easy to use violent language towards those who are below us
88 in station, to be arrogant, to tyrannize; but such was not St. John the Baptist's manner of
89 reproving. He reprov'd under the prospect of suffering for his faithfulness; and we
90 should never use a strong word, however true it be, without being willing to acquiesce in
91 some penalty or other, should it so happen, as the seal of our earnestness. We must
92 not suppose, that our inferiors are without power to annoy us, because they are inferior.
93 We depend on the poor as well as on the rich. Nor, by inferiors, do I mean those merely
94 who are in a lower rank of society. Herod was St. John's inferior; the greatest king is, in
95 one sense, inferior to God's ministers, and is to be approached by them, with all honour
96 indeed and loyal service, but without trepidation of mind or cowardice, without forgetting
97 that they are servants of the Church, gifted with their power by a divine appointment.
98 And what is true even in the instance of the King himself is much more applicable in the
99 case of the merely wealthy or ennobled. But is it a light matter to reprove such men?
100 And can we do so without the risk of suffering for it? Who is sufficient for these things,
101 without the guidance and strength of Him who died to purchase for His Church this high
102 authority?

103 Again, parents are bound to rebuke their children; but here the office is irksome for a
104 different reason. It is misplaced affection, not fear, which interferes here with the
105 performance of our duty. And besides, parents are indolent as well as overfond. They
106 look to their home as a release from the world's cares, and cannot bear to make duties
107 in a quarter where they would find a recreation. And they have their preferences and
108 partialities about their children; and being alternately harsh and weakly indulgent, are
109 not respected by them, even when they seasonably rebuke them.

110 And as to rebuke those who are inferior to us in the temporal appointments of
111 Providence, is a serious work, so also, much more, does it require a ripeness in
112 Christian holiness to rebuke our equals suitably;—and this, first, because we fear their
113 ridicule and censure; next, because the failings of our equals commonly lie in the same
114 line as our own, and every considerate person is aware, that, in rebuking another, he is
115 binding himself to a strict and religious life, which we naturally shrink from doing.
116 Accordingly, it has come to pass, that Christians, by a sort of tacit agreement, wink at
117 each other's faults, and keep silence; whereas, if each of us forced himself to make his
118 neighbour sensible when he did wrong, he would both benefit another, and, through
119 God's blessing, would bind himself also to a more consistent profession. Who can say
120 how much harm is done by thus countenancing the imperfections of our friends and
121 equals? The standard of Christian morals is lowered; the service of God is mixed up
122 with devotion to Mammon; and thus society is constantly tending to a heathen state.
123 And this culpable toleration of vice is sanctioned by the manners of the present age,
124 which seems to consider it a mark of good breeding not to be solicitous about the faith
125 or conduct of those around us, as if their private views and habits were nothing to us;
126 which would have more pretence of truth in it, were they merely our fellow-creatures,
127 but is evidently false in the case of those who all the while profess to be Christians, who

128 imagine that they gain the privileges of the Gospel by their profession, while they bring
129 scandal on it by their lives.

130 Now, if it be asked, what rules can be given for rebuking vice?—I observe, that, as on
131 the one hand to perform the office of a censor requires a maturity and consistency of
132 principle seen and acknowledged, so is it also the necessary result of possessing it.
133 They who reprove with the greatest propriety, from their weight of character, are
134 generally the very men who are also best qualified for reproof. To rebuke well is a gift
135 which grows with the need of exercising it. Not that any one will gain it without an effort
136 on his part; he must overcome false shame, timidity, and undue delicacy, and learn to
137 be prompt and collected in withstanding evil; but after all, his mode of doing it will
138 depend mainly on his *general* character. The more his habitual temper is formed after
139 the law of Christ, the more discreet, unexceptionable, and graceful will be his censures,
140 the more difficult to escape or to resist.

141 What I mean is this: cultivate in your general deportment a cheerful, honest, manly
142 temper; and you will find fault well, because you will do so in a natural way. Aim at
143 viewing all things in a plain and candid light, and at calling them by their right names. Be
144 frank, do not keep your notions of right and wrong to yourselves, nor, on some conceit
145 that the world is too bad to be taught the Truth, suffer it to sin in word or deed without
146 rebuke. Do not allow friend or stranger in the familiar intercourse of society to advance
147 false opinions, nor shrink from stating your own, and do this in singleness of mind and
148 love. Persons are to be found, who tell their neighbours of their faults in a strangely
149 solemn way, with a great parade, as if they were doing something extraordinary; and
150 such men not only offend those whom they wish to set right, but also foster in
151 themselves a spirit of self-complacency. Such a mode of finding fault is inseparably
152 connected with a notion that they themselves are far better than the parties they blame;
153 whereas the single-hearted Christian will find fault, not austere or gloomily, but in love;
154 not stiffly, but naturally, gently, and as a matter of course, just as he would tell his friend
155 of some obstacle in his path which was likely to throw him down, but without any absurd
156 feeling of superiority over him, because he was able to do so. His feeling is, "I have
157 done a good office to you, and you must in turn serve me." And though his advice be
158 not always taken as he meant it, yet he will not dwell on the pain occasioned to himself
159 by such a result of his interference; being conscious, that in truth there ever is much to
160 correct in his mode of doing his duty, knowing that his intention was good, and being
161 determined any how to make light of his failure, except so far as to be more cautious in
162 future against even the appearance of rudeness or intemperance in his manner.

163 These are a few suggestions on an important subject. We daily influence each other for
164 good or evil; let us not be the occasion of misleading others by our silence, when we
165 ought to speak. Recollect St. Paul's words:—"Be not partaker of other men's sins: keep
166 thyself pure." [1 Tim. v. 22.]

167 The Feast of the Nativity of St. John Baptist.