

John Wesley

SERMON 139

[text from the 1872 edition]

ON LOVE

Preached at Savannah, February 20, 1736

"Though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not love, it profiteth me nothing." 1 Cor. 13:3.

[1.] There is great reason to fear that it will hereafter be said of most of you who are here present, that this scripture, as well as all those you have heard before, profited you nothing. Some, perhaps, are not serious enough to attend to it; some who do attend will not believe it; some who do believe it, will yet think it a hard saying, and so forget it as soon as they can; and, of those few who receive it gladly for a time, some, having no root of humility, or self-denial, when persecution ariseth because of the word, will, rather than suffer for it, fall away. Nay, even of those who attend to it, who believe, remember, yea, and receive it so deeply into their hearts, that it both takes root there, endures the heat of temptation, and begins to bring forth fruit, yet will not *all* bring forth fruit unto perfection. The cares or pleasures of the world, and the desire of other things, (perhaps not felt till then,) will grow up with the word, and choke it.

[2.] Nor am I that speak the word of God any more secure from these dangers than you that hear it. I, too, have to bewail "an evil heart of unbelief." And whenever God shall suffer persecution to arise, yea, were it only the slight one of reproach, I may be the first that is offended. Or, if I be enabled to sustain this, yet, should he let loose the cares of the world upon me, or should he cease to guard me against those pleasures that do not lead to him, and the desire of other things [than knowing and loving him], I should surely be overwhelmed, and, having preached to others, be myself a castaway.

[3.] Why then do I speak this word at all? Why? Because a dispensation of the gospel is committed to me: And, though what I shall do to-morrow I know not, to-day I will preach the gospel. And with regard to you, my commission runs thus: "Son of man, I do send thee to them; and thou shalt say unto them, Thus saith the Lord God; -- whether they will hear, or whether they will forbear."

[4.] Thus saith the Lord God, "Whosoever thou art who wilt enter into life, keep the commandments." (In order to this, "believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved.") "Forsake not the assembling together, as the manner of some is." In secret, likewise, "pray to thy Father who seeth in secret," and "pour out thy heart before him." Make my word "a lantern to thy feet, and a light unto thy paths." Keep it "in thy heart, and in thy mouth, when thou sittest in thy house, when thou walkest by the way, when thou liest down, and when thou risest up." "Turn unto me with fasting," as well as prayer; and, in obedience to thy dying Redeemer, by eating that bread and drinking that cup, "show ye forth the Lord's death till he comes." By the power thou shalt through these means receive from on high, do all the things which are enjoined in the Law, and avoid all those things which are forbidden therein, knowing that if ye offend in one point, ye are guilty of all." "To do good also, and to distribute, forget not;" -- yea, while you have time, do all the good you can unto all men. Then "deny thyself, take up thy cross daily;" and, if called thereto, "resist unto blood." And when each of you can say, "All this have I done," then let him say to himself farther, (words at which not only such as Felix alone, but the holiest soul upon earth might tremble,) "Though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not love, it profiteth me nothing."

It concerns us all, therefore, in the highest degree, to know,

I. The full sense of those words, "Though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned;"

II. The true meaning of the word *love*; and,

III. In what sense it can be said, that without love all this profiteth us nothing.

I. As to the First: It must be observed that the word used by St. Paul properly signifies, *To divide into small pieces, and then to distribute what has been so divided; and, consequently, it implies, not only divesting ourselves at once of all the worldly goods we enjoy, either from a fit of distaste to the world, or a sudden start of devotion, but an act of choice, and that choice coolly and steadily executed. It may imply, too, that this be done not out of vanity, but in part from a right principle; namely, from a design*

to perform the command of God, and a desire to obtain his kingdom. It must be farther observed, that the word give signifies, actually to deliver a thing according to agreement; and, accordingly, it implies, like the word preceding, not a hasty, inconsiderate action, but one performed with open eyes and a determined heart, pursuant to a resolution before taken. The full sense of the words, therefore, is this; which he that hath cars to hear, let him hear: "Though I should give all the substance of my house to feed the poor; though I should do so upon mature choice and deliberation; though I should spend my life in dealing it out to them with my own hands, yea, and that from a principle of obedience; though I should suffer, from the same view, not only reproach and shame, not only bonds and imprisonment, and all this by my own continued act and deed, not accepting deliverance, but, moreover, death itself, -- yea, death inflicted in a manner the most terrible to nature; yet all this, if I have not love, (the love of God, and the love of all mankind, `shed abroad in my heart by the Holy Ghost given unto me,') it profiteth me nothing."

II. Let us inquire what this love is, -- what is the true meaning of the word? We may consider it either as to its properties or effects: And that we may be under no possibility of mistake, we will not at all regard the judgment of men, but go to our Lord himself for an account of the nature of love; and, for the effects of it, to his inspired Apostle.

The love which our Lord requires in all his followers, is the love of God and man; -- of God, for his own, and of man, for God's sake. Now, what is it to love God, but to delight in him, to rejoice in his will, to desire continually to please him, to seek and find our happiness in him, and to thirst day and night for a fuller enjoyment of him?

As to the measure of this love, our Lord hath clearly told us, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart." Not that we are to love or delight in none but him: For he hath commanded us, not only to love our neighbour, that is, all men, as ourselves -- to desire and pursue their happiness as sincerely and steadily as our own, -- but also to love many of his creatures in the strictest sense; to delight in them, to enjoy them: Only in such a manner and measure as we know and feel, not to indispose but to prepare us for the enjoyment of Him. Thus, then, we are called to love God with all our heart.

The effects or properties of this love, the Apostle describes in the chapter before us. And all these being infallible marks whereby any man may judge of himself, whether he hath this love or hath it not, they deserve our deepest consideration.

"Love suffereth long," or is longsuffering. If thou love thy neighbour for God's sake, thou wilt bear long with his infirmities: If he want wisdom, thou wilt pity and not despise him: If he be in error, thou wilt mildly endeavour to recover him, without any sharpness or reproach: If he be overtaken in a fault, thou wilt labour to restore him in the spirit of meekness: And if, haply, that cannot be done soon, thou wilt have patience with him; if God, peradventure, may bring him, at length to the knowledge and love of the truth. In all provocations, either from the weakness or malice of men, thou wilt show thyself a pattern of gentleness and meekness; and, be they ever so often repeated, wilt not be overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good. Let no man deceive you with vain words: He who is not thus long-suffering, hath not love.

Again: "Love is kind." Whosoever feels the love of God and man shed abroad in his heart, feels an ardent and uninterrupted thirst after the happiness of all his fellow-creatures. His soul melts away with the very fervent desire which he hath continually to promote it; and out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaketh. In his tongue is the law of kindness. The same is impressed on all his actions. The flame within is continually working itself away, and spreading abroad more and more, in every instance of good-will to all with whom he hath to do. So that whether he thinks or speaks, or whatever he does, it all points to the same end, -- the advancing, by every possible way, the happiness of all his fellow-creatures. Deceive not, therefore your own souls: He who is not thus kind, hath not love.

Farther: "Love envieth not." This, indeed, is implied, when it is said, "Love is kind." For kindness and envy are inconsistent: They can no more abide together than light and darkness. If we earnestly desire all happiness to all, + we cannot be grieved at the happiness of any. The fulfilling of our desire will be sweet to our soul; so far shall we be from being pained at it. If we are always doing what good we can for our neighbour, and wishing we could do more, it is impossible that we should repine at an ill good he receives: Indeed, it will be the very joy of our heart. However, then, we may flatter ourselves, or one another, he that envieth hath not love.

It follows, "Love vaunteth not itself;" or rather, is not rash or hasty in judging: For this is indeed the true meaning of the word. As many as love their neighbour for God's sake, will not easily receive an ill opinion of any to whom they wish all good, spiritual as well as temporal. They cannot condemn him even in their heart without evidence; nor upon slight evidence neither; nor, indeed upon any, without first, if it be possible, having him and his accuser face to face, or at the least acquainting him with the accusation, and letting him speak for himself. Every one of you feels that he cannot but act thus, with regard to one whom he tenderly loves. Why, then, he who doth not act thus hath not love.

I only mention one more of the properties of this love: "Love is not puffed up." You cannot wrong one you love: Therefore, if

you love God with all your heart, you cannot so wrong him as to rob him of his glory, by taking to yourself what is due to him only. You will own that all you are, and all you have, is his; that without him you can do nothing; that he is your light and your life, your strength and your all; and that you are nothing, yea, less than nothing, before him. And if you love your neighbour as yourself, you will not be able to prefer yourself before him. Nay, you will not be able to despise any one, any more than to hate him. [Nay, you will think every man better than yourself.] As the wax melteth away before the fire, so doth pride melt away before love. All haughtiness, whether of heart, speech, or behaviour, vanishes away where love prevails. It bringeth down the high looks of him who boasted in his strength, and maketh him as a little child; diffident of himself, willing to hear, glad to learn, easily convinced, easily persuaded. And whosoever is otherwise minded, let him give up all vain hope: He is puffed up, and so hath not love.

III. It remains to inquire, in what sense it can be said that "though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, yea, though I give my body to be burned, and have not love, it profiteth me nothing."

The chief sense of the words is, doubtless, this: That whatsoever we do, and whatsoever we suffer, if we are not renewed in the spirit of our mind, by "the love of God shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost given unto us," we cannot enter into life eternal. None can enter there, unless in virtue of covenant which God hath given unto man in the Son of his love.

But, because general truths are less apt to affect us, let consider one or two particulars, with regard to which all we can do or suffer, if we have not love, profiteth us nothing. And, First, all without this profiteth not, so as to make life happy; nor, Secondly, so as to make death comfortable.

And, First, without love nothing can so profit us as to make our lives happy. By happiness I mean, not a slight, trilling pleasure, that perhaps begins and ends in the same hour; but such a state of well-being as contents the soul, and gives it a stead, lasting satisfaction. But that nothing without love can profit us, as to our present happiness, will appear from this single consideration: You cannot want it, in any one single instance, without pain; and the more you depart from it, the pain is the greater. Are you wanting in longsuffering? Then, so far as you fall short of this, you fall short of happiness. The more the opposite tempers -- anger, fretfulness, revenge -- prevail, the more unhappy you are. You know it; you feel it; nor can the storm be allayed, or peace ever return to your soul, unless meekness, gentleness, patience, or, in one word, love, take possession of it. Does any man find in himself ill-will, malice, envy, or any other temper opposite to kindness? Then is misery there; and the stronger the temper, the more miserable he is. If the slothful man may be said to eat his own flesh, much more the malicious, or envious. His soul is the very type of hell; -- full of torment as well as wickedness. He hath already the worm that never dieth, and he is hastening to the fire that never can be quenched. Only as yet the great gulf is not fixed between him and heaven. As yet there is a Spirit ready to help his infirmities; who is still willing, if he stretch out his hands to heaven, and bewail his ignorance and misery, to purify his heart from vile affections, and to renew it in the love of God, and so lead him by present, up to eternal, happiness.

Secondly. Without love, nothing can make death comfortable.

By comfortable I do not mean stupid, or senseless. I would not say, he died comfortably who died by an apoplexy, or by the shock of a cannon, any more than he who, having his conscience seared, died as unconcerned as the beasts that beasts that perish. Neither do I believe you would envy any one the comfort of dying raving mad. But, by a comfortable death, I mean, a calm passage out of life, full of even, rational peace and joy. And such a death, all the acting and all the suffering in the world cannot give, without love.

To make this still more evident, I cannot appeal to your own experience; but I may to what we have seen, and to the experience of others. And two I have myself seen going out of this life in what I call a comfortable manner, though not with equal comfort. One had evidently more comfort than the other, because he had more love.

I attended the first during a great part of his last trial, as well as when he yielded up his soul to God. He cried out, "God doth chasten me with strong pain; but I thank him for all; I bless him for all; I love him for all!" When asked, not long before his release, "Are the consolations of God small with you?" he replied aloud, "No, no, no!" Calling all that were near him by their names, he said, "Think of heaven, talk of heaven: All the time is lost when we are not thinking of heaven." Now, this was the voice of love; and, so far as that prevailed, all was comfort, peace, and joy. But as his love was not perfect, so neither was his comfort. He intervals of [anger or] fretfulness, and therein of misery; giving by both an incontestable proof that love can sweeten both life and death. So when that is either absent from, or obscured in, the soul, there is no peace or comfort there.

It was in this place that I saw the other good soldier of Jesus Christ grappling with his last enemy, death. And it was, indeed, a spectacle worthy to be seen, of God, and angels, and men. Some of his last breath was spent in a psalm of praise to Him who was then giving him the victory; in assurance whereof he began triumph even in the heat of the battle. When he was asked, "Hast thou the love of God in thy heart?" he lifted up his eyes and hands, and answered, "Yes, yes!" with the whole strength he

had left. To one who inquired if he was afraid of the devil, whom he had just mentioned as making his last attack upon him, he replied, "No, no: My loving Saviour hath conquered every enemy: He is with me. I fear nothing." Soon after, he said, "The way to our loving Saviour is sharp, but it is short." Nor was it long before he fell into a sort of slumber, wherein his soul sweetly returned to God that gave it.

Here, we may observe, was no mixture of any passion or temper contrary to love; therefore, there was no misery; perfect love casting out whatever might have occasioned torment. And whosoever thou art who hast the like measure of love, thy last end shall be like his. [Section numbers in brackets follow the Bicentennial Edition.]

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