

THE LAST QUESTION AND COMMAND.

"Lovest thou Me? Follow thou Me."—JOHN XXI. 16, 22.

OUR Lord here closes His earthly relations with Simon Peter by a most solemn question, which He had never put to him or to any man before, followed by a command which, in this full personal form, He had never laid on him or any other. It seems as if his heavenly Director was here summing up in two short emphatic sentences the whole substance of His spiritual discipline of three years. But Simon Peter is the representative of every true Christian. The narrative requires us to keep him in view throughout, but we must all along think of our individual selves. Each one of us is the *Thou* made here so emphatic; each one of us must reply to the appeal and receive the injunction for himself.

It may be said that these two short sentences wrap up the whole personal relation of every Christian to his Lord. To view them in this aspect would be to describe the entire range of religion as the experience of love within and the practice of the imitation of Christ without. I do not invite you to this; but to

the simple consideration of the connection there evidently is between the question and the precept, between the internal love and the external following. May He Who spake to Simon speak to us !

I. The first point of connection is this. Jesus, as our Divine-human Lord, demands of every disciple an absolute selfrenouncing devotion of the whole being. From the first time He used the expression FOLLOW to this the last, such is the unlimited meaning it bears. But never till now did He so expressly show that this must be the fruit of an unqualified and pure love to Himself.

Let us read the affecting narrative in this light: the two sentences being the keynotes of the whole.

Peter had lately given proof that he had never perfectly followed Christ because he had never purely loved Him. It may seem hard to say this, but it is the simple truth. Certainly his fellowship with Jesus had been externally faithful until the last most sad revelation of weakness. He was one of the first little company who seemed to forsake all for the new Master. He had always thought himself a genuine and thorough disciple. The solemn words about renouncing all and bearing the cross of selfsacrifice and obloquy and death he had often heard, and with selfcomplacent confidence thought that he exemplified their meaning. It was he who once said: "Lo, we have left all and have followed Thee ! What shall we have?" But this little question itself shows the secret of failure. He had never truly renounced himself all the time. Self was the subtle, secret, deadly worm

at the root of his devotion. Now self has an infinite variety of forms and expressions; some more and some less obviously mischievous. As it appeared in Simon, son of Jonas, and disappeared from Peter, son of God in Christ, it was self of a nobler type, but self still. It was ambitious rather than mercenary, it was selfconfident but not insincere; it was ignorant of its own devices, and knew not how really in its inmost secret Simon was first and Jesus second. But his Master knew what was in man: what was in Judas, what was in Peter. And He was evermore carrying on the spiritual education of these disciples individually. You see traces of His manner of guiding Peter's soul particularly. There was a constant holy war between the Lord and the self of His servant: a contest in which, so lately as the night of Gethsemane, the Stronger seemed to have failed.

But now at the last Jesus has gotten Himself the victory. He has vanquished the self in Simon by shedding abroad in his heart the divine love of forgiveness. The amazing, abounding, infinite mercy which had pardoned from early Galilee until now, which had had its last grand demonstration after the Denial, has overcome. Simon has at length become Peter. We must remember that there is much secret history behind this narrative. The Lord had seen the penitent apostle in private; and in private had forgiven him. What passed there we shall never know. The thrice-repeated question now had reference to the public reparation required of him as the first apostle who had dishonoured his vocation. "When thou wast young," said the Saviour, "thou girdedst thy-

self:" thus does He remind His servant of the fault which had marked his early discipleship. Then, when He had said these words, He added, "Follow Me!" Even yet there was some slight venial expression of the old self: "What shall this man do?" "What is that to thee?" was the only answer. And then the Lord takes occasion to repeat the injunction, as the question had been repeated, and with its utmost emphasis, "Follow thou Me!"

Here, then, brethren, we have the secret of an entire consecration to Christ: viewed in its imperfect preparations, in its consummating crisis, and in its settled continuance. For, these three stages are suggested by the word "Follow" when it is applied to the idea of Christ's service, as we have seen it illustrated in Peter, and as it is found in the history of every soul.

It may be boldly said that the great majority of Christ's disciples are in that earlier stage where perfect following is not, because self is not sacrificed to Christ. They are coming to Him, but the coming has not yet come; it is heavily shackled and impeded; it has not deepened into the full and perfect following. There is in the secret soul a lack of that entire surrender of all, and of self, without which no one can be a perfect follower of Jesus. Still the Lord is saying to many of us: "One thing thou lackest." He said it to Simon all through His life down to the present: but now to him He would say it no more. Does He say it to us? Is He still carrying on the gracious and earnest contest with us individually? Lord, is it I?

How few there are in whose souls and in whose lives the Lord has achieved the victory of love: that perfect victory which no doubt He had obtained over Simon Peter. If you would be among them you must have the revelation to you and in you of the overwhelming love of Jesus. You feel that you are not a thorough, wholehearted, and perfect follower of Christ; and you will feel it until His love has vanquished the self that keeps you from Him. There lies the secret. Absolutely to follow Christ, without reserve and without uncertainty, with entire consecration and conscious of it, is impossible until the heart can answer the question "Lovest thou Me?" with unflinching confidence. Take the lesson of the text home to yourself. You want to follow Jesus in a life of full devotion. Then ask Him to pardon you as He pardoned Peter and give Him this victory. Make this the very beginning. Say not in your heart: "I will begin to lay aside my carelessness, and strive to forget my old habits, and train my soul to make Jesus my Master alone, and join the saints in their absorbing devotion to His service." Say all that indeed in due time. But now say: "I will never rest until the Lord has pardoned me, and enabled me to cry, Thou knowest all things, Thou knowest that I love Thee." To say that, as Simon said it, is not only to be able to follow Jesus: it is the very essence of the following itself.

And here is the secret of the continuance of the consecration; as that is suggested by the very word. Its strength is that it combines the entire renunciation of all for the Lord with a persistency of devotion.

Simon's devotion waited for the day of Pentecost to seal it with perfection. But the Lord's word here—the last that Simon ever heard from those lips—made all the preparation complete. In the strength of Christ's love the recovered disciple and reinstated apostle went on his way rejoicing, singing as he went: "In Whom, though now we see Him not, yet believing, we rejoice with joy unspeakable!"

II. This leads directly to another and a second meaning of the term Follow—which indeed is not another—that of the imitation of the Lord's example. Though Jesus did not Himself use the word expressly in this sense, He intended that it should be so used. His apostles caught that meaning, and it has been always sanctified in the hearts of His people. We have to show the connection between this following and love; and it will be sufficient to dwell on two plain propositions; if we love Christ we must imitate Him; and if we would imitate Him we must love Him. These assertions lie at the foundation of Christian duty.

If we truly and evangelically love our Master, we must by an absolute necessity of judgment, heart and will strive to copy His imitable perfections.

This is true if we look at it simply as matter of obedience. He Himself has said: "If ye love Me, keep My commandments." And one of the commandments which He has given us, with His own lips and through His apostles, was that we should copy His example. To follow the precepts which He has left, and which He has illustrated by His own

pattern, is the first law of a grateful religion. Undoubtedly it is this which our Lord Himself most dwells upon. If ye love Me, then show your love by giving Me My deep satisfaction. He has asked for this again and again: that we give Him the best proof of our sincere devotion, the unreserved surrender of our lives to the sway of His grace. So here at the last our Lord has at length assured Himself of the truth and depth and purity of the love which Simon Peter bore Him. And He seems to say: "Dost thou so truly love Me? I do not now as before distrust it. Show it to Me by sincere and grateful service to Mine. Feed My sheep in your office which I restore to you, and as to yourself, follow, copy and imitate Me. Your fault hitherto has been that your eyes have been holden, not to see the image of selfsacrificing holiness which I came from the Father to show you! I accept your love; and I counsel and command you to keep it by studying and imitating My love to you."

But the love of Jesus is a higher principle than simple obedience to positive commandments. It is the faculty which contemplates the assemblage of Divine perfections displayed by Christ in human nature, and finds its supreme delight in transferring them to itself. When the love of God is poured into the soul by the Holy Ghost, the affections are at once turned towards God as the Supreme Perfection with complacency and delight. The spiritual eye rests upon the Great Benefactor with gratitude, and seeks to know His will to do it in the spirit of thankfulness. But it also rests upon Him with delight for His own

sake, and finds the imitation of His character a strong and most blessed necessity. There is no genuine and perfect love of God which does not delight in God's holiness and long to reflect it. Those two most wonderful words in the Bible must always be joined together. "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and mind, and soul, and strength;" this is one. The other is: "Be ye holy, for I am holy." These must be joined, as both commandment and promise.

Now we must remember that Christ is this same God manifest in the flesh. As such our love rests upon Him, and as such He is the object of imitation. It can hardly be doubted that our Lord leaves this final injunction with our representative Peter as about to be glorified in heaven: in other words, as His Divine-human Person is about to be revealed more fully in its Divinity. Simon had loved Him and followed Him, even as he had known Him, "after the flesh." His love had now been made perfect as love to his God and Saviour; and the imitation of love must now be the pursuit of His Master's divine perfections made "manifest in the flesh." It is not merely human excellence that love beholds in the Lord. The standard is higher than that. As St. Peter says in his epistle: "Whereby are given to us exceeding great and precious promises, that by them we may be partakers of the Divine nature." Our love to Jesus must contemplate in Him the highest holiness of God, and be changed into that image from good to better, "from glory to glory."

Once more, the mystery of the love of Jesus has in

it another precious secret: that it silently and surely produces a universal conformity to the Object beloved. Its active effect is not all. It has also a passive operation, if such a word may be used. It is the blessed posture, attitude or state of the soul which renders it apt to receive all the inexpressible influences of the virtue of the Lord's holiness. Love in the Christian is the self-forgetting, selfrenouncing, self-resigning grace which is content for ever to receive what the Lord by His Spirit is pleased to give. Without thinking of self at all, without even being conscious that it is doing anything, without any prayer, and almost without any active desire, it is turned to the Lord, and receives the sacred impression of His grace. "Receiving as in a glass the glory of the Lord, we are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord." There is a following of Jesus which is simply the being drawn and yielding to the subtle and gracious influence.

This is a view of the imitation of Christ which may seem to forsake the literal meaning of the word follow. But it is of great importance, and we must linger on it. Be sure, dear brethren, that very much of your conformity to the Sacred Image will be, must be, the result of your habitual and unconscious communion with your Holy Master. Let His holy image be ever present to your loving thoughts, carried about everywhere in your heart as its hidden shrine, and it will surely irradiate you with its sanctity. You will become more and more like Him, "you know not how." His very company is sancti-

fyng to the soul that loves Him. Fellowship with Him through the Spirit is transforming: the fellowship of His virtue, which goes out to the touch of perpetual, unconscious faith. Remember that this is not independent of what has gone before, but only the consummation and perfection of all the rest. Love obeys Him and imitates; love is ambitious to be like Him in everything; and love also silently and insensibly attains its end.

Lest, however, we should pervert and abuse this blessed truth, it is well for us to turn to the other proposition: in order to imitate and follow our Lord aright we must purely and perfectly love Him.

As it regards the specific love of Jesus, all that holds good which is said generally of love: that it is the bond of perfectness and the fulfilling of the law. It is the strength of all obedience; and no one ever even enters upon the full evangelical life of duty until his faith begins to work by love. Before love, the love of God in Christ, the love of Christ, is shed abroad in the heart, faith may do much in producing fruits meet for repentance, but the graces and virtues and duties of religion, as they are summed up in the imitation of Christ, it is not equal to attain. What has been said as to entire consecration may be said as to the following of the Saviour's example, it is impossible without the shedding abroad of His love in the heart. Without it the enlightened reason may say of the Lord's holiness, It is high; but the failing strength sighs, I cannot attain unto it.

But there is an affecting sense in which the following of Christ is preeminently the imitation of His

selfsacrificing love to mankind. From the time when He began to speak of our bearing the cross after Him, down to the very eve of His passion, He impressed this upon His disciples. Indeed His last lesson before His death was devoted to the enforcement of this imitation, as the very condition of discipleship. It may be said that the one only instance in which Jesus solemnly made the copying of His own example a law was when He washed the disciples' feet. But before that He had shown to what extent the imitation of His selfsacrifice must go. "Except a corn of wheat die it abideth alone; but if it die it bringeth forth much fruit. He that loveth his life shall lose it." And it was when He was about to enter the thick darkness of His awful valley of the shadow of death that He said, "If any man serve Me, let him follow Me:" let him know that My service will never in this world be detached from suffering, profound selfabasement, keen self-denial, and all of which the cross is a symbol. And what our Lord said His apostles confirm. St. Peter and St. Paul especially unite in making the imitation or following of Jesus mainly in this life the copying the example of His suffering and patience and self-sacrifice. Now it is utterly impossible to continue long in this fellowship of the Saviour's suffering unless we fervently love Him. When St. Paul was giving an account of the selfrenouncing zeal which many counted madness this was all he had to say: "The love of Christ constraineth us." It requires a warm love to persist in well-doing under the most favourable circumstances of life. How much more

does it require this warm love when our religion is as it were only a cross. If we are faithful in self-denial, in the endurance of persecution, in the contest with hot temptation, it is only because we are knit to Christ by a love which many waters cannot quench. If we are failing in this, and shrinking from the hard work of religion, within our own souls and in external duty, it is because our love to our suffering Master fails.

But neither in theology nor in ethics must we separate the active from the passive righteousness of our Lord. We must take the Lord's example as one consummate and perfect whole. And in our imitation of it we must remember that nothing but love to Him will enable us to follow Him. Men have made the experiment by the aid of other principles and have always failed. Philosophical and admiring contemplation is not enough. Ascetic rigour of rule and discipline may have helped, but has never made men like Christ. Admiration of His beautiful character, and self-mortification in multiplying crosses, may have been useful in their way. But unless the warm, deep, and all-commanding energy of personal love to the Lord has been added, the disciple has not been in the best sense of the word "as his Lord." Once more then I say, seek a more abundant effusion of the Redeemer's love in your soul, that you may be able to begin anew the glorious struggle of life: for the attainment of conformity to the character of Christ in following Him alone.

III. We are now prepared to follow the word

“follow” into the other world, where it finds its last meaning. If we love our Lord with a perfect love we shall understand this its ultimate and highest import.

The scene of our text is a farewell scene. It is the last recorded incident of our Lord's personal fellowship with His disciples as individuals: the last in which He names them by name. Only the great official ascension remains behind. Viewed in this light the entire chapter is indescribably pathetic. Especially pathetic is the reference to Simon Peter's end, which is quite unique in the history of our Lord's dealings with His servants. He showed him—as Peter afterwards knew—in what a specific sense he was to follow his Lord in his manner of death. When the excited disciple made a suggestion about John—“And what shall this man do?”—his Master stopped him and said, emphatically repeating His word: “What is that to thee? Let it be your business and his alike to see Me again in My glorious kingdom. I said before, thou shalt follow Me afterwards: I now say again: follow thou Me!”

Our love to Jesus is the measure of our aspiration to follow Him and enjoy His perfect fellowship for ever; and that same love will give all diligence to be prepared for that union.

Not very long before He departed, and when His coming departure was very near at hand, He said: “If any man serve Me, let him follow Me; and where I am there shall My servant be;” as if He would bequeath to every earnest follower of his Lord this incentive and encouragement. Those who follow

Jesus in selfrenouncing love feel within them an evergrowing desire to be with Him. This hope gradually gives its character to all their views of heaven: they desire the rest and blessedness and glory of the inheritance; but chiefly the vision of God which is the vision of their Lord. Their hearts respond to their Master's prayer: "Father, I will that they whom Thou hast given Me be with Me where I am!" Their longing to be with Him meets His longing to receive them to Himself. Hence to true Christians there is a sense in which the previous meanings of the word "follow" are only preparatory to this one. They follow Him in perfect consecration, they follow Him in close imitation, in order that they may follow Him for ever into His kingdom and glory. There is nothing in this world, there is nothing even in Christian life itself, which can satisfy them short of the final union with Jesus which nothing throughout eternity will interrupt.

Hence their love is continually occupied in preparation for that ultimate blessedness. They continually hear Him say "Lovest thou Me? then see to it that thou be ready when I come for thee, as I shall come to John; see to it, O Peter, that thou be ready when I summon thee to come to Me by a death of martyrdom." This gives the law to the Christian's life. In all his duties he seeks to approve himself to his Master as one who is on his way to His presence, and may soon follow Him into eternity. He disdains the pleasures and vanities of time: not so much because of their unsatisfactoriness in themselves as because they are hindrances to his great

pursuit. He has risen and ascended with Christ in the faith and hope of mystical fellowship, and he has set his affection upon things above. Amidst all the shifting scenes and diversified engagements of life, his soul is faithful to one steady unchanging attraction. "Follow thou Me!" is for ever resounding in his ears. So was it with Simon Peter. We do not hear much about his private life afterwards for a long time. We see him constantly swallowed up in active duty for Christ, following Him in complete selfrenunciation, imitating Him in His active and suffering holiness. But by-and-by we have some revelation of his secret heart in his late epistles; and they show how fervent and full of glorious hope his soul was in the prospect of putting off his tabernacle and being with his Lord for ever. And if we are true Christians, we shall know it by this token, that, loving our Lord's appearing, we are making ready to follow Him for ever.

In conclusion, brethren, let us sum up all by impressing on your hearts the blessed combination of these two short sentences, and commending them to your solemn reflection.

Mark how they make the whole of religion concentrate itself on our personal relation to Christ. Nowhere in the gospels is the Saviour's "Me" and the Christian's "Thou" so straitly connected as here. "Lovest thou Me?" "Follow thou Me!" All our experience, and duty, and destiny are in these two phrases. Everything depends on our being able to answer aright the question. Everything depends on our right view of the command. Let me

beg you to regard the Lord as fixing His eye upon your soul, and uttering both these sentences in your ears and in your heart. Take them with you, muse on them as you go, and determine not to rest without a clear personal understanding of their full significance in regard to your own personal salvation and hope.

Mark once more how they mutually test each other.

That love alone is perfect and pure and sufficient which follows Christ in self-forgetting devotion, imitation, and preparation for heaven. The Lord loves to hear our profession. He rejoiced over Simon's triple assurance, though He made no direct response. But His answer is, "Follow thou Me! Show that love by its appropriate fruits. Let me see that it is as ready to follow Me in life and death as it is to utter its devotion and thanks."

That following alone is after the Lord's own heart which is inspired by love. Multitudes are called, and call themselves disciples, following the Saviour in external profession, in faultless worship, in vehement adherence to His cause, who have not the precious secret of His love in their hearts. He desires that other and more effectual following which loves nothing in comparison of Him, which seeks to be like Him in everything, and has only one home and one hope.

Lastly, mark the order of the two words. United they make up all religion, which is interior love and exterior following. But love has the preeminence here as everywhere. Let me repeat what has been

said again and again, and what cannot be repeated too often, that all must begin with the answer of a good conscience to the question "Lovest thou Me?" We cannot take one step in advance until we answer that question. He who puts it to you is able to give the love for which He asks. In Simon Peter's case He asked for it because He knew it was there. In your case, perhaps, He asks for it because He knows you have not His love in you clearly revealed. Confess that fault, that lack, that sin. Never rest till you know that He has forgiven your transgressions as He forgave Peter's. And when you can say, "Thou knowest that I love Thee," His great commandment "Follow thou Me!" will not make you afraid. To Him be glory for ever. Amen.