EXPOSITORY THOUGHTS
ON THE GOSPELS.

FOR FAMILY AND PRIVATE USE.

WITH THE TEXT COMPLETE,
And many Explanatory Notes.

BY THE REV. J. C. RYLE, B. A.,

CHRIST CHURCH, OXFORD.
VICAR OF STRADBROKE, SUFFOLK:
Author of "Home Truths," etc.

ST. JOHN. VOL. III.

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

1873AD
22 If I had not come and spoken unto them, they had not had sin: but now they have no cloak for their sin.

23 He that hateth me hateth my Father also.

24 If I had not done among them the works which none other man did, they had not had sin: but now have they both seen and hated both me and my Father.

25 But this cometh to pass, that the word might be fulfilled that is written in their law, They hated me without a cause.

23 But when the Comforter is come, whom I will send unto you from the Father, even the Spirit of truth, which proceedeth from the Father, he shall testify of me:

27 And ye also shall bear witness, because ye have been with me from the beginning.

IN these verses our Lord Jesus Christ handles three subjects of great importance. They are difficult subjects, no doubt, subjects on which we may easily fall into error. But the words before us throw much light upon them.

We should observe, for one thing, how our Lord speaks of the misuse of religious privileges. It intensifies man’s guilt, and will increase his condemnation. He tells His disciples that if He had not “spoken” and “done” among the Jews things which none ever spoke or did before, “they had not had sin.” By this, we must remember, He means, “they had not been so sinful and so guilty as they are now.” But now they were utterly without excuse. They had seen Christ’s works, and heard Christ’s teaching, and yet remained unbelieving. What more could be done for them? Nothing—absolutely nothing! They wilfully sinned against the clearest possible light, and were of all men most guilty.

Let us settle it down as a first principle in our religion, that religious privileges are in a certain sense very dangerous things. If they do not help us toward heaven, they will only sink us deeper into hell. They add to our responsibility. “To whomsoever much is given, of him shall much be required.” (Luke xii. 48.) He that dwells in a land of open Bibles and preached Gospel, and yet dreams that he will stand in the judgment day on the same level with an untaught Chinese, is fearfully deceived. He will find to his own cost, except he repents, that his judgment will be according to his light. The mere fact that he had knowledge and did not improve it, will of itself prove one of his greatest sins. “He that knew His Master’s will and did it not, shall be beaten with many stripes.” (Luke xii. 47.)

Well would it be for all professing Christians in England, if this point was more thoroughly considered! Nothing is more common than to hear men taking comfort in the thought that they “know” what is right, while at the same time they are evidently unconverted, and unfit to die. They rest in that unhappy phrase, “We know it, we know it,” as if knowledge could wash away all their sins,—forgetting that the devil has more knowledge than any of us, and yet is no better for it. Let the burning words of our Lord in the passage now before us, sink down into our hearts, and never be forgotten:
“If I had not come and spoken unto them, they had not had sin: but now they have no cloak for their sin.” To see light and not use it, to possess knowledge and yet not turn it to account, to be able to say “I know,” and yet not to say “I believe,” will place us at the lowest place on Christ’s left hand, in the great day of judgment.

We should observe, for another thing, in these verses, how our Lord speaks of the Holy Ghost.

He speaks of Him as a Person. He is “the Comforter” who is to come; He is One sent and “proceeding;” He is One whose office it is to “testify.” These are not words that can be used of a mere influence or inward feeling. So to interpret them is to contradict common sense, and to strain the meaning of plain language. Reason and fairness require us to understand that it is a personal Being who is here mentioned, even He whom we are justly taught to adore as the third Person in the blessed Trinity.

Again, our Lord speaks of the Holy Ghost as One whom He “will send from the Father,” and One “who proceedeth from the Father.” These are deep sayings, no doubt, so deep that we have no line to fathom them. The mere fact that for centuries the Eastern and Western Churches of Christendom have been divided about their meaning, should teach us to handle them with modesty and reverence. One thing, at all events, is very clear and plain. There is a close and intimate connection between the Spirit, the Father, and the Son. Why the Holy Ghost should be said to be *sent* by the Son, and to *proceed* from the Father, in this verse, we cannot tell. But we may quietly repose our minds in the thought expressed in an ancient creed, that “In this Trinity none is afore or after other: none is greater or less than another.”—"Such as the Father is such is the Son, and such is the Holy Ghost.”—Above all, we may rest in the comfortable truth that in the salvation of our souls all three Persons in the Trinity equally co-operate. It was God in Trinity who said, “Let us create,” and it is God in Trinity who says, “Let us save.”

For ever let us take heed to our doctrine about the Holy Spirit. Let us make sure that we hold sound and Scriptural views of his nature, His Person, and His operations. A religion which entirely leaves Him out, and gives Him no place, is far from uncommon. Let us beware that such a religion is not ours. “Where is the Lamb, the Lord Jesus Christ?” should be the first testing question about our Christianity. “Where is the Holy Ghost?” should be the second question. Let us take good heed that the work of the Spirit is not so buried under extravagant views of the Church, the ministry, and the Sacraments, that the real Holy Ghost of Scripture is completely put out of sight. “If any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of His.” (Rom. viii. 9.) No religion deserves to be called Scriptural and apostolic, in which the work of the Spirit does not stand forth prominently, and occupy a principal place.
We should observe lastly, in these verses, how our Lord speaks of the special office of the Apostles. They were to be His witnesses in the world. “Ye also shall bear witness.”

The expression is singularly instructive and full of meaning. It taught the eleven what they must expect their portion to be, so long as they lived. They would have to bear testimony to facts which many would not believe, and to truths which the natural heart would dislike. They would often have to stand alone, a few against many, a little flock against a great multitude. None of these things must move them. They must count it no strange thing to be persecuted, hated, opposed, and discredited. They must not mind it. To witness was their grand duty, whether men believed them or not. So witnessing, their record would be on high, in God’s book of remembrance; and so witnessing, sooner or later, the Judge of all would give them a crown of glory that fadeth not away.

Let us never forget, as we leave this passage, that the position of the Apostles is that which, in a certain sense, every true Christian must fill, as long as the world stands. We must all be witnesses for Christ. We must not be ashamed to stand up for Christ’s cause, to speak out for Christ, and to persist in maintaining the truth of Christ’s Gospel. Wherever we live, in town or in country, in public or in private, abroad or at home, we must boldly confess our Master on every opportunity. So doing, we shall walk in the steps of the Apostles, though at a long interval. So doing, we shall please our Master, and may hope at last that we shall receive the Apostles’ reward.

NOTES. JOHN XV. 22-27.

22.—[If I had not come, etc.] In this and the three following verses our Lord shows the peculiar guilt and wickedness of the Jews in not believing Him.—“If I had not come among them and spoken such words as no one ever spake before, and taught such truths as no one ever taught before, they would not have been so guilty as they are. But now they have no excuse for their unbelief. They cannot say that they were not taught in the plainest way who I am and who sent Me.”

Does not our Lord in this verse point to the famous prophecy (Deut. xviii. 18, 19) of a Prophet to be raised up like Moses, to whom the Jews were to hearken? Does He not seem to say, “I have come as that Prophet, and have spoken my Father’s words, and they ought to have received and hearkened to them? The refusal of the promised Prophet is of itself their condemnation, and leaves them without excuse.”

The word rendered “cloke,” would have been better as in the margin, “excuse.” The clause literally is, “They have now no excuse concerning their sin.”

When our Lord says “they had not had sin,” He does not of course mean they would not have been sinners at all. It is only another way of putting the degree of their guilt. “They would have been less guilty than they are now. To have heard Me and not believed will increase their condemnation.” (Compare John ix. 41.)

Let us note that there are degrees of sin, and that nothing seems to increase man’s guiltiness so much as to have privileges, and not use them aright.

23.—[He...hateth Me...Father also.] The object of this verse is to supply a reason why the guilt
of hearing Christ without believing was so great. It was because Christ’s words were not only His words but the Father’s also.—“He that hears Me, and hates and refuses my teachings, is hating not Me only but my Father, because I and my Father are one.”—Once more we are reminded of the close union between the first and second Persons of the Trinity. The idea that we can worship and serve God while we neglect Christ, is a baseless dream. Neglecting Christ, we neglect the Father. (See Psalm lxix. 9.)

Poole remarks, “It is a common error of the world, that many pretend to love God, while yet they are manifest haters of Christ and His Gospel. Our Saviour saith, this is impossible; whosoever hateth him who is sent, hateth also him who sent him.”

Hengstenberg observes, “The Jews professed that they loved God, and that on the ground of that love they hated Christ; the God, however, whom they loved was not the true God, but a phantom which they named God. The fact that they rejected Christ, in spite of all His words of spirit and truth, showed them to be enemies of the Father.”

24.—[If I had not done, etc.]—In this verse our Lord gives another proof of the exceeding wickedness of the Jews. They had seen works and miracles done under their eyes, in confirmation of Christ’s Divine mission, more numerous and mighty than any one had ever worked before, and yet they continued unbelieving. The more they saw of Him the more they hated Him; and in so hating Him, they hated not Him only, but the Father which sent Him.—“The Jews would not be so guilty as they now are, if they had not seen my miracles as well as heard my words. But now they have both seen and heard overwhelming proofs of my Divine mission, and yet remain unbelieving. They have had the clearest evidence that could be given—the evidence of works and words; and yet they have persisted in hating both Me and the Father which sent Me.”

Burgon here remarks, “It is not meant that every single miracle which our Lord performed, surpassed in wonder any single miracle recorded of Moses, Elijah, or Elisha; for that would not be true. But Christ’s works were made so great by the way He wrought them. Without effort, by a mere word, He showed that all creation was obedient to His will.”

Let us carefully observe how our Lord appeals to His miracles as a proof of His Messiahship, which ought to have convinced the Jews. They are a part of the evidences of Christianity which ought never to be kept back or omitted.

25.—[But this cometh to pass, etc.] The manner in which our Lord quotes Scripture here is so common in the Gospels that it needs little remark. The things He mentions did not happen in order that Scripture might be fulfilled, but by their happening Scripture was fulfilled. “Their law” here is a general expression denoting the Old Testament Scripture.

“Without a cause” means literally “gratuitously, as a free gift.” The word occurs only nine times in the New Testament. Six times it is rendered “freely,” once “in vain,” once “for nought,” and once “without a cause.”

What precise text our Lord had in view is not quite clear, and some have thought that He only referred generally to Scripture testimony, like Matt. ii. 23. Others however point to Psalm xxxi. 19, and Psalm lxix. 4.

Let us note that gratuitous, ceaseless hatred was our Lord’s portion on earth; and His true disciples in every age must never wonder if they share His lot.

26.—[But when the Comforter, etc.] The object of this verse appears to be the encouragement of the disciples. They were not to despond or feel hopeless because of the unbelief and hardness of the Jews. A witness would be raised up by and by, whose evidence the Jews would not be able to resist. There would come One who would give such testimony to the Divine mission of Christ, that even the wicked Jews would be silenced and crushed, although unconverted. Who was this promised witness? It was the Holy Ghost, who was to come forth with peculiar power in the day of Pentecost, and to abide in the early Church.
The second chapter of Acts was the first fulfilment of the verse. The irresistible influence which the Gospel obtained in Jerusalem, in spite of all the efforts of scribe and priest, and Pharisee and Sadducee, was another fulfilment.

The “proceeding” here spoken of, we must remember, does not merely mean that the Spirit is sent by the Father, and comes from the Father. All the best interpreters agree in thinking, that it means the eternal procession of the Holy Spirit.

We should carefully note in this verse the language which our Lord uses concerning the Holy Ghost. He is the “Comforter,” or rather the Advocate, as we have seen before. He is the “Spirit of truth,” also, as we have seen before. But we should specially mark that Christ says, “I will send Him;” and also says, He “proceedeth from the Father.” The singular number is used: “He proceedeth,” not “will proceed.”—This then is one of those texts which appears to supply evidence of the Holy Ghost proceeding both from the Father and from the Son, though not direct evidence. The whole Greek Church, however, denies the procession from the Son; and it must be honestly conceded that the Scripture does not so distinctly and directly assert it as the procession from the Father. Yet, on the other hand, it is hard to understand how the Son can send the Spirit, and the Spirit in no sense proceed from the Son. The subject is a deep and mysterious one, and we have not eyes to see everything about it. The difference between the Eastern and Western Churches may after all be more apparent than real; and we must beware of denouncing men as heretics, whom perhaps God has received. But in any case the text before us is one which ought to be carefully noted, as one on which much of the controversy hinges. Let us take that care we ourselves have the Holy Spirit in our hearts; and when we die we shall know all about the point in dispute.

One thing at any rate comes out very plainly here, and that is the personality of the Holy Ghost. In the Greek it stands out very prominently in the gender of the pronouns, which our English language cannot reach. The word we render “whom,” in the Greek text is masculine;—“which” is neuter;—and “he” is masculine again.

27.—[And ye also shall bear witness.] In this verse our Lord continues the line of encouragement which He began in the preceding verse. Notwithstanding all the hardness and unbelief of the Jews, even the disciples would be enabled to bear a testimony to their Lord’s Divine mission, which none of their enemies would be able to gainsay or resist. How remarkably this was fulfilled we know from the first seven chapters of the Acts of the Apostles. For instance, the verse, “with great power gave the Apostles witness of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus” (Acts iv. 32), is an exact accomplishment of the promise of the text.

It is noteworthy that both the verbs in this verse are in the present tense. They would be naturally rendered, “Ye do bear witness,” and, “Ye are with Me.” Does this point to the certainty of the testimony being borne? “Ye do bear witness;” you are sure to be enabled to do it.

In leaving this chapter, let us not fail to note how systematically our blessed Master gave His disciples instruction on three most important points. The first was their relation to Himself. They were to abide in close union with Him, like branches in a vine. The second was their relation to one another. They were to love one another with a deep, self-sacrificing love, like their Master’s. The third was their relation to the world. They were to expect its hatred, not be surprised at it; to bear it patiently, and not be afraid of it.