

Sermons of St John Henry Newman: (4) Love, The One Thing Needful

This is the last in this series of articles which try to convey the tenor of some Newman sermons (1). What follows is my summary of his sermon with the above title, though any summary can only be a glimpse into its profundity.

Newman begins with the passage of St Paul (2): *“Though I speak with the tongues of me and angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal”*. He says he presumes that the greater number of persons who try to live Christian lives are dissatisfied with their own state on this point. They feel that the love of God, and of man for His sake, is not their ruling principle. The same goes for religious men, not less than others - their reason and their heart do not go together; their reason tends heavenwards but their heart earthwards. The sermon is aimed at being one step in removing this defect.

Even if we were like St Paul in doing great deeds, having great insight into the Gospel and strong faith, these are no necessary evidence of love. Neither is self-denying almsgiving, nor even martyrdom. Obedience to God’s commandments may flow from a sort of conscientiousness short of love. People without religion may act morally, not out of love of God, but because of worldly constraints. So Christians should perceive that they themselves may obey God far more that they love Him and ask themselves: *“How are we to learn, not merely to obey, but to love?”* Without love there may be remorse, regret, self-reproach, but not saving penitence; conviction of the reason, but not conversion of the heart. We may maintain our religious devotion by regular observance, but not by love.

Also, absence of love may be shown in the ease with which we are engrossed with trifles. Questions arise, the answer to all of which is because we are deficient in love. These questions include: Why do we complain of want of variety in life, even our religious life? Why can our faith be dispirited by hearing casual objections urged against the doctrine of Christ? Why are we afraid of the opinions of men, or their ridicule? Why may we turn away from God, or even complain to Him, when afflicted by troubles and distress? A smooth and easy life could, if we are not careful, choke up all the avenues of the soul, through which the life and breath of heaven may come to us. A hard life, alas, is no guarantee of becoming spiritual, but it is one of the means by which God makes us spiritual.

We must cherish a constant love of Christ in dying on the Cross for us. He showed His love for us in deed, not word. Think always of the Cross, consecrating and sealing all your doings with this one mental action. Dwell also upon His manifold mercies to us, the wonders of His grace, the gifts He has given us, our prayers He has answered, His sacred truth preserved in the Church and the Saints, how evil has been changed into good. It is by such deeds and such thoughts that all we do will become instinct with the spirit of love. We do everything thankfully and joyfully when we are temples of Christ. Then it is that we mix with the world without loving it, for our affections are given to God.

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(1) Realizations: Newman’s own selection of his sermons: Ed. Ferrer Blehl (2009); (2) 1 Corinthians 13:1