

Love the Supreme Test of the Church

by T. Austin-Sparks

The sermon emphasizes that love is the ultimate test of the Church and the key to understanding God's message in the Bible.

Scripture: Jeremiah 2:2, John 2:24, Acts 9:1-9, 1 Corinthians 8:1, 2 Corinthians 4:17, Galatians 2:20, Ephesians 2:4, Hebrews 12:7, Revelation 1:5, Revelation 2:4-5

Topics: "Divine Love", "The Church's Calling"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes that love is the supreme test of the Church, drawing from Ephesians 2:4 to illustrate God's great love for humanity. He explores the messages to the seven churches in Revelation, highlighting that the essence of their challenges revolves around love--specifically, the loss of first love, which encompasses suffering, discernment, and steadfastness. Sparks argues that true love is not merely sentimental but requires a deep commitment and discernment, urging the Church to return to this foundational love as it approaches the end times. He concludes that love must be the driving force behind all actions and teachings within the Church, as it is the key to understanding God's purpose.

Transcript

"His great love wherewith he loved us" (Eph. 2:4).

We come now to the close of the New Testament, the consummation in the book of the Revelation. A great deal of reading ought to take place at this point for which we have not the time. Will you open the Word at the beginning of the book of the Revelation and glance down through the first, second and third chapters as the first main part of this book, hurriedly recalling what is there, and helping as best you can as we go on by noting details also?

We have said that we are here in the consummation, and I think I shall have no difficulty in having your agreement that, when we come to the book of the Revelation, we do come to the consummation of all that is in the Word of God; that is, it is a gathering up of all at the end to a final settlement. That at least we can say about the book of the Revelation. Whatever may be our ideas of interpretation of the many things here, we are all agreed that here we are at the end and everything is being gathered up to a final settlement. At this point we must just ask a further question. Have we not much to go upon that we are now nearing that final settlement of all things, that we are in the days of the consummation of the ages? Is it necessary for me to gather up all the proofs and evidences and signs to prove that? But I think there again I have your agreement. We certainly are in the end times.

If that is true, then it is a matter of supreme importance that we should recognize what are the primary and ultimate factors with God; and if those factors are at all at issue in our considering them together at this time, then our meditation must take on a significance which is altogether beyond our own. It must be a very solemn and consequential time, and it must demand and receive from us a definite act of putting away every other kind of thought and consideration. There should be an open-hearted seeking of the Lord, with no prejudices, no suspicions, no curiosity, nor anything that is casual or indefinite. We must come, and, with all our hearts, take the attitude that if God is going to say to us that which with Him is of primary and ultimate consequence, we must note that and we must be in it.

I tarry to lay emphasis on one further matter. I am intensely concerned that we should not be just occupied with a lot of Bible matter. This is not just a theme that is being taken up, a subject, with all the subject matter about it being brought out. No, a thousand times no! If this is not God's message to us, well, we had better cut it short and go and do something else.

Well then, let us come to this book of the Revelation. We take chapters 1 to 3. I have many times made great efforts to resolve these three chapters into one clear meaning, but I have always finished with a sense of defeat. There has been something true and right, but in the thing that I was after I have had a sense of defeat and frustration; and when we come to certain details in these messages to the churches, such as Jezebel, Balaam, the Nicolaitans, somehow we seem to have got into a realm of the technical. The thing has not become a concrete, definite, positive message, it has escaped me. I knew what those things meant in principle, but what I so much wanted to do was to find one resolving thing which gathers them all up and makes of them as a whole a single message for the Lord's people. Until now, as I say, I have felt defeated every time, all through the long years. I am wondering if I have got it now; we shall see.

LOVE THE MASTER-KEY TO THE WHOLE BIBLE

It seems to me at length that the master-key to the whole Bible is in our hands when we come to this. The master-key to everything is love; and if you will look, I do not think there is any doubt but that you will come to see that all that is here is gathered into that one matter of Divine love. We are in the consummation of love in this book, and it begins and ends with the Church.

LOVE THE KEY TO THE VISION IN REVELATION 1

You take, then, the first chapter, and what is the key? The key to the first chapter and also to the whole book is to be found in the words, "Unto him that loveth us, and loosed us from our sins by his blood; and he made us a kingdom, priests unto his God and Father." You can see love in almost every word of that great sentence.

But alongside of, or following on, that statement, you have the presentation of the risen and glorified Lord, and He presented at once in that marvelous designation "Son of man," the title of kinship, the redeeming kinsman. "Unto him that loveth us, and loosed us from our sins" - the title, you see, belongs to One who has come right into our estate, and eventually into our state. That is the theme of love. Oh, how great, how comprehensive, is that Son of man, flesh of our flesh, bone of our bone, to redeem us unto His Father! He is described in that matchless presentation, verse by verse, step by step, and when you have read it all and noted everything that is said about Him, every detail of His person and of His adornment, you find it is the sum total of love.

He is "girt about at the breasts with a golden girdle." Every word speaks of Divine love, the breasts, the gold, the girdle. The girdle is the symbol of strength, of energy, of intention, of purpose. You mean business when you gird yourself. The robes are no longer flowing for leisure, loose for reclining. The girdle is golden, symbolic of the very nature of God who is love. Above the rest that girdle seems to me to include all the other features, give meaning to everything else.

I am not going to mention in detail all the features of this Son of man as given to us here. What I am trying to convey to you is that this inclusive presentation of the risen and glorified Christ is the comprehensive presentation of love. "But," you say, "is that true? - because some of the terms used are terrible, awful. John fell at His feet as one dead when he saw Him. Is that the effect of love? Would it not be truer to say that this is the Lord All-terrible, rather than the Lord All-loving?" But think again. It is love, but not our idea of love. We have to reconstitute our conception of Divine love. This One here is described as "the faithful and true." Have you never been in the hands of the Lord in discipline, in breaking, yes, in shattering, being poured out like water on the ground, and afterward have had to say, "Thou wast right, Lord; it was the only way. It was a terrible experience, but Thou wast faithful with me, faithful to all the highest and deepest principles of heaven. It was not in anger and judgment, but in faithfulness and mercy to my soul that Thou didst do it." We have to reconstitute our idea of love. Here John says, "When I saw him I fell at his feet as one dead. And he laid his right hand upon me, saying, Fear not." This is not judgment, this is not destruction, this is not death and condemnation. The right hand is the token of honour, of favour. "Fear not; I am the first and the last." "Everything is in My hands and in the end it will be all right; I took it up and I am going to finish it; fear not."

I was saying that John fell at His feet as one dead. There was another man who, travelling on a road with the positive intention of blotting out from this earth, as far as it lay in his power, every remembrance of Jesus of Nazareth, was met by this same Lord of glory. All-terrible? Well, certainly Saul of Tarsus went down, he was broken, the encounter overpowered him and left its mark upon his very physical body to the end of his life. For three days he had no sight, and they had to help him into the city. But do you tell me that was God the All-terrible? Oh, listen to the conversation! "Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?" What is the tone of that? It is not, I am sure, the tone of anger. It is a pleading tone of entreaty, of sorrow, of solicitude. "Who art thou, Lord?" "I am God the All-terrible, and now I have brought you to book"? No - "I am Jesus whom thou persecutest... What shall I do, Lord?... Rise, and enter into the city, and it shall be told thee what thou must do." The Lord went ahead of him, prepared the way for him (Acts 9:1-9; 22:4-11). Do you tell me that terrible revelation was not love? Well, ask Paul himself what he thought about it, and see in after years what he had to say about it. He did not say, "He met me, He smote me, He destroyed me, He brought me into such awful judgment that I lost all hope." He said, "He loved me and gave himself up for me" (Gal.2: 20). That meeting, terrible and devastating as it might be in one sense, was a meeting with the Lover of his soul.

I say again, we have to make over anew our conception of Divine love. It is not that sickly, sentimental thing we call love. It is something tremendous. We have so to reconstruct our conception of Divine love as to see that our highest interests for all eternity demand very faithful dealings with us by God, and the more we really know the heart of God, the more we come to be ready to say, "Thou art right, Lord; even in what I would call Thy hard handling of me, Thou art right." God in His love has the end in view, not just the pacifying of some fretful child with a sop. We are called unto His eternal glory and "our light affliction, which is for the moment, worketh for us more and more exceedingly an eternal weight of glory" (2 Cor. 4:17). But we do not always believe it while the affliction is on us. We do not even call it "light"; but He

knows how transcendently and infinitely the glory outweighs the suffering. He has decided, with the greatness of the end in view, it is worth His while to be faithful with us and let nothing pass that would take from that glorious prize of His glory or work against it. He knows quite well that, when we are with Him afterward, were we to see something that was not taken up by Him and dealt with because of the suffering and the pain it would have caused us, and because we would have murmured and complained, that we would say to Him then, "Lord, why didst Thou not do that in spite of me?" And so, knowing the end and dealing with us in the light of it, the faithful and the true love is other than our poor sickly conception of love. Love in our thinking so often means just giving way all the time, just having everything we want or giving everything that others want. God deals with us, not as infants, but as sons (Heb. 12:7). The presentation, you see, is all a comprehensive and detailed consummation of love.

THE CHURCHES CHALLENGED AS TO LOVE

Now you pass to the next two chapters, and you have the churches; and the Lord is here dealing with the churches on the basis of the presentation. That can be seen by noting that every one of the seven messages to the churches takes up some feature of the presentation of Christ in the first chapter. You can look at that and note it. Actual phrases in the presentation of chapter one are used in relation to the churches respectively. So He is dealing with the churches on the basis of Himself as fully presented, and therefore if the presentation is the comprehensive embodiment of love, He is dealing with all the churches on that basis.

Now you note that the messages and the churches are bounded by Ephesus and Laodicea, and not as unrelated but as embracing and covering all the seven. In Ephesus and Laodicea the trouble is defective love. Ephesus, "thou didst leave thy first love"; Laodicea, "thou art neither hot nor cold." The whole question with these churches is love. Let us hurriedly look at them separately, as far as we can.

FIRST LOVE AS COVERING ALL

Here again is the wonderful thing, that in Ephesus, which marks the beginning of everything, all turns on love. "Thou didst leave thy first love." What is first love? Well, first love is all-inclusive in its nature. You will not be able subsequently to find any characteristic or feature of love without finding it in first love. First love covers all the ground of love. We could not tabulate the meaning of first love. It is everything, it is all that you can say about love; utterly selfless, self-forgetting, uncalculating. It is fierce, it is fiery, it is completely hot, strong and faithful. That is where the Lord begins. First love is the basis on which the Lord takes up the whole matter, comprehensive of all love's features. So in relation to the ultimate situation, we see here, through Ephesus, that what the Lord must have in His Church is inclusive love, love in all its features. He must come at the end back to the beginning, and bring His Church likewise back to that basis. Of course, there must have been a first love; you cannot depart from what never was. That will challenge us.

To Israel the Lord said, through a prophet, with a sigh of disappointment and grief, "I remember concerning thee the kindness of thy youth, the love of thine espousals; how thou wentest after me in the wilderness, in a land that was not sown" (Jer. 2:2). That is what love will do. Love will go after its lover in a wilderness where there is nothing to live on.

If necessary, it will die of starvation in order to be with its lover. "I remember concerning thee... the love of thine espousals." Inclusive love is the basis upon which the Lord begins, and in effect He is saying, "I can be satisfied with nothing less." Oh, there is love in Ephesus, there is no doubt about that. "I know thy works, and thy toil and patience" - and this, that and the other: it is not that they are without love, but that

they are without their first love, that utter, inclusive, every-sided love; that is the trouble.

Let this come to our hearts. We all love the Lord; I trust we can say that truly. We love the Lord and we will do much for Him. But is our love of this kind? Is everything in our lives prompted by love, or is much of it lived under a sense of duty, of obligation or necessity, of having to do; or are there other motives, other interests and objects that keep us in the work of God as Christians? Is it the fear that we must not drop out in case of what happens to us? That is all on a lower level of life. Inclusive love is God's starting-point, and He says, "I can be satisfied with nothing less; even you who labour and are patient and have this, that and the other thing which are very commendable, I cannot let your lampstand remain with a loss of first love." Testimony is really gone when first love is gone, however much remains.

THE NATURE OF FIRST LOVE

(a) SUFFERING LOVE

We look now at Smyrna, and see that a great suffering has come upon the church there, a period of intense suffering in which it will be necessary to be faithful unto death; and so the Lord, in the inclusiveness of first love, would say, and does say, as I see it here, that first love is suffering love. It is indicated by what you will go through for the Lord's sake and out of love for the Lord, what you will endure, what you will put up with. No, not just to what part of the world you will go to minister to the heathen and lay down your life for your Lord, but what you will put up with at home, what you will put up with in other Christians, what you will put up with of daily martyrdom in love for your Lord without a revengeful spirit, without wanting to see those who cause your suffering and affliction made to suffer themselves for it. Suffering love, that is first love. Are you having to suffer, and suffer wrongfully? Peter says, "If, when ye do well, and suffer for it, ye shall take it patiently, this is acceptable ("grace" - R.V. margin) with God" (1 Peter 2:20). As we have said, grace is only another name for love. Suffering love - that is first love.

I could illustrate that. You have no need that it should be done, but you know quite well that in a first wholehearted devotion to any object you are prepared to go through anything for that object. It does not matter what people say, the love is stronger than all hindrances.

(b) DISCERNING LOVE

Next we come to Pergamum. Here we have an awful state of mixture, contamination, compromise, entanglement with evil things. If we seek for the cause, we find that the church in Pergamum has not discriminated between the things that differ, between what is of the Lord and what is not. It has compromised by reason of defective spiritual sight, and so the issue here, the matter of first love, is that first love is a discerning love. There is much about that in the Bible. Paul is rich on the matter of discerning love.

"...having the eyes of your heart enlightened, that ye may know what is the hope of his calling, what the riches of the glory of his inheritance in the saints" (Eph. 1:18). "The eyes of your heart enlightened" discerning love. Love is as far removed from blindness as heaven from earth. "Love is blind"? No - not true love. The fact is that true love sees everything, but transcends everything. The love of Christ for His disciples was not blind love that did not know His men, love that was duped, deceived, misled, but eventually found out that they were not the men He thought they were.

No, "he... knew what was in man" (John 2:24). His love saw everything, could tell them beforehand exactly what they would do; but love persisted in face of it all. Love is a great seeing thing. If you are consumed with a burning love for the Lord, you will be very quick of scent as to what is doubtful and questionable. You will not need to be frequently and continuously told when a thing is not right. No, love for the Lord will bring you quickly to see and to sense there is something that needs to be adjusted.

You may not know what it is at the time, but you have a sense that all is not well. Love will do it. All the instruction in the world will not bring you to it. You may have the Word of God brought to you on all such points, and you might even say, "All right, because you say so, because it is in the Bible, I will do it, I will be obedient." Do you think that is good enough? Such a thing has never come to you through the eyes of your heart. But mark you, if this love, this discerning love, has really filled your heart by all the intelligence of the Holy Spirit indwelling you, you will sense it without being told; or if it should be brought to you from the Word, that within you will say, "Yes, I know that is right, the Lord tells me that is right."

Do you not think that is the kind of Christian that is needed, and what the Lord needs at the end? That is what He has had in mind from the beginning and He calls that first love that is quick of scent to see what needs to be cut off or added, what adjustments are necessary, and does accordingly. You do not have to follow round and say, "Please do this; have you never taken note that you might be helpful in this way?" You do not have to do that where there is devotion, love watchful all the time, aliveness, alertness, perception, readiness to do without being all the time told to do it. Real devotion to the Lord is something that far outreaches legality. First love is discerning love.

I would like to spend all my time on this matter of discerning love, because there is so much about it. We do not grow by teaching and information, by being filled up with the Bible and its doctrines and its truths, however wonderful and true and great they are. We only grow by love, and we grow by love in terms of spiritual discernment. "Love buildeth up" (1 Cor. 8:1); but love buildeth up because love gives us spiritual insight, and the simplest child of God, who has never been brought up in profound things, in the midst of a great wealth of teaching, but who loves the Lord, will make far greater strides in spiritual growth than those who have it all mentally and intellectually and not through the eyes of the heart. It is true. If there is an adequate love there will be no compromise with error, with wrong, no permitting of questionable things, no long-drawn-out shedding of things which, while they may not be altogether wrong, would be better not there. The Holy Spirit can come along that way. Have we not seen it? Have we not seen people making all kinds of changes in their habits, in their manner, in their very adornments and fashions, as they have grown spiritually, and because of an intense love for the Lord, without anyone having said anything at all? Probably had someone pointed out various things - I had better not mention them - they might have said, "All right, he says we must not do this." Is that good enough? Oh no! But without ever mentioning these things, we have seen people gripped by the love of God, some right at the beginning of their Christian life, steadily through following months changing themselves outwardly, becoming different people. Love is the key. You can see, then, why the Lord spoke to the church at Pergamum in the terms in which He did. What was needed there, and therefore what is needed in the consummation, is first love as marked by discernment.

(c) UNCOMPROMISING LOVE

In Thyatira again we come to a bad state, as well as a sad one, a state of spiritual tragedy. Look at the language, the names, the history behind certain names there, and it is the history of the seduction of Israel. They have been seduced, and corrupted through seduction. That is summing it up. What, then, is

the requirement, in what way will love express itself? If a state of compromise in Pergamum requires discerning love, in Thyatira seduction and corruption demand an uncompromising love, repudiating Balaam and all the rest of his kind. No compromise, no seduction unto confusion, no mixing things up, no trying to bring together contrary things, no wearing of linen and wool, no ploughing with ox and ass - the symbols, you know, of two realms, of two natures - none of this trying to bring together the life of the flesh and of the Spirit; it cannot be done. No compromise can really be established between the flesh and the Spirit, between the world and Christ. No; here first love to be recovered will mean no compromise, no mixture, no confusing of issues.

(d) DISTINGUISHING LOVE

Sardis - what is the upshot of things in Sardis? "Thou hast a name that thou livest, and art dead." You look at the message to the church at Sardis and try to put it all into one word. What is the word that sums it up? Well, you have to say it is indefiniteness. So we can say again, in the light of the whole standard, that first love, ultimate love, the love of Christ, the love which He is seeking, is a distinguishing love that marks you out as clearly defined for the Lord and all that is of the Lord. Distinguished, different, outstanding, defined, unmistakable by the love that characterizes and governs. The thing that distinguishes from all else is this great love, and this great love brings about a distinctiveness of life. You cannot be indefinite if you are mastered by this kind of love. First love does not care one little bit what people think or say. Oh, everybody is saying this and that about the lover in the grip of first love. They may be using all sorts of language - He is a fool, he is mad! - it does not matter. This love is making them clear-cut - one object, one design, one thought, one intent. They are people marked by one thing and not two. There is no doubt about it. We have our humorous ways of speaking of people who are in that state. He is in love, you cannot get away from it, everything goes by the board! There is one thing and one thing only in that life. That is, of course, how it ought to be. You young people, never have any relationships in the beginning that are not like that. First love is like that, and the Lord says, "I want you where you were at the beginning." Or shall we say, "I want you where I have ever been. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end; I am like that from first to last. I want you back there in a distinguishing love."

(e) STEADFAST LOVE

Philadelphia is very quickly summed up. While the name itself means "brotherly love," there is one word that sums up this message, and that is patience. "The word of my patience." First love is patient love, or, to use the other word that is always in the margin of the New Testament when you come on patience, steadfast love. That is first love, that is the love of Christ. "He loved them unto the end" (unto the uttermost): "I have loved thee with an everlasting love"; and oh, what a triumph that kind of love was and is! It needs steadfastness to go on with all that love has to encounter and suffer and endure. It is the quality of the love of God, steadfast love.

(f) FERVENT LOVE

Finally, we have Laodicea. What is the word which sums up Laodicea? It is mediocrity, neither one thing nor the other, nothing outstanding, nothing positive. You cannot say they are not Christians, but yet again you cannot say very much that is good about them as Christians. They are very ordinary. There is no such thing as an ordinary first love. In first love you are a most extraordinary person. What then is first love? It is, as over against Laodicea, fervent love, which means red-hot love, white-hot love, fervent love.

This is the sum of first love - suffering love, discerning, uncompromising, distinguishing, steadfast, fervent. Have we the key to the messages, have we the key to the end time? There may be another, but I have not found it yet. This is the last one I have found. I think we are right this time, and it amounts to this, that the Lord is going to speak to the Church, to His people, to us at the end, and that the thing He will speak about is the matter of love. He will place more emphasis upon that than upon anything else. All other aspects of truth are important, and they will be the directions in which love will work itself out; but the foundation, the spring of all, that which is to impregnate all - whether it be the service of the Lord, the very truth of the Church's eternal calling and vocation, the greatness of the work of the Cross, whatever it may be as a matter of aspects of the one whole truth - beneath and through all must be this Divine love. Have the things in themselves - the truths, if you like to call them that - have them all without love, and they are nothing. May the Lord write this in our hearts.

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