

Eternal Verities and Love Centred in Christ

The breaking of bread is a pleasure; and the pleasure is of a kind that yields profit, which is a great and constant evidence of the wisdom of Christ in appointing it. There is no exercise in life which we can ever compare with it. It differs from every effort of instruction in which men can engage. We do not come together at the Table of the Lord to learn. We do not meet to revive knowledge of any abstract truth we may have acquired. We meet to call to our remembrance a personal friend. He who commanded it, and whose command is alone our reason for attending to it, said

“Do this in remembrance of ME.”

The institution is intensely personal in its meanings and associations, both as regards the object it brings before our minds, and as regards the relations it is intended to establish between ourselves and that object.

In this, it differs from all human systems of wisdom and knowledge. These systems are impersonal. They exist independently of any man. The men die and are forgotten, but the systems live on. English Liberalism is for the moment bound up with the name of Mr. Gladstone, but Mr. Gladstone will die and Liberalism will go on its course as if such a man never lived. The scientific speculations popularised by Charles Darwin will thrive long after his bones have mouldered to dust. It is not so with Christ. He did not found a system, in the ordinary acceptance of that term. He offered himself. His language was

“Without me, ye can do nothing.”

“I am the living bread that came down from heaven, whereof if a man eat, he shall live for ever.”

“I go away, but if I go away, I will come again and receive you unto myself, that where I am, there ye may be also.”

“I go to my Father and your Father: to my God and your God.”

“This is the Father’s will that of all that He hath given me, I should lose nothing, but should raise it up again at the last day.”

It is therefore a man—a person—a friend we meet to think about and to fix our minds on; more, a head, a captain, a God. In this, the Truth supplies our need as no human system does. We need truth and duty drawn into this personal focus. We are not constituted to worship the abstract. Our minds have no faculty to work on the infinite. We are adapted to the personal and the single. We can worship truth. . . incorporate and individualised. . . Every power of the mind is thus drawn out, every spring of the heart opened. Christ meets all our need. He is the standard of our duty, the magnet of our loyalty; the absorbent of our love, the theme of our intellectual appreciations, the stimulator of our sublimest sentiments, and the adequate object of our most fervent adoration. There is no extravagance in Paul’s declaration that *“in him are filled up all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.”*

In this is the perfect beauty of the gospel as contrasted with the wisdom of the world in its most pretentious forms—that in Christ, we have a man who is *“the truth.”* Astronomic truth has no personal applications. It is beautiful, but it is high and cold like the glitter of the stars on a frosty night. It speaks no hope and yields no guidance. We are glad to retire from the fatiguing futility of trying to grasp it, and to take refuge in our small mortal way. So with all other forms of scientific truth. They know us not and comfort us not as persons, and mock us with their sterile beauty and consistency, telling us that low and mortal we are, and must remain, and that the grave is the inexorable corollary of life. On the other hand, if the world offers us a friend in some man of excellence, we have a theme more suited to our smallness. But how equally vain in another way! The best and strongest of mortal men are like the worst and weakest in one respect:

“all are of the dust and all turn to dust again.”

As the flowers that grow and bloom, and show their beauty and exhale their fragrance in their season, and then wither and vanish, so the best mortal friend we can have is but a transient form of the universal power, destined to disappear in the ceaseless transmutations of things, and leaves us comfortless and forlorn. Mortal friendship has no root.

“The flesh profiteth nothing.”

Human knowledge has no result, and human friendship no permanence. And thus if we look to the wisdom of the world in its ultimate issues,

“all is vanity and vexation of spirit.”

What is wanted is something that will connect the eternal verities at which science can only peep, with the personal attractiveness of friendship made perfect and abiding. This is exactly what is done for us in Christ.

“The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us.”

The Word, which is God, and by which all things have been made, becoming flesh, has given us a man “full of grace and truth”—a man in whom blend the sublimity of the infinite, the beauty of the perfect, the interest of the advantageous, and the felicity of the strong and lovely—yea also, the solution of history, the secret of futurity, and the remedy of the world. Science is poor by his side, for he holds in his hand the power whose multiform products science can but register and classify in man’s puny style. History apart from him is high-banked accumulation of cloud and fog, lurid with distant conflagration; futurity, an impenetrable night; destiny a frightful abyss; the universe, a suicide-engendering enigma.

In Christ is peace. He combines all that the heart can desire or the intellect aspire to. He is a friend and a head, and at the same time, the incorporation of the Eternal and the universal. Sublime and glorious combination! He gives bosom to the aching heart and pillow to the tired head. They are no empty words that he uttered, though they have been deprived of all meaning by the vapid sentimentality with which they are usually associated, when he said *“Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest”*—rest now, from the burden of human futility—rest supernal in the issue to which he is leading human life upon the earth.

Being such, ought we not to listen, with fervent submission, to his voice? He says, *“Ye call me Master and Lord, and ye say well, for so I am.”* If he be Master what are we? His servants whose part it is to obey his word—with understanding, with implicitness, with thoroughness. This is reasonable. It is what he commands. It is what human masters exact, do you think Christ will be satisfied with less? On this Christ has spoken plainly, and it is for us, in calling him to remembrance, to remember what he has said. He says,

“Call me not Lord, Lord if ye do not the things that I say.”

“He that hath my commandments and keepeth them, he it is that loveth me.”

“The man that heareth these sayings of mine and DOETH THEM NOT, is like a foolish man that built his house upon the sand, from which it was washed away by the descending storm.”

Here is a point that it is not possible to emphasize too strongly. However unpopular the doctrine may be—however much men may fail in acting on the principle, it remains the same Truth that will confront us at last when life’s feverish struggle is in the past for ever—that the standard of our acceptance with Christ in the day of his appearing will be the obedience of his commandments. We may overlook this in the theoretical contentions forced upon us by the modern exigencies of the Truth. We may even in some cases be tempted to profanely make light of the commandments of Christ, either as an impossible rule of action, or as one that in our curious blindness we may say no man acts up to, but the fact remains the same. God has given no authority since Christ’s ascension to relax any of these commandments given for general obedience.

Let us spend a moment in considering one or two of his commandments. Three times he asked Peter *“Lovest thou me?”* This points directly to what, in a certain sense, we might call the first

of his commandments. All through his teaching, he exhibits himself as an object of love. He makes a man's love the test of his worthiness of the privilege of his friendship.

"If any man love father or mother...more than me, he is not worthy of me."

This was new and extraordinary teaching in the midst of Israel. They had been accustomed to the commandment delivered to them of old time.

"Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart...Him only shalt thou serve."

Here was one placing himself on the same pedestal as the Father.

"I and my Father are one."

This was what the Jews could not endure. They took up stones to stone him, saying,

"For a good work, we stone thee not, but because that thou, being a man, makest thyself God."

The Truth has enabled us to understand where the Jews failed to understand. Begotten and anointed by the one Spirit consubstantial with the Father, Jesus was the manifestation of the Father—the Son of the Father, whom it was the Father's will all men should honour, even as they honoured the Father. Therefore the love that men were Mosaicallly called upon to give to the Father, belongs to Christ also, the love of whom becomes the test of fitness for inclusion in the family of the Father. Here then, Christ calls upon us—commands us—to love him. It was a love active with Paul. He said *"the love of Christ constraineth me."* It was a love that was strong, high, deep. He speaks of it as *"the love of Christ that passeth knowledge."* This is what we might call natural to the subject. Love varies with the value and loveableness of the object it acts upon. A man does not love his horse as he does his friend, nor the coals in his cellar, as the books in his library. A man who truly knows Christ cannot love anything as he loves him. Because he is so great, the love of him, when fully awakened, is a love transcending what we feel for any other object. The command to love him, and by comparison, to hate even our own lives, is reasonable; for ultimately, it will be seen that he is our life and our joy; that apart from him there is no well-being at all. It might seem as if the command to love were an anomaly. Love, as an affair of moral affinity, might seem beyond the range of command. It is not so really. We have all heard of people trying to love persons to whom they did not feel drawn, and we have heard of success. Love can be cultivated. How much more where all the materials of love exist, but are inactive from inertness or ignorance, and where it is but needful to apply the fire of the will to set the whole aflame. The love of Christ will grow with acquaintance and contemplation: it will grow till it becomes the leading and constraining bias.

Christ gives us a rule by which we may judge our attainments in the matter.

"He that hath my commandments and keepeth them, he it is that loveth me."

And again,

"If ye love me, keep my commandments."

It is evident that Christ will not accept a sentimental appreciation that falls short of practical compliance with his enjoined will. The reasonableness of this will commend itself. Do we not see in everyday life that where love exists it powerfully inclines the subject of it to do what is pleasing to the object of his love? Should we not say that one did not really love another if he showed himself indifferent to his wishes? Christ is only recognising a universally operative rule when he says

"He that hath my commandments and keepeth them, he it is that loveth me."

It is, therefore, in our power to judge ourselves, as we are told to do. Do we know his commandments and keep them? The answer will be the true decision of our standing in the matter of love. Love cannot be quenched; hatred may tire, but love: never.

We look at Christ. There is everything to love, his own excellence; his unflagging devotion to the Father; his tireless compassion for the multitude; his love for his friends, even unto death; his holiness as the sin-hater and sin-remover; his power, both to heal and destroy; his towering greatness

as the Son of God and the heir of all things; his immeasurable importance as the coming possessor of all things on earth and the dispenser of the permanent goodness of the ages—everything combines to engage the highest love, a love passing knowledge, when the eyes are fully open to his unsearchable wealth in all things. With this love aglow, his commandments become easy, and shortcomings a burden. We eagerly believe and are baptised. We joyfully yield him the first place in our lives, with bended knee and confessing tongue. What next? We desire to do what he instructed the apostles to enjoin on us: to “*observe all things whatsoever he has commanded.*” Love cannot be satisfied with anything short of this. He has commanded many things—some of them easy—some of them difficult. Love will not evade the difficulties, it will desire to “*observe all*” the things difficult and easy.

Of one thing, he specifically says, “*This I command you,*” namely, “*that ye love one another.*” It is well that he spoke so plainly as this. It is a great help in the matter. It is comparatively easy to love Christ, because he is “*altogether lovely,*” and it is in a manner natural—natural to love the lovely.

But among ourselves, there are many faults and blemishes—a good deal that is not lovable; and if Christ had not made love to one another a matter of command, we might easily have given in to our aversions, and found ourselves hating where we ought to love. We are not to wait for the lovable before we love. We are to be beforehand with it, and even shut our eyes to the unlovely. *Love covereth a multitude of sins.* We are to carry this love so far as to “*love even our enemies, and do good to them that hate us and despitefully use and persecute us.*” Some say this is impossible. It is impossible for those who start wrongly. No man who does not first love Christ will love his enemies. If a man love Christ, he can love his enemies because Christ has commanded it. His love of Christ will constrain him. If he look only to his evil neighbours and his own feelings, he will fail, he will hate his enemy and do him evil, in word and deed. But if he have Christ in consideration and view, he will find it possible to do good to them that hate him. The will of Christ whom he loves will help him.

The reason that Christ gives will also help;

“That ye may be the children of the Highest who sendeth His rain upon the just and the unjust.”

The goodness of God is a fine copy for mortal man who was made in His image. It is high and, in its perfect form, unattainable by weak, erring man. But in measure, we can reach to it in obedience to Christ, who says,

“Be like unto your Father.”

He giveth liberally and upbraideth not. So the Lord loveth a cheerful giver. The world prescribes political economy as the rule of action. Christ prescribes the character of God as the standard. It is for us as His children to choose the one and refuse the other.

There are those who cynically declare that these commandments are never obeyed. We must not be discouraged by such. They speak not truly. They might speak for themselves, but they speak for others, and thus disobey the command which tells us to judge not one another. No one can judge another, for a just judgment requires that the judge know all, which mortal man cannot do. It is not for us to judge one another, but to exhort each other, pointing to the commandments delivered unto us, and the glorious inducements God has associated with their obedience.

By this course, obedience will grow in ourselves and others, and the abounding evil of our present state be a little modified and overcome by the good that God has brought to bear upon us in His Word. And the way will thus be prepared for that morning of brightness and healing which will chase this night of darkness for ever away.

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