

STUDIES IN THE FIRST EPISTLE OF JOHN.

II.

THE TRUE KNOWLEDGE OF GOD (*continued*).

OBEDIENCE is the school of love's perfecting. Out of love we obey rule, and by obeying learn to love better. Love is never brought to any height of perfectness in the family, human or Divine, where there are no strict commands to keep, no hard tasks to do, where all is ease, indulgence, and concession. There is, of course, a kind of strictness fatal to love; but there is another kind which is its guardian and true nurse. The most orderly households are, in general, the most affectionate, while the ill-governed and the disarrayed are rife with bickering and spite.

It is significant that the "keeping of commandments" of verses 3 and 4 has now become the "keeping of *His word*," ὅς δ' ἂν τηρῇ αὐτοῦ τὸν λόγον. The former are concentrated, and yet broadened out, in the latter. The ἐντολαί are a part of the Divine λόγος, of that whole utterance in which God declares Himself to men and challenges their loving obedience. It is because they come as "God's word," as the expression of His mind and gracious will, and in the shape of His "word" articulate through human lips, that those commandments are effective and executive; in this form they come to possess the soul, to win the reason and affections, and to reproduce themselves, as by a resident and congenial power, within the nature of the child of God. Six times in this Epistle the phrase τηρεῖν τὰς ἐντολάς is repeated; only in this instance do we read τηρεῖν τὸν λόγον.

In John's Gospel, on the lips of Jesus, the latter ex-

pression predominates, "the word" being the message that He brings from God, of which He has so often to speak; ἐντολή(-αί) appears only in our Lord's final charge (John xiv. 15, 21, xv. 10), on the occasion of His giving specific and new injunctions to His disciples. Near in sense to this passage are the affecting words of the intercessory prayer of the Saviour in John xvii. 6 ff., where our Lord commends His disciples to the Father's protection as those "whom Thou hast given me," who "have kept thy word," and in consequence "have now come to know that all things whatsoever Thou hast given me are from Thee." Knowledge of the things of God, conveyed through Christ to His disciples, comes from and is of a piece with the faithful cherishing and obedient practice of God's word.

We have assumed the genitive in ἡ ἀγάπη τοῦ Θεοῦ to be *objective*; the "love of God" signifies the love that the keeper of His word has to God—not contrariwise, the love which God has for him. The whole drift of the context carries us to this rendering; the same relationship of this noun to its genitive appears in ii. 15 and v. 3; John xiv. 15, 31 illustrate from the words of Christ the infallible sequence by which the Christian keeping of commands follows from love toward Him from whom they proceed. In chap. iv. 9 the context points just as decisively the other way, interpreting "the love of God" as that which He has manifested toward us in the sending of His Son to save us; with St. Paul too the τοῦ Θεοῦ (or τοῦ Χριστοῦ) after ἀγάπη should always, it appears, be read *subjectively*. Nothing is gained by forcing the latter sense upon the locution in this passage; nor in iv. 12 (ἡ ἀγάπη αὐτοῦ), where the same alternative is presented and is decided by the same considerations. The middle course adopted by Haupt and Westcott, who balance the subjective and objective interpretations against each other, does not commend itself in either text. To paraphrase ἡ ἀγάπη τοῦ Θεοῦ as

“Divine love, love such as God feels,” and not distinctly either that felt by God or toward God, is to introduce a subtle and exceptional rendering of a familiar phrase, and to drop the link of transition from *ἔγνωκα αὐτόν (ἡ γνῶσις)* to *ἡ ἀγάπη τοῦ Θεοῦ*, in which the force of the Apostle’s implicit argument really lies.<sup>1</sup> The “perfecting” of our love to God by “love to one another,” described in chap. iv. 11–14, is tantamount to its “perfecting” by the “keeping of God’s word”; for the Divine message which St. John has received and constantly repeats, culminates here: this is, with him, the “old” and “new commandment,” “the word which you had from the beginning” (*vv. 7–11*),—*ἀγαπητοί, ἀγαπῶμεν ἀλλήλους.*

3. In both these passages of the Epistle (ii. 5, 6, and iv. 11–14), to the love of God, which finds its scope and fulfilment in the keeping of His word, a great and immediate reward, a privilege of immeasurable worth, is assigned: *Abiding in God is the result of the true knowledge of Him*,—of the knowledge, that is, which works by love and is proved by obedience to command. So it follows in verse 5*b*, *γινώσκουμεν ὅτι ἐν αὐτῷ ἐσμέν*; similarly, and by the like token, *γινώσκουμεν ὅτι ἐν αὐτῷ μένομεν*, in iv. 13. This constitutes the *κοινωνία*, the fellowship of man with God at which the whole Gospel aims (i. 3, 5); it is fellowship in its deepest and most absolute sense. Nay, it is more than communion, it is *union*. The *κοινωνία* thus distinguished is not the intercourse of two separate personalities external to each other, but of the creature with its Creator, of the finite knowledge and love with the infinite, the fellowship of the seeing eye with the light that fills the universe around it, of the living soul, the spark of kindled being in

<sup>1</sup> On this, as on some other leading points of grammatical interpretation Lücke, whose comparatively brief *Commentar über die Briefe des Evangelisten Johannes* (1836) is little known, shows a firmer grasp and a clearer judgment than the two great interpreters above named,

us, with the eternal Source, the all-comprehending element of life, the loving Will of God. The soul finds itself, in the consciousness of observant love toward God, occupied, encircled, and upheld by Him, as the bird in the air, as the ship on the ocean.

And in this recognition (*γινώσκουμεν ὅτι ἐν αὐτῷ ἔσμεν*) the human heart for the first time enters into and properly feels its own existence: "in this we perceive that in Him we exist" (cf. Acts xvii. 28: the inversion *ἐν αὐτῷ ἔσμεν* emphasizes the *verbum essentiae*). *ἐν αὐτῷ εἶναι* becomes in the next verse *ἐν αὐτῷ μένειν* (cf. iv. 13, *γινώσκουμεν ὅτι ἐν αὐτῷ μένομεν*); "abiding in God" is existence in God perpetuated; it is union made enduring, restful, secure. *μένειν* is one of St. John's key-words, learnt in its spiritual use from his Master (John viii. 31, xiv. 10, xv. 4 ff.); in this idea the aged Apostle's experience and disposition of mind show their stamp.<sup>1</sup> His life has long been hid with Christ in God. God is his soul's habitation. His thought, affection, will never move out of God, nor fix on any object in which God is not seen and His presence and direction realized. God is at the centre of every desire, at the spring of every impulse; God fills the circumference of outlook and of aim. God is "all things and in all" to the soul that loves Him with its whole self, that lives in the atmosphere and walks by the light of His word.

At the end of verse 5, reaching this conclusion, St. John's thought doubles back upon itself, repeating as if in an amended and ampler form the statement of verse 3. "Herein we know"—not simply (*v.* 3) "that we have known God" (as the Gnostic loved to say), nor "that we love God" (as the Christian prefers to say, and as the

<sup>1</sup> The verb *μένειν* occurs oftener in St. John's Gospel and Epistles than in the whole New Testament besides. And the phrase *μένειν ἐν*, applied to spiritual objects (Christ, God, love, etc.), so conspicuously Johannine is only found in 1 Tim. ii. 15 and 2 Tim. iii. 14 elsewhere.

former part of verse 5 leads one to expect the writer's saying), but "that *we are in Him*." This Apostle's mind moves in ever-widening circles, and by Protean changes of expression in which the same substance takes incessantly new shapes and colours. Knowledge of God (*vv.* 3, 4) is restated as "love of God" in verse 5; and where "love of God" should have been repeated, this gives place in turn to the idea of "being" and "abiding in God." Fellowship (*i.* 3, etc.) divides itself into knowledge and love (*ii.* 3, 4), and these recombine in this enriched conception of a fellowship through which the human spirit finds its home, its ground and sphere of being for evermore in the Divine.

The thought of man's abiding in God has its complement and counterpart, as the Apostle indicates in the parallel context, in that of God's abiding in him: *ἐν αὐτῷ μένομεν, καὶ αὐτὸς ἐν ἡμῖν* (*iv.* 13, 16); for God tenants the believing and loving soul, while He enfolds it. The bird is in the air; but the air too is in the bird filling breast and wings, and gives it the power to rise and soar in the kindred element. If this correlative side of the truth of Divine fellowship is not expressed here, the reason is that St. John in confuting the false pretenders to religious knowledge is concerned for the present with the marks of the genuine Christian state as these appear from the human side and as they are verified in the experience of himself and his children in the faith. In such men three tokens are found, obedience and love, resulting in a conscious dwelling in God (*ἐντολῶν τήρησις, ἀγάπη τοῦ Θεοῦ, and ἐν αὐτῷ εἶναι, μένειν*); and these three are one.<sup>1</sup>

#### 4. Finally, verse 6 sets up *the standard of the life of*

<sup>1</sup> Bengel analyses verses 3-6*a* somewhat differently, as though into three stages of progress, *ἐγνωκέναι αὐτόν, εἶναι ἐν αὐτῷ, μένειν ἐν αὐτῷ*—"cognitio, communitio, constantia."

*Divine fellowship which is furnished by the history of Jesus Christ.* That knowledge of God by which the soul dwells in Him, cleaving to Him in love and doing always the things that please Him, belonged to one amongst men in its perfect measure. In Him, if in no other, "the love of God has been perfected" in the constant keeping of His word: "I have kept my Father's commandments," said Jesus, "and abide in His love." Hence He claimed in His debate with "the Jews" to possess the knowledge of the Father that was lacking to them, the want of which made their religious life so hollow and futile. "It is my Father," He protested, "that glorifieth me, of whom you say that He is your God, and you have not known Him (*οὐκ ἐγνώκατε αὐτόν*; cf. *vv.* 3, 4 above). But I know Him; and if I should say, 'I know Him not,' I shall be like you, a liar; but I do know Him, and I keep His word" (John viii. 54, 55). The secret of the Lord was with Jesus, when the spiritual guides of His people had altogether lost it: a gracious, loving temper, a lowly purity of heart and utter selflessness, a calm and clear insight into the will of God—these were signs in Him, to which the character of His impugn-ers presented a melancholy opposite, of the intimacy with the Father in which He lived and wrought. If He was in this respect a true witness, the Jewish leaders who challenged Him were "liars."

Now, St. John, meeting the Gnostics at the end of the Apostolic age, sees the situation of Jesus and the Rabbis of Jerusalem virtually reproduced. These men also "say" of God, "I have known Him" (*v.* 4); they "say that they abide in Him" (*v.* 6); their high pretensions and air of wisdom and authority impose on simple minds. "But look at their lives," the Apostle says: "do they walk *as He walked*?"

It is a formidable criterion that the Gospel record thus supplies for application to the title of those who come in

Christ's name. But the criterion is one from which His representatives may not shrink. "I have left you an example," our Master said, "that you should do as I have done unto you,"—"by this shall all men know that you are my disciples"; and if this example be not followed, and the spirit and trend of our life bear in a direction quite away from His, men are justified in drawing the opposite inference. The example may be, and sometimes is, misapplied, through narrowness or ill-will; a formal and mechanical construction is put upon it when the imitation of Jesus is made to consist in the reproduction of outward details and particular traits of the Blessed Life, which were determined by His social environment and His personal mission. The essential character of His "walk" and its exemplary power are lost in the attempt to grasp it in its comparatively superficial features. But whatever difficulties and limitations attach to the use of this model, it remains the perfect pattern of a holy humanity, the ideal of the religious life made practicable and practised before our eyes, the creed actualized and rendered into flesh and blood—breathing, walking, living, dying, rising again in this realistic form stamping itself upon its votaries, who cannot hold it as notional believers and by way of intellectual assent or conventional observance, if indeed they believe that Jesus lived and died, the Word made flesh, living out the life of God in the soul and body of a man! One cannot merely accept the doctrine of Jesus without the responsibility of following the *walk* of Jesus. By this touchstone St. John exposed the grandiose spiritual pretensions of contemporary Gnosticism. By it the true and the false gospel are normally to be distinguished. That type of faith is nearest to the faith of Jesus which produces in the greatest number, and of the finest quality, men like Jesus, who "walk even as He walked."

The *ἐκείνος* of this sentence is, in rationally grammatical

propriety, another person from the *αὐτός*. The writer's idea is not that if one dwells in Christ one must *walk* in Christ (cf. for instance Gal. v. 25), but that if one dwells in God, one will walk *like Jesus*; that Christ is in fact the pattern of the true life in God. It is not consistency with ourselves, conformity of practice and profession, that the Apostle enjoins, but conformity of both to Jesus Christ. If you abide in God, you will love God and keep His word in the very way that the Lord Jesus did; your knowledge of God will thus prove itself to be of the same order, and to have the like contents with the human knowledge of the Father that Jesus possessed, and out of which He lived His life amongst men. As He held His earthly existence consciously in God and for God, so it should be with ourselves who profess His faith, who present to the world His gospel and represent Him on its behalf.

At later turns in the Epistle the writer commends two features of the walk of Jesus in particular to the imitation of his readers. In chapter iii. 3, its *purity*: *πᾶς ὁ ἔχων τὴν ἐλπίδα ταύτην ἐπ' αὐτῷ ἀγνίζει ἑαυτὸν καθὼς ἐκεῖνος ἀγνός ἐστιν*, "Every one that has this hope set on him, purifies himself as He is pure." *ἀγνεία* is a virgin purity, a chastity of soul, such as marks a nature not merely clear of (cleansed from) moral defilement (*καθαρός*: see John xv. 3), but wholly remote from it, and that shrinks from contamination by a delicate and instinctive repugnance. This more positive purity, this richer and finer strain of moral virtue, shone throughout the walk of Jesus Christ; and He breathes it with His Spirit into those who walk with Him.<sup>1</sup>

Furthermore, in the 16th verse of the third chapter, the crowning act of the earthly course of Jesus is adduced for imitation: "In this we have come to know love

<sup>1</sup> Cf. 1 Peter i. 22, where the same verb is applied to the character "new born" in men who had aforesaid "walked ἐν ἀσελγείαις, ἐπιθυμίαις, κ.τ.λ." (iv. 3): τὰς ψυχὰς ὑμῶν ἡγνικότες ἐν τῇ ὑπακοῇ τῆς ἀληθείας . . . ἀναγεγεννημένοι.



(ἐγνώκαμεν τὴν ἀγάπην), in that He (ἐκεῖνος) for us laid down His life (soul, τὴν ψυχὴν αὐτοῦ); and we ought for the brethren to lay down our lives." Both there and here ὀφείλω expresses the obligation stated (ὀφείλει . . . καὶ αὐτὸς περιπατεῖν, v. 6; ὀφείλομεν . . . τὰς ψυχὰς τιθέναι, iii. 16); this verb presents the duty as something that we owe (see Luke xvii. 10), a personal obligation which we have contracted to God and to our brethren, under the relations in which we are placed to both by our Lord Jesus Christ. There is more incumbent on us in the following of Jesus than the copying of an example; it is the discharge of our debt. We do not simply see the beauty of Christ's self-devotion, the ideal purity of His spirit and life, and set ourselves, for our own sake and out of admiration and moral aspiration, to the task of reproducing His lineaments. We are no volunteers or amateurs in the quest; nay, but "necessity is laid upon us" (1 Cor. ix. 16), and we are not free to do otherwise.

Every step of that lovely "walk" of Jesus, which so enthralled us, was taken in the path of man's salvation, toward the goal of our redemption by His blood. By treading this pathway to the end—a course of self-sacrifice, self-inanition, from first to last—Jesus Christ has established the strongest of claims upon us and has become in fact our Lord; we are not our own any more—we "were bought at a price" (1 Cor. vi. 20); He has "purchased unto God with His blood men of every tribe and tongue . . . and made them unto our God a kingdom and a company of priests" (Rev. v. 9, 10). To state the same principle again, in St. Paul's words: "He died for all, that the living should no longer live to themselves, but to Him who for their sakes died and rose again"—that they might be "imitators of God as beloved children, and walk in love as Christ also loved us, and gave up Himself an offering and a sacrifice to God,

for an odour of sweet smell": to this kind of walk "the love of Christ constraineth us" (2 Cor. v. 15; Eph. v. 1, 2); and the career of Jesus Christ does not afford His brethren merely an exterior copy, but an interior compulsive and assimilative force. Christ is to be "formed in" us; and till this is accomplished, the Apostles travail as in birth over their children—*ὠδίνω ἄχρις οὗ μορφώθη Χριστὸς ἐν ὑμῖν* (Gal. iv. 19). Only by virtue of this experience is the Christian a Christian indeed; then at last, when we are conformed to the image of God's Son, we truly "keep the word of God," and "love is made perfect with us, that we may have boldness in the day of judgement, because as *He is* (*καθὼς ἐκεῖνός ἐστιν*) we too are in this world" (iv. 17).

The present tense of the verb *τιθέναι*, used in chap. iii. 16 of the Christian's "laying down his life for the brethren" and illustrated by St. John's protracted years of selfless ministry, shows that he was not thinking of martyrdom, nor of any single exemplary act of self-devotion for Christ's sake, but of the sustained activity of a Christian life, in which self is habitually merged in the service of God's kingdom and the soul daily laid out and spent upon the highest good of mankind, after the fashion of Jesus Christ.

This sacrificial aspect and direction of his Master's walk dominated everything else in the Apostle's remembrance of Him; it coloured and determined every detail in the course of imitation which he pursued, and in which he is leading his little children. "The Father hath sent the Son to be the Saviour of the world," hath sent Him "into the world that we might live through Him" (iv. 9-14); and Jesus had said, in words never absent from His Apostle's thoughts, "As the Father hath sent me, even so send I you" (John xx. 21). In the walk of Jesus the end determined the way; the cross threw its shadow back as far as Bethlehem—and farther still, into all the preparings and

prophesyings of His advent. And it throws its shadow forward upon all the issues and the followings thereof. The man who "walks even as He walked," moves onward to that goal.

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