SERMONS,

PREACHED

IN THE PARISH CHURCH OF

HIGH WYCOMBE.

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BY

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SERMON XVII.

THE CONSTRAINING INFLUENCE OF THE LOVE OF CHRIST.

2 Corinthians 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.*

The truths brought before us in this declaration, are the most important that the Bible contains. The chief of them are these five;—the wretched and hopeless condition to which sin has reduced man; “Then were all dead—the interposition of Christ in his behalf; “He died for all—the principle or motive from which this interposition proceeded; “The love of Christ—the end which Christ had in view in it; “That they which live, should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto him which died for them and rose again—and then, lastly, the influence which this amazing effort of love exercises on the hearts and lives of all true believers; “The love of Christ constraineth us.” An attentive considera­tion of these truths will suggest to us several practical inferences.

I. The first is this—*The conduct of a Christian is closely connected with his principles,* with his religious opinions, with the doctrines he believes. The text represents it as influenced by the judg­ment which he forms of the great truths of the gospel, and produced by the reception which he gives to these doctrines.

And yet it is often asserted that it matters not what doctrines we believe or what creed we embrace, so that our dispositions are holy and our lives sober and righteous. In one sense the assertion is true. We admit that holy dispositions and a godly life constitute the sum and substance of genuine religion; that the man in whom these are found, is a servant of God and an heir of heaven. But how are these holy dispositions to be produced? How is the life to be made thus conformable to the righteous law of God? This is not a trifling work. These effects are too great to be produced without an adequate cause. Where then shall we look for this cause? Can we find it in carelessness, in ignorance, in un­belief? No. It can be found only in a right knowledge of God and of ourselves; in a simple and heartfelt belief of the Bible; in an unfeigned reception of the great truths of the gospel. Right dispositions and right conduct can proceed only from right principles. These are the springs of action; and as long as we are destitute of these, neither our tempers nor our conduct will bear to be tried by the standard of God’s holy law.

The reason why many of us hold the great truths of the gospel in such low estimation, is simply this—we are not striving to do the will of God; we are not practical Christians; we are in­dulging unhallowed dispositions, and living care­less and worldly lives. We desire not the fruit, and the consequence naturally is, we pour con­tempt on the tree which produces it. The Christian, on the contrary, highly values these doctrines, because he has been taught their practical efficacy. He desires to be holy, and he therefore prizes the springs and the means of holiness. He has felt the constraining influence of the love of Christ; and as long as he knows that his happiness is centred in the service and enjoyment of his God, he will hold fast the profession of his faith; he will rejoice in “the glorious gospel of the blessed God.”

II. The text leads us also to infer that *they are not Christians, whom the love of Christ does not influence.* They may call themselves after the name of the Saviour who bled for them, but they have not the distinguishing characteristic of the people who belong to him; they are not con­strained by his love; they are not living “unto him which died for them.”

This devotedness to Christ is essential to the Christian character. Nothing can supply the place of it; no correct system of opinions, no zeal for doctrines, no lively feelings, no tears or prayers. As long as we stop short of this, we are destitute of spiritual life, we are “dead in tres­passes and sins.” “Every one that loveth,” says Saint John, “is born of God and knoweth God; he that loveth not, knoweth not God.” The end of Christ in dying for us cannot be defeated. If through faith we are become savingly interested in his death, the effect of the love which he mani­fested in it, is certain—we are affected by it; we are constrained by it. “We are alive unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord.”

Are we then thus influenced by the love of the dying Jesus? We may admire the character which this love has a tendency to form; we may delight in tracing its effects in the apostles and martyrs of the primitive church; we may be gra­tified by contemplating its quickening and trans­forming efficacy in those around us; but these are not the turning points. Is my own soul affected? Does the love of Christ force my own hard heart to feel, and my own dry eyes to weep? Have I experienced in my own breast its enliven­ing, warming, constraining power? Has it sanc­tified my dispositions and changed my conduct? Am I making the glory of my Saviour the great business of my life? Are his people dear to me? Do I make his cause my cause? In the midst of my many infirmities and sins, is my family, are my neighbours, constrained to see that I am not acting as though I deemed myself my own, but as though I regarded myself the servant of a holy Redeemer, who has bought me with his blood? Happy are we, brethren, if we can press home such questions as these to our hearts, and have the testimony of our conscience that our Christian profession will bear to be tried by them. These are “the things which accompany salvation.” These are the things which will bring a man peace at the last, and bear the fiery trial of death and of judgment.

III. The words of the apostle remind us, fur­ther, of *the superior excellence of the religion of Christ;* its excellence, not only as it saves the soul, but as it affords to man a new, a nobler, and a more powerful motive to obedience.

This motive is love, love to a dying Lord; a motive unheard of in the world before the pub­lication of the gospel of Christ. And what motive can be nobler? It appeals to the finest feelings of the soul, to the most generous emo­tions of the heart. As for its efficacy, it is stronger than that of all other motives combined. The world has heard for ages of the beauty of virtue and the deformity of vice. The hopes and the fears of mankind have been appealed to, by promises of reward and threatenings of punish­ment in eternity. And what has been the result? Men have lived, for the greater part, just as they would have lived if these things had never been heard of. Here and there indeed an appearance of virtue has been produced*;* even a form of god­liness has been put on, and man has become superstitious and wretched. But has the heart been touched? Have the sins of the heart been re­strained? Has passion been subdued? Has pride been rooted out? Has selfishness been overcome? Has there been a single human being prevailed on by these motives to live no longer unto himself, but unto the God who created him? Not one. It is the love of Christ only, which can effect such a work, and win such a triumph as this. It is the love of Christ only, which can reach the heart of a man, root out its sins, and give its affections to God. Our duty then is plain. It is to get the love of Christ shed abroad in our hearts; and when we have received this gift, to seek that it may be preserved to us and increased.

We profess to lament our selfishness, brethren, and to mourn over our unfruitfulness and cold­ness. Here then is a remedy provided. Here is a principle which will make our hearts burn within us, and bring forth in our lives all the fruits of the Spirit. If your professions and sor­row are sincere, seek this principle, have recourse to this remedy; apply for a sense of this love at the throne of grace. You cannot obtain a more useful gift from heaven, or a sweeter comforter. It will enable you to face any difficulties, to weather any storms, and to endure any sufferings, so that your God may be honoured, and the name of your Saviour praised. It will overcome ini­quity and lusts within you; it will render even self-denial easy; it will make your duty your delight. It will soothe your soul in affliction, strengthen it in trials, cheer it in death, and ex­pand it with joy in eternity.

IV. The text also *plainly accounts for the pe­culiar conduct of Christians.*

In whatever age or country he may live, the man who is a Christian indeed, will always have something peculiar in his conduct. There will be an outward, as well as an inward difference between him and others. Now this difference cannot be concealed from the world. It will be visible and marked, and the men of the world will be sure to discover it. The most ignorant and vicious of them will be offended and perhaps incensed by it. They will impute it to hypocrisy, to enthusiasm, to fanaticism; to every source which they deem dishonourable and base. Others will view it with a mixture of pity and admiration. They cannot altogether approve it; they are forced to ascribe it in some degree to mental weakness; but they are at the same time convinced that the men are sincere and in earnest, and that they are acting under the influence of some secret and powerful motive peculiar to themselves. They cannot ascertain the nature of this motive. They are sure it exists, but it baffles all their efforts to discover and comprehend it. Now the text points out the secret spring of the Christian’s conduct, and solves the difficulty. Indeed it was written for this very purpose.

Influenced by the arts of the false apostles, who, by tolerating their corruptions, had intro­duced themselves into their church and obtained their confidence, some of the Corinthians began to cool in their attachment to their early and faithful teacher. His earnestness in rebuking iniquity offended them, and they first ceased to love, and then proceeded to censure him. The character of Paul was not however a very vulner­able character. They could not accuse him of hypocrisy. His spotless integrity and disinter­ested zeal would have at once repelled such an accusation. They charged him therefore with being beside himself, with acting under the in­fluence of enthusiasm and madness. The apostle did not directly deny the charge. With an ad­dress and dignity altogether his own, he seems to admit it, and then traces the conduct that filled them with so much wonder and displeasure, to a cause which at once vindicated his earnestness and reproved their lukewarmness. This was the answer with which the noble apostle repelled their accusation; “Whether we be beside our­selves, it is to God;or whether we be sober, it is for your cause; for the love of Christ con­straineth us.”

Here then the source from which the peculiar conduct of the Christian originates, is laid open. It is the constraining love of Christ. It is this, which bears him away like a torrent, and leads him to feel and to act, while others are coldly speculating and disputing. It does not make him an enthusiast or a fanatic; it does not deprive him of humility and meekness, prudence and wis­dom; but it burns like a fire within him, warming him to energy and zeal; and it renders him a blessing to the world, and an honour to the religion of his. Lord.

Dare not then, brethren, to censure the conduct which flows from a principle so hallowed. Con­demn fanaticism and intemperance wherever you find them, but revile, not the zeal which has the love of God for its source. It is a sacred thing, and there is danger as well as folly in as­sailing it. Instead of rashly condemning the warmth of the Christian, enquire how it is that so much in­difference and apathy are to be found in your own temper and conduct. Ask how it is that profess­ing to serve the same God, and to hope in the same Saviour, you are spending your days in worldly vanities, while he is spurning all the follies of the world, denying himself, taking up his cross and following Christ. The conclusion to which such enquiries will bring you, will be humiliating. You will discover that while you have been suspecting the religion of your neighbour, you ought to have suspected your own. You will find that your con­duct has been different from his, because the state of your heart has been different; because you have wanted that spiritual life which has quickened and animated him. You will feel yourselves to be spiritually dead; strangers to pardoning grace; strangers to the power of redeeming love; stran­gers to religion, to Christ, and to God.

But what, if these conclusions be humiliating and painful? Is it not better to be humbled here, than to be condemned hereafter? Is not the pain of a broken and contrite spirit easier to be borne, than the pains of eternity? Paul him­self was once forced to open his mind to such convictions as these. He too was constrained to see himself ungodly, unpardoned, and perishing, after having for years deemed himself righteous and blameless. And did he ever regret the dis­covery? Never. As long as he remained on earth, he always spoke of it as a marvellous in­stance of mercy; and when he thinks of it now, the thought adds fresh warmth to his gratitude and gives a new burst to his song. Could he now speak to us from his heavenly throne, he would tell us that the convictions against which we are struggling, are the very convictions which were once lodged in his own soul; that they were the beginning of his spiritual existence, the forerunners of his present blessedness and joy. He would tell us that there is not a ran­somed sinner exulting around him, who has not tasted of their bitterness and shame; and he would call upon us to welcome them into our hearts, as messengers sent to us on an errand of mercy from heaven. Why then should we refuse them admission? Why should we any longer resist the Holy Ghost? Let us cease to cavil and dispute, and learn to pray. Let us entreat the Father of mercies to open our hearts to the hum­bling influence of his life-giving Spirit. Then shall we experience the transforming power of the love of Christ; the efficacy of that grace which brings to the soul righteousness and peace, hope and salvation.