



Richard Sibbes

Lesson Given by Mark Dever

Meditate

Sibbes exhorted his people, “Measure not God’s love and favor by your own feeling. The sun shines as clearly in the darkest day as it does in the brightest. The difference is not in the sun, but in some clouds which hinder the manifestation of the light thereof.” Meditate on Ephesians 2:4–5.

Learn

Sibbes was known by many as “the heavenly Doctor,” due to his godly preaching and heavenly manner of life. A contemporary said of him, “Heaven was in him, before he was in heaven.” Maurice Roberts describes Sibbes’s theology as “the fuel of some great combustion engine, always passing into flame and so being converted into energy thereby to serve God and, even more, to enjoy and relish God with the soul.”

His Life

- 1577** Richard Sibbes is born at Tostock, Suffolk.
- 1602** He earns a master's degree at Cambridge, having already obtained a bachelor's three years earlier.
- 1603** Sibbes is converted through the preaching of Paul Baynes, the successor of William Perkins at the Church of St. Andrews.
- 1608** He is ordained as a deacon and a priest in the Church of England.
- 1609** Being elected as a college preacher, Sibbes begins to rise in prominence as a preacher and lecturer.
- 1610** Sibbes takes up the position of lecturer at Holy Trinity Church in Cambridge.
- 1617** He receives a call to London to be a lecturer for Gray's Inn.
- 1626** While continuing his preaching at Gray's Inn, Sibbes also becomes the master of St. Catharine's College in Cambridge.
- 1633** He becomes the vicar of Holy Trinity in Cambridge at the invitation of King Charles I.
- 1635** Sibbes dies from an illness on July 5.

Did You Know?

- Sibbes's father, though a Christian, was frustrated by Richard's interest in books as a young child and wanted him to follow in his steps as a repairer of wooden wheels.
- During his years at Holy Trinity, Sibbes helped turn Thomas Goodwin away from Arminianism and was instrumental in John Preston's shift from "witty preaching" to plain, spiritual preaching.
- Sibbes never married, but he established an astonishing network of friendships that included godly ministers, noted lawyers, and parliamentary leaders.
- He began his will and testament the day before his death with the words, "I commend and bequeath my soul into the hands of my gracious Savior, who hath redeemed it with his most precious blood, and appears now in heaven to receive it."

His Legacy

Dever refers to Sibbes as a "sweet expounder" of God's grace and love in Christ. He never seemed to tire of impressing upon his hearers the grand truth of God's merciful affection toward hell-worthy sinners.

Gospel: The Display of God's Love in Christ

For Sibbes, the chief manifestation of God's love was the gospel. He states, "You see how full of love he was. What drew him from heaven to earth, and so to his cross and to his grave, but love to mankind?" Sibbes was amazed that God would love sinners to such an extent that He would send His Son to take on flesh and suffer in their stead. He had drunken deeply of the sweetness of this grace and it thus permeated all of his preaching. The gospel, in Sibbes's mind, was first and foremost a declaration of divine love.

Regeneration: The Perceiving of God's Love in Christ

Sibbes upheld that “a carnal eye will never see spiritual things.” When sinners, however, are graciously quickened by the Spirit of God, they are overtaken with “the sight of their misery and the sight of God’s love in Christ.” The divine love and grace which could not be perceived before become experientially known via regeneration. Sibbes believed that this ordinarily happens through the preaching of the gospel: “As the minister speaks to the ear, Christ speaks, opens, and unlocks the heart at the same time; and gives it power to open, not from itself, but from Christ.” Christ, by His Spirit, transforms the souls of sinful men to see and receive the love of God in the gospel.

Sanctification: The Response to God’s Love in Christ

But how do you know if you have truly received the love of God? Sibbes would say that one great evidence of God’s love for you is a corresponding love to God. He reasons, “When we look upon the mercy of God in Christ, it kindleth love, and love kindleth love, as fire kindleth fire.” God’s love in the soul is like a fire that ignites love toward God. And this apprehension of and affectionate response to the love of God is foundational to a life of holiness. Sibbes writes, “Whatsoever we do else, if it be not stirred by the Spirit, apprehending the love of God in Christ, it is but morality. What are all our performances if they be not out of love to God?” If our works are not flowing from the love of God, then they are not pleasing to God.

Discuss

1. How does Sibbes's understanding of the love of God in the gospel and the Spirit's work in regeneration inform our evangelism?
2. Sibbes argues that if our works be not flowing from an apprehension of God's love, then they will be mere "morality." What does he mean by this? How does grasping the love of God fuel our sanctification?
3. If our good works are to be done as a loving response to God's love, what are we to do when we don't sense God's love and find our own hearts cold and loveless?
4. Sibbes was known as a gracious and humble man who avoided the controversies of his day as much as possible. What can we learn from him here? How might his experience of God's grace and love have worked in him such humility?

Read

Primary Sources

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