

## SERMON XVII

(language updated to more modern English by Rev. Troy Sims.

*Italicized words are those which have been added or edited for clarity.)*

PREACHED AT ST. MARY'S, OXFORD, BEFORE THE UNIVERSITY ON JANUARY 1, 1733.

*"Circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter."* Romans 2:29.

1. IT is the melancholy remark of an excellent man, that he who now preaches the most essential duties of Christianity, runs the hazard of being esteemed, by a great part of his hearers, *"someone who sets forth new doctrines."* Most people have so lived away the substance of that religion, *the profession of which they still retain*, that no sooner are any of those truths proposed which *show the difference of the Spirit of Christ from the spirit of the world*, than they cry out, *"You bring strange things to our ears; we would know what these things mean:"* — Though he is only preaching to them *"Jesus and the resurrection,"* with the necessary consequence of it, — *If Christ is risen, you then ought to die to the world, and to live wholly to God.*

2. A hard saying is this to the natural *person*, who is alive to the world, and dead to God; and one that he will not readily be persuaded to receive as the truth of God, unless it be so qualified in the interpretation, as to have neither use nor *significance* left. *The person "receives not the" words "of the Spirit of God,"* taken in their plain and obvious meaning; *"they are foolishness to him: Neither" indeed "can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned:"* — *These are perceived only by the spiritual senses, which were never awakened in that person for that person rejected the wisdom and power of God as idle fancies of humanity.*<sup>1</sup>

3. That *"circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter;"* — that the distinguishing mark of a true follower of Christ, of one who is in a state of acceptance with God, is not either outward circumcision, or baptism, or any other outward form, but a right state of soul, a mind and spirit renewed after the image of Him that created it; — is one of those important truths that can only be spiritually discerned. And this the Apostle himself intimates in the next words, — *"Whose praise is not of people, but of God."* As if he had said, *"Expect not, whoever you are, who thus follows your great Master, that the world, the ones who do not follow him, will say, 'Well done, good and faithful servant!' Know that the circumcision of the heart, the seal of your calling, is foolishness with the world. Be content to wait for your applause till the day of your Lord's appearing. In that day you shall have praise of God, in the great assembly of people and angels."*

I design, First, particularly to inquire, wherein this circumcision of the heart consists; and, Secondly, to mention some reflections that naturally arise from such an inquiry.

## I.

1. I am, First, to inquire, wherein that circumcision of the heart consists, which will receive the praise of God. In general we may observe, it is that habitual disposition of soul which, in the sacred writings, is termed holiness; and which directly implies, the being cleansed from sin, *"from all filthiness both of flesh and spirit;"* and, by consequence, the being endued with those

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1 Original Sentence: They are perceivable only by that spiritual sense, which in him was never yet awakened; for want of which he must reject, as idle fancies of men, what are both the wisdom and the power of God.

virtues which were also in Christ Jesus; the being so "renewed in the spirit of our mind," as to be "perfect as our Father in heaven is perfect."

2. To be more particular: Circumcision of heart implies humility, faith, hope, and charity.

Humility, a right judgment of ourselves, cleanses our minds from those high conceits of our own perfections, from that undue opinion of our own abilities and attainments, which are the genuine fruit of a corrupted nature. This entirely cuts off that vain thought, "I am rich, and wise, and have need of nothing;" and convinces us that we are by nature "wretched, and poor, and miserable, and blind, and naked." It convinces us, that in our best estate we are, of ourselves, all sin and vanity; that confusion, and ignorance, and error reign over our understanding; that unreasonable, earthly, sensual, devilish passions usurp authority over our will; in a word, that there is no whole part in our soul, that all the foundations of our nature are out of course.

3. At the same time we are convinced, that we are not sufficient of ourselves to help ourselves; that, without the Spirit of God, we can do nothing but add sin to sin; that it is He alone who *works* in us by his almighty power, either to will or do that which is good; it being as impossible for us even to think a good thought, without the supernatural assistance of his Spirit, as to create ourselves, or to renew our whole souls in righteousness and true holiness.

4. A sure effect of our having formed this right judgment of the sinfulness and helplessness of our nature, is a disregard of that "*honor which comes from people*," which is usually paid to some supposed excellency in us. He who knows himself, neither desires nor values the applause which he knows he *does not* deserve. It is therefore "a very small thing with him, to be judged by *people's* judgment." He has all reason to think, by comparing what *is* said, either for or against him, with what he feels in his own breast, that the world, as well as the god of this world, was "a liar from the beginning." And even as to those who are not of the world; though he would choose, if it were the will of God, that they should *consider* him as one *who is found* to be a faithful steward of his Lord's goods, if haply this might be a means of enabling him to be of more use to his fellow-servants, yet as this is the one end of his wishing for their *approval*, so he does not at all rest upon it: For he is assured, that whatever God wills, *God* can never want instruments to perform; since *God* is able, even of these stones, to raise up servants to do his pleasure.

5. This is that lowliness of mind, which they have learned of Christ, who follow *Christ's* example and tread in his steps. And this knowledge of their disease, whereby they are more and more cleansed from one part of it, pride and vanity, disposes them to embrace, with a willing mind, the second thing implied in circumcision of the heart, — that faith which alone is able to make them whole, which is the one medicine given under heaven to heal their sickness.

6. The best guide of the blind, the surest light of them that are in darkness, the most perfect instructor of the foolish, is faith. But it must be such a faith as is "mighty through God, to the pulling down of strong-holds," — to the overturning all the prejudices of corrupt reason, all the false maxims revered among *people*, all evil customs and habits, all that "wisdom of the world which is foolishness with God;" as "casts down imaginations," reasonings, "and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, and brings into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ."

7. "All things are possible to *the one* that" thus "believes." "The eyes of his *or her* understanding being enlightened," *one* sees what is his *or her* calling; even to glorify God, who has bought *us* with so high a price, in *one's* body and in *one's* spirit, which now are God's by redemption, as well as by creation. *The person* feels what is "the exceeding greatness of *God's* power," who, as he raised up Christ from the dead, so is able to *enliven* us, dead in sin, "by his Spirit which dwells in us." "This is the victory which overcomes the world, even our faith;" that faith, which is not only an unshaken assent to all that God has revealed in Scripture, — and in particular to those important truths, "Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners;" "He bare our sins in his own body on the tree;" "He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world;" [The following part of this paragraph is now added to the Sermon formerly preached.] — but likewise the revelation of Christ in our hearts; a divine evidence or conviction of his love, his free, unmerited love to me a sinner; a sure confidence in his pardoning mercy, wrought in us by the Holy Ghost; a confidence, whereby every true believer is enabled to bear witness, "I know that my Redeemer lives," that I have an "Advocate with the Father," and that "Jesus Christ the righteous" is my Lord, and "the propitiation for my sins," — I know he has "loved me, and given himself for me," — He has reconciled me, even me, to God; and I "have redemption through his blood, even the forgiveness of sins."

8. Such a faith as this cannot fail to show evidently the power of Him that inspires it, by delivering his children from the yoke of sin, and "purging their consciences from dead works;" by strengthening them so, that they are no longer constrained to obey sin in the desires thereof; but instead of "yielding their members to it, as instruments of unrighteousness," they now "yield themselves" entirely "to God, as those that are alive from the dead."

9. Those who are thus by faith born of God, have also strong consolation through hope. This is the next thing which the circumcision of the heart implies; even the testimony of their own spirit with the Spirit which witnesses in their hearts that they are the children of God. Indeed it is the same Spirit who works in them that clear and cheerful confidence that their heart is upright toward God; that good assurance, that they now do, through his grace, the things which are acceptable in his sight; that they are now in the path which leads to life, and shall, by the mercy of God, endure therein to the end. It is He who gives them a lively expectation of receiving all good things at God's hand; a joyous prospect of that crown of glory, which is reserved in heaven for them. By this anchor a Christian is kept steady in the midst of the waves of this troublesome world, and preserved from striking upon either of those fatal rocks, — presumption or despair. *The Christian* is neither discouraged by the misconceived severity of *the Lord*, nor does he *or she* "despise the riches of *God's* goodness." *The Christian* neither apprehends the difficulties of the race set before him *or her* to be greater than he *or she* has strength to conquer, nor expects them to be so little as to yield in the conquest, till *the Christian* has put forth all his *or her* strength. The experience one already has in the Christian warfare, as it assures *one* that his *or her* "labor is not in vain," if "whatever *one's* hand finds to do, *that one* does it with *one's* might;" so it forbids his *or her* entertaining so vain a thought, as that *one* can otherwise gain any advantage, as that any virtue can be shown, any praise attained, by faint hearts and feeble hands; or, indeed, by any but those who pursue the same course with the great Apostle of the Gentiles: "I," says he, "so run, not as uncertainly; so *I fight*, not as one that beats the air: But I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection; lest, by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway."

**10.** By the same discipline is every good soldier of Christ to *harden oneself* to endure hardship. Confirmed and strengthened by this, *the Christian* will be able not only to renounce the works of darkness, but every appetite too, and every affection, which is not subject to the law of God. For "every one," says St. John, "who has this hope, purifies *oneself* even as He is pure." It is *one's* daily care, by the grace of God in Christ, and through the blood of the covenant, to purge the inmost recesses of *one's* soul from the lusts that before possessed and defiled it; from uncleanness, and envy, and malice, and wrath; from every passion and temper that is after the flesh, that either springs from or cherishes *one's* native corruption: As well knowing, that *the one* whose very body is the temple of God, ought to admit into it nothing common or unclean; and that holiness becomes that house for ever, where the Spirit of holiness *desires* to dwell.

**11.** *Yet you lack one thing, whoever you are. You have joined a lively hope to deep humility and a steadfast faith, and by that, in a good measure, you have cleansed your heart from its inbred pollution.*<sup>2</sup> If you will be perfect, add to all these, charity; add love, and you have the circumcision of the heart. "Love is the fulfilling of the law, the end of the commandment." Very excellent things are spoken of love; it is the essence, the spirit, the life of all virtue. It is not only the first and great command, but it is all the commandments in one. "Whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are amiable," or *honorable*; "if there be any virtue, if there be any praise," they are all comprised in this one word, — love. In this is perfection, and glory, and happiness. The royal law of heaven and earth is this, "You shall love the Lord *your* God with all *your* heart, and with all *your* soul, and with all *your* mind, and with all *your* strength."

**12.** Not that this forbids us to love anything besides God: It implies that we love our brother *and sister* also. Nor yet does it forbid us (as some have strangely imagined) to take pleasure in any thing but God. To suppose this, is to suppose the Fountain of holiness is directly the author of sin; since he has inseparably annexed pleasure to the use of those creatures which are necessary to sustain the life he has given us. This, therefore, can never be the meaning of his command. What the real sense of it is, both our blessed Lord and his Apostles tell us too frequently, and too plainly, to be misunderstood. They all with one mouth bear witness, that the true meaning of those several declarations, "The Lord *your* God is one Lord;" "You shall have no other gods but me;" "You shall love the Lord *your* God with all *your* strength;" "You shall cleave unto him;" "The desire of *your* soul shall be to his name;" — is no other than this: The one perfect Good shall be your one ultimate end. One thing shall *you* desire for its own sake, — the fruition of Him that is All in all. One happiness shall *you* propose to your souls, even an union with Him that made them; the having "fellowship with the Father and the Son;" the being joined to the Lord in one Spirit. One design you are to pursue to the end of time, — the enjoyment of God in time and in eternity. Desire other things, so far as they tend to this. Love the creature as it leads to the Creator. But in every step you take, be this the glorious point that terminates your view. Let every affection, and thought, and word, and work, be subordinate to this. Whatever *you* desire or fear, whatever *you* seek or shun, whatever *you* think, speak, or do, be it in order to your happiness in God, the sole End, as well as Source, of your being.

**13.** Have no end, no ultimate end, but God. Thus our Lord: "One thing is needful:" And if *your* eye be singly fixed on this one thing, " *your* whole body shall be full of light." Thus St. Paul:

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<sup>2</sup> Original sentence: Yet lackest thou one thing, whosoever thou art, that to a deep humility, and a steadfast faith, hast joined a lively hope, and thereby in a good measure cleansed thy heart from its inbred pollution.

"This one thing I do; I press toward the mark, for the prize of the high calling in Christ Jesus." Thus St. James: "Cleanse your hands, *you* sinners, and purify your hearts, *you* double-minded." Thus St. John: "Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eye, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world." The seeking happiness in what gratifies either the desire of the flesh, by agreeably striking upon the outward senses; the desire of the eye, of the imagination, by its novelty, greatness, or beauty; or the pride of life, whether by pomp, grandeur, power, or, the usual consequence of them, applause and admiration; — "is not of the Father," comes not from, neither is approved by, the Father of spirits; "but of the world:" It is the distinguishing mark of those who will not have Him to reign over them.

## II.

1. Thus have I particularly inquired, what that circumcision of heart is, which will obtain the praise of God. I am, in the Second place, to mention some reflections that naturally arise from such an inquiry, as a plain rule whereby every *person* may judge *for oneself*, whether he or she be of the world or of God.

And, First, it is clear from what has been said, that no *one* has a title to the praise of God, unless *one's* heart is circumcised by humility; unless *one* is little, and base, and vile in *one's* own eyes; unless *one* is deeply convinced of that inbred "corruption of *one's* nature," "whereby *one* is very far gone from original righteousness," being prone to all evil, averse to all good, corrupt and abominable; having a "carnal mind which is enmity against God, and is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be;" unless *one* continually feels in *one's* inmost soul, that without the Spirit of God resting upon him, he can neither think, nor desire, nor speak, nor act anything good, or well-pleasing in his sight. No *one*, I say, has a title to the praise of God, till *one* feels *one's* need of God; nor indeed, till *one* seeks that "*honor* which comes *from* God only;" and neither desires nor pursues that which comes *from people*, unless so far only as it tends to this.

2. Another truth, which naturally follows from what has been said, is, that none shall obtain the *honor* that comes *from* God, unless *one's* heart be circumcised by faith; even a "faith of the operation of God:" Unless, refusing to be any longer led by his senses, appetites, or passions, or even by that blind leader of the blind, so idolized by the world, natural reason, *the Christian* lives and walks by faith; directs every step, as "seeing Him that is invisible;" "looks not at the things that are seen, which are temporal, but at the things that are not seen, which are eternal;" and governs all *one's* desires, designs, and thoughts, all *one's* actions and conversations, as one who is entered in within the veil, where Jesus sits at the right hand of God.

3. It were to be wished, that they were better acquainted with this faith, who employ much of their time and pains in laying another foundation; in grounding religion on the eternal fitness of things, on the intrinsic excellence of virtue, and the beauty of actions flowing from it; on the reasons, as they term them, of good and evil, and the relations of beings to each other. Either these accounts of the grounds of Christian duty coincide with the scriptural, or not. If they do, why are well-meaning *people* perplexed, and drawn from the weightier matters of the law, by a cloud of terms, whereby the easiest truths are explained into obscurity? If they are not, then it behooves them to consider who is the author of this new doctrine; whether he is likely to be an angel from heaven, who preaches another gospel than that of Christ Jesus; though, if he were, God, not we, have pronounced his sentence: "Let him be accursed."

4. Our gospel, as it knows no other foundation of good works than faith, or [*foundation*] of faith than Christ, so it clearly informs us, we are not his disciples while we either deny him to be the Author, or his Spirit to be the Inspirer and Perfecter, both of our faith and works. "If any one *does not* have the Spirit of Christ, *that one* is none of his." He alone can quicken those who are dead to God, can breathe into them the breath of Christian life, and so prevent [*prevene* – as in *prevenient grace*], accompany, and follow them with his grace, as to bring their good desires to good effect. And, "as many as are thus led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons *and daughters* of God." This is God's short and plain account of true religion and virtue; and "other foundation can no person lay."

5. From what has been said, we may, Thirdly, learn, that none is truly "led by the Spirit," unless that "Spirit bear witness with *one's* spirit, that he *or she* is a child of God;" unless *one* sees the prize and the crown before *oneself*, and "rejoice in hope of the glory of God." So greatly have they erred who have taught that, in serving God, we ought not to have a view to our own happiness! Nay, but we are often and expressly taught of God, to have "respect unto the recompense of reward;" to balance the toil with the "joy set before us," these "light afflictions" with that "exceeding weight of glory." Yea, we are "aliens to the covenant of promise," we are "without God in the world," until God, "of his abundant mercy, has begotten us again unto a living hope of the inheritance incorruptible, undefiled, and that fades not away."

6. But if these things are so, it is high time for those persons to deal faithfully with their own souls, who are so far from finding in themselves this joyful assurance that they fulfill the terms, and shall obtain the promises, of that covenant, as to quarrel with the covenant itself, and blaspheme the terms of it, to complain, they are too severe; and that no *person* ever did or shall live up to them. What is this but to reproach God, as if he were a hard Master, requiring of his servants more than he enables them to perform? — as if he had mocked the helpless works of his hands, by binding them to impossibilities; by commanding them to overcome, where neither their own strength nor his grace was sufficient for them?

7. These blasphemers might almost persuade those to imagine themselves guiltless, who, in the contrary extreme, hope to fulfill the commands of God, without taking any pains at all. Vain hope! that a child of Adam should ever expect to see the kingdom of Christ and of God, without striving, without agonizing, first "to enter in at the *narrow gate*;" — that one who was "conceived and born in sin," and whose "inward parts are very wickedness," should once entertain a thought of being "purified as his Lord is pure," unless that person tread in His steps, and "take up his *or her* cross daily;" unless *that person* "cut off his *or her* right hand," and "pluck out the right eye, and cast it from *oneself*;" — that he *or she* should ever dream of shaking of *one's* old opinions, passions, tempers, of being "sanctified throughout in spirit, soul, and body," without a constant and continued course of general self-denial!

8. What less than this can we possibly infer from the above-cited words of St. Paul, who, living "in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses" for Christ's sake; — who, being full of "signs, and wonders, and mighty deeds, — who, having been "caught up into the third heaven;" — yet reckoned, as a late author strongly expresses it, that all his virtues would be insecure, and even his salvation in danger, without this constant self-denial? "So run I," says he, "not as uncertainly; so fight, not as one that beats the air:" By which he plainly teaches us,

that he who does not thus run, who does not thus deny himself daily, does run uncertainly, and fights to as little purpose as *one* that "beats the air."

**9.** To as little purpose does [*Paul*] talk of "fighting the fight of faith," as vainly hope to attain the crown of incorruption, (as we may, Lastly, infer from the preceding observations,) whose heart is not circumcised by love. Love, cutting off both the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eye, and the pride of life, — engaging the whole *person*, body, soul, and spirit, in the ardent pursuit of that one object, — is so essential to a child of God, that, without it, whosoever lives is counted dead before him. "Though I speak with the tongues of *people* and of angels, and have not love, I am as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal. Though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, and have not love, I am nothing." Nay, "though I give all my goods to feed the poor, and my body to be burned, and have not love, it profits me nothing."

**10.** Here, then, is the sum of the perfect law; this is the true circumcision of the heart. Let the spirit return to God that gave it, with the whole train of its affections. "Unto the place from whence all the rivers came," *there* let them flow again. Other sacrifices from us he would not accept; but the living sacrifice of the heart he has chosen. Let it be continually offered up to God through Christ, in flames of holy love. And let no creature be suffered to share with him: For he is a jealous God. His throne will he not divide with another: He will reign without a rival. *Let there be* no design, no desire admitted there, but what has Him for its ultimate object. This is the way wherein those children of God once walked, who, being dead, still speak to us: "Desire not to live, but to praise his name: Let all your thoughts, words, and works, tend to his glory. Set your heart firm on him, and on other things only as they are in and from him. Let your soul be filled with so entire a love of him, that you may love nothing but for his sake." "Have a pure intention of heart, a steadfast regard to his glory in all your actions." "Fix your eye upon the blessed hope of your calling, and make all the things of the world minister unto it." For then, and not till then, is that "mind in us which was also in Christ Jesus;" when, in every motion of our heart, in every word of our tongue, in every work of our hands, we "pursue nothing but in relation to him, and in subordination to his pleasure;" when we, too, neither think, nor speak, nor act, to fulfill our "own will, but the will of him that sent us;" when, whether we "eat, or drink, or whatever we do, we do all to the glory of God."