

SERMON XIII.

THE LOVE OF GOD.

MATT. xxii. 37, 38.

Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment.

AMONG all the right affections of the heart, all the various branches of the Christian temper, there is no one which better deserves, and more requires to be cultivated, than the love of God.

The love of God is styled by our Saviour in the text, "the first and great commandment." All God's commandments, without exception, even those which are comparatively the least important, must be carefully observed by us, and cannot be wilfully neglected without the utmost danger. And, certainly, that which by our Lord himself is said to be the first and greatest of them all, must have the strongest claim to our attention.

In discoursing on the love of God, I shall, First, lay before you some of its effects or properties; by the consideration of which you will be enabled to judge whether you are influenced by it or not.

Secondly, I wish to show you *why, and how justly*, the love of God was termed the first and great commandment of the law.

I shall, Thirdly, direct you to the means of acquiring, or of increasing the love of God;

And shall conclude by mentioning some of the advantages which result from the presence of this excellent principle in our hearts.

I. In speaking of the effects or properties of the love of God, we shall derive assistance from considering what are the effects and properties of the love which we bear to any earthly object.

Whatever we really love will be much and often in our thoughts. Our minds recur to it naturally and without effort, and we find a sort of satisfaction in thinking upon it. The man, for instance, who loves money, will have his mind dwell much upon what he has already gained, and the means of gaining more. He who loves sensual pleasures, will have the idea of such pleasures constantly returning to his imagination. When we feel love for a fellow-creature, for some dear relation, or friend who is as our own soul, we think of him much and often when absent, and feel satisfaction in his presence. His *mere presence* is a source of pleasure; and this is still further increased by the communication of our thoughts, by *conversing* with him. And thus if we love God, we may be sure that he will be often in our mind. We shall frequently think of him; shall feel comfort in the idea that he "is not far from any one of us;" shall long to be admitted to his more immediate presence in heaven; shall take pleasure in speaking to him in the language of praise, thanksgiving, and prayer.

Is this the case, my friends, with us? One of the marks of the wicked man, given by the Psalmist, is, that "God is not in all his thoughts." Let us take care that this passage do not apply to ourselves. Another feature in the character of the unbelievers is, that "they have not called upon God." Are we in the constant habit of *calling upon God*? Do we find it our comfort and delight to be permitted to open to him the desires of our

hearts; to lay before him our wants and our sorrows; to implore his mercy, his protection, and support? If we do not love to call upon God in prayer, to hold this converse with him, we have reason to fear that we do not love God as we ought to do.

When we sincerely love any one, especially one of superior wisdom and power, we naturally fall into and adopt his likes and dislikes; we are anxious to learn his wishes, and careful, as far as we can, to comply with them. And if we love God, we shall naturally love what he loves, and hate what he hates; we shall love that which is lawful and right, and, on the other hand, shall hate and avoid the thing that is evil; we shall be very desirous to learn his will, and very careful to perform it. "If ye love me," says our Saviour, "keep my commandments;" and again, "he that hath my commandments, and keepeth them, he it is that loveth me." "Ye are my friends, if ye do whatsoever I command you."^a And St. John, in the same manner, says, "this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments."^b But we shall not only keep them, keep them as of necessity, because we are afraid of doing otherwise, but shall take pleasure in keeping them. We shall feel the truth of the Apostle's assertion in the latter part of the verse, "his commandments are not grievous." We shall not feel the observance of them as a painful burden, a burden from which we would gladly be relieved, but shall find it rather a source of delight. This was felt by David—"Lord—" "love have I unto thy law! all the day long is my study in it. Thy testimonies have I claimed as mine heritage for ever;" for "they are the very joy of my heart."^c "More to be desired are they

^a John xiv. 15, 21; and xv. 14.

^c Psalm cxix. 97 and 111.

^b 1 John v. 3.

"than gold, yea, than much fine gold; sweeter also than honey, and the honey-comb."^d There is not one of God's commandments which is more earnestly enforced than that which enjoins the love of our neighbour. Thus the same Apostle urges, "this commandment have we from him, that he who loveth God, love his brother also." If we love God, we shall love our fellow-men, as being originally made in his likeness, as being still the objects of his fatherly care, as being actually, or at least as capable of being adopted in Christ as his children. Accordingly, to be without the love of man, is a proof of the absence of the love of God. "If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar: for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen?"^e

Let us examine ourselves, my friends, by the tests just mentioned; ever bearing in mind, that if we fail in the love of God, we fail in the chief part of our duty. Are we then careful to keep his commandments? Are we in the habit of doing his will, of doing it *willingly* and with pleasure? In particular, do we love our fellow creatures? and are we ready to do them whatever kind offices are in our power, for God's sake? These are important questions, which demand our serious attention. God grant that our consciences may answer them satisfactorily.

Again; when we really love any person, we are zealous for his reputation, are anxious that he should be honoured among men, and are pained when we see him treated with disrespect. And thus, if we love God, we shall be very desirous of

^d Psalm xix. 10.

^e 1 John iv. 20. See the whole of this beautiful and affectionate Epistle.

promoting his glory, of extending the influence of practical religion among all around us. We shall be anxious that *his name may be hallowed*, that *his kingdom may come*, and that *his will may be done* by men in general. We shall take pains to let our light so shine before men, that they may see our good works, and glorify—not ourselves—but our Father which is in heaven. And, on the other hand, it will give us deep pain and grief of heart to see God dishonoured, his laws and will neglected and despised; to hear his name profaned, his authority and ordinances treated with contempt. On such occasions we shall be disposed to exclaim with David—“Mine eyes gush out with water; because
“men keep not thy law.”^r

To give one instance more. We naturally feel an interest in every thing which serves to remind us of those we love. Whatever belongs to them, whatever they valued, becomes to us an object of regard. And thus, if we love God, we shall love whatever is dedicated to his immediate honour and service, whatever is designed to preserve the remembrance of him fresh and strong in our minds. We shall love his *word*, his *law*, his *house*, his *worship*, his *sacraments*. We shall take pleasure in reading and studying his *word*, and shall prize it more highly “than gold or precious stones.” His *day* we shall look upon, not as a time of gloom and dejection, but shall esteem “the Sabbath a delight, “the holy of the Lord, and honourable.”^s His *house*, and the *worship* to which it is dedicated, we shall regard in the same spirit with David, who thus gave utterance to the feelings of his heart—“I was glad when they said unto me, We will go “into the house of the Lord: one day in thy courts “is better than a thousand” spent elsewhere; “I

^r Psalm cxix. 136.

^s Isaiah lviii. 13.

“had rather be a door-keeper in the house of my “God, than to dwell in the tents of ungodliness.”

His *sacraments* we shall esteem a sacred pledge of his love, designed and excellently calculated to keep up the flame of divine love in our hearts, and which can not, which *will* not be neglected by any, in whose souls the love of God is in any degree shed abroad.

This train of reflection, my friends, you may carry farther for yourselves. What I have said may in some degree assist you in judging how far you are influenced by the love of God.

II. Let us proceed, in the second place, to consider *why, and how justly*, the love of God is styled “the first and great commandment.”

It is so, because its immediate object is the first, and greatest, and best of beings, who accordingly has a better right and title to our love than any thing else. All earthly objects are in some degree imperfect. Many of them we may and ought to love; our parents, for instance, our friends, our fellow creatures generally. Even many inanimate objects may be valued to a certain degree; but nothing on earth must be allowed to hold as high a place in our regard as God; nothing must be allowed to come in competition with the obedience, the duty, the *love* which we owe to him. “He that “loveth father or mother more than me, is not worthy of me: and he that loveth son or daughter “more than me, is not worthy of me.”^b

The love of God is also the *first and great commandment*, because it comprehends within itself all other commandments whatever. “This is the love “of God,” says the verse which I before quoted, “that we keep his commandments.” Love is, in every sense, “the fulfilling of the law.” As all the

^b Matt. x. 37. See also Luke xiv. 26.

laws of the second table are briefly comprehended in this one saying, "thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself;" so the love of God comprises within itself the whole compass of moral obligation.

The love of God, too, is *the first and great commandment*, not only because its object is so exalted, and its nature so comprehensive, but because it is the noblest and highest principle of obedience. "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom;" and it is well when men are induced even by *fear* to wish and endeavour to work out their salvation. Where *fear*, however, is the only principle of obedience, obedience is constrained, and paid grudgingly, and as of necessity. The obedience, on the other hand, which proceeds from love, is lively, vigorous, and cheerful, and, as the service of a willing mind, is doubly acceptable in the sight of God.

III. Let us now proceed, in the third place, to inquire into the means of acquiring or increasing the love of God. And here the first step must be to root out of our hearts whatever is contrary to that love. We must endeavour to subdue all attachment to sin, those sins especially to which by nature, or constitution, or habit, we are most inclined—"the sin which doth most easily beset us"—in order that this divine principle may find our hearts empty, and ready to receive it. The love of the *world* is represented in the Scriptures as being peculiarly inconsistent with the love of God. "If any man love the world," says St. John, "the love of the Father is not in him;"ⁱ and our Lord himself assures us, that we cannot serve, or at the same time supremely love, God and Mammon. We must strive, therefore, to conquer and keep down all undue love of the world, which we shall do most

ⁱ 1 John ii. 15.

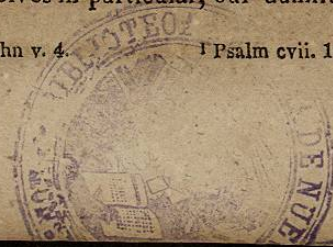
effectually by cultivating and cherishing a strong and vigorous belief of the great doctrines of religion; for "this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith."^k

One of the most powerful means of acquiring and increasing the love of God, is the contemplation of his excellency and goodness. Evil and corrupted as our nature is, yet still, distinguished and exalted goodness is sure to meet, not only with approbation, but with admiration and love; and this, even in cases where we derive from it no advantage to ourselves. When we read or hear of the virtues of men who lived perhaps many centuries ago, or in far distant countries, or who never existed at all but in the imagination of the writer, we feel for them a kind of esteem and affection. And, certainly, we ought to feel the same affection of soul when we contemplate that Being, in whom goodness and every kind of moral excellence are found in the highest degree possible. Certainly we ought to *honour*, to *admire*, and to *love* him. When we reflect upon his goodness as displayed in the works of nature and providence, the language of our hearts ought certainly to be, Thou art good, and doest good; the earth is full of the goodness of the Lord; his mercies are over all his works. "O that men would therefore praise the Lord for his goodness, and declare the wonders that he doeth for the children of men."^l

The love and admiration, however, which we feel for goodness in general, becomes naturally more strong, when from that goodness we ourselves derive some personal benefit. And so, when from considering the goodness of God to his creatures in general, we come to reflect upon his kindness to ourselves in particular, our admiration and

^k 1 John v. 4.

^l Psalm cvii. 15.



love acquire warmth and strength from *gratitude*. Surely we must, and ought to love *him*, in whom we live, and move, and have our being; to whom we are indebted for food and raiment, for the kindness of friends, for the comforts of society, for health of body, and tranquillity of mind. How many blessings do we daily and hourly receive! Every comfortable night's rest, every sufficient meal, furnishes an argument for thankfulness. Especially how often have we been delivered from danger, how repeatedly might we have perished and been cut off in our sins, if God's protecting hand had not been stretched out to save us!^m We have all abundant reason to say, "I will love the Lord my strength," for thou art my deliverer and defence. We have all cause to exclaim, "Praise the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits."ⁿ

But when from this consideration of the goodness of God, both to men in general, and to ourselves, in the works of nature and providence, we go on to contemplate it as manifested in the work of redemption, our love and thankfulness ought to rise to the highest pitch. "God so loved the world, that he gave his only-begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life." And does not this wonderful instance of the love and mercy of God richly deserve the warmest return of gratitude from us? "Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us,"^o we ought certainly to love him in return as much as we possibly can, "with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our mind, and with all our strength," and to love one another for his sake.

The principal means, however, of obtaining the

^m Paley.

ⁿ Psalm ciii. 2.

^o 1 John iv. 10, 11.

love of God, is *prayer*. The carnal mind, we are told, is enmity against God. The sinfulness and corruption of the nature of man indisposes him, and incapacitates him for this divine principle. That natural incapacity can only be removed by the Holy Spirit, of whose distinguishing fruits *love* is the *first*;^p and whose gracious office it is to "shed" the love of God "abroad in our hearts."^q His aid for this purpose is to be obtained by earnest prayer; and certainly we *shall* pray for it, pray for it most earnestly, if we reflect, that without it we shall be guilty of disobedience to "the first and great commandment."

No additional arguments can be requisite for quickening our endeavours, and giving earnestness to our prayers, for obtaining this divine principle. Still, it may not be unprofitable, in the last place, to add a few words on the advantages which accompany the love of God. It is rewarded with his favour and protection. "The Lord preserveth all them that love him." He will watch over them with fatherly care, and pour down his blessings upon them in an abundant measure. And when they are visited by outward calamity and affliction, when poverty, or pain, or sorrow, becomes their portion, yet even these seeming evils will be rendered beneficial to them, "for all things work together for good to them that love God;"^r and "to the godly there ariseth up light in the darkness," the light of comfort, and hope, and spiritual joy, in the darkness of distress and grief. But it is in *the world to come* that the love of God will be most plenteously rewarded. "Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him."^s There, those

^p Gal. v. 22.

^q Rom. v. 5.

^r Rom. viii. 28.

^s 1 Cor. ii. 9.

who have loved him while on earth, will be admitted through Christ into his presence; and will, to all eternity, be made happy with that fulness of joy which results from communication with the great object of their reverential affections, with those unspeakable pleasures which are at God's right hand for evermore.

Let, then, the attainment of the love of God, the effectual keeping of *this first and great commandment*, be the object of our persevering endeavours, and of our most earnest prayers: and may that gracious Being, who hath prepared for them that love him such good things as pass man's understanding, pour into our hearts such love towards him, that we, loving him above all things, may obtain his promises, which exceed all that we can desire, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

• Collect for the sixth Sunday after Trinity.

SERMON XIV.

WORLDLY-MINDEDNESS.

MATT. vi. 24.

No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon.

Few things are more opposite to the love of God, and more tend to check the progress of religion in the soul, than the *love of the world*. Against the love of the world, accordingly, we are anxiously and repeatedly cautioned both by our Lord himself, and by the first teachers of his religion, the holy Apostles. "Love not the world," says St. John, "neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him." From what follows in the following verse—"for all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life"—it seems that the Apostle had in view those sins which are occasioned by the love of sensual pleasure, the love of show and ostentation, and the love of money. Our Saviour, when he warns us against worldly-mindedness in the sermon on the mount, and in the striking parable of the wedding-supper, appears to have had particularly in his con-

• 1 John ii. 15.