Saving Knowledge

Parochial and Plain Sermons vol 2 sermon 14

St. John Henry Newman

April 20, 1835

"Hereby do we know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments." 1 John ii. 3.

[Note] TO know God and Christ, in Scripture language, seems to mean to live under the conviction of His presence, who is to our bodily eyes unseen. It is, in fact, to have faith, according to St. Paul's account of faith, as the substance and evidence of what is invisible. It is faith, but not faith such as a Heathen might have, but Gospel faith; for only in the Gospel has God so revealed Himself, as to allow of that kind of faith which may be called, in a special manner, knowledge. The faith of Heathens was *blind*; it was more or less a moving forward in the darkness, with hand and foot;—therefore the Apostle says, "if haply they might feel after Him." [Acts xvii. 27.] But the Gospel is a *manifestation*, and therefore addressed to the eyes of our mind. Faith is the same principle as before, but with the opportunity of acting through a more certain and satisfactory sense. We recognise objects by the eye at once; but not by the touch. We know them when we see them, but scarcely till then. Hence it is, that the New Testament says so much on the subject of spiritual knowledge. For instance, St. Paul prays that the Ephesians may receive "the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Christ, the eyes of their understanding being enlightened;" and he says, that the Colossians had "put on the new man, which is renewed in knowledge, after the image of Him that created him." St. Peter, in like manner, addresses his brethren with the salutation of "Grace and peace, through the knowledge of God, and of Jesus our Lord;" according to the declaration of our Lord Himself, "This is life eternal, to know Thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom Thou hast sent." [Eph. i. 17, 18. Col. iii. 10. 2 Pet. i. 2. John xviii. 3.] Not of course as if Christian faith had not still abundant exercise for the other senses (so to call them) of the soul; but that the eye is its peculiar sense, by which it is distinguished from the faith of Heathens, nay, I may add, of Jews.

It is plain what is the object of spiritual sight which is vouchsafed us in the Gospel,—"God manifest in the Flesh." He who was before unseen has shown Himself in Christ; not merely displayed His glory, as (for instance) in what is called a providence, or visitation, or in miracles, or in the actions and character of inspired men, but really He Himself has come upon earth, and has been seen of men in human form. In the same kind of sense, in which we should say we saw a servant of His, Apostle or Prophet, though we could not see his soul, so man has seen the Invisible God; and we have the history of His sojourn among His creatures in the Gospels.

To know God is life eternal, and to believe in the Gospel manifestation of Him is to know Him; but how are we to "know that we know Him?" How are we to be sure that we are not mistaking some dream of our own for the true and clear Vision? How can we tell we are not like gazers upon a distant prospect through a misty atmosphere, who mistake one object for another? The text answers us clearly and intelligibly; though some Christians have recourse to other proofs of it, or will not have patience to ask

themselves the question. They say they are quite certain that they have true faith; for faith carries with it its own evidence, and admits of no mistaking, the true spiritual conviction being unlike all others. On the other hand, St. John says, "Hereby do we know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments." Obedience is the test of Faith.

Thus the whole duty and work of a Christian is made up of these two parts, Faith and Obedience; "looking unto Jesus," the Divine Object as well as Author of our faith, and acting according to His will. Not as if a certain frame of mind, certain notions, affections, feelings, and tempers, were not a necessary condition of a saving state; but, so it is, the Apostle does not insist upon it, as if it were sure to follow, if our hearts do but grow into these two chief objects, the view of God in Christ and the diligent aim to obey Him in our conduct.

I conceive that we are in danger, in this day, of insisting on neither of these as we ought; regarding all true and careful consideration of the Object of faith, as barren orthodoxy, technical subtlety, and the like, and all due earnestness about good works as a mere cold and formal morality; and, instead, making religion, or rather (for this is the point) making the test of our being religious, to consist in our having what is called a spiritual state of heart, to the comparative neglect of the Object from which it must arise, and the works in which it should issue. At this season, when we are especially engaged in considering the full triumph and manifestation of our Lord and Saviour, when He was "declared to be the Son of God with power, by the resurrection from the dead," it may be appropriate to make some remarks on an error which goes far to deprive us of the benefit of His condescension.

St. John speaks of knowing Christ and of keeping His commandments, as the two great departments of religious duty and blessedness. To know Christ is (as I have said) to discern the Father of all, as manifested through His Only-begotten Son Incarnate. In the natural world we have glimpses, frequent and startling, of His glorious Attributes; of His power, wisdom, and goodness; of His holiness, His fearful judgments, His long remembrance of evil, His long-suffering towards sinners, and His strange encompassing mercy at times when we least looked for it. But to us mortals, who live for a day, and see but an arm's length, such disclosures are like reflections of a prospect in a broken mirror; they do not enable us in any comfortable sense to know God. They are such as faith may use indeed, but hardly enjoy. This then was one among the benefits of Christ's coming, that the Invisible God was then revealed in the form and history of man, revealed in those respects in which sinners most required to know Him, and nature spoke least distinctly, as a Holy yet Merciful Governor of His creatures. And thus the Gospels, which contain the memorials of this wonderful grace, are our principal treasures. They may be called the text of the Revelation; and the Epistles, especially St. Paul's, are as comments upon it, unfolding and illustrating it in its various parts, raising history into doctrine, ordinances into sacraments, detached words or actions into principles, and thus everywhere dutifully preaching His Person, work, and will. St. John is both Prophet and Evangelist, recording and commenting on the Ministry of his Lord. Still, in every case, He is the chief Prophet of the Church, and His Apostles do but explain His words and actions; according to His own account of the guidance promised

to them, that it should "glorify" Him. The like service is ministered to Him by the Creeds and doctrinal expositions of the early Church, which we retain in our Services. They speak of no ideal being, such as the imagination alone contemplates, but of the very Son of God, whose life is recorded in the Gospels. Thus every part of the Dispensation tends to the manifestation of Him who is its centre.

Turning from Him to ourselves, we find a short rule given us, "If ye love Me, keep My commandments." "He that saith he abideth in Him, ought himself also so to walk, even as He walked." "If ye then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God." [John xiv. 15. 1 John ii. 6. Col. iii. 1.] This is all that is put upon us, difficult indeed to perform, but easy to understand; all that is put upon us,—and for this plain reason, because Christ has done everything else. He has freely chosen us, died for us, regenerated us, and now ever liveth for us; what remains? Simply that we should do as He has done to us, showing forth His glory by good works. Thus a correct (or as we commonly call it), an orthodox faith and an obedient life, is the whole duty of man. And so, most surely, it has ever been accounted. Look into the records of the early Church, or into the writings of our own revered bishops and teachers, and see whether this is not the sum total of religion, according to the symbols of it in which children are catechized, the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, and the Ten Commandments.

However, it is objected that such a view of religious duty encourages self-deception; that a man who does no more than believe aright, and keep God's commandments, is what is called a formalist; that his heart is not interested in the matter, his affections remain unrenewed; and that, till a change takes place there, all the faith and all the obedience which mind can conceive are but external, and avail nothing; that to his heart therefore we must make our appeal, that we must bid him search himself, examine his motives, look narrowly lest he rest upon himself, and be sure that his feelings and thoughts are spiritual before he takes to himself any comfort. The merits of this view of religion shall be considered hereafter; at present, let us take it merely in the light of an objection to what has been already stated. I ask then in reply, how is a man to know that his motives and affections are right except by their fruits? Can they possibly be their own evidence? Are they like colours, which a man knows at once without test or calculation? Is not every feeling and opinion, of one colour or another, fair or unpleasant, in each man's own judgment, according to the centre light which is set up in his soul? Is not the light that is in a man sometimes even darkness, sometimes twilight, and sometimes of this hue or that, tinging every part of himself with its own peculiarity? How then is it possible that a man can duly examine his feelings and affections by the light within him? how can he accurately decide upon their character, whether Christian or not? It is necessary then that he go out of himself in order to assay and ascertain the nature of the principles which govern him; that is, he must have recourse to his works, and compare them with Scripture, as the only evidence to himself, whether or not his heart is perfect with God. It seems, therefore, that the proposed inquiry into the workings of a man's mind means nothing at all, comes to no issue, leaves us where it found us, unless we adopt the notion (which is seldom however openly maintained), that religious faith is its own evidence.

On the other hand, deeds of obedience are an intelligible evidence, nay, the sole evidence possible, and, on the whole, a satisfactory evidence of the reality of our faith. I do not say that this or that good work tells anything; but a course of obedience says much. Various deeds, done in different departments of duty, support and attest each other. Did a man act merely a bold and firm part, he would have cause to say to himself, "Perhaps all this is mere pride and obstinacy." Were he merely yielding and forgiving,—he might be indulging a natural indolence of mind. Were he merely industrious,—this might consist with ill-temper, or selfishness. Did he merely fulfil the duties of his temporal calling,—he would have no proof that he had given his heart to God at all. Were he merely regular at Church and Holy Communion,—many a man is such who has a lax conscience, who is not scrupulously fair-dealing, or is censorious, or niggardly. Is he what is called a domestic character, amiable, affectionate, fond of his family? let him beware lest he put wife and children in the place of God who gave them. Is he only temperate, sober, chaste, correct in his language? it may arise from mere dulness and insensibility, or may consist with spiritual pride. Is he cheerful and obliging? it may arise from youthful spirits and ignorance of the world. Does he choose his friends by a strictly orthodox rule? he may be harsh and uncharitable; or, is he zealous and serviceable in defending the Truth? still he may be unable to condescend to men of low estate, to rejoice with those who rejoice, and to weep with those who weep. No one is without some good quality or other: Balaam had a scruple about misrepresenting God's message, Saul was brave, Joab was loyal, the Bethel Prophet reverenced God's servants, the witch of Endor was hospitable; and therefore, of course, no one good deed or disposition is the criterion of a spiritual mind. Still, on the other hand, there is no one of its characteristics which has not its appropriate outward evidence; and in proportion as these external acts are multiplied and varied, so does the evidence of it become stronger and more consoling. General conscientiousness is the only assurance we can have of possessing it; and at this we must aim, determining to obey God consistently, with a jealous carefulness about all things, little and great. This is, in Scripture language, to "serve God with a perfect heart;" as you will see at once, if you compare the respective reformations of Jehu and Josiah. As far then as a man has reason to hope that he is *consistent*, so far may he humbly trust that he has true faith. To be consistent, to "walk in all the ordinances of the Lord blameless," is his one business; still, all along looking reverently towards the Great Object of faith, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, Three Persons, One God, and the Son Incarnate for our salvation. Certainly he will have enough to direct his course by, with God in his eye, and his work in his hand, though he forbear curious experiments about his sensations and emotions; and, if it be objected that an evidence from works is but a cold comfort, as being at best but faint and partial, I reply, that, after all, it is more than sinners have a right to ask,—that if it be little at first, it grows with our growth in grace,—and moreover, that such an evidence, more than any other, throws us in faith upon the loving-kindness and meritorious sufferings of our Saviour. Surely, even our best doings have that taint of sinfulness pervading them, which will remind us ever, while we regard them, where our True Hope is lodged. Men are satisfied with themselves, not when they attempt, but when they neglect the details of duty. Disobedience blinds the conscience; obedience makes it keen-sighted and sensitive. The more we *do*, the more shall we trust in Christ; and that surely is no morose doctrine, which, after giving us whatever evidence of our

safety can be given, leads us to soothe our selfish restlessness, and forget our fears, in the vision of the Incarnate Son of God.

Lastly, it may be objected, that, since many deeds of obedience are themselves acts of the mind, to do them well we must necessarily examine our feelings; that we cannot pray, for instance, without reflecting on ourselves as we use the words of prayer, and keeping our thoughts upon God; that we cannot repress anger or impatience, or cherish loving and forgiving thoughts, without searching and watching ourselves. But such an argument rests on a misconception of what I have been saying. All I would maintain is, that our duty lies in acts,—acts of course of every kind, acts of the mind, as well as of the tongue, or of the hand; but anyhow, it lies mainly in acts; it does not directly lie in moods or feelings. He who aims at praying well, loving sincerely, disputing meekly, as the respective duties occur, is wise and religious; but he who aims vaguely and generally at being in a spiritual frame of mind, is entangled in a deceit of words, which gain a meaning only by being made mischievous. Let us do our duty as it presents itself; this is the secret of true faith and peace. We have power over our deeds, under God's grace; we have no direct power over our habits. Let us but secure our actions, as God would have them, and our habits will follow. Suppose a religious man, for instance, in the society of strangers; he takes things as they come, discourses naturally, gives his opinion soberly, and does good according to each opportunity of good. His heart is in his work, and his thoughts rest without effort on his God and Saviour. This is the way of a Christian; he leaves it to the ill-instructed to endeavour after a (so-called) spiritual frame of mind amid the bustle of life, which has no existence except in attempt and profession. True spiritual-mindedness is unseen by man, like the soul itself, of which it is a quality; and as the soul is known by its operations, so it is known by its fruits.

I will add too, that the office of self-examination lies rather in detecting what is bad in us than in ascertaining what is good. No harm can follow from contemplating our sins, so that we keep Christ before us, and attempt to overcome them; such a review of self will but lead to repentance and faith. And, while it does this, it will undoubtedly be moulding our hearts into a higher and more heavenly state;—but still indirectly;—just as the mean is attained in action or art, not by directly contemplating and aiming at it, but negatively, by avoiding extremes.

To conclude. The essence of Faith is to look out of ourselves; now, consider what manner of a believer he is who imprisons himself in his own thoughts, and rests on the workings of his own mind, and thinks of his Saviour as an idea of his imagination, instead of putting self aside, and living upon Him who speaks in the Gospels.

So much then, by way of suggestion, upon the view of Religious Faith, which has ever been received in the Church Catholic, and which, doubtless, is saving. Tomorrow I propose to speak more particularly of that other system to which these latter times have given birth.

Note - Monday in Easter Week.