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...
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.

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 any 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 not.

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
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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.]