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THE HEART OF THE GOSPEL

One of twelve sermons from the book bearing the same title.

DELIVERED AT THE
METROPOLITAN TABERNACLE,
IN THE AUTUMN OF 1891.

BY

ARTHUR T. PIERSON, D.D.

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To the Memory
of
CHARLES HADDON SPURGEON,

THAT VALIANT SOLDIER OF THE CROSS,
WHO FOR FORTY YEARS WIELDED WITH SUCH POWER
THE SWORD OF THE SPIRIT, WHICH IS THE WORD OF GOD,
AND BRAVELY BORE THE BANNER OF THE CROSS
UNTIL IT FELL FROM HIS DYING GRASP,
THIS VOLUME OF SERMONS,
WHICH REPRESENTS A HUMBLE EFFORT
TO PERPETUATE HIS TESTIMONY TO THE SAME OLD GOSPEL,
IS MOST LOVINGLY DEDICATED.

Prefatory Note.

"THIS book aspires to no pre-eminence as furnishing homiletic models.

Twelve sermons are here put in print, which were preached in the Metropolitan

Tabernacle, London, in the Autumn of 1891, while Pastor C. H. Spurgeon was seeking recovered health at Mentone. They were never written, even in part, and are reproduced almost verbatim.

If any interest invests them, it is almost wholly circumstantial, owing to the unique conditions under which they were spoken. Many and marked as are their defects, it pleased God, in a remarkable degree, to use them both to convert sinners and confirm saints.

There was a call for their publication, and it was so general that it was thought best not to disregard it, and it is devoutly hoped that He, for Whose sake they were prepared and preached, may have even yet some further errand for them to accomplish. With this prayer, they are sent forth in His name." --Arthur T. Pierson.

METROPOLITAN TABERNACLE,
LONDON, JUNE, 1892.

SERMON NUMBER TWO

The Heart of the Gospel.

"For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son,
that whosoever believeth in Him
should not perish, but have Everlasting Life"

(John 3:16).

Introduction.

THERE is one text in the New Testament that has been preached from oftener than any other in the Bible. It has been the foundation of great revivals of religion, like that among the Tahitians; or that among the Telugus in India, where 2,222 people were baptized in one day, nearly 5,000 people in thirty days, and 10,000 people within ten months; and where, even during the year drawing to its close, nearly 10,000 more souls have been baptized. It is a wonderful text. Luther called it one of "the little gospels." It is this (John 3:16): "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have Everlasting Life."

You will naturally wonder what there is in that old text that is new. I have found something that was very new to me, and which also may be to you. I suppose that I had read that verse tens of thousands of times, and yet, a little while ago, as I was led to preach upon that text, I sought of the Lord a clearer view of it, that I might glorify Him, by bringing forth out of His treasure things new and old. After reading these familiar words over, perhaps a hundred times, prayerfully asking for new light and insight, there suddenly came to me this absolutely new discovery, as though one, looking up into the heavens, should see a cloud swept away from before the stars, and a new constellation revealed. It flashed on my thought that there are ten words in the verse that are quite prominent words, such as

"God," "loved," "world," "whosoever," and so on. Then a little more close and careful search showed those words in a hitherto undiscovered mutual relation: the ten words were in five pairs. There is one pair of words that has to do with the two persons of the Godhead-- God the Father, and God the Son. There is a second pair of words that has to do with the expression of the Father's attitude or posture towards this world-- He "loved" and He "gave." Then there is a third pair of words that refers to the objects of the divine love-- "world" and "whosoever." Then there is a fourth pair of words that shows us what the attitude of man ought to be when God's love and gift come to his knowledge-- "believe" and "have." Then the last pair of words points us to the extremes of human destiny: the result of rejection, and the result of acceptance-- "perish" and "life."

Often as I had read this "gospel in a sentence," I had never seen before that singular relation borne by the main words in the sentence; and, so far as I know, nobody else had seen it before; for it is one of the beautiful privileges about the study of the precious Word of God that the humblest believer who asks the grace of God and the guidance of the Holy Spirit in studying the Holy Scriptures, may make a discovery for himself that nobody has ever made before, or if so, without his knowledge; so that it is still his own discovery.

Let us look at this text in the light of this fresh arrangement of the thoughts which it contains. To my mind, it is one of the most remarkable discoveries that it has ever been permitted me to make in the study and exploration of the hidden treasures of the Word of God.

I. In the first place, "God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son." There are two of the persons of the Godhead. Many persons are troubled about the relation of the Father to the Son, and of the Son to the Father. They cannot exactly see how Jesus Christ can be equal with God if He is God's Son; and they cannot see how He can be as glorious as the Father, and how He can be entitled to the same honor and homage and worship as the Father if He proceeds forth from the Father, and comes into the world.

But let us seek a simple illustration. It is said, in the introduction of this Gospel according to John, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." [John 1:1] What is a word? It is the expression of a thought that lies in the mind. The thought is not visible, the thought is not audible; but, when it takes the form of a spoken word or a written word, that thought that was invisible in the mind, that you could not see, or hear, or know about in any other way, comes to your eye on the printed page, or to your ear through the voice of the speaker. And so my invisible thoughts are coming to you now through these audible words. The word is so connected with the thought that it is the expression of the thought. The thought is the word invisible: the word is the thought visible. Now Jesus Christ was the invisible thought of God put into a form in which you could see it and hear it; and just as the word and the thought are so connected that if you understand the word you understand the thought, and if you understand the thought you understand the word; and as the word would have no meaning without the thought, and the thought no expression without the word, so Jesus Christ helps us to understand the Father, and the Father could not make Himself perfectly known to us except through the Son. But, again, we are told that Christ is "the Light of the world." [John 8:12] Suppose I should say, "In the beginning" was the light, and the light was with the sun, and

the light was the sun. The sun sends forth the light, and the light proceeds from the sun; yet the light and the sun are the same in nature and the same in essence, and the glory of the sun is the glory of the light, and the glory of the light is the glory of the sun; and although the light goes forth from the sun, it is equal with the sun, shares the same glory, and is entitled to the same valuation. We cannot think of the one without the other.

In this text not a word is said about the love of the Son for sinners, nor a word about the Son's offering of Himself for the Salvation of men. What is the common, old-fashioned notion that we sometimes find cropping up even in the conceptions of Christian people as well as unbelievers, in these days? Many think of the Father as representing justice and of the Son as representing mercy. They imagine the Son as coming between the wrath of the Father and the guilty sinner.

It is very much like the story of Pocahontas, the daughter of an Indian chief, who came between the executioner and Captain Smith, when the executioner was standing with his club uplifted, ready to strike the fatal blow on the head of his victim.

The notion of a great many people is that God the Father is all wrath, and that we can never look at God or think of God, and that God never can look at us or think of us, except with a kind of mutual abhorrence and antagonism; and that so Jesus Christ incarnates the principle of love, and comes in between the angry God and the sinner. That is a very shallow notion indeed. Have you never got hold of the idea that the Father is just as much interested in you as the Son is, and that the Father loves you just as much as the Son does? Look at this verse. It puts all the glory of the love and the sacrifice upon the Father: "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son." He puts it thus that you and I may understand that our notion of the Son is our notion of the Father. When Philip said, "Lord, show us the Father, and it sufficeth us," Jesus answered, "Have I been so long time with you, and yet hast thou not known Me, Philip? He that hath seen Me hath seen the Father; and how sayest thou then, Shew us the Father?" [John 14:8-9]

Do you not understand my thought if you understand my word? And if my word is the right expression of my thought, how absurd it would be for somebody to say, "I understand his word well enough, but I wish that I could understand his thought." My word, being human, may not always properly express my thought; but with God the Word is the perfect expression of the thought; and so if you have understood the word you have understood the thought: and if you have understood the thought you have understood the word. If you have seen the Son, you have seen the Father. If the love of the Son has touched you, the love of the Father has touched you. If you worship the Son, you worship the Father. If you obey the Son, you obey the Father; so that you need not be troubled about your feelings toward the Father, and say, as many a person has said to me, "I wish that I could feel towards God the Father as I feel towards Jesus. I wish that I could have those views of God the Father that I have of Jesus. I wish that I could have the freedom with the Father that I have with the Son."

Now, dismiss all that kind of trouble and perplexity from your mind; for as you think of the Son you think of the Father; as you love the Son, you love the Father; as you pray to the Son, you pray to the Father; and as you obey and serve the Son, you obey and serve the Father. The Son thinks of you just as the Father does, and the Father thinks of you just as the Son does.

"So near, so very near to God,

Nearer I cannot be;
For in the person of His Son
I am as near as He.
So dear, so very dear to God,
Dearer I cannot be;
For the love wherewith He loves the Son
Is the love He bears to me."

II. The second pair of words is loved and gave. He loved and gave. I have no desire to enter into nice distinctions, but with the simplicity of a little child approach this heart of the Gospel. And yet a child will understand that when we use the word love, we sometimes mean one thing and sometimes another. For instance, suppose that you should try to get some poor criminal out of prison, a miserable, filthy, degraded, defiled man. Somebody asks you why you do it, and you say that you love him. Now, that would not be taken to mean the same kind of love as you bear your mother. Those are very different loves, the love that you bear to your mother and the love that you bear to some vile criminal. The word love has a different meaning in different cases. The apostle John says, "We love Him because He first loved us." [John 4:19] Was not the love of God to us something different from the love that we bear to Him? I love God because I know him to be the most beautiful, the most wise, the most glorious, the most fatherly, the most tender, the most pitiful, the most gracious Being in the universe. Why did He love me? Because He saw that I was beautiful and truthful, and lovely, and honest, and honourable? Not so, says the apostle. "But God commendeth His love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." [Romans 5:8] So there are two kinds of love. We call them the love of complacency and the love of benevolence. Complacency means a feeling of pleasure. You love a beautiful person, a lovely character, because you see something in the person and in the character that draws out your love.

But that is not the kind of love that we call the love of benevolence, for such love is bestowed on people in whom we do not see anything beautiful or lovely. We love them for the sake of the good that we may do them, and for the sake of the beautiful character that, by grace, we may help to develop in them. So, therefore, the love of complacency is intensive, but the love of benevolence is extensive; the love of complacency is partial, the love of benevolence is impartial; the love of complacency is exclusive and select, the love of benevolence is inclusive and universal. The love of complacency is a kind of selfish love, but the love of benevolence is a generous love. The love of complacency may be an involuntary love: we see the qualities that attract affection, and we love unconsciously and involuntarily; but the love of benevolence is voluntarily exercised. The love of complacency has to do with comparatively few of the people whom we know; the love of benevolence takes in the whole world, and hundreds and thousands of people whom we do not know, and never saw, but whom, for the sake of Jesus, we love.

Have you fixed that in your thought? The kind of love, then, that God had for us was the love of benevolence, extensive, inclusive, impartial, universal, self-denying, self-forgetting, voluntary.

Now, it is the characteristic of that kind of love that it gives. We call it the love of benevolence, and benevolence is another word for giving; and such love keeps nothing, but gives everything that it has,

and gives to everybody. Of course, if God loved us after that sort He had to give. He could not so love if He did not give, any more than the sun could be the sun without shining, or a spring of water could be a spring without flowing out into a stream. And so these words, loved and gave, naturally go together. You could not have the one without the other. There could not be this wonderful giving without this wonderful loving; and there could not be this wonderful loving without this wonderful giving.

III. Now let us look at the third pair of words, world and whosoever. It need not be said that those are both universal terms. World is the most universal term that we have in the language. For instance, we sometimes mean by it the whole earth on which we dwell; sometimes the whole human family that dwells on the earth; and sometimes the world-age, or whole period during which the whole family of man occupies the sphere. That is the word that God uses to indicate the objects of His love. But there is always danger of our losing sight of ourselves in a multitude of people. In the great mass individuals are lost, and it becomes to us simply a countless throng. But when God looks at us, he never forgets each individual. Every one of you stands out just as plainly before the Lord as though you were the only man, woman, or child on earth. So God adds here another word, whosoever, that is also universal, but with this difference between the two: world is collectively universal, that is, it takes all men in the mass; whosoever is distributively universal, that is, it takes everyone out of the mass, and holds him up separately before the Lord. If this precious text only said, "God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son," one might say, "Oh, He never thought of me. He had a kind of general love to the whole world, but He never thought of me." But when God uses that all-embracing word "whosoever," that must mean you and me; for whatever my name or yours may be, our name is whosoever, is it not? John Newton used to say that it was a great deal better for him that this verse had the word "whosoever" in it than the words John Newton;

"for," he said, "if I read, 'God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that' when John Newton believed he 'should have Everlasting Life,' I should say, perhaps, there is some other John Newton; but "whosoever" means this John Newton and the other John Newton, and everybody else, whatever his name may be."

Blessed be the Lord! He would not have us forget that He thought of each one of us, and so He said, "whosoever." You notice the same thing in the great commission, "Go ye into all the world" (collectively universal) "and preach the Gospel to every creature" (distributively universal). [Mark 16:15]

Before I leave this pair of words, let me illustrate what a precious term this word whosoever is. It reminds me of the great gates of this Tabernacle, that spring open to let in poor souls that want to hear the Gospel. This word whosoever is the wide gateway to Salvation, and lets in any poor sinner who seeks to find for himself a suffering but reigning Savior.

In the South Seas, in the beginning of the present century, was a man of the name of Hunt, who had gone to preach the Gospel to the inhabitants of Tahiti. The missionaries had labored there for about fourteen or fifteen years, but had not, as yet, a single convert. Desolating wars were then spreading across the island of Tahiti and the neighboring islands. The most awful idolatry, sensuality, ignorance,

and brutality, with everything else that was horrible, prevailed; and the Word of God seemed to have made no impression upon those awfully degraded islanders. A translation of the Gospel according to John had just been completed, and Mr. Hunt, before it was printed, read from the manuscript translation, the third chapter; and, as he read on, he reached this sixteenth verse, and, in the Tahitian language, gave those poor idolaters this compact little gospel: "God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have Everlasting Life."

A chief stepped out from the rest (Pomare II), and said, "Would you read that again, Mr. Hunt?" Mr. Hunt read it again. "Would you read that once more?" and he read it once more. "Ah!" said the man, "that may be true of you white folks, but it is not true of us down here in these islands. The gods have no such love as that for us." Mr. Hunt stopped in his reading, and he took that one word whosoever, and by it showed that poor chief that God's Gospel message meant him; that it could not mean one man or woman any more than another. Mr. Hunt was expounding this wonderful truth, when Pomare II said, "Well, then, if that is the case, your book shall be my book, and your God shall be my God, and your people shall be my people, and your heaven shall be my home. We, down on the island of Tahiti, never heard of any God that loved us and loved everybody in that way." And that first convert is now the leader of a host, numbering nearly a million, in the South Seas.

Reference has already been made to the fact that this was the great text that Dr. Clough found so blessed among the Telugus. When the great famine came on, in 1877, and the missionaries were trying to distribute relief among the people, Dr. Clough, who was a civil engineer, took a contract to complete the Buckingham Canal, and he got the famishing people to come in gangs of four thousand or five thousand. Then, after the days work was over, he would tell them the simple story of redemption. He had not yet learned the Telugu language sufficiently to make himself well understood in it, but he had done this: he had committed to memory John 3:16 in the Telugu tongue. And when, in talking to his people, he got "stuck," he would fall back on John 3:16. What a blessed thing to be able at least to repeat that! Then he would add other verses, day by day, to his little store of committed texts, until he had a sermon, about half-an-hour long, composed of a string of texts, like precious pearls. I have sometimes thought that I would rather have heard that than many modern sermons. So, once again the great text that God used for bringing souls to Christ was still Luther's little gospel: "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have Everlasting Life."

IV. Now we come to the fourth pair of words, believe and have. You will see how important these words are. If God so loved that He gave, what is necessary on the part of man? Only this, that he should take and have. That is very plain. If God loved you and the whole world, and gave you all that he had to give, all that remains for anybody to do is so to appreciate the love of God as to take the gift that God bestows, and so to have the gift that he takes. Believing is receiving. John, at the beginning of this Gospel, tells us in what sense he is going to use the word believe. That word occurs forty-four times in the Gospel according to John, which is the great Gospel of "believing." You do not find the word repent in it once, but it is constantly repeating believing, believing, believing, and having life. In the twelfth and thirteenth verses of the first chapter, we read: "To as many as received Him, to them gave He power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on His name." [John 1:12] "To as

many as received... even to them that believe." That little word "even" indicates that to believe is equivalent to receive. You may, in any one of those forty-four instances in this Gospel, put the word "receive" in the place of the word "believe," and still make good sense. For example: "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever" received Him might "have Everlasting Life."

You have what you take, do you not? It is a very simple thing to take what is given to you, and so to have it. That is, practically, all there is in faith. We may make faith obscure by talking too much about it, leading others to infer that there is in it some obscurity or mystery. Faith is very simple: it is taking the eternal life that is offered to you in Christ. If you can put forth your hand and receive a gift, you are able to put forth your will and receive the gift of God, even Jesus Christ, as your Savior.

I heard of an old lady, who was starting on a railway journey from an American station, out of which many trains move, although in different directions. Not having traveled much on the rail cars, she got confused. The old lady I speak of was going up to Bay City, Michigan, and she was afraid that she was, perhaps, on the wrong train. She reached over, and showed her ticket to somebody in the seat immediately in front of her, and said, "I want to go to Bay City. Is this the right train?" "Yes madam." Still, she was not quite at ease, for she thought that perhaps this fellow-passenger might have got into the wrong train too; so she stepped across the aisle of the car, and showed her ticket to another person, and was again told, "Yes, madam, this is the right train." But still the old lady was a little uncertain. In a few moments in came the conductor, or, as you call him, the guard; and she saw on his cap the conductors ribbon, and she beckoned to him, and said, "I want to go to Bay City; is this the right train?" "Yes, madam, this is the right train." And now she settled back in her seat, and was asleep before the train moved. That illustrates the simplicity of taking God at His word. She did nothing but just receive the testimony of that conductor. That is all; but that is faith. The Lord Jesus Christ says to you, "I love you; I died for you. Do you believe? Will you receive the Salvation that I bought for you with My own blood?" You need do no work; not even so much as to get up and turn around. You need not go and ask your fellowman across the church aisle, there, whether he has believed, and received, and been saved. All that you need to do is with all your heart to say, "Dear Lord, I do take this Salvation that Thou hast bought for me, and brought to me." Simple, is it not? Yes, very simple: yet such receiving it is the soul of faith.

And what is assurance but consciously having what you take? Somebody comes and offers me, tonight, some freewill offering. It costs me nothing. All that I have to do is to take what is given to me, and have it for my own. Faith is the taking, and the assurance is the conscious having; and that is all that I know about it.

V. There remains another pair of words. Would to God that I might impress the meaning of those terms, perish and everlasting life! What does perish mean, and what does life mean?

When the prodigal son went into the far country, and had wasted his substance in riotous living, he came to himself; and he came back to his father, and he said, "Father, I have sinned." [Luke 15:21] And the father said, "This my son was dead, and is alive again. He was lost, and is found." [Luke 15:24] A

son that is lost to his father is dead to his father, and a son that is found by his father is alive to his father.

God said to Adam, "Of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die." [Genesis 2:17] It did not mean that Adam should that day die, physically. It meant something worse than that. He died to God when he ate. One proof that he died to God when he ate that forbidden fruit is that, when the Lord God came down to walk in the garden as the companion of Adam in the cool of the day, our first parents shrank from the presence of the Lord, and hid behind the trees of the garden, when they heard His footsteps and the sound of His voice. They were dead to sympathy towards God, dead to love towards God, dead to pleasure in God: and so they tried to get out of the way of God, as if it were possible to put a veil between them and Him. How do you know you are dead to God? You want to get out of His way. You do not love the things that God loves; you would like to be independent of God's rule. You would like, if possible, to get into some corner of the universe where there is no God.

You are like the men in America who went across to California, when the golden gates of that country were first opened, that they might enrich themselves. They tried to do without God, and there was a horrible state of sensuality and criminality there; and though there were, nominally, Christian families, and even Christian churches, these gold-seekers had left God on the other side of the Rocky Mountains, if not still further off, on the other side of the Alleghenies. They sought to get where there was no sanctuary, Bible, or family altar, and no restraint of Christian government, or recognition of a God above. The Psalmist twice says, "The fool hath said in his heart, there is no God" [Psalm 14:1; 53:1]; and if you leave out the italicized words, which are not in the original, it reads like this: "The fool hath said in his heart, No God!" That is, "I wish that there were no God." The impious man hates God. It is an uncomfortable thing for him to think that there is a Sovereign of all the earth who will judge all the works done in the body. It is uncomfortable to think that beyond the grave there lie the great assizes of the judgment day, and that one is unprepared to go into that judgment, and meet the Judge. And so people try to make up their minds that there is no hereafter or judgment, and that there is no God. It is a sign that you are "dead" when you would like that there should be no God, and you do not want God to have any rule over you. And what is the sign that you are alive? You come to yourself, and then you come to the Father? You would not have God out of the universe if, by a stroke of the hand, you could annihilate Him. You would not have the judgment-seat out of the universe, for that is the place where all wrongs are righted. You would not have heaven blotted out, for that is where

The quenched lamps of hope are all re-lighted,
And the golden links of love are re-united;

and where there shall be no more sin, nor sorrow, nor sighing, nor tears; and where every shadow shall flee away. Paul says that the "woman who lives in pleasure is dead while she liveth." [1Timothy 5:6] That is to say that, while she exists, she is so wrapped up in fashion, in ornaments, in the plaiting of the hair, and the putting on of gold and of gorgeous apparel, living for this world and her own indulgence, that she is dead to the things that are alone worth living for, and that take hold of the invisible, divine, and eternal.

Now, let us once more hear the word of the living God. God so loved you that He gave the best that He had to give, and all that He had to give; and while He gave to the whole world, He singled you out

as the object of His love, and said, "whosoever," "every creature." And now that that gift is given to you, and there is no more to be given, God can do no more. He does not ask you to pay the one-thousandth part of a farthing for the priceless values represented in the Son of God. All that God can do now is to say to you that the very fact that you reject His dear Son is a proof that you are spiritually dead. Even though you dispute the fact, you are dead; as a deaf man may not understand how deaf he is, and a blind man may not understand the glories of sight, so a dead man cannot understand the energies of the living. And so the very fact that you think that you are not dead is another proof that you are. You have no sensibility even to the fact that you are spiritually without life. God comes and says, "Come back to Me, My prodigal and wandering son. You shall have the robe; you shall have the ring; you shall have the shoes. I will give them all to you with the absoluteness of an infinite love, and you shall take them, and have them because you take them." Just the moment that you turn toward God, and say, "My Father, I take the robe and the ring, and the shoes, and the place of a restored son in the Fathers house," you will live again; for you recognize your Father, and yourself as His son. You recognize His right to command, and your duty to obey. You recognize that the only place for a son is the home and the heart of his father. That is the proof that you are once more alive.

"Tell me how long it would take to change from death unto life?" Just as long, and no longer, as it takes you to turn round. Your back has been on God. You turn, and your face is toward Him. It will take no longer for a sinner to become a living son of God than that. Just put your heart into your acceptance of Jesus. Cast your whole will into the acceptance of the Fatherhood of God, renounce your sin and your rebellion, and take the Salvation that is given to you as freely as the sun gives its light, or the spring gives its stream; and before you turn round to go out of that church door, you may have this Salvation, and perhaps enjoy in yourself the consciousness that you are saved!

The End.