

Love

A Sermon

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“We love him, because he first loved us.”—[1 John 4:19](#).

DURING the last two Sabbath days I have been preaching the gospel to the unconverted. I have earnestly exhorted the very chief of sinners to look to Jesus Christ, and have assured them that as a preparation for coming to Christ, they need no good works, or good dispositions, but that they may come, just as they are, to the foot of the cross, and receive the pardoning blood and all-sufficient merits of the Lord Jesus Christ. The thought has since occurred to me, that some who were ignorant of the gospel might, perhaps, put this query:—Is this likely to promote morality? If the gospel be a proclamation of pardon to the very chief of sinners, will not this be a license to sin? In what respects can the gospel be said to be a gospel according to holiness? How will such preaching operate? Will it make men better? Will they be more attentive to the laws which relate to man and man? Will they be more obedient to the statutes which relate to man and God? I thought, therefore, that we would advance a step further, and endeavour to show, this morning, how the proclamation of the gospel of God, though in the commencement it addresses itself to men who are utterly destitute of any good, is, nevertheless, designed to lead these very men to the noblest heights of virtue, yea, to ultimate perfection in holiness. The text tells us, that the effect of the gospel received in the heart is, that it compels and constrains such a heart to love God. “We love him, because he first loved us.” When the gospel comes to us it does not find us loving God, it does not expect anything of us, but coming with the divine application of the Holy Ghost, it simply assures us that God loves us, be we never so deeply immersed in sin; and then, the after effect of this proclamation of love is, that “we love him because he first loved us.”

Can you imagine a being placed halfway between this world and heaven? Can you conceive of him as having such enlarged capacities that he could easily discern what was done in heaven, and what was done on earth? I can conceive that, before the Fall, if there had been such a being, he would have been struck with the singular harmony which existed between God’s great world, called heaven, and the little world, the earth. Whenever the chimes of heaven rang, the great note of those massive bells was *love*; and when the little bells of earth were sounded, the harmonies of this narrow sphere, rang out their note, it was just the same—*love*. When the bright spirits gathered around the great throne of God in heaven to magnify the Lord, at the same time, there was to be seen the world, clad in its priestly garments, offering its sacrifice of purest praise. When the cherubim and seraphim

did continually cry, “Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of armies,” there was heard a note, feebler, perhaps, but yet as sweetly musical, coming up from paradise, “Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of armies.” There was no jar, no discord; the thunder peals of heaven’s melodies were exactly in accord with the whispers of earth’s harmonies. There was “glory to God in the highest,” and on earth there was glory too; the heart of man was as the heart of God; God loved man, and man loved God. But imagine that same great Spirit to be still standing between the heavens and the earth, how sad must he be, when he hears the jarring discord, and feels it grate upon the ear! The Lord saith, “I am reconciled to thee, I have put away thy sin;” but what is the answer of this earth? The answer of the world is, “Man is at enmity with God: God may be reconciled, but man is not. The mass of men are still enemies to God by wicked works.” When the angels praise God, if they list to the sounds that are to be heard on earth, they hear the trump of cruel war; they hear the bacchanalian shout and the song of the lascivious, and what a discord is this in the great harmony of the spheres? The fact is this,—the world was originally one great string in the harp of the universe, and when the Almighty swept that harp with his gracious fingers there was nothing to be heard but praise; now that string is snapped, and where it has been reset by grace, still it is not wholly restored to its perfect tune, and the note that cometh from it hath but little of sweetness, and very much of discord. But, bright Spirit, retain thy place, and live on. The day is hastening with glowing wheels, and the axle thereof is hot with speed. The day is coming, when this world shall be a paradise again. Jesus Christ, who came the first time to bleed and suffer, that he might wash the world from its iniquity, is coming a second time to reign and conquer, that he may clothe the earth with glory; and the day shall arrive, when thou, O Spirit, shall hear again the everlasting harmony. Once more the bells of earth shall be attuned to the melodies of heaven; once more shall the eternal chorus find that no singer is absent, but that the music is complete.

But how is this to be? How is the world to be brought back? How is it to be restored? We answer, the reason why there was this original harmony between earth and heaven was, because there was *love* between them twain, and our great reason for hoping that there shall be at last re-established an undiscordant harmony between heaven and earth is simply this, that God hath already manifested his love towards us, and that in return, hearts touched by his grace do even now love him; and when they shall be multiplied, and love re-established, then shall the harmony be complete.

Having thus introduced my text, I must now plunge into it. We shall notice the *parentage*, the *nourishment*, and the *walk of love*; and shall exhort all believers here present, to love God, because he hath first loved them.

1. In the first place,

THE PARENTAGE OF TRUE LOVE TO GOD

“What though the spicy breezes blow soft o’er Java’s isle;

Where every prospect pleases, and only man is vile.”

Where God is most resplendent in his works, and most lavish in his gifts, there man has been the vilest and God is the most forgotten.

Others have taught, if not exactly in doctrine, yet their doctrine necessarily leads to it, that human nature may of itself attain unto love to God. Our simple reply is, we have never met with such an instance. We have curiously questioned the people of God, and we believe that others have questioned them in every age, but we have never had but one answer to this question, “Why hast thou loved God?” The only answer has been, “Because he first loved me.” I have heard men preach about free-will, but I never yet heard of a Christian who exalted free-will in his own experience. I have heard men say, that men of their own free-will may turn to God, believe, repent, and love, but I have heard the same persons, when talking of their own experience, say, that they did not so turn to God, but that Jesus sought them when they were strangers, wandering from the fold of God. The whole matter may look specious enough, when preached, but when felt it is found to be a phantom. It may *seem* right enough for a man to tell his fellow that his own free-will may save him; but when he comes to close dealing with his own conscience, he himself, however wild in his doctrine, is compelled to say, “Oh! yes, I do love Jesus, because he first loved me.” I have wondered at a Wesleyan brother, who has sometimes railed against this doctrine in the pulpit, and then has given out this very hymn, and all the members of the church have joined in singing it most heartily, while at the same time they were tolling the death-knell of their own peculiar tenets; for if that hymn be true Arminianism must be false. If it be the certain fact, that the only reason for our loving God is that his love has been shed abroad in our hearts, then it cannot be true anyhow, that man ever did or ever will love God, until first of all God has manifested his love towards him.

But without disputing any longer, do we not all admit that our love to God is the sweet offspring of God’s love to us? Ah! beloved, cold admiration every man may have; but the warmth of love can only be kindled by the fires of God’s Spirit. Let each Christian speak for himself, we shall all hold this great and cardinal truth, that the reason of our love to God is, the sweet influence of his grace. Sometimes I wonder that such as we should have been brought to love God at all. Is our love so precious that God should court our love, dressed in the crimson robes of a dying Redeemer? If we had loved God, it would have been no more than he deserved. But when we rebelled, and yet he sought our love, it was surprising indeed. It was a wonder when he disrobed himself of all his splendours, and came down and wrapt himself in a mantle of clay; but methinks the wonder is excelled yet, for after he had died for us, still we did not love him; we rebelled against him; we rejected the proclamation of the gospel; we resisted his Spirit; but he said, I *will* have their hearts; and he followed us day after day, hour after hour. Sometimes he laid us low, and he said, “Surely they will love me if I restore them!” At another time he filled us with corn and with wine, and he said “Surely

they will love me now,” but we still revolted, still rebelled. At last he said, “I will strive no longer, I am Almighty, and I will not have it that a human heart is stronger than I am. I turn the will of man as the rivers of water are turned,” and lo! he put forth his strength, and in an instant the current changed, and we loved him, because we then could see the love of God, in that he sent his Son to be our Redeemer. But we must confess, beloved, going back to the truth with which we started, that never should we have had any love towards God, unless that love had been sown in us by the sweet seed of his love to us. If there be any one here that hath a love to Christ, let him differ from this doctrine here, but let him know that he shall not differ hereafter; for in heaven they all sing, praise to free grace. They all sing, “Salvation to our God and to the Lamb.”

II. Love, then, has for its parent the love of God shed abroad in our hearts. But after it is divinely born in our heart it must be divinely

NOURISHED

The first thing, then, that our love feeds upon, when it is but an infant, is a sense of favours received. Ask a young Christian why he loves Christ, and he will tell you, I love Christ because he has bought me with his blood! Why do you love God the Father? I love God the Father because he gave his Son for me. And why do you love God the Spirit? I love him because he has renewed my heart. That is to say we love God for what he has given to us. Our first love feeds just on the simple food of a grateful recollection of mercies received. And mark, however much we grow in grace this will always constitute a great part of the food of our love.

But when the Christian grows older and has more grace, he loves Christ for another reason. He loves Christ because he feels Christ deserves to be loved. I trust I can say, I have in my heart now a love to God, These men did not merely love Christ because of what he had done for them; but you will find in their sonnets and in their letters—that their motive of love was, that he had communed with them, he had showed them his hands and his side; they had walked with him in the villages; they had lain with him on the beds of spices; they had entered into the mystic circle of communion; and they felt that they loved Christ, because he was all over glorious, and was so divinely fair, that if all nations could behold him, sure they must be constrained to love him too.

This, then, is the food of love; but when love grows rich—and it does sometimes—the most loving heart grows cold towards Christ. Do you know that the only food that ever suits sick love, is the food on which it fed at first. I have heard say by the physicians, that if a man be sick there is no place so well adapted for him as the place where he was born; and if love grow sick and cold, there is no place so fit for it to go to as the place where it was born, namely, the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Where was love born? Was she born in the midst of romantic scenery, and was she nursed with wondrous contemplations upon the lap of beauty? Ah! no. Was she born on the steeps of Sinai, when God came from Sinai

and the holy one from mount Paran, and melted the mountains with the touch of his foot, and made the rocks flow down like wax before his terrible presence? Ah! no. Was love born on Tabor, when the Saviour was transfigured, and his garment became whiter than wool, whiter than any fuller could make it? Ah! no; darkness rushed o'er the sight of those that looked upon him then, and they fell asleep, for the glory overpowered them. Let me tell you where love was born. Love was born in the garden of Gethsemane, where Jesus sweat great drops of blood, it was nurtured in Pilate's hall, where Jesus bared his back to the ploughing of the lash, and gave his body to be spit upon and scourged. Love was nurtured at the cross, amid the groans of an expiring God, beneath the droppings of his blood—it was there that love was nurtured. Bear me witness, children of God. Where did your love spring from, but from the foot of the cross? Did you ever see that sweet flower growing anywhere but at the foot of Calvary? No; it was when ye saw "love divine, all loves excelling," outdoing its own self; it was when you saw love in bondage to itself, dying by its own stroke, laying down its life, though it had power to retain it and to take it up again; it was there your love was born; and if you wish your love, when it is sick, to be recovered, take it to some of those sweet places; make it sit in the shade of the olive trees, and make it stand on the pavement and gaze, while the blood is still gushing down. Take it to the cross, and bid it look and see afresh the bleeding lamb; and surely this shall make thy love spring from a dwarf into a giant, and this shall fan it from a spark into a flame.

And then, when thy love is thus recruited, let me bid thee give thy love full exercise; for it shall grow thereby. You say, "Where shall I exercise the contemplation of my love, to make it grow?" Oh! Sacred Dove of love, stretch thy wings, and play the eagle now. Come! open wide thine eyes, and look full in the Sun's face, and soar upward, upward, upward, far above the heights of this world's creation, upwards, till thou art lost in eternity. Remember, that God loved thee from before the foundation of the world. Does not this strengthen thy love? Ah! what a bracing air is that air of eternity? When I fly into it for a moment, and think of the great doctrine of election—of

"That vast unmeasured love,
Which from the days of old,
Did all the chosen seed embrace,
like sheep within the fold."

It makes the tears run down one's cheeks to think that we should have an interest in that decree and council of the Almighty Three, when every one that should be blood-bought had its name inscribed in God's eternal book. Come, soul, I bid thee now exercise thy wings a little, and see if this does not make thee love God. He thought of thee before thou hadst a being. When as yet the sun and the moon were not,—when the sun, the moon, and the stars slept in the mind of God, like unborn forests in an acorn cup, when the old sea was not yet born, long ere this infant world lay in its swaddling bands of mist, then God had inscribed

thy name upon the heart and upon the hands of Christ indelibly, to remain for ever. And does not this make thee love God? Is not this sweet exercise for thy love? For here it is my text comes in, giving, as it were, the last charge in this sweet battle of love, a charge that sweeps everything before it. “We love God, because he first loved us,” seeing that he loved us before time began, and when in eternity he dwelt alone.

And when thou hast soared backward into the past eternity, I have yet another flight for thee. Soar back through all thine own experience, and think of the way whereby the Lord thy God has led thee in the wilderness, and how he hath fed and clothed thee every day—how he hath borne with thine ill manners—how he hath put up with all thy murmurings, and all thy longings after the flesh-pots of Egypt—how he has opened the rock to supply thee, and fed thee with manna that came down from heaven. Think of how his grace has been sufficient for thee in all thy troubles—how his blood has been a pardon to thee in all thy sins—how his rod and his staff have comforted thee. And when thou hast flown over this sweet field of love, thou mayest fly further on, and remember that the oath, the covenant, the blood, have something more in them than the past, for though “he first loved us,” yet this doth not mean that he shall ever cease to, love, for he is Alpha and he shall be Omega, he is first, and he shall be *last*; and therefore bethink thee, when thou shalt pass through the valley of the shadow of death, thou needest fear no evil, for he is with thee. When thou shalt stand in the cold floods of Jordan, thou needest not fear, for death cannot separate thee from his love; and when thou shalt come into the mysteries of eternity thou needest not tremble, for “I am persuaded that neither principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” And now, soul is not thy love refreshed? Does not this make thee love him? Doth not a flight over those illimitable plains of the ether of love, inflame thy heart, and compel thee to delight thyself in the Lord thy God? Here is the food of love. “We love him, because he first loved us,” and because in that first love there is the pledge and promise that he will love us even to the end.

III. And now comes the third point, the

WALK OF LOVE

When we are on our knees in prayer, I fear that when we are praying for the church we do not mean all that we say. We are praying for *our* church, our section of it. Now, he that loves Christ, if he be a Baptist, he loves the doctrine of baptism, because he knows it to be Scriptural; but, at the same time wherever he sees the grace of God to be in any man’s heart, he loves him because he is a part of the living church, and he does not withhold his heart, his hand, or his house from him, because he happens to differ on some one point. I pray that the church in these days may have a more loving spirit towards herself. We ought to delight in the advance of every denomination. Is the Church of England rousing from its sleep? Is she springing like a phoenix, from her ashes? God be with her, and God bless her!

Is another denomination leading the van, and seeking by its ministers to entice the wanderer into the house of God? God be with it! Is the Primitive Methodist labouring in the hedge and ditch, toiling for his Master? God help Him! Is the Calvinist seeking to uphold Christ crucified in all his splendours? God be with him! And does another man with far less knowledge preach much error, but still hold that “by grace are ye saved through faith,” then God bless him, and may success be with him evermore. If ye loved Christ better ye would love *all* Christ’s church, and all Christ’s people.

Do you not know that Christ hath now a mouth on earth, and hath left a hand on earth and a foot on earth still, and that if ye would prove your love to him, ye would not think that ye cannot feed him—ye need not imagine that ye cannot fill his hand, or that ye cannot wash his feet? Ye can do all this to-day. He has left his poor and afflicted people, and their mouths are hungry, for they need bread, and their tongue is parched for they need water. You meet them; they come to you; they are destitute and afflicted. Do ye refuse them? Do you know who it was ye denied at your door? “Inasmuch as ye did it not unto one of the least of these, my brethren, ye did it not to me.” In rejecting the petition of the poor when you might have helped them, you rejected Christ. Christ was virtually the man to whom you parsimoniously refused the needed alms, and your Saviour was thus rejected at the door of one for whom he himself had died. Do you want to feed Christ? Open your eyes, then, and you shall see him everywhere; in our back streets, in our lanes, in our alleys, in all our churches, connected with every branch of Christ’s people, ye shall find the poor and the afflicted. If ye want feed Christ, feed *them*. But ye say that ye are willing to wash Christ’s feet Ah! well, and ye may do it. Has he no fallen children? Are there no brethren who have sinned, and who are thus defiled? If Christ’s feet were foul, ye say ye would wash them; then if a Christian man has stepped aside, seek to restore him, and lead him once more in the way of righteousness. And do you want to fill Christ’s hands with your liberality? His Church is the treasure-house of his alms, and the hand of his church is outstretched for help, for she always needs it. She has a work to do which must be accomplished. She is straitened because your help is withheld from her; pour your gifts into her treasury, for all that ye can give unto her is given to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Finally, to stimulate your love, let me remind you that Christ Jesus had two trials of his love, which he endured with firmness, but which are often too much for us. When Christ was high, and glorious, I marvel that he loved *us*. I have known many a man who loved his friend when he was in the same low estate; but he has risen, and he has disdained to know the man at whose table he had fed. A lofty elevation tries the love which we bear to those who are inferior to us in rank. Now, Christ Jesus, the Lord of heaven and the King of angels, condescended to notice us before he came on earth, and always called us brethren: and since he has ascended up to heaven, and has re-assumed the diadem. and once more sits down at the right hand of God, he never has forgotten us. His high estate has never made him

slight a disciple. When he rode into Jerusalem in triumph, we do not read that he disdained to confess that the humble fishermen were his followers. And “now, though he reigns exalted high, his love is still as great;” still he calls us brethren, friends; still he recognizes the kinship of the one blood. And yet, strange to say, we have known many Christians who have forgotten much of their love to Christ when they have risen in the world. “Ah!” said a woman, who had been wont to do much for Christ in poverty, and who had had a great sum left her, “I cannot do as much as I used to do.” “But how is that?” said one. Said she, “When I had a shilling purse I had a guinea heart, and now I have a guinea purse I have only a shilling heart.” It is a sad temptation to some men to get rich. They were content to go to the meeting-house and mix with the ignoble congregation, while they had but little; they have grown rich, there is a Turkey carpet in the drawing-room, they have arrangements now too splendid to permit them to invite the poor of the flock, as once they did, and Christ Jesus is not so fashionable as to allow them to introduce any religious topic when they meet with their new friends. Besides this, they say they are now obliged to pay this visit and that visit, and they must spend so much time upon attire, and in maintaining their station and respectability, they cannot find time to pray as they did. The house of God has to be neglected for the party, and Christ has less of their heart than ever he had. “Is this thy kindness to thy friend?” And hast thou risen so high that thou art ashamed of Christ? and art thou grown so rich, that Christ in his poverty is despised? Alas! poor wealth! alas! base wealth! vile wealth! ‘Twere well for thee if it should be all swept away, if a descent to poverty should be a restoration to the ardency of thine affection.

But once again: what a trial of love was that, when Christ began to suffer for us! There are many men, I doubt not, who are true believers, and love their Saviour, who would tremble to come to the test of suffering. Imagine yourself my brother, taken to-day into some dark dungeon of the Inquisition; conceive that all the horrors of the dark ages are revived, you are taken down a long dark staircase, and hurried you know not whither, at last you come to a place, far deep in the bowels of the earth, and round about you see hanging on the walls the pincers, the instruments of torture of all kinds and shapes. There are two inquisitors there who say to you, “Are you prepared to renounce your heretical faith, and to return to the bosom of the church?” I conceive my brethren and sisters, that you would have strength of mind and grace enough to say, “I am not prepared to deny my Saviour.” But when the pincers began to tear the flesh, when the hot coals began to scorch, when the rack began to dislocate the bones; when all the instruments of torture were wreaking their hellish vengeance, unless the supernatural hand of God should be mightily upon you, I am sure that in your weakness you would deny your Master, and in the hour of your peril would forsake the Lord that bought you. True, the love of Christ in the heart, when sustained by his grace, is strong enough to bear us through; but I am afraid that with many of us here present, if we had no more love than we have now, we should come out from the inquisition miserable apostates

from the faith. But now, remember Christ. He was exposed to tortures, which were really more tremendous, far. There is no engine of Romish cruelty that can equal that dreadful torture which forced a sweat of blood from every pore. Christ was scourged and he was crucified; but there were other woes unseen by us, which were the soul of his agonies. Now, if Christ in the hour of sore trial had said, "I disown my disciples, I will not die," he might have come down from the cross; and who could accuse him of evil? He owed us nothing; we could do nothing for him. Poor worms would be all that he would disown. But our Master, even when the blood-sweat covered him as with a mantle of gore, never thought of disowning us—NEVER. "My Father," said he once, "if it be possible, let this cup pass from me." But there was always the "If it be possible." If it be possible to save without it, let the cup pass; but if not thy will be done. You never hear him say in Pilate's hall one word that would let you imagine that he was sorry he had undertaken so costly a sacrifice for us; and when his hands are pierced, and when he is parched with fever, and his tongue is dried up like a potsherd, and his whole body is dissolved into the dust of death, you never hear a groan or a shriek that looks like going back. It is the cry of one determined to go on, though he knows he must die on his onward march. It was love that could not be stayed by death, but overcame all the horrors of the grave.

Now, what say we to this? We who live in these gentler times, are we about to give up our Master, when we are tried and tempted for him? Young man in the workshop! it is your lot to be jeered at because you are a follower of the Saviour; and will you turn back from Christ because of a jeer? Young woman! you are laughed at because you profess the religion of Christ, shall a laugh dissolve the link of love that knits your heart to him, when all the roar of hell could not divert his love from you. And you who are suffering because you maintain a religious principle, are you cast out from men; will you not bear that the house should be stripped, and that you shall eat the bread of poverty, rather than dishonour such a Lord? Will you not go forth from this place, by the help of God's Spirit, vowing and declaring that in life, come poverty, come wealth—in death, come pain, or come what may, you are and ever must be the Lord's; for this is written on your heart, "We love him, because he first loved us."