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SURREY.

BY

THE REV. CHARLES BRADLEY,

VICAR OF GLASBURY.

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## SERMON VII.

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### THE RISEN JESUS QUESTIONING PETER'S LOVE.

ST. JOHN XXI. 17.—“He saith unto him the third time, Simon son of Jonas, lovest thou me? Peter was grieved because he said unto him the third time, Lovest thou me? and he said unto him, Lord, thou knowest all things; thou knowest that I love thee.”

THE compassionate Jesus never grieved unnecessarily a single heart. When therefore we find him thus paining anew the stricken Peter, we may be sure that he had some object in view of more than ordinary importance; at all events, too important to be sacrificed either to his disciple's feelings or his own. That object perhaps is easily discovered. It appears to have been the vindication of his own holiness.

Peter had sinned against him; he had basely and publicly disowned him. Christ had pardoned his offence; nay, he had made an open exhibition of the pardon he had given him, for he had treated him immediately after his resurrection with peculiar favour, and might have almost been thought to love him more for the injury he had done him. No sooner therefore are Peter's wounds a little healed, than his risen Lord must let him see, must let the other disciples and us also see, that he never loses his holiness in his tenderness; that in the lowest depths of his compassion, in the most soaring heights of his love, he hates sin; hates it as much when he speaks peace to a contrite heart, as when he strikes down the thousands of murmuring Israel in the desert, or deluges a world. He accordingly reproveth Peter. But mark how gently he reproveth him. Nothing is said of his offence; no mention is made of his cowardice, or oaths, or curses: all he has to bear is this simple question, “Lovest thou me?” True, the reproof was a little strengthened by the manner in which he was addressed. His Master calls him not Peter, the name he himself had given him. He was unworthy of such a title. A feather tossed by the wind was a better emblem of the man, than the rock which withstands the storm. Hence his fisherman's name is revived; he is called once more, “Simon, son of Jonas.” But yet again in thus sending him back to the days of his ignorance, Christ does not disown him. He exalts even while he reproveth him, giving him a public opportunity of making a repeated declaration of his faith and love, and re-investing him with his apostolic commission. Thrice Peter had virtually renounced it; thrice his Lord returns it into his hands.

Brethren, what a Master is ours! He is “righteous in all his ways and holy in all his works,” and yet he spares us when we deserve chastisement, and even “in his wrath he remembers mercy.” He often pardons our sins before he reproveth them; and then he makes that very reproof, when it comes, a

fresh manifestation of his love; putting honour on us with one hand, while he gently scourges us with the other.

In proceeding to examine more closely his question to Peter and afterwards Peter's reply to it, I hardly need say that a question thrice repeated by the Son of God, and as often answered by a beloved apostle, is deserving of your attention. No question that you can be asked, is more deserving of it. May the Spirit of God carry it home to your hearts!

I. 1. We gather from *our Lord's enquiry*, that *he takes pleasure in the love of his people towards him and in their avowal of it*. And herein he discovers his human nature.

We are all conscious that whenever there is any real affection in our minds towards any object, we desire to see the same affection in that object towards ourselves, and are gratified by any sincere and well-timed manifestation of it. Jonathan shared in this feeling. We read that when he had made a covenant of friendship with David, he was not content with David's pledging himself once to a faithful adherence to it; he "caused him to swear again." And why? Because he distrusted his friend? "No," says the sacred historian, "because he loved him, for he loved him as he loved his own soul."

Now our Lord's heart is, in all sinless things, like our hearts. He loved Peter, loved him with the tenderest and most intense affection. He found gratification therefore, not only in Peter's love towards him, but in those reiterated assurances of it, which this trial of him drew forth. He makes no enquiry, observe, into his faith or hope, he asks him not one question as to the reality or depth of his contrition; all he says is, "Lovest thou me?"

And pass not over this, brethren, as a matter of mere sentiment. It is a fact, and a heart-cheering fact, that he who died for my sins, sets a high value on my love; a love that many a fellow-worm would not take at my hands, that scarcely one on the earth deems worth his keeping or acceptance. Poor as it is and poor as it ever must be, my Saviour delights in it, and so delights in it, that his happiness even on his heavenly throne, would be marred were he to lose it. "He taketh pleasure," he tells me, "in them that fear him," in them that merely stand in awe of his majesty; how much more then in those who love him! who love him in that character which forms his brightest glory, his character of a Saviour! love him as a pardoned sinner loves him, with a love which, mean as it may be, is yet such as no angel ever experienced; such as heaven itself never witnessed, till it glowed there in a sinner's heart, and burst forth there in praise from a sinner's lips.

2. We may infer again that *Christ has now a special claim on our love*.

Previously to his final sufferings and death, he does not appear to have ever questioned any of his disciples as to the state of their affections towards himself. Tender as was his heart, his main concern seems to have been that

they might be obedient to his Father, and at peace among themselves. But when for their sakes he had gone to Golgotha and Calvary, when he had bled in the garden, and expired on the cross, and laid himself down in the grave, he felt and acted like one who had now earned a claim on a sinner's affection, and such a claim as even a sinner's heart, in all its death-like coldness, could not resist. He comes out of the tomb, he shows the weeping Peter his hands and his side, and then he says to him, and he says the same to every one of us who has heard of his agony and cross, "Lovest thou me?"

We have been told however that all this is degrading; that such a love for Christ, as is grounded on anything he has done or suffered for us, is base; that the only affection he will accept, is that which takes its rise from admiration of his excellencies, the attractions of his human nature and the glories of his divine. But what will not men say when they have a theory to uphold or a conceit to adorn? The wisest of them can argue readily against his own experience, and dispute against the plainest facts. What can these reasoners know of their own hearts? We feel at once that they know nothing of ours. They are more fit to talk to adoring seraphs than to men like us. True, the blessed Jesus is "altogether lovely," "fairer than the children of men" or the angels of God. But what then? All the blaze of glory with which our imaginations can surround him; all the moral beauty in which a mind the most soaring and refined can invest him; the power that awes, and the greatness that overwhelms; the patience that never wearies, and the compassion that never fails; the goodness that makes us wonder, and the holiness that makes heaven thrill—all this does not come home to a sinner's heart like the sorrow at Gethsemane, and the dying groan on the cross. We can say with the worshipping hosts above us, and almost tremble as we say it, "Holy, holy, holy, Lord God almighty!" but if we want a song that will call forth every power of our souls and bring into action every feeling of our hearts, we must take up the language of the ransomed Paul, "He loved us and gave himself for us."

Place the cross in whatever light we may, there is no exaggerating its importance or its power. As the basis of love, nothing even in heaven is like it. In the very presence of Christ, in the full splendour of his glory and all the unveiled brightness of his perfections, they that see him as he is, ground on it their warmest affection and their loudest praise. It is still, in their estimation, the Redeemer's highest claim on them; it constitutes his noblest worth. "Worthy," they cry, "is the Lamb that was slain, to receive honour, and glory, and blessing." Death has not silenced the song they loved on earth; the glories of heaven have not changed it. They said then, "Unto him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in his own blood, to him be glory and dominion." They say now, "Thou wast slain, and hast redeemed us to God by thy

blood.” “Salvation to our God which sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb.”

3. We learn also from this reiterated question, that *real love for Christ is of the very utmost importance to us*. He would not have made so much of a trifle, or of anything not essential to our happiness.

And yet what is love? It is nothing more than a feeling. Its importance arises from the place it holds in the mind, and the influence it exercises over all its operations, over every other feeling, every thought and movement. It is the spring of action. All we do comes more or less under its power. It is one of those feelings that assume the character of principles. It is, in fact, the strongest of all principles, and capable of producing the greatest results.

No wonder therefore that when Christ brings a sinner to his feet, the first thing he asks him for there, is his heart; one of the first things he takes, is his love. We must love him. Love for him is not an ornament; it is not a right thing merely, an offering in which Christ delights and to which he has a special claim; it is a necessary thing; it is essential to the Christian character; it is the very life and soul of all true religion. It is religion itself, its foundation, its spring, its strength, its perfection, its glory. Without love, we can perform none of the duties of religion, never taste its consolations, never be capable of forming even a conception of its eternal joys. Be Christians without it? Brethren, you might as easily breathe, and have nothing to do with air; as well talk of being living men, without a body or a soul. Love is no arbitrary demand of heaven. Its importance, its necessity, both lie in the very nature of things. God must annihilate the religion of his Son, leave not one particle of it undestroyed in his creation, before any one of us can be disciples of Christ without a supreme love for Christ; before he can alter this declaration of his Spirit, “If any man love not the Lord Jesus Christ, let him be accursed.” Such a man is accursed. The very want of this love is his curse. It is a want of everything that can rescue, and ennoble, and bless.

4. There is another inference to be drawn from this enquiry—*our love for Christ is sometimes questionable and ought to be questioned*.

Some of us perhaps object to this conclusion. We ask, “Who does not love his blessed Lord?” We say that the man is no better than a heathen, whose love for him is for one moment doubtful. But look here. Peter, the apostle; Peter, the most zealous, warm-hearted, of all the apostles; the man who had felt willing to die for his Master, and had actually drawn his sword against an armed band in his defence; this man is singled out by Christ to have his love for him called publicly into question, is asked by Christ, and at a time when his soul could hardly hold the love he cherished for him, whether he had any real love for him at all. “Jesus saith unto him the third time, Lovest thou me?”

No matter then what we feel or have felt, no matter how much the Saviour has honoured us or how much he has enabled us to honour him, we must be willing to have the state of our minds towards him looked into; we must be anxious to look into it ourselves; not shrinking away from the probe, not restless under our neighbour's scrutiny or our own, but willing to come into the light, desiring nothing more than to get into the light, thankful to every minister or friend who forces us to ask ourselves whether we love Christ or not, and never so thankful to him, as when we are stirred up to the closest self-examination. O what a happy people should we be, if every one of us were often to leave this house of God enquiring and praying! Some of us might lose for a time a little peace of mind, others still more of self-complacency; but what are these things worth when enquiry disturbs them, when thought shakes them, when prayer annihilates them? Better to lose every peaceful, every pleasurable feeling we know, every comfort we enjoy, and every earthly good we hope for, than live deceived; than die with nothing but "a lie in our right hand," mistaking a shadow for a substance, a name for a reality, a show of godliness for its power.

II. We come now to *the answer which Peter gave to the enquiry of his Lord.*

From this we infer at once, that it is a question which may be answered. It is not only possible, but, under some circumstances, easy to answer it; and that in the midst of infirmities, and all those humiliating and perplexing feelings connected with a remembrance of sin. Thrice said Christ to Peter, "Lovest thou me?" and thrice Peter answered with promptitude and firmness, that he did love him. It mattered not how low he had fallen, how grievously he had sinned, how cutting a sense he still had of his transgressions, or how pointedly he had been reprov'd; he meets the question without one moment's shrinking; he appeals to him who, he was aware, well knew his heart and was thus wounding it by his reiterated enquiries; he says with all that consciousness of sincerity which heartfelt love inspires, "Lord, thou knowest all things; thou knowest that I love thee."

How then, under similar circumstances, may we come to a similar answer? In other words, how may a man discover in himself, amidst convictions of sin, and shame and sorrow on account of it, real love for his Saviour?

1. We love him *when we mourn bitterly for our sins against him.*

Nothing pains a feeling heart more than to offend causelessly a heart it loves, and when that provocation is gross and repeated, and yet forgiven, and passed over, and to all appearance forgotten, none but ourselves can tell how keen and almost intolerable the recollection of it becomes. Forgiveness cannot wear our pain away, kindness cannot dissipate it; they sometimes rather aggravate than remove it. Now sin is an offence against Christ. It is like

Peter's crime, a denial of him, a dishonour done to him, a shameful and execrable thing. The heart therefore that loves Christ, bitterly deplores its transgressions. It is conscious of a treachery, and ingratitude, and baseness, which make it loathsome. It can hardly bear with its own vileness. It is more than saddened, it is sometimes racked, with a feeling of its desperate wickedness. Go out once in his life like Peter, and weep bitterly? Such a man at times can hardly weep at all; his sorrow for his sin overwhelms him. It can be expressed only in misery and prayer.

Are any of you, brethren, men of this stamp? Are you often and deeply deploring your guilt? Is sin against Christ, against redeeming grace and saving mercy, your sorest affliction, your keenest sorrow? Then you love him. You could not have a surer mark of a holy affection for him. The songs of heaven, could they come from your lips, would not say more plainly, "Lord, thou knowest all things; thou knowest that I love thee/"

2. We love Christ *when we are especially on our guard against a repetition of those sins wherewith we have dishonoured him.*

Every man has his besetting evil; some sin, into which, owing to his natural disposition or his habits or circumstances, he is most prone to fall. Peter's was self-confidence. Our Lord accordingly tries him in this weak point. He had said before that though all the other apostles should forsake their Master, he never would; no, he would rather die with him, than deny him. He has now a fair opportunity of making the same declaration again. He is almost invited to make it. "Simon, son of Jonas," asks the Saviour, "lovest thou me more than these?" "I have shown thee greater favour than I have shown to these thy brethren; I have pardoned in thee greater sins; hast thou for me greater love?" But Peter would not be overcome a second time. With a deep humility, with an admirable self-command, he waves that part of the question altogether. No more catching at an opportunity for display, he makes no pretensions to a warmer love than his fellow-disciples possessed, but says what from his inmost soul he knew and felt to be true, "Yea, Lord; thou knowest that I love thee."

A similar spirit in us will warrant a similar conclusion. You have fallen perhaps, brethren, into some heavy transgression, some mournful error of heart or life. It has pleased God to show you your guilt. Now if you have no true love for the Lord Jesus, nothing is more easy than to tell how you will act. You will be disgusted, it may be, with yourselves for an hour or a day, and then the first favourable opportunity that presents itself, you will fall again into the very sin which you profess to deplore. And thus, unless God interferes, you will go on to your dying day—your conscience struggling against your practice, and then again your practice wounding your conscience; your mind never at rest, and your conduct never decided, and your character ever doubtful. But take a man who really loves his Lord, and

overcome him by temptation; lead him, in some unguarded hour, to act contrary to his high and holy calling; and then mark his conduct. He will ever after shun you, and he will shun every approach to that sin into which you have drawn him. There will be no reasoning with you about the matter, no more tampering with it; no more asking, "How far can I go? How near may I approach evil?" He says now, "How far can I get away?" There will be a hatred of the accursed thing; there will be kept up in that man's heart a spirit of watchfulness and prayer against it, a determination to avoid it, which the world may ridicule and the great tempter assail, but which, by God's help, neither earth nor hell can shake. And this proves the reality of his love. It establishes the uprightness of his character. It warrants him again to say, "Lord, thou knowest all things, thou knowest that I love thee."

3. We may be assured that we love the Saviour, *when no sin, no sorrow on account of sin, no state of mind whatsoever, can keep us from his feet.*

Do we love a fellow-creature? We long to be with him. If our love for him is ardent, separation from him is painful; we overcome difficulties in order to get into contact with him, and when in his society, his mere presence becomes a source of pleasure. A real attachment for Christ acts towards Christ precisely in this way. The soul thirsts for him; it longs to be with him, to have some consciousness of his presence with it, and some communion with his Spirit. Nor does a sense of guilt long or materially interrupt this desire. For a moment perhaps or an hour, it may cause a man to dread his Bible and his closet, but where love is, this dread is soon over. The soul again turns to its redeeming Saviour, turns to him with deeper emotions and stronger desires than it ever knew before; enquires for him, laments after him, would give ten thousand worlds if it had them, once more to repose in its former assurance of his pardon and sense of his favour.

We might have supposed that after such conduct as Peter had exhibited, we should have heard no more of him; that he would have concealed himself and his shame far from his fellow-disciples amid the mountains and lakes of Galilee; but this man was the first in his Master's forsaken grave, he manifested a stronger desire than any of his brethren, to be again by his side. Behold him as he is represented in the beginning of this chapter. Several of the disciples were fishing together on the sea of Tiberias. The Lord came and stood near them on the shore. After a while John recognizes him. "It is the Lord," he says to Peter. The next moment Peter plunges into the sea, and is at his Master's feet. James, and John, and Thomas, and the rest of them, can row their boats and drag their nets calmly and leisurely, but what are nets and boats to this pardoned, contrite, fervent soul? He "loved much, for much had been forgiven" him, and regardless of everything else, he springs at once to his adored Lord.

It is well with us when sorrow for sin leads us to Christ, when tears lead to prayers, when nights of weeping and shame become nights of thirsting after God and his forgiving mercy.

And now, men and brethren, turn to yourselves. How stands the case with you? If the risen Jesus should put this question to each of you this day, “Lovest thou me?” could you return him Peter’s answer? could you say, “Thou who knowest all things, knowest that I love thee?”

You must be aware that in the evidences of attachment to Christ which have now been mentioned to you, we could not well have taken lower ground. The Bible speaks of keeping God’s commandments, of a resolute devotedness to his service in heart and life, and insists on that as the best evidence of love for him; but you have heard of nothing more today than a sorrow for sin, a dread of sin, an earnest seeking for a Saviour. If you are destitute of these things, be assured that you are equally destitute of any true regard for the Being who made you, the Redeemer who bled for you, the God who will be your Judge. Love can never be separated from its natural fruits and effects. A dead faith is an absurdity; a dead, inoperative love is tenfold more absurd. A love without power or feeling, a love that seldom thinks of its object, that never delights in him, that can offend him without compunction, and live estranged from him without sorrow, and would not lose one atom of its happiness if he were annihilated—can you seriously call this a real affection? Can you for one moment think that he who commands you to love him with all your heart, and soul, and strength, will accept or acknowledge it? Offer it to your friend, tender it to any of your fellow-worms—there is not one of them, who would not reject it with scorn, and give you in return for it his pity or contempt. And ought that to pass for a supreme love to the Lord Jesus Christ, which would not pass for common friendship among men? Will that love do for heaven, which is not good enough for earth?

Brethren, the safety of many among you lies in coming to a conviction of this fact, not that your love for the Saviour is imperfect, weak, and cold; but that you have no love at all for him; that you are actually in a state of enmity against him and his ways; an enmity concealed from yourselves perhaps under a form of religion, never hinted at by your neighbours, but as real, and as deadly, and, unless you take heed, as permanent, as sin can make it. It is deeply seated in your nature. No power but the regenerating power of the Holy Ghost, can root it out. A new heart is as necessary for you, as your daily food, more needful than air or light. Of all the things you ever heard of, you need it the most. May a gracious God lead you to seek it!

To you who really love the Lord Jesus Christ, and who, notwithstanding your occasional misgivings, have good evidence of your love for him, how

sweet must be the consciousness of this affection! It is not an unrequited love. It is the effect of such a love for you existing in the divine mind, as could satisfy ten thousand hearts; such a love as you have sought perhaps all your life long on earth, and never found. It is more; it is stronger and warmer. No created mind can comprehend it. You cannot fathom its depth, you can scarcely form a conception of its tenderness, you can set no bounds to its activity, you will never see its end.

And then add to this blessed truth yet another. Your love for Christ not only springs out of his love to you, he condescends to speak of it as, in its turn, drawing forth his affection, and bringing him nearer to you. "If any man will love me," he says, "my Father will love him, and we will come unto him, and make our abode with him." Here is a promise of the divine presence with you in this world; and, dark as the world is, what more can you desire? Christ in heaven makes heaven a world of joy, and Christ in the soul, be it where it may, is the soul's happiness and rest. Beyond this world, your blessedness is sure. Love is the one grand qualification for the enjoyment of God. It gives the soul a capability of entering into the pursuits of his kingdom, it opens the heart to its joys. It becomes therefore something more to the Christian than a duty, or a badge, or a source of delight; it is a warrant and foretaste of heaven. A righteous God will never exclude from that blessed world one among his creatures, to whom he has first given a meetness for its happiness. It is a world of love. If you can be happy in it, you will assuredly see it; you will receive in it that "crown of life, which the Lord hath promised to them that love him."