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The Great Commandment.

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TEXT:—1 John III., 23, 24. "And this is His commandment, that we should believe in the name of His Son Jesus Christ, and



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love one another, even as He gave us commandment. And he that keepeth His commandment abideth in Him, and He in him. And hereby we know that He abideth in us, by the Spirit which He gave us." In this part of his epistle, John has been insisting very strongly on the necessity of true love. He tells us that love is the great test whereby we can know in what spiritual state we are. "We know that we have passed from death into life, because we love the brethren. He that loveth not abideth in death." (v. 14). Love is the great power for self sacrifice. "Hereby know we love because He laid down His life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren" (v. 16). Love, wherever it really lives in the heart, is always flowing forth in kindly service, opening the door of compassion so that we love in deed and in truth (v. 18). Love is the great means of reassuring our hearts before God. "Hereby shall we know that we are of the truth, and shall assure our heart before Him" (v. 19). Thus, John, like Paul, has exalted love to a high place in the Christian life.

Now from teachings such as these, so practical and so precious, the natural heart might take false comfort and argue that all that is required of us is to do what is kind and benevolent, and it does not much matter what we believe. They might say, does not John here endorse the sentiment of the oft quoted couplet—

"For forms of faith let graceless bigots fight,
He can't be wrong, whose life is in the right."

This is one of several errors into which men have fallen in regard to the Christian life, and it is one exceedingly congenial to the men of this century and of this continent.

Time was when men thought that the Christian life consisted of a bundle of doctrines, and that the sure test of being a Christian was for a man to delight in the orderly arrangement of scriptural truth, in the discussion and dissection of knotty theological points, in the separation of orthodoxy from heterodoxy. These may be called Doctrinists, and they are not a numerous class to day, cannot be, because so many professing Christians are ignorant of their Bibles, and indifferent to the value of sound doctrine.

A more numerous class are the Sacerdotalists, who make the Christian life consist of a bundle of ceremonies. They think they must be good Christians because of their punctilious performance of all religious rites and ceremonies, attending to fasts and feasts, times and seasons, in submission to a religious hierarchy and under its direction. They are a feverish host, with unquenchable thirst for countless observances, a "rage for ceremonials and statistics."

Then there is another class, whom we may call the Sentimentalists. They think they must be Christians because of the pleasant feelings that are stirred within them when they listen to a touching sermon, or read a pathetic tale, or gaze on a sublime picture, or listen to a grand oratorio or a sweet service of praise. With them the Christian life is resolved into a bundle of emotions. That they are a numerous class is shown by the way in which so many churches are striving to win their patronage.

Then there is a fourth class, whom we may call the Philanthropists, because they think they are good Christians on account of their good deeds and kindly benevolences. Creeds of all kinds are to them a matter of small concern. Religious views and scripture doctrines they do not trouble their heads about. They resolve the Christian life into a bundle of philanthropic actions. "Humanity is the one article of their creed. Altruism their highest duty." This is the fashionable class around us to-day, and it is not difficult to imagine some members of this class taking false comfort to themselves from a one sided view of the teachings of John in this part of his epistle.

He has been dwelling so much on the necessity of love, in deed and in truth—that is, of love which finds its practical outflow in good deeds, that they might conclude that to be benevolent and kind is everything. The love of which John speaks is to them nothing more than natural benevolence. This is an error which is seducing many around us in these days, a very plausible and pleasant error, which harmonizes entirely with what is called "this tolerant age" in which we live; an age which is never wearied of repeating, with increasing confidence, that a man's creed is of little consequence, the all important things are his deeds, that it is not our faith but our works; not what we believe but what we do, which will commend us to God. Thus it is nothing more than the modern phase of the old contention between justification by faith

and justification by works. Now it is in reference to these things that John here gives the great commandment which puts everything in its right place. Notice how John concludes his teaching on this subject. After saying, "Beloved, if our hearts condemn us not we have boldness before God, and whatsoever we ask we receive of Him because we keep His commandments and do the things that are pleasing in His sight" (vs. 21-22); he adds, "And this is His commandment, that we believe in the name of His Son Jesus Christ and love one another even as He gave us commandment." Hence, this popular talk is all wrong. They speak contrary to the scriptures who say that all that is required is to do what is right, and that it does not much matter what we believe. Not so says the apostle. In order to do what is right, it is necessary to believe. Faith is the first step in true obedience to God's commandments.

Notice well, that John does not say that the commandments are Faith and Love, but the commandment. The thing God commands is Faith and Love. Therefore, two things are plainly taught. The Love of which John speaks is inseparable from Faith. The Faith of which John speaks is inseparable from Love. The Faith that is not accompanied by Love is no Faith. The Love that is not accompanied by Faith is no Love. You can no more separate Faith from Love, and have each a living thing acceptable to God, than you can cut a living body in two and have each part alive. He that does not love in deed and in truth has not Faith. He that does not believe has not Love. We may do many things good and beneficial in themselves, the fruit of natural kindness of heart, and these may be very pleasing in the sight of man—all men will praise us for them; but we cannot do that which is pleasing in the sight of God, except we keep His commandments. This truth is self-evident. In our dealings with God it will never do for us to make our own terms with God—to compound with Him, as it were, and make our attention to one duty an excuse for not attending to another. If we would please Him we must do what He commands; and what does He command? What is the commandment which He puts before and above all others, which He considers of primary importance, essential to the establishing of a right relation between Him and us? "This is His commandment that we should believe in the name of His Son Jesus Christ."

Why should God lay such stress on this commandment? Why is it so fundamental? Because God is holy. He desires our holiness, and He knows that only in the keeping of this commandment are we sinners enabled to keep all the other commandments. Perfect obedience, perfect love, the doing of the things that are pleasing in God's sight, are all wrapped up in faith. The only door of entrance into perfect obedience to all God's commandments is the door of faith. He knows that if we truly believe in His Son Jesus Christ, we will love one another and do the things that are pleasing in His sight, therefore this is His great commandment. And to this correspond the words of the Saviour. When they asked Him, "What must we do to work the works of God?" how did He answer? Build a hospital, endow a charity, feed the hungry, clothe the naked, shelter the outcast? Nay, but "This is the work of God, that ye believe on Him whom He hath sent." Except we do this, nothing else that we do can be pleasing to God; but we can do nothing that will please Him more than this. This is what His heart is set upon, what He desires first of all from us, that the Son of His love should be the object of our faith. What a word is this for the sinner! You feel that you are in no condition to keep God's commandments so as to please Him. But here is something you can do which will please Him greatly. "Believe in the name of His Son Jesus Christ." He will be pleased with your keeping of no other commandment, but He will be pleased with your keeping of this. You may be in no circumstances to do anything else that will be pleasing in His sight, but you are in the very circumstances to do that which will please Him best. Sinner, think of it! God asks of you if you will do Him this pleasure, to believe in the name of His Son. This is His commandment here and now to keep. Here is the thing pleasing in His sight, here and now to do. Without faith it is impossible to please Him, but faith does please Him, it pleases Him well; therefore, believe in the name of His Son Jesus Christ.

Special stress is also laid on this commandment, because God is loving. It is His desire to bless us, to do us good. He has no pleasure in the death of him that dieth. It is His desire to make us partakers of the divine nature, to lift us out of darkness into light, out of death into life; to make us, who are by nature the children of wrath, in very deed the children of God. All those blessings depend on faith in Jesus Christ. "As many as received Him to them gave He the right to become children of God, even to them that believe on His name."

Now, filled with a sense of our great unworthiness, we sinners might say: such an honor is too great for me; it would be presumption for me to lay hold of it. But when I see that God commands me to believe, lays upon me all the weight of divine authority to shut me up to faith, and therefore makes my unbelief my greatest disobedience and rebellion, all such feelings are swept away. Surely there can be no presumption in obeying the command of God. He will never find fault with me for doing what He has laid upon me as my first great duty toward Him. All the presumption would be in not believing. It is not using a great liberty to believe—it is simply keeping the commandment of God. The liberty is all the other way. You use a great liberty when you refuse to believe. Be not disobedient. Displease not God by unbelief; rather please Him by believing. Oh, how loving is God! He would shut up you and me, and all men, to salvation in Christ by commanding us thus. If any man is not saved, it is not because he has broken all the ten commandments, but because he has broken this New Testament commandment.

(CONCLUDED NEXT WEEK.)