

# A Sermon on the Nature of Love to God

Preached at Ashby, Massachusetts, April 1812

By Seth Payson, D.D.  
Pastor of the Church of Rindge, New Hampshire

“But as it is written, 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”—1 Corinthians. 2:9.

This passage is a quotation from the Old Testament (Isa. 64:4). Like many other predictions of the ancient prophets, it appears to have a primary reference to the light and glory, which should attend the rising of the sun of righteousness; but at the same time, directing the eye of faith to the consummation of all the blessings, which God has prepared for his church, and which, we are taught here, as elsewhere, belong to those only, who love God. Though a future life of immortal bliss was more fully brought to light by the Gospel, yet we are not to conceive, that the reward which awaits the righteous beyond the grave, was concealed from ancient saints. They confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth; who had here no continuing city, but looked for one which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God (Heb. 11:13, 10). It was the view, which faith gave them of these invisible glories, which supported them under the evils of life, and stimulated them to those heroic deeds, which the Apostle, in his Epistle to the Hebrews, so worthily celebrates. May the same Spirit, which raised their minds to such a glorious elevation above the world, excite us, under our greatly increased privileges, to become followers of those, who, through faith and patience, inherit the promises. Of this glorious state, our text is calculated to give us the most exalted views; while it also teaches us the qualification requisite for our enjoying the same.

We are here led to consider, first, the nature of that love to God, which is essential to our enjoying the happiness of heaven; and second, the representation here given of the felicities of that state.

In this discourse our attention will be confined to a consideration of the nature of love to God.\* To love God, Christ declares to be the first and great command. It is the sum of all religion and holiness. To understand the nature of this grace, and to possess its happy influence, is, therefore, to us, of the first importance. The many errors to which men are liable on this subject, affords us a further excitement to give it our serious attention.

Love is an exercise totally distinct from a conviction of duty, or the dictates of conscience. Neither will the strongest convictions produce love, nor can it be called into exercise by the force of argumentation. It arises from the conformity of the beloved object to the taste or relish of the heart. Love to God implies,

First, a just view of his character. If we have formed a wrong idea of God, our loving that ideal existence, is no proof of love to the true God, but the contrary. This is a point where many doubtless are fatally deceived. Because they love the idol which is the creature of their own carnal imaginations, they fancy that they love God. The Jews, in the days of Christ, loved the God which they had formed to themselves — a God who they supposed loved them, and was delighted with their long prayers, and heartless services: but we have undeniable proofs, that these persons were destitute of love to the God of Israel; for, if they had loved the Father, they would have loved him, who was the brightness of the Father’s glory, and the express image of his Person (Heb. 1:3). In their malicious rage against Christ, we have a perfect expression of their enmity to the holy character of God. On the same principle, the Papist loves a God, who he thinks will pardon all his sins, when he has performed the appointed penance. The formal

Protestant loves a God, who, he believes, looks on his multiplied duties with approbation, while his heart is yet in alliance with sin and the world. The Universalist loves a God, who he hopes will save him, though he should not submit to the hateful conditions of repentance and faith. Finally, the enthusiast, who fancies that he has seen Christ smiling upon him, or heard a voice from heaven, assuring him that his sins are forgiven, will love a God, who, he thinks, has thus distinguished him from others; for sinners love those who love them.

In his Word, God has given us a view of his true character; if we love him, that character, in every part of it, will be pleasing to us. Far from being disposed to deprive him of that holiness, which is his glory; of that justice which supports the authority of his law, and maintains perfect equity in his kingdom, or of that absolute sovereignty which of right belongs to him, and forms the glory and strength of his government, the real friends of God accord in their feelings with those whom St. John heard exclaiming with united voices, "Just and true are thy ways, thou King of Saints. Who shall not fear thee, O Lord, and glorify thy name? For thou only art holy" (Rev. 15:3-4).

Many turn away with disgust from the character of God as exhibited in his Word, and yet, such is the deceitfulness of sin, see not the enmity of their hearts to him. If we love not an holy and sin-hating God, we love not him who reigns, and ever will reign, on the throne of heaven. If we cannot endure the idea of a God, who now punishes sin, and who will pursue it with everlasting wrath, we most certainly hate him, who has declared, "That the wicked shall be turned into hell, and all the nations that forget God" (Ps. 9:17). If it be our wish, that the declaration, "I will have mercy, on whom I will have mercy" (Rom. 9:15), was erased from the Word of God, then we wish that God was deprived of the throne he now possesses; and had we a power equal to our will, his creation would no longer enjoy the blessed effects of his perfect and absolute government. If we love not that character of God which is given us in his Word, we love not the God, before whom, we must appear in judgment.

Second, love to God will be attended with love to his law, and a sincere delight in all its requirements. The law is a perfect expression of the purity and holiness of its Author. It brings those who render a perfect obedience to it, to the highest degree of conformity to God, to which creatures can be raised. If God is to us glorious in holiness, we cannot but be delighted with that law, which is an exact expression of the rectitude of his nature. They who are destitute of the love of God, have the same feelings towards his law, which they have towards him — it is too strict, too holy for them. It would require great abatements, to reduce it to their taste. But when the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts, the law of the Lord will appear perfect: we shall then esteem all its precepts concerning all things to be right; and though it condemns us in every particular, we shall still pronounce it holy, just and good.

Third, those who love God will rejoice in his government, and submissively acquiesce in all the dispensations of his providence. This will be the effect of love to God, not only as it is natural to entrust our concerns in the hands of those we love, but, as far as we have any due regard to our own interests, or to the interests of the universe, it will be matter of unspeakable joy, to see all things under the control and absolute disposal of Jehovah. The mind cannot form an idea of any-thing more glorious, than, the government of infinite love, directed by unerring wisdom, and supported by Almighty power; exerting itself with absolute sovereignty, so that nothing can in any degree defeat its plans, or obstruct its purposes. Under such a government nothing can take place but that which is promotive of the glory of God, the greatest good of the universe, and the best interests of those, who put their trust in him. If we have any just sense of our own blindness, and of the perfections of God, we shall be easily persuaded, that those things which, to our narrow minds, appear as evils and defects, will, in the issue, be found to be so many proofs of Divine wisdom and goodness. "They who know thy name," said the Psalmist, truly "will put their trust in thee" (9:10).

Fourth, those who love God love his children. To those who are really such, God has

communicated his image; and if we love him who is begat, we shall love him that is begotten of him (1 John 5:1). If we love the original, we shall love the resemblance. If we love the parent, we shall love the children that resemble him; and we shall love them, not only for their likeness to the parent, but for their relation to him. We are most solemnly assured, "If any man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar" (1 John 4:20). We are commanded, not only not to injure, slander, or reproach such, but to do them all possible good, even to be ready to lay down our lives for their sakes. If, then, those only are Christians, who are perfect in obedience, where are Christians to be found? What reason, alas, have those who have made the greatest progress, to confess, with the Apostle, That they have not yet attained to perfection. There are many, indeed, who lay a claim to this evidence of the reality of their religion. If we love anything, say they, we love our dear brethren in Christ. But why do you love them? Is it not from some other consideration than their likeness to God, or their resemblance of him? Many love those of their own party, sect, or denomination; especially if those who join them are comparatively few. It is also natural to love those who speak well of us, and who assist us in those things on which our desires and affections are placed. But do you love the faithful reprovcr, who tells you of your faults? Do you love those whose names are cast out by the world as evil; and do you love them for that for which they are hated and despised of men, that is, their strict and conscientious walk with God? Do you love men of every denomination, as far as they exhibit the spirit of holiness? This, and this only, is that love of the brethren, which is a proof of our love to God.

Fifth, love to God will produce love to his cause, and proportionable desires to promote and advance it. The advancement of true religion involves in it the highest display of the glory of God, the best interests of men, and the peace, comfort and sanctification of our own souls; if then this cause, which is calculated to excite every pious feeling of the heart; the cause which was the object of God's eternal counsels, the cause for which the Son of God came from heaven, in which he labored, and for which he died; if this cause is not dear to our hearts; if we are alive to worldly speculation, and schemes of present aggrandizement, but have no heart to pray and labor for the prosperity of Zion, how dwelleth the love of God in us? The Psalmist spake the feelings of the friends of God, when he declared, That he preferred Jerusalem to his chief joy. How fervent were his affections on this subject! "If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning. If I do not remember thee, let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth" (137:5-6).

Sixth, love to God will be attended with frequent and delightful thoughts of him. David's love to God often broke out in expressions like these, I meditate on all thy works. I have remembered thy name, O Lord, in the night; my meditation of thee shall be sweet. How naturally, and with what pleasure, do the thoughts run to a beloved object. Where the treasure is, there will the heart be also; and where the heart is, there the thoughts will be busily and delightfully employed. How then do men persuade themselves that they love God, when he is not in all their thoughts? Oh, how great and alarming is the deceitfulness of sin!

Seventh, those who love God will delight in, and diligently attend on those means, by which he is wont to manifest himself to those who seek him. If we love God, shall we not love that precious book in which he causes his glory to pass before us? When the bible is neglected; when prayer is neglected, and our language is, What profit shall we have if we pray unto him? When the holy day of God is loitered away in idleness; wasted in thinking our own thoughts, and speaking our own words, or spent in the pursuits of worldly gain; and when that ordinance, in which the Savior of sinners requires us to remember his dying love, is disregarded, what evidence have we that the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts? None, all must confess, who admit the Scriptures to be the standard of true religion; yet multitudes, who cannot be supposed to be the subjects of real religion, or the love of God, plead their attendance on Divine institutions, as evidence in their favor. But, my friend, have you ever asked yourself why, and how, you attend on these means of grace? Is it a desire to see the glory of God, as his saints have seen it in the sanctuary, which brings you to the house of God; for we may show much love to

God, while our hearts are yet going after their idols (Ezek. 33:31). Do we attend on these means with that application, diligence and perseverance with which we labor to increase our worldly possessions, or to obtain deliverance from bodily diseases? Do we search for knowledge as for silver? And seek it as hid treasures? Do we go to the house of God as those who are intent on worldly gain go to an earthly market? Such desires after God, and not an unfeeling formal attendance on the institutions of religion, is the true evidence of the love of God.

Eighth, a disposition to keep his commandments, and in all things prove our fidelity to him, is another invariable effect of love to God in the heart. Love is strong as death. It gives a commanding authority to the desires of a friend, even when that friend has no real authority over us, nor his request any special excellency to induce our compliance; but in the present case, the perfect excellency of the law of God; the awful weight of his authority; the constraining influence of the love of Christ, and a due regard to our own present and future happiness, all combine to excite those who love God to keep his commandments.

These excitements to holiness will, in the present case be greatly increased by a disposition, which is strong in human nature, to be ourselves, what we admire in others. True love to God, as we have seen, is founded, not in the selfish idea that he loves us in particular, and has distinguished us from others; but in the excellency of his perfections, character and government. To his real friends, he is *glorious in holiness*, but what appears glorious and lovely in the Divine character, we shall endeavor to imitate; striving to be holy, as he is holy, and perfect, as our Father in heaven is perfect. How fatal, then, is the delusion of those, who persuade themselves that they love God, while they yet live under the influence of those unrighteous, unmerciful and wicked tempers, which are perfectly opposite to the holy nature of God?

Ninth, love to God will produce deep regret and humiliation for our past transgressions. A fear of offending one we love, is one of the most powerful principles in our nature. Joseph felt its influence, when he thus expressed the feelings of a pious heart, "How can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God" (Gen. 39:9). Love is no less powerful to melt the heart into contrition for offense given, than to restrain us from giving it. True penitents are, therefore, represented as looking on him whom they have pierced, mourning, as one that mourneth for an only son (Zech. 12:10). Those, who excuse their past wickedness, dwell upon it in their thoughts with secret pleasure, or pride themselves on relating their sinful feats, are certainly destitute of the love of God.

Once more. Those who love God will desire to enjoy him in his heavenly kingdom. But who, you will say, does not desire to go to heaven? All, doubtless, desire happiness; and many, hearing heaven described as a world of perfect bliss, fancy that they desire it; but did these persons realize what composes this happiness, they would see at once, that it is no heaven for them.

The objects of the Christian's desire are, to go to God — to serve him with all his powers, and forever to ascribe all praise and glory to his name. These are the things, principally, which make heaven desirable in the view of the friends of God. To rest from the labors and sufferings of the present state, is, indeed, a great good; but to be free from sin; to have their hearts filled with humility, gratitude and love; to have all their faculties unceasingly engaged in the service of God, without weariness or wandering; to behold, without any intervening cloud, infinite loveliness, and to have a constant sense of the unchangeable love of God to them; this, to those who love God, constitutes the greatest good which heaven itself can yield.

## IMPROVEMENT

1. If love to God, which is the sum of religion, renders his ways and service, all our thoughts of him, and all our approaches to him pleasant, then the ways of religion must be ways of pleasantness, and all her paths peace. While destitute of love, persons find no pleasure in the service and praises of God, and judging of others by themselves, they conclude that religion is to all the same dull, formal, and wearisome service. But, sinner, if ever the love of God is shed

abroad in your heart, you will then feel, and own, the happy difference.

Christians, indeed, find but little of that heavenly joy, which would be the consequence, if their love was such as to produce in them a constant single eye to the glory of God. Our duty and happiness are here intimately connected, and our pleasure in the service of God will be in proportion to our love to him.

2. From this view, of the nature of that love, which is the sum of religion, we are taught the nature of that depravity, which possesses the unregenerate heart, and which is directly opposite to that love of God, that has now been described. To such the character of God is hateful and his ways grievous; he is not an object to which their thoughts are ever carried out with delight; in their view, his laws are the requisitions of an hard master; far from rejoicing in the government of Jehovah, it is not their will that he should reign over them, and as Christ was hateful to men of this character, his faithful followers must not expect their love. Christians, indeed, at this day, have hardly religion enough to offend the world, but this is undeniable, that it is not the image of Christ in his professed followers, for which they are loved by the world. Nor is the promotion of religion in himself, or in the world, an object of desire to the unrenewed sinner; it rather fills him with uneasiness to see those around him impressed with a sense of its importance; and though such persons may give their support, and attention to the forms of religion, and confess their sins in the language of penitence, yet all these effects may, and in them do arise, either from a regard to reputation; the clamors of an uneasy conscience, or some other motive, separate from holy love. And far from desiring the enjoyment of God in heaven, communion with him makes no part of the sinner's joy; but even when he is professedly engaged in his service his heart and affections are pursuing their idols.

These things are so perfectly natural, and so common in our world, that they are not considered by these persons as affording any just cause of alarm, so long as they avoid gross crimes, and maintain their reputation in the world; but, however they may appear to us, they are the sad evidences of a soul totally destitute of the holy image of God, and dead in trespasses and sins; nor is the most offensive corpse so disgusting to our senses, as such a soul to a God of infinite purity. In such characters we see vessels of wrath fitted to destruction.

3. It becomes us to bring this subject to ourselves by serious self-examination. The love of God is one grand characteristic of his children, in distinction from the unbelieving world. Are we possessed of it? If delight in the character given of God in his Word; love to his law, and to those who live godly in Christ Jesus; a disposition to rejoice in the Divine government; an earnest desire for the advancement of true religion, and to be perfect as God is perfect; if self-abhorrence for sin, and longing desires for a life of communion with God here, and to serve and praise him forever in heaven, are among the essential fruits of love to him, must not many among us, unless they shut their eyes against the light, be convinced, that the love of God is not in them? But if this is the unhappy case of any to whom I now speak, oh, turn not away from the friendly, though painful light, which your Savior sends you, that seeing your danger, you may seek and find the precious remedy, while it is yet to be obtained. What madness, unhappy creature, is that which makes thee an enemy to Infinite Excellence! Which moves you to hate him in whose hands thy breath is, and whose are all thy ways! Consider the ungrateful part you are acting, while rejecting such a Savior as Jesus! Consider too, the danger of standing in rebellion against the King of kings. Are you willing to live and die an enemy to your Maker, a stranger to the peace, the joy, the salvation which Jesus gives! Are you willing to join the malignant spirits of hell in forever blaspheming your Creator and Redeemer? But the course you are pursuing, little as you consider it, is leading directly to this issue; every step you take in this way increases the evidence, that this will be your end, and, unless you receive the love of God into your hearts, this will soon be the dreadful catastrophe of your departure from God.

4. This subject, duly improved, will promote the work of humiliation in the people of God. If the foregoing inquiry affords us any evidence, any scriptural ground to hope that the love of God

has been shed abroad in our hearts, does it not, at the same time, bring those things to view, which may justly lead us to abhor ourselves, and to repent as in dust and ashes! Is it not even difficult to find in ourselves any real evidences of the love of God, or to say what sacrifices we are making; what self-denial we are practicing; which shows our attachment to him whom we call our Master and Lord?

Abraham left his country at the call of God, and prepared to offer up his son, his only son, and even to become himself the perpetrator of a deed, to which all the natural feelings of the heart must have been perfectly repugnant. From love to God Moses rejected the alluring treasures and crown of Egypt. David panted for God as the hart panteth for the cooling stream; and dedicated the fruits of his victories to build him a house. Many ancient saints cheerfully endured all kinds of sufferings and privations in the cause of God. The Apostles accounted not their lives dear, that they might receive the joyful approbation of the Lord. The primitive Christians took joyfully the spoiling of their goods for Christ's sake. And the poor widow cast her two mites into the treasury of the Lord. But what sacrifices are we making for God? Lord increase our faith. Amen.