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THE CHRISTIAN LAW OF CHARITY.

A DISCOURSE

DELIVERED BEFORE THE

GRADUATING CLASS

AT THE

University of North Carolina,

JUNE 5TH, 1860,

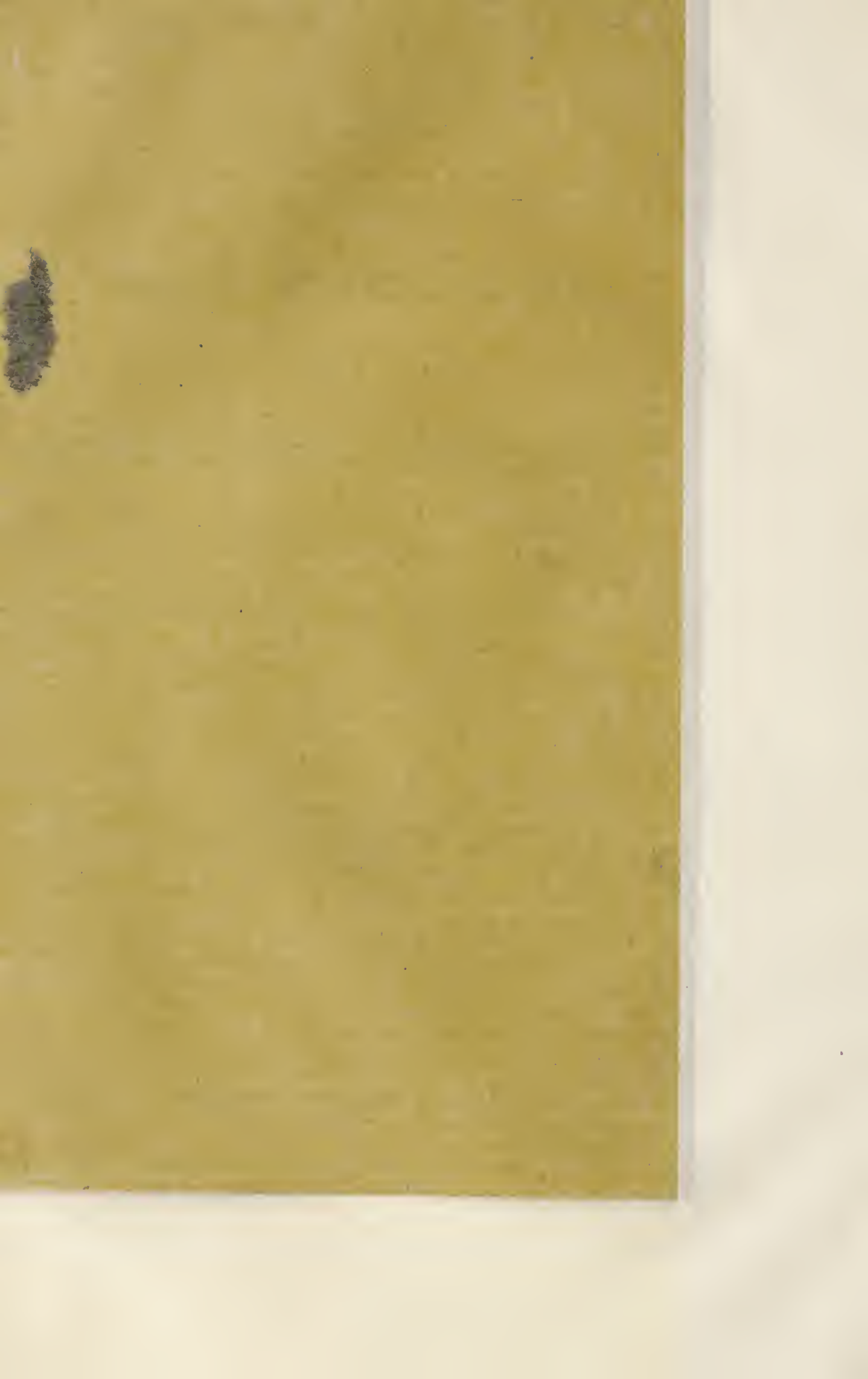
BY THE MOST REV. ARCHBISHOP OF NEW YORK.

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1860.



BACCALAUREATE SERMON,

DELIVERED IN GIRARD HALL

BY THE MOST REV. ARCHBISHOP HUGHES,

JUNE 5TH, 1860.

YOUNG GENTLEMEN OF THE GRADUATING CLASS:

I embrace this first opportunity to thank you for your kindness in inviting me to preach on this occasion. To that invitation I am indebted for the privilege and pleasure of a first visit to the State of North Carolina, and to its noble University, at Chapel Hill; of which your State has had, now has, and is likely to have still more, such great reasons to be proud.

MATTHEW XXII, 34: But the Pharisees hearing that He had silenced the Sadducees, came together and one of them, a doctor of the law, asked Him, tempting Him: Master which is the great commandment in the law? Jesus said to him: Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with thy whole heart, and with thy whole soul, and with thy whole mind. This is the greatest and first commandment, and the second is like to this: Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. On these two commandments dependeth the whole law and the prophets.

It might appear strange at first view that our divine Redeemer should have deemed it necessary to renew a precept, placing the affections of the human soul under obedience. It should seem but a necessary consequence that they who know God to be their creator, father and saviour, should love him by a spontaneous movement of their hearts without the necessity of a commandment to that effect. But it should be remembered that the precept as originally laid down in the book of Deuteronomy, and now so emphatically confirmed by the incarnate Son of God, was addressed to that fallen race whom he came to redeem and elevate.

So far as we know, the angels themselves were not commanded to love their Creator. The principle of that love was inherent in their spiritual nature. No doubt a test was appointed by which in the exercise of their free will they might prove their fidelity to God, or their rebellion against Him. By this test they were tried. Having been created simultaneously, the trial or temptation which would prove their fidelity was one and the same. In the exercise of their free will some adhered to God; others resisted and would not serve. These latter were expelled from Heaven, and fell to rise no more. For them there was not, and there was not to be, at any time a saviour.

Again, in the creation of our first parents in the garden of Paradise there is no evidence that God imposed on them any special obligation to love him. This would be necessarily implied, but it has not been specifically commanded. Their test by which they should recognize the supremacy and sovereignty of their creator was embodied in a prohibitory precept forbidding them to taste of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. They were free, and in the exercise of their freedom they chose to violate the commandment of their God, and to involve themselves and their posterity in a ruin which would have been irremediable for time and for eternity if God had not so loved the world as to give His only begotten Son, that whosoever should believe in Him might not perish, but might have life everlasting. It is to their descend-

ants, all maimed and wounded in their nature by the ravages of original and actual sin, that the precept was given in specific words, commanding them to love God and to love their neighbor.

There is a great mystery involved in what I have just said. The right understanding of it furnishes a key for all other mysteries. It is this—Why God permitted that the noblest work of His creation, viz: angels and men, should have the power to rebel against Him, whilst all the other portions of His creation obey His laws with constant and unvarying fidelity? in other words, why God should have permitted sin, or at least not prevented it? The answer to this is—so far as man may interpret the divine counsel—that he created both angels and men, and endowed them with such exalted faculties that an obedience of necessity on their part would have been unworthy of His infinite majesty and of the dignity of their nature.

There were but two alternatives. One would be the law of necessity by which they should have to move under perpetual compulsion, and thus stand before God, bowing reverence, as puppets on a wire bow at the touch of a spring. This order has been observed by the Almighty in the creation of the material world, whether animate or inanimate. Thus the planet which we inhabit obeys God in its revolutions, in its seasons, in its fertility, in the beauty of its solid grounds, and the terrific majesty of its mighty oceans. Thus the other planets of our system move in their orbits with a constancy and regularity that has never been found at fault. Each is found precisely in the place at the time appointed according to the law which God has imposed upon them for their guidance. Thus also in reference to the stars, which His powerful hand has distributed and poised in their several places throughout the immensity of space. If God, therefore, had denied free will at their creation, either to angels or men, they would have fallen under a law similar to that which is applicable to the irrational works of Almighty God. Sin, indeed would have been thus prevented; but then intelligence would have been a superfluous burden, free will a mockery, and memory either useless or impossible. There would be no rational being to offer freely its homage and adoration to its creator and sovereign. God would still remain in the solitude of His being, as He was previous to the creation of men or angels. He might contemplate His works as they would stand out giving evidence of His power, but among them all there would not be any person, or anything capable of rendering Him that soul-felt, rational, voluntary homage which is due from all creatures, as a recognition of his infinite power and unspeakable perfection. Men and angels, and things whether animate or inanimate, would be under a law of necessity. Free will there could be none, and without free will there can be no rational or voluntary obedience, love or adoration towards God.

As it is, all His works may be referred to as exemplifying His omnipotence and His glory. They do not understand themselves. But man, in the greatness of his intellect, can be their interpreter. He can read their bright pages, and even, if Heaven had not given him a better book, this alone would be sufficient to raise his soul and fix his heart in the contemplation of his divine author.

But after all, it is not in the survey of this outward glorious world that man discovers those perfections of his Creator, which excite him to charity and love. When we consider His eternity, His infinite knowledge, His omnipotence, the wonders of His creation, we are filled with respect, with

astonishment, with admiration; our understanding is confounded, is overwhelmed, but the heart is not touched. It is only when we meditate upon His goodness, His mercy, and His charity towards His creatures that our hearts feel the first attraction of love, by which we are drawn to Him, and recognize that His love for us should be reciprocated on our part.

Here, then, we begin to understand the reasonableness of the precept by which we are commanded to love Him with our whole heart, and with our whole soul, and with our whole mind—and our neighbors as ourselves.

It is difficult, if not impossible, for us to know whether at any time we love God according to the force and energy which the evangelist employs in characterizing the nature of that love. Parents and children, and even friends, are conscious of the affection which binds them to each other. But this is in the natural order. It is tender. It is sustained, while it lasts, in a great measure, by the aid of the senses as well as the susceptibility of our nature. The love which we owe to God, is not of this order, since we see Him not with the eyes of the flesh, since we hear Him not except through the echoes of His word. The love, therefore, that is due to Him, is of a supernatural character, and the precept of our Saviour does not imply that we shall be moved to deep sensibility by the operation of divine love in our hearts. It requires that we should love God as God, and man as our neighbor. Our blessed Saviour has abundantly explained this point by laying down the test of love such as the law requires. In the 14th chapter of St. John we are told: "He that hath my commandments and keepeth them, he it is that loveth me. And he that loveth me shall be loved of my Father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him." And again, in the same evangelist, we find the Saviour's words as follows: "If you keep my commandments you shall abide in my love, as I also have kept my Father's commandments, and do abide in His love."

The test, therefore, laid down by the Saviour himself shows that the fulfilment of the precept is not necessarily evidenced by sentiments or feelings which are present to us, and of which we are conscious at any time but rather depends for its accomplishment upon the sterner virtues of self-denial and obedience to the commandments.

This will require many sacrifices which it is impossible to make unless by the aid of divine grace, promised to us through the merits of Jesus Christ, for without Him we can do nothing.

There is another point of view in which it would seem that the nature of man, even in his fall, is such that it is of itself prepared for the reception of the precept contained in my text. His heart's life is love. The capacity of that love can embrace the boundaries of the world, and elevated by divine grace, can penetrate the heavens, and make its offerings at the foot of the throne of God himself. We all know this by experience, that we can love our parents, our kindred, our friends, our neighbors, our country, our fellow beings throughout the world. Of course, in proportion as these are more nearly related to us, our love, if I can so speak, is more ardent. But God has endowed our hearts with a capacity to extend, in principle, at least, our good will to men, and even to angels. And yet this capacity and the love itself remain undiminished, like the light and warmth of the sun, which constantly diffuse themselves over the world, and are never exhausted or diminished in the luminous fountain from which they proceed. This aptitude in the natural order would seem to

have been a preparation for our duties in the supernatural. God has so created us that we could not divest ourselves of the desire to be happy. We seek to satisfy that desire by placing our affection upon objects entirely inadequate to the purpose. They are attractive, and in addition we invest them with properties of excellence by which we suppose that in their possession we should find happiness. Sometimes we are not disappointed. But the duration of our felicity is always precarious and essentially brief. The object is removed from us—or it has not the qualities which we had ascribed to it—or it has not accomplished towards our felicity what we had anticipated—or our affection itself has undergone a change, and we find that our love yearns for something better, something more permanent, something more capable of filling up the void which we feel. Now, in reality, so immense is the capacity of love in the human heart that nothing can satisfy it fully, adequately and permanently except God, who is unchangeable, infinitely lovely and perfect. Show me a man who, without forfeiting any just privilege of human affection really loves God, and I will point him out to you as one who is essentially happy. For another, who fixes his affections upon human things, no matter how excellent they may or seem to be, but who does not love God, real happiness is utterly impossible. And it is for this reason that St. Augustine exclaimed: "Thou hast made us for Thyself, O God! and our hearts cannot rest until they rest in Thee."

Among Christians of every name it is well ascertained that meek-eyed Charity has never given rise to controversy. She has been recognized by all as the dove bearing amidst the distractions of the Christian world the olive branch of peace. All have recognized in her the descriptions of the heavenly virtue, as given by St. Paul: Charity is patient, is kind. Charity envieth not, dealeth not perversely, is not puffed up. Now it is certain that the ground-work of charity is the love of God as commanded in the words of my text, and yet infidelity has not hesitated to raise its voice against this virtue, and to proclaim that it is impossible to love a God such as our religion represents him to be—that it is impossible to love a God who inspires fear into the hearts of men and punishes crime by an everlasting penalty. But we answer, if God did not punish crime on what basis could virtue and holiness found their hopes of His approval and of their recompense at His hands. No infidel has yet dared to deny the distinction between vice and virtue. The simplest notions of common justice indicate that God, as a legislator, exercises the double function of rewarding the one and punishing the other, otherwise the wicked and the just would be on a perfect equality in the Divine presence. Crime would have no remorse, and virtue would be robbed of its motive and its hope. Where a wicked man, against the laws of heaven and earth, imbrues his hands in the blood of his brother, he is justly, by Divine and human law, condemned to forfeit his life. His country causes him to be executed, and if the infidel's argument were sound that would be a reason why we should not love our country. But he would say that, after all, it was only the cruel anticipation of a death which, in the natural order, would occur at no very distant period, but that God's penalty for unrepented crime is eternal. This, so far as his objection is concerned, is a fallacy. The execution of a man by the authority of his country is an act, so far as he is concerned, reaching to eternity. He dies oftentimes impenitent, sometimes blaspheming God, and pouring his maledictions on his fellow-beings. We know what the sentence of Divine justice will be in his regard, but

the execution of the sentence is not postponed on that account. Shall we, therefore, cease to love our country? Assuredly not. But it would cease to deserve our patriotism if it did not make the distinction between virtue and vice—if it did not protect the good citizen and punish the evil-doer.

I mention this illustration of the fallacy as well as the impiety that are generally blended together in the seductive pages of infidel writing, because, unhappily, falling into the hands of young men merging from college life, they but too often produce impressions, or doubts, or hesitations, which it will take years and years oftentimes to vanquish and remove. They would do well, therefore, to avoid every species of written or of spoken infidelity. They would do well to cherish the simple belief of those lessons both of precept and example which were inculcated in the domestic circle of their homes and their university. Infidels may speak and write as they will, multiplying with seductive eloquence their words against religion, but educated youth should not permit such words to disturb in their regard the foundation of Christianity, for they are solid as the everlasting hills, and indestructible as the Divine architect by whom they were laid. Other things including infidels and infidel writings shall pass away, but the foundation and the superstructure of Christianity—never.

Having said so much on the first, on the greatest and the first commandment, we turn to the second, which is like to it—Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.

The fulfilment of this precept is, under all circumstances, difficult, and were it not that it depends on the first commandment—the love of God—of which it is an inseparable appendix, I have no hesitation in saying that, in many cases, it would be impossible. And yet it is the special test by which Christ would have his disciples to be recognised. In the 13th chapter of St. John He says: “A new commandment, I give unto you—that ye love one another, as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one for another.” In the 15th chapter of the same Gospel our Saviour declares: “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love than this no man hath, that a man lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends, if you do the things that I command you.” The sphere in which this virtue is to be exercised is precisely that which is occupied by our fallen race. This portion of the Divine precept could have no application either to our first parents or to the celestial spirits that surround the throne of God. Among them there is no opportunity for the exercise of fraternal charity—there are no tears to be dried away—no sorrows to be assuaged—no sufferings to be alleviated—no desolate orphans nor any destitute, aged or sick to be protected or comforted. But in this life, on the contrary, the very order of human existence would seem to have pointed out to man the necessity of mutual aid between those who need it and those who have the means to afford it. This is clear from the moment we reflect that there is no member of the human family that is independent by himself alone; be he a king, or be he a beggar, the necessity of aid and sympathy from his fellow-beings is indispensable; and this law pervades the whole human race, proving that man was created for society and not for solitude or selfishness. The human family exists by succession in the natural order, and not by a simultaneous creation. In the weakness of childhood, or in the feebleness of old age, we should perish promptly, were it not for the aid and protection that are furnished

by our kindred, or our fellow-beings. In the moral order, we should grow up in ignorance of our God and of our duty, were we not provided with the means of instruction by those who were in life before us. Under these circumstances, it would seem but natural that mankind should, from the very necessity of the case, from a sense of their mutual dependence on each other, have coalesced in a common system of mutual aid and mutual benefit. We know from history, however, that the very reverse of this has been the ordinary condition of men whenever Divine Charity had not prepared the way for the right appreciation of the duties which we owe one to another. Human nature was essentially the same at all times and in all places; and yet, if you go outside the boundaries of Christianity, you will find not a trace or an evidence of the benefits which charity has diffused among the followers of Christ. Humanity had not been extinguished—philosophy boasted itself as philanthropic, but this was only in pompous words, for nothing was in reality accomplished. Cruelty in legislation, hard-heartedness in social life, indifference to the sufferings of others, the oppression of the weak by the strong, the deliberate and authorized destruction by parents of their offspring, the power of life and death over their children and domestic dependants—these were all that humanity could accomplish, whilst it was unenlightened by Divine Charity, and unimpelled to do good by the precept and example of our Lord. It was into such a world that He introduced the Christian religion, and by a new commandment inculcated especially the mutual duty of love and charity—a new commandment I give unto you, that you love one another. This is my commandment, that you love one another. He that hath my commandments, and keepeth them, he it is that loveth me. And St. John, in the 4th chapter of his first epistle, says: “Let us, therefore, love God, because God hath first loved us. If any man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar, for he that loveth not his brother, whom he seeth, how can love God, whom he seeth not, this commandment we have from God, that he who loveth God loves also his brother.” From the period, therefore, when Christ imposed this new commandment upon his disciples there was light and hope for the world. After the ascension of our Redeemer the Apostles and those who succeeded them in their ministry ceased not to inculcate this as an obligatory part of His religion, so that wherever the Gospel was preached charity became an essential portion of Christianity. It had to encounter the hostility of paganism and of human passions. Nevertheless, it diffused its happy influence on every side. Even before the close of the persecutions by the Roman Emperors it had accomplished wonders, both among the disciples themselves and the pagans by whom they were surrounded. Eusebius, in his Ecclesiastical History, tells us of the miracles of fraternal charity performed by the brethren during the pestilence, that desolated the Roman Empire for a period of ten years, in the third century, in which they took care not only of their own members, but also of the suffering pagans, who had been abandoned by their own friends and relatives. And St. John Chrysostom, in his preface to the Epistle to the Phillippians, does not hesitate to say that the charity of the Christians exercised a most powerful influence in the conversion of the pagans. We know that Julien, the apostate, was bitter in his reproaches against those who still adhered to the tottering gods of paganism, because they permitted themselves to be so outstripped by the Galileans in works of fraternal charity.

I am aware that the precept of our Saviour on this subject, if misunderstood, is liable to objection. For instance, we are commanded to love not only our neighbors but our enemies. Now, if this were understood to be a love such as a parent cherishes for his son, or mutual friends for each other, obedience to the precept would hardly be possible. But in this case also our Divine Redeemer described the species of love which we are to entertain for our enemies. In the 5th chapter of St. Matthew He says: "You have heard that it hath been said thou shalt love thy neighbor and hate thy enemies; but I say to you, love your enemies. Do good to them that hate you, and pray for them that persecute and calumniate you." Now this is the species of love which is required in order to fulfill His precept. There are other passages connected with this subject, to which exception has been taken. It has been said that the duty of doing unto others as we would that others should do unto us, if reduced into practice, would in many instances, be subversive of order in civil society, and tend to reduce all conditions of life to a certain species of general equality. No such consequence can be fairly deduced from the legitimate meaning of fraternal charity. Order and subordination it respects. Government is essential in the family and in the State, and no government can subsist in either without the distinction of conditions. But charity would reconcile and elevate them all into the beautiful harmony of Christian brotherhood. Such has been the effect of her influence from the days of Christ himself; her advance may seem to us to have been slow; but it has ever been steady and progressive. Under her auspices every species of human suffering has been, to a great extent, provided for. She has operated in a two-fold manner; first, acting on individuals in their every-day life, preparing them to do good, and to relieve distress in a private way; next, in inducing Christian to combine for accomplishing works of humanity through the means of association, and thus in every Christian land, whether of Europe or of America, public institutions have been erected for the relief of human wretchedness. She has provided homes and nurses, and food and clothing, and instruction for destitute orphans and abandoned infants—retreats for the aged—hospitals for the sick. With that ingeniousness which the love of God and man inspires, she has invented a language for the deaf and dumb, by which they can interchange thought with each other, the same as if the gift of speech and hearing had not been denied them. She has contrived a system of education by which the blind can read by touch of their fingers. Even the insane have not been forgotten in the scope of the love enjoined upon us by the commandment of Christ. It is true that many of these institutions have been founded and fostered by civil governments. But whence did such governments derive the feeling and convictions which have prompted them to make such provisions for the poor? Unquestionably they have descended to us from the precept of our Lord, for wherever that precept is unknown civil governments have never attempted anything of the kind. The most civilized countries of paganism, such as Greece and Rome, never left behind them a single monument, I had almost said, of decent humanity. They excelled us, indeed, in works of art, which we still admire. But so far as the interest of humanity are concerned, all those works, including the admirable productions of Phidas and Praxiteles, are insignificant as compared with the single lunatic asylum, which crowns one of the summits of your beautiful capital.

There have not been wanting those who have criticised and almost cen-

sured this whole system of Christian charity and human benevolence. They have insisted that it encourages idleness and destroys that noble feeling of self-reliance on the exercise of which the prosperous and healthy condition of a community so much depends. Alas! it is easy for those who have inherited or acquired by their own industry competency and wealth to criticise the condition of their less fortunate brethren. In some few instances such an abuse of public and private charity on the part of those who are its recipients may have taken place, but this is not a valid reason why the love of our neighbors should be discountenanced. It is not the poor alone who abuse the gifts which God bestows upon them, whether by the hands of charity or through any other channel. Is not every gift of His liable to abuse? The light of the day—the darkness of the night—the wealth, of which His providence has made us the stewards—the health, without which life itself would become tiresome—do we not abuse them all? But God, who knows our nature, does not withhold those gifts because we occasionally abuse them. Let us extend the same principle to the poor, and hold in its merited estimation that great commandment of our Lord and Master, that as His disciples we should love one another.

Young gentlemen of the graduating class, my task is done. I have endeavored to present to you, not according to the details of theology, but in a broad and general view of its benefits, the great precept of Christian charity. I have pointed out the divine authority on which the precept is founded, whether as it regards the love of God or the love of our neighbor. This has not been in that style of language, of oratory, or of eloquence to which you have been accustomed, or which befits the hall of science and such an audience as I see before me. For more than a third of a century it has been my duty to preach the word of God, but it was, almost always, to the willing ears and fervent hearts of the humble and simple minded, who in their own fervor were prepared to hear and be edified at whatever might be said. In speaking to them I have acquired the habit of imitating the simplicity of the gospel itself, caring little for ornaments of style, provided I could find terms calculated to convey ideas. If the ideas should be retained by my hearers, the language, which had been used as their vehicle, was of the slightest consequence. On this occasion, however, more attention to the language, as well as to the idea, might have been given with great propriety. I have at least, given you proof of my good-will; and if I have communicated ideas that may rise up in your memory hereafter, prompting you to love God and your neighbor, I shall feel myself highly rewarded. In the mean time, I thank you for that patience and attention which you have exhibited during my discourse. You are now about to go forth and enter upon the busy scenes of active life. It is the wish and the hope of all your nearer friends, and it is mine also, that you will so deport yourselves on the new theatre of life as to reflect credit upon your distinguished *alma mater*, be a source of comfort and legitimate pride to your parents and your family, and an honor to the great country which rightfully expects much from her noble sons who have had the benefits of such an education as it has been your privilege to receive. Another wish and hope, which I may be allowed to express in my own name, is that God will protect you, pour upon you his choicest blessings in this life, and enable you to reach that better life, in another world, for which you were created.

