

The Spouse Her Earnest Desire After Christ

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Richard Sibbes (1577-1635) was lecturer at Holy Trinity, Cambridge, 1610-1615, preacher at Gray's Inn, London, from 1617, and Master of St. Catherine's Hall, Cambridge, from 1626 until his death. He was one of the most significant preachers of the Puritan period.

Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth: for thy love is better than wine.

— CANT. 1.2.

The Holy Ghost is pleased here to condescend to our infirmities; and, that we might help ourselves in our spiritual estate by our bodies, he speaketh here of heavenly things after an earthly manner, and with a comfortable mystery. As in other places the Holy Ghost sets out the joys of heaven by a sweet banquet, so here he sets out the union that we have with Christ by the union of the husband with the wife; and that we might the better understand what this union is, he condescends to our weakness, that we might see that in a glass which we through our corruptions cannot otherwise discern. This book is nothing else but a plain demonstration and setting forth of the love of Christ to his church, and of the love of the church to Christ; so familiarly and plainly, that the Jews take great scandal at it, and would not have any to read this book till they are come to the age of thirty years, lest they thereby should be tempted to incontinency; wherein they would seem wiser than God himself. But the Holy Ghost is pleased thus by corporeal to set out these spiritual things, which are of a higher nature, that by thinking and tasting of the one they might be stirred up to translate their affections (which in youthful age are most strong) from the heat of natural love to spiritual things, to the things of God; and all those who are spiritually minded (for whom chiefly the Scriptures were written) will take special comfort and instruction thereby, though others take offence and scandal at it. So here, the union between Christ and his spouse is so familiarly and livelily set forth by that union which is between the husband and the wife, that, though ungodly men might take offence at it, yet the godly may be bettered by it.

'Let him kiss,' &c. These words are the words of the spouse to Christ, containing in them two particulars.

First, *an earnest desire*, in these words, 'Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth.'

In which note three parts.

First, the person desiring, the church.

Secondly, the person desired, Christ.

Thirdly, the things desired, a familiar kiss of his mouth.

Secondly, *the ground of the desire*, fetched from the excellency of the thing desired, in these words, 'For thy love is sweeter than wine.'

From the whole in general observe a *spiritual contract between Christ and his church*. There is a civil contract between man and wife, answerable to which the spiritual contract between Christ and his church holds firm resemblance.

1. That this civil contract may hold, *both parties must consent*. So it is between Christ and his spouse. He was so in love with mankind, that he hath taken our nature upon him; and this his incarnation is the ground of all our union with Christ. First, his incarnation is the cause or ground of our union with him in grace here; and, secondly, our union in grace is the ground of our union in glory. Now, that we may be a spouse to him, he gives us his Spirit to testify his love to us, that we might give our consent to him again, as also that we might be made a fit spouse for him.

2. Likewise in marriage there is *a communicating of all good things*. So it is here. Christ here in this spiritual contract gives himself, and with himself all good things. The Spirit is the church's. His happiness is the church's. His graces are the church's. His righteousness is the church's. In a word, all his privileges and prerogatives are the church's; as saith the apostle, 'All things are Christ's, and Christ is yours,' 1 Cor. iii. 21; for all are Christ's, and all that are Christ's are yours by this spiritual contract. This excellency is set down by the prophet Hosea in his second chapter and latter end, where he, speaking of this spiritual contract between Christ and his church, saith, Hos. ii. 19, &c. 'In that day when he shall marry her unto himself in faithfulness, he will make a covenant for her with all creatures, with the beasts of the field, the fowls of heaven, and all that creepeth upon the earth.' So that upon this contract cometh in a league between the church and all the creatures. All that he hath done, all that he hath suffered by this contract is made ours. We have the benefit of all.

Obj. But what have we to bestow upon him again?

Solution. Nothing at all; neither portion nor proportion, beauty nor riches, but our miserable and base condition that he took upon him.

Use. This is a *well-spring of much comfort*, and a ground of *much duty*.

1. Christ condescended so far unto us, to such a near league, as to take us to be his spouse, who hath all things. What then can we want when we are at the fountain of all things? We can want no protection, for that is the covering of this well. We can want no good thing but he will supply it. We have free access unto him, as the wife hath to her

husband. Who hath free access to the husband if the wife hath not? So who hath free access to Christ but the spouse?

Obj. Yea, but we have infirmities.

Solution. True, indeed; but shall man bear with his wife because she is the 'weaker vessel,' 1 Pet. iii. 7, and shall not Christ much more with his spouse? Herein then is our chiefest comfort, that this union, this contract, is not for a time, but for ever: 'I have married thee unto myself for ever,' Hos. ii. 19. And therefore we shall never want protection nor direction, nor anything that is good for us.

2. Now, the duty on our part is to love him again with a mutual love, and obedient love; to honour him as Sarah did Abraham, by calling him Lord, 1 Pet. iii. 6; and manifest it by doing what he would have thee to do, and by suffering what he would have thee to suffer.

To come to particulars.

First, of the *person desiring*, 'Let him kiss me.'

'Me' is here the speech of the whole church, and so of every particular member which is the spouse of Christ.

Doct. All Christian favours belong to all Christians alike. We have one faith, one baptism, one Spirit. As every Christian may say 'me,' so may the whole church, and every Christian as well as the church. All Christian privileges belong to all alike.

Use 1. Herein have comfort then, that whatsoever belongs to the church in general, belongs to every member in particular.

Use 2. This teacheth us to reason from one spiritual thing to another, as thus Abraham believed, 'and it was counted to him for righteousness, Rom. iv. 22; and therefore if I believe I shall be counted righteous. David sinned, and David repented and found mercy; and therefore if I, &c. So all privileges belong alike to all Christians. Every Christian soul is the spouse of Christ as the whole church is. Therefore St Paul propounds himself an example to all that would believe in Christ. 'God had mercy on him,' 1 Tim. i. 16, and therefore he encourageth all to come 'unto Christ, by this, that he will have mercy on thee, as he had on him. Whatsoever is promised to the whole church, that apply to thy own soul in particular; and whatsoever is required of the whole church, that is required of thee in particular by Christ, if thou be a member. But though in spiritual favours all have a like portion, yet it is not so in outward things; but some are rich, some are poor, some honorable, some base. But in the best privileges and best gifts there is an equal extending to all alike, to the poor Christian as well as to the rich, to him that is base in the eye of the world, as well as to him that is honourable.

Secondly, of the *person desired*, 'Let him.'

Many make love to the spouse; as the devil, the world, and the flesh. The devil and

carnal persons make love to the soul, to draw her away from Christ, but she looks to Christ still. 'Let *him* kiss me.' She goes not as the papists do, to Peter and Paul, but to Christ and to Christ alone. He 'is my well-beloved, and I am his,' Cant. ii. 16; he is my peculiar, and I am his peculiar; none have 'I in heaven but him, and there is none that I desire in comparison of him,' Ps. lxxiii. 25. He hath singled out me, and I have singled out him, 'Let him kiss me.'

Thirdly, *of the thing desired*, 'Let him kiss me,' &c.

The thing desired, it is a kiss. There are divers sorts of kisses spoken of in Scripture. There is a kiss of superiors to inferiors, and of inferiors to superiors. There is an holy kiss, Rom. xvi. 16, 1 Cor. xvi. 20, and an hypocritical kiss, as Joab to Amasa, 2 Sam. xx. 9, and as Judas to Christ, Mat. xxvi. 49. There are kisses of love; so Jonathan kissed David, 1 Sam. xx. 41. There are kisses also of subjection, as, Kiss ye the Son, &c., Ps. ii. 12. But here is the kiss of a superior to an inferior. 'Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth,' that is, let him shew me further testimony of his love by his presence; let me enjoy further communion with him still; let him further assure me of his love. Consider what the church meant; howsoever she had interest in this spiritual contract and covenant at the first, yet the church, according to the different degrees of time, had different degrees of desires to be further and further assured of his love. As in Solomon's time, so before from the beginning, there was a desire in the church of the kisses of Christ, that is, that he would come in our nature, and that he would manifest by little and little, clearer and clearer, his coming in the flesh; and accordingly he did by degrees reveal himself, as first in paradise, 'The seed of the woman shall break the serpent's head, Gen. iii. 15; then to Abraham, 'In thy seed shall all the families of the earth be blessed,' Gen. xii. 3. After that to one tribe, Gen. xlix. 10, the tribe of Judah, Heb. vii, 14; then to one family of that tribe, the house of David, Luke i. 27; then a virgin shall conceive, Isa. vii, 14; and after that pointed out by the finger of John the Baptist, 'Behold the Lamb of God that takes away the sins of the world,' John i. 29. So you see how Christ did reveal himself more and more by degrees unto his church. Answerable to these degrees were the desires of the church for the coming of Christ, as the prophet Isaiah saith, 'Come down and break the heavens,' Isa. lxiv. 1.; and then prophesied of by those that waited for the consummation of Israel. So that before Christ came in the flesh the church had a longing desire after his incarnation, as here, 'Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth.' But that is not all. For she knew this should not be till the last days, and therefore desireth some further means of acquaintance and knowledge of him, desiring that he would manifest himself more and more by his word, by his grace, and by his Spirit; and therefore as then the desire of the church was for the coming of Christ, so now that which Christians desire and long after is, to go to him that they may remain with him in glory. They love his appearance, but because this shall not be yet, though the church be still in expectation of it, therefore she desireth to hear his words, and to have him kiss her with his mouth in his word. But this is not all; but let me find his Spirit now walking with me here, and further, 'kiss me with his mouth,' by increasing his graces in me, manifesting his love unto me more and more. This is the desire of the church, and of every Christian soul, that Christ would thus kiss her; that he would reveal himself every day more and more unto her, in his word, in his sacraments, by his Spirit,

by his graces, by increasing of them. This is the desire of the church and of every Christian soul, that Christ would thus 'kiss her with the kisses of his mouth.'

Now we are come to the ground of this desire, taken from the excellency of the love of Christ, which is here said by experience of the whole church, and of every Christian soul, to be 'sweeter than wine.'

From hence we note two things.

Doct. 1. First, that every Christian soul and the spouse in general hath a sweet taste of the love of Christ even in this life.

Doct. 2. That after this contract and taste of this love, she hath ever springing up in her a further desire of the increase and manifestation of it.

Doct. 1. For the first, as after the contract there is a more manifestation of love than was before, yet not a full manifestation of love till after the marriage, so Christ, though he do give his spouse a taste of his love here, and sends love-tokens unto her, some graces whereby his love is made more manifest than before (as Isaac sent to Rebekah some jewels and bracelets to manifest his love to her, Gen. xxiv. 58); yet his love is not fully manifested in this life, but is kept until the great solemnity. Christ cannot delight in the spouse unless she be decked with his graces, and therefore he gives her of them; and these are not only a taste of his favours, but the fruit of his favours.

The reasons are diverse.

Reason 1. The first reason is *to solace their long absence*, that they may not faint, but having a sweet taste of his love here, may stay their hearts thereupon until the day wherein he will fully manifest his love unto them. The Lord seeth his children are subject to be oppressed with heaviness here; therefore he gives them a taste of his love here, that thereby they might be comforted, when nothing else can.

Reason 2. The Lord gives his children a sweet taste of his love here, *that when they by weakness and frailty fall away and lose their first love, when by their former taste they might return and recover themselves again*, considering how sweet, and how strong that love was, that once they had enjoyed from Christ, and hereby they might say with the church, 'I will return,' &c. Hos. ii. 7

Reason 3. The third reason is, *because the manifestation of this his love doth wonderfully strengthen a Christian to go lightly through the heaviest affliction*; for when Christ assures a Christian of his love, then affliction will seem grievous, but he will through all, he will suffer whatsoever shall befall him for Christ's sake with joy.

Reason 4. Lastly, Christ gives his church, and so every Christian, a taste of his love in this life, *because he knows we have many temptations in this world which are ready to steal away our affections*, as carnal pleasures, riches, honours, and the like. Now that

these might not draw away our affections, he gives us a taste of his love, which is better than all other things, 'which is sweeter than wine,' that by this our affections might be preserved chaste to him. So then Christ gives us, his spouse, a sweet taste of his love in this life, that afflictions on our left hand might not too much press us down and discomfort us; nor the pleasures and delights on our right hand steal away our hearts from him.

Use. The use is to teach us to *admire* (that is, 'wonder' - ed.) *at the goodness of God* in this, that he is pleased so to provide for us, as to keep us from being too much overcome with heaviness through the multitude of temptations and afflictions which in this life we are subject unto; expelling the bitterness thereof with the sweetness of his love, thereby preserving our affections chaste unto himself.

Now we come to the second doctrine.

Doct. 2. That the church (and so every Christian) after this contract and taste of Christ's love, hath evermore springing up in them an insatiable desire for a further taste and assurance of his love.

The reasons of this doctrine are two.

Reason 1. The first reason is taken from the nature of true love, *which is never satisfied.* And hence it is, that though Christ give his spouse a taste of his love in his word, by sending his ambassadors, his ministers with his love-letters, the gospel of peace, giving therein a taste of his love, as also by his Spirit, by his sacraments, by his graces; yet all this will not satisfy her soul, but Christ having once manifested his love unto her, there is a continual desire to have a farther taste and assurance of it.

Reason 2. The second reason is drawn *from Christ's infinite riches*, infinite in his glory, in his power, in his beauty, in his pleasures, and joys, and the like. He hath all things, 'All power is given him in heaven and in earth,' Mat. xxviii. 18; every way infinite in himself; and hence it is, that the spouse hath an infinite desire to have a further taste of his love, and a nearer communion with him. So you see whether we regard the nature of love, which is never satisfied, or whether we consider his infinite riches, both manifest this truth, that there is an insatiable desire in a Christian, to be further filled with, and more fully assured of, the love of Christ. Where grace is, there is a further desire of growth in grace. It is an higher degree of love to desire the enjoying of the presence of Christ, than to enjoy heaven itself; but this will not be yet.

Use 1. Therefore let us try our love by *our labouring for that sight of Christ which we may have*; as in his ordinances where he manifests himself in a special manner. Is it the great grief of thy soul that thou art shut from the presence of Christ in his ordinances, from the congregation of the saints, where he by familiar kisses useth to manifest his love to thee more and more? I can but wonder that some persons dare to take upon them the name of Christianity, and yet think that men be too holy. These want this character of a Christian, viz., a further desire of the manifestation of Christ's love. Many

of them neglect the ordinances of God, or if they do come there, they desire not further inward kisses of his love, but content themselves with the outward.

When the Spirit should witness and seal up the love, the love of Christ to their souls, by an inward kiss, they only content themselves with the outward, the bare hearing of the word. But where this further desire of familiarity with Christ is not, there is but a barren soul, there is no taste of Christ's love. If there were a taste, there would be a further desire of growth in that love. There are some that make a profession of religion, as many that marry to cloak their adultery; so these profess Christ, to cover their strong covetousness and strong faults, that they may have the more strength to commit sin. We must not content ourselves without these outward kisses, but give, as the outward man, so sacrifice the inward man, Rom. vii. 22, the soul unto God. Let those that find, after this trial, these desires springing up in them, comfort themselves in this, that they are Christ's, and Christ shall manifest his love more and more unto them. For God hath promised to grant the desires of the righteous, Ps. xxxvii. 4. Hast thou then a longing desire to have a further taste of the love of Christ? Use the means, and then be sure that Christ will manifest his love more and more unto thy soul.

Use 2. The second use is for exhortation and spiritual direction *how we shall come to a further assurance, sign, and fruit of Christ's love.* If we desire this, we must labour to have, first, *chaste judgments*, and secondly, *chaste affections.* A *chaste judgment* from error, heresy, and schism; and our affections chaste from the world, from pleasures and the like. For Christ is wonderful jealous of our judgments, and of our love. Therefore Paul desires to present the Corinthians a 'pure virgin unto Christ,' 2 Cor. xi. 2. So then, as we must affect (that is, 'love' - ed.) goodness, so we must profess truth. We must have chaste judgments as well as chaste affections. The spouse of Christ, as she is pure in affections, so she is pure in judgment; she hears his voice and follows him. Whatsoever comes not from the word, receive it not, but reject it. Thus much for the judgment.

So likewise labour for *chaste affections.* Christ will not have us to divide our affections; partly for him, and partly for the world, or partly to pleasures, and partly to him. He will not have it so. He will have the whole heart and whole affections, or he will have neither heart nor affections. If we give our hearts to the world or to the pleasures of the world, the love of which is enmity with God, James iv. 4, then have we an adulterous heart; which to do is a double sin. As for a wife to commit whoredom is a double sin, there is adultery and breach of marriage covenant; so to embrace the world after we are contracted unto Christ, is spiritual whoredom and a breach of our covenant in spiritual contract. Take heed of worldly-mindedness, which will glue thy affections to the earth, and will not suffer them to be lifted up to Christ. Take heed of the pleasures of the world, lest they drown thy soul, as they do the souls of many that profess themselves to be Christians.

Use 3. Thirdly, if we will grow in the assurance of the love of Christ, and have more familiar kisses of his mouth, then labour *to get an humble heart*, by searching out our own unworthiness in respect of what we are, or were by nature. Indeed, we may disparage our credits by abasing ourselves in respect of men, but never can we be too

much humbled to our Saviour in acknowledging ourselves unworthy of all that we have. There is no danger in thus debasing ourselves to our Saviour, nay, it is for our honour with God. For those that thus honour him he will honour with his graces; for he giveth grace to the humble, and with such a spirit he delights to dwell, Isa. lxvi. 2. Let us with humility, then, acknowledge all to be from his free grace, and with Jacob, acknowledge ourselves to be less than the least of his mercies, Gen. xxxii. 10.

Use 4. Fourthly, if we will grow in the assurance of the love of Christ, *we must give Christ no peace.* Take no nay of him, till he hath given thee the kisses of his love. Many times he delays the manifesting of his love— what though? Yet wait his pleasure, for he hath waited long upon thee. We see Mary Magdalen, what ado she made when she could not find Christ. He having manifested himself unto her at the beginning, at length he calleth her by her name, demanding for what she wept, and whom she sought, Luke vii. 47. Give him no rest, take no denial, till he answer thee, for he will do it. What did the woman of Canaan? She gave him no rest till he did apply himself unto her, Mat. xv. 22, *seq.* Jacob wrestled with God, and would not let him go, till he had assured him of his love and favour, Gen. xxxii. 24, *seq.* He hath promised to grant the desires of the righteous, Ps. xxxvii. 4. Hath he given us such strong desires after him? Then continue constant importuning him by prayer, and he cannot stand out with us long; he cannot deny us some further assurance of his love.

Use 5. Again, take *everything to thine advantage*, as his former love and favour, his power, fidelity, and stability. Take advantage from these, and plead for thy desires, as the woman of Canaan. Christ accounts her a dog, Mat. xv. 26. I am indeed so, saith she. She taketh advantage of his words, and thereby pleads for her desire. As the servants of Benhadad catch at words of comfort from Ahab, 1 Kings xx. 38; 50 continually take advantage from your own experience. He hath been thus and thus good unto thee, these and these means thou hast enjoyed, and thus and thus hath it wrought for my good; I will therefore follow him now until he assure me of his love in a further degree.

Use 6. Again, consider thou must be *modest in thy desires of this kind.* Desire no great matter at the first. I mean, not full assurance of the love of Christ at the first; but observe the degrees of his kisses, and manifestation of his love. The thief on the cross desired but to be remembered of Christ when he came into his kingdom, Luke xxiii. 42, —no great matter; so do thou desire any taste of his love, though never so little. Indeed, so the children of God do. First they desire the pardon of their sins, and having obtained this, they grow more and more in desiring the graces of the Spirit, as seals to assure them of the pardon of them, and of his love unto them, and nearer communion with him.

Obj. But this communion is not always felt.

Sol. 1. I answer, if Christ be strange to us, it *is from ourselves, not from Christ*; for he is all love. It is either because our loose hearts run after some carnal contents; and then no marvel though Christ shew himself strange unto us, and we go mourning all the day long, without a sense of his love.

Or else, 2, It is when *we will not seek for his kisses*, a farther taste of his love, as we should, in his ordinances, nor exercise those graces that we have as we should, in attending upon the ordinance, resting by faith upon God's promise for a blessing.

Or else, 3, *We are so negligent, that we do not stir up those graces of God in us by private duties.*

Or else, 4, *We join ourselves to evil company*, or to persons led with an evil spirit. These are the causes why Christ is strange to us.

Or else, 5, It is to exercise and try our faith, and to let us see ourselves and our own weakness. Thus he left Peter. Otherwise, it is Christ, his nature, to manifest himself and his love by familiar kisses of his mouth. Search into your hearts, and you shall find that these and such like are the causes why Christ is strange unto you, and why you are senseless (that is, 'unconscious of') of your communion with him.

Use 7. Consider, again, when it is, *at what time* is it *that we have the sweetest kisses, and are most refreshed with Christ's love.* Is it not when we put our strength to good means, as when we strive with God in prayer, and labour in humility rightly, and profitably to use all his ordinances? Mark these two well as a means to preserve and increase the assurance of Christ's love in you.

First, *how you fall into deadness*, and the causes of it.

Secondly, *how you come to have most communion with Christ*, and at what time, and after what performances. Canst thou say, I was thus and thus dead and senseless of Christ's love, but now I am thus and thus comforted and refreshed? either when thou deniedst anything to thyself, which thy heart stood strongly for, or when thou hadst been most careful in holy duties. If we deny ourselves in anything, that our hearts stand strongly for, because it hinders us in holy courses, God will be sure to recompense us in spiritual things abundantly, yea, and in temporal things many times.

Use 8. Consider, again, *when I was afflicted and had none else to comfort me, then the Lord was most sweet unto me, then he refreshed my soul with a sense of his love.*

These may help us much in getting a further assurance of Christ's love. Be stirred up, then, to desire to be where Christ is, and to have the kisses of his love in his ordinances, as further testimonies of his favour, and never rest from having a desire to increase in grace and communion with Christ. So shall you never want assurance of a good estate, nor comfort in any good estate. Cast such a man into a dungeon, he hath paradise there. Why? Because Christ comes to him. And if we have this communion with Christ, then though we are compassed about with death, yet it cannot affright us, because the great God is with us, Ps. xxiii. 4. Do with such a one what you will; cast him into hell, if it were possible; he having a sweet communion with Christ, will be joyful still; and the more sense we have of the love of Christ, the less we shall regard the

pleasures or riches of the world. For what joy can be compared with this, that the soul hath communion with Christ? All the world is nothing in comparison.

Now, then, seeing you cannot requite this love of Christ again, yet shew your love to Christ in manifesting love to his members, to the poor, to such poor especially as have the church of God in their families. As the woman poured oil on the head of Christ, so shall we do well to pour some oil upon the feet of Christ. That which we would do to him, if he were here, let us do to his members, that thereby we may further our communion with Christ.

FINIS.

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