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The Sermons of John Wesley - Sermon 77

Spiritual Worship

"This is the true God, and eternal life." 1 John 5:20.

1. In this Epistle St. John speaks not to any particular Church, but to all the Christians of that age; although more especially to them among whom he then resided. And in them he speaks to the whole Christian Church in all succeeding ages.

2. In this letter, or rather tract, (for he was present with those to whom it was more immediately directed, probably being not able to preach to them any longer, because of his extreme old age,) he does not treat directly of faith, which St. Paul had done; neither of inward and outward holiness, concerning which both St. Paul, St. James, and St. Peter, had spoken; but of the foundation of all, -- the happy and holy communion which the faithful have with God the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.

3. In the preface he describes the authority by which he wrote and spoke, (1 John 1:1-4,) and expressly points out the design of his present writing. To the preface exactly answers the conclusion of the Epistle, more largely explaining the same design, and recapitulating the marks of our communion with God, by, "we know," thrice repeated. (1 John 5:18-20.)

4. The tract itself treats, First, severally, of communion with the Father; (1 John 1:5-10;) of communion with the Son; (1 John 2 and 3;) of communion with the Spirit. (1 John 4.)

Secondly, conjointly, of the testimony of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost; on which faith in Christ, the being born of God, love to God and his children, the keeping his commandments, and victory over the world, are founded. (1 John 5:1-12.)

5. The recapitulation begins, (1 John 5:18,) "We know that he who is born of God," who sees and loves God, "sinneth not," so long as this loving faith abideth in him. "We know we are of God;" children of God, by the witness and the fruit of the Spirit; "and the whole world," all who have not the Spirit, "lieth in the wicked one." They are, and live, and dwell in him, as the children of God do in the Holy One. "We know that the Son of God is come, and hath given us" a spiritual "understanding, that we may know the true One," the faithful and true witness. "And we are in the true One," as branches in the vine. "This is the true God, and eternal life."

In considering these important words, we may inquire,

I. How is he the true God

II. How is he eternal life I shall then,

III. Add a few inferences.

I. 1. And, First, we may inquire, How is he the true God He is "God over all, blessed for ever." "He was with God," with God the Father, "from the beginning," from eternity, "and was God. He and the Father are One;" and, consequently, "he thought it not robbery to be equal with God." Accordingly, the inspired writers give him all the titles of the most high God. They call him over and over, by the incommunicable name, JEHOVAH, -- never given to any creature. They ascribe to him all the attributes and all the works of God. So that we need not scruple to pronounce him, "God of God, Light

of Light, very God of very God: In glory equal with the Father, in majesty co-eternal."

2. He is the true God, the only Cause, the sole Creator of all things. "By him," saith the Apostle Paul, "were created all things that are in heaven, and that are on earth," -- yea, earth and heaven themselves; but the inhabitants are named, because more noble than the house, -- "visible and invisible." The several species of which are subjoined: "Whether they be thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers." So St. John: "All things were made by him, and without him was not anything made that was made." And, accordingly, St. Paul applies to him those strong words of the Psalmist: "Thou, Lord, in the beginning hast laid the foundation of the earth, and the heavens are the work of thy hands."

3 . And as the true God, he is also the Supporter of all the things that he hath made. He beareth, upholdeth, sustaineth, all created things by the word of his power, by the same powerful word which brought them out of nothing. As this was absolutely necessary for the beginning of their existence, it is equally so for the continuance of it: Were his almighty influence withdrawn, they could not subsist a moment longer. Hold up a stone in the air; the moment you withdraw your hand, it naturally falls to the ground. In like manner, were he to withdraw his hand for a moment, the creation would fall into nothing.

4. As the true God, he is likewise the Preserver of all things. He not only keeps them in being, but preserves them in that degree of well-being which is suitable to their several natures. He preserves them in their several relations, connexions, and dependencies, so as to compose one system of beings, to form one entire universe, according to the counsel of his will. How strongly and beautifully is this expressed: *Ta panta en autv sunesthken*. "By whom all things consist:" Or, more literally, "By and in him are all things compacted into one system." He is not only the support, but also the cement, of the whole universe.

5. I would particularly remark, (what perhaps has not been sufficiently observed,) that he is the true Author of all the motion that is in the universe. To spirits, indeed, he has given a small degree of self-moving power, but not to matter. All matter, of whatever kind it be, is absolutely and totally inert. It does not, cannot, in any case, move itself; and whenever any part of it seems to move, it is in reality moved by something else. See that log, which, vulgarly speaking, moves on the sea! It is in reality moved by the water. The water is moved by the wind; that is, a current of air. And the air itself owes all its motion to the ethereal fire, a particle of which is attached to every particle of it. Deprive it of that fire, and it moves no longer; it is fixed: It is as inert as sand. Remove fluidity (owing to the ethereal fire intermixed with it) from water, and it has no more motion than the log. Impact fire into iron, by hammering it when red hot, and it has no more motion than fixed air, or frozen water. But when it is unfixed, when it is in its most active state, what gives motion to fire The very Heathen will tell you. It is,

Totam Mens agitans molem, et magno se corpore miscens. ["The general soul Lives in the parts, and agitates the whole." -- Edit.]

6. To pursue this a little farther: We say, the moon moves round the earth; the earth and the other planets move round the sun; the sun moves round its own axis. But these are only vulgar expressions: For, if we speak the truth, neither the sun, moon, nor stars move. None of these move themselves: They are all moved every moment by the almighty hand that made them.

"Yes," says Sir Isaac [Newton], "the sun, moon, and all the heavenly bodies, do move, do gravitate,

toward each other." Gravitate. What is that "Why, they all attract each other, in proportion to the quantity of matter they contain." "Nonsense all over," says Mr. Hutchinson; "jargon, self-contradiction! Can anything act where it is not No; they are continually impelled toward each other." Impelled! by what "By the subtle matter, the ether, or electric fire." But remember! be it ever so subtle, it is matter still: Consequently, it is as inert in itself as either sand or marble. It cannot therefore move itself; but probably it is the first material mover, the main spring whereby the Creator and Preserver of all things is pleased to move the universe.

7. The true God is also the Redeemer of all the children of men. It pleased the Father to lay upon him the iniquities of us all, that by the one oblation of himself once offered, when he tasted death for every man, he might make a full and sufficient sacrifice, oblation, and satisfaction for the sins of the whole world.

8. Again: The True God is the Governor of all things: "His kingdom ruleth over all." The government rests upon his shoulder, throughout all ages. He is the Lord and Disposer of the whole creation, and every part of it. And in how astonishing a manner does he govern the world! How far are his ways above human thought! How little do we know of his methods of government! Only this we know, *Ita praesides singulis sicut universis, et universis sicut singulis!* "Thou presidest over each creature, as if it were the universe, and over the universe, as over each individual creature." Dwell a little upon this sentiment: What a glorious mystery does it contain! It is paraphrased in the words recited above:

FATHER, how wide thy glories shine! Lord of the universe, -- and mine: Thy goodness watches over the whole, As all the world were but one soul; Yet keeps my every sacred hair, As I remain'd thy single care!

9. And yet there is a difference, as was said before, in his providential government over the children of men. A pious writer observes, There is a three-fold circle of divine providence. The outermost circle includes all the sons of men; Heathens, Mahometans, Jews, and Christians. He causeth his sun to rise upon all. He giveth them rain and fruitful seasons. He pours ten thousand benefits upon them, and fills their hearts with food and gladness. With an interior circle he encompasses the whole visible Christian Church, all that name the name of Christ. He has an additional regard to these, and a nearer attention to their welfare. But the innermost circle of his providence encloses only the invisible Church of Christ: all real Christians, wherever dispersed in all corners of the earth; all that worship God (whatever denomination they are of) in spirit and in truth. He keeps these as the apple of an eye: He hides them under the shadow of his wings. And it is to these in particular that our Lord says, "Even the hairs of your head are all numbered."

10. Lastly, being the true God, he is the End of all things; according to that solemn declaration of the Apostle: (Rom. 11:36:) "Of him, and through him, and to him, are all things: "Of him, as the Creator, -- through him, as the Sustainer and Preserver; and to him, as the ultimate End of all.

II. In all these senses Jesus Christ is the true God. But how is he eternal life

1. The thing directly intended in this expression is not, that he will be eternal life: Although this is a great and important truth, and never to be forgotten. "He is the Author of eternal salvation to all them that obey him." He is the Purchaser of that "crown of life" which will be given to all that are "faithful unto death;" and he will be the soul of all their joys to all the saints in glory.

The flame of angelical love Is kindled at Jesus's face; And all the enjoyment above Consists in the rapturous gaze!

2. The thing directly intended is not, that he is the resurrection; although this also is true, according to his own declaration, "I am the resurrection and the life:" Agreeable to which are St. Paul's words: "As in Adam all died, even so in Christ shall all be made alive." So that we may well say, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who... hath begotten us again unto a lively hope by the resurrection of Christ from the dead, to an inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away."

3. But waiving what he will be hereafter, we are here called to consider what he is now. He is now the life of everything that lives, in any kind or degree. He is the Source of the lowest species of life, that of vegetables, as being the Source of all the motion on which vegetation depends. He is the Fountain of the life of animals; the Power by which the heart beats, and the circulating juices flow. He is the Fountain of all the life which man possesses in common with other animals. And if we distinguish the rational from the animal life, he is the Source of this also.

4. But how infinitely short does all this fall of the life which is here directly intended, and of which the Apostle speaks so explicitly in the preceding verses! (1 John 5:11, 12:) "This is the testimony, that God hath given us eternal life; and this life is in his Son. He that hath the Son hath life," -- the eternal life here spoken of, -- "and he that hath not the Son" of God "hath not" this "life." As if he had said, "This is the sum of the testimony which God hath testified of his Son, that God hath given us, not only a title to, but the real beginning of, eternal life: And this life is purchased by, and treasured up in, his Son; who has all the springs and the fullness of it in himself, to communicate to his body, the Church."

5. This eternal life then commences when it pleases the Father to reveal his Son in our hearts; when we first know Christ, being enabled "to call him Lord by the Holy Ghost;" when we can testify, our conscience bearing us witness in the Holy Ghost, "the life which I now live, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me." And then it is that happiness begins; happiness real, solid, substantial. Then it is that heaven is opened in the soul, that the proper, heavenly state commences, while the love of God, as loving us, is shed abroad in the heart, instantly producing love to all mankind; general, pure benevolence, together with its genuine fruits, lowliness, meekness, patience, contentedness in every state; an entire, clear, full acquiescence in the whole will of God; enabling us to "rejoice evermore, and in everything to give thanks."

6. As our knowledge and our love of him increase, by the same degrees, and in the same proportion, the kingdom of an inward heaven must necessarily increase also; while we "grow up in all things into Him who is our Head." And when we are en autv pephrvmenoi, complete in him, as our translators render it; but more properly when we are filled with him; when "Christ in us, the hope of glory," is our God and our All; when he has taken the full possession of our heart; when he reigns therein without a rival, the Lord of every motion there; when we dwell in Christ, and Christ in us, we are one with Christ, and Christ with us; then we are completely happy; then we live "all the life that is hid with Christ in God;" then, and not till then, we properly experience what that word meaneth, "God is love; and whosoever dwelleth in love, dwelleth in God, and God in him."

III. I have now only to add a few inferences from the preceding observations.

1. And we may learn from hence, First, that as there is but one God in heaven above and in the earth

beneath; so there is only one happiness for created spirits, either in heaven or earth. This one God made our heart for himself; and it cannot rest till it resteth in him. It is true, that while we are in the vigour of youth and health; while our blood dances in our veins; while the world smiles upon us, and we have all the conveniences, yea, and superfluities of life, we frequently have pleasing dreams, and enjoy a kind of happiness. But it cannot continue; it flies away like a shadow; and even while it does, it is not solid or substantial; it does not satisfy the soul. We still pant after something else, something which we have not. Give a man everything that this world can give, still, as Horace observed near two thousand years ago, --

Curtae nescio quid semper abest rei.

Still, --

Amidst our plenty something still, To me, to thee, to him is wanting!

That something is neither more nor less than the knowledge and love of God; without which no spirit can be happy either in heaven or earth.

2. Permit me to recite my own experience, in confirmation of this: -- I distinctly remember, that, even in my childhood, even when I was at school, I have often said, "They say the life of a schoolboy is the happiest in the world; but I am sure I am not happy; for I am not content, and so cannot be happy." When I had lived a few years longer, being in the vigour of youth, a stranger to pain and sickness, and particularly to lowness of spirits; (which I do not remember to have felt one quarter of an hour since I was born;) having plenty of all things, in the midst of sensible and amiable friends who loved me, and I loved them; and being in the way of life which, of all others, suited my inclinations; still I was not happy. I wondered why I was not, and could not imagine what the reason was. The reason certainly was, I did not know God; the Source of present as well as eternal happiness. What is a clear proof that I was not then happy is, that, upon the coolest reflection, I knew not one week which I would have thought it worth while to have lived over again; taking it with every inward and outward sensation, without any variation at all.

3. But a pious man affirms, "When I was young, I was happy; though I was utterly without God in the world." I do not believe you; Though I doubt not but you believe yourself. But you are deceived, as I have been over and over. Such is the condition of human life!

Flowerets and myrtles fragrant seem to rise: All is at distance fair; but near at hand, The gay deceit mocks the desiring eyes With thorns, and desert heath, and barren sand.

Look forward on any distant prospect: How beautiful does it appear! Come up to it; and the beauty vanishes away, and it is rough and disagreeable. Just so is life. But when the scene is past, it resumes its former appearance; and we seriously believe, that we were then very happy, though, in reality, we were far otherwise. For as none is now, so none ever was, happy, without the loving knowledge of the true God.

4. We may learn hence, Secondly, that this happy knowledge of the true God is only another name for religion; I mean Christian religion; which, indeed, is the only one that deserves the name. Religion, as to the nature or essence of it, does not lie in this or that set of notions, vulgarly called faith; nor in a round of duties, however carefully reformed from error and superstition. It does not consist in any

number of outward actions. No: it properly and directly consists in the knowledge and love of God, as manifested in the Son of his love, through the eternal Spirit. And this naturally leads to every heavenly temper, and to every good word and work.

5. We learn hence, Thirdly, that none but a Christian is happy; none but a real inward Christian. A glutton, a drunkard, a gamester may be merry; but he cannot be happy. The beau, the belle, may eat and drink, and rise up to play; but still they feel they are not happy. Men or women may adorn their own dear persons with all the colours of the rainbow. They may dance, and sing, and hurry to and fro, and flutter hither and thither. They may roll up and down in their splendid carriages, and talk insipidly to each other. They may hasten from one diversion to another: But happiness is not there. They are still "walking in a vain shadow, and disquieting themselves in vain." One of their own poets has truly pronounced, concerning the whole life of these sons of pleasure,

'Tis a dull farce, and empty show: Powder, and pocket-glass, and beau.

I cannot but observe of that fine writer, that he came near the mark, and yet fell short of it. In his "Solomon" (one of the noblest poems in the English tongue) he clearly shows where happiness is not; that it is not to be found in natural knowledge, in power, or in the pleasures of sense or imagination. But he does not show where it is to be found. He could not; for he did not know it himself. Yet he came near it when he said,

Restore, Great Father, thy instructed son; And in my act may thy great will be done!

6. We learn hence, Fourthly, that every Christian is happy; and that he who is not happy is not a Christian. If, as was observed above, religion is happiness, everyone that has it must be happy. This appears from the very nature of the thing: For if religion and happiness are in fact the same, it is impossible that any man can possess the former, without possessing the latter also. He cannot have religion without having happiness; seeing they are utterly inseparable.

And it is equally certain, on the other hand, that he who is not happy is not a Christian; Seeing if he was a real Christian, he could not but be happy. But I allow an exception here in favour of those who are under violent temptation; yea, and of those who are under deep nervous disorders, which are, indeed, a species of insanity. The clouds and darkness which then overwhelm the soul suspend its happiness; especially if Satan is permitted to second those disorders by pouring in his fiery darts. But, excepting these cases, the observation will hold, and it should be well attended to, -- Whoever is not happy, yea, happy in God, is not a Christian.

7. Are not you a living proof of this Do not you still wander to and fro, seeking rest, but finding none - - pursuing happiness, but never overtaking it And who can blame you for pursuing it It is the very end of your being. The great Creator made nothing to be miserable, but every creature to be happy in its kind. And upon a general review of the works of his hands he pronounced them all very good; which they would not have been, had not every intelligent creature, yea, everyone capable of pleasure and pain, been happy in answering the end of its creation. If you are now unhappy, it is because you are in an unnatural state: And shall you not sigh for deliverance from it "The whole creation," being now "subject to vanity," "groaneth and travaileth in pain together." I blame you only, or pity you rather, for taking a wrong way to a right end; for seeking happiness where it never was, and never can be, found. You seek happiness in your fellow-creatures, instead of your Creator. But these can no more make you happy than they can make you immortal. If you have ears to hear, every creature cries aloud,

"Happiness is not in me." All these are, in truth, "broken cisterns, that can hold no water." O turn unto your rest! Turn to Him in whom are hid all the treasures of happiness! Turn unto him "who giveth liberally unto all men;" and he will give you "to drink of the water of life freely."

8. You cannot find your long-sought happiness in all the pleasures of the world. Are they not "deceitful upon the weights" Are they not lighter than vanity itself How long will ye "feed upon that which is not bread" -- which may amuse, but cannot satisfy You cannot find it in the religion of the world; either in opinions or a mere round of outward duties. Vain labour! Is not God a spirit, and therefore to be "worshipped in spirit and in truth" In this alone can you find the happiness you seek; in the union of your spirit with the Father of spirits; in the knowledge and love of Him who is the fountain of happiness, sufficient for all the souls he has made.

9. But where is He to be found Shall we go up into heaven, or down into hell, to seek him Shall we "take the wings of the morning" and search for him "in the uttermost parts of the sea" Nay, quod petis, hic est! What a strange word to fall from the pen of a Heathen! "What you seek is here!" He is "about your bed." He is "about your path" He "besets you behind and before." He "lays his hand upon you." Lo! God is here! not afar off. Now believe and feel him near! May he now reveal himself in your heart! Know him, love him, And you are happy!.

10. Are you already happy in him Then see that you "hold fast whereunto ye have attained!" "Watch and pray," that you may never be "moved from your steadfastness." "Look unto yourselves, that ye lose not what you have gained, but that ye receive a full reward." In so doing, expect a continual growth in grace, in the loving knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. Expect that the power of the Highest shall suddenly overshadow you, that all sin may be destroyed, and nothing may remain in your heart, but holiness unto the Lord. And this moment, and every moment, "present yourselves a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God," and "glorify him with your body and with your spirit which are God's!"

Michael Anderson with corrections by Ryan Danker and George Lyons for the Wesley Center for Applied Theology at Northwest Nazarene University.

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