

EXPOSITORY THOUGHTS ON THE GOSPELS.

FOR FAMILY AND PRIVATE USE.

WITH THE TEXT COMPLETE,
And many Explanatory Notes.

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ST. JOHN. VOL. III.

LONDON:
WILLIAM HUNT AND COMPANY, 23, HOLLES STREET,
CAVENDISH SQUARE.
IPSWICH: WILLIAM HUNT, TAVERN STREET.

1873AD

JOHN XV. 12–16.

12 This is my commandment, That ye love one another, as I have loved you.	things that I have heard of my Father I have made known unto you.
13 Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.	16 Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you, and ordained you, that ye should go and bring forth fruit, and <i>that</i> your fruit should remain: that whatsoever ye shall ask of the Father in my name, he may give it you.
14 Ye are my friends, if ye do whatsoever I command you.	
15 Henceforth I call you not servants; for the servant knoweth not what his Lord doeth: but I have called you friends; for all	

THREE weighty points demand our attention in this passage. On each of these the language of our Lord Jesus Christ is full of striking instruction.

We should observe first, *how our Lord speaks of the grace of brotherly love.*

He returns to it a second time, though He has already spoken of it in the former part of His discourse. He would have us know that we can never think too highly of love, attach too much weight to it, labour too much to practice it. Truths which our Master thinks it needful to enforce on us by repetition, must needs be of first-class importance.

He commands us to love one another. “This is my commandment.” It is a positive duty laid on our consciences to practice this grace. We have no more right to neglect it than any of the ten precepts given on Mount Sinai.

He supplies the highest standard of love: “Love one another as I have loved you.” No lower measure must content us. The weakest, the lowest, the most ignorant, the most defective disciple, is not to be despised. All are to be loved with an active, self-denying, self-sacrificing love. He that cannot do this, or will not try to do it, is disobeying the command of his Master.

A precept like this should stir up in us great searchings of heart. It condemns the selfish, ill-natured, jealous, ill-tempered spirit of many professing Christians, with a sweeping condemnation. Sound views of doctrine, and knowledge of controversy, will avail us nothing at last, if we have known nothing of love. Without charity we may pass muster very well as Churchmen. But without charity we are no better, says St. Paul, than “sounding brass and tinkling cymbal.” (1 Cor. xiii. 1.) Where there is no Christ-like love, there is no grace, no work of the Spirit, and no reality in our religion. Blessed are they that do not forget Christ’s commandment! They are those who shall have right to the tree of life, and enter the celestial city. The unloving Christian is unmeet for heaven.

We should observe, secondly, *how our Lord speaks of the relation between Himself and true believers.* He says, “Henceforth I call you not servants . . . but I have called you friends.”

This is indeed a glorious privilege. To know Christ, serve Christ, follow Christ, obey Christ, work in Christ’s vineyard, fight Christ’s battles, all this

is no small matter. But for sinful men and women like ourselves to be called “friends of Christ,” is something that our weak minds can hardly grasp and take in. The King of kings and Lord of lords not only pities and saves all them that believe in Him, but actually calls them His “friends.” We need not wonder, in the face of such language as this, that St. Paul should say, the “love of Christ passeth knowledge.” (Ephes. iii. 19.)

Let the expression before us encourage Christians to deal familiarly with Christ in prayer. Why should we be afraid to pour out all our hearts, and unbosom all our secrets, in speaking to one who calls us His “friends”? Let it cheer us in all the troubles and sorrows of life, and increase our confidence in our Lord. “He that hath friends,” says Solomon, “will show himself friendly.” (Prov. xviii. 24.) Certainly our great Master in heaven will never forsake His “friends.” Poor and unworthy as we are, He will not cast us off; but will stand by us and keep us to the end. David never forgot Jonathan, and the Son of David will never forget His people. None so rich, so strong, so independent, so well off, so thoroughly provided for, as the man of whom Christ says, “This is my friend!”

We should observe, lastly, *how our Lord speaks of the doctrine of election*. He says, “Ye have not chosen Me, but I have chosen you, . . . that ye should go and bring forth fruit.” The choosing here mentioned is evidently twofold. It includes not only the election to the Apostolic office, which was peculiar to the eleven, but the election to eternal life, which is the privilege of all believers. To this last “choosing,” as it specially concerns ourselves, we may profitably direct our attention.

Election to eternal life is a truth of Scripture which we must receive humbly, and believe implicitly. Why the Lord Jesus calls some and does not call others, quickens whom He will, and leaves others alone in their sins, these are deep things which we cannot explain. Let it suffice us to know that it is a fact. God must begin the work of grace in a man’s heart, or else a man will never be saved. Christ must first choose us and call us by His Spirit, or else we shall never choose Christ. Beyond doubt, if not saved, we shall have none to blame but ourselves. But if saved, we shall certainly trace up the beginning of our salvation to the choosing grace of Christ. Our song to all eternity will be that which fell from the lips of Jonah: “Salvation is of the Lord.” (Jonah ii. 9.)

Election is always to sanctification. Those whom Christ chooses out of mankind, He chooses not only that they may be saved, but that they may bear fruit, and fruit that can be seen. All other election beside this is a mere vain delusion, and a miserable invention of man. It was the faith and hope and love of the Thessalonians, which made St. Paul say, “I know your election of God.” (1 Thess. i. 4.) Where there is no visible fruit of sanctification, we may be sure there is no election.

Armed with such principles as these, we have no cause to be afraid of the doctrine of election. Like any other truth of the Gospel, it is liable to be abused and perverted. But to a pious mind, as the seventeenth Article of the Church of England truly says, it is a doctrine “full of sweet, pleasant, and unspeakable comfort.”

NOTES. JOHN XV. 12–16.

- 12.—[*This...commandment...love...loved you.*] In this verse our Lord returns to the old lesson which He has taught before: the great duty of love towards other Christians. He backs the command by His own example. Nothing less than His matchless love towards sinners should be the measure and standard of love to one another.

The frequent repetition of this command teaches the vast importance of Christian charity, and the great rarity of it. How any one can pretend to Christian hope who is ignorant of Christian love, it is hard to understand. He that supposes he is right in the sight of God, because his doctrinal views are correct, while he is unloving in his temper, and sharp, cross, snappish, and ill-natured in the use of his tongue, exhibits wretched ignorance of the first principles of Christ’s Gospel. The crossness, spitefulness, jealousy, maliciousness, and general disagreeableness of many high professors of “sound doctrine,” are a positive scandal to Christianity. Where there is little love there can be little grace.

- 13.—[*Greater love...for his friends.*] In this verse our Lord teaches what should be the measure and degree of the love which Christians should have to one another. It should be a self-sacrificing love, even to death, as His was. He proved the greatness of His love by dying for His friends, and even for His enemies. (Rom. v. 6–8.) It would be impossible for love to go further. There is no greater love than willingness to lay down life for those we love. Christ did this, and Christians should be willing to do the same.

Let us note here that our Lord clearly speaks of His own death as a sacrificial and propitiatory death. Even His friends need a substitute to die for them.

- 14.—[*Ye are my friends...command you.*] This verse seems closely connected with the preceding one. “You are the friends for whom I lay down my life, if you do whatever things I command you.” We are not to dream that we are Christ’s friends, if we do not habitually practice His commands. Very striking is it to observe how frequently our Lord returns to this great principle, that obedience is the great test of vital Christianity, and doing the real mark of saving faith. Men who talk of being “the Lord’s people,” while they live in sin and neglect Christ’s plain commands, are in the broad way that leads to destruction.

- 15.—[*Henceforth I call you not servants, &c.*] Having used the word “friends,” our Lord tells His disciples that He has used that word purposely to cheer and encourage them. “Observe that I call you friends. I do so intentionally. I no longer call you servants; because the servant from his position knows not all his master’s mind, and is not in his confidence. But to you I have revealed all the truths which my Father sent me to teach the world, and have kept nothing back. I may therefore justly call you friends.”

When our Lord speaks of “having made known all things” to the disciples, we must reasonably suppose that He means all things needful to their spiritual good, and all things that they were able to bear.

The high privilege of a believer is strikingly taught here. He is a friend of Christ, as well as a child of God. No one need ever say I have no “friend” to turn to, so long as Christ is in heaven. Once only before this place does Christ call the disciples “friends.” (Luke xii. 4.)

It is noteworthy that Abraham is the only person in the Old Testament who is called "the friend of God" (Isa. xli. 8) and of him the Lord says, "Shall I hide from Abraham that thing which I do?" (Gen. xviii. 17.)

16.—[*Ye have not chosen Me, etc., etc.*] The connecting link between this verse and the passage preceding it is not very clear.

Hengstenberg thinks that it refers to the commandment just laid down, to love one another. "I may fairly lay down laws and rules for your conduct, because I first chose and called you to be members of my church."

I much prefer thinking that our Lord's object is to exalt the privilege of discipleship in the eyes of the eleven. "Remember, when I call you friends, that I called you into the number of my people, and chose you before you chose Me. See then how great and free and deep is my love to you."

When our Lord speaks of "choosing" in this verse, I think that He means two things: viz., His choice of the eleven to be His apostles, and their eternal election to salvation. There seems to be a peculiar fulness in the phrase. The choice of the believer to eternal life is not the whole idea that our Lord means to convey. True as that glorious doctrine is, it is not the whole doctrine of this verse. The "choosing" includes a choosing for an office, like John vi. 70, and seems to have a special reference to the choice of the eleven faithful apostles to be the first children of Christ's Church.

Calvin certainly says, "the subject now in hand is not the ordinary election of believers, by which they are adopted to be God's children; but that special election by which Christ sets apart His disciples to the office of preaching the gospel." (See John vi. 70.) This also is the view of Chrysostom and Cyril.—But most of the Latin fathers apply the "choice" to eternal election. So also does Lampe. My own impression is, that, for once, the expression includes both official and eternal election.

The Greek word rendered "ordained" means simply, "I have placed you" in a certain position as my apostles.

When our Lord says, "I have chosen and ordained you that ye should go and bring forth fruit," I think He refers to the work of conversion and building a Church in the world. "I chose and set you apart for this great purpose, that ye should go into all the world preaching the Gospel, and gathering in the harvest and fruit of saved souls; and that this work begun by you might remain and continue long after your deaths." And then to encourage the eleven, He adds, "It was part of my plan that so bringing forth fruit, ye should obtain by prayer everything that ye need for your work."

It is vain to deny that the verse is a very difficult one both as to its connection and contents. As a general rule I hold strongly that the things spoken by our Lord in this last discourse decidedly belong to all believers in every age, and not to the eleven only. Yet there are perhaps exceptions, and this verse may be one.—The expression "Go and bring forth fruit" certainly seems to apply peculiarly to the eleven, who were to "Go" into all the world and preach the Gospel. It is as though our Lord said "Take comfort in the thought that I chose you as my friends for this great purpose, to go and preach, to reap an abundant harvest of souls, to do lasting work, and to obtain a constant supply of grace and help, by prayer."—I cannot see how the word "go" can apply to any but the eleven to whom the Lord was speaking; and this weighs heavily with me in interpreting it.—"That your fruit should remain," again, is a phrase that I cannot apply to anything but the lasting and abiding work which the Apostles did when they went through the world preaching the Gospel. But I freely admit that I find in the verse "things hard to be understood."