

The Message of the Letters of John

by G. Campbell Morgan

G. Campbell Morgan's sermon emphasizes the importance of fellowship with God through the teachings of John, focusing on the themes of light and love as essential for eternal life.

Scripture: John 1:1-14, John 20:31, Ephesians 5:14, 1 John 1:5, 1 John 2:6, 1 John 2:20-21, 1 John 3:18, 1 John 4:7, 1 John 4:10, 1 John 5:13

Topics: "Fellowship With God", "Light and Love"

Description

G. Campbell Morgan emphasizes the profound message of the Letters of John, focusing on the life of fellowship with God as central to Christian existence. He explains that this fellowship is rooted in the resources of light and love, which are exemplified in the life of Christ and made manifest in believers. The letters serve as both a teaching and a test, urging individuals and the Church to evaluate their lives through the lenses of light and love, ensuring that their actions align with God's will. Morgan highlights the importance of seeking and obeying the light, as well as yielding to the impulse of love while maintaining its holiness. Ultimately, the letters call for a deep, authentic relationship with God that reflects in both personal and communal faith.

Transcript

A. THE PERMANENT VALUES

I. The Central Teaching. The Life of Fellowship explained

i. As to Resources.

a. Objective. The Pattern provided.

1. Of Light. The Sinless One. ii. 6.

2. Of Love. - He loved us." iv. 10.

b. Subjective. The Power provided.

1. For Light. "Begotten we see." ii. 20, 27.

2. For Love. Begotten we love. iv. 7.

ii. As to Realization.

a. Its Value to us. The Fulfillment of Life.

1. The perfected Being.

2. The Friendship of God.

b. Its Value to God. The Fulfillment of Purpose.

1. Media of Manifestation.

2. Instruments of Accomplishment.

II. The Abiding Appeal. The Responsibilities of Fellowship declared

i. As to Light.

a. Its Testing must be sought.

b. Its Revelation must be obeyed.

ii. As to Love.

a. Its Impulse must be yielded to.

b. Its Holiness must be maintained.

B. THE LIVING MESSAGE

I. To the Individual

Life must be tested by Light and Love.

To the Church

The Law of its Fellowship is that of Life expressed in Love tested by Light.

"Believe not every spirit"

"Look to yourselves."

"Welcome such."

The three letters of John are intimately related to each other. In the first we have teaching, and in the second and third, illustrations; but the message is one.

There is, moreover, a close relation between these letters and the Gospel according to John. Two statements, one in the Gospel, and one in the letters, in which the apostle declared the purpose of his writing in each case, reveal that relation.

The purpose for which the Gospel was written was that those reading it should believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that as a result of their belief, they might themselves enter into life. This the

writer clearly declared in the words,

"These are written that ye may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God ; and that believing ye may have life in His name" (John XX. 31).

The purpose for which the letters were written was that those reading them, having already believed on the name of the Son of God, might have the means whereby to find assurance of their possession of eternal life. This with equal clearness John declared in the words,

"These things have I written unto you, that ye may know that ye have eternal life, even unto you that believe on the name of the Son of God " (I John v. 13).

In the Gospel, then, we have the unveiling of eternal life in its manifestation in the Son of God ; and the revelation of the fact that this life is, through Him, placed at the disposal of men through the mystery of His death, and the victory of His resurrection. When we read the Gospel story, we know what eternal life really is, for it is clearly manifested in the Son of God; and further, we learn that we may share in that life by believing in His name. Thus the theme of the Gospel is that of eternal life; as it is revealed in the Son of God; and as the Son of God is able to communicate it to believing souls.

In the letters, the theme is still that of eternal life, only in these we see its manifestation in the children of God, that is, in those who through faith in the Son of God have received that life. So that the theme of the letters is that of eternal life, as it is revealed in the children of God, as they are under the mastery of the Son of God.

The theme of the Gospel and the letters is thus seen to be the same. It is that of age-abiding life, that is, life according to the will and purpose of God. In the Gospel we see one lonely figure, that of the Son of God, revealing and communicating eternal life. In the epistles we see the children of God, those whom the Son brings into this life, that is all such as believe on His name.

In the prologue of the Gospel, John wrote of the Son of God,

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. . . . And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us . . . full of grace and truth" (John i. 1 and 14).

In the parenthesis of the fourteenth verse, John, in evident exultation of spirit, wrote,

"And we beheld His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father full of grace and truth." and in that brief and almost abrupt phrase, "full of grace and truth," he gave the distinguishing facts of the "glory."

When we turn to his letters, we find the same facts of grace and truth dominating his thought: the first of them illustrating the power of grace in the life of all those who believe in the Son of God, and the second and third insisting upon the importance of truth, by showing the necessity for loyalty thereto on the part of those who share the privileges of grace.

These letters, then, afford a teaching and a test. They teach us what eternal life is in the experience of the child of God; and they enable us therefore to test our life, and to know whether it is eternal life.

In dealing with the essential message we find that its central teaching is an explanation of the life of fellowship; while its abiding appeal is that of a declaration of the responsibilities of fellowship.

As we commence our reading of the first letter, the word fellowship is found, and it is the key-note of the three epistles, the master-thought of the writer being that eternal life is life in fellowship with God; we enter upon eternal life when we are brought into fellowship with God; we continue in eternal life as we abide in fellowship with God.

The explanation of the life of fellowship falls into two parts, the first dealing with resources, and the second with realization.

The resources of the life of fellowship are objectively presented in the pattern provided in the Son of God; and subjectively received in the power provided when we are begotten children of God.

The pattern of eternal life is given in Christ, and the writer dealt with it in its twofold aspect of light and of love.

When dealing with the subject of light, the apostle wrote,

"He that saith he abideth in Him ought himself to walk even as that One walked" (I John ii. 6).

It is evident from that literal translation that w John wrote, he had before his vision the Lord and Master Whom he knew so intimately. If we desire an accurate interpretation of the phrase, "that One," we must go back to the Gospel to find it, for there we see the One upon Whom John was looking in spirit, and by faith, when he wrote the words. In that Gospel the Son of God is revealed, walking in light, and, therefore, as the sinless One, never consenting to darkness, never hiding from God, or attempting so to do; the One of Whom it was preeminently true that in His spirit there was no guile, no deceit. He is the pattern, therefore, of eternal life, as perfect conformity to light. In the measure in which we walk as He walked, we walk in light.

It must be remembered that this writing was for the children of God, that the Lord Jesus Christ is not presented as a pattern to men until they have yielded themselves to Him; for the perfection of His life is such that to present it as an ideal to be realized would be but to mock the impotence of unregenerate men. It is perfectly true that we may present Him as the great Ideal to men who have not yet received His gift of life ; but in doing so we only succeed in discovering to them their inability to imitate the pattern, and so to reveal to them the necessity for the new birth. Having become His by the gift of life, we are called upon to live the life of fellowship with God, and our first resource is that of the pattern which He thus presents.

In dealing with the subject of love, the apostle wrote,

"Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us, and sent His Son to be the Propitiation for our sins " (I John iv. 10).

In all the life of the Son of God thus sent by the Father there was a revelation of the attitude and activity of perfect love. No word ever passed His lips but that was love inspired. He wrought no deed but in answer to the demand of love. Thus in Him we see eternal life in the sinlessness of light, and the selflessness of love.

If, however, as we have already indicated, our resources in Christ are only objective, then we are left helpless indeed. The more carefully I contemplate the revelation of eternal life in Christ, the more impossible do I feel it to be to imitate the pattern given. Those who speak of imitating Jesus Christ, and seem to hope to realize the ideal in their own strength, have surely never seen Him in that marvellous

wonder of perfect sinlessness and absolute love which John has presented to us in his Gospel. The pattern is not enough, and therefore in dealing with our resources, he shows that Christ is not merely objectively presented to us as from without, that we may gaze upon Him; but that by the communication of His own life to us He becomes a subjective, an actual power, working within' our lives.

This is true both with regard to light and to love. The light only comes when comes the life, and the love only comes when comes the life. When a man is begotten of God, he sees, he becomes sensitive in the matter of sin, he knows exactly what he ought to do. Moreover, when a man is begotten of God, the first impulse of his new life is love, which drives him out upon the pathway of sacrificial service on behalf of other men.

The relation of life to light in the case of the children of God is revealed in two statements;

"Ye have an anointing from the Holy One, and ye know all things."

"And as for you, the anointing which ye received of Him abideth in you, and ye need not that any one teach you ; but as His anointing teacheth you concerning all things, and is true, and is no lie, and even as it taught you, ye abide in Him" (I John ii. 20 and 27).

While there are many values in these statements, for the purpose of our present meditation we may summarize their teaching in this respect by saying that the child of God is never left in doubt by God as to the thing which is sinful, and the thing which is right. That statement may be challenged, but let it be carefully pondered in the light of Christian experience. There are times when we may be tempted to argue with ourselves that we are not sure; but in the deepest fact of our life in Christ we always know. As we have received His life, that life is always light, and though there may be moments when on some threshold between light and darkness we waver and wonder, that very uncertainty does but demonstrate the necessity for fleeing the danger, and pressing back into the clear light. The man begotten of God sees, and if we are conscious of the loss of a keen sense of sin, we may know that our life is at a low ebb.

The relation of life to love in the case of the children of God is revealed in the words;

"Every one that loveth is begotten of God, and knoweth God" (I John iv. 7).

The man begotten of God loves. That is the very essence of Christianity. The first movement in the soul of a man born of God is a movement inspired by love and impelling to service. Let that be illustrated in the simplest possible way. Here is a man born again in some service, or, it may be, in the loneliness of his own home. Then immediately, and without any exception, he thinks of some one else whom he loves, and desires that such an one may share his joy; and is consequently impelled to go and tell that one the secret of his new-found life. There is no exception to this. The life of God is love, and the moment we share it, we love. We may quench love, be afraid to let it lead us to full expression, but all such action reacts upon life itself. The truth of infinite value is that the most loveless become love mastered as they are born of God.

These writings reveal not the resources of life alone, but also the values of its realization. These are twofold, the value to us, and the value to God.

The value of the life of fellowship to us is that of the realization of our own life, the perfection of our being, in friendship with God.

Some time ago I received a letter, in which the writer said, "How am I to find the secret that will admit me to the realization of all of which I am conscious? Life seems to me as though it ought to be made up of love and laughter, but I am afraid that this is an improper definition of life." In answer to that letter I said that such is life indeed, according to the will of God, and that life only becomes love and laughter as it is eternal life, or life in fellowship with God. It is self-evident that when I use the word laughter I am not referring to such laughter as the preacher described in the book of Ecclesiastes, when he wrote,

"For as the crackling of thorns under a pot, so is the laughter of the fool: this also is vanity " (vii. 6).

I refer rather to that exultant hilarity which results from full consciousness of life. When a man is born of God, he is made to realize what God meant when He first made man. That is eternal life.

That way of stating the fact may surprise a great many truly Christian people who seem to have an idea that eternal life changes a man into some other order of being. Let us ever carefully remember that what we are essentially, in our first creation, we are by the will and power of God. He creates each human being a member of the great commonwealth of humanity, necessary for the perfecting of the whole. We never come to a realization of these powers, or make our contribution to the larger whole, until we are living eternal life, that is, life in fellowship with God. The words of Jesus are most significant in this respect, in which He declares, "Whosoever loseth his life shall find it," that is, the very life he loses. He that loses his life for Christ's sake does not find a different life. He finds rather the key to his own life, which unlocks its secrets; and the power which enables him to realize its potentialities. The value of eternal life to us then is the perfecting of our personalities in friendship with God, according to the will of God. Eternal life is true life, life as God intended it should be.

Realization of eternal life by the children of God is valuable to God Himself, in that He finds in every human being who lives in fellowship with Himself a medium through which He can manifest Himself, and an instrument through which He is able to accomplish His purposes. When a man begins to live the life eternal, God gains in him an opportunity to show Himself in the shop or the office where he works, in the circle of men and women among whom he moves.

The abiding appeal of these letters consists in their declaration of the responsibilities of the life of fellowship. These responsibilities are those of light and love.

With regard to light, the first responsibility is that its testing must be sought. It is not enough that I should say that light must be obeyed. Our first duty is to seek the light. We often say that we have no light on a given subject. Let it be remembered that if that is so, the fault is with us. We can have light if we will. That fact is most clearly taught by Paul in one of his letters, in which he said, "Awake, thou that deepest, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall shine upon thee." This does not merely mean once, at the beginning, but along the whole pathway of life. It is possible for us not to seek the light, not to want to have the light, not to desire its shining; and our first responsibility therefore is that we do seek the light. If indeed we bear His name and profess to live the life of fellowship, we have no right to undertake any business without seeking light, no right to enter upon any pleasure without desiring to know His will. There must be the testing of the life by light on the part of all those who are living in fellowship with God.

Then when the light shines, it must be obeyed wherever it leads, and at whatever cost.

Our responsibilities as to love are that its impulse must be yielded to, and its holiness must be maintained.

It is a matter for the most solemn consideration that we may destroy our capacity for love by not yielding to its impulse. There is a time in the earlier experiences of all Christian life when the soul is conscious of a great passion for lost men and women. It is possible to lose this. It is possible to continue the service, and yet to have lost the love. We lose the love impulse when we refuse to obey its suggestions. Love asks for some sacrificial service, and we listen to some calm, calculating, satanic voice, and caring for ourselves, we stifle love. If the life of God in the soul of a man is in its first movement an impulse of love, our first responsibility is that of obedience thereto. Love will lead us to the doing of such things that the world will be unable to understand. Judas will still inquire, "Why this waste?" If we listen to that criticism, and cease to respond to love, love will die. If we turn a deaf ear to such suggestions of Satan, and yielding ourselves to love, serve in answer to its impulse, love will deepen and intensify.

We are not only to yield to love; we are to guard its holiness. It is possible to be led astray from the activity of true love by yielding to a false charity. At the very centre of love is light. That is not true love which sacrifices principle. God has never acted in love at the expense of light. If I could be persuaded for one moment that God can be so loving as to pass lightly over sin, then I should feel that the government of the universe was insecure. The fact is otherwise. He loves with such intensity that He never can excuse sin. In all our love, therefore, we must see to it that the light is shining, and that holiness is maintained.

These letters have an immediate application to the individual and to the Church. That to the individual may thus be briefly stated. Life must be tested by light and by love. That is a word full of solemnity. We talk of our fellowship with God. How are we to prove to ourselves that we are really living in fellowship with Him? The test of the life is that of light and love. If the light is not shining clearly, or if shining, we are disobedient to it; if the love that once burned and inspired is no longer operative, then may God deliver us from mere satisfaction with the formulae of orthodoxy, or correct intellectual apprehensions of the doctrines of grace.

As to the Church, the law of its fellowship is life, and as in the case of the individual, life must be tested by light and by love. We have no right to be so broad in our Church fellowship as to receive men who deny Christ as He is presented in the Gospel, and as He has accomplished His victories in the souls of men in the centuries of the Christian era. We may respect the convictions of these men, but there can be no fellowship with them in Church life, which does not weaken the testimony of the Church. It would be infinitely better that the fellowship of any Church should be smaller than that its numbers should be enlarged by the inclusion of those who fail to walk in light, or to respond to love.

It is a remarkable fact and not to be lightly passed over, that in these writings of John, who has become known preeminently as the apostle of love, we find the sternest words as to the necessity for loyalty to truth; and the Church of God needs to remember that fellowship with God necessitates separation from all who fail to fulfill the responsibilities of fellowship in light, or in love

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