

ARTICLE VII.

THE WORK OF CHRIST.

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IN what way does the work of Christ on earth make any difference as to our salvation? What difference does it make with God in his forgiving sin? Could not God forgive sin without it? Could not men repent and be saved without it just as well as with it? In these and various other ways, people ask about the work of Christ.

Concerning this it may be said as a preliminary that, whatever our view may be, or whatever our lack of an understanding of the subject may be, it is manifest that God saw the work to be important and even necessary. With unmeasured love to his Son and to men, the Father "spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all." Or, as stated in words much appreciated by every Christian heart, "God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth on him should not perish, but have eternal life." This implies a serious sacrifice on God's part, to meet a serious necessity, in order to accomplish an important result. Is it possible for us to see a real necessity practically met and a real difficulty practically overcome by the work of Christ?

I.

We may reasonably believe that men situated as they were could have turned from sin without this work of Christ. They had the power of choice, and sin is the wrong use of that

power. Men choose to do evil things, to think evil thoughts, to indulge evil propensities; and, in so choosing, they sin. These choices are in their own power. Their power to choose amiss involves power to choose aright; otherwise it would not be real choice, there would be no responsibility for the act and no moral character would result from it. Men sin because they do not use their power as they should. Could men, then, repent? Yes; for they could discontinue the wrong use of their power and disapprove their past choices of this kind; and this is a chief element in repentance, if indeed it is not the whole of it. Men could have done this, even without the work of Christ. It was their duty to do so.

But would men have repented without the helpful influences which come from Christ's manifestation on earth? We may not have the data for judging this matter; for we cannot fully measure the position of men without the influences from Christ — for example, the work of the Spirit, etc.— which are operating and have been for a long time. But, even with them, many do not repent; and we cannot be certain that any ever would have repented without them. Indeed, we feel certain that they would not, and Christ declares that none do.

The work of Christ brings a mighty influence persuading men to repentance. Christ revealed the Father to men. He showed us the Father's interest, his compassion, his love to us, his desire to bless us. Men have a new view of God since Christ has revealed him. They see now his beautiful, loving character and learn to love him. Offenses against him now seem more terrible. The love of Christ, or the love of God as manifested in Christ, constrains men to love as they would not have been constrained without this view of him. This love thus manifested constitutes an additional reason for love; and because it is love to us, it is the more potent in calling

forth our love in return. "We love, because he first loved us."

With this influence added to all the other reasons for repentance, some now turn from sin. They seem to be persuaded by this love. In fact, our own hearts tell us that "the love of Christ constraineth us"; and we know that here is a motive, an influence, which has been and is successful in leading men to repentance. This motive succeeds.

From this we may reasonably say that this work of Christ was needed to persuade men to repentance. The necessity of it is seen in that it is the decisive influence. Other influences alone failed. This influence together with the others succeeds. It is as when we say that special evangelistic services are sometimes necessary to the conversion of men. They could repent without them; they should do so, but they do not. The special services are held. The pastor or the evangelist preaches, prays, urges, and men yield. We say that the special services were necessary. They were so, not absolutely, but as related to man's inaction and immobility. So the influences from Christ are necessary, not absolutely, but as related to man's perversity, in order that men may be persuaded to love God.

Herein is one of the benefits of the work of Christ. It brings to men a persuasive influence under the sway of which some repent and are saved. They would not be saved without it. In this sense it was necessary. This is a necessity as related to men.

II.

Is there any necessity as related to God? Does it make any difference with him?

We may affirm several things as preliminary to the answer to this question. It does not bring him any information which

he did not have before, for he knew all things. It does not remove the evil of sin, for sin is now as evil as before. It does not in itself bring to men any personal goodness, for personal qualities cannot be transferred. It does not change the fact of past sin, for later events do not change historic facts. Neither does it allay any ruffled feelings of God, for there were none. He loved men with an infinite love "from the foundation of the world"; and, foreknowing the sins of men, he planned to give his Son that they might be saved. "Not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins." A perfectly irate being does not do anything to allay his own wrath, but "God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth on him should not perish, but have eternal life." None of these specifications can be the reason why there was need of the work of Christ; but we find a reason as we consider the holiness of God and the relations which he sustains to the universe, especially his relations to sinful men.

God, the loving Father of all, desires his children to be like himself in their moral character, even holy as he is holy. Speaking reverently, there were in the nature of things certain necessities resting upon God. He could not himself remain holy without desiring to have the benefits of holiness come to his creatures and doing what he could to promote their holiness; and, in teaching them, he must make known to them the facts as they were — the worthiness of good action and the unworthiness of bad action. This he did by giving them powers for perceiving the right and the wrong of actions — the worthiness of kindness, for example, and the unworthiness of unkindness — and a feeling of obligation to choose the one and avoid the other. In his Word, also, he has given directions concerning life, with illustrations of con-

duct good and bad. These perceptions and revelations show men what he would have them do; and they are necessary to help them to be holy. If we think of God as the father of a great family, we may think of these as family rules or directions about conduct; or, if we think of him as the one who is over this great universe, governing earthly affairs, we may think of them as laws for the regulation of conduct. Whether family laws or governmental laws, they show us the will of our Creator, his wish as to our conduct, and place the influence of the heavenly Father or heavenly King entirely upon the side of right in opposition to wrong. With his holy laws he supports holiness and opposes sin. He is thus true to himself as the holy one, desiring the holiness of his creatures.

We do not think a father or a ruler perfect unless he opposes evil with all his influence. The father of the family, the teacher of the school, or the government of the state has regulations of some kind — in each case according to the conditions existing — to restrain evil and encourage good. It would be a bad government that would fail to have laws against evil-doing, or that, having such laws, would fail to enforce them; for, without a penalty inflicted for its violation, a law becomes merely advice, and weak human nature needs more. This is seen in any case where penalty for crime is not inflicted — for example, when violators of liquor laws are not punished, the law becomes a farce and iniquity is unrestrained. This arises from the nature of the case. Penalty is necessary to the effectiveness of law. Law is necessary to the restraint of evil and the encouragement of good. It is the same in God's government of his great family. Human governments have not devised any method by which universal pardon can be offered to violators of law without destroying the restraining influence of law and so giving a free hand to

evil. This is the reason why human governments do not offer universal pardon to criminals. How then can the God of love grant pardon to all who come to him in penitence, without destroying the restraints which his laws place upon evil-doers and thus showing himself unworthy to be regarded a holy God?

It is well, perhaps, to notice here the relations of love and justice. Infinite love reaches out to all beings and seeks the good of all — of every one, not merely the good of evil-doers. Love for the good requires that they shall be protected from the evil influence of wrong-doing; and this cannot be if the wrong-doers are not restrained in their wickedness, for their action harms the good. It is but reasonable that each one should do and endure whatever may be necessary to counteract the evil effects upon others of his own wrong-doing; and love to the good requires this. Justice is the rendering of what is due, but it looks in two directions; or perhaps we should say that it is of two kinds, viz. justice to the individual and justice to people in general. By neglecting this distinction in thinking of justice the subject is much obscured. Individual justice looks at what the individual deserves; general justice looks at what the general public deserves. It is not just to people in general that they should be harmed by the evil deeds of others. Sin makes the world worse. It harms the good directly and by its influence. Justice to the good requires that they should be protected.

In a just government the penalty is exactly what the wrong-doer deserves. If he does not receive it he does not receive justice. Pardon is the direct opposite of individual justice; it sets aside individual justice. It is highly honorable for a ruler to be gracious and to forgive, if he can do so without harm to other people; but it is not honorable to harm the inno-

cent in pardoning. To pardon evil-doers, when so doing will destroy the force of law and expose people in general to increased danger, does harm the innocent and is not honorable. This is illustrated by recent occurrences in South Carolina. People are shocked at the unlimited pardons granted there, and the Governor is disgraced. Pardon may properly be granted to the individual only when general justice permits it. Love to people in general — that is, general justice — requires that the penalty shall not be remitted when its omission will expose men to increased evil. Love always respects the general good, general justice, and permits pardon — or we may even say requires it — when general justice will not be set aside by it; but, if general justice is set aside by it, love does not permit pardon. The good of the public is superior to the good of the individual. Men are properly punished on the ground of their own ill-desert and in accordance with it when the general good requires it — the pardon of some must not be injustice to others — but they may be pardoned, individual justice being set aside, when the general good permits it. The worthiness of the ruler is even enhanced by his doing so.

But do such circumstances ever arise? They arise when some important event changes the plane of action on which the law is based. Ordinarily universal pardon is impossible because it dishonors the law and destroys its restraining from evil. Even the pardon of individuals is ordinarily unwise for the same reason. But some circumstances make it possible. When in case of a great fire a prisoner risks his life in saving life — perhaps the life of the family of his keeper — his services change the conditions and his pardon does not encourage crime. Ten years or more ago a prisoner in a Michigan prison serving a sentence for forgery developed tuberculosis. The disease advanced toward its last stages. He wished to

die a free man with his family. The Governor pardoned him; and no one was encouraged to commit forgery with the thought of pardon when he should have that disease. The rescue, or the tuberculosis, or any other sufficiently remarkable event changes the plane of action, and future crime is not encouraged by the pardon. The law still has the same force, even after the pardon; though pardon without some such event encourages evil. The event is not a rendering of justice to the criminal; but it preserves general justice, since it prevents the removal of the restraints of law.

The work of Christ on earth — comprised in the incarnation, with his humiliation, sufferings, and death — constitutes such an event. It reveals the love of God to men, his hatred of sin, his desire to encourage men in what is good in order that they may be good and enjoy the blessings of holiness, and also his determination to honor his laws against sin at whatever cost — it reveals these in such a way that he may now pardon without setting aside law. How does it do this?

The gift of Christ so reveals the love of the Father that intelligent beings will not think him inconsiderate of their welfare even while he punishes for sin. His love is honored.

The gift of Christ to win men from sin shows to all intelligences how evil God thinks sin is. It is so evil that to persuade men from it he was willing even to give his Son to humiliation and suffering and death. These are not so much to be avoided as sin is. His condemnation of sin is honored.

The gift of Christ thus revealing the evil of sin discloses also God's estimate of the importance of his laws against sin, his desire and determination that they shall be respected, and shows that in his view they are necessary and must not be broken down. Nothing is sufficient to prevent his carrying out those laws. His regard for law is honored.

This gift of Christ also reveals the unlimited efforts which God will put forth to save men from sin and to bring to them the blessings of happiness in holiness. He "spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all." "God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth on him should not perish, but have eternal life." His desire for the holiness and happiness of men is honored.

With this gift of Christ, no one will think God does not love men, even if he punishes sinners. No one will think that God puts a light estimate upon the evil of sin, even if he does pardon men. No one will think he is ready to set at naught his laws, even though he does omit the penalty in the case of penitent suppliants. This gift of Christ so reveals God to the universe — his love, his estimate of the evil of sin, his regard for the welfare of men protected by holy laws — that no harm will come to others from any encouragement to sin, which might otherwise result, even though he shall now omit the just penalty of sin and treat sinners as though they were just. This is what Paul tells us in Rom. iii. 24–26. Christ was "set forth" "for the showing" of God's righteousness, in order "that he might himself be just" to other people, in protecting them from any harm that might naturally result, even though he should treat sinners as though they had always been just. None can now say that God is careless as to sin, indifferent as to the encouragement of virtue, or unjust to the good, even though sinners are freely pardoned.

And this result we see. God does pardon and bless sinners freely, abundantly; and yet no one thinks that he may sin presumptuously or that God will be careless as to sin. There is mystery in the atonement. Paul mentions "the mystery of the gospel"; also "the riches of the glory of this mystery." and we are not able to fathom its depths entirely. But this

much may be said: The gift of Christ and his work on earth constitute such an event as to make it possible for God to pardon penitent sinners, safely so far as his honor is concerned, and justly so far as the general good is concerned. The purpose, "that he might himself be just ["accounted righteous," margin], and the justifier of him that hath faith in Jesus," is accomplished. The natural difficulty of breaking down law by omitting the penalty, is thus overcome.

Here was a necessity as related to God. It was a necessity in the nature of the case, if sinful men were to be pardoned. The necessity as related to men arose from man's unwillingness to turn from sin without it. The necessity as related to God arises, not from any unwillingness of God to bless men, but from the natural harmful influence of pardon in encouraging sin. If God would love men and save them from the just penalty of sin without obscuring his own righteousness and giving license to evil, an atonement was necessary; and God in his wisdom made it in the gift of Christ.

In this way the sufferings of Christ take the place of the just punishment of sinners. It is not asserted that he was punished in place of sinners; for, no one can be punished but the guilty, though others can suffer. It is not asserted that he bore the same amount of pain that the wicked deserved; for no one is competent to estimate that. It is not asserted that God desired a certain amount of suffering and was satisfied with that; for God does not desire the suffering of any, not even of the wicked. But, rather, that God so loved wicked men and good men also, if such there are, that he wished to save the wicked from the suffering justly due them without exposing the good to harm. He made this possible by giving Christ. Until human governments discover some method of offering universal pardon to penitent criminals

without destroying the force of law, it may not be wise for men to criticize God's plan. The sufferings of Christ are in this way substituted for the punishment of penitent sinners, and take the place of it. As Christ himself says: "The Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for [*anti*, "in place of"] many."