

CHRIST'S CONSTRAINING LOVE

"For the love of Christ constraineth us." II Corinthians 5:14.

Men often misjudge our words and deeds. It is a dangerous thing to be unlike other people. It is still more dangerous to be better than other people. The worldly minded have a large number of depreciatory terms that they always fling at all who have higher standards and nobler aims than they have. Long ago, they called a prophet "a fool." When the news came to the brothers of Jesus that He so kept on in His benevolent work of healing the sick and preaching the gospel and raising the dead, that He didn't even have time to eat, and that He was so shut in by the needy, anxious and sorrowing people who crowded around Him that He couldn't get any rest, that He seemed to be wearing His very life out, they said, "He is beside Himself; let us go and seize Him." Thus the family of Jesus proposed the getting out of a writ of lunacy and putting Him under confinement as not having His right mind, needing a guardian, needing somebody to take care of His affairs.

On a certain occasion, Paul appeared in court to answer a charge preferred against him, and as he was telling about the vision that he received on the way to Damascus, and how the Lord Jesus Christ converted him, commissioned him, and empowered him to turn the nations from darkness to light, and to give them an inheritance with the saints in light through faith in Jesus -- and as he was going on with his story of his meeting and experience with Jesus, Festus pointed his finger at him and said, "Paul, you are beside yourself. Much learning hath made thee mad." Festus could not understand it. Think of such a speech as that in a courthouse, with a shrewd, calculating lawyer prosecuting. It was quite natural for Festus to say, "That man is crazy. Now, he isn't a bad man; he is simply crazy."

Although the Corinthian brethren had heard him, had believed him, had been baptized upon a profession of their faith and had started in the Christian life, when Paul came before them and exhibited a zeal that was like an unquenchable fire, and stood and received stripes on his body until the blood ran down his back, they said, "He is crazy."

In substance, his reply was, You ask an explanation of my conduct, why I unselfishly do the things that I do: why I count money nothing; why I count fame and glory as nothing; why I spurn the greatest honors that this world offers. He told them that his actions were inspired, controlled and impelled by the constraining love of Christ. He had abandoned a brilliant career for what seemed to them a very poor one. He was utterly indifferent to the ordinary aims of men. He had a consuming passion. The worldlings explained it all by saying that he was "insane." But his triumphant answer to his accusers, in which he explained the reason for his conduct, is found in the words of our text: "For the love of Christ constraineth us." Immediately one had the feeling that this is the language of intensity. It is the unashamed testimony of a life that was commanded by a mighty and all-mastering motive, and that motive was none other than the constraining love of Christ.

I. The Meaning Of Our Scripture.

1. "The love of Christ."

Does this expression mean the love of Christ for us, or our love for Christ? Unquestionably, it means His love for us and not our love for Him. However, Christ's love for us is creative in its effect. It awakens and sustains a responsive love for Him such as we express in the old hymn:

"My Jesus, I love Thee,
I know Thou art mine;
For Thee all the follies
Of sin I resign;
My gracious Redeemer,
My Saviour art Thou,
If ever I loved Thee,
My Jesus, 'tis now."

When Paul uses the phrase, "the love of Christ," he does not mean his own affection for, love to, or devotion to Christ. He does mean Christ's love to and for Him. Of course, Paul's affection for and devotion to Christ did cause him to work for and serve Christ, but they were certainly secondary in the chain of causes and consequences. They were not the source and origin of his energy and activity. The love of Christ might well be considered from the standpoint of its: --

- (1) Pure benevolence.
- (2) Strong affection.
- (3) Unsolicited mercy.
- (4) Marvelous liberality.

His love has many properties or qualities: --

- (1) It is self-denying.
- (2) It is unselfish.
- (3) It is free.
- (4) It is beneficial.

It enriches with righteousness, peace, and liberty.

- (5) It is boundless.
- (6) It is continuous.
- (7) It is eternal.

A prayerful meditation about the love of Christ will: --

- (1) Humble us.
- (2) Instruct us.
- (3) Comfort us.
- (4) Stimulate us.
- (5) Lay hold of our affections.
- (6) Influence our conduct.

Change the life as well as affect the heart.

2. "Constraineth."

Sunecho is the Greek word used here, and it means to hold together and press on every side. In other words, it means to shut up to one line and purpose, as in a narrow, walled road. Paul was shut up, hemmed in, and kept in a narrow way. When Paul said, "the love of Christ constraineth us," he meant that the love of Christ shuts us up, and hems us in, and opens to us no other way to go except to do what we are doing. His conception of Christ's love for him held him together to his task regardless of what others thought, said or did.

Christ's constraining love grasped his mind, supplied him with motives, quickened his conscience, commanded his will, controlled his emotions, formed his character, directed his conduct, and molded his entire life. It took full possession of his soul, captivated his thoughts, engaged his affections, held him to one object in life -- which was Christ and shut him up to one course of conduct. Christ had won exclusive rights in him.

Secondary Thoughts -- The love of Christ: --

(1) Constrained Paul.

Brought his energies within the realm of God's will and work, so that no other line of devotion or life appealed to him. The world was crucified unto him, and he was crucified to the world. He no longer lived to or for himself; he lived to and for Christ.

(2) Restrained Paul.

From self-indulgence, worldliness, sinful appetites, evil habits, an incorrigible temper, an unconquerable disposition, and unmanliness.

(3) Impelled Paul.

Forward with Christ to do and suffer the impossible in the face of impending difficulties and imperilling death. He delighted to think of Christ; to study about Christ; to talk about Christ; to live for Christ; and to die in the service of Christ. To understand his meaning here is to comprehend his life of sacrifice and service; his joy and power in life and death. For him to live was Christ; for him to die was Christ.

II. The Motives For Our Service.

Every intelligent act results from some motive, whether that act is physical, moral or religious. The act may be due to natural instinct, personal interests, private or public ambitions. It may be done for pleasure, profit, position or power. The motives may be high and holy, or they may be degrading and devilish, but we are constrained, restrained, and impelled by motives.

1. The Fear of Punishment.

We may be held back from doing many things because we fear the penalty. Many do things that are right because they are afraid to do wrong. There is a natural alarm in the human mind concerning eternity. But this fear of the future, with the probability of punishment, is a very inadequate motive for religious service. Many serve thinking that they will thereby escape the punishment of hell. The one who serves from a sense of fear renders a slavish service.

2. The Sense of Duty.

This gives evidence of the consciousness of moral and spiritual obligations. It involves a desire to do what is right.

3. The Hope of Reward.

Many have a great interest in their reputations. Some form of religion is favorable to one's reputation. The supreme object of many is to pass through life with honor.

To gratify self-esteem is their greatest aim. Multitudes serve because they think that service will gratify their desire for future happiness. In other words, they serve with the hope of gaining heaven. Those who serve in order to get rewards certainly render a selfish service.

4. The Love of Christ.

The purest and highest and mightiest motive for service is love. We cannot love a thing. There must be some heart, some power to love in return, in that which we love. We can love a person only. What is it in Jesus that draws men, that wins their allegiance away from other masters, that makes them ready to follow Him through peril and sacrifice, even to death? Is it His wonderful teaching? Is it His power as revealed in His miracles? Is it His sinlessness? Is it the perfect beauty of His character? No, none of these will account for the power of the wonderful affections we feel toward Jesus Christ. The answer is that it is "the love of Christ." He came into the world to reveal the love of God. Indeed, He was the love of God in human form. His nature was love. His life was love. He revealed love, Men saw it in His face, felt it in His touch, and heard it in His voice.

Napoleon said, "Alexander, Caesar, Charlemagne, and I, myself, have founded great empires; but upon what do these creations of our genius depend? Upon force. Jesus, alone, founded His empire on love, and to this day millions would die for Him."

The love of Christ is the constraining motive under which we enter the Christian life. "We love Him because He first loved us." Love is the inciting motive under which we are led to an open confession and acknowledgment of Christ. This impulse may find illustration in the case of a soldier at the Battle of Williamsburg. He had the artery of his arm severed by the fragment of a shell and was fast bleeding to death. He saw a surgeon riding at a distance. Lifting his hand, he called to him for help. The doctor dismounted and quickly gave the needed relief. As he started to go the man said, "Doctor, what is your name?" "Oh, it doesn't matter about that," was the reply. "But, doctor, I want to tell my wife and my children who it was that saved me!"

Just so when Christ comes to us, binding up our broken hearts, healing our wounded spirits, and saving our dying souls. Is it any wonder that there comes a longing to tell others of what He has done for us and openly confess Him everywhere? Love is the impelling motive behind all self-denial, self-sacrifice, and labor for Christ.

And then this reminds us of what Livingstone said so strikingly when writing of the dangers he had to undergo in his missionary travels in South Africa. He said, "I do not mention these privations as if I consider them to be 'sacrifices' for I think that the word ought never to be applied to anything we can do for Him Who came down from heaven and died for us."

The one who serves because he loves is moved by the noblest impulse that ever stirred God, angels or man. There is no service like that of the one who serves because he loves. Those who serve from a sense of love are far more careful and accurate in their obedience than those who serve from a sense of loss or gain. Is the love of Christ the great motive power in your Christian life? If not, you are not rendering the highest Christian service and you are not having the greatest Christian joy. "The love of Christ" should constrain us: ---

1. To live godly lives.

This love should prompt us to heed His challenge, "Be ye holy, for I am holy."

2. To love each other.

If we allow the love of Christ to work in us, it will create love for others.

3. To be resolute.

- (1) In our beliefs.
- (2) In our knowledge of the Word of God.
- (3) In our devotion to Him.

4. To be filled with the Spirit.

"Be filled with the Spirit."

5. To be obedient to His will. This obedience must be : --

- (1) Willing and hearty.
- (2) Sincere and full.
- (3) Constant and persevering.
- (4) Zealous for His interest and honor.

6. To give.

- (1) To the poor and needy.
- (2) To the church.
- (3) To the missionary enterprise.

7. To faithfully promote His cause.

Napoleon stood before his men and cried, "One hundred men, Forward! Step out of the ranks!" He thus called for one hundred loyal soldiers to lead a forlorn hope when it was probable that every volunteer would be killed. Not only one hundred men, but every man in the regiment stepped forward, and offered himself to live or die for his emperor. Christ, our Captain, lifts His blood-stained hands, and calls for you and me to step forward in His service; to give our hearts, our talents, our time, our lives, our all for His cause. "Were the whole realm of nature mine, etc."

When we look at the uplifted Christ and see how He loves us, in the rays of that glorious love we receive power to spell out many hard words, and to understand many difficult passages in life's records; life takes on new meaning and glory so that our sorest afflictions lose their sharpest stings.

8. To build for eternity. Aim to serve Christ acceptably in return for His love. Life thus spent is worth far more.