THE CIRCUMCISION OF THE HEART

Preached at St. Mary's, Oxford, before the University, on January 1, 1733. "Circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter." Romans 2:29.

1. It is the melancholy remark of an excellent man, that he who now preaches the most essential duties of Christianity, runs the hazard of being esteemed, by a great part of his hearers, "a setter forth of new doctrines." Most men have so lived away the substance of that religion, the profession whereof they still retain, that no sooner are any of those truths proposed which difference the Spirit of Christ from the spirit of the world, than they cry out, "Thou bringest strange things to our ears; we would know what these things mean:" -- Though he is only preaching to them "Jesus and the resurrection," with the necessary consequence of it, -- If Christ be risen, ye ought then to die unto the world, and to live wholly unto God.

2. A hard saying this to the natural man, Who is alive unto the world, and dead unto God; and one that he will not readily be persuaded to receive as the truth of God, unless it be so qualified in the interpretation, as to have neither use nor significance left. He "receiveth not the" word "of the Spirit of God," taken in their plain and obvious meaning; "they are foolishness unto him: Neither" indeed "can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned:" -- They are perceivable only by that spiritual sense, which in him was never yet awakened for want of which he must reject, as idle fancies of men, what are both the wisdom and the power of God.

3. That "circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter;" -- that the distinguishing mark of a true follower of Christ, of one who is in a state of acceptance with God, is not either outward circumcision, or baptism, or any other outward form, but a right state of soul, a mind and spirit renewed after the image of Him that created it; -- is one of those important truths that can only be spiritually discerned. And this the Apostle himself intimates in the next words, -- "Whose praise is not of men, but of God." As if he had said, "Expect not, whoever thou art, who thus followest thy great Master, that the world, the one who follow him not, will say, `Well done, good and faithful servant!' Know that the circumcision of the heart, the seal of thy calling, is foolishness with the world. Be content to wait for thy applause till the day of thy Lord's appearing. In that day shalt thou have praise of God, in the great assembly of men and angels."

I design First, particularly to inquire, wherein this circumcision of the heart consists; and, Secondly, to mention some reflections that naturally arise from such an inquiry.

I. I am, First, to inquire, wherein that circumcision of the heart consists, which will receive the praise of God. In general we may observe, it is that habitual disposition of soul which, in the sacred writings, is termed holiness; and which directly implies, the being cleansed from sin, "from all filthiness both of flesh and spirit;" and, by consequence, the being endued with those virtues which were also in Christ Jesus; the being so "renewed in the spirit of our mind," as to be "perfect as our Father in heaven is perfect."

2. To be more particular: Circumcision of heart implies humility, faith, hope, and charity. Humility, a right judgment of ourselves, cleanses our minds from those high conceits of our own perfection, from that undue opinion of our own abilities and attainments, which are the genuine fruit of a corrupted nature. This entirely cuts off that vain thought, "I am rich, and wise, and have need of nothing;" and convinces us that we are by nature wretched, and poor, and miserable, and blind, and naked. "It convinces us, that in our best estate we are, of ourselves, all sin and vanity; that confusion, and ignorance, and error reign over our understanding; that unreasonable, earthly, sensual, devilish passions usurp authority over our will; in a word, that there is no whole part in our soul, that all the foundations of our nature are out of course.

3. At the same time we are convinced, that we are not sufficient of ourselves to help ourselves; that, without the Spirit of God, we can do nothing but add sin to sin; that it is He alone who worketh in us by his almighty power, either to will or do that which is good; it being as impossible for us even to think a good thought, without the supernatural assistance of his Spirit, as to create ourselves, or to renew our whole souls in righteousness and true holiness.

4. A sure effect of our having formed this right judgment of the sinfulness and helplessness of our nature, is a disregard of that "honor which cometh of man," which is usually paid to some supposed excellency in us. He who knows himself, neither
the dead, so is able to quicken us, dead in sin," by his Spirit which dwelleth in us." This is the victory which overcometh the world, as well as by creation. He feels what is "the exceeding greatness of this power," who, as he raise up Christ from the dead, so is able to quicken us, dead in sin," by his Spirit which dwelleth in us." This is the victory which overcometh the world, even our faith; that faith, which is not only an unshaken assent to all that God hath revealed in Scripture, -- and in particular to those important truths, "Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners;" "He bare our sins in his own body on the tree;" "He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world;" [N.B. The following part of this paragraph is now added to the Sermon formerly preached.] -- but likewise the revelation of Christ in our hearts; a divine evidence or conviction of his love, his free, unmerited love to me a sinner; a sure confidence in his pardoning mercy, wrought in us by the Holy Ghost; a confidence, whereby every true believer is enabled to bear witness, "I know that my Redeemer liveth," that I have an "Advocate with the Father," and that "Jesus Christ the righteous" is my Lord, and "the propitiation for my sins," -- I know he hath "loved me, and given himself for me," -- He hath reconciled me, even me, to God; and I "have redemption through his blood, even the forgiveness of sins." 8. Such a faith as this cannot fail to show evidently the power of Him that inspires it, by delivering his children from the yoke of sin, and "purging their consciences from dead works;" by strengthening them so, that they are no longer constrained to obey sin in the desires there of; but instead of yielding their members unto it, as instruments of unrighteousness, they now "yield themselves" entirely "unto God, as those that are alive from the dead."

5. this is that lowness of mind, which they have learned of Christ, who follow his example and tread in his steps. And this knowledge of their disease, whereby they are more and more cleansed from one part of it, pride and vanity, disposeth them to embrace, with a willing mind, the second thing implied in circumcision of the heart, -- that faith which alone is able to make them whole, which is the one medicine given under heaven to heal their sickness.

6. The best guide of the blind, the surest light of them that are in darkness, the most perfect instructor of the foolish, is faith. But it must be such a faith as is "mighty through God, to the pulling down of strong-holds," -- to the overturning all the prejudices of corrupt reason, all the false maxims revered among men, all evil customs and habits, all that "wisdom of the world which is foolishness with God;" as "casteth down imaginations," reasoning, "and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringeth into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ."

7. "All things are possible to him that believeth." "The eyes of his understanding being enlightened," he sees what is his calling; even to glorify God, who hath bought him with so high a price, in his body and in his spirit, which now are God's by redemption, as well as by creation. He feels what is "the exceeding greatness of this power," who, as he raise up Christ from the dead, so is able to quicken us, dead in sin," by his Spirit which dwelleth in us." This is the victory which overcometh the world, even our faith; that faith, which is not only an unshaken assent to all that God hath revealed in Scripture, -- and in particular to those important truths, "Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners;" "He bare our sins in his own body on the tree;" "He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world;" [N.B. The following part of this paragraph is now added to the Sermon formerly preached.] -- but likewise the revelation of Christ in our hearts; a divine evidence or conviction of his love, his free, unmerited love to me a sinner; a sure confidence in his pardoning mercy, wrought in us by the Holy Ghost; a confidence, whereby every true believer is enabled to bear witness, "I know that my Redeemer liveth," that I have an "Advocate with the Father," and that "Jesus Christ the righteous" is my Lord, and "the propitiation for my sins," -- I know he hath "loved me, and given himself for me," -- He hath reconciled me, even me, to God; and I "have redemption through his blood, even the forgiveness of sins." 8. Such a faith as this cannot fail to show evidently the power of Him that inspires it, by delivering his children from the yoke of sin, and "purging their consciences from dead works;" by strengthening them so, that they are no longer constrained to obey sin in the desires there of; but instead of yielding their members unto it, as instruments of unrighteousness, they now "yield themselves" entirely "unto God, as those that are alive from the dead."

9. Those who are thus by faith born of God, have also strong consolation through hope. This is the next thing which the circumcision of the heart implies; even the testimony of their own spirit with the Spirit which witnesses in their hearts that they are the children of God. Indeed it is the same Spirit who works in them that clear and cheerful confidence that their heart is upright toward God; that good assurance, that they now do, through his grace, the things which are acceptable in his sight; that they are now in the path which leadeth to life, and shall, by the mercy of God, endure therein to the end. It is He who giveth them a lively expectation of receiving all good things at God's hand; a joyous prospect of that crown of glory, which is reserved in heaven for them. By this anchor a Christian is kept steady in the midst of the waves of this troublesome world, and preserved from striking upon either of those fatal rocks, -- presumption or despair. He is neither discouraged by the misconceived severity of his Lord, nor does He despise the riches of his goodness." He neither apprehends the difficulties of the race set before him to be greater than he has strength to conquer, nor expects there to be so little as to yield in the conquest, till he has put forth all strength. The experience he already has in the Christian warfare, as it assures him his "labor is not in vain," if "whatever his findeth to do, he doeth it with his might;" so it forbids his entertaining so vain a thought, as that he can otherwise gain any advantage, as that any virtue can be shown, any praise attained, by faint hearts and feeble hands; or, indeed, by any but those who pursue the same course with the great Apostle of the Gentiles - "I," says he, "so run, not as uncertainly; so fight I, not as one that beateth the air: But I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection; lest, by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway." 10. By the same discipline is every good soldier of Christ to inure himself to endure hardship. Confirmed and strengthened by this, he will be able not only to renounce the works of darkness, but every appetite too, and every affection, which is no subject to the law of God. For "every one," saith St. John, "who hath
soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength." 12. Not that this forbids us to love anything besides God: It implies that 
and happiness. The royal law of heaven and earth is this, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy 
commandments in one. "Whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are amiable; or honorable; 
"if there be any virtue, if there be any praise," they are all comprised in this one word, -- love. In this is perfection, and glory, 
and happiness. The royal law of heaven and earth is this, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, 
and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength." 12. Not that this forbids us to love anything besides God: It implies that 
we love our brother also. Nor yet does it forbid us (as some have strangely imagined) to take pleasure in any thing but God. To 
suppose this, is to suppose the Fountain of holiness is directly the author of sin; since he has inseparably annexed pleasure to 
the use of those creatures which are necessary to sustain the life he has given us. This, therefore, can never be the meaning of 
his command. What the real sense of it is, both our blessed Lord and his Apostles tell us too frequently, and too plainly, to be 
misunderstood. They all with one mouth bear witness, that the true meaning of those several declarations, "The Lord thy God 
is one Lord;" "Thou shalt have no other Gods but me;" "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy strength" "Thou shalt 
cleave unto him;" "The desire of thy soul shall be to His name;" -- is no other than this: The one perfect Good shall be your one 
ultimate end. One thing shall ye desire for its own sake, -- the fruition of Him that is All in All. One happiness shall ye propose 
to your souls, even an union with Him that made them; the having "fellowship with the Father and the Son;" the being joined 
to the Lord in one Spirit. One design you are to pursue to the end of time, -- the enjoyment of God in time and in eternity. 
Desire other things, so far as they tend to this. Love the creature as it leads to the Creator. But in every step you take, be this 
the glorious point that terminates your view. Let every affection, and thought, and word, and work, be subordinate to this. 
Whatever ye desire or fear, whatever ye seek or shun, whatever ye think, speak, or do, be it in order to your happiness in God, 
the sole End, as well as Source, of your being. 13. Have no end, to ultimate end, but God. Thus our Lord: "One thing is 
needful:" And if thine eye be singly fixed on this one thing, "thy whole body shall be full of light." Thus St. Paul: "This one thing I do; I press toward the mark, for the prize of the high calling in Christ Jesus." Thus St. James: "Cleanse your hands, ye 
sinners, and purify your hearts, ye double-minded." Thus St. John: "love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. 
For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eye, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the 
world." The seeking happiness in what gratifies either the desire of the flesh, by agreeably striking upon the outward senses; 
the desire of the eye, of the imagination, by its novelty, greatness, or beauty; or the pride of life, whether by pomp, grandeur, 
power, or, the usual consequence of them, applause and admiration; -- "is not of the Father," cometh not from, neither is 
approved by, the Father of spirits; "but of the world:" It is the distinguishing mark of those who will not have Him to reign over 
them.

II. 1. Thus have I particularly inquired, what that circumcision of heart is, which will obtain the praise of God. I am, in the 
Second place, to mention some reflections that naturally arise from such an inquiry, as a plain rule whereby every man may 
judge of himself, whether he be of the world or of God. And, First, it is clear from what has been said, that no man has a title to 
the praise of God, unless his heart is circumcised by humility; unless he is little, and base, and vile in his own eyes; unless he is 
deeply convinced of that inbred "corruption of his nature," "whereby be is very far gone from original righteousness," being 
prone to all evil, averse to all good, corrupt and abominable; having a "carnal mind which is enmity against God, and is not 
subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be," unless he continually feels in his inmost soul, that without the Spirit of God 
resting upon him, he can neither think, nor desire, nor speak, nor act anything good, or well-pleasing in his sight. No man I say, 
has A title to the praise of God, till he feels his want of God; nor indeed, till he seeketh that "honor which cometh of God 
only;" and neither desires nor pursues that which cometh of man, unless so far only as it tends to this.

2. Another truth, which naturally follows from what has been said, is, that none shall obtain the honor that cometh of God, 
unless his heart be circumcised by faith; even a "faith of the operation of God:" Unless, refusing to be any longer led by his 
senses, appetites, or passions, or even by that blind leader of the blind, so idolized by the world, natural reason, he lives and 
walks by faith; directs every step, as "seeking Him that is invisible;" "looks not at the things that arc seen, which are temporal, 
but at the things that arc not seen, which are eternal;" and governs all his desires, designs, and thoughts, all his actions and 
conversations, as one who is entered in within the veil, where Jesus sits at the right hand of God.

3. It were to be wished, that they were better acquainted with this faith, who employ much of their time and pains in laying 
another foundation; in grounding religion on the eternal fitness of things on the intrinsic excellence of virtue, and the beauty of 
actions flowing from it; on the reasons as they term them, of good and evil, and the relations of beings to each other. Either 
these accounts of the grounds of Christian duty coincide with the scriptural, or not. If they do, why are well meaning men
with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not love, I am as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal. Though I have the gift
of his disciples while we either deny him to be the Author, or his Spirit to be the Inspirer an Perfecter, both of our faith and
pronounced his sentence: "Let him be accursed."

things only as they are in and from him. Let your soul be filled with so entire a love of him, that you may love nothing but for
ultimate object. This is the way where in those children of God once walked, who, being dead, still speak to us:" Desire not to
will he not divide with another: He will reign without a rival. Be no design, no desire admitted there, but what has Him for its
pure," unless he tread in His steps, and "take up his cross daily;" unless he "cut off His right hand," and "pluck out the right
born in sin," and whose "inward parts are very wickedness," should once entertain a thought of being "purified as his Lord is
incorruptible, undefiled, and that fadeth not away.

7. These blasphemers might almost persuade those to imagine themselves guiltless, who, in the contrary extreme, hope to fulfil
commands of God, without taking any pains at all. Vain hope ! that a child of Adam should ever expect to see the kingdom
Christ, in flames of holy love. And let no creature be suffered to share with him: For he is a jealous God. His throne
sacrifices from us he would not; but the living sacrifice of the heart he hath chosen. Let it be continual offered up to God
honor to the recompense of reward;" to balance toil with the "joy set
through Christ, in flames of holy love. And let no creature be suffered to share with him: For he is a jealous God. His throne

9. To as little purpose does He talk of "fighting the fight of faith," as vainly hope to attain the crown of incorruption, (as we
may, Lastly, infer from the preceding observations,) whose heart is not circumcised by love. Love, cutting off both the lust of
the flesh, the lust of the eye, and the pride of life, -- engaging the whole man, body, soul, and spirit, in the ardent pursuit of that
one object,-is so essential to a child of God, that, without it, whosoever liveth is counted dead before him. "Though I speak
with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not love, I am as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal. Though I have the gift
of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, and have
not love, I am nothing." Nay, "though I give all my goods to feed the poor, and my body to be burned, and have not love, it
profit me nothing."

10. Here, then, is the sum of the perfect law; this is the true circumcision of the heart. Let the spirit return to God that gave it,
with the whole train of its affections. "Unto the place from whence all the rivers came thither let them flow again. Other
sacrifices from us he would not; but the living sacrifice of the heart he hath chosen. Let it be continual offered up to God
through Christ, in flames of holy love. And let no creature be suffered to share with him: For he is a jealous God. His throne
will he not divide with another: He will reign without a rival. Be no design, no desire admitted there, but what has Him for its
ultimate object. This is the way where in those children of God once walked, who, being dead, still speak to us:" Desire not to
live, but to praise his name: Let all your thoughts, words, and works, tend to his glory. Set your heart firm on him, and on other
things only as they are in and from him. Let your soul be filled with so entire a love of him, that you may love nothing but for

his sake." "Have a pure intention of heart, a steadfast regard to his glory in all your actions." "Fix your eye upon the blessed hope of your calling, and make all the things of the world minister unto it." For then, and not till then is that "mind in us which was also in Christ Jesus;" when, in every motion of our heart, in every word of our tongue, in every work of our hands, we pursue nothing but in relation to him, and in subordination to his pleasure;" when we, too, neither think, nor speak, nor act, to fulfil our "own will, but the will of him that sent us;" when, whether we; eat, or drink, or whatever we do, we do all to the glory of God."