

## Friction.

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OUR subject introduces us to familiar ground, ground which most of us have traversed in our lifetime, and perhaps will be found traversing again some dark day. Even the mildest and meekest of men do not entirely escape it, while the imperious and proud are never out of touch with it.

It is not a pleasant feature of our existence that we should come into collision with our fellows, and nothing in life leads to such deep scars and bitter recollections. We would give much to escape friction, and one of the anticipated joys of heaven is that there it is not.

It is because friction is so universal and so noxious that we do well to look it fairly in the face, and look well, too, around it, that we may be able to find some wise way of dodging and escaping it. We may not always be able to escape an evil entirely, but we can often mitigate it and minimize it. A second best is not so good as a first best, but it is better than a third or a fourth best.

From his very position the minister is more likely than most people to collide with others, because his everyday business is with men, and by his profession he is called upon to say and do things which may rub the wrong way. Unless he pursues peace at all costs, even that of faithfulness, I do not see how he can avoid unpleasant collisions altogether.

There is the *personal* aspect of his ministry, which may easily cause friction, for no man rubs shoulders with others so often and so closely as he. He is the centre of a large number of workers who share with him the working of his parish. He also shares with them the imperfections of humanity, the tendency to sensitiveness, to love of power, to partiality, to

self-importance. And out of this complex mixture sparks may easily fly when the rough edges meet.

Then there are the *parochial* possibilities with minister and people, a people many of whom want to be let alone, want to be propitiated by material and solid attentions, who are suspicious and selfish, and who quickly imagine neglect. Here, of course, the possibilities of friction are endless, for each of your thousands or hundreds may be a centre of mischief, a hard point against which you may collide.

*Ecclesiastical friction* has become a proverb, so rife is it, and perhaps the flag of party has never flown so flauntingly as now. Men will not agree to differ, will not look at the other side of a truth, will rarely compare the agreements between them, but consider it to be their bounden duty to strike out at the other side whenever the chance offers itself. No hand is so often clenched as a party hand, and no muscle is held so tense as the striking one. That the white should go for the black is only right, but that the white should march out with banners flying against the whity-brown, so little removed from white itself, is strange indeed. Unfortunately, just as relations, when they quarrel at all, usually quarrel more than strangers, so it is the microscopic change of tint which causes the most violent friction, and all in the sacred name of principle and under the sacred plea of faithfulness.

But, probably, the most inevitable friction is the *congregational friction*, antagonism between the heart and truth. It is the minister's duty to preach the truth, and the truth has a strangely rasping power when hearts are hostile. He has to point to ways which the human spirit shrinks from taking, to insist on the performances of duties which the human will is bound naturally to resist, to press submission on rebels, and the renunciation of evil practices on unrepentant sinners. And the effect can only be the friction of resistance. It is just as it is in the heavens when an asteroid splinter strikes our earth's atmospheric envelope and bursts into flame at once. Something is gained if we recognize the necessity of friction as well as its inevitableness, for there may be profit in it, and often is.

It is in the spiritual world, as it is in the material world, an absolute necessity. You cannot drive in a nail or strike a match without it. A carpenter cannot shave and plane a board without it. The whole essence of success in life is in the right management of it. There are few things wholly evil in the world, and a little sensible management will work wonders with many apparently intractable things.

But we are bound to confess that there is a whole world of difference between necessary and unnecessary friction, and it is this unnecessary friction with which we are concerned in this paper. Most men are sensible enough to know that some friction there is bound to be. But they chafe at the friction which is gratuitous, and wilful, and painful, and misplaced.

Possibly, most of us in looking back at the difficulties of our past can see the special corner where, through a piece of clear mismanagement on our part, we came into collision with another. Some of us would like to live our lives over again, if only to handle the old misunderstandings more gently and more wisely. We fancy that the years have taught us something which would stand us in good stead had we to meet the same experience again.

Now, my object in this paper is to voice the feelings of my brethren, and to set down what, no doubt, they would write themselves had it fallen to their lot to take my place. It is not a philosophy of friction, but a contribution to it—how to avoid friction.

There is a world of good sense in that bit of matchbox direction, "Rub lightly," which is so familiar to us. Friction there must be, if you are to strike a light at all, but let there be just enough and no more. It is the excess which wears the box and destroys the head of your match. And it is the excess too, when you rub heavily and raspingly, which exasperates the tempers of men and women. If we have to come down on people, do not let us come down with too heavy a hand. If a light touch will do the work, we are foolish to rub hard.

It is good and wise also to *drive carefully round corners.*

Most of the accidents in our roads come from drivers taking it for granted that the road is clear. And so they come carelessly and furiously along, only to find that there is someone there, and to see them prostrate on the ground and violently protesting. To beg pardon and to lend a hand to repair the mischief is as much as they can do now, but it ought to be a caution to them for the rest of their lives not to drive so recklessly. I have known persons who, in spite of their being in the wrong, have tried to throw the blame on the other for not driving carefully, but that is a bit of sheer bluff and meanness. You know what I mean. Let us not drive with eyes tight shut, let us not be careless how we go, let us not drive over anybody from sheer thoughtlessness, but keep a good lookout, remembering the possibility that otherwise someone will be hurt.

We do well not to forget *what a mass of susceptibilities* may be wrapped up under one sensitive skin. A rough touch, an unduly loud voice, too much abruptness, will set some people shuddering and shivering. We rub them on the raw when we handle them inconsiderately, and little good we are likely to do them then. Sensitive people are much to be pitied, and ought to have all the gentleness we can give them.

We shall be well advised if we also *keep ourselves well in hand*. A minister can run away just as can a horse, and if he does he will do perhaps the more damage of the two. Let us keep ourselves heavily bitted. One man is run away with by his *humour*, and lets himself go to a hazardous extreme. Humour is an essential to every man, but within limits. It is easy to degenerate into the funny man, and to lose all our gravity before we know it. Sydney Smith was a philosopher and a humorist, and the humorist quite drowned the religious philosopher. It is very easy to be humorous at others' expense, and there is no surer way of causing friction. Our *zeal*, too, may run away with us, and we may lose our heads in the fury of the zealous heart. Zeal requires a heavy dose of discretion to curb it. Otherwise, like a ship without rudder, we may collide with someone else. If we have a strong *critical* faculty,

we may be so keen in our manipulation of the crucible as to see alloy in everything and everybody. Life can be better spent than in the dissection of others and the imputation to them of inferiority. We stand to lose, not gain, by passing clever judgments on our fellows. Some men run naturally to *satire*, and burn and blister everybody by their clever, cutting, biting, and vitriolic wit. They are the least lovable of men and the least useful. An over-developed *imagination* is a difficult companion for a minister to live with. It is likely to run to flowers in his discourses, to violations of charity in his judgments, to over-statements in his arguments, and to untruthfulness in his comments on others. But, above all, the *tongue* must be bridled in the minister, for, while it is his chief agent of communication with the world around him, it may easily act like the lion's tongue to draw blood wherever it touches.

The minister, too, will be well advised if he *wears blinkers*. It is not an unmixed blessing to see everything, and we may easily see too much. The use of blinkers is to circumscribe the vision, and so to enable the horse to forge ahead undisturbed. The minister will also be wise if he wears something corresponding over his ears to prevent his hearing too much. It seems a little inconsistent to cultivate the blind eye and the deaf ear, but it has its advantages, nevertheless. For one thing, the blind eye preserves us from trifling interferences which as a rule do more harm than good. The blind eye gives things a little awry the chance to right themselves, which they often do if let alone, while too keen an eye vivifies noxious things, and resurrects them when they are almost moribund. The deaf ear, in the same way, prevents the currency of tales which are probably untrue, and ought never to come into the open at all. Besides, the minister, if his ears be properly closed, will not be a receptacle for the tittle-tattle of the parish. The more he discourages the conveyance of small talk in his direction, the better for him and the peace of his parish. Yes, the use of blinkers and the ear-secluder are vital if friction is to be prevented, and they cannot be dispensed with.

It is important, too, I think, for the minister who would diminish friction to beware of *taking too many things for granted*. Our people may be very good-natured, but we may press them too far. Because they like us, we fancy we may make as many changes as we please. But we do well to remember that theological prepossessions are mightier than personal likings, and it is more disastrous to rub people's views the wrong way than their affections. We may flatter ourselves that they will not mind, but the awakening will be rude indeed. It is better to take less than much for granted in this world. We may take too many liberties, and make too little of men's sensitiveness and tolerance.

We must be careful, too, in the common practice of *insisting too much on our rights*. It is easy to find ourselves in hot water through the too great insistence on them. Besides, it is a short step to forgetting that other people have their rights as well. The law has, no doubt, given the parson a large province of authority in Church matters and arrangements, and it is, as a rule, well defined. But to push these rights to their extremest limits is fatal to the peace of the parish. The golden rule, I think, is to cover our rights and powers decently over, and to bury them out of sight until they are disputed. The more we act single-handed and unaided, the less is our influence for good. The more we call our officers and people into consultation, the better for the whole parochial concern. Co-operation should be the order of the day, and hand-in-hand work should be the rule. Now and again the noise of quarrels is heard in the ecclesiastical land, parson and people are found in opposite camps, and we often discover that one or the other is pressing his rights and insisting on them. Be the victory with whom it may, the issue is fatal.

The free *use of the imagination* may work much friction as well, unless it is moderated considerably. When we do not know we imagine, and our imagination is often taken for knowledge and certainty, with the inevitable result. We imagine slights, for instance, which might just as easily be something much more

harmless. We imagine motives which more than probably do not exist outside our own imagination. We imagine neglect, which may well be forgetfulness or absence of mind. We imagine disdainful feelings when overlooked or passed without a greeting, which may just as well be shortness of sight and the spectacles left at home. The strange thing is that, with a thousand examples of mistake on our part in imputing wrong feelings to others, we should still pursue the evil course and still imagine all sorts of slights and wrongs. We had better keep that imagination of ours in strict check, unless we want to be run away with in a downward direction.

One fruitful method of keeping the peace is *to hear both sides* before deciding. Sometimes we do not, and the results are not pleasant. For the minister, surely, ought to be the most judicious of men, and to be judicious is to be judicial, and to act as the upright judge is to hear both sides and judge impartially according to the evidence. Because one may be a friend is no reason for being unfair to the other. Right is right, be the parties who they may. We all know from our own experience what a dreadful burden the feeling of injustice brings. There is nothing so painful. He who deals unjustly with another, even though only by the simple expression of an opinion, has ruffled more feelings than he will ever replace again. And when his friends and neighbours take sides with him, the hardly treated victim, as he feels himself to be, the materials for a very ugly scandal are all ready to hand. Much of this would be prevented if we only heard both sides of the question. We should then balance one story against the other, but to leap to a decision utterly unprepared is to court inevitable disaster.

It is advisable also to *keep our own side of the hedge*. To skip to the other side is to commit trespass and to encroach on another's preserves. Yet how frequently we do not mind our own business! If we do not, we must expect the fate of meddlers and be scorched by the spirit of friction. The fear is lest we ministers should imagine ourselves the arbiters in all questions, political and social, as well as theological and parochial.

Surely, our duties are sufficient without stepping beyond our boundaries. Yet has it not been the case that much parochial friction has resulted from this very interference in other men's matters? If we be approached on certain questions not strictly our own, and be invited to come over and help, we should do well to go, but not otherwise. There is nothing men more intensely dislike than to be dictated to on matters appertaining to their own province, and we lay ourselves open to the very distressing retort to mind our own business.

We have need to *watch well over our manners* lest we grow imperious and dictatorial. Natures, of course, differ widely, and while some are too yielding others are too commanding. It is these latter who expose themselves most to the awakening of friction. Intense heat can be generated by a patronizing and superior way, and there will be frequent ructions where this proud treatment is rife. A little humility would save some of us a great measure of trouble in our dealings with others. Perhaps there are some parishioners who will immediately surrender at the word of command. On the other hand, there are many more whose backs will be set up in the most defiant fashion. But even the most submissive will feel that a soft word would be preferable, and that a less imperious manner would be more comfortable. The sharp crack of a whip may do for beasts of burden, but free men and women may be pardoned if they resent being driven with whip and spur. Small boys will obey the schoolmaster, and are wise enough to know that it is the best thing to do for sundry reasons, but the schoolmaster spirit in a minister is so entirely misplaced that he will do well to avoid it.

In truth, there is no profession in the world which so requires that everything should be *wrapped in something soft* as the minister's. Love is out and out the best of wrappings. Those sharp angles, which get in our own and others' way, love will soften and round. That sharp tongue, which is so fatally compromising, can be protected by a sheath of love, and in no other way. That sharp manner, which rasps whatever it touches, if

only folded well in love's soft texture, will be sharp no longer. Love can handle gently without hurting. Love can calculate its movement so nicely, that we can shave the closest corners safely. Love can make allowances and look at things with a merciful eye, and can take in all aspects with discrimination. Love can be hurt and yet smile kindly. Love can abate suspicions and doubts and give credit for the very best intentions on very slender evidence. Love can root out that spirit of self which throws such a veil of darkness over our dealings with others, and which is responsible for three-fourths of the frictions of life. Love sweetens the temper. In fact, love is the triple armour which protects us against the exasperating happenings of life, but which is at the same time so soft and pleasant to the touch that we may move anywhere, at any speed, without disturbing anyone against whom we may brush.

Now, in advancing all these palliations of friction, I am well aware that all the wrong is not likely to be on one side. It may be just as easily on the other. If we are blameless, and the whole cause of offence is in the misunderstanding, the unkindness and want of charity of the layman, what is to be done then? Why, just bear it as well as we can, bear it silently, bear it manfully and Christianly. It takes two to make a quarrel, and we need not make one of those two. Then it will die down without spreading or scandal. But we must fall back on that special grace which He gives Who was misunderstood more than all men upon earth, and, leaning hard on Him, keep the peace and rest happily on the Great Justifier. Certainly, "the servant of God must not strive." Rather, he must trust and be still. And so we may hope that by the oil of the Spirit, friction, if not entirely removed, may be abated and neutralized.

