

The Subject and Temper of the GOSPEL
MINISTRY:

A

S E R M O N

Preached in the PARISH-CHURCH of

ST MARY WOOLNÖTH,

On SUNDAY, December 19, 1779.

(The Day of his First PUBLIC SERVICE in
that CHURCH)

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JOHN NEWTON, RECTOR.

1 THESS. ii. 8.

— Being affectionately desirous of you, we were willing to have imparted unto you, not the Gospel of God only, but also our own souls, because ye were dear unto us.

L O N D O N :

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TO THE
INHABITANTS

OF THE PARISHES OF

ST MARY WOOLNOTH,

AND

ST MARY WOOLCHURCH,

This SERMON is respectfully dedicated and presented,

By their affectionate Servant

in the Gospel,

JOHN NEWTON.

EPHESIANS IV. 15.

— *Speaking the truth in love* —

THE words, in the original, have a more comprehensive sense than in our version, *Αληθειοντες εν αγαπη.* They extend no less to conduct than to speech, and comprize, in one short sentence, that combination of integrity and benevolence, which constitute the character of a true Christian. But, as our Morning Service has been already much prolonged, I mean not to enlarge at present upon this important subject. I propose my text rather as a kind of motto, to introduce a brief account of the feelings, desires, and purposes of my heart, on this my first appearance before you. The inhabitants of these parishes, to whom I more immediately address myself, have a right to be informed, now the Providence of God
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has placed me in this City, and in this Church, of the views with which I have undertaken the important trust lately committed to me, and of the manner and spirit in which it is my desire to discharge it: If these enquiries be upon any of your minds, accept my answer in the words I have read: I came, and, by the grace of God, I hope to abide amongst you, “ speaking the truth in
“ love.”

I should be utterly unworthy your attention, I should deserve your contempt and detestation, if, under the solemn character of a Minister of JESUS CHRIST, and with a professed regard for his service and the good of souls, I should presume to speak any thing amongst you, but what I verily believe in my conscience to be the Truth. The Apostles were ambassadors for CHRIST*; and we, however inferior in other respects, are so far concerned in this part of their character, as to be equally bound to conform to the instructions of our Lord and Master. The Bible is the grand repository of the Truths which it will be the business and the pleasure
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* 2 Cor. v. 20.

of my life to set before you. It is the complete system of Divine truth, to which nothing can be added, and from which nothing can be taken *, with impunity. Every attempt to disguise, or soften any branch of this truth, in order to accommodate it to the prevailing taste around us, either to avoid the displeasure, or to court the favor of our fellow-mortals, must be an affront to the majesty of God, and an act of treachery to men. My conscience bears me witness, that I mean to speak the truth among you. May the grace of God enable me always to do it. The principal branches of the truth, as it is in JESUS, according to St Paul's expression, are summarily contained in the Articles, which I have just now read and given my solemn assent to in your hearing. These I acknowledge and adopt as a standard of sound doctrine, not merely because they are the Articles of our Church, but because, upon mature and repeated examination, I am persuaded they are agreeable to the Scripture. I am to enlarge on the declarations of the Scripture and of the Articles concerning the depravity of fallen man, the evil of sin,

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* Rev. xxii. 18, 19.

the method of salvation by grace through faith in our Lord JESUS CHRIST. I am to bear testimony to the dignity and excellency of the Redeemer's person and characters, the suitableness of his offices, the efficacy of his blood and obedience to death on the behalf of sinners, and his glory as Head of the Church, and LORD of heaven and earth. I am to set before you the characters, obligations and privileges of those who believe in his name; and to prove that the doctrines of the grace of God are doctrines according to godliness; which, though they may be abused by men of corrupt minds, have in themselves, when rightly understood, a direct and powerful tendency to enforce universal obedience to the commands of God, and to promote the peace and welfare of civil society. I am likewise to warn all who hear me, of the sin and danger of rejecting the great salvation revealed by the Gospel. These will be the subjects of my ministry; and, if what I shall offer upon these heads be agreeable not only to the Articles, which I have subscribed, but to the Scriptures, which we all profess to believe, it must of course be admitted that I shall speak the truth.

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But the cause of truth itself may be discredited by improper management: and therefore the Scripture, which furnishes us with subject-matter for our ministry, and teaches us what we are to say, is equally explicit as to the temper and spirit in which we are to speak. Though I had the knowledge of all mysteries*, and the tongue of an angel to declare them, I could hope for little acceptance or usefulness, unless I was to speak in love. The Gospel is a declaration of the astonishing love of God to mankind; it exhibits the perfect exemplar of love in the character of Him, who, when upon earth in the form of a servant, went about doing good †, and exerted the most unbounded benevolence to all around him. The servant of the LORD, of that meek and merciful Savior, who wept over his avowed enemies, and prayed for his actual murderers, while nailing him to the cross, learns at his Savior's feet to bear a cordial love to all mankind. Man, considered as the creature of God, is the noblest and most important of his works in the visible creation, formed by him who originally

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* 1 Cor. xiii. 1.

† Acts x. 38.

made him for himself, with such a vastness of desire, such a capacity for happiness, as nothing less than an infinite good can satisfy; formed to exist in an eternal unchangeable state. And even fallen man, though depraved and perverted, guilty, and, in his present state, obnoxious to eternal misery, is yet capable of being restored to the favor of God, and renewed into his image, of serving him here, and being happy with him for ever. Whoever therefore has tasted of the love of CHRIST, and has known by his own experience the need and the worth of redemption, is enabled, yea he is constrained to love his fellow-creatures. He loves them at first sight. And, if the Providence of God commits a dispensation of the Gospel, and a care of souls to him, he will feel the warmest emotions of friendship and tenderness, while he beseeches them by the tender mercies of God*, and even while he warns them by his terrors †. Surely I durst not address you from this place, if I could not with sincerity at least, if not with equal warmth, adopt the Apostles words, and say, Being affectionately desirous of you, we were willing to impart unto

* Rom. xii. 1.

† 2 Cor. v. 11.

unto you, not the Gospel of God only, but our own souls also, (were it possible) because ye were dear unto us *.

This love which my heart bears, I offer as a plea for that earnestness and importunity which I must use. I came not to amuse you with subjects of opinion or uncertainty, or even with truths of a cold, speculative, uninteresting nature, which you might receive without benefit, or reject without detriment, but to speak the *truths of God*, truths of the utmost importance to the welfare of your souls in time and in eternity. If I love you, therefore, I cannot be content with delivering my message, my spirit must and will be deeply engaged for its success. I cannot be content with the emoluments annexed to my office—I seek not yours, but you §. That you may know the love of CHRIST, which passeth knowledge †, that you may be delivered from the power of this evil world ||, and that I and you may at length stand accepted before the throne of God; in a word, that by a blessing from on high, accompanying

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* 1 Thess. ii. 8.

§ 2 Cor. xii. 14.

† Ephes. iii. 19.

|| Gal. i. 4.

companying my poor labors, I may both save myself, and them that hear me*.—These are the aims and ends which I hope always to have in view, and therefore love will prompt me to be faithful and earnest.

Too often the due reception of the truth is greatly impeded by the cares, the busi-
nesses, or the amusements of the world. We find many of our hearers, alas! too happy, or too much engrossed, to afford us that attention we have a right to claim, considering the weight of our message, and the authority under which we speak. But God, in mercy to the souls of men, frequently suits the appointments of his Providence, in subserviency to the purposes of his grace. He prepares for them, what they do not desire for themselves, seasons for leisure, retirement and reflection. This is one gracious design of the various afflictions of human life. When he visits with sickness or pain, crosses and disappointments — when our cisterns are broken, and our gourds wither, when the desire of our eyes is taken away with a stroke †, or we meet with a thorn

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* 1 Tim. iv. 16.

† Ezek. xxiv. 16.

or sting where our fond hearts were expecting only pleasure — then perhaps the truths, which were heard with too much indifference in the hour of prosperity, may be more regarded. My love will prompt me to be always near you, waiting for such seasons, and ready, upon the first intimation, (for I mean not to intrude myself) to offer my sympathy, my prayers, my best advice. Though I shall have but little time for visits of mere ceremony; to visit you as a Minister, and to assist you to the utmost of my power in making a right improvement of the Providences of God, is a service which I shall always owe you from a principle of duty, and which I hope always to be glad to render from a principle of love.

If the grace of God, without which I can do nothing, should thus enable me to speak the truth in love, may I not hope for your favorable attention? Would it not imply an unjust reflection upon your candor, to suppose that any of you will be angry with one who only wishes to speak the truth in love? Certainly I can as yet have no particular reason to expect an unkind return from any individual

dividual among you, because I am a stranger to you all. But the Scripture teaches, what experience and observation abundantly confirm, that the doctrines of Divine Truth are so mysterious in themselves, and so opposite and mortifying to the opinion mortals are prone to entertain of their own wisdom and goodness, that persons of very amiable characters in common life, are too often amongst the warmest opposers of the Ministers, who dare faithfully and plainly persevere in speaking the truth. Should I have this trial to meet with from any of you, still I hope to speak the truth in love, and to remember that I am a follower of Him who only returned kindness for hard usage. I hope to consider, that if any oppose it is because they know not what they do; and to bear in mind, that I myself was once a scorner and despiser of the Gospel which I now preach; that I stand here as a pattern of the long-suffering of God; and that having obtained mercy myself, I have encouragement, from my own case, to hope that the strongest prejudices may be softened by the power of his grace.

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Let me close with one observation. The transactions of this day, and the consequences of it, will not be soon forgotten. They will be registered in the annals of eternity. As surely as we are now met together, so surely we must all appear before the judgement-seat of CHRIST*. Then I must give an account of my ministry, and you of the manner in which you received it. If I speak the truth—it is at the peril of my hearers to treat it with contempt, or even with neglect. But I would hope better things, even that the LORD, the Holy Spirit, will prepare our hearts to receive with meekness that engrafted word, which is able to save our souls †.

I only add my earnest request for a frequent and fervent remembrance in your prayers; That the Father of mercies, the GOD of all wisdom, may so influence my spirit, that no part of my conduct may be unfuitable to what I have at this time professed—That speaking the truth in love, and commending it by a conversation becoming
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* 2 Cor. v. 10.

† James i. 21.

the Gospel *, my labors and my life may be acceptable and serviceable among you. I trust that I, on my part, shall not cease to pray, That his blessing may rest upon you, upon your persons, your families, and upon all your concerns, and more especially for the welfare and comfort of your souls— That he may guide you by his counsel through this life †, and afterwards receive you to his glory.

* Phil. i. 27.

† Psalm lxxiii. 24,

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