

S E R M O N I V.

I JOHN V. 2.

By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God, and keep his commandments.

OF all the marks that are useful in the trial of our spiritual state in reference to eternity, there is none affords a more clear and comfortable assurance of God's special and saving mercy, than love to the saints. This has often resolved the doubts, and quieted the fears of afflicted inquiring souls, when other graces have not been so apprehensible in their operations. But there is no mark which the deceitful heart does more securely rest upon, through the mistake of natural human love for that which is spiritual and divine: it is therefore most worthy our serious thoughts, the deceit being so easy and infinitely dangerous, to show what is the unfeigned genuine love of the brethren, to which salvation is annexed, to confirm the humble sincere christian, and undeceive presuming hypocrites.

The great design of St. John in this epistle, is to excite and inflame in christians the love of God, and of their brethren, the two comprehensive duties, and bright sum of the law, our principal perfections in heaven and earth. These he recommends by the most affectionate and obliging, the most warming, melting

persuasives; the superlative love of God to us, and our communion with the saints in nature and grace.

In the former ver: the apostle argues from the reality of the effect, as an evidence of the cause. "Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ," that is, the Saviour of the world, foretold by the prophets, and expresses the truth of that faith in a suitable conversation, "is born of God; and every one that loveth him that begat, loveth him also that is begotten of him." Grace is not less powerful in producing tender reciprocal affections between the offspring of the same heavenly Father, than the subordinate endearments of nature. The pretence is vain of love to God, without loving his regenerate children. And in the text he argues from the knowledge of the cause, to the discovering of the sincerity of the effect: "by this we know that we love the children of God," with a holy affection, "if we love God, and keep his commandments."

There is but one difficulty to be removed, that the force of the apostle's reasoning may appear; it is this, a medium to prove a thing must be a clearer evidence than what is concluded by it: now though a demonstration from the cause be more noble and scientific, yet that which is drawn from the effect, is more near to sense, and more discernible. And this is verified in the instance before us; for the love of God, who is absolutely spiritual in his being and excellencies, doth not with that sensible fervour affect and passionately transport us, as love to his children, with whom we visibly converse, and who are receptive of the most sensible testimonies of our affection. Accordingly the apostle argues, "he that loves not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen?" As the motives to love our brethren, from our conjunction in nature, and familiar conversation, are more capable to allure our affections, and more sensibly strike the heart than the invisible Deity, who is infinitely above us; by the same reason we may more easily judge of the truth of our love to them, than of our love to God. To this the answer is clear; the apostle doth not speak of the love of God, as a still, silent, contemplative affection, confined to the superior faculty of the soul, but as a burning, shining affection (like fire *) active and declarative of itself

* *Luminae qui semper proditur ipsi suo.*

in those effects that necessarily flow from it, that is voluntary obedience to his commands; and thus it becomes manifest to the renewed conscience, and is a most convincing proof of the sincerity of our love to the saints.

The text being cleared, affords this doctrine:

Doct. The sincerity of our love to the children of God, is certainly discovered by our love to God, and obedience to his commands.

For the illustration and proof of the point, I will briefly show,

I. Who are described by this title, The children of God.

II. What is included in our love to them.

III. What the love of God is, and the obedience that flows from it.

IV. How from love to God, and willing obedience to his commands, we may convincingly know the sincerity of our love to his children.

To explain the first, we must consider that this title, The children of God, is given upon several accounts.

First. By creation the angels are called the sons of God, and men his offspring.

The reason of the title is,

1. The manner of their production by his immediate power. Thus he is styled, "the Father of spirits," in distinction from the fathers of the flesh. For though the conception and forming of the body be the work of his secret providence, yet it is by the hand of nature, the parents concurring as the second causes of it: but the production of the soul is to be entirely ascribed to his power, without the intervention of any creature.

2. In their spiritual immortal nature, and the intellectual operations flowing from it, there is an image and resemblance of God; from whence this title is common to all reasonable creatures, and peculiar to them: for though matter may be ordered and fashioned by the hand of God into a figure of admirable beauty, yet it is not capable of his likeness and image; so that neither the lights of heaven, nor the beasts and plants of the earth are called his children.

Secondly. By external calling and covenant some are denominated his children; for by this evangelical constitution God is pleased to receive believers into a filial relation. Indeed where

there is not a cordial consent and subjection to the terms of the covenant, visible profession, and the receiving the external seals of it, will be of no advantage; but the public serious owning of the gospel, entitles a person to be of the society of christians; and *filius* and *fœderatus* are all one.

Thirdly. There is a sonship that arises from supernatural regeneration; that is the communicating a new nature to man, whereby there is a holy and blessed change in the directive and commanding faculties, the understanding and will, and in the affections, and consequently in the whole life. This is wrought by the efficacy of the word and Spirit, and is called by our Saviour regeneration, because it is not our original carnal birth, but a second and celestial. It is with the new man in grace, as with an infant in nature, that has the essential parts that compose a man; a soul endowed with all its faculties, a body with all its organs and parts, but not in the vigour of mature age. Thus renewed holiness in a christian, is complete and entire in its parts, but not in perfection of degrees; there is an universal inclination to all that is holy, just and good, and a universal aversion from sin, though the executive power be not equal. And regenerate christians are truly called the children of God; for as in natural generation there is communicated a principle of life and suitable operations, from whence the title and relation of a father arises; so in regeneration there are derived such holy and heavenly qualities to the soul, as constitute a divine nature in man, whereby he is partaker of the life and likeness of God himself: from hence he is a child of God, and has an interest and propriety in his favour, power and promises, and all the good that flows from them, and a title to the eternal inheritance.

II. I will show what is included in our love to the children of God.

First. The principle of this love is divine. "The soul is purified through the Spirit to unfeigned love of the brethren." 1 Pet. 1. 22. Naturally the judgment is corrupted, and the will depraved, that carnal respects either of profit or pleasure are the quick and sensible incitements of love; and till the soul be cured of the sensual contagion, the inclination can never be directed, and the desires fastened on the supernatural image of God in his saints. As holiness in the creature is a ray derived

from the infinite beauty of God's holiness, so the love of holiness is a spark from the sacred fire of his love. St. John exhorts christians, "let us love one another, for love is of God." 1 John 4. 7. Natural love among men is by his general providence, but a gracious love to the saints is by his special influence. The natural affection must be "baptized with the Holy Ghost, as with fire," to refine it to a divine purity.

Secondly. The qualifications of this love are as follow :

1. It is sincere and cordial ; it does not appear only in expressions from the tongue and countenance, but springs from the integrity of the heart. It is styled "unfeigned love of the brethren ; it is a love not in word and tongue only, but in deed and truth." A counterfeit formal affection, set off with artificial colours, is so far from being pleasing to God, the searcher and judge of hearts, that it is infinitely provoking to him.

2. It is pure ; the attractive cause of it is the image of God appearing in them. Our Saviour assures us, that love shall be gloriously rewarded, that respects a disciple upon that account as a disciple, and a righteous man as a righteous man. The holy love commanded in the gospel, is to christians for their divine relation, as the children of God, as the members of Christ, and temples of the Holy Ghost.

3. From hence it is universal, extended to all the saints. The church is composed of christians that are different in their gifts and graces, and in their external order ; some excel in knowledge, and zeal, and love, in active graces ; others in humility, meekness and patience, that sustain and adorn them in sufferings ; some are in a higher rank, others are in humble circumstances : as in the visible world things are placed suitably to their natures, the stars in the heavens, flowers in the earth ; and our special respects are due to those whom the favour of God has dignified above others, and in whom the brightness and power of grace shines more clearly : for according as there are more reasons that make a person deserving love, the degrees of love should rise in proportion. But a dear affection is due even to the lowest saints ; for all have communion in the same holy nature, and are equally instated in the same blessed alliance.

4. It must be fervent, not only in truth, but in a degree of eminency. St. Peter joins the two qualifications ; "see that ye

love one another with a pure heart fervently." Our Saviour sets before us his own pattern, as a pillar of fire to direct and inflame us; "This is my commandment, that ye love one another as I have loved you." John 15. 12. "As I have loved you!" Admirable example! His love was singular and superlative; a love that saves and astonishes us at once; for he willingly gave his precious life for our ransom. This we should endeavour to resemble, though our highest expressions of love and compassion to the saints, are but a weak and imperfect imitation of his divine perfection.

I shall add farther; this love includes all kinds of love.

(1.) The love of esteem correspondent to the real worth and special goodness of the saints. It is one character of a citizen of heaven, that "in his eyes a vile person is contemned," Psal. 15. however set off by the glory of the world, and the ornaments of the present state, that, as a false mask, conceal their foul deformity to carnal persons; "but he honours them that fear the Lord," though disfigured by calumnies, though obscured and depressed by afflictions, and made like their blessed head, in whom there was "no form nor comeliness in the judgment of fools." In our valuation, divine grace should turn the scales against all the natural or acquired perfections of body or mind; beauty, strength, wit, eloquence, human wisdom; against all the external advantages of this life, nobility, riches, power, and whatever is admired by a carnal eye. The judgment and love of God should regulate ours. A saint is more valued by God, than the highest princes; nay, than the angels themselves, considered only with respect to their spiritual nature. He calls them "his peculiar treasure, his jewels, the firstfruits of the creatures," sacred for his use and glory, in comparison of whom, the rest of the world are but dregs, a corrupt mass. They are styled "his sons;" being partakers of that life of which he is the author and pattern: and what are all the titles on earth, compared with so divine a dignity.

(2.) The love of desire, of their present and future happiness. The perfection of love consists more in the desire than in the effects; and the continued fervent prayers that the saints present to God for one another, are the expressions of their love.

(3.) The love of delight, in spiritual communion with them.

All the attractives of human conversation, wit, mirth, sweetness of behaviour, and wise discourse, cannot make any society so dear and pleasant to one that is a lover of holiness, as the communion of saints. David, whose breast was very sensible of the tender affections of love and joy, tells us, that "the saints in the earth, the excellent, were the chief objects of his delight." Psal. 16. And consequent to this, there is a cordial sympathy with them in their joys and sorrows, being members of the same body, and having an interest in all their good or evil. It is observable, when the Holy Spirit describes the sweetest human comforts that are the present reward of the godly man, the enjoyment of his estate in the dear society of his wife and children, there is a promise annexed, that sweetens all the rest, that "he shall see the good of Jerusalem, and peace upon Israel." Psal. 128. Without this all temporal comforts are mixed with bitter displeasure to him. There is an eminent instance of this in Nehemiah, whom all the pleasures of the Persian court could not satisfy, whilst Jerusalem was desolately miserable. Neh. 2.

(4.) The love of service and beneficence, that declares itself in all outward offices and acts for the good of the saints: and these are various; some are of a sublimer nature, and concern their souls; as spiritual counsel and instruction, compassionate admonition and consolation, the confirming them in good, and the fortifying them against evil, the doing whatever may preserve and advance the life and vigour of the inward man; others respect their bodies and temporal condition; directing them in their affairs, protecting them from injuries, supplying their wants, universally assisting them for their tolerable passage through the world. And all these acts are to be cheerfully performed; there is more joy in conferring than receiving a benefit, because love is more exercised in the one than the other. In short, the highest effect of love that comprises all the rest, is to die for the brethren; and this we ought to do when the honour of God, and welfare of the church require it. "Hereby perceive we the love of God, because he laid down his life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren." If christians thus loved one another, the church on earth would be a lively image of the blessed society above.

III. The love of God, and obedience to his commands, the product of it, are to be considered.

The love of God has its rise from the consideration of his amiable excellencies, that render him infinitely worthy of the highest affection; and from the blessed benefits of creation, preservation, redemption and glorification, that we may expect from his pure goodness and mercy. This is the most clear and essential character of a child of God, and most peculiarly distinguishes him from unrenewed men, however accomplished by civil virtues.

Now the internal exercise of love to God, in the valuation of his favour, as that which is better than life, in earnest desires of communion with him, in ravishing joy in the testimonies and assurance of his love, in mourning for what is displeasing to him, is in the secret of the soul; but with this there is inseparably joined a true and visible declaration of our love in obedience to him. "This is the love of God, the most real and undeceitful expression of it, "that we keep his commandments." 1 John 3. 16.

The obedience that springs from love, is,

1. Uniform and universal; for the two principal and necessary effects of love are an ardent desire to please God, and an equal care not to displease him in any thing. Now the law of God is the signification of his sovereign and holy will, and the doing of it is very pleasing to him, both upon the account of the subjection of the creature to his authority, and conformity to his purity: he declares that obedience is better than the most costly sacrifice. There is an absolute peremptory repugnance between love to him, and despising his commands: and from thence it follows, that love inclines the soul to obey all God's precepts, not only those of easy observation, but the most difficult and distasteful to the carnal appetites; for the authority of God runs through all, and his holiness shines in all. Servile fear is a partial principle, and causes an unequal respect to the divine law; it restrains from sins of greater guilt, from such disorderly and dissolute actions at which conscience takes fire; but others are indulged: it excites to good works of some kind, but neglects others that are equally necessary. But love regards the whole law in all its injunctions and prohibitions; not merely to please ourselves, that we may not feel the stings of an accusing conscience, but to please the lawgiver.

2. The obedience of love is accurate; and this is a natural

consequence of the former. The divine law is a rule not only for our outward conversation, but of our thoughts and affections, of all the interior workings of the soul, that are open before God. Thus it requires religious service, not only in the external performance, but those reverent holy affections, those pure aims, wherein the life and beauty, the spirit and true value of divine worship consists. Thus it commands the duties of equity, charity and sobriety, all civil and natural duties for divine ends, to "please and glorify God." Heb. 13. 16. It forbids all kinds and degrees of sin; not only gross acts, but the inward lustings that have a tendency to them. Now the love of God is the principle of spiritual perfection. It is called "the fulfilling of the law," 1 Cor. 10. 31. not only as it is a comprehensive grace, but in that it draws forth all the active powers of the soul to obey it in an exact manner. This causes a tender sense of our failings, and a severe circumspection over our ways, that nothing be allowed that is displeasing to the divine eyes. Since the most excellent saints are God's chiefest favourites, love makes the holy soul to strive to be like him in all possible degrees of purity. Thus St. Paul, in whom the love of Christ was the imperial commanding affection, declares, his zealous endeavour to be "conformable to the death of Christ," in dying to sin, as Christ died for sin, and that "he might attain to the resurrection of the dead," Phil. 3. 10, 11. that perfection of holiness that is in the immortal state.

3. The obedience of love is chosen and pleasant. "This is the love of God, that we keep his commandments, and his commandments are not grievous." 1 John 5. 3. Those that are strangers to this heavenly affection, imagine that a solicitous diligent respect to all God's precepts, is a melancholy task; but it is delightful to the saints: for obedience is the continual exercise of love to God, the paradise of holy souls. The mortification of the carnal appetites, and the restraint from such objects as powerfully insinuate and engage carnal hearts, is with a freer complacency to a saint, than a sensual fruition of them. The sharpest sufferings for religion are allayed, nay sweetend to a saint from the love of God, that is then most sincerely, strongly, and purely acted. The apostle more rejoiced in sharp tribulation for Christ's sake, than in divine revelation.

4. The love of God produces persevering obedience. Servile

compliance is inconstant. A slave hates the duties he performs, and loves the sins he dares not commit; therefore as soon as he is released from his chain and his fear, his obedience ceases: but a son is perfectly pleased with his Father's will, and the tenor of his life is correspondent to it. He that is pressed by fear to serve in an army, will desert his colours the first opportunity; but a volunteer, that for the love of valour, and of his country, lists himself, will continue in the service. The motion that is caused by outward poises, will cease when the weights are down; but that which proceeds from an inward principle of life, is continual; and such is the love of God planted in the breast of a christian.

IV. We are to prove that from the love of God, and willing obedience to his commands, we may convincingly know the sincerity of our love to his children.

There is an inseparable union between these two graces, and the one arises out of the other. "Godliness and brotherly kindness" are joined by the apostle. And it will be evident that where this affection of love to the saints is sincere and gracious, there will be an entire and joyful respect to the law of God, by considering the reasons and motives of it.

First. The divine command requires this love. "These things I command you," saith our Saviour, "that ye love one another." This precept so often repeated, and powerfully reinforced by him, made so deep an impression on the first christians, that "they had one heart, and one soul, and their estates were common between them." And in the next succeeding ages, this fraternal love was so conspicuous in the professors of his sacred discipline, that their enemies observed it as a rare and remarkable thing: * "See how the christians love one another! See how ready they are to die for one another!" Now the same gracious principle that inclines us to do one command, will make us universally willing to observe all; for sincere obedience primarily respects the authority of the lawgiver, which binds the whole law upon the conscience. And as he that "breaks the law wilfully in one point, is guilty of all," Jam. 2. because the violation of a single precept proceeds from the same cause that induces men to transgress all, that is, contempt of the divine

* Tert. Apol. c. 33.

majesty; so he that sincerely obeys one command, does with consent of heart, and serious endeavours obey all. And from hence it is clear, that without a religious and unreserved regard of the divine commands, it is impossible there should be in any person a gracious affection to the saints; that is the product of obedience to God, and consequently the observance of his precepts, is the certain proof of our love to his children.

Secondly. Spiritual love to the saints arises from the sight of the divine image appearing in their conversation. Now if the beauty of holiness be the attractive of our love, it will be fastened on the law of God in the most intense degree. The most excellent saints on earth have some mixtures of corruption; their holiness is like the morning-light, that is checkered with the shadows and obscurity of the night; and it is our wisdom not to love their infirmities, but to preserve an unstained affection to them. But the law of God is the fairest transcript of his nature, wherein his glorious holiness is most resplendent. "The law of the Lord is perfect, converting the soul; the commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes." Psal. 19. 7, 8. This ravished the heart of David with an inexpressible affection. "O how I love thy law! It is my meditation all the day." Psal. 119. And he repeats the declaration of his love to it with new fervour, upon this ground; "I love thy law, because it is pure." Now love to the commands of God will transcribe them in our hearts and lives. As affectionate expressions to the children of God, without the real supply of their wants, are but the shadows of love; so words of esteem and respect to the law of God, without unfeigned and universal obedience, are but an empty pretence.

Thirdly. The divine relation of the saints to God as their Father, is the motive of spiritual love to them. And this is consequent to the former; for by partaking of his holiness, they partake of his life and likeness. And from hence they are the dearest objects of his love; his eye and heart are always upon them. Now if this consideration excites love to the children of God, it will be as powerful to incline us to keep his commands; for the law of God, that is the copy of his sacred will, is most near to his nature, and he is infinitely tender of it. Our Saviour tells us, that "it is easier for heaven and earth to pass away, than for one tittle of the law to fail." Luke 16. 17. If the entire

world, and all the inhabitants of it were destroyed, there would be no loss to God ; but if the law lose its authority and obligation, the divine holiness would suffer a blemish.

The use of the doctrine is, to try our love to the children of God, to which all pretend, by this infallible rule, our obedience to his commands. This is absolutely necessary, because the deceit is so easy and so dangerous : and it will be most comfortable, if upon this trial our love be found to be spiritual and divine. The deceit is easy, because acts of love may be expressed to the saints from other principles than the love of God : some for vain-glory are bountiful ; and when their charity seems so visibly divine, that men admire it, there is the worm of vanity at the root, that corrupts and makes it odious to God. The pharisees are charged with this by our Saviour ; Mat. 6. 2. their alms were not the effect of charity, but ostentation ; and whilst they endeavoured to make their vices virtuous, they made their virtues vicious. There is a natural love among persons united by consanguinity, that remains so entire since the ruin of mankind by the fall, and is rather from the force of nature, than the virtue of the will, and this in all kind offices may be expressed to the saints. There is a sweetness of temper in some, that inclines them to wish well to all, and such tender affections that are easily moved and melted at the sight of others miseries ; and such may be beneficent and compassionate to the saints in their afflictions : but the spring of this love is good-nature, not divine grace. There are human respects that incline others to kindness to the saints, as they are united by interest, fellow-citizens and neighbours, and as they receive advantage by commerce with them, or as obliged by their benefits : but civil amity and gratitude are not that holy affection that is an assurance of our spiritual state. There are other motives of love to the saints, that are not so low nor mercenary ; in the thickest darkness of paganism, the light of reason discovered the amiable excellence of virtue, as becoming the human nature, and useful for the tranquillity and welfare of mankind ; and the moral goodness that adorns the saints, the innocence, purity, meekness, justice, clemency, benignity, that are visible in their conversations, may draw respects from others who are strangers to the love of God, and careless of his commandments.

And as the mistake of this affection is easy, so it is infinitely

dangerous ; for he that builds his hope of heaven upon a “sandy foundation,” upon false grounds, will fall ruinously from his hopes and felicity at last. How fearful will be the disappointment of one that has been a favourer of the saints, that has defended their cause, protected their persons, relieved their necessities, and presumed for this, that his condition is safe as to eternity, though he lives in the known neglect of other duties, and the indulgent practice of some sin ?

But if we find that our love to the children of God flows from our love to God, that sways the soul to an entire compliance to his commands, and makes us observant of them in the course of our lives: what a blessed hope arises from this reflection ? We need not have the book of the divine decrees opened, and the secrets of election unveiled ; “for we know that we are passed from death to life, if we love the brethren.” 1 John 3. 14. This is an infallible effect and sign of the spiritual life, and the seed and evidence of eternal life.