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SERMON V.

THE FINAL GLORY OF THE CHURCH.

EPHESIANS V. 25, 26, 27.—“Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it; that he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word; that he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing, but that it should be holy and without blemish.”

THERE was a wonderful elevation in St. Paul’s mind. Whatever occupied it, it seems to have been always pointing upwards, prepared to ascend in a moment to high and heavenly things.

We have one of its rapid soarings in this text. The apostle is inculcating what we should call a plain, common-place duty, the love which a husband ought to bear towards his wife. And how does he enforce it? By arguments on a level with the duty itself? By considerations drawn from its reasonableness and utility? No. He ascends at once into a higher region. He thinks of the great Husband of the church, and without absolutely forgetting the point he is urging, he speaks of his love for his unworthy bride, as though he had no other object in view than to display and adore it. Our souls are in a blessed state, brethren, when Christ thus dwells in the heart, when he is thus uppermost in the affections and thoughts, when everything else is half lost sight of in the sweet remembrance of him.

The subject we have to consider is the final state of the church, viewed in connection with the causes to which it is ascribed, and the great end for which so glorious a change in its condition is effected.

I. In describing *the future condition* of the church, the apostle has evidently in his mind two previous states of it—its original state when lying dead in trespasses and sins, and its subsequent earthly state, when separated from the mass of the ungodly and partially redeemed. It follows then that we have it before us in three distinct points of view; first, as wholly defiled, then as in some measure cleansed, and then as altogether pure. And this view of the passage will serve as a key to the right understanding of it.

It speaks, first, of “sanctifying and cleansing” the church; and here, in these terms, it intimates the original defilement of the church. It brings man before us in his natural condition, the condition in which Christ finds every one whom, in his saving mercy, he finds at all. This is an unsanctified, polluted condition. The stain of sin is on the soul. It is unfit for its Creator’s use; it is not meet for his presence. It is worse than guilty, and helpless, and wretched; to a holy God it is odious and loathsome.

This state however is represented as altered, but at first not entirely so; for though sanctified, we read of spots still left on the church. And thus comes

out its present mixed, imperfect condition. It is not what it once was; for spots pre-suppose a general purity and brightness of character; they are the partial disfigurements of an otherwise clean thing. A change therefore, and a great change, must have passed on the people referred to, before a term like this could be applied to them. Neither is their state what it is ultimately intended to be. There is something on the church yet to be removed, and enough to mar its happiness and tarnish its glory. It is a church rising up out of the polluting dust, emerging from the contamination it once loved; not holy yet, but beginning to discover the excellence and beauty of holiness; panting for it; hating, and loathing, and trying to throw off, “the garments spotted by the flesh,” and longing to array itself in the white robes of heaven. It is echoing the language of St. Paul, “O wretched man that I am!” It is asking with him, “Who shall deliver?”

And now at last we are come to its third and final state. The view, which the apostle takes of this, may appear to some of us but little attractive. It may seem to be nothing, to say of heaven, The soul is without sin, without spot or blemish, there. But the man who has once felt the misery of a polluted nature, will think differently. He will feel as he reads this text, “Here, is the blessing my heart aches for. This is the heaven in which I long to be—a holy world; a world where I can be tempted no more and sin no more; where I can breathe an atmosphere that is not tainted, and breathe it without ever tainting it; where I may rest from the conflict that now wearies my inmost soul, cast away all watchfulness and fear, give the desires of my heart their widest and fondest range, and yet never wound my spirit nor offend my God.”

How highly St. Paul himself estimated this heavenly purity, we may infer from his dwelling so much on the idea of it in this place. He mentions it, and then he repeats the mention of it, and then, not satisfied, he repeats it again; heaping up words as though he found words too poor to describe it, too weak to come up even to his conceptions of its blessedness. The church is first “sanctified and cleansed;” then it is “without spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing;” and at last it is “holy and without blemish.”

All these expressions convey nearly the same meaning. “Spots” impair the moral beauty of the church—they consequently shall be cleansed away. “Wrinkles” are signs of decay, and feebleness, and suffering—not one of them shall be left. The soul shall wake up in immortal youth; vigorous as well as pure; with every power in full activity, able to execute the commands of Jehovah and to enter into his joy. “Blemishes” are defects. In our present state we are wanting in everything. In heaven every defect shall be supplied; nothing shall be wanting in us, which can bring glory to our Redeemer or happiness to ourselves. Taken together, the words convey this idea, that the church, in its future state, shall be free from sin and from all the consequences of sin. No remnant, or effect, or stain, or trace, of the accursed thing shall be

left on it. It shall be as pure as though sin had never come near it; still indeed bearing the marks of the process it has undergone, still testifying to a wondering universe of saving mercy and renewing grace, but showing forth these operations of its God, not by the incompleteness of his work, but by the elevation to which he has raised it, the depth of its humility, and the fervour of its songs.

But there are different standards of purity, and some of us may be ready to ask, "According to what standard is the future holiness of the redeemed to be measured? In whose estimation will it be complete?" O the riches of Jehovah's goodness, and O the power of Jehovah's Spirit!—it will be complete in his estimation, in whose sight his own "heavens are not clean." To be sinless in our own estimation would be nothing; to be deemed pure by our fellow-sinners would be little more than nothing; to stand spotless in the sight of angels might satisfy an angel; but the purity of the ransomed spirit will soar above all this. It will be faultless in his presence, who sees things as they are, "to whom all hearts are open and from whom no secrets are hid and faultless, not when viewed by him at a distance, but when brought into his immediate presence, placed as it were in comparison with him, in the full blaze of his glory. Is this language too strong? The Holy Spirit has employed language like it. "Now unto him," says St. Jude, "that is able to keep you from falling, and to present you faultless"—where? "before the presence of his glory; to the only wise God, our Saviour, be glory and majesty."

And how will this amazing change in the soul be effected? The apostle tells us.

II. He points out *the causes to which it is to be ascribed*. Of these he mentions four.

1. The first is *the love of Christ*. "He loved the church."

And something of this nature seems to have been necessary for the accomplishing of so great a work. Mercy, kindness, compassion, might all have been inadequate to the end. They might have failed, been exhausted and worn out, long before it was accomplished, had not some stronger principle been at the root of them, and kept them in exercise. "By grace are ye saved," says St. Paul, but it is a grace which had its origin in love, and still finds in love its spring, its life and freshness. It is in fact love itself under another name; love putting on the form of grace, that it may pour blessings on the guilty in the only way in which it can bless them, with the freeness and authority that become the Monarch of the skies.

And is not this an almost overwhelming thought? I can easily conceive of myself as an object of compassion in heaven; an immortal being in a condition so deplorable as mine, might well excite that feeling anywhere; but to be an object of love to my holy Saviour in my present state of vileness, nay,

to have been that in my original pollution, before once his Spirit touched me, with every imagination of my heart only evil, and every feeling of my soul towards my God a feeling of rebellion—I strive in vain to comprehend such love. And so did Paul. With his lofty mind, he could not grasp it; he was constrained to say, “It passeth knowledge.”

But look at this love in its effects.

2. And the first glance we give it in this view, discovers to us another step towards our final purity—*the sacrifice of Christ*.

Earthly love will seldom bear examination. It is either weak, willing to do little or nothing for its object, or it is a blind, reckless, absorbing passion; laying reason prostrate, confounding right and wrong, and trampling alike on every human and sacred obligation. But was the love of Christ weak? It did all that love ever could do—“he gave himself for us.” Was it destructive of his moral excellence, or heedless of Jehovah’s law? The same answer may be returned again, for it meets the question—“he gave himself for us.” He might have gratified his love for us at once; a word from his lips would have placed us before him pure and happy, without involving on his part any earthly degradation, or pain, or sacrifice; but the honour of his character as the world’s great Governor, the welfare of the creatures over whom he ruled, both said, “This must not be. Sin must be expiated. Before the sinner can be blessed, offended justice must be appeased, a broken law must be magnified.” And the result was, love and righteousness, mercy and justice, triumphed together. Christ put himself in the sinner’s stead, came forth in our form the Representative of his guilty church, took all its transgressions on his head; and then stooping down to the obligations and enduring the penalties of his own law, he did what none other ever could have done, he opened a way by which, without impairing his authority, grace could come down from heaven on man, and man go up to heaven redeemed and purified, as welcome and happy as the happiest dweller there. Not that his cross of itself sanctifies. This work is ascribed to it, because it supplies the strongest motives to sanctification, and because, in conjunction with his obedience, it purchased for sinners that heavenly grace which makes these motives effectual.

3. Hence the apostle goes on to bring before us *the Holy Spirit* as a third source to which the church must ascribe its future holiness. He does not indeed expressly mention him, but when he speaks of our being cleansed by “the washing of water,” he evidently has him in his mind. If we say that he means baptism, we say the same thing in other words; for what is baptism? If anything more than a mere ceremony, it is an outward, visible sign of an inward and spiritual operation. And what is this operation? It is the purifying of the heart by the power of the Holy Ghost. It is the carrying into effect Christ’s purposes of love towards us by Christ’s own Spirit. It is the sanctifying of man, setting him apart for God, and making him meet for his

enjoyment and service. Let the apostle explain himself. “After that,” he says in his epistle to Titus, “the kindness and love of God our Saviour toward man appeared; not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Ghost.”

4. And how does the Holy Spirit carry on this cleansing process? The text shows us, and its answer to the question reminds us of the fourth means of our sanctification—*the word of God*. “The washing of water” is “by the word.”

This is the uniform testimony of scripture. “Ye are clean,” says Christ to his disciples, “through the word which I have spoken unto you.” “Sanctify them through thy truth,” he says again to his Father; “thy word is truth.”

We do not say that the word is the only instrument employed by the Spirit. He employs many instruments—mercies, and comforts, and disappointments, and conflicts, and a whole train of bitter sorrows. All that happens to us, and all that surrounds us, he can bring to bear on our souls, and turn into a furnace to refine us. But when he uses these, it is to explain, and confirm, and enforce, the declarations of his holy scriptures; to recall them to our memories; to make us feel their power. Providence, in his hands, becomes a practical commentary on his word.

What then is the Bible, brethren? and what are the sermons we hear from sabbath to sabbath? They are mentioned here in connection with the love of Christ, the sacrifice of Christ, the Spirit of Christ. The purification, and consequently the salvation, of our immortal souls, is as much ascribed to them as to any of these lofty things. And yet how completely powerless do we often find them! There are times when they can no more raise an emotion in our souls than in the stones we tread on. All their efficacy comes from the Holy Ghost. Without him the Bible is a book, and nothing more than a book. It does not work; it is a dead letter. But put that feeble book into the Spirit’s hand, and what is it become? None but those who have experienced its power, can tell. It is the sword of the Spirit; it is the rod of Jehovah’s strength; it is the instrument by which the soul is mastered and subdued; emptied of its folly, and self-sufficiency, and iniquity, and wretchedness; and filled with the humility, the holiness, the blessedness, of heaven. I cannot then be a holy man, and remain ignorant of the power of God’s word. It must have reached my heart, and I must have discovered its value and excellence. I must hold it in the very highest estimation. I must read it too with a relish and delight. If it is leading me to heaven, its testimonies are my counsellors, and its “statutes my songs in the house of my pilgrimage.”

We have now a complete view of the several steps in the working out of the glorious change we are considering. If we enquire for its commencement, we find it in the love of Christ; in the desire of effecting this change existing

in the divine mind, and owing its existence there to the benevolence of that mind. The next step shows us this love of Christ in exercise, removing out of its way the obstacles which interposed between it and the sinner—here comes in the Redeemer’s sacrifice, “he gave himself for us.” And now we behold it in contact with the sinner, the Holy Spirit reaching and purifying him by his grace, like the washing of water. And the instrument the Spirit employs in this process, is the word of God.

III. We have to go on now to our last point—*the great end for which all these means of holiness are brought into operation.*

It is, we are told, to “sanctify and cleanse” the church. But why is the church to be thus sanctified? What is the ultimate object aimed at in this cleansing? All terminates in this one blessed end, that Christ, in the great day of his triumph, may “present the church unto himself a glorious church.”

However far the apostle may seem to have been led away, in this passage, from the subject he introduces it to illustrate, there is no doubt but that he still keeps that subject in mind. These expressions have a remote allusion to it. They refer to a custom which prevails in eastern countries of presenting an espoused virgin to her betrothed husband at the celebration of the marriage ceremony. The church is often referred to as the bride of the Redeemer. In this character St. Paul speaks of “espousing her to one husband,” and “presenting her as a chaste virgin to Christ.” But here there is a peculiarity in the language he uses. The office of presenting the bride belongs properly to her parents or friends; but what parent or friend has the lost church? Like the object of mercy spoken of by Ezekiel, and evidently intended to be an emblem of her, she is cast out friendless and forlorn, without an eye to pity or a hand to help her. In this state of destitution, the Bridegroom looks round for no father for her, no friend. He presents her to himself. He takes her in all her abject misery as the beloved of his soul, and he loves her and delights in her the more, because no hand save his own has rescued her, because she owes all her greatness and happiness to him alone.

At the time of her presentation to Christ, we are told, she shall be “a glorious church and we feel at once that in a situation like hers, she must be glorious. Her high destination, we say, constitutes her glory. She goes into heaven the bride of the enthroned Saviour; she is taken into the very closest alliance with the most exalted Being in the universe; she sits down with him on his throne. No elevation equals hers. So marvellous is the honour put on her, that the Holy Spirit calls them happy who are allowed even to witness it. “Blessed,” he says, “are they who are called to the marriage supper of the Lamb.” He employs the noblest objects in nature to shadow her forth. He clothes her with the sun; the moon is put under her feet; and on her head is a crown of stars. She is “a wonder in heaven.” But what is all this? It strains

our imaginations to form a single idea of its grandeur, but, in St. Paul's estimation, there is something yet higher. He does not place the chief glory of the church in the lofty eminence she has climbed; he does not see it in the radiance which covers her; no, he traces it still in her purity. She is "a glorious church," and this, even on the summit of her greatness, constitutes her glory—she has "no spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing;" she is "holy and without blemish."

Nothing dishonours, brethren, but sin; nothing but sin is really shameful. Now take sin from the soul, and you have removed from it everything that can degrade it. And then array it in the exalted purity we have been contemplating, you have put on it the very highest honour a creature of God can receive. No matter who or what that creature is, holiness is its perfection, the highest pinnacle of excellence to which it can either attain or aspire. We may go farther—the chief glory of God is the holiness of God. His purity is his brightest attribute. His power and immensity strike us more, for our minds are debased, we have lost the perception of that which is most elevated in its character—moral greatness; but go up into heaven, or rather read the language of heaven as we find it in the Bible—power and majesty are both extolled in it, but this is the one great subject of adoration in heaven, in the very world where all the divine greatness is most fully manifested—the purity of Jehovah; and this the song which, next to the song of salvation, rises most constantly in its splendid courts—"Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of hosts."

No wonder then that the church will be "a glorious church;" the likeness of God will be put on her, the image of God will shine in her; that attribute of Divinity, which is the perfection of Divinity, will be her crown. "The King's daughter shall be all glorious," because she is "glorious within." She has left all her impurity in the world she has forsaken, and has waked up in her Redeemer's likeness, "holy and without blemish." She is in heaven, not with an angel's holiness, but with the holiness of her Lord; a holiness that causes the infinite Jehovah, as he looks on her "faultless" before him, to look on her with admiration and delight; with a feeling which, in the plenitude of his inconceivable happiness, he calls "exceeding joy."

We have now gone through our subject. The one great truth we are to learn from it, is *the real value of holiness*.

The estimation in which men in general hold this, is seen at a glance. We cannot say that they undervalue it, for they set no value at all on it; they treat it with contempt; nay, some of them deem it an evil, rather than a good. The law that enjoins it, were they to speak out, they would call a law of harshness and severity. It is a system of restraints, a galling yoke, an intolerable burden. This is man's judgment; now see God's judgment. He forms the determination to place in heaven a people who shall be more glorious than any besides;

a people who shall appear there in a relation to him so close, that he represents it by bringing before our minds the image of a chosen and beloved bride. This people he determines to take from our fallen earth. Now what course does he adopt to carry his design into effect? How does he lift up fallen man to this height of honour? He “sanctifies and cleanses” him; he makes him holy. He adopts this course to make him glorious—he makes him pure.

God had also another object in view in his mysterious dealings with man. He determined to display the love of his own infinite mind in the very highest way in which it could be displayed; to go to the uttermost in the manifestation of it, not only in the mode of its exhibition, but in the end accomplished by it. This end is our purification. He strips us of the sin that degrades us, and gives us in exchange for it his own holiness; and then the angels that surround him, are constrained to say, “Behold how he has loved them!”

And once more observe how dearly he purchases for us this purity. It is not, like the sun and the stars, the effect of a creating word. He spake, and they shone forth, in a moment, in all their magnificence. But when the church is to be cleansed, all the energies of Jehovah are called into exercise. We dare not say that there was effort in heaven, but there was in this thing a display of power, and wisdom, and grace, which heaven had never before witnessed. God gave himself for us. He stoops down to a sinner’s form, dwells in a sinner’s world, and lies down in a sinner’s grave. And then the eternal Spirit puts forth his omnipotence. He establishes ordinances; he sends forth prophets and ministers; with his own everlasting pen he writes his word; he sets up an apparatus of mercy on the earth, and preserves it there age after age, and all to produce this one effect, to put on a company of redeemed sinners the likeness of their God.

Is sin then a blessing, brethren? Can indulgence in sin make one of you happy? O what a libel on the gospel is such an idea! What an aspersion cast on the judgment and ways of an all-wise God! Sin may be sweet to a polluted mind; pleasure may be wrung out of iniquity; we may love “the unclean thing” better than we love heaven, or peace of conscience, or even life itself; but our love for it alters not its nature. In exact proportion as holiness is a blessing, sin is a curse; there is as much misery in the one, as there is blessedness in the other; and in the end we shall know this, and own it. Our judgments, the judgment of every creature that lives, shall correspond with the judgment of God. Even in the hell in which sin was born, it shall be acknowledged to be the heaviest, the only evil. In heaven, where all happiness abounds, holiness shall be felt to be the highest good. They who rejoice in it, shall deem it the perfection of their excellence, the consummation of their bliss.

I see then what I ought most fervently to desire, and most earnestly to seek. It is not a mere change of situations or of worlds, but a more complete change of heart. It is not simply the kingdom or presence of my Lord, but his likeness, his holiness. Higher than this I cannot look; lower than this, by God's help, I will not. I will deem everything an evil, that obstructs my pursuit of this; I will consider everything a good, that brings me nearer to this, or quickens my longings for it. The thought of it shall teach me to prize my Bible, as though it were my chief earthly treasure; it shall cause me to welcome sabbaths and ordinances with emotions of joy. The hope of it, if it does not take from afflictions all their bitterness, shall make me willing to receive them, and turn at least some of my tears into tears of thankfulness. It shall endear the blessed Jesus to my heart as my Purifier, as well as my Saviour. No longer will I seek holiness in my own proud resolutions and efforts. I will look for it to the love, and the cross, and the Spirit, and the word, of Christ. And I know that I shall not look in vain. As surely as he wore my form, I shall wear his. I shall be like him when I see him as he is.