

SHORT
EXPOSITORY READINGS
ON THE
GOSPEL OF ST. JOHN.

A SELECTION DESIGNED FOR
Family Reading, Mothers' Meetings, and
District Visitors.

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LXIII.

THE TRUE VINE.

JOHN XV. 1-6.

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the husbandman.

“Every branch in Me that beareth not fruit He taketh away: and every branch that beareth fruit, He purgeth it, that it may bring forth more fruit.

“Now ye are clean through the word which I have spoken unto you.

“Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine, no more can ye, except ye abide in Me.

“I am the vine, ye are the branches: He that abideth in Me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without Me ye can do nothing.

“If a man abide not in Me, he is cast forth as a branch, and is withered; and men gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned.”

THESE verses, we must carefully remember, contain a parable. In interpreting it we must not forget the great rule which applies to all Christ's parables. The general lesson of each parable is the main thing to be noticed.

We are meant to learn first, from these verses, that *the union between Christ and believers is very close*. He is “the Vine,” and they are the branches.

The union between the branch of a vine and the main stem is the closest that can be conceived. It is the whole secret of the branch's life, strength, vigour, beauty, and fertility. Separate from the parent stem, it has no life of its own. The sap and juice that flow from the stem are the origin and maintaining power of all its leaves, buds, blossoms, and fruit. Cut off from the stem, it must soon wither and die.

The union between Christ and believers is just as close, and just as real. In themselves believers have no life, or strength, or spiritual power. All that they have of vital religion comes from Christ. They are what they are, and feel what they feel, and do what they do, because they draw out of Jesus a continual supply of grace, help, and ability. Joined to the Lord by faith, and united in mysterious union with Him by the Spirit, they stand, and walk, and continue, and run the Christian race. But every jot of good about them is drawn from their spiritual Head, Jesus Christ.

The thought before us is both comfortable and instructive. Believers have no cause to despair of their own salvation, and to think they will never reach heaven. Let them consider that they are not left to themselves and their own strength. Their root is Christ, and all that there is in the root is for the benefit of the branches. Because He lives, they shall live also.

Worldly people have no cause to wonder at the continuance and perseverance of believers. Weak as they are

in themselves, their Root is in heaven, and never dies. “When I am weak,” said Paul, “then am I strong.” (2 Cor. xii. 10.)

We are meant to learn, also, from these verses, that the *fruits of the Spirit are the only satisfactory evidence of a man being a true Christian*. The disciple that “abides in Christ,” like a branch abiding in the vine, will always bear fruit.

He that would know what the word “fruit” means, need not wait long for an answer. Repentance toward God, faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ, holiness of life and conduct,—these are what the New Testament calls “fruit.” These are the distinguishing marks of the man who is a living branch of the true Vine. Where these things are wanting, it is vain to talk of possessing “*dormant*” grace and spiritual life. Where there is no fruit there is no life. He that lacketh these things is “dead while he liveth.” (1 Tim. v. 6.)

True grace, we must not forget, is never idle. It never slumbers and never sleeps. It is a vain notion to suppose that we are living members of Christ, if the example of Christ is not to be seen in our characters and lives. “Fruit “is the only satisfactory evidence of saving union between Christ and our souls. Where there is no fruit of the Spirit to be seen, there is no vital religion in the heart. The Spirit of Life in Christ Jesus will always make Himself known in the daily conduct of those in whom He dwells. The

Master Himself declares, "Every tree is known by his own fruit." (Luke vi. 44.)

We are meant, lastly, to learn from these verses, that *God will often increase the holiness of true Christians by His providential dealings with them.* "Every branch," it is written, "that beareth fruit, He purgeth it, that it may bring forth more fruit."

The meaning of this language is clear and plain, Just as the vine-dresser prunes and cuts back the branches of a fruitful vine, in order to make them more fruitful, so does God purify and sanctify believers by the circumstances of life in which He places them.

Trial, to speak plainly, is the instrument by which our Father in heaven makes Christians more holy. By trial He calls out their passive graces, and proves whether they can suffer His will as well as do it. By trial He weans them from the world, draws them to Christ, drives them to the Bible and prayer, shows them their own hearts, and makes them humble. This is the process by which He "purges" them, and makes them more fruitful. The lives of the saints in every age are the best and truest comment on the text. Never, hardly, do we find an eminent saint, either in the Old Testament or the New, who was not purified by suffering, and, like His Master, a "man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief." (Isaiah liii. 3.)

Let us learn to be patient in the days of darkness, if we know anything of vital union with Christ. Let us remember the doctrine of the passage before us, and not murmur

or complain because of trials. Our trials are not meant to do us harm, but good. God chastens us “for our profit, that we may be partakers of His holiness.” (Heb. xii. 10.) Fruit is the thing that our Master desires to see in us; and He will not spare the pruning-knife if He sees we need it. In the last day we shall see that all was well done.

LXIV.

ABIDING IN CHRIST.

JOHN XV. 7–11.

“If ye abide in Me, and my words abide in you, ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you,

“Herein is my Father glorified, that ye bear much fruit; so shall ye be my disciples,

“As the Father hath loved Me, so have I loved you: continue ye in my love,

“If ye keep my commandments, ye shall abide in my love; even as I have kept my Father’s commandments, and abide in His love,

“These things have I spoken unto you, that my joy might remain in you, and that your joy might be full,”

THERE is a wide difference between believers and believers. In some things they are all alike. All feel their sins; all trust in Christ; all repent and strive to be holy. All have grace, and faith, and new hearts. But they differ widely in the degree of their attainments. Some are far happier and holier Christians than others, and have far more influence on the world.

Now what are the inducements which the Lord Jesus holds out to His people, to make them aim at eminent holiness? This is a question which ought to be deeply interesting to every pious mind. Who would not like to be a

singularly useful and happy servant of Christ? The passage before us throws light on the subject in three ways.

In the first place, our Lord declares, "If ye abide in Me, and my words abide in you, ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you." This is *a distinct promise of power and success in prayer*. And what does it turn upon? We must "abide in Christ," and Christ's "words must abide in us."

To abide in Christ means to keep up a habit of constant close communion with Him,—to be always leaning on Him, resting on Him, pouring out our hearts to Him, and using Him as our Fountain of life and strength, as our chief Companion and best Friend.—To have His words abiding in us, is to keep His sayings and precepts continually before our memories and minds, and to make them the guide of our actions, and the rule of our daily conduct and behaviour.

Christians of this stamp, we are told, shall not pray in vain. Whatever they ask they shall obtain, so long as they ask things according to God's mind. No work shall be found too hard, and no difficulty insurmountable. Asking they shall receive, and seeking they shall find. Such men were Martin Luther, the German Reformer, and our own martyr, Bishop Latimer. Such a man was John Knox, of whom Mary, Queen of Scots, said, that she "feared his prayers more than an army of twenty thousand men." It is written in a certain place, "The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much." (James v. 16.)

Now, why is there so little power of prayer like this in our own time? Simply because there is so little close communion with Christ, and so little strict conformity to His will. Men do not “abide in Christ,” and therefore pray in vain. Christ’s words do not abide in them, as their standard of practice, and therefore their prayers seem not to be heard. They “ask and receive not, because they ask amiss.” (James iv. 3.) Let this lesson sink down into our hearts. He that would have answers to his prayers, must carefully remember Christ’s directions. We must keep up intimate friendship with the great Advocate in heaven, if our petitions are to prosper.

In the second place, our Lord declares, “Herein is my Father glorified, that ye bear much fruit; so shall ye be my disciples.” The meaning of this promise seems to be, that *fruitfulness in Christian practice will not only bring glory to God, but will supply the best evidence to our own hearts that we are real disciples of Christ.*

Assurance of our own interest in Christ, and of our consequent eternal safety, is one of the highest privileges in religion. To be always doubting and fearing is miserable work. Nothing is worse than suspense in any matter of importance, and, above all, in the matters of our souls. He that would know one of the best receipts for obtaining assurance, should diligently study Christ’s words now before us. Let him strive to bear “much fruit” in his life, his habits, his temper, his words, and his works. So doing he shall feel the “witness of the spirit” in his heart, and give

abundant proof that he is a living branch of the true Vine. He shall find inward evidence in his own soul that he is a child of God, and shall supply the world with outward evidence that cannot be disputed. He shall leave no room for doubt that he is a disciple.

Would we know why so many professing Christians have little comfort in their religion, and go fearing and doubting along the road to heaven? The question receives a solution in the saying of our Lord we are now considering. Men are content with a *little* Christianity, and a *little* fruit of the Spirit, and do not labour to be “holy in all manner of conversation.” (1 Peter i. 15.) They must not wonder if they enjoy little peace, feel little hope, and leave behind them little evidence. The fault lies with themselves. God has linked together holiness and happiness; and what God has joined together we must not think to put asunder.

In the third place, our Lord declares, “If ye keep my commandments, ye shall abide in my love.” The meaning of this promise is near akin to that of the preceding one. The man who *makes conscience of diligently observing Christ’s precepts, is the man who shall continually enjoy a sense of Christ’s love in his soul.*

Of course we must not misunderstand our Lord’s words when He speaks of “keeping His commandments.” There is a sense in which no one can keep them. Our best works are imperfect and defective, and when we have done our best we may well cry, “God be merciful to me a

sinner.” Yet we must not run into the other extreme, and give way to the lazy idea that we can do nothing at all. By the grace of God we may make Christ’s laws our rule of life, and show daily that we desire to please Him. So doing, our gracious Master will give us a constant sense of His favour, and make us feel His face smiling on us, like the sun shining on a fine day. “The secret of the Lord is with them that fear Him, and He will show them His covenant.” (Ps. xxv. 14.)

THE FRIENDS OF CHRIST.

JOHN XV. 12–16.

“This is my commandment, That ye love one another, as I have loved you.

“Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.

“Ye are my friends, if ye do whatsoever I command you.

“Henceforth I call you not servants; for the servant knoweth not what his lord doeth: but I have called you friends; for all things that I have heard of my Father I have made known unto you.

“Ye have not chosen Me, but I have chosen you, and ordained you, that ye should go and bring forth fruit, and that your fruit should remain: that whatsoever ye shall ask of the Father in my name, He may give it you.”

WE should observe here *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.” (Eph. 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!”

LXVI.

THE HATRED OF THE WORLD.

JOHN XV. 17–21.

“These things I command you, that ye love one another.

“If the world hate you, ye know that it hated Me before it hated you.

“If ye were of the world, the world would love his own: but because ye are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you.

“Remember the word that I said unto you, The servant is not greater than his lord. If they have persecuted Me, they will also persecute you; if they have kept my saying, they will keep yours also.

“But all these things will they do unto you for my name’s sake, because they know not Him that sent Me.”

WE are shown, first, in this passage, *what true Christians must expect to meet in this world,—hatred and persecution.* If the disciples looked for kindness and gratitude from man, they would be painfully disappointed. They must lay their account to be ill-treated like their Master.—*”The world hateth you. Be not moved or surprised. If they have persecuted Me, they will also persecute you; if they have kept my saying, they will keep yours also.”*

Facts, painful facts in every age, supply abundant proof that our Lord's warning was not without cause. Persecution was the lot of the Apostles and their companions wherever they went. Not more than one or two of them, probably, died quietly in his bed.—Persecution has been the lot of true believers throughout the eighteen centuries of Church history. The doings of Roman Emperors and Roman Popes, the Spanish Inquisition, the martyrdoms of Queen Mary's reign, all tell the same story.—Persecution is the lot of all really godly people at this very day. Ridicule, mockery, slander, misrepresentation, still show the feeling of unconverted people against the true Christian. As it was in St. Paul's day, so it is now. In public and in private, at school and at college, at home and abroad, "all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution." (2 Tim. iii. 12.) Mere churchmanship and outward profession are a cheap religion, of course, and cost a man nothing. But real vital Christianity will always bring with it a cross.

To know and understand these things is of the utmost importance to our comfort. Nothing is so mischievous as the habit of indulging false expectations. Let us realize that human nature never changes, that "the carnal mind is enmity against God," and against God's image in His people. (Rom. viii. 7.) Let us settle it in our minds that no holiness of life or consistency of conduct will ever prevent wicked people hating the servants of Christ, just as they

hated their blameless Master. Let us remember these things, and then we shall not be disappointed.

We are shown, secondly, in this passage, *two reasons for patience under the persecution of this world*. Each is weighty, and supplies matter for much thought.

For one thing, persecution is the cup of which Christ Himself drank. Faultless as He was in everything, in temper, word, and deed,—unwearied as He was in works of kindness, always going about doing good,—never was any one so hated as Jesus was to the last day of His earthly ministry. Scribes and High Priests, Pharisees and Sadducees, Jews and Gentiles, united in pouring contempt on Him, and opposing Him, and never rested till He was put to death.

Surely this simple fact alone should sustain our spirits, and prevent our being cast down by the hatred of man. Let us consider that we are only walking in our Master's footsteps, and sharing our Master's portion. Do we deserve to be better treated? Are we better than He? Let us fight against these murmuring thoughts. Let us drink quietly the cup which our Father gives us. Above all, let us often call to mind the saying, "Remember the word that I spake unto you, The servant is not greater than his Master."

For another thing, persecution helps to prove that we are children of God, and have treasure in heaven. It supplies evidence that we are really born again, that we have grace in our hearts, and are heirs of glory: "If ye were of the world, the world would love his own: but because ye

are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you.” Persecution, in short, is like the Goldsmith’s Hallmark on real silver and gold: it is one of the marks of a converted man.

Let us nerve our minds with this cheering thought, when we feel ready to faint and give way under the world’s hatred. No doubt it is hard to bear, and the more hard when our conscience tells us we are innocent. But, after all, let us never forget that it is a token for good. It is a symptom of a work begun within us by the Holy Ghost, which can never be overthrown. We may fall back on that wonderful promise, “Blessed are ye when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven.” (Matt v. 11, 12.) When the world has said and done its worst, it cannot rob believers of that promise.

Let us leave the whole subject with a feeling of deep pity for those who persecute others on account of their religion. Often, very often, as our Lord says, they do it because they know no better. “They know not Him that sent Me.” Like our Divine Master and His servant Stephen, let us pray for those who despitefully use us and persecute us. Their persecution rarely does us harm, and often drives us nearer to Christ, the Bible, and the throne of grace. Our intercession, if heard on high, may bring down blessings on their souls. The last prayer of dying Stephen may prove

to have been a link in the wondrous story of St. Paul's conversion. (Acts vii. 60.)

LXVII.

THE PERSONALITY OF THE HOLY SPIRIT.

JOHN XV. 26, 27.

“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:

“And ye also shall bear witness, because ye have been with Me from the beginning?”

WE should observe, 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 dear 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.