3. THE LOVE OF GOD

The Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.—Galatians 2:20.

Some of us never get beyond the vague notion of a benevolent power working in and through the world, which somehow overrules all things for good. The above text expresses a more satisfying viewpoint, as it sets forth the love of God in Jesus Christ. It reminds us that that love is individual. "Who loved me"—We could never be content with a love that had no focus. A good will that is so infinitely diffused that it touches everywhere in general and fails to touch anywhere in particular is no more than an ineffectual sentiment. Yet just here lies the difference between that "eternal goodness," so much on the lips of sentimental religionists, and the personal love for individual souls which the gospel declares to us.

Love is a real, measurable, comprehensible thing. A ray of light may be analyzed. It is composed of several distinct and recognizable colors—red, violet, orange, and the rest. So love may be resolved into its constituents, and shown to include such elements as sympathy, yearning and good-will. If these do not show themselves we may conclude we are dealing with something else than real love. How is it with the benevolence we seem to find in nature? Is it
sufficient to meet the needs of the human heart? We look up into the starry firmament at night and are powerfully reminded of God’s wisdom and majesty. But so far from finding in it any suggestion of divine sympathy, such vastness quite excludes this from our thought. We are affected as was David: “When I consider the heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and stars which thou hast ordained, what is man that thou art mindful of him?” The heavens suggest the diffuseness of God’s benevolence. For they stoop down impartially over the barest plain and the most squalid hut at night, with all the stellar magnificence which they shed upon the blooming garden and the marble palace. But the discrimination and individuality so essential to personal love are absent.

The opening flower, again, with the exquisite tinting of leaf and petal, and the delicious fragrance which drops from its cup, witnesses to divine good-will, but never suggests compassion for me in my sin or sympathy with me in my sorrows and struggles. If we are looking for a basis for our piety this defect is radical. A love that is not specific and personal can never meet man’s deeper spiritual cravings. A love which cannot in its last analysis be reduced to an individual regard for me, and a pity for me, and a good-will toward me, and a willingness to suffer and sacrifice for me, is not the love which my soul longs for and requires.

This truth is illustrated in our relations with each other. A young man is said, in popular language, to “fall in love” with a girl. That means that he cherishes for her a special affection and partiality. Philanthropy could never be a sufficient ground for marriage. A general good-will and kindliness toward the human race would never serve as strong enough motive for being joined in wedlock to some mem-

ber of that race. Conjugal love must be individual and exclusive, or it will never warrant the sympathies and toils and sacrifices which the married relationship involves.

So with the love of God in Jesus Christ. It is infinitely general and yet at the same time intensely specific. It is like the sun which fills the whole earth with its radiance and warmth, and yet mirrors itself in luminous fulness in each dewdrop. It embraces all creation in its compass, and yet concentrates itself with direct, and, as it were, undivided ardor, upon each separate soul. “God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son”—“Who loved me and gave himself for me.”

No single one of us, therefore, shall ever say in the world to come that he was left orphaned and unloved, that in the breadth and diffuseness of the divine affection it failed to compass and compassionate one poor sinner. Many a guilty transgressor may utter the complaint, and justly: “No man cared for my soul.” But none can truly say: “The Christ who loved the world and died for the world forgot me in His salvation and lost sight of me among the multitude of the subjects of His grace.” Christ’s love can miss no one. A minuteness of regard which numbers each hair of our heads can never overlook an immortal soul amid the myriads of creation. So be assured, O sinner, that however vast be the boundaries of your Saviour’s love, it is a love that keeps sight of thee, and goes out to thee, and yearns for thee in thy disobedience, just as if there were no other in all His universe.

I have already suggested that love may be analyzed and shown to include such elements as pity, kindliness, self-denial. The cross is the prism which accomplishes this wondrous analysis. The love of God shining through the cross.
in white, unbroken ray emerges from it revealed in all these lovely hues of “manifold,” or as the word means exactly, “many-colored,” grace. Through the cross we see divine compassion—or love yearning for the miserable; divine forgiveness—or love going out to the unworthy and sinful; divine self-sacrifice—love giving itself for the lost. So on the cross the oft-repeated declaration of Scripture that Christ loved us is translated into the most familiar of all dialects—that of human suffering. Thus the true measure of that “so loved the world” is furnished in the gift of Him who cared enough to die for the world.

“He loved me” “He gave himself for me.” It is no part of Himself or His possessions, such as we give lightly and call self-denial; not some precious fragment broken off and flung into the fire of sacrifice. That word “self” expresses as strongly as is possible the wholeness of being. It is the integer of our manhood which cannot be increased. And this He gave—for me. Shall so much of divine pity and loving-kindness and sacrifice directed toward me not warn me from the torpor of indifference? Shall I lie directly in the focus of eternal love and be so encased in hardness and frozen with unbelief that its genial rays shall utterly fail to penetrate my heart?

“Love so amazing, so divine” deserves my truest tenderest devotion in return. His love measured itself by His sacrifice. “He loved me and gave Himself for me.” And if there is any who can rise to that high level of argument, he will say: “Even so I love and give myself to Him.” Christ does not ask that our love should be equal to His. But He does ask that it shall be equal to ourselves. He made Himself the measure of His love. We are bound accordingly to make ourselves the measure of our love—and give ourselves. “For he died for all that they which live should henceforth not live unto themselves, but unto him who for their sakes died and rose again.”

Keep yourselves in the love of God.—Jude 1:21.

We are not told to keep ourselves in love with God, or to keep the love of God in ourselves. That might be impossible, for love is hard to control. We may do our best to incite our affections, to kindle our hearts into fervor, to exercise strong aspiration toward God; but with all this we may be constantly failing to advance in the divine love. A shipmaster says: “Sailing from Cuba we thought we had gained sixty miles in our course one day; but at the next observation we found we had lost more than thirty miles. The ship had been going forward by the wind but going backward by the current.” The experience of the soul may be similar. While there is great activity in pushing ahead in Christian work, strong religious emotions, powerful spiritual exercises, we may be retrogressing all the while because, though our sails are set for the gales of heaven, our keel dips into the undertow of the world. So the question becomes not how we feel, or how we “enjoy our mind,” as the saying is, or how much inner satisfaction or ecstasy we experience, but how deeply we are in communion with God.

Nothing is more difficult to estimate than our personal experiences. How much of our love is artificially generated? How much of our enjoyment is the effervescence of good spirits? How much of our happy feeling is merely self-stimulated excitement? These things are difficult to determine. So God does not set us to careful examination of our spiritual frames and feelings. The eye of faith, like the eye of the body, looks outward, not inward. If we turn it
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within, the consequent light may be only the stimulated flash of the optic nerve. Our emotions, that is to say, may be largely the result of our physical states. What we call "religious depression," when we look back upon it, may prove to have been due to the damps and vapors of bodily sickness which were clouding the soul. So some period of rare spiritual elevation may be traceable to an unusually high tide in the ebbing and flowing of our physical health. We would emphasize, therefore, the importance of drinking constantly at the eternal fountain as the only way we may be sure of a well within us "springing up into everlasting life."

Our temptation is to reverse God's order, to let the action be from self toward God instead of from God toward self. I sometimes think that the same ambition which leads men to strive for originality in thought leads them to strive for originality in spiritual things. They wish to be givers instead of receivers. "Genius," somebody has said, "is the ability to light one's own fire," the ability, that is, to strike off ideas which nobody has expressed before. And we think to be geniuses in religion and produce sparks of love and devotion which draw the eye of God toward ourselves. But God is the true originator. "We love because He first loved us." Our affections are but the resultant and return of His. Let us see to it that we receive before we attempt to give.

We have five senses which bring us into communication with the external world. We have only to open our eyes that our whole body may be full of light. We have only to open our ears that our whole body may be full of melody. Strange folly would it be to close the eyelid and try to get light by exciting the optic nerve to give out flashes of fire, or to close the ear to external harmonies and try to get music in the soul by some artificial vibration of the ear-drums. And shall we seek to quicken our love by working up our emotions? That may result in flashes of ecstasy and scintillations of enthusiasm. But for the love that endures, that keeps on in calm, growing and deepening exercise, we have simply to open the soul to God, and take in all the rich and abundant manifestations of His love which He has given us in the person of Christ and in the revelation of the Word. A single hour's study of the New Testament, a single hour's contemplation of the suffering and sacrifice of Jesus Christ, will do more to help us in our purpose to love the Lord our God than months and years of introspection and heart manipulation.

Acquaint thyself with God and be at peace.—Jon 22:21.

Remember that acquaintance can come through no casual contact: calling on God in the morning and leaving our visiting card of devotion, but having no care as to whether we find Him at home, and really catch sight of His face, talking with God through an interpreter—through the minister or the sacraments or the hymn-book—but knowing nothing of real and intimate and personal conversation with Him. This is not acquaintance with God. It is a kind of society etiquette like that which requires that we be polite to our neighbors even when we have no real interest in them. Beware of formalism. It is the decorum of religion. And what will it avail, though we be deeply skilled therein, if we know not what it is to have "fellowship with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ"? What earnest prayer, what profound meditation upon the word, what chastening of the inward and the outward cross there must be in order that we may truly be acquainted with God. The sweetest expositions of Scripture are, for this reason, found in lives rather than in learned books.
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I will bear the indignation of the Lord.—Micah 7:9.

Do not imagine that because God blots out our transgressions He therefore blots out the distinction between right and wrong, between good and evil, between sin and holiness. "The sin of Judah is written with a pen of iron and the point of a diamond," says Scripture. God uses the graving tool to emphasize the reality of evil as well as the eraser to obliterate the penalties thereof. And while the gospel sweeps the tablet of our life with one blessed text—"The blood of Jesus Christ cleanseth us from all sin"—it also uncovereth the handwriting of the law, deep-graven and ineffaceable, "The wages of sin is death" and "Sin is the transgression of the law."

If one expects the mercy of God he must put himself under the law of God. He must say, "I have sinned," and submit himself to the consequences of sin, the indignation of the Lord. And there is no one who does not deserve that indignation in view of our selfishness, our sinfulness, our love of the present world, and our forgetfulness of God. If for one hour we could see ourselves as God sees us, if the untempered light of His uncovered face could be let in upon us, there could be no escaping His judgment. We have sometimes turned up a stone in a field just to see the nameless brood of hideous insects underneath, as they rushed in every direction to hide themselves from the revealing sun. So if the shield of respectability were suddenly removed, if the sanction of false custom were lifted, if human palliations and excuses were taken away, and our hearts were left open and naked before Him with whom we have to do, what a hurried and hiding there would be from the face of Him that sitteth on the throne! What a shrinking away of secret sins, of enmity and jealousy and falsehood and impurity! In these days of shallow theology there is nothing more needful than frequent days of thorough self-examination. We ought now and again to take out a search warrant for our own hearts, and as we come to know the evil that is in us, say: "Strike, Lord, for I deserve the worst, I will not evade, I will not extenuate, I will not contend. 'I will bear the indignation of the Lord because I have sinned against him.'"

But afterward.—Hebrews 12:11.

It is possible for a man to get a blessing even out of a sinful past. He who can strike the lowest note in the scale of regret can often strike the highest note in the scale of exultation. It was because Paul knew himself the "chief of sinners" that he was able to lift his voice so high in praise of Christ, "the chief among ten thousand, the one altogether lovely." "The sting of death is sin," writes Paul, and we may say that sin is equally the sting of life. For the memory of wrong-doing is the one and only thing which can make us miserable in life and death alike. But if that remembrance of sin be accompanied with the remembrance of mercy, so that we can say, "Where sin abounded grace did much more abound," it may become the source of unspeakable joy. It has been discovered that the sting of a bee has purposes other than pain for its enemies. When the cell is filled with pure honey, and the lid is finished, a drop of formic acid from the poison bag connected with the sting is added to the honey by perforating the lid. This formic acid preserves the honey from fermentation. Most insects that have a stinging apparatus like that of the bee are collectors and storers of honey. How blessed the parable here! As often as my guilty past comes before me and sin thrusts
its sting into my conscience, I see that this is only to keep the honey of grace sweet and pure, making me love much because I am forgiven much. O memory, drive the sting of sin deep into my heart, and I shall cry out: “Yes, I have sinned; but the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin.” O Accuser of the brethren, remind me if you will that the sting of death is sin. I will appeal to the Advocate of the brethren on high, saying, “If we confess our sins he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” There is nothing that can keep the honey of assurance so sweet as the thrusts of sin’s envenomed sting.

*Ye that love the Lord, hate evil.*—PSALM 97:10.

There are both attractions and repulsions in Christian love. It is capable not only of warming and comforting, but also, when raised to its highest temperature, of burning and destroying. The Christian love which always keeps a medium temperature where it delights in God and his attributes is not all that is required. God wants a love that will burn up sin in us as well as warm our religious affections. We ought to shudder and shrink from sin as we instinctively do from a serpent, which we hasten to bruise under our heel. Is there anything more repulsive than the serpent charmer who has deliberately schooled himself to fondle snakes, carrying them in his bosom and letting them twine about his neck? But there are professed Christians who treat sins in the same way, and learn to live on good terms with them. Some learn to live in covetousness, some in worldly fashion, some in self-indulgence. They become so accustomed to these things that they result in no pangs of conscience. . . . There are two classes of sins which we are most likely to encounter, indulgence of things forbidden and excessive use of things permitted. True Christians may fall into either, but no Christian can remain in either happy, content, satisfied. We all of us tend to a more or less fixed condition. We are becoming inured to sin so that it sits easily on our conscience, or we are becoming assimilated to holiness so that sin hurts and discomforts us. Our condition is determined by the relative strength of the two elements. Water will quench fire, or fire will quench water according to which is stronger. A pail of water on a little fire will put it out; but a powerful flame on a little water will evaporate and dissipate it. So if the fire of Christian love is strong and steady it will quench our besetting sin; but if the love of the world be dominant in us it will quench the Spirit. Blessed be God for the gospel of His Son with its provision not only for forgiving but for destroying sin. Lifted up, He draws all men unto Him; but in His drawing He separates. As the ray of sunlight falling upon a muddy pool draws up a clear and crystalline drop of water, and leaves behind the soil that was mingled with it, so Christ draws the sinner out of his sin, His love repelling the evil at the same time that it attracts the evil-doer. In this He is our example. We should love God and lost souls for whom He gave His Son, while with great vehemence we hate the sin which nailed Him to the cross.

*Who hath translated us into the kingdom of his dear Son.*

—COLOSSIANS 1:13.

God deals first of all with persons. He forgives the sinner not the sin; He changes the man not his clothes. He translates us into the Kingdom. This needs emphasis because there is so much second-hand dealing with the Lord—
through creeds and conduct and covenant, while the soul holds off from Him and stands on its own ground. "I believe in Christ," says one, "but I make no profession." So he uses his faith as he does his opera glass, to seem to be near the Lord, while he is far from Him. So with those who contribute of their means to the church, though otherwise they hold themselves aloof. We seek not yours but "you," says the Apostle.

A man's weight is in his personality, not in his property. And the Lord requires the weight of our influence to be thrown into His cause. A man's weight can never be known if he has one foot on the scales and the other on the floor. So we cannot estimate your real moral and spiritual heft and register it on God's side, so long as you have one foot in the world and the other in the church. Think of this and don't delay longer to identify yourself definitely with God's people. He does not want you to stay out and give in your influence and your contributions to the church, but to come within and give out your influence and blessing to the world. The Kingdom of God ought to be the radiating center from which your life should shed forth blessings instead of a circumference on which you touch only casually and occasionally.