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A SERMON

by

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SERMON XVIII.

GOD IS LOVE.

1 JOHN iv. 8.—*God is love.*

LOVE is a gentle, pleasing theme, the noblest passion of the human breast, and the fairest ornament of the rational nature. Love is the cement of society, and the source of social happiness; and without it the great community of the rational universe would dissolve, and men and angels would turn savages, and roam apart in barbarous solitude. Love is the spring of every pleasure; for who could take pleasure in the possession of what he does not love! Love is the foundation of religion and morality; for what is more monstrous than religion without love to that God who is the object of it? Or who can perform social duties without feeling the endearments of those relations to which they belong? Love is the softener and polisher of human minds, and transforms barbarians into men; its pleasures are refined and delicate, and even its pains and anxieties have something in them soothing and pleasing. In a word, love is the brightest beam of divinity that has ever irradiated the creation; the nearest resemblance to the ever-blessed God; for God is love.

God is love. There is an unfathomable depth in this concise laconic sentence, which even the penetration of an angel’s mind cannot reach; an ineffable excellence, which even celestial eloquence cannot fully represent. God is love; not only lovely and loving, but love itself; pure, unmixed love, nothing but love; love in his nature and in his operations; the object, source, and quintessence of all love. My present design is to recommend the Deity to your affections under the amiable idea of love, and for that end to show that his other perfections are but various modifications of love.

I. Love comprehends the various forms of divine beneficence. Goodness, that extends its bounties to innumerable ranks of creatures, and diffuses happiness

through the various regions of the universe, except that which is set apart for the dreadful, but salutary and benevolent purpose of confining and punishing incorrigible malefactors; grace, which so richly showers its blessings upon the undeserving, without past merit or the prospect of future compensation; mercy, that commiserates and relieves the miserable as well as the undeserving; patience and longsuffering, which so long tolerate insolent and provoking offenders; what is all this beneficence in all these its different forms towards different objects, what but love under various names? It is gracious, merciful, patient and longsuffering love; love variegated, overflowing, and unbounded; what but love was the Creator of such a world as this, so well accommodated, so richly furnished for the sustenance and comfort of its inhabitants? and what but love has planted it so thick with an endless variety of beings, all capable of receiving some stream of happiness from that immense fountain of it, the divine goodness? Is it not love that preserves such a huge unwieldy world as this in order and harmony from age to age, and supplies all its numerous inhabitants with every good? and oh! was it not love, free, rich, unmerited love, that provided a Saviour for the guilty children of men? It was because God loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. John iii. 16. Oh love, what hast thou done! what wonders hast thou wrought! It was thou, almighty love, that broughtest down the Lord of glory from his celestial throne, to die upon a cross an atoning sacrifice for the sins of the world. And what but love is it that peoples the heavenly world with colonies transplanted from this rebellious province of Jehovah's dominions; that forms such miracles of glory and happiness out of the dust, and the shattered, polluted fragments of human nature! and what but eternal love perpetuates their bliss through an eternal duration? but it is so evident, that these instances of divine goodness are only the effects of love, that it is needless to attempt any farther illustration.

II. What is divine wisdom but a modification of divine love, planning the best adapted schemes for communicating itself in the most advantageous, beneficent, and honourable manner, so as to promote the good of the great whole or collective system of creatures by the happiness of individuals; or to render the punishment and misery of individuals, which, for important reasons of state may be sometimes necessary in a good government, subservient to the same benevolent end? Whatever traces of divine wisdom we see in creation; as the order and harmony of the great system of nature, its rich and various furniture, and the conspiracy of all its parts to produce the good of each other and the whole; whatever divine wisdom appears in conducting the great scheme of providence through the various ages of time; or in the more astonishing and godlike work of redemption; in a word, whatever displays of divine wisdom appear in any part of the universe, they are only the signatures of divine love.

Why was yonder sun fixed where he is, and enriched with such extensive vital influences, but because divine love saw it was best and most conducive to the good of the system; Why were our bodies so wonderfully and fearfully made, and all their parts so well fitted for action and enjoyment, but because divine love drew the plan, and stamped its own amiable image upon them? Why was the manifold wisdom of God displayed, not only to mortals, but also to angelic prin-

cialties and powers, Eph. iii. 10, in the scheme of redemption, which advances at once the honours of the divine perfections and government, and the happiness of rebellious and ruined creatures, by an expedient which nothing but infinite wisdom could ever devise, the incarnation, the obedience, and passion of the co-equal Son of God? Why, I say, but because divine love would otherwise be under restraint, and incapable of giving full scope to its kind propensions in a manner honourable to itself and conducive to the public good? In short, divine wisdom appears to be nothing else but the sagacity of love, to discover ways and means to exercise itself to the greatest advantage; or, which is the same, divine wisdom always acts under the benign determination and conduct of love; it is the counsellor of love to project schemes subservient to its gracious purposes; and in all its councils love presides.

III. What is divine power but the omnipotence of love? Why did omnipotence exert itself in the production of this vast amazing world out of nothing? It was to open a channel in which the overflowing ocean of love might extend itself, and diffuse its streams from creature to creature, upwards as high as the most exalted archangel, and downwards as low as the meanest vital particle of being, and extensive as the remotest limits of the universe, and all the innumerable intermediate ranks of existence in the endless chain of nature. And why does divine power still support this prodigious frame, but to keep the channel of love open from age to age? and for this purpose it will be exerted to all eternity. Perhaps I should assist your ideas of divine power, if I should call it the acting hand, the instrument, the servant of love, to perform its orders, and execute its gracious designs.

IV. What is the holiness of God but love—pure, refined, and honourable love? What is it but the love of excellence, rectitude, and moral goodness? Holiness, in its own nature, has a tendency to promote the happiness of the universe; it is the health, the good constitution of a reasonable being; without which it has no capacity of relishing those enjoyments which are suitable to its nature. It is no arbitrary mandate of heaven that has established the inseparable connection between holiness and happiness, between vice and misery. The connection is as necessary, as immutable, and as much founded in the nature of things, as that between health of body and a capacity of animal enjoyments, or between sickness and a disrelish for the most agreeable food. Every creature in the universe, as far as he is holy, is happy; and as far as he is unholy, he is miserable. Therefore, by how much the more holy Jehovah is, by so much the more fit he is to communicate happiness to all that enjoy him; and consequently he is an infinite happiness, for he is infinitely holy.

His taking so much care to promote holiness is but taking care of the public good. The strict exactions of his law, which contains every ingredient of the most perfect holiness, and admits of no dispensation, are but strict injunctions to his subjects to pursue that course which infallibly leads them to the most consummate happiness; and every abatement in his demands of obedience would be a license to them to deduct so much from their happiness, and render themselves so far miserable with his consent. That mitigation of the rigour of his law, which some imagine he has made to bring it down to a level with the abilities of degenerate creatures, disabled by their voluntary wickedness, would no more contribute to

their felicity than the allowing a sick man to gratify his vitiated taste by mixing a little deadly poison in his food would contribute to the recovery of his health, or the preservation of his life. The penal sanctions of the divine law are but friendly warnings against danger and misery, and honest admonitions of the destructive consequences of sin, according to the unchangeable nature of things; they are threatenings which discover no malignity or ill-nature, as sinners are apt to imagine, but the infinite benevolence of the heart of God; threatenings which are not primarily and unconditionally intended to be executed, but to prevent all occasion of their being executed, by preventing sin, the natural source, as well as the meritorious cause of every misery: threatenings which are not executed, but as the only expedient left in a desperate case, when all other means have been used in vain, and no other method can secure the public good, or render a worthless criminal a vessel of wrath fitted for destruction, and fit for nothing else; of no other service to the great community of rational beings. These are some of the ingredients and displays of the holiness of God: and what are these but so many exertions of pure love and benevolence? It is because he loves his creatures so much that he requires them to be so holy: and that very thing, against which there are so many cavils and objections, as too severe and oppressive, and a rigid restraint from the pursuit of pleasure, is the highest instance of the love of God for them, and his regard for their happiness.

Let me therefore commence advocate for God with my fellow-men, though it strikes me with horror to think there should be any occasion for it. Ye children of the most tender Father, ye subjects of the most gracious and righteous Sovereign, ye beneficiaries of divine love, why do you harbour hard thoughts of him? Is it because his laws are so strict, and tolerate you in no guilty pleasure? This appointment is the kind restraint of love: the love of so good a being, will not allow him to dispense with your observance of anything that may contribute to your improvement and advantage, nor indulge you in anything that is in its own nature deadly and destructive, no more than a father will suffer a favourite child to play with a viper, or a good government permit a madman to run at large armed with weapons to destroy himself and others.

Do you think hard of God because he hates all moral evil to such a degree, that he has annexed to it everlasting misery of the most exquisite kind? But what is this but an expression of his infinite hatred to everything that is hurtful to his creatures, and his infinite regard to whatever tends to their benefit? Or has he been too rigid in exacting holiness as a necessary pre-requisite to the happiness of heaven? You may as well complain of the constitution of nature, that renders abstinence from poison necessary to the preservation of health, or that does not allow you to quench your thirst in a fever with cold water. Let me remind you once more, that holiness is essential to the happiness of heaven, and that without it you labour under a moral incapacity of enjoyment; and a moral incapacity will as inevitably deprive you of the pleasures of enjoyment, as if it were natural. While unholy you can no more be happy even in the region of happiness than a stone can enjoy the pleasure of animal life, or a mere animal those of reason. "But why," you will perhaps murmur and object, "why has God formed such a heaven as cannot be universally enjoyed? Why has he not provided a happiness for every taste?" You

may as well ask why he has not created a light that would be equally agreeable to every eye; to the mole and the owl, as well as to man and the eagle? Or why has he not formed light with all the properties of darkness; that is, why has he not performed contradictions? You may as well query, why has he not given us equal capacities of enjoyments in sickness and in health, and furnished us with equal pleasures in both? I tell you that, in the nature of things, the low and impure pleasures which would suit the depraved taste of the wicked, would be nauseous and painful to pure minds refined and sanctified; and they cannot mingle, they cannot approach each other without being destroyed. The element of water may as well be converted into a fit residence for the inhabitants of dry land, and yet retain all its properties that are suitable to its present natives; or the solid earth become a fit receptacle for fishes, and yet both it and the fishes retain their usual qualities. In short, men, beasts, birds, fishes, insects, angels, devils, the inhabitants of every zone and climate, of every planet, or any other region of the universe, may as well form one society in one and the same place, and mingle their respective food and pleasures, as a heaven of happiness be prepared that would suit every taste.

God has prepared the only kind of heaven that is in its own nature possible; the only one that would be an expression of love, or afford real and extensive happiness to such of his creatures as are capable of it. The heaven of sinners would be a nuisance to all other beings in the universe; a private good only to malefactors, at the expense of the public; an open reward of wickedness, and a public discountenancing of all moral goodness. This would be the case upon the supposition that the heaven of sinners were possible. But the supposition is infinitely absurd; it is as impossible as the pleasures of sickness, the sensibility of a stone, or the meridian splendours of midnight. Therefore acknowledge, admire, and love the beauty of the Lord, his holiness. Give thanks, says the Psalmist, at the remembrance of his holiness, Ps. xcvi. 12, of his holiness, as well as of his goodness and love; for it is the brightest modification of his love and goodness. An unholy being, in the character of supreme magistrate of the universe, cannot all be love, or communicate nothing but what is pleasing to all; nay, as far as he is unholy he must have a malignant disposition towards the public happiness, and be essentially deficient in benevolence.

V. What is the justice, even the punitive justice of God, but a modification of love and goodness! As there is no divine perfection which appears so terrible to offenders as this, which therefore they toil and sweat to disprove or explain away, I shall dwell the longer upon it. And I hope to convince you that justice is not that grim, stern, tremendous attribute which is delineated by the guilty, partial imagination of sinners, who have made it their interest that there should be no such attribute to Deity, but that it is infinitely amiable and lovely, as well as awful and majestic; nay, that it is love and benevolence itself. By the punitive justice of God, I mean that perfection of his nature which executes the sentence of his law upon offenders, or inflicts upon them the punishment he had threatened to disobedience, exactly according to his own denunciation. The present world, which is a state of trial and discipline, and not of final rewards and punishments, is not the proper theatre of vindictive justice, but of a promiscuous providence: All things come alike to all, and no man can know the love or hatred of the Ruler of the

world to him, by all that is before him. Eccles. ix. 1, 2. Yet, sometimes, even in this life, justice arrests the guilty, and displays its illustrious terrors upon them, especially upon guilty nations that have no existence in a national capacity in the eternal world, and therefore can be punished in that capacity in this only. It was vindictive justice that deluged the whole world in a flood of vengeance; that kindled the flames of Sodom and Gomorrah; and that cut off the nations of Canaan when they had filled up the measure of their iniquities. It is justice that arms kingdoms from age to age, and makes them the executioners of divine wrath upon one another, while they are gratifying their own ambition, avarice, or revenge. The devastations of earthquakes, inundations, plagues, epidemical sicknesses, famines, and the various calamities in which mankind have been involved, are so many displays of divine justice; and their being brought on the world according to the course of nature, and by means of secondary causes, will by no means prove that they are not so, but only that the very make and constitution of this world are so planned and formed by divine wisdom as to admit of the execution of justice at proper periods, and that all its parts are the instruments of justice to accomplish its designs.

But these and all the other judgments of heaven upon our world are only preludes and specimens of the most perfect administration of it in a future state. There the penalty of the law will be executed upon impenitent offenders with the utmost impartiality. And Revelation assures us that the punishment will be endless in duration, and of as exquisite a kind and high degree as the utmost capacity of the subject will admit; and consequently that it will not, like fatherly chastisements, have any tendency to their reformation or advantage, but to their entire and everlasting destruction. Now it is this display of punitive justice that appears so terrible and cruel to the guilty children of men; and therefore this is what I shall principally endeavour to vindicate and to clothe with all the gentle and amiable glories of love and public benevolence. For this end I beg you would consider, that whatever has a tendency to prevent sin tends to prevent misery also, and to promote the happiness of the world and of all the individuals in it; that good laws are absolutely necessary for the prevention of sin; that penal sanctions are essential to good laws; and that the execution of the penal sanctions upon offenders is absolutely necessary to their efficacy and good tendency; and consequently the execution of them is a display of love and benevolence.

Consider also, that many are excited to seek everlasting happiness, and deterred from the ways that lead down to destruction, by means of the threatenings of the law: that even those on whom they are finally executed were once in a capacity of receiving immortal advantage from them, but defeated their good influence and tendency by their own wilful obstinacy: and that the righteous execution of these threatenings upon the incorrigible, may promote the common good of the universe. Consider farther, that criminals are incompetent judges of vindictive justice, because they are parties; and therefore we should not form an estimate of it by their prejudices, but from the judgment of the disinterested and impartial part of the creation.

Finally consider, that proceedings similar to those of the divine government, are not only approved of as just in all human governments, but also loved and

admired as amiable and praiseworthy, and essential to the goodness and benevolence of a ruler. Let us briefly illustrate these several classes of propositions.

I. “Whatever has a tendency to prevent sin, tends to prevent misery also, and to promote the happiness of the universe and of all the individuals in it: good laws are absolutely necessary for the prevention of sin: penal sanctions are essential to good laws; and the seasonable execution of those sanctions is absolutely necessary to their efficacy and good tendency; and consequently the execution of them is a display of love and benevolence.” “Whatever has a tendency to prevent sin, tends to prevent misery also,” and that for this reason, because sin is necessarily productive of misery, and destructive of happiness. Can a rational creature be happy that is disaffected to the Supreme Good, the only source of that kind of happiness which is adapted to a rational nature? This is as impossible as that you should enjoy animal pleasures while you abhor all animal enjoyments. Can a social creature be happy in eternal solitude, or in a state of society, while ill-affected towards the other members of society, or while they are ill-affected towards him and he to them, hateful, and hating one another? Can a creature, formed capable of felicity superior to what any good can communicate, be happy in the eager pursuit of bubbles; that is, of its highest happiness in inferior enjoyments?

All those dispositions of heart, and the practices resulting from them, in which sin consists, enmity to God, uneasy murmurings and insurrections against his perfections, and the government of his law and providence; a churlish, malignant, envious temper towards mankind; an anxious, excessive eagerness of desire after vain, unsatisfactory enjoyments; a disrelish for the exalted pleasures of holiness and benevolence; what are these and the like dispositions, but so many ingredients of misery, and so many abatements of happiness? and consequently all measures that are taken for the prevention of sin are so many benevolent expedients for the prevention of misery and the increase of happiness. I add, “good laws are absolutely necessary for the prevention of sin.” Indeed those dispositions and actions which are sinful and forbidden by the divine law would be of a deadly nature to the soul, even if they were not forbidden, as a stab to the heart would prove mortal to the body, although there were no laws against it, and for that very reason laws have been made against it. Therefore the laws of God do not properly constitute the destructive nature of sin, but only point out and warn us against what is destructive in its own nature previous to all explicit law. And is it not absolutely necessary, and an act of the highest benevolence, that the supreme Lawgiver should warn us against this pernicious evil, and plainly inform us what it is? This is the design of his laws both natural and revealed. And without them, what sure instructor, what unerring guide, or what strong inducements to a proper conduct could we have in this most important case? Is it not necessary, is it not kind, that the supreme Legislator should interpose his authority, and lay us under the strongest obligations to avoid our own ruin? And if good laws are necessary, so are penal sanctions; for “penal sanctions are essential to good laws.” Laws without penalties would be only the advices of an equal or an inferior, and not the obligatory commands of authority. They might be observed or not, according to pleasure, and consequently would answer no valuable purpose. They would also be infinitely absurd in their own nature; for if what the law enjoins be reasonable,

necessary, and of good tendency, is it not necessary and fit that they who do not observe it should feel the bad effects of their omission? And what is this but a penalty!

But on a point so plain I need not multiply words; I appeal to the common sense of mankind, I appeal to the universal practice of all governments. Have there ever been, or can there possibly be any laws without penal sanctions? Would not such laws be exposed to perpetual insult and contempt, and be destitute of all force and energy? The common sense and universal practice of all the world, in all ages, remonstrate against such an absurdity. But if penal sanctions are essential to good laws, then so is their execution; for—"The seasonable execution of penal sanctions is absolutely necessary to their efficacy and good tendency." Penalties denounced can have no efficacy upon the subject of the law; that is, they cannot excite fear, and by that means deter them from disobedience, unless they are believed, and their execution expected. But they would soon cease to be believed, and their execution would no longer be expected, if in several instances they should be dispensed with, and a succession of sinners should pass with impunity. Other sinners, judging of future events by past facts, would expect the same indulgence, and therefore venture upon disobedience without any restraint from the penalty of the law.

Here again I shall bring the matter to a quick decision, by appealing to the common reason and universal practice of mankind. Would human laws have any force if the penalty was hung up as an empty terror, and never executed? Would not such laws be liable to perpetual violation and insult, and become the sport of daring offenders? Would not the escapes of former offenders encourage all future generations to give themselves a-loose, in hopes of the same exemption? Is it not necessary in all government that public justice should make examples of some, to warn and deter others? Have not all nations, especially the more civilized, made such examples? And have not all the impartial world commended their proceeding as necessary to the safety and happiness of society, and expressive of their regard to the public good? View all these things together, and methinks I may bid defiance to common sense to draw any other conclusion than that the justice of God, in executing the penalties of his law upon impenitent offenders, is the height of goodness and love. If love requires that all proper expedients be used for the prevention of sin; if good laws are necessary for this end; if penalties are essential to good laws; and if the seasonable execution of penalties be absolutely necessary to give them their benevolent force and good tendency, does it not unavoidably follow, that love itself requires both the enacting of penal sanctions to the law of God, and the execution of them upon proper subjects? Without this wholesome severity, the divine laws would be less secure from contempt, and the divine government would be less favourable to the peace and happiness of the subjects than the laws and governments of mortals in all civilized nations.

"But why does the penalty rise so high? Why is the execution lengthened out through everlasting ages? Why might not a gentler punishment suffice?" This is the grand objection; and in such language as this the enmity of the rebellious heart against the justice of God generally expresses itself. But if the original design and natural tendency of the threatened penalty be to prevent sin, then by how much

severer the penalty, by so much the more effectual tendency has it to answer this kind design. No punishment can rise higher than those which a righteous God has annexed to disobedience the natural source of every misery; and what is this but to say that no methods more effectual can be taken to prevent it than what he has actually taken? We may therefore infer the ardour of the love of God from the terror of his threatenings. He has denounced the greatest misery against sin, in order to restrain his creatures from running into that very misery; and threatens the loss of heaven, in order to prevent his creatures from losing it. I must also here repeat the common argument, which appears to me as valid as common; “that as the essence of sin consists in the breach of an obligation, the evil of sin must be exactly proportioned to the strength of the obligation;” that as we are undoubtedly under infinite obligations to a God of infinite excellency, our Maker, Ruler, and Benefactor, the evil of sin, which violates those obligations, must be infinite also; and that no punishment short of what is infinite can be adequate to the demerit of an infinite evil, and consequently sinners ought to suffer a finite punishment through an infinite duration, because that is the only way in which they are able to bear an infinite punishment. But on this common topic a few hints may suffice. I proceed to the next set of propositions.

II. “That many are excited to the pursuit of everlasting happiness, and deterred from the ways of destruction, by means of threatenings of the divine law; that even those unhappy creatures on whom they are finally executed were once in a capacity of receiving immortal advantage from them, but defeated their good influence and tendency by their own wilful obstinacy: and that the righteous execution of these threatenings upon the incorrigible may promote the common good of the universe.”

“Many are excited to the pursuit of everlasting happiness, and deterred from the ways of destruction, by means of the threatenings of the divine law.” I appeal to experience and observation, whether the terrors of the Lord are not the very first thing that gives a check to sinners in their headlong career to ruin? It is the law that worketh wrath, Rom. iv. 15; that is, an alarming apprehension of the wrath of God against sin; and constrains them to use the instituted means of deliverance. Thus even the terrors of the law are made subservient to divine love, in “turning sinners from the error of their way, and saving souls from death.” And could we consult the glorious assembly of the spirits of just men made perfect, they would all own that if their heavenly Father had not threatened them so severely, they would always have continued undutiful, and consequently rendered themselves miserable; and that they were saved from hell by being honestly warned of the danger of falling into it. It is true there are multitudes who do not receive this advantage by the penal sanctions of the divine law, but are made miserable for ever by the execution of them; yet it may be added, “That even those unhappy creatures on whom they are executed, were once in a capacity of receiving infinite advantage from them, but defeated their good influence and tendency in their own wilful obstinacy.” The threatenings of the divine law had the same good tendency in their own nature with respect to them, to deter them from disobedience, and urge their pursuit of happiness, as with respect to others; and these were some of the means of God appointed for their salvation. But they hardened themselves

against them and thus defeated their good tendency, and obstinately ruined themselves in defiance of warning: they even forced a passage into the infernal pit through the strongest enclosures. But if they had not been thus warned, they not only would not have been saved in the event, but they would not have enjoyed the means of salvation. Now their enjoying these means was in itself an inexpressible blessing, though in the issue it only aggravates their misery; and consequently the enacting those penalties to the divine law was really an act of kindness even to them; and their abuse of the blessing does not alter its nature.

The primary and direct end of a penalty is not the punishment of the subjects, but to restrain them from things injurious to themselves, and others, and urge them to pursue their own interest. But when this good end is not answered, by reason of their wilful folly and disobedience, then, and not till then, the execution is necessary for the good of others,¹ which leads me to add, "That the righteous execution of the threatened penalty upon the incorrigible may promote the common good of the universe." This world of ours is a public theatre, surrounded with numerous spectators, who are interested in its affairs. Angels, in particular, are witnesses of the proceedings of Providence towards mankind and thence learn the perfections of God, and the maxims of his government. Hell is also a region dreadfully conspicuous to them; and there, no doubt, the offended Judge intends to show his wrath, and make his power known to them as well as to mankind. Now they are held in obedience by rational motives, and not by any mechanical compulsion. And among other motives of a gentler kind, no doubt this is one of no small weight; namely, their observing the destructive consequences of sin upon men and angels, and the terrible displeasure of God against it. It is not at all inconsistent with their dignity and purity to suppose them swayed by this motive in a proper connection with others of a more disinterested and generous nature. Therefore the confirmation of the elect angels in holiness, and their everlasting happiness is no doubt not a little secured and promoted by the execution of righteous punishment upon some notorious hardened malefactors, both of their own order and of the human race. The same thing may be said of the spirits of just men made perfect; they are happily incapable of sinning, and consequently of becoming miserable; but their incapacity arises from the clear conviction of their understanding, which has the conduct of their will; and, while sin appears to them so deadly and destructive an evil, it is impossible, according to the make of a rational nature, that they should choose it. But the consequences of sin upon the wretched creatures on whom the penalty denounced against it is executed, is no doubt one thing that affords them this conviction; and so it contributes to their perseverance in obedience and happiness.

Thus the joys of heaven are secured by the pains of hell, and even the most noxious criminals, the enemies of God and his creatures, are not useless in the universe, but answer the terrible but benevolent end of warning all other creatures against disobedience; which would involve them in the same misery, just as the execution of a few malefactors in human governments is of extensive service to the rest of the subjects. But as the greater part of mankind perish, it may be queried, "How is it consistent with love and goodness, that the majority should be punished and made monuments of justice, for the benefit of the smaller number?"

To this I reply, that though it be equally evident from Scripture and observation, that the greater part of mankind go down to destruction in the smooth, broad descending road of sin, in the ordinary ages of the world; and though revelation assures us that the number of the apostate angels is very great, yet I think we have no reason to conclude that the greater part of the rational creation shall be miserable; nay, it is possible the number of those on whom the penalty of the divine law is inflicted, may bear no more proportion to that of the innumerable ranks of creatures that may be retained in obedience and happiness by means of their conspicuous and exemplary punishment, than the number of criminals executed in our government, for the warning of others, bears to the rest of the subjects. If we consider that those who have been redeemed from the earth, even in the ordinary ages of the world, though comparatively but few, yet absolutely are a “multitude which no man can number, of all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues, Rev. vii. 9, and that the elect angels are an innumerable company,”² Heb. xii. 22, perhaps much greater than the legions of hell; if to those we add the prodigious numbers that shall be converted in that long and blessed season when Satan shall be bound, when the prince of peace shall reign, and when “the kingdom and dominion, and the greatness of the kingdom under the whole heaven, shall be given to the people of the saints of the Most High,” Dan. vii. 27, in which not only the greater number of the generations that shall live in that glorious millennium shall be saved, but perhaps a greater number than all that perished in former generations, which is very possible, if we consider the long continuance of that time, and that the world will then be under the peculiar blessing of heaven, and consequently mankind will multiply faster, and not be diminished as they now are by the calamities of war, plagues, epidemical sicknesses, and the other judgments of God upon those times of rebellion; if we also borrow a little light from the hypothesis of philosophy, and suppose that the other planets of our system are peopled like our earth with proper inhabitants, and particularly with reasonable creatures, (for he that made those vast bodies made them not in vain, he made them to be inhabited;) if we further suppose that each of the innumerable fixed stars is a sun, the centre of habitable worlds, and that all these worlds, like our own, swarm with life, and particularly with various classes of reasonable beings, (which is not at all unlikely, if we argue from parity of cases, from things well known to things less known, or from the immense ever flowing goodness, wisdom and power of the great Creator, who can replenish the infinite voids of space with being, life, and reason, and with equal ease produce and support ten thousand worlds as ten thousand grains;) if we suppose that his creative perfections will not lie inactive for ever, contented with one exertion for six days but that he still employs and will employ them for ever in causing new worlds, replenished with moral agents, to start into existence here and there in the endless vacancies of space; and finally, if we suppose that the flames of hell will blaze dreadfully bright and conspicuous in the view of all present and future creations; or that the destructive nature of sin will be some way or another made known to the rational inhabitants of all worlds by the punishment inflicted upon a number of men and angels, and that by this means they are effectually deterred from sin, and preserved from the misery inseparable from it; I say, if we admit these suppositions, some of which are un-

doubtedly true, and the rest I think not improbable, then it will follow that the number of holy and happy creatures in the universe will be incomparably greater than that of miserable criminals, and that the punishment of the latter is one principal mean of preserving this infinite number in obedience and happiness; and consequently is highly conducive to the public happiness, and expressive of the love and goodness of the universal Ruler to the immense community of his subjects. And thus God is love, even in the most terrible displays of his vindictive justice. To illustrate this subject, consider farther:

III. "That criminals are incompetent judges of vindictive justice." They are parties, and it is their interest there should be no such attribute as justice in the Deity. It is natural for them to flatter themselves that their crimes are small; that their Judge will suffer them to escape with impunity, or with a gentle punishment, and that if he should do otherwise, he would be unmerciful, unjust, and cruel. The excess of self-love suggests to them a thousand excuses and extenuations of their guilt, and flatters them with a thousand favourable presumptions. An impenitent criminal is always an ungenerous, mean-spirited, selfish creature, and has nothing of that noble, disinterested self-denial and impartiality which would generously condemn himself and approve of that sentence by which he dies.

A little acquaintance with the conduct of mankind will soon make us sensible of their partiality and wrong judgments in matters where self is concerned; and particularly how unfit they are to form an estimate of justice when themselves are to stand as criminals at its bar. Now this is the case of all mankind in the affair now under consideration. They are criminals at the bar of divine justice; they are the parties to be tried; they are under the dominion of a selfish spirit; it is natural to them to palliate their own crimes, and to form flattering expectations from the clemency of their Judge. And are they fit persons to prescribe to their Judge how he should deal with him, or what measure of punishment he ought to inflict upon them? Sinners! dare you usurp this high province! Dare you "Snatch from his hand the balance and the rod, Prejudge his justice, be the god of God!"³ Rather stand at the bar, ye criminals! that is your place. Do not dare to ascend the throne; that is the place of your Judge. Stand silent, and await his righteous sentence, which is always just, always best; or, if creatures must judge of the justice of their Sovereign, I appeal to the saints; I appeal to angels, those competent disinterested judges; I appeal to every upright, impartial being in the universe. They approve, they celebrate, they admire, and love all the displays of punitive justice, as necessary to the public good; and their judgment may be depended on; it is not misled by ignorance nor perverted by self-interest. To whom would you appeal as judges of the proceedings of courts of justice among men? To malefactors in a dungeon, who have made justice their enemy, and who are therefore enemies to it? No; but you would appeal to obedient subjects, who are not obnoxious to justice themselves, but enjoy protection under its guardianship, and are sensible of its beauty and public utility. They all approve it with one voice, and would look upon a supreme Magistrate without it as a very contemptible and odious character, and essentially deficient in goodness. Hence it follows that even the punitive justice of God not only is in reality, but to all impartial judges appears to be a most amiable, engaging, and beneficent perfection; majestic indeed, but not forbidding; awful,

but not sullen and hateful; terrible, but only to criminals; and destructive only to what destroys the public good. I have so far anticipated myself that I need hardly add,

IV. “That proceedings similar to those of the divine government are not only approved of as just in all human governments, but also loved and admired as amiable and praiseworthy, and highly essential to the goodness and benevolence of a ruler.”

Does the supreme Lawgiver annex severe penalties to his laws, which render the disobedient miserable forever? So do human governments, with the unanimous approbation of their subjects; they inflict punishments that affect life, and cut off the offender from civil society forever; and this is the only kind of everlasting punishment that can be endured or executed by mortals. Does Jehovah maintain good order in his immense empire, protect his subjects, and deter them from offending by making examples of the guilty? and does he secure and advance the good of the whole by the conspicuous punishment of obnoxious individuals? This is done every day for the same ends in human governments, and that with universal approbation. Does he inflict punishments that are not at all intended for the reformation and advantage of the guilty sufferer, but only for the admonition and benefit of others? This is always the case in human governments when the punishments reaches to the life; for then the offender himself is put out of all capacity of reformation or personal advantage by it, but he suffers entirely for the good of others. Even criminals must be made useful to society; and this is the only use they are fit to answer. Would it not be inexpedient and greatly injurious for a magistrate, in his public character, to forgive crimes and suffer criminals to escape, though to do so in a private character might be a virtue? Just so God, who is the supreme Magistrate of the universe, and not at all to be considered, in this case, as a private person acting only in a private character; the great God, I say, is obliged, by his regard for his own honour and the benefit of his subjects, to inflict proper punishments and distribute his pardoning mercy to individuals consistently with the general good of the whole. What would be revenge in a private person, which is the ruling passion of devils, is justice, honour, and benevolence itself in the supreme ruler of the world; and a failure in this would render him not only less glorious and majestic, but less amiable, less beneficent to his creatures. I know hardly anything of so much importance to give us just sentiments of the proceedings of God, with his creatures, as that we should conceive of him as a moral Ruler, or the supreme Magistrate of the world. And it is owing to their not considering him in this character that sinners indulge such mistaken, dangerous presumptions concerning him. They choose to conceive of him under some fond and tender name, as a Being of infinite grace, the indulgent Father of his creatures, &c. All this is true; but it is equally true that he is their moral Ruler as well as their Father. His creatures are his subjects as well as his children: and he must act the wise and righteous Magistrate as well as the tender Father towards them. His goodness is that of a Ruler, and not of a private person; and his pardoning of sin and receiving offenders into favour, are not private kindnesses, but acts of government, and therefore they must be conducted with the utmost wisdom; for a

wrong step in his infinite administration, which affects such innumerable multitudes of subjects, would be an infinite evil, and might admit of no reparation.

Though I have thus enlarged upon this subject, yet I am far from exhausting my materials. But these things, I hope, are sufficient to convince your understandings that divine justice is not that unkind, cruel, and savage thing sinners are wont to imagine it; but that God is just, because God is love; and that he punishes, not because he is the enemy, but because he is the friend of his creatures, and because he loves the whole too well to let particular offenders do mischief with impunity.⁴ I shall only add, that this is the view Jehovah has given of himself in the clearest manifestation of his perfections that he ever made to mortals. He promises his favourite Moses, that he would make all his goodness pass before him. Observe, it is his goodness he intends to exhibit; and the proclamation runs thus: “The LORD, the LORD God, merciful and gracious, long-suffering, forgiving iniquity,” &c. That these are acts or modifications of goodness, will be easily granted. But observe, it is added even in this proclamation of his goodness, That he will by no means clear the guilty; intimating, that to be just and punish sin is an act of goodness, as well as to be merciful and to forgive it. And now when we have this copious subject in review, does it not suggest to us such conclusions as these:—

I. May we not conclude that the case of impenitent sinners is desperate indeed, when it is not excessive rigour, not a malignity of temper, nor tyranny, or a savage delight in torture that condemns them, but goodness itself, love itself? Even the gentler perfections of the Deity, those from which they derive their presumptuous hopes, are conspired against them, and unite their forces to render them miserable, in order to prevent greater misery from spreading through the universe.

Impenitent sinners! even the unbounded love of God to his creatures is your enemy. Love, under the name and form of justice, which is equally love still, demands your execution; and to suffer you to escape would not only be an act of injustice, but an act of malignity and hostility against the whole system of rational beings. Therefore repent and be holy, otherwise divine love will not suffer you to be happy. God is love; therefore will he confine you in the infernal prison, as a regard to the public welfare in human governments shuts up criminals in a dungeon, and madmen in Bedlam.

II. May we not hence conclude that all the acts of the Deity may be resolved into the benevolent principle of love? God is love; therefore he made this vast universe, and planted it so thick with variegated life. God is love; therefore he still rules the world he has made, and inflicts chastisements and judgments upon it from every age. God is love; therefore he spared not his own Son, but made him the victim of his justice. God is love; therefore he requires perfect holiness, perfect obedience from all his subjects. God is love; therefore he has enacted such tremendous sanctions to his law, and executes them in their full extent upon offenders. God is love; therefore he has made the prison of hell, and there confines in chains of everlasting darkness those malevolent creatures, that would be a nuisance to society, and public mischiefs, if suffered to run at large. In short, whatever he does, he does it because he is love. How amiable a view of him is this! Therefore,

III. We may certainly conclude that if God be love, then all his creatures ought to love him. Love him, O all ye inhabitants of heaven! But they need not my exhortation; they know him, and therefore cannot but love him. Love him, all ye inhabitants of the planetary worlds! if such there be. These also, I hope, need no exhortation, for we would willingly persuade ourselves that other territories of this immense empire have not rebelled against him as this earth has done. Love him, O ye children of men! To you I call: but oh! I fear I shall call in vain. To love him who is all love is the most hopeless proposal one can make to the world. But whatever others do, love the Lord, all ye his saints! You, I know, cannot resist the motion. Surely your love even now is all on fire. Love the Lord, O my soul! Amen.

FOOTNOTES

1 Penalties operate by a kind of retrospective influence: that is, whilst they are only threatened, and the subject expects they will be executed, should he turn disobedient, they have a powerful tendency to deter him from disobedience. But they could not have this benevolent tendency, unless they be executed upon those, on whom their primary and chief design is not obtained: namely, the restraining of them from sin. It is enough that the offenders themselves once had an opportunity of taking warning, and reaping the advantage of the threatened penalty, while they were in a state of trial, and candidates for eternity. But it is absurd that they should receive any benefit from it, when, after sufficient trial, it appears they will take no warning, but are resolved to persist in sin, in defiance of the most tremendous penalties.

2 I do not forget that the original is *myriads* of angels. But the word is often, I think, generally used in the Greek classics, not for any definite number, but for a great and innumerable multitude. And so it is used here.

3 Pope's *Essay on Man*.

4 It may perhaps be objected, "That to represent justice under the notion of love is to affect singularity in language, to destroy the distinction of the divine attributes, and the essential difference of things."—To which I answer,

1. That a *catachresis* may be beautiful and emphatical, though it be always a seeming impropriety in language. Such is this representation, "Divine justice, divine love."

2. I do not deny that God's executing righteous punishment upon the guilty may be called justice; but then it is his love to the public that excites him to do this; and therefore his doing it may be properly denominated love, as well as justice, or love under the name of justice, which is love still.

3. I do not mean that the usual names of things should be changed, but that we should affix suitable ideas to them. We may retain the name of justice still, but let us not affix ideas to it that are inconsistent with divine love. Let us not look upon it as the attribute of a tyrant, but of a wise and good ruler.