

Christ's Mission the Revelation of God's Love.

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TEXT: "Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us, and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins." 1 Jno. 4: 10.

This is the second of a pair of twin verses which deal with substantially the same subject under two slightly different aspects. The thought common to both is that Christ's mission is the revelation of God's love. But in the preceding verse the point on which stress is laid is the manifestation of that love, and in our text the point mainly brought out is its essential nature. In the former we read, "In this was manifested the love of God," and in the present verse we read, "Herein is love." In the former verse John fixes on three things as setting forth the greatness of that manifestation—viz., that the Christ is the Only Begotten Son, that the manifestation is for the world, and that its end is the bestowment of everlasting love. In my text the points which are fixed on are that that love in its nature is self-kindled—"not that we loved God, but that He loved us"—and that it lays hold of, and casts out of the way, that which, unremoved, would be a barrier between God and us—viz., our sin: "He hath sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins."

Now, it is interesting to notice that these twin verses, like a double star which reflects the light of a central sun, draw their brightness from the great word of the Master, "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish but have everlasting life." Do you not hear the echo of His voice in the three expressions in the verse before the text—"only begotten," "world," "live?" Here is one more of the innumerable links which bind together in indissoluble union the gospel and the epistle. So then the great thought suggested by the words before us is just this, that in the incarnation and sacrifice of Jesus Christ we have the great revelation of the love of God.

I. Now, there are three questions that suggest themselves to me, and the first is this: What, then, does Christ's mission say about love?

I do not need to dwell on the previous question whether, apart from that mission, there is any solid revelation of the fact that there is love in heaven, or whether we are left apart from it to gropings and probabilities. I need not refer you to the ambiguous oracles of nature or to the equally ambiguous oracles of life. I need not, I suppose, do more than just remind you that even the men whose faith grasps the thought of the love of God most intensely, know what it is to be brought to a stand before some of the dreadful problems which the facts of humanity and the facts of nature press upon us, nor need I remind you how, as we see around us to-day in the drift of our English literature and that of other nations, when men turn their backs upon the Cross they look upon a landscape all swathed in mists, and on which darkness is steadily settling. The reason why the men of this generation, some of them very superficially and for the sake of being "in the swim," and some of them despairingly and with bleeding hearts are turning themselves to a reasoning pessimism is because they will not see what shines out from the Cross that God is love.

Nor need I do more than remind you in a word of the fact that, go where we will through this world, and consult all the conceptions that men have made to themselves of gods many and lords many, whilst we find the deification of power and of vice and of fragmentary goodnesses, of hopes and fears, of longings, of regrets, we find nowhere a god of whom the characteristic is love. And amidst that Pantheon of deities, some of them savage, some of them lustful, some of them embodiments of all vices, some of them indifferent and neutral, some of them radiant and fair, none reveals this secret, that the center of the universe is a heart. So we have to turn away from hopes, from probability dashed with many a doubt and find something that has more solid substance in it if it is to be enough to bear up the man that grasps it and to yield before no tempests. For all that Bishop Butler says, probabilities are not the guide of life in its deepest and noblest aspects. They may be the guide of practice, but for the anchorage of the soul we want no shifting sands bank, but that to which we may make fast and be sure that, whatever shifts, it remains immovable. You can no more clothe the soul in "perhapes" than a man can make garments out of a spider's web. Religion consists of the things of which we are sure, and not of the things which are probable. "Peradventure" is not the word on which a man can rest the weight of a crushed, or an agonising, or a sinking soul; he must have "Verily!" verily! and then he is at rest.

How do we know what a man is? By seeing what a man does. How do we know what God is? By knowing what God does. So John does not argue with logic, either frosty or fiery, but he simply opens his mouth, and in calm, pellucid utterances sets forth the truths and leaves them to work. He says to us: "I do not relegate you to your intuitions; I do not argue with you; I simply say, Look at Him; look, and see that God is love."

What, then, does the mission of Christ say to us about

the love of God? It says, first, that it is a love independent of, and earlier than, ours. We love, as a rule, because we recognize in the object to which our heart goes out something that draws it, something that is lovable. But he whose name is "I am that I am" has all the reasons of His actions within Himself, and just as He

"Sits on no precarious throne,

Nor borrows leave to be,"

nor is dependent on any creature for existence, so He is His own motive, He is His own reason. Within that sacred circle of the infinite nature, lie all the energies which bring that infinite nature into action; and like some clear fountain, more sparkling than crystal, there wells up forever, from the depths of the divine nature, the love which is Himself. He loves, not because we love Him, but because He is God. The very sun itself, as some astronomers believe, owes its radiant brightness and ever-communicated warmth to the impact on, and reception into, it of myriads of meteors and of matter drawn from the surrounding system. So, when the fuel fails, that fire will go out, and the sun will shrivel into a black ball. But this central sun of the universe has all His light within Himself, and the rays that pour out from Him owe their being and their motion to nothing but the force of that central fire, from which they rush with healing on their wings.

If, then, God's love is not evoked by anything in His creatures, then it is universal, and we do not need anxiously to question ourselves whether we deserve that it shall fall upon us, and no conscious unworthiness need ever make us falter in the least in the firmness with which we grasp that great central thought. The sun, inferior emblem as it is of that light of all that is, pour down its beams indiscriminately on dunghill and on jewel, though it be true that in the one its rays breed corruption and in the other draw out beauty. That great love wraps us all, is older than our sins, and is not deflected by them. So that is the first thing that Christ's mission tells us about God's love.

The second is—it speaks to us of a love which gives its best. John says "God sent His Son," and that word reposes, like the rest of the passage, on many words of Christ's—such as, for instance, when He speaks of Himself as "sanctified and sent into the world," and many another saying. But remember how, in the foundation passage to which I have already referred, and of which we have some reflection in the words before us, there is a tender expression—not merely "sent," but "gave." Paul strengthens the word when he says, "gave up for us all." It is not for us to speculate about these deep things, but I would remind you of what I dare say I have had occasion often to point out, that Paul seems to intend to suggest to us a mysterious parallel, when he further says, "He that spared not His own Son but freely gave Him up to death for us all." For that emphatic word "spared" is a distinct allusion to, and quotation of, the story of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac: "Seeing thou hast not withheld from Me thine only son. And so, mysterious as it is, we may venture to say that He not only sent, but He gave, and not only gave, but gave up. His love like ours, delights to lavish its most precious gifts on its objects.

Now, there arises from this consideration a thought which I only mention, and it is this. Christian teaching about Christ's work has often, both by its friends and its foes, been so presented as to lead to the conception that it was the work of Christ which made God love men. The enemies of evangelical truth are never tired of talking in that sense; and some of its unwise friends have given reason for the caricature. But the true Christian teaching is, "God so loved . . . that He gave." The love of the cause of the mission, and not the mission that which evokes the love. So let us be sure that, not because Christ died does God love us sinful creatures, but that, because God loves us, Christ died for us.

The third thing which the mission of Christ teaches us about the love of God is that it is a love which takes note of and overcomes man's sin. I have said, as plainly as I can, that I reject the travesty of Christianity which implies that it was Christ's mission which originated God's love to men. But a love that does not in the slightest degree care whether its object is good or bad—what sort of a love do you call that? What do you name it when a father shows it to his children? Moral indifference; culpable and weak and fatal. And is it anything nobler, if you transfer it to God, and say that it is all the same to Him whether a man is living the life of a hog, and forgetting all that is high and noble, or whether he is pressing with all his strength towards light and truth and goodness? Surely, surely they who, in the name of their reverence for the supreme love of God, cover over the fact of His righteousness, are mutilating and killing the very attribute that they are trying to exalt. A love that cares nothing for the moral character of its object is not love, but hate; it is not kindness, but cruelty. Take away the background because it is so black, and you lower the brilliancy of whiteness of that which stands in front of it. There is such a property in God as is fittingly described by that tremendous word "wrath." God cannot, being what He is, treat sin as if it were no sin; and therefore we read, "He sent His son to be the pro-

pitiation for our sins." The black dam, which we build up between ourselves and the river of the water of life, is to be swept away; and it is the death of Jesus Christ which makes it possible for the highest gift of God's love to pour over the ruined and partially removed barrier and to flood a man's soul. Brethren, no God that is worthy the name can give Himself to a sinful soul. No sinful soul that has not the habit, the guilt, the penalty of its sins swept away, is capable of receiving the life, which is the highest gift of the love. So our twin texts divide what I may call the process of redemption between them; and whilst the one says, "He sent his Son that we should have life through Him," the other tells us of how the sins which bar the entrance of that life into our hearts, as our own consciences tell us they do, can be removed. There must first be the propitiation for our sins, and then that mighty love reaches its purpose and attains its end, and can give us the life of God to be the life of our souls. So much for my first and principal question.

II. Now, I have to ask, secondly, how comes it that Christ's mission says anything about God's love?

That question is a very plain one, and I should like to press the answer to it very emphatically. Take any other of the great names of the world's history of poet, thinker, philosopher, moralist, practical benefactor; is it possible to apply such a thought as this to them—except with a hundred explanations and limitations—that they, however radiant, however wise, however beneficent, however fruitful their influence, make men sure that God loves them? The thing is ridiculous, unless you are using language in a very fantastic and artificial fashion.

Christ's mission reveals God's love, because Christ is the Son of God. If it is true, as Jesus said, that "He that hath seen Me hath seen the Father," then I can say, "In thy tenderness, in Thy patience, in Thy attracting of the publican and the harlot, in Thy sympathy with all the erring and the sorrowful, and, most of all, in Thy agony and passion, in Thy cross and death, I see the glory of God which is the love of God." Brother, if you break that link, which binds the man Christ Jesus with the ever-living and the ever-loving God, I know not how you can draw from the record of His life and death a confidence, which nothing can shake, in the love of the Father.

Then there is another point. Christ's mission speaks to us about God's love, if—and I was going to say only if—we regard it as His mission to be the propitiation for our sins. Strike out the death as the sacrifice for the world's sin, and what you have left is a maimed something, which may be, and I thankfully recognize often is very strengthening, very helpful, very calming, very ennobling, even to men who do not sympathize with the view of that work which I am now setting forth, but which is all that to them, very largely, because of the unconscious influence of the truths which they have cast away. It seems to me that those who, in the name of the highest paternal love of God, reject the thought of Christ's sacrificial death, are kicking away the ladder by which they have climbed, and are better than their creeds, and happily illlogical. It is the cross that reveals the love, and it is the cross as the means of propitiation that pours the light of that blessed conviction into men's hearts.

III. My last question is this: What does Christ's mission say about God's love to me?

We know what it ought to say. It ought to carry, as on the crest of a great wave, the conviction of that divine love into our hearts, to be fruitful there. It ought to sweep out, as on the crest of a great wave, our sins and evils. It ought to do this; does it? On some of us I fear it produces no effect at all. Some of you, dear friends, look at that light with lack-lustre eyes, or, rather, with blind eyes, that are dark as midnight, in the blaze of noonday. The voice comes from the cross, sweet as that of harpers harping with their harps, and mighty as the voice of many waters, and you hear nothing. Some of us it slightly moves now and then, and there an end.

Brethren, you have to turn the world-wide generality into a personal possession. You have to say, "He loved me, and He gave Himself for me." It is of no use to believe in a universal Saviour; do you trust in your particular Saviour? It is of no use to have the most orthodox and clear conception of the relation between the cross of Christ and the revelation to men of the love of God. Have you made that revelation the means of bringing into your own personal life the conviction that Jesus Christ is your Saviour, the propitiation for your sins, the giver to you of life eternal? It is faith that does that. Note that, in the great foundation passage to which I have made frequent reference, there are two conditions put in between the beginning and the end. Some of us are disposed to say, "God so loved the world that every man might have eternal life." That is not what Christ said, "God so loved the world that"—and here follows the first condition—"He gave his Son that"—and here follows the second—"he that believeth on Him should not perish, but have everlasting life." God has done what it is needful for him to do. His part of the conditions has been fulfilled. Fulfill yours—"He that believeth on Him." And if you can say, not "He is the propitiation for our sin, but for my sin, then you will live and move and have your being in a heaven of love, and will love Him back again with an echo and reflection of His own, and nothing shall be able to separate you from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.—Selected.

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