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Surrey Tabernacle Pulpit.

THE LOVE OF GOD.

A SERMON

PREACHED ON SUNDAY MORNING, 8TH MARCH, 1868,

By MR. JAMES WELLS,

AT THE NEW SURREY TABERNACLE, WANSEY STREET.

“I will love them freely.”—HOSEA xiv. 4.

JOHN saith, “We love God because he first loved us.” And I suppose in all Christendom you would not meet with a person who would not say that he loved Christ, and that he loved God. But it does seem a most solemn consideration that there are thousands who think they love God, and do not; there are thousands who think they love Jesus Christ, and do not. The Pharisees of old all thought that they loved God, and that God was in an especial sense their Father, and that they were in an especial sense his children. Yet when the Saviour put them to the test of God’s eternal truth, he himself being the embodiment of that truth, and the great messenger of that great covenant truth, who came to establish it and to carry it out, so far from their loving God in the saving and scriptural sense of the word, the Saviour had to describe them as serpents, and a generation of vipers. Is there anything under the heavens so much concerns us as to know what our real condition before God is? If we make no profession, why, that of course is simply a proof that we are dead in sin, and have no concern, and dying in that state must be lost. But, nevertheless, we may make a profession, and think too that we have a love to Christ, and a love to God, and at the same time our love not be real; so deceiving our own souls, and be lost at last. I make these remarks because our text points not to the whole election of grace as they stand merely in God’s purpose, but to those that are made manifest by the grace of God as partakers of that grace, whose backsliding or apostasy the Lord hath healed or put a stop to. These are the persons concerning whom he saith, “I will love them freely.” And I shall this morning, with all the care possible, describe very simply and very minutely, what the character of the man is that stands manifest as an object of God’s everlasting love, taking this as my first part. Our text will then stand before us in two parts. First, *the objects loved*;—secondly, *the love wherewith they are loved*.

First, then, *the objects loved*;—the manifest character of those that the Lord hath loved with an everlasting love. Now the first thing to
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evidence interest in his love is that of faith. And wherever there is true faith, there is always conviction of sin, conviction of our need of what the Lord hath provided. The Saviour himself explains this; and I have often grieved when I have heard men that I try to think well of pervert that scripture, where the Saviour saith of the Holy Spirit, "He shall convince them of sin, because they believe not in me." Men interpret that to mean that man's great, damning sin is not savingly believing in the Lord Jesus Christ; whereas faith is the gift of God, and the Lord never did yet, and he never will condemn any man for not savingly believing in the Lord Jesus Christ. "This is the condemnation"—not the causal condemnation, but the evidential condemnation, or condemnation in the evidence of it;—"that light is come into the world"—that is, gospel light—"and men loved darkness rather than light." We must be careful not to turn evidences into causes. Saving faith that I am about to describe is not the cause of your salvation, it is only the evidence of it. "Faith is the confidence of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen." Therefore when the Saviour saith, "He shall convince them of sin because they believe not in me," the meaning evidently is that in order that they may believe in me they shall be convinced of sin, of righteousness, and of the final defeat of the adversary. Now, wherever there is true faith there will be that kind of experience that will drive you sooner or later to the yea and amen promise of God that is in Christ Jesus. And I shall lay very great emphasis upon this; I shall repeat the words;—wherever there is true faith, that faith that is the result of regeneration, that faith that is the operation of God, that faith that stands in the power of God, there will be that experience that will drive you sooner or later to the yea and amen sworn promise of God that is in Christ Jesus the Lord; and if your experience does not drive you to that, then you are not in a path that will bring you to love God in the scriptural and gospel sense of the word.

Now we will begin with Abraham, and then we will notice his seed,—where they were. The Lord brought Abraham forth abroad, and said, Look now toward heaven, and tell the stars, if thou be able to number them; and he said unto him, "So shall thy seed be." Here was a yea and amen, wonderful promise. "And he believed in the Lord; and he counted it to him for righteousness." You find the apostle James saith of Abraham, alluding, as in the Book of Chronicles, to this very occasion, "He was called the friend of God." That implies love to God; that Abraham did receive the yea and amen promise of the blessed God, and loved God in that promise, in that counsel, in that covenant, in that order of things, for Abraham saw in that order of things the Great Melchisedec, the antetypical Melchisedec. The Saviour himself saith, "Abraham saw my day, and rejoiced; he saw it, and was glad." Now we will come down to your experience upon this matter. Supposing eternal life were promised to you, eternal salvation and glory, conditionally, what would you say? I know what you would say, if you know what your own heart is, what your own nature is, and what a poor weak creature you are, you would say, That would be to me like no promise at all; for if there be any holiness, any righteousness, any goodness, any stability, anything good, required of me, I have not that to render, and I must be lost. Now the Lord gives a promise without an *if*. And is it our happy lot to be driven to this; to be brought to feel that unless the promise be yea and amen, there can be no hope for us? Of course we distinguish between legal *ifs* and gospel *ifs*. We sometimes say there are no *ifs* in the gospel; but there are *ifs* in the gospel—delineating *ifs*, discriminating *ifs*; and those *ifs* in the gospel do not imply and are not put into such a position as to imply any uncertainty in the promise. All gospel *ifs* the Christian can get over; but the Christian cannot get over legal *ifs*. If a legal *if* be brought in, he cannot get over it. For

instance, Philip said to the eunuch, "If thou believest with all thine heart." Suppose he had said to the eunuch, *If* you mean in future to have no evil thoughts, *if* you mean in future to be perfectly holy and perfectly righteous—to go on to natural perfection, *if* you will not allow your flesh to be the dwelling-place of sin, so that you will be so good as not to have to say with the Apostle Paul, "O wretched man that I am," and, "in my flesh dwelleth no good thing," I think that the eunuch, even in that early stage of his conviction that God had wrought in his mind, would have said, "Then it is no use for me to be baptized; for I have no hope of ever being what you require. I must give it up." But no, Philip brought in the gospel *if*—not a legal *if*; for he that will cleave to the legal *if* is under the law and its curse. But "*If* thou believest with all thine heart!" Ah, I can get over that; for I do believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God—I believe it with all my heart. I can get over that *if*. That doesn't imply any *if* in the promise. And so he was baptized, and went on his way rejoicing in the faith, filled with joy and peace in believing. Let me give you another gospel *if* in the 10th of Romans. "They"—the Israelites—"being ignorant of God's righteousness"—ignorant of the new covenant promise, not knowing their need of the same—"and going about to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted themselves unto the righteousness of God. For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to every one that believeth." Now comes another gospel *if*. The law saith so and so, "but the righteousness which is of faith speaketh on this wise, "*If* thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus,"—confess him as the end of the law for righteousness; and if he is the end of the law for righteousness, then he is the end of sin, the end of death, the end of wrath, the end of all tribulation—"if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus,"—why, Christian, you can get over that *if*; that *if* is not a legal *if*, it is a gospel *if*—"and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved. For there is no difference between the Jew and the Greek; for the same Lord over all is rich unto all that call upon him." For the scripture saith, "Whosoever believeth on him shall not be ashamed," and again, "Whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved." Thus you will see, when we go a little farther at least, that to love God in the spiritual, the gospel, and vital sense of the word—to prove the reality of your love, there must be an experience that drives us to the yea and amen promise that is in Christ Jesus the Lord. Where there is much forgiven, and that will bring forth much love. Where there are wonderful things done for us that will bring forth much love. Where there are wonderful things provided for us; for "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," that, again, will increase our love to him.

Let us now look at Abraham's seed—where they were. Never mind what the world says, profane or professors, never mind anybody else; God help you to look to your own soul. Now the Apostle Paul, in the 11th of the Hebrews tells you where the ancient seed of Abraham (and they are the same now in kind, and will be to the end of time)—where they died; and, after telling us where they died, he then tells us where they lived, how they lived, and what their prospects were. Let us compare ourselves with them honestly as in the sight of God. "These all died in faith;" this is where they died. Now, where did they live? "Not having received the promises,"—that is, the promises were not yet mediatorially accomplished. Christ had not yet come; but they saw these same yea and amen promises that he would come, and that his coming to us was no more certain than all the people for whom he died being brought to him. They saw the promises—mark that. They were such poor creatures—lost, ruined, helpless, not a particle of anything to call their own but sin, guilt, wretchedness, lamentation and misery—and therefore they saw

these promises in Christ afar off, were persuaded of them and embraced them. Now the apostle found Pharisaism was making head at rather a frightful rate among the Hebrews, to whom he was writing, and he said, "Let us therefore fear, lest a promise being left us of entering into his rest, any of you should seem to come short of it." As though he should say, You do not seem to care to hear much about the eternal priesthood of Christ, for ye are dull of hearing. "For when for the time ye ought to be teachers"—from the profession you have made—"ye have need that one teach you again which be the first principles of the oracles of God!" And, therefore, as your faith seems to come short of the promise, and you do not seem to appreciate the yea and amen promise, I say I am in doubt of you; I am afraid lest you should come short. For, remember, it will always stand good in the painful as well as in the pleasing sense,—“According to your faith be it unto you.” If you believe a lie, hell will be your portion, for no liar can enter heaven; and if you believe with a fleshly faith merely, and the enmity of your heart heaves against God’s yea and amen promise, then you will not be reckoned a saint, but a sinner; you will not be reckoned a friend of God, as was Abraham; you will not be reckoned a friend of God, as were the disciples unto whom the Saviour revealed all that which the Father revealed unto him. This is where they were then—faith in the yea and amen promise in Christ Jesus. The consequence is, that you must look to the Lord to bless you in the very face of your heart rebellions; you must look to the Lord to bless you in the very face of the stumbles and mistakes you make in the world; you must look to the Lord to bless you in the face of it all. Ah! say you, will not that be presumptuous? Well, friends, I only say that; to run away from His truth would be daring insult; and to neglect His house, neglect His book, fly, as it were, from the throne of grace, because of these drawbacks and hindrances, would be the greatest insult you could offer to the blessed God. The Israelites of old did exceedingly wrong, it was a very great sin they had committed, in choosing an earthly king; and their motive also was very bad, it was that they might be like the nations around—just the very thing they were to avoid. What did Samuel say? “You have thus committed this sin, yet do not cease from following the Lord your God, and I will not sin against the Lord in ceasing to pray for you.” Ah, the Lord foreknew what poor creatures we should be, and therefore he has put the promise into such a shape and form that the most tried Christian shall have no just cause to turn his back upon the temple of the Lord, to run away from the Lord; but rather to say with David, when he had done wrong in numbering the people or attempting to number them, “Let me fall not into the hand of man, but let me fall into the hand of the Lord, for great are His mercies.” Now, what is your experience? Does it bring you down in your own feelings and self, and your own estimation, and make you prize this anchorage ground? For there is no sure anchorage ground for a sinner that feels his ruined condition, but in the yea and amen promise that is Christ Jesus. That is the anchorage ground that makes our hope sure and steadfast, entering into that within the veil, whither our Forerunner is for us entered. And these ancient seed of Abraham would not stoop to pick up any of the religions of the world, they would not stoop to manufacture anything, they would not stoop to look at any of it. What do you think they were? Why, “they confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the face of the earth.” They went travelling on. Well, but stop, manufacture a little holiness there, a little righteousness there. Ah, prodigal, stop, stop, stop, look at your shoes; buy a better pair than that before you go home. Why, you are dressed in filthy garments, do not go home like that, get something better than that. Ah, I am such a poor creature, it is no use to beg, for no one will give me what I want; I am too honest to steal; I am too poor to buy; and if I never go till I am better I shall never go at all, so I will

go as I am. And you know how he was received,—there was the exemplification of our text,—“I will love them freely.” And these ancient seed of Abraham, like me, and I hope like you too—judge for yourselves—were not over fond of bringing the doctrine of backsliding into the new covenant. For “they might have had opportunity to have returned.” There is always plenty of opportunity to give up the truth; there is always plenty of opportunity to run away from God; there are always plenty of opportunities to return to this world, plenty of invitations to go back. But “they desired a better country,” therefore they kept travelling on from strength to strength. “They desired a better country;” how much better it does not say, and I know of but one reason why it does not say so, and that one reason is that no language can describe it. It is unspeakably better, infinitely better, eternally better;—“that is, an heavenly.” And will the Lord disappoint them? No. “Wherefore God is not ashamed to be called their God,” the God of these poor creatures, that have nothing but his yea and amen promise, and by faith in that promise are separated from the world; “for he hath prepared for them a city.”

Now, this is the first evidence of being among those that the Lord loves—brought to receive his yea and amen promise. And what do you want more? If you rightly understand the promise you will find everything in it, you will want nothing else. And that promise is branched out into every possible form from Genesis to Revelation, to suit your experiences, your circumstances, your necessities. I have never yet known a Christian in any trouble that there is not a promise in the Bible that suits him in that trouble; and whether he can get hold of it or not, it belongs to him; because if one promise belongs to you, they all belong to you, as saith the apostle, “All are yours.” Oh no, Paul; there is only one promise brought home with power. Very likely, but it is yours all the same for that. It does not say you enjoy it all, but it is all yours—ministers and all—whether Paul or Cephas, life or death—all are yours, for ye are Christ’s, and Christ is God’s. How is it with us, then? Can we say this is the God we love; this is the God we adore? Remember, and never forget it, that all through the Bible the first characteristic of the real friend of God is the poor and the needy. You know Abraham’s estimation of himself:—“Behold now, I have taken upon me to speak unto the Lord, which am but dust and ashes.” No self-righteousness, no self-holiness there. So then you must be a believer in God’s promise, and that yea and amen promise must endear the Eternal Three to you, and that will sever you from the world, conform you to the precept, make the ways of the Lord what are described—“Wisdom’s ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace.” And thus in holding fast the truth you hereby keep the commandments, words, and sayings of the Saviour, and he it is saith the Lord that loveth me.

But I will give two more versions of this description of character. The next will be the 56th of Isaiah:—“Also the sons of the stranger, that join themselves to the Lord, to serve him.” There is a poor stranger, a sinner, he says, What a good thing it must be to be a servant of God. I should like to walk in his ways, to serve him, to be one of his. “And to love the name of the Lord:” that is the next thing:—serve him first, and then love him afterwards. Why, say you, I should have thought the love came first. No, with me the service came first, and a pretty service it was. What a lot of prayer books I bought, and I came before the Lord with a great many paper prayers from time to time, and I served him in the best way I could. And when people laughed at me about my religion, I used to quote that Scripture, and it encouraged me; I was then in the dark with regard to God’s truth—“We walk by faith, not by sight.” I thought, I am not going to be laughed out of my religion; I will go on. And so I did go on, and served the Lord in the best way I could, but it was in a way not acceptable to him, for he rejects all the

chaff and the rubbish. By and by a little light came, and when mercy rolled in, then I saw the new covenant name of the Lord, and my soul loved him; there was something endearing; my affection was set upon him. "And to be his servants." Now you observe this is named twice, First, to serve him, then comes the love, and then to be his servants. And the word "servants" there signifies that they are to be his for ever. In the Old Testament dispensation when a servant said, "I love my master," his ears were to be opened, and he was to be the master's property for life. So when the soul is brought thus to love the Lord, it is his for ever. There is nothing I should so much dread as not being his for ever. There is nothing the Christian so much trembles at as the possibility of a separation from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus. Then come these words:—"Every one that keepeth the sabbath from polluting it." That sabbath of course means Jesus Christ; we must understand it in the Christian sense of the word. If any work were done on the sabbath day, it was death; and if you will have human works to help out your salvation, you will be damned if you die in that state. If you will hold that the Saviour's righteousness and atonement are not sufficient of themselves to entirely release you, and give you everlasting rest, then you do in the most awful sense of the word pollute the sabbath, by gathering your duty-faith and free-will sticks on the sabbath day. Dry sticks they are; dry doctrines and dead doctrines; throw them into the fire; have nothing to do with them; let Christ be all in all. "I," saith the Saviour, "will give you rest;" and the release he gives you is entire, the rest he gives is everlasting. "And taketh hold of my covenant;" there it is again, that is the character of Abraham's seed; "even them will I bring to my holy mountain;" that is to Christ Jesus, where there is all the exaltation we can require; "raised up to sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus." "And I will make them joyful in my house of prayer;" Christ is the house of prayer; he is the way in which the Lord hears and answers. "Their burnt offerings and their sacrifices shall be accepted upon mine altar." "Their burnt offerings." I like that. What does that, when taken in the Christian sense, mean? Why, it means their living prayers, their living praises, their living affections, their red hot zeal for God. Why, my hearer, when in our right minds we grieve to see that we serve the Lord so coldly as we do. The burnt offering is the living prayer, the living praise, the burning love, the burning zeal, the immovable decisions. Those are the services that God accepts. "Their burnt offerings and their sacrifices shall be accepted upon mine altar;" and the apostle Peter explains this, "offering up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God, by our Lord Jesus Christ." Here, then, is another version of those whom God loves. Am I speaking to some this morning that have a concern for eternal things, but are saying, Well, as to the promise you have spoken of, I cannot understand it; and as to taking hold of God's everlasting covenant, I cannot understand it? Well, then, I must speak to you as you can understand. You desire to know the Lord? you desire to serve him? and you desire to be one of his? and you are actually come this morning with a hope that something you might hear might do you good? Well, then, if this be your feeling, the work is begun in your heart and soul. Look to the Lord, and in his own blessed time he will send some Philip to you that shall enlighten your mind, saying unto you, "Understandest thou what thou readest?" and you will be ready to answer, "How can I, except some one guide me?" The Lord sees you are inquiring, he sees your desire, and he always has had, has now, and ever will have, compassion on them that are ignorant and out of the way. Therefore, still seek, and still look, and still wait; do not run away with the notion, that unless you understand things as clearly as I myself am favoured to do, therefore you are not a Christian. But I will say this—the work being real, you will in the Lord's own time

understand this great mystery of the yea and amen promise, and then you will look back and wonder how you could be so blind and ignorant. So, then, do not be discouraged; but "still wait upon the Lord, and he shall strengthen thine heart; wait, I say, on the Lord."

Shall I give one more version of the people that stand manifest as objects of God's love? 50th of Jeremiah, "In those days, and in that time, saith the Lord, the children of Israel shall come, they and the children of Judah together, going and weeping: they shall go, and seek the Lord their God, they shall ask the way to Zion." Ah! where is that path which the vulture's eye hath not seen? where is that strait gate and narrow way which few find? I shall never be content till I know I am brought in at the strait gate, and know the Lord savingly. "They shall ask the way to Zion with their faces thitherward," determined to seek, determined to look; "saying," in substance,—for that is how we must understand that scripture, it does not mean they shall all say those precise words, but those words embody the spirit of every true seeker,—“Come and let us join ourselves to the Lord in a perpetual covenant that shall not be forgotten.” See then, Divine teaching makes us feel our poverty, and brings us to receive the promise; Divine teaching joins us to the Lord, to be his servants, to serve him freely, lovingly, constantly, zealously. Divine teaching turns our faces toward Zion, puts the earnest inquiry into our hearts. What must I do to be "saved," and we shall never feel happy till we are brought into the bond of the everlasting covenant. We shall very soon, not many years, want our evidences; and the language of some of you perhaps is,—

" 'Tis a point I long to know,
Oft it causes anxious thought;
Do I love the Lord or no,
Am I his, or am I not?"

There are some, that I am afraid are strangers to much soul trouble, despise those words; for myself, I like them very much. Why, say some, you must be a fool if you do not know whether you love him or not. No, you are not. A true Christian knows that there are so many false loves, that there are so many love in mere profession, so many love the name of Jesus Christ, but hate the perfection of his work. We cannot be too anxious upon the matter, and it cannot stand too clear. When you come to die, then you will want your character to be clear. What am I? Am I a friend of God, or am I not? Am I one of the seed of Abraham, a true friend of God, a servant of his? If so, then as sure as Abraham is in heaven, I shall be there also. These, then, are the people whom the Lord saith he will love freely.

I must close with just a few representations of *the love wherewith they are loved*. First, it is an everlasting love. The Lord loved them before the world was. If he had not, would he have blessed them with all spiritual blessings before the world was? And does not the Saviour say, "That they may be made perfect in one?" I want you to lay great emphasis upon this, for there is more in it than may at first sight appear. "That they may be made perfect in one; and that the world may know that thou hast sent me, and hast loved them as thou hast loved me." Mark, how is the world to know this? The world there I understand to mean the Gentile world—that is, a number in the Gentile world that should be called to the knowledge of the truth. "That they may be made perfect in one," that by that perfection the Gentile world called by grace may know that thou hast loved them as thou hast loved me. So then, if I understand it rightly, the indissoluble oneness we have with Christ, the completeness we have in Christ, the sure and eternal triumphs we have in Christ, is the doctrine that is to raise the dead Gentile world to life, the doctrine that is so to enlighten them as to give them to see the oneness of the love of God to the Son of God, and to the sons of God. And in the

very next verse the Saviour, carrying out the expression of this love, saith, "Father, I will that they also, whom thou hast given me, be with me where I am, that they may behold my glory which thou hast given me, for thou lovedst me before the foundation of the world." Besides, you have the Lord's own declaration, "yea, I have loved thee with an everlasting love."

" He saw me ruined in the fall,
Yet loved me notwithstanding all."

And do you answer to the character I have described this morning? If so, this love will accompany you every day of your life, every night of your life; it will be with you in all places; it will make your bed in sickness, it will strengthen you on the bed of languishing, and will give you at the last, with infinite delight, an abundant entrance into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. So then, if we have no one else to love us, we have our God to love us, and that for ever. If the world hate us, that will not alter the love of God. "Ye shall be hated of all men for my name's sake; but he that shall endure" this hatred, "unto the end, the same shall be saved." Secondly, it is also immutable love. Love may last you know, but it may have a good deal of the barometer in it—it may often rise and fall, it may often point to "stormy," often point to the cloud. But this heavenly barometer is always at "settled fair"—it never changes. This love cannot be deeper or higher, it cannot be greater or stronger; it is always just the same. The thoughts of God's heart stand good the same to all generations. The apostle James saith (and there is not a higher doctrine man in the Bible than my namesake James)—"Every good and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning." And then this love is also wonderfully active. The goings forth of the Lord on our behalf have been from everlasting. And as for the Saviour, was there anything sluggish, or dull, or unwilling about him? Was he not like the roe or young hart upon the mountains of Bether? Did he not get him to the mountain of Myrrh? Did he not take all the bitterness of the curse of our sins? And did he not ascend triumphantly to the hill of Frankincense? Does he not now range over the mountains of Spices? Is he asleep? No, saith the Church,—"The voice of my beloved; behold, he cometh leaping upon the mountains, skipping upon the hills." Our God is active; Christ is active; the Holy Spirit comes as a rushing mighty wind,—active in his operations. I will mention only one more quality;—the Lord has also loved you to his own satisfaction. "Sing, O daughter of Zion; shout, O Israel; be glad and rejoice with all thy heart, O daughter of Jerusalem. The Lord hath taken away thy judgments, he hath cast out thine enemy; the king of Israel, even the Lord, is in the midst of thee; thou shalt not see evil any more. In that day it shall be said to Jerusalem, Fear thou not; and to Zion, Let not thine hands be slack. The Lord thy God in the midst of thee is mighty; he will rejoice over thee with joy; he will rest in his love." What do you think of that? "He will rest in his love." He will never say, I wish I had chosen this one instead of that; I should have made a better choice if I had chosen that one,—no, he rests in his love. As Mr. Hart sings:—

" Whom once he loves he never leaves,
But loves them to the end."

"He will joy over thee with singing." See what language is made use of to set before us the attractive love of the great God.

May the Lord lead us more and more into these mysteries, for his name's sake.