

Paul's Description of Christian Charity.

by Thomas Reade

The sermon emphasizes the importance of Christian charity, love, and self-examination in the Christian life, highlighting the glory of God and the power of the Holy Spirit.

Scripture: John 13:34, Romans 12:9, 1 Corinthians 13:1, 1 Corinthians 16:14, Galatians 5:22, Ephesians 4:2, Colossians 3:14, 1 Peter 4:8, 1 John 4:7, 1 John 4:20

Topics: "Christian Love", "Personal Holiness"

Description

Thomas Reade preaches about Paul's description of Christian charity, emphasizing the importance of love as the fruit of faith in a crucified Redeemer. He highlights the all-encompassing nature of love in the Christian system and the need for churches to be united in love, rather than allowing jealousy and mistrust to divide them. Reade urges self-examination based on Paul's teachings, emphasizing the necessity of humility, sincerity, and prayer to detect hidden sins and strive for personal holiness through the grace of God.

Transcript

PAUL'S DESCRIPTION OF CHRISTIAN CHARITY.

ON SELF-EXAMINATION.

The doctrine of the Cross shines with peculiar luster in the writings of Paul. Its sublimity far surpasses the conception of the strongest intellect; while, through its simplicity, the most unlettered peasant is made wise unto salvation. Love to God, producing love to man, is the blessed fruit of faith in a crucified Redeemer. Nothing can equal the master-strokes of the great Apostle in his portraiture of Christian love. They discover a mind enlightened from above- a heart clothed with humility. While charmed with the beauty of the picture, we must feel abased at our own little resemblance to it. Oh! that our whole soul may be molded into this heavenly grace.

Spiritual gifts, so highly valued by the primitive churches, were as nothing in the estimation of this eminent saint, if unaccompanied by love. With what peculiar force does he express this feeling to the Corinthian Christians, "If I could speak in any language in heaven or on earth but didn't love others, I would only be making meaningless noise like a loud gong or a clanging cymbal. If I had the gift of prophecy, and if I knew all the mysteries of the future and knew everything about everything, but didn't love others, what good would I be? And if I had the gift of faith so that I could speak to a mountain and make it move, without love

I would be no good to anybody. If I gave everything I have to the poor and even sacrificed my body, I could boast about it; but if I didn't love others, I would be of no value whatever."

How all-pervading in the Christian system, is love. As the sap, which circulates unseen, causes the fertility of the tree; so is this hidden principle the cause of fruitfulness in the believer. Earth would resemble heaven, were all who call themselves Christians, the living exemplars of this lovely grace. But alas! how widely different from celestial love, is the prevailing spirit of the Christian world. The spiritual foe is fearfully at work. Union in the camp of Satan, and disunion in the Church of God is most portentous of approaching evil. The enemies of Christ are making one common cause against His Truth- while his professing people are allowing jealousies and mistrusts to separate them from each other. Oh! that a spirit of love may be speedily poured out upon all our churches, lest the Holy Dove should flee away from these scenes of strife, and leave us to the miseries of a fallen people.

Let us contemplate the features of Christian charity as drawn by the masterly hand of the Apostle, and then look at those of our fallen nature- and though painful be the contrast, may it lead us in self-abasement to the Cross of Christ, where love is displayed in its divinest form.

Love is patient and kind. We are quick in our resentments, slow in our reconciliations, and backward to repay an injury with kindness.

Love does not envy. We look with envious eye on the possessions and preferments of others; and cannot bear to be outshone by the superior talents of our neighbor. The Scripture says not in vain, "the spirit that dwells in us lusts to envy; and where envy is, there is confusion and every evil work."

Love does not boast, it is not proud. We are naturally vain and self-sufficient, proud of our gifts, and wise in our own conceits.

Love is not rude. We transgress the bounds of decency and propriety; and fail in that reverence which is due to our superiors.

Love is not self-seeking. We are selfish, regarding our own interest and pleasure; caring not who sinks, if only we swim.

Love is not easily angered. We take fire at the least offence; making a man an offender for a word allowing anger to rest in our bosoms; and letting the sun go down upon our wrath.

Love thinks no evil. We readily indulge in evil surmisings, and unfounded censures; sitting in judgment on the motives of others, and condemning those as hypocrites whom the Lord does not condemn.

Love rejoices not in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth. We take a secret delight in the falls of those whom we dislike; and find a pleasure in hearing and propagating the tale of slander.

Love bears all things. We do not bear unkind treatment with meekness, nor cover the defects of others with the veil of love.

Love believes all things. We are unwilling to put the best construction on our neighbor's actions, and to give him credit for his good intentions.

Love hopes all things. We seldom anticipate good from the conduct of those, against whom we have imbibed a prejudice.

Love endures all things. We cannot endure with patience undeserved reproach; nor be willing, at all times to suffer, rather than to inflict an injury.

Thus we are by nature, the very reverse of this holy charity; for having, through the fall of our first parents, lost the image of God, who is love, we bear the image of Satan, who is the author of envy, malignity, and pride. "Whoever has watched the sun in his declining course, and has seen him sink into the horizon, must sometimes have observed dark clouds gathering round him, as if to blot out and extinguish his rays; but instead of effecting this, the sun throws on them the brightness of his own pure light, and reflects upon the dark face of the hostile clouds, the radiant colors of his own splendor. They glow with borrowed hues of glory. This will be the effect of Christian Charity also. If any assail us with dark suspicions, doubts, and fears, let us spread over them the light of Christian love; let our example be as pure as the object is holy; thus shall we tinge them with better colors; they will catch the same glow, and be excited to better purposes."

Divinely glorious is that principle, which can effect such happiness. In the midst of manifold changes and dissolutions- Charity never fails. Prophecies shall be fulfilled- Tongues shall cease- Knowledge, like the scaffolding, shall be removed- Faith shall be lost in vision- Hope, in enjoyment- but Love shall never fail. This grace will flourish with immortal vigor in the Paradise above; forever expanding its beauties, and filling the redeemed with eternal joy, the nearer it approaches the untreated Fountain of Light and Love.

How divinely glorious is the Gospel. Its effects on the human heart are truly wonderful. It may well be called the power of God unto salvation to every one that believes. The Gospel, when cordially received, begets such a gracious temper of mind, as makes us humble, amiable, and charitable; forbearing and forgiving; ready to do every good work. It smooths the ruggedness of our natural disposition; banishes selfishness from our hearts; and infuses that gentle and loving spirit which sheds a blessing wherever its influence is felt.

This new-creating power of the Gospel was most visible in the first and best ages of Christianity. No sooner did the Gospel fly abroad into the world upon the wings of love, than the charity of Christians became notorious even to a proverb. The very Heathens, who raged against them, were compelled to exclaim, "See how these Christians love one another." Clement, of whom Paul speaks so highly in his Epistle to the Philippians, styling him his fellow-laborer, whose name is in the book of life, enforces the duty of Charity with an almost apostolic authority in his Epistle to the Corinthian church, "He that has the love that is in Christ," says this truly Christian Bishop, "let him keep the commandments of Christ.

For who is able to express the obligation of the love of God? What man is sufficient to declare, as is fitting, the excellency of its beauty? The height to which Charity leads, is inexpressible. Charity unites us to God; Charity covers the multitude of sins; Charity endures all things, is patient in all things. There is nothing base and sordid in Charity. Charity lifts not itself up above others; admits of no divisions; is not seditious; but does all things in peace and concord.

By Charity were all the elect of God made perfect; without it nothing is pleasing and acceptable in the sight of God. Through Charity did the Lord join us unto himself; while for the love that he bore towards us, our Lord Jesus Christ gave his own blood for us, by the will of God; his flesh, for our flesh; his soul, for our souls. You see, beloved," continues this Primitive Father of the Christian Church, "how great and wonderful a thing Charity is; and how that no expressions are sufficient to declare its perfection.

But who is fit to be found in it? Even such only as God shall vouchsafe to make so. Let us therefore pray to him, and beseech him, that we may be worthy of it; that so we may live in charity, being unblameable, without evil propensities, without respect of persons. All the ages of the world, from Adam, even unto this day, are passed away; but they who have been made perfect in love, have, by the grace of God, obtained a place among the righteous; and shall be made manifest in the judgment of the kingdom of Christ.

Happy then shall we be, beloved, if we shall have fulfilled the commandments of God, in the unity of love; that so, through love, our sins may be forgiven us. For so it is written- Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, and whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man unto whom the Lord imputes not iniquity, and in whose, spirit there is no guile. Now this blessing is fulfilled in those who are chosen by God through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen."

If the first duty of the Christian be Charity, without which all our doings are nothing worth; if faith, working by love, be the only saving faith- how important is Paul's admonition to the Corinthian church, and to all the churches of Christ in every succeeding age- "Examine yourselves, whether you be in the faith; prove your own selves; know you not your own selves, how that Jesus Christ is in you, except you be reprobates."

With much humility, sincerity, and prayer, we should enter into our own bosoms, and there, search the secret recesses of our hearts, to detect each lurking evil, and to know the worst of our selves. This self-knowledge, though a difficult, is an indispensable attainment. No labor should be deemed too great, no discovery too humiliating in the prosecution of this inward search. May the Divine Spirit teach us by his illuminating influence. We are naturally blind to our real state and character- but God fully knows the deceitfulness and desperate wickedness of our heart.

The following considerations are submitted to the pious reader, in the humble hope, that they may, in some measure, conduce to this desirable end, through the blessing of Him from whom all holy desires, all good counsels, and all just works do proceed.

ON THE NATURE OF GOD.

When I meditate upon the greatness and glory of God, on his infinite and adorable perfections, what effect has this knowledge upon my heart? Do I reverence this Holy Lord God? Do I love him above all created beings? Am I anxious to please, and fearful to offend him? Does a sense of his Omniscience restrain me from secret sin? Does a conviction of his Omnipotence inspire me with confidence in the hour of danger? Does a firm persuasion of his Omnipresence encourage me to bear up under outward trials, and to press forward on the way to glory.

ON ORIGINAL SIN.

When I reflect upon the introduction of moral evil into the world, and all its dire calamities; temporal, spiritual, and eternal; what are my feelings on this mysterious subject? Do I receive this truth in the simplicity of faith, not desiring to be wise above what is written? Feeling the effects of sin, by painful experience, am I desirous to obtain the remedy which a gracious God has provided in the Gospel of his Son? Am I more anxious to extinguish the destructive fire, than curious to know how it was first kindled? Does a consciousness of sin humble me before God, and empty my soul of all hope of self-justification in his sight? Can I rest satisfied with the Divine Revelation, that "by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death has passed upon all men, for that all have sinned?"

ON THE FALL OF MAN.

When I think upon man's apostasy from God- the total corruption of my heart- the hardening, polluting, and blinding nature of sin; what is the influence of these momentous truths? Do they lay me in the dust before God, and cause me to cry out- Unclean, unclean! Woe is me! I am undone! Behold I am vile! Have they made me to despair of salvation by any righteousness of my own; and filled me with shame in the presence of Infinite Purity? With self-aborrence do I cast myself on the unmerited mercy of God in Christ, daily praying with the broken-hearted Publican, "God be merciful to me a sinner?"

ON SALVATION BY JESUS CHRIST.

When I survey the freeness and fullness of Divine grace, the suitableness and sufficiency of Christ's salvation, the efficacy of his blood, the value of his righteousness, the prevalency of his intercession, and the sweet and precious promise of eternal life through him; how am I affected by these glorious truths? Do I feel a spring of delight rising up within me, at the sound of these glad tidings of great joy? Have I felt my need of this grace? And, in humble penitence and faith, have I come to Christ as my only Savior, to be redeemed from present sin and future misery?

Renouncing all self-dependence, and casting myself upon Christ for righteousness and strength, have I experienced a change of heart, and found sin to be exceeding sinful? Does my soul sink deeper in humility, while beholding my just desert in the agony and bloody sweat, the cross and passion of my compassionate Redeemer? Does gratitude continually ascend, like holy incense from my heart, when reviewing the Savior's dying love? Is my benevolence toward man more enlarged, and my obedience to God rendered more lively and sincere, from these precious views of the grace of Christ?

ON THE WORK OF THE HOLY SPIRIT.

When I view the work of the Spirit, his mighty energy in opening the blind eyes to see the glory of Jesus; in unstopping the deaf ears to receive the sweet sounds of salvation through him; in making the tongue of the dumb to sing his praise, and the feet of the lame to run in the paths of willing obedience- When I dwell upon his powerful operations in breaking the chain of sin, destroying the strongholds of Satan, convincing the rebel of his ingratitude, inclining him to accept the offered mercy, and to become the willing subject of the Prince of peace; what effect have these all-important truths upon my heart?

In this rebel, do I behold myself? With full conviction of my depravity, do I earnestly seek, through Christ, for the aid of the Holy Spirit? Have I hitherto experienced anything of this mighty change, this growing renovation of heart? Is sin less powerful in my soul? Do I feel its force decreasing, and the power of grace, the love of holiness, acquiring strength? Through the influence of the Spirit, can I renounce the vain and empty pleasures of the world, its carnal company, its sinful ways? Have I resigned my all to God, desiring that his will should rule, and his Spirit guide, my every thought and action?

Are all my hopes of heavenly glory derived from, and resting upon Jesus, as my Prophet, Priest, and King! Has the Divine Spirit made me willing to kiss the scepter of his grace, and to take my station beneath the banner of the cross? Through his Almighty strength have I become a faithful soldier of Jesus Christ? Do I now wage war against the world, the flesh, and the devil, with whom I was once in league against the Majesty of Heaven? Conscious of my utter inability to withstand these foes without the power of Christ, am I continually going to the Strong for strength, and thus living in humble dependence on his grace, do I come off more than conqueror, through Him who loved me and gave himself for me?

ON PERSONAL HOLINESS.

When I consider the dangers which surround me, and the sin which still dwells within me; do I pray for grace, to keep my heart with all diligence, to walk along the slippery path of life with circumspection, and to cultivate a spirit of humility and godly fear? Am I kind to those who treat me with contempt, because I profess myself an unworthy follower of a crucified Redeemer? Have I indulged any murmuring thoughts at my present condition, or envied the possessions, or attainments, of those whose superior wealth or knowledge cast me into the shade? Am I willing to be nothing in the sight of men, if so I may, through Christ, be admitted into favor with God? Is this the language of my heart- "Make me little and unknown, Loved and prized by God alone." Is it my daily prayer and study to recommend the Gospel by gentleness, kindness, and courtesy; thus silencing those who would accuse the religion of Jesus as tending to foster uncharitable feelings, moroseness of spirit, disagreeableness of manners, and discord in domestic life?

When little provocations occur, which, in some shape or other will perpetually happen, through the perverseness of those with whom we dwell; is my temper easily ruffled?- Or am I maintain a spirit of self-possession, when tempted to anger by more serious causes, being wishful to reprove in love, rather than in a spirit of bitterness?

Have I any pleasure in hearing or speaking evil others; or do I cast a veil of charity over their failings, being willing at all times, when an action will admit of two constructions, to hope the best?

Is it a grief when evil thoughts arise in my mind and are they at such times my burden and cross? Do I pray and strive through the Spirit to subdue them? Do I fly to the blood of Jesus to be cleansed from every pollution of sin?

Am I distressed when I hear of abounding wickedness? Is my soul pained within me, when I behold the falls of professors, the backslidings of God's children, and the reproach which they bring upon the Gospel of Christ? Have I a holy joy when sinners are converted, when the cause of Truth is triumphing, and when the Gospel is extending its influence throughout the earth?

ON RELATIVE DUTIES.

When I learn from Scripture the necessity of good works- that holiness is an essential part of Christ's salvation- that to be really holy, is to be relatively holy; when I meditate on the duties of man to man, on brotherly affection, and on all the charities of social life; when I dwell upon those obligations which are laid upon me as a Christian, to fulfill the law of love; and contemplate the happiness, connected with a strict obedience to the precepts of the Gospel, the blessedness arising from a kind endeavor to make others happy, and the felicity, flowing from a consciousness of desire to promote by prayer, by influence, by precept, and example, the salvation of my fellow sinners; when I read in my Bible, the reciprocal duties of rulers and subjects, of husbands and wives, of parents and children, of masters and servants, of ministers and people- what effect have these important duties on my life and conversation? Am I walking with steady step in this path of holy obedience; aiming, in a spirit of love, to fulfil the duties of my station; seeking to attain to higher, and still higher degrees of holiness; and devising plans of usefulness, which may promote the temporal and eternal interests of mankind?

These questions, put honestly to the conscience, may lead us, through the light of the Spirit, to form some judgment of our state before God. The difficulty of ascertaining our true character, arises from the blinding influence of self-love. We have, naturally, a fond conceit of our own excellence, and cannot believe that

our hearts are so bad as the Bible declares them to be. We can speak humbly enough of ourselves, even when pride is whispering that we are better than thousands around us; but we cannot bear to hear our conduct condemned by others. Nothing is more common, and yet nothing more dangerous, than self-deception. The faithful Apostle gave this caution to the Corinthian church, "Let no man deceive himself." How dreadful, when the soul is first awakened from its delusion in the place of torment.

This self-deception is very prevalent. Jesus said to his disciples, "Not every one that says unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in your name? And in your name have cast out devils? And in your name have done many wonderful works? And then, will I profess unto them, I never knew you, depart from me, you that work iniquity."

The foolish virgins, with their exhausted lamps and empty vessels said, "Lord, Lord, open to us." But the door was shut; and being once closed, was closed forever! These virgins, justly called foolish, were self-deceivers. They represent, by parable, thousands of nominal Christians, who rest contented with the light of outward profession, without examining whether they possess the grace of the Spirit in their hearts. These people, having a name that they live, build upon a vague hope of mercy, while utter strangers to the sanctifying influence of the Gospel, and thus perish in their sins.

The religion of Jesus reveals the remedy for all these evils. Grace, abounding to the chief of sinners, through the blood and righteousness of Christ, was the theme which kindled into a flame all the energies of Paul; and if, like him, we are taught of God to know the truth, and to feel its power, it will kindle ours.

What joy springs up in the soul of a sinner, when Jesus is preached in all the fullness of his salvation, and received in the simplicity of faith. Christ crucified is the magnet which draws away the heart from earthly things, and fixes it on things above. To feel the holy influence of this mystery of love, is to feel our heaven begun.

Sovereign grace is the source of holiness; for what is grace, but the favor of God, whereby he freely imparts to perishing sinners, every spiritual blessing through the atonement of Jesus Christ.

Out of Christ, God is a consuming fire. In Christ, he is the Father of mercies.

Out of Christ, we are ignorant, guilty, polluted, and enslaved. In Christ, we are enlightened, accepted by God, purified, and redeemed.

Out of Christ, we are hastening fast to hell. In Christ, we are journeying toward the bliss of heaven.

Out of Christ, eternity is full of torment. In Christ, it is filled with unspeakable joy.

Oh! that every dying sinner would reflect on these things before it be too late. Many, during the joyous season of health and plenty, treat subjects such as these with a scornful smile. But their summer-days will not last forever. The wintry season of affliction will quickly come, when blooming health must be exchanged for pallid sickness, and splendid opulence for a noisome grave.

The rich worldling died- and oh! how altered his condition! His remains were drawn to the tomb with all the pomp of a funeral procession- but his soul was hurried to the place of torment. The wretched Lazarus died; poor but pious. No stately hearse conveyed his body to the grave, but waiting angels carried his spirit to the joys above. Each left the world as he came into it- bringing nothing in, he carried nothing out. The

beggar left his rags, the rich man his estates behind him. Rank and wealth, though ordained of God for useful ends, are but temporal distinctions. They cease at the hour of dissolution. Riches cannot arrest the stroke of death, nor procure for their possessor a passport to heaven. Poverty cannot sharpen its sting, nor subtract one joy from the poorest saint's eternal happiness. One moment in heaven will convince the believer, that his afflictions upon earth were light. One moment in hell will convince the pleasure-loving sinner, that it would have been good for him, if he had never been born.

Ah, who can grasp the thought of never-ending joy, or everlasting woe! The mind labors to conceive, and yet can never reach beyond the first impression of eternity. Numbers, years, ages, all, all are lost in the immeasurable, unfathomable abyss!

The riches of grace are the only durable riches, without which the mightiest monarchs of the earth are poor. When earth with all its glories shall have passed away, the lowly followers of Jesus will abide forever, and shine forth as the sun, in the kingdom of their Father.

How difficult it is to get heart-affecting views of sin, of Christ, of hell, and of heaven. We talk about them, but alas! how little are we practically affected by them. But what is knowledge without practice or feeling, without conversion of the heart to God? Nothing but the Spirit of Christ can open our eyes to see the deformity of sin- the preciousness of the Savior- the misery of hell- the bliss of heaven.

"Quick as the apple of an eye;

O God my conscience make;

Awake my soul, when sin is nigh,

And keep it still awake.

O may the least omission pain,

My well-instructed soul;

And drive me to the blood again

Which makes the wounded whole."

If every motion of the soul, which does not spring from love to the Savior, be sinful, then, what innumerable sins crowd into the space of every fleeting hour! What an immense amount at the close of a long life! This view is indeed overwhelming. Oh! that it may at once humble us, and lead us to the Lamb of God, whose blood can wash away our guilty stains, whose love can cast our sins into the depths of the sea.

Who can adequately conceive of hell, and all its horrors? or of heaven, and all its glories? We are now standing on the brink of death. Before us, lies an eternal world. Soon we must enter into it. But how shall we enter it? As we die, so shall we appear at the throne of God. We may die this very day. What then is our present state? Are we prepared by deep repentance, humble faith, and holy love, to meet our God? Oh! let us not allow one fleeting hour to escape, until the important enquiry be solemnly made; and an answer of peace be graciously obtained. Let us now go to Jesus- bow lowly at his feet- place ourselves beneath the droppings of his blood- cast our eyes upon him in faith, and fix them there, until he remove us to that blissful place where we shall forever dwell beneath his smiles, and grieve him by our sins no more.

"What love, what pleasure, what surprise,
Shall fill the enraptured heirs of heaven,
The day the Savior meets their eyes,
The day the promised rest is given.
Their love is kindled here below,
The Author of their hope they love;
A purer, brighter flame will glow,
In yonder glorious world above.
Of pleasure too they taste below,
But pleasure not unmixed with pain;
In yonder world 'twill not be so,
For there no sorrow will remain.
And if obscure and transient views
Of heavenly things give such surprise,
What wonder must the sight produce,
When God appears before their eyes?
O joyful sight? O glorious day,
When God the Savior shall be seen;
When earthly things shall pass away,
And heaven's unchanging state begin."

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