

SERMON XXVII.

CHARITY.

1 COR. xiii. 13.

And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity.

THERE is, perhaps, no single chapter in the sacred volume, which better deserves to be repeatedly read, and studied, and committed to memory, than the thirteenth chapter of the first Epistle to the Corinthians. It sets before us the nature, and properties and excellence of *charity*; that greatest of Christian graces, without which all our doings, all our acquirements, are nothing worth. The occasion of St. Paul's being led to give this beautiful description of charity was this:—The church of Corinth appears to have been troubled with many irregularities, to have been much divided into different religious parties or factions; and these divisions and irregularities appear to have in some degree originated in the improper exercise of the miraculous gifts of the Spirit, such as the gifts of tongues, and of prophecy, and the power of working miracles, which were designed to assist in the extension of the Christian faith. These gifts form the subject of the twelfth chapter, and St. Paul returns again to the consideration of them in the fourteenth; but between these two chapters, he

inserts, in the thirteenth, his account of *charity*, without which, he tells them, all the gifts of which he had been speaking, however excellent in themselves, and however greatly to be desired, were *nothing worth*, were useless with respect to salvation. To the description of charity thus given by St. Paul, let us now direct our attention. You will give me your attention the more readily, if you reflect that charity is a grace or virtue, without which you cannot be saved;—that all talents, and acquirements, and seeming good works, in a religious point of view, are useless to the possessor of them, if they are unaccompanied by *charity*. It is the more necessary that you should attend, because many mistaken notions on the subject of charity are apt to go forth into the world, and to pass current among men.

Possibly some of you may be ignorant that the Epistles of St. Paul (with the exception perhaps of that to the Hebrews) were originally written in the Greek language. Now the Greek word here translated *charity*, is generally rendered *love*. For instance, St. Paul, in the thirteenth chapter to the Romans, repeatedly speaks of *love* as being the fulfilling of the law. Love in that passage, and charity in this which we are now considering, are expressed by exactly the same Greek word; so that you are to consider *charity* as being merely another word for *love*. The whole of Christian duty is comprised in the love of God,—which our Saviour styles the first and great commandment,—and in the love of man. Charity, in its most extended sense, comprises the love of both; and as it regards our fellow-creatures, it means the love of our neighbour for God's sake; it means a real heartfelt good will towards men in general, founded on Christian principles. Accordingly, when St. Paul speaks of charity or love as being “the more excellent way;”

as being that without which every thing else is "no-thing worth;" as being the *greatest* of Christian graces; it is in the same sense in which, in the passage to the Romans first alluded to, he had spoken of love as being "the fulfilling of the law."

Keeping then in mind that charity is merely another word for love,—the love of God and man,—let us proceed to the more particular consideration of the account here given of it by St. Paul.

He begins—"Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal."

The miraculous gift of tongues, of speaking foreign languages, was indispensable to the first preaching of the Gospel, and was accordingly conferred on the day of Pentecost. And in all ages, some men have been distinguished above others, for the talent of speaking with eloquence, of expressing their sentiments with readiness and ease, in a graceful and striking manner. We every day see the effect of this faculty of speaking, and how easily the uninstructed and ignorant, indeed how *all men*, in some degree, are led by a man who speaks readily and fluently. None of these talents, however, whether miraculous or natural, not even the eloquence of angels, are of any real benefit to the possessor of them, without *charity*. He has no more substantial worth than an empty musical instrument, "than sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal."

"And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing."

The gift of prophecy, in the first age of the Church, sometimes extended to the foretelling of future events; and in this way it was possessed by Agabus and others: and sometimes seems rather

to have implied a supernatural penetration into the deepest sense of the oracles of God. The *faith* spoken of in this verse, is the faith of miracles, as distinguished from saving faith. Saving faith is the ground-work of religion, and is never separated from charity, since it "worketh by love."^a In the first age of the Gospel, however, men who were not effectually influenced by saving faith, were yet endued with the faith of miracles; the faith which both here and in St. Matthew is spoken of as removing mountains. Thus our Lord says, that many would come unto him at the last day, who would say, "Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works?"—who would yet perish, because they were workers of iniquity;^b in other words, because they were without the genuine Christian temper of mind here styled charity.

The next verse is particularly worthy of observation:—"And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing."

Though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor. Some people seem to confine the idea of charity to alms-giving. If a man should give all his goods to feed the poor, he would probably be cried up as a very charitable person; his neighbour would say, How good he is! and would load him with thanks and praises. St. Paul, however, here tells us, that a man may do this, and yet be without charity; and if you think for a moment, your own sense and reason will tell you the same. Giving assistance to those who are in need, is certainly a most necessary duty; and a charitable man will give alms in proportion to his means; but then, as we have just

^a Gal. v. 6.^b Matt. vii. 22.

said, the mere giving of alms does not of itself prove a man to be charitable. He may possibly give his goods to feed the poor from vanity, from ostentation, from a love of the praise of man, from a desire to get their good will and good word, and from a hundred other motives, in which real charity has no part. So again, a man may give his body to be burned ostensibly for the sake of religion—may suffer martyrdom—and yet be without charity, without real religious principle. He may encounter even this last extremity, from sturdiness and stubbornness of disposition, or from *pride*, which, under another name, is called a sense of honour. From motives probably such as these, we have heard of a man suffering martyrdom in the cause of atheism. But no alms however liberal, no sufferings however acute and courageously borne, are of any real benefit if unaccompanied by charity.

Having made these general observations on the nature and excellence of charity in general, St. Paul next goes on to mention some of its marks or properties. And first, "charity suffereth long." It is patient under the injuries and oppositions which it meets with in the world. A man under the influence of his natural feelings, is too often irritable and touchy. He, perhaps, seems almost on the watch for occasions of ill humour; takes offence where none was intended; and is eager and hasty to express his resentment by his manner, his words, and his actions. This he considers as a mark of proper spirit. This readiness to take offence and to resist injuries is certainly a mark of *spirit*—of the spirit of the world—the *evil world*—but not the spirit of charity. "Charity suffereth long;" it is patient under injuries; it makes all possible allowances for the weaknesses, the tempers, and the prejudices of other men, and bears with them in the spirit of gentleness and meekness.

But charity not only suffers with patience—it is also *kind*—ready to do whatever kind offices are in her power, obliging in manner and behaviour, careful not to give unnecessary pain, but anxious to promote the happiness and well-being of all around her. She is glad to relieve the distress of those who are in want, to alleviate the sufferings of the afflicted; and, in short, to rejoice with them that do rejoice, and weep with them that weep.

This being the case, it follows as a matter of course, that charity *envieth not*. Envy is a secret displeasure of mind, at seeing some other persons possessed of an advantage which we ourselves want. This is one of the most dark and evil feelings of our corrupted nature. Those who feel it most, are ashamed to own it. It is classed by the Apostles together with strife, deceit, malice, and murder. And as it is a most sinful affection of the mind, so is it also a most uneasy and painful one. "Envy," says the wise man, "is as the rottenness of the bones;"^c and again, "envy slayeth the silly ones." Evil, however, and shameful as envy is, it is, I fear, but too common. For how many are the men who feel something of this passion at seeing others, whom they perhaps think less deserving, better off in the world than themselves! How many are the men who feel out of humour at seeing some advantage—some gift, for instance—bestowed upon another, while they themselves do not share in it! They perhaps feel a degree of ill will, though they hardly dare acknowledge it, against both him who gives and him who receives the benefit; and are tempted to catch at any opportunity of running them down. Nothing can well be more contrary to charity—more contrary to Christian principle. A man who really loves his neighbour, will rejoice

^c Prov. xiv. 30.

to see any good happen to him. He takes a kind of interest in his well-doing, and is far from feeling as if he himself was worse off than before, because another is better off. He takes pleasure in seeing instances of kindness, even if he derives no other benefit from them himself.

“Charity vaunteth not itself.” A true and real Christian is not disposed to vaunt, and *show off* himself;—is not disposed unnecessarily and rashly to put himself forward—to thrust himself into situations to which he is not called. Instead of presumptuously engaging in matters which are too high for him, he is inclined rather to be diffident and unpretending; to study to be quiet, and to mind his own business;^d according to the expression of the psalmist, to “refrain” his “soul, and keep it low, like as a child that is weaned from his mother.”^e

And as “charity vaunteth not itself,” so also it “is not *puffed up*” with pride and self-conceit. Both the Scriptures and reason assure us, that *humility* is one of the leading graces of the Christian character. “Pride was not made for man”—least of all for a *Christian*. He knows, and practically feels, that poverty of spirit, or lowliness of mind, is the disposition which best becomes him; the disposition which was most earnestly inculcated by our Lord, both by precept and example, upon all his followers. He acknowledges, that whatever advantages he may seem to possess, were all conferred by the bounty of the Most High; that he has nothing—no talent, no virtue, no grace—but what he hath received, and therefore has not the smallest right to glory as if he had not received it. He acknowledges, that “all his sufficiency is of God.” He feels too in himself so much infirmity,

^d 1 Thess. iv. 11.

^e Psa. cxxxi. 3.

so much folly, and so much sin, that instead of being puffed up, instead of being conceited and arrogant, instead of looking down upon other men as if they were beneath him, he is rather disposed to comply with the apostolical precepts, submit “yourselves one to another in the fear of God;”^f “in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves.”^g

A man who, from the influence of Christian charity, is “not puffed up,” will be, comparatively, in small danger of behaving “*unseemly*,”—of behaving himself in any manner which does not *beseem*, does not become the Christian character, or which might bring discredit upon the Christian profession. There will be in his behaviour, nothing scornful or haughty, nothing of improper levity.

Charity seeketh not her own. A moderate and well-regulated attention to a man’s own interests and concerns, is not only allowed, but required, both by Scripture and reason, in order that a man may not only be able to provide for those of his own house, but may have also something to give to him that needeth. Without such attention, his substance, instead of being a benefit to the deserving, would become the prey of the unjust and the rapacious; and he would be reduced to become himself a pensioner on the bounty of others. A man accordingly may be a charitable man, even though he should in a temperate manner require the payment of what is justly due to him.

When it is said, charity “seeketh not her own,” I consider the expression as meaning, charity is not *selfish*;—she does not so attend to her own concerns, as to be regardless of those of others. On the contrary, she takes a lively interest in the welfare of all around, is anxious to promote it by every

^f Eph. v. 21.

^g Phil. ii. 3.

means in her power, and will often, to a certain degree, neglect herself, for the sake of helping or benefiting a neighbour. When St. Paul says, in the tenth chapter of this Epistle, "Let no man seek his own, but every man another's wealth;"^b and again to the Philippians—"Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others;"^c I consider him, not as enjoining an utter carelessness about our own concerns—this would be inconsistent with many other parts of his writings;—but as cautioning us against being selfish; as enjoining us not to be so taken up with ourselves, as to be inattentive to the good of others; as inculcating the duty of being ready often to give up to others, to be ready to assist them, even with some loss to ourselves.

The next character of charity is, that she is *not easily provoked*.

Nothing could contribute more to the peace and comfort, both of individuals and of society, than the diligent cultivation of this branch of charity. Men suffer themselves to be easily and violently provoked—often about comparative trifles—and, then, in the heat of their passion, say and do things, of which, in their cooler moments, they would be ashamed, but which often lead on to the most fatal animosities; animosities which are destructive of charity, and consequently fatal to the safety of the soul.

The following property of charity, that it "thinketh no evil," is capable of being understood in two senses, *both* in strict accordance with its general character. First, charity is unwilling to think evil of any one, unless she is absolutely forced to do so. She is backward in paying attention to idle stories to another person's disadvantage, and wil-

^b 1 Cor. x. 24.

^c Phil. ii. 4.

ling to take every thing in the most favourable point of view. Charity also thinketh evil *against* no one; she does not plan schemes of malice or revenge, or devise mischief against those who may have injured her.

"Rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth."

To rejoice in iniquity—to take pleasure in other men's sins, to exult in seeing them do that which is contrary to the will of God, and ruinous to their own souls—is worthy only of the author of evil. There are, however, I fear, too many persons who are capable of partaking in this guilty joy; and who find either their malice or their pride gratified by the transgressions of others. Nothing can well be more contrary to charity—to that love of God and man which naturally "rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth;" rejoiceth in the spreading and increase of true religion and sound morality, and wishes nothing more than that they may ever flourish and increase among us.

The next verse is a very comprehensive one. "Charity beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things."

Charity "beareth all things"—as was said under the first character of charity, is meek and patient under injuries and insults; ready to pass them over and make the best of them—unwilling to talk of, still more to exaggerate them. Charity "believeth all things"—as she places implicit reliance upon all the promises of God, and in articles of faith is indisposed to seek for cavils and objections; so with regard to men she is frank and unsuspecting, ready to believe in the appearances of good which present themselves; and if she finds little present grounds for thinking well of any one, she still "hopeth all things," hopes that a time will come when he will return to God, and be numbered

among his children. Finally, charity "endureth all things"—charity suffers with perfect resignation all the trials and afflictions which it is called upon to undergo. It never murmurs or repines under them, but submits to them as instances of God's fatherly care; is sensible that "whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth;" and can truly say from the bottom of the heart, "it is good for me that I have been afflicted."

The excellence of charity further appears from what follows next, "charity never faileth." The miraculous gifts of prophecy, and tongues, and supernatural knowledge, of which St. Paul had been speaking in the preceding verses, were all given for the *present* exigencies of the Church, and were to last only for a time. They were, too, at the best, incomplete and imperfect, and in a future state of existence there would be no necessity, no place for them. Those who are admitted into heaven will be blessed with a fulness of knowledge and understanding, as much above the imperfect knowledge even of the most knowing and learned man, as the knowledge of a man is above the knowledge of a child. "We know in part, and we prophecy in part;" our knowledge here is partial and incomplete; "but when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away. When I was a child I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things. For now we see through a glass darkly;" our knowledge of divine truth is here indistinct and confused; "but then face to face;" in heaven we shall see these truths as clearly and plainly as we see objects placed immediately before our eyes. "Now I know in part;" my knowledge here is partial and defective; "but then shall I know, even as also I am known."

The chapter concludes—"And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity."

Can any thing be greater than faith and hope? *Faith* is the very foundation of religion, and absolutely necessary to carry us to heaven; it is the instrument of our justification. *Hope*, too, is recommended by the Apostles in the most earnest manner. The superiority of *charity* seems to consist in this, that *it never faileth*. In the world to come, there will, it should seem, be no more room for the exercise of faith, which will then terminate in sight. And hope will end in the actual possession and enjoyment of its object—What a man seeth, and possesseth, how can he still hope for?^k But, though faith and hope thus terminate, "charity never faileth." *Charity*—the love of God and man—will continue to all eternity, and to all eternity will constitute the greater part of the enjoyment of those blessed spirits—the spirits of just men made perfect—who are there united in holy fellowship, in the presence of "God the Judge of all, and of Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant."

THE PRAYER.

O Lord, who hast taught us that all our doings without charity are nothing worth; send thy Holy Ghost, and pour into our hearts that most excellent gift of charity, the very bond of peace, and of all virtues, without which whosoever liveth is counted dead before thee; grant this for thine only Son Jesus Christ's sake.

^k Rom. viii. 24.