

What God is — God is Love.

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1 John 4: 7-12.

I am sure, beloved friends, that, in reading the Bible, you have noticed that it only contains two subjects — what man is, and what God is. They may be presented in different ways and aspects, but in their essence it is simply the unfolding of the heart of man and the heart of God. And it is impossible to conceive a greater contrast : it is the contrast between perfect darkness and perfect light. The apostle John sums it all up when he says, speaking of the Word, "In him was life; and the life was the light of men. And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not." In the previous chapter also we have the contrast distinctly marked: "Whoso hateth his brother is a murderer. . . . Hereby perceive we the love [of God], because he laid down his life for us." (1 John 3: 15, 16.) From this we learn — and I want you to mark it — that man is *hate*; and that God, as set forth in Christ, is *love*; that man is hate, and manifests his hatred even unto putting his brother to death, as Cain actually did; and that God is love, and manifested His love in Christ laying down His life for us.

Again, we ask, can you conceive of a greater contrast? But it *must be* considered and comprehended, if we would understand the truth of what man is, and also what God has wrought for His own glory in revealing Himself in Christ and in the blessed work of redemption. This is all contained in the wondering exclamation of the apostle: "Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons [children] of God;" for what causes the heart of the apostle to overflow is the contemplation of the fact that the love of the Father has flowed out, for its own gratification in its own sovereign exercise, towards those who were in a state of ruin and death, and has brought them close to His own heart, in the intimate relationship of children.

Coming now to the passage I have read, you will see that three words in verse 8 are the foundation of all that follows. All the rest clusters around the statement — the blessed statement — that GOD is LOVE. This is the setting forth of what God is in His own nature; He is also light, it is true, but this is said relatively to darkness — "God is light, and in him is no darkness at all." (1 John 1: 5) We also say that God is righteous, that is righteous in His actings and ways, but when the word of God speaks of what He is absolutely in His nature, one word describes it, and that word is LOVE. If we enter into this, we shall have no difficulty in understanding that "love is of God," for in truth it could not be found elsewhere in the universe. I do not deny, in any wise, that much natural affection may be seen in fallen man, that, husbands and wives, parents and children may be knit together very closely by it; but we are now speaking of divine love, what only, in fact, is really love; and this we say proceeds alone from the heart of God because it is nowhere else found. Love, then, is of God, and consequently the love that fills our hearts tonight has come down into them, through the Lord Jesus Christ, from that blessed and sovereign source. We had therefore never known love otherwise; and this indeed is what the

apostle says, "Every one that loveth is born of God and knoweth God. He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love." It is thus an absolute necessity to be born of God before we can love, and know God.

Let us now consider briefly how God has revealed Himself, and how we are brought to know that He is love. The statement in the word of God would not of itself, we judge, have conveyed the truth that God is love to our souls. We mean that unless God had come out, unless there had been a manifestation, or expression of Himself, we never should have comprehended it — even though we had meditated upon the scriptures from morning to night. As we have pointed out already, love is nowhere else but in God, and it is thus outside of man's experience. The natural man knoweth not the things of God, and hence the things which are most simple to the child of God are either an insoluble problem, or folly to the keenest intellect: the light shone in darkness and the darkness comprehended it not. Let us remember — especially when reading the scriptures, or listening to ministry — that without divine teaching we cannot grasp what is set forth.

As we understand it, the incarnation was the first step in the display of what God is as love. He was ever the same from all eternity; and I do not mean that there were no outshinings of God in the Old Testament, only that it was not possible, before redemption had been accomplished, before the cross whereon He was glorified in all that He is concerning what we were, and what we had done, that He should come out into the light. We thus read that clouds and darkness were round about Him; that righteousness and judgment were the habitation of His throne. (Psalm 97) Look also at the wilderness encampment of the children of Israel. Of all the two million souls which composed it, not one, save the high priest once a year, dared to go into the presence of God. God could not come out, and the people could not enter into the holiest of all where He dwelt. God was love, but He was not free in righteousness to reveal Himself to His people. But when Christ came all was changed; as we read in 2 Corinthians 5, God was in Christ, and, as it is in another place, all the fulness was pleased to dwell in Him. All that God is was then revealed in that lowly Man, that Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief, so fully and completely that He said to His enemies, "If ye had known me, ye should have known my Father also"; and to Philip, "He that hath seen me hath seen the Father." The revelation was there, if not available until the Holy Ghost came after Christ was glorified. There was the perfect presentation of the Father even if those around Him had not yet eyes to perceive the glorious revelation.

Although this is true, it is to the cross we have to come for the perfect display of what God is. It was there in the death of His beloved Son that He told out all that He is, His righteousness against sin, His love in providing the sacrifice; yea, every divine attribute was displayed in the cross, and in all the perfection of their entire harmony because there every question of good and evil was for ever solved. If the Son of man must be lifted up, God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son. The moment that our blessed Lord had "yielded up the ghost," the veil of the temple was rent in twain from the top to the bottom. It was God, who had been waiting, and, may we not say, yearning to reveal what was in His heart; and He thus stepped in to declare that He was now no longer hidden, that He was set free in righteousness to come out to seek and to save that which was lost. It is wonderful, beyond all our comprehension, that God should come in, and tell out in the dark domain of death what He is! As in the hymn —

"Love that on death's dark vale,
Its sweetest odours spread."

It is all this really to which the apostle calls our attention in verses 9 and 10: "In this was manifested the love of God towards us, because that God sent his only begotten Son into the world that we might live through him. Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins." There are two things in these admiring and adoring statements of the apostle. He had said, God is love; and that would have been true if He had ever remained in the solitariness of His own bliss; but, as we are now told, He *manifested* His love toward us; and then, secondly, John teaches us wherein the love is; it was not in that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. He unfolds our state — that we were dead, without life towards God, and guilty in our sins, to enhance our conception of the love. Dead and guilty, how could we love God? Nay, we must be in such a condition indebted to Him for everything. We could do nothing: it was God who acted, and in the sovereignty of love, when we were without life and in sins. Let us then magnify His marvellous grace, which, in pursuance of His eternal counsels, has brought life and propitiation to us in and through His beloved Son. Now we can understand that the gospel is the display of what God is — LOVE.

Let me connect with this a passage in Romans, that we may see how this love is made good in our hearts. After unfolding the truth of justification in Him who is risen out of death, from under the judgment which He bore on our behalf, and the blessings on which the justified enter as their blessed possession, the apostle speaks of the love of God shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost given unto us. If you examine the context you will find that there are three stages in this love: it was testified to in the death of Christ, it was commended to us (God's "own love") in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us, and, finally, it is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost. (Rom. 5: 5) God has thus come out, He has revealed what He is, that He is love in the death of Christ, and through that death He has made a way to our hearts as love; and hence His love becomes the atmosphere of our souls, that in which we live and move and have our being. How marvellous it is that God should care to make His home in our hearts! We could not comprehend it in any measure, if we did not remember that He has acted thus from His own heart and for His own pleasure, because He chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world.

Now I want to say a word about the application. We read in verse 11, "Beloved, if God so loved us, we ought also to love one another." First, let me remind you of a distinction: it never says that we ought to love God, but it does say that we ought to love one another. The law said, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, etc.; but in Christianity no such obligation is laid upon us; it is only our brethren whom we "ought" to love. The reason is obvious. We love God because He first loved us, and we do this as the consequence of the activity of the Holy Spirit, who has shed abroad the love of God in our hearts. This is the response which He produces when He brings before our souls the wondrous character of the love of God in Christ Jesus. We love Him, I was about to say, because we cannot help ourselves, and hence loving God is the normal characteristic of every believer — as the apostle Paul speaks, "To them that love God, the called according to his purpose." You may say, as indeed we all have to say, we

know very little about it. This may be so, but still do not forget that it is the characteristic of all believers, and that the more we are occupied with His ineffable love, that love which was told out in the death of His Son, the greater will be the response. We had never known love otherwise: hereby perceive we love, what love is, because He laid down His life for us; and the marvellous thing is, as we said just now, that it was shown out in all the darkness of death. What we need therefore is to let this blessed love flow unhindered into our hearts, until they are flooded with it, and then that which has flowed down from the heart of God will, in the power of the Spirit, becoming within us a springing well, rise up to its eternal source.

But, as we have already reminded you, there is an obligation to love one another. If God so loved us, we ought also to love one another. The nature of the obligation is simple: it is that we should act towards one another as God has acted towards us. So in the previous chapter, after the apostle has shown that love is seen in Christ laying down His life for us, he adds, "And we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren." The obligation thus reaches, if the occasion arise, to the manner and the measure of the love of Christ! We may therefore say that it would not be righteous if we did not love one another. Happy is it for us that every one who possesses the divine nature *does* love his brethren, for he that loveth Him that begat, loveth him also that is begotten of Him; only do not forget that the apostle speaks of love in manifestation towards one another, as is seen by his specifying the case of a brother in need. Let us remember this; for while it is good if you love me in your heart, I shall never benefit by it if you never let me see it in manifestation.

If I might say one practical word, beloved friends, in this connection, it would be this: the cure of all discords among the saints may be found in this obligation. You remember how the Lord pressed the importance of the subject in the parable of the two debtors, and that He described the king as saying to the servant, who had failed in love toward his fellow-servant, "O thou wicked servant, I forgave thee all that debt, because thou desiredst me; shouldest not thou also have had compassion on thy fellow-servant, even as I had pity on thee?" Ah! yes, if we were governed by this spirit, all our personal breaches would be healed, we should be knit together in love, and Christ would be magnified.

Another thing would follow. If we thus loved one another it would turn to a testimony before the world, according to the words of our blessed Lord: "A new commandment I give unto you, that ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another. By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another." How blessed a testimony this would be! We sometimes have special prayer-meetings for the gospel, that the word may be in power, and surely we cannot wait too perseveringly on the Lord in prayer. But be certain of this — if love one to another is active in its manifestation in any assembly, souls will be both drawn and reached, and God will be glorified. As has often been said, we affect others more by what we are than by what we say. If therefore we desire to attract souls to the ministry of the gospel, love is the best advertisement.

There are two or three things more I would like to touch upon briefly, and they are the blessings connected with knowing the love of God. If we turn to verse 12, we read: "No man hath seen God at any time. If we love one another, God dwelleth in us, and his love is perfected in us." In the gospel it is, "No man hath seen God at any time; the, only begotten Son, which is in

the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him." Here I suppose that we are to learn that only the Son, the Son who is in the bosom of the Father, was competent to reveal the Father. None but a divine Person was sufficient for this, as the Lord said indeed: "Neither knoweth any man the Father save the Son, and he to whomsoever the Son will reveal him" (and it might perhaps be added that only the disciple who lay upon the breast of Christ was the suitable instrument to record the revelation). But in the epistle the revelation is made good. By what means? If we love one another, God dwelleth in us, and His love is perfected in us! Again, lower down — only this goes still further — "God is love; and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him." (Ver. 16.) Here are deeps which can never be fathomed; and yet how blessed to contemplate them!

Two remarks may be made with a practical object in view. If we love one another, God dwelleth in us — it is thus when love is in active manifestation that we are in the suited state for God to dwell in us. Nay it is more than this, loving one another, just because it is the activity of His own nature, *brings* God in; and, dwelling in us, He causes us to know His love ever more perfectly. Secondly, if we dwell in love, for God is love, we dwell in God, and God, for He is love, dwells in us. With what fervent desire then we should seek to be kept in the love of God! Are we waiting for heaven? Why, if we are in the truth of this, heaven is already brought into our souls. Oh, with what overflowing hearts we should be found together in assembly, if we entered into this, hearts which would find a blessed relief in pouring forth their praises and adoration in the power of the Holy Ghost!

In conclusion, I desire to refer you for a moment to a verse in 1 John 1: "If we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sins." (1 John 1: 7) I refer to this, as the question may arise in the minds of some as to how far the manifestation of our love one toward another should go. This scripture supplies the answer. The first thing it teaches is that God has wholly come out into the light; that is, that he has wholly revealed Himself; and it is indeed in the light that we learn that He is love. The second thing is, that if we walk in the light, as we can owing to the efficacy of the precious blood of Jesus Christ, God's Son, we have fellowship one with another. The circle of our fellowship then is the light, and we must never travel outside of that circle, but inside that circle there is nothing but love, and love in active manifestation. This is the limit of our fellowship, the circle of light, for that which is expressed there, in our fellowship, is HOLY LOVE. If you go outside of that circle, you go outside of the revelation God has made of Himself — a solemn thing to remember. Inside that circle you enjoy the revelation He has made, and it is that He is love; and it is in loving one another that you realise and express your unity and fellowship. It is always indeed that, when love is active, we realise the oneness of all the people of God.

I will not say more: if the Lord do but take a little of what has been before us, and bring it home to our hearts in the power of the Holy Ghost, it will be the means of lasting blessing to ourselves, and to the saints with whom we are in immediate fellowship. May He grant that it may be so for His own name's sake, and to Him shall be all the praise! E. D.