SERMONS,

PREACHED

IN THE PARISH CHURCH OF

HIGH WYCOMBE.

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BY

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SERMON XVI.

THE CONSTRAINING INFLUENCE OF THE LOVE OF CHRIST.

2Corinthians v. 14, 15.

*The love of Christ constraineth us, because we thus judge, that if one died for all, then were all dead; and that he died for all, that they which live, should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto him which died for them and rose again.*

This text may be considered as a summary of Christian faith and practice. All the great truths of the gospel are comprised or implied in it, and it delineates the practical effects which a sincere reception of these truths never fails to produce. Happy is the man who can enter into the mean­ing of these words, and has a heartfelt knowledge of their truth!

I. Among the many subjects of consideration which the text suggests to us, *the condition to which sin has reduced man,* appears to be the first.

1. This the apostle describes as a condition of *peculiar wretchedness.* “If one died for all,” he says, “then were all dead.”

Now this testimony concerning us sends us back to the scene of man’s first transgression, and brings to our remembrance the sentence which was passed on him when he first became a sinner. “In the day that thou eatest thereof, thou shalt surely die,” was the plain declaration of God, but man despised it; he ate and died. He did the dreadful work which his enemy had given him to do, and he and all his posterity have received its wages. We are dead.

The death which sin has thus brought on our fallen race, is something more than the death of the body; it is a moral death, the death of the soul. The scriptures often describe our spiritual state under this figure, and they could not have employed a more natural or expressive one. It is a figure too which is easily understood.

We all know that a man, when dead, is inca­pable either of action or enjoyment. He might yesterday have been possessed of much strength of body, and have prided himself on great energy of mind; we might have seen him happy in the enjoyment of a thousand blessings; but now all is over. The objects which busied him, and the things he delighted in, still remain unchanged around him, but he heeds them not; he lies un­moved in the midst of them all. The occupations of the world cannot rouse him to action, nor the pleasures of life wake him to joy.

It is thus with our souls. They are dead. They have lost their spiritual life, and are become incapable of spiritual employments and delights. They still retain all their original faculties, as the dead body retains for a season its original mem­bers, but then the living principle which once animated them and called them into exercise, is gone. Heaven and hell are still awful realities; the one is as desirable as ever, and the other as fearful; but the soul has lost its feeling, and we are become alike indifferent to both. We hear of them, and we believe their existence, but this is all. They do not move us; they have no prac­tical influence on our minds.

2. The figure which the apostle makes use of, shows us also *the hopelessness* of our condition. We are not dying, but dead. We are not like a tree which, though withered, may be brought into a situation where the sun may shine and the rain descend on it, and revive it. We are rather like those trees, of which it is said that they are “twice dead, and plucked up by the roots.” The spiritual life of the soul is utterly extinct. Matter of fact proves that it is totally gone. We have all the means of spiritual restoration which a dying sinner could ask for. We have sabbaths and Bibles to awaken us; we have ministers to quicken us*;* we have afflictions to arouse us; we have mercies innumerable to affect us. And what effect have all these means of grace produced? Do the dry bones live? Are our souls quickened, and forced to think and feel? Alas, no! We are, for the greater part, still dead, as dead to spi­ritual and eternal things, as though there were not a sabbath in our year, or a Bible in our land.

But this spiritual insensibility is not all that the scriptures mean by the death of the soul. It is an earnest of the fruit we are to reap from our transgressions, rather than the fruit itself. There is a day approaching, in which the full wages of sin will be given us. The spiritual death which now incapacitates us for the services and enjoy­ments of heaven, will end in *eternal death;* not in annihilation or nothingness, but in a living death; in those unknown and bitter pains, to which no earthly sufferings can be compared, but the pangs of the dying. These will at once call into action the dormant powers of the soul. These will em­ploy all its strengthened faculties in the eternity before us, and leave not a moment for peace or joy.

Observe too that it is not some or a small part of mankind, who are in this wretched and hopeless condition. The language of the apostle extends to all. It includes the decent and the virtuous, as well as the profligate and the vicious; the man who calls himself after the name of Christ, as well as the heathen who has never heard of his name. “If one died for all, then were all dead.”

The death which the great Governor of the universe has made the wages of sin, is not the consequence of great and complicated iniquities only. It follows sin of every description, and guilt of every degree. The first act of trans­gression we ever committed, brought this curse on our souls, so that the condition of any one of us is, by nature, the condition of us all. We are all criminals condemned to die, and left for execu­tion; respited indeed for a season by the clemency of our Judge, but still liable every moment to be called on and hurried to judgment.

II. The words of the apostle lead us to notice, secondly, *the interposition of Christ on the behalf of man.* “He died for them and rose again.”

Observe *who it is that is here said to have had compassion on man.* This Christ was no other than the eternal Son; the being who framed the world, and built the skies, and gives to his own glorious heaven all its joys and splendours. It was he who had existed from all eternity enthroned in light, and had never known in that eternity one moment’s humiliation, pain, or sorrow.

Observe *how this Being interposed for man; what he did for him.* “He died.” And how much, brethren, is comprehended in this ex­pression! what mysteries of grace and love! If we would see something of its meaning, we must lift up our eyes to the heavens above us, and be­hold the Son of God descending for the first time from his throne amidst wondering angels, and withdrawing himself from their sight. We must then bring down our eyes back again to the earth, and behold “the high and lofty One” who had hitherto inhabited eternity, dwelling here; appearing on our own sinful globe, in our own degraded form. He is seen at first lying in a manger as a helpless babe. A few years after­wards, we find him in a state of suffering, as well as of degradation; wandering about on the earth which his hands had formed, without a place in it “where to lay his head;” “despised and re­jected” by all who behold him, and persecuted by thousands who pour contempt on his greatness, and thirst for his blood. And how did this de­gradation and these sufferings end? Did he at length throw off the form which concealed his divinity, and show himself to an astonished world in the glory of his greatness? No. We see him wounded and bruised, crucified and slain; ending his sorrows as a malefactor, and expiring on a shameful cross.

Observe further *for whom this death was en­dured.* He died for man. Not that he died in the same spiritual sense in which we are de­scribed as dead; or that he endured those pains of eternal death, which are the desert of our sin. It was a natural death only which he underwent; and though his soul was racked with anguish greater than man could bear, there were some of the peculiar torments of the accursed, which he did not taste. He died on the behalf and in the stead of man. His sufferings effectually rescue those who believe in him, from the punishment due to their guilt, and are therefore spoken of in the scriptures as an equivalent, and are called a “ransom” and a “price;” but we must not give a pecuniary meaning to words which were de­signed to convey only a moral signification. We must not infer from this language, that Christ suffered on the cross just the same agonies that his people must otherwise have suffered in the kingdom of despair. The scriptures nowhere warrant such an inference; and it would not be difficult to show that it involves in it at least a moral, if not a natural impossibility. It becomes us to speak with the greatest caution on every subject connected with this great “mystery of godliness;” but we may perhaps venture to assert that if only one sinner was to have been redeemed by the blood of Christ, it would have pleased the Father to have laid just as much grief on his be­loved Son, as he laid on him for the salvation of all the world. He would have made just as grand a display of his holiness, and as fearful a manifesta­tion of his justice.

Hence we are told in the text, that Christ “died for all;” in other words, that “he made on the cross by his one oblation of himself once offered, a full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, oblation, and satisfaction, for the sins of the whole world.” Not that we are to infer that the sins of the whole world, or of any one sinner in the world, are ne­cessarily pardoned in consequence of the death of Christ. All we are to conclude is this—that in consideration of the sacrifice of Christ, the Al­mighty can now pardon every sinner whom his infinite goodness inclines him to pardon, without sullying the glory of his character as the Gover­nor of the universe, or impairing the authority of his law.

I am aware, brethren, that it has been asserted, and by some who profess to have peculiarly clear and exalted ideas of the glory of Christ, that the atonement which he has offered for sin, was an atonement of limited worth; that it was an im­perfect sacrifice; of sufficient efficacy indeed to enable the Almighty to pardon all the transgressions of a few sinners, but insufficient to enable him, consistently with his attributes, to blot out the iniquities of others. No opinion however can be more unscriptural than this, or more dis­honourable to the Redeemer. It militates against many of the plainest declarations of the Bible; it impeaches the veracity of him who calls a whole world of sinners to the cross of his Son; it impairs the glory of the gospel; it limits the Holy One of Israel. The humble Christian, he whom an attachment to human systems has not yet cor­rupted from “the simplicity that is in Christ,” shrinks from an opinion so bold and strange, and wonders that any of his fellow-Christians can have so faint a sense of the dignity of their Re­deemer, as to allow it for one moment to be har­boured in their breasts. He presumes not to mark out the men who will be savingly benefited by the death of his Lord; but he knows that his blood “cleanseth from all sin that it is able to justify the ways of Jehovah to his creatures, though he were to pardon and save ten thousand sinful worlds.

“What then,” it may be asked, “becomes of those declarations of scripture, which seem to imply that it is only a chosen people on the earth, who will be made partakers of the saving efficacy of the cross? Are they to be blotted out of our Bibles? Or are we to wrest them from their meaning and explain them away, before we re­ceive them?” In no wise. All the declarations of the Bible are “the faithful and true sayings of God and none of them, however offensive to human pride, are to be disbelieved or qualified by man. The doctrine which ascribes unlimited, infinite efficacy to the atonement of Christ, is not opposed to one of these declarations. It is per­fectly consistent with them all; with those which tell us that the flock of Christ is a little flock chosen out of the world, as well as with those which call on all the ends of the earth to look to the cross and be saved.

It is plain that there may be treasures in the mines of the earth, sufficient to enrich all who live on it, and yet but few of the inhabitants of the earth may be enriched by these treasures. And is it not equally possible that there may be undiscovered riches in Christ, a treasure of grace in an infinite God, sufficient to save a universe of sinners, though many are suffered to despise his salvation and perish? Is the balm of Gilead un­able to heal, because the wounded sufferer refuses to have it applied? Shall the deep and over­flowing river of life be said to be empty, because we refuse to drink of its waters, and perish with thirst? Is the Holy One of Israel to be limited, because his creatures pour contempt on the glo­ries he offers them, and choose instead of them the pleasures and wages of sin? As well might a man contend that the sun has ceased to shine around him, because he closes his eyes against its light; or that food is unable to support his body, because he objects to receive it. The suffi­ciency of a remedy to remove an evil, is one thing; the application of the remedy to that evil, is another. The death of Christ is able to save every sinner, but it is the will of God that the contrite and believing sinner only should be inter­ested in its saving power; therefore the penitent believer only is saved.

Christ died for all; he made on the cross so awful a display of the divine holiness, that the Most High can now pardon sin wherever he finds it, without militating against the honour or authority of his moral government;—this is the doctrine taught in the text. In dispensing his mercy, the Almighty passes by the angels that sinned; he leaves them as awful monuments of his justice; while he sets his love on a people on the earth, and carries them to heaven as mo­numents of his redeeming grace. “He chooses them in Christ out of mankind, and he brings them by Christ to everlasting salvation as vessels made to honour;”—this is the doctrine of sove­reign grace. Both these doctrines are plainly taught us in the scriptures; they are both the doctrines of our church. Whatever contrariety we may see between them, he who wrote the scriptures, sees none. He has left them upon record in his word, and he calls upon us to re­ceive and believe them; not to contend for them as the tenets of a sect or the badges of a party, but to embrace them as the faithful sayings of God; not to view them merely as subjects of speculation and controversy, but as designed to produce a practical and holy effect on our hearts and lives.

But the interposition of Christ on the behalf of man was not confined to dying for him. “He rose again.”

Had Christ only died for us, his death would not have materially profited us; at least, it would not have effectually rescued us from our lost condition. It might have saved us from eternal death, but we should still have been spiritually dead. It might have procured heaven for us, but we should have been incapable of sharing in its services and joys. The blessed Jesus therefore, after he had opened a way for the salvation of his church by his death on the cross, began to prepare and qualify his church for the enjoyment of that salvation. He rose again to complete the work which he had begun. He returned to heaven in the same character in which he left it, as the Saviour of sinners. Nearly two thousand years have past since he gave up the ghost on Calvary, but not a moment has past in which he has not been employed in the salvation of his church. God exalted him to be a Saviour, and he is faithful to the office he has received. He delights in communicating to sinners the spiritual life which they have lost; in calling them out of the world, convincing them of sin, leading them to his cross, comforting them in their sorrows, making them meet for their eter­nal inheritance, and leading them by “a way which they know not,” to the kingdom he has purchased for them.

III. The next subject of consideration sug­gested by the text, is *the principle or motive from which the interposition of Christ on our behalf proceeded.*

The apostle traces it in the text to love. “The love of Christ constraineth us.” It was not an act of justice. We had no claim whatsoever on the compassion of Christ. Instead of expecting him to come down from heaven as a Saviour to die for us, we have reason to wonder that he had so long delayed to come down as a Judge to condemn, and as an Avenger to destroy us.

Neither did his interposition proceed from a regard to his own honour only. He was “glorious in holiness” and “fearful in praises” long before we were created; and as for the lustre which he has shed around his throne by the redemption of man, there were other sinners in the universe for whom he could have died, and whose salvation would perhaps have shown forth his praise as brightly and widely as ours. He has never yet needed the aid of any of his creatures to make him a glorious God.

It was love alone, free and unmerited love, which brought Christ down to the earth. It was love, which caused him to dwell on this accursed world as a man of sorrows, and to take so large a share of its degradation and miseries. It was love, which made him so willing to be “despised and rejected of men,” and to be bruised and put to grief by his God. It was love, which enabled him to bear the exceeding great trouble of his soul in the garden, and the mysteriously racking agonies of the cross. All that he suffered for us when on earth, and all that he has been since doing for us in heaven, he has done and suffered solely for this one reason, because he loves us.

This is the divine attribute to which all the blessings of redemption must be traced. This is the attribute which shines with the brightest lustre in the gospel of Christ. The work of redemption reveals to us treasures of wisdom and power. Matchless wisdom devised its stupendous plan, and infinite power executed, it; but it was love, which called this wisdom and this power into ex­ercise. It was love, which made these attributes so glorious to God, and the instruments of such rich blessings to man.

IV. But although the interposition of Christ on our behalf proceeded solely from love, it was never­theless designed to answer a great and gracious purpose. The apostle accordingly points out to us in the text, *the end which Christ had in view in dying and rising again for man.* It was this—“that they which live, should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto him which died for them and rose again.”

This language plainly implies that by nature we are all living to ourselves; that our own will is the law of our actions, and our own gratifica­tion, our own interest or pleasure, the end of them. It is not thus with some of the rational creatures of God, neither was it always thus with man. The selfish and independent principle within us, is one of the sad fruits of our depra­vity. It is a part of that spiritual death, that alienation from God, which sin has spread over the soul, and which nothing but a new birth unto righteousness can remove. It is directly opposed to our happiness, for all the happiness of the creature is derived from the service of the Crea­tor, and all his blessedness flows from a conformity to the divine law and will. It is also in the high­est degree hateful to God. We show by it that we do not consider him as having any claim on us or our services. It is an open denial of his authority as the Sovereign of the universe. It is an act of rebellion.

Now the design of Christ in dying for man was to root out this selfish principle from his heart; to save him from it; to bring the rebel back again to the forsaken service of his heavenly King. The gospel finds us in a state of bondage to Satan, and it delivers us from it; but it does not leave us lawless; it does not make us our own masters. It sanctions and strengthens all the original obli­gations which we are under as creatures to serve the God who formed us, and it gives him a new and more endearing claim on our services. He has bought us with a price; he therefore deems us his own, and calls upon us to glorify him “in our body and in our spirits which are his.” He points to the cross and the tomb, and tells us that it was “for this end Christ both died, and rose, and revived, that he might be Lord both of the dead and the living.”

Shall we then hesitate to admit the lawfulness of a title, obtained by so much degradation and suffering? Shall we rob the blessed Jesus of the purchase of his blood? Shall we keep back from its proprietor so worthless a possession, after it has been purchased by him at so costly a price? No. We are not our own. We cannot be our own. If we have ever tasted of redeeming grace, we shall not even wish to be our own. As for living to ourselves or to the world, the very thought of it will be a grief and shame to us. It will be the first wish of our soul to be entirely de­voted to God; to consecrate to him every action of our life and every thought of our heart; to give to him every moment as it flies.

V. Such was the end which Christ had in view in dying for man; but has this end been answered? Have the sinners whom he has redeemed, ceased to live unto themselves? and are they really living “unto him which died for them and rose again?” The text answers this enquiry, and reminds us, lastly, of *the influence which the interposition of Christ on the behalf of man has on his people;* of the effect which his dying love produces in the hearts and lives of those who really believe in him. The apostle says that it “constraineth” them. “The love of Christ constraineth us.”

There is much meaning and force in this ex­pression. It signifies to bear away, to carry on with the force and rapidity with which a torrent hurries along whatever it meets with in its course. As the word is used here, it implies that the love which Christ has manifested for man, has a mighty and irresistible influence on the hearts of his ser­vants; that it fills their whole soul, and forces them, as it were, to obey its dictates.

1. It intimates that *it lays hold of their affec­tions;* that it touches their hearts, and calls into the liveliest exercise every feeling within them.

It has indeed been contended that the religion of Christ has nothing to do with the affections; that to look on his cross and be moved by the sight, is enthusiasm and weakness; that a sinner who is going into eternity, ought to hear the tidings that hell is escaped and heaven won, with as much coolness, as a man at his ease would examine a mathematical problem. But what are we to think of such an opinion as this? In what light are we to regard the men who maintain it? Shall we say that they are sober-minded, rational Christians? Reason and Christianity disclaim the alliance. They pronounce that reli­gion only to be rational, which calls into action the hopes and the fears of a man; and that Christianity only to be genuine, which fills the heart to the full with feeling, and puts into it a love which “many waters cannot quench, nor many floods drown.” He who can look with cold indifference on the blessed Jesus lying on the ground in the garden of Gethsemane, and crying out in the extremity of his anguish for deliverance; he who can see him patiently bearing his cross, and quietly yielding his sacred body to be tortured on it; he who can hear him uttering his mysterious complaint to his Father, and pierc­ing the air with his dying groans; he who can contemplate such a scene as this, and remember that all these sufferings were endured for his worthless, rebellious soul, and yet remain unaf­fected at the thought—such a man, brethren, may be a decorous, an upright, a useful man, but he is not a Christian. He may have “a form of god­liness,” but he knows no more of its power, than the ground he treads on. He may have a high reputation for wisdom in the world, but in the estimation of God he is a very fool.

But while we do not undervalue lively affec­tions in religion, let us not overrate them. It is possible for the heart to be affected by the love of Christ in dying for sinners, just as it is affected by the contemplation of any other noble and generous act, and yet the heart remain a stranger to itself and to God. The feeling may be strong, but it may be a merely natural, and not a spi­ritual feeling. There may be no more religion in it, than in the feelings which are excited, and in the tears which are drawn forth, by some of the narratives of history, or the pictures of ima­gination.

2. Hence we must observe further, that *the love of Christ influences the conduct of his ser­vants,* as well as excites their affections. It not only makes them feel, it makes them act for Christ. It teaches them to do good, as well as to praise and to pray. It changes their life, as well as their heart.

There was a time, when they thought that religion required of them only a certain measure of devotedness to God. They thought it possible to serve him too well, as well as to love him too much. But now nothing appears too afflictive to be endured for his sake; no act of self-denial too painful to be undertaken; no labour of love too arduous to be performed. They were before cold and formal worshippers of the Lord, or at best lukewarm and hesitating professors of the gospel; but now the love of God has been shed abroad in their hearts, and given a decision, a life and a soul, to their religion. It has made them active Christians, decided Christians, laborious Chris­tians. There is no more halting between two opinions; no more striving to serve God and mammon; no more conferring with flesh and blood. There is an open avowal of their attach­ment to their crucified Lord, a glorying in his reproach, a holy reverence for his laws, a willing­ness to spend and be spent for his sake.

Will anyone say that these things are not to be found in the world? that the love of Christ never has produced and never will produce such effects as these? Look at the history of the man who wrote the words in the text. Follow him through the course of his life. Contemplate the sacrifices he made, the trials he endured, the labours of love he performed. Behold him suf­fering the loss of all things, and taking the loss with joy. Hear him singing at midnight in a prison the praises of his God. View him boldly preaching Christ in his chains. Trace him through his scourgings, shipwrecks, and perils; hear him exclaiming in the midst of them all, “None of these things move me; neither count I my life dear unto myself.” Behold the man; and see what a triumph for the gospel was here! And what was it that obtained this glorious triumph? What made Saul of Tarsus so noble a spectacle to angels and to men? It was love; love for the Saviour who had died for him, and the God who had redeemed him. And is the power of this principle lost? No. It is reigning in the hearts of thousands around us, and pro­ducing the most blessed effects in a thousand places, where we little suppose it to exist. We may know nothing of the men whom it governs, and may hear nothing of their zeal for the Lord; they may never be found in the societies in which we delight, and may be treated by us and our associates as the very refuse of mankind and “the offscouring of all things;” but the influence of the love of Christ is felt, in all its energy, in their houses and cottages; the voice of prayer and of praise, of peace and of joy, is heard in their habitations. There the power of religion is seen, and there the works of righteousness abound. There man is holy and happy, and there God is worshipped and feared.