EXPOSITORY THOUGHTS

ON THE GOSPELS.

FOR FAMILY AND PRIVATE USE.

WITH THE TEXT COMPLETE,
*And Many Explanatory Notes*.

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LUKE XVII. 1–4.

1 Then said he unto the disciples, It is impossible but that offences will come: but woe *unto him,* through whom they come!

2 It were better for him that a mill-stone were hanged about his neck, and he cast into the sea, than that he should offend one of these little ones.

3 Take heed to yourselves: If thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him; and if he repent, for­give him.

4 And if he trespass against thee seven times in a day, and seven times in a day turn again to thee, saying, I repent; thou shalt forgive him.

WE are taught for one thing in these verses, *the great sinfulness of putting stumbling-blocks in the way of other men’s souls.* The Lord Jesus says, “Woe unto him through whom offences come! It were better for him that a mill-stone were hanged about his neck, and he cast into the sea, than that he should offend one of these little ones.”

When do men make others stumble? When do they cause “offences” to come? They do it, beyond doubt, whenever they persecute believers, or endeavour to deter them from serving Christ.—But this, unhappily, is not all. Professing Christians do it whenever they bring discredit on their religion by inconsistencies of temper, of word, or of deed. We do it whenever we make our Christianity unlovely in the eyes of the world, by conduct not in keeping with our profession. The world may not understand the doctrines and principles of believers. But the world is very keen-sighted about their practice.

The sin against which our Lord warns us was the sin of David. When he had broken the seventh command­ment, and taken the wife of Uriah to be his wife, the prophet Nathan said to him, “Thou hast given great occasion to the enemies of the Lord to blaspheme.” (2 Sam. xii. 14.) It was the sin which St. Paul charges on the Jews, when he says, “The name of God is blas­phemed among the Gentiles through you.” (Rom. ii. 24.) It is the sin of which he frequently entreats Christians to beware: “Give none offence, neither to the Jews nor to the Gentiles, nor to the Church of God.” (1 Cor. x. 32.)

The subject is a deeply searching one. The sin which our Lord brings before us is unhappily very common. The inconsistencies of professing Christians too often supply the men of the world with an excuse for neglect­ing religion altogether. An inconsistent believer, whether he knows it or not, is daily doing harm to souls. His life is a positive injury to the Gospel of Christ.

Let us often ask ourselves whether we are doing good or harm in the world. We cannot live to ourselves, if we are Christians. The eyes of many will always be upon us. Men will judge by what they see, far more than by what they hear. If they see the Christian con­tradicting by his practice what he professes to believe, they are justly stumbled and offended. For the world’s sake, as well as for our own, let us labour to be eminently holy. Let us endeavour to make our religion beautiful in the eyes of men, and to adorn the doctrine of Christ in all things. Let us strive daily to lay aside every weight, and the sin which most easily besets us, and so to live that men can find no fault in us, except concerning the law of our God. Let us watch jealously over our tempers and tongues, and the discharge of our social duties. Anything is better than doing harm to souls. The cross of Christ will always give offence. Let us not increase that offence by carelessness in our daily life. The natural man cannot be expected to love the Gospel. But let us not disgust him by inconsistency.

We are taught, for another thing, in these verses, *the great importance of a forgiving spirit.* The Lord Jesus says, “If thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him, and if he repent, forgive him: and if he trespass against thee seven times in a day, and seven times in a day turn again to thee, saying, I repent, thou shalt forgive him.”

There are few Christian duties which are so frequently and strongly dwelt upon in the New Testament as this of forgiving injuries. It fills a prominent place in the Lord’s Prayer. The only profession we make in all that prayer, is that of forgiving “those who trespass against us.”—It is a test of being forgiven ourselves. The man who cannot forgive his neighbour the few trifling offences he may have committed against him, can know nothing experimentally of that free and full pardon which is offered us by Christ. (Matt. xviii. 35; Ephes. iv. 32.)—Not least, it is one leading mark of the indwelling of the Holy Ghost. The presence of the Spirit in the heart may always be known by the fruits He causes to be brought forth in the life. Those fruits are both active and passive. The man who has not learned to bear and forbear, to put up with much and look over much, is not born of the Spirit. (1 John iii. 14; Matt. v. 44, 45.)

The doctrine laid down by our Lord in this place is deeply humbling. It shows most plainly the wide con­trariety which exists between the ways of the world and the Gospel of Christ. Who does not know that pride, and haughtiness, and high-mindedness, and readiness to take offence, and implacable determination never to for­get and never to forgive, are common among baptized men and women? Thousands will go to the Lord’s table, and even profess to love the Gospel, who fire up in a moment at the least appearance of what they call “offensive” conduct, and make a quarrel out of the merest trifles. Thousands are perpetually quarrelling with all around them, always complaining how ill other people behave, and always forgetting that their own quarrelsome disposition is the spark which causes the flame. One general remark applies to all such persons: they are making their own lives miserable and show­ing their unmeetness for the kingdom of God. An unforgiving and quarrelsome spirit is the surest mark of an unregenerate heart. What says the Scripture? “Whereas there is among you envying, and strife, and divisions, are ye not carnal, and walk as men?” (1 Cor. iii. 3; 1 John iii. 18-20; iv. 20.)

Let us leave the whole passage with jealous self-inquiry. Few passages ought to humble Christians so much, and to make them feel so deeply their need of the blood of atonement and the mediation of Christ. How often we have given offence, and caused others to stumble How often we have allowed unkind, and angry, and revengeful thoughts to nestle undisturbed in our hearts! These things ought not so to be. The more carefully we attend to such practical lessons as this passage contains, the more shall we recommend our religion to others, and the more inward peace shall we find in our own souls.

NOTES. LUKE XVII. 1–4.

1.*—*[*Then said he unto the disciples.*]Let it be observed that our Lord here turns again to His disciples and specially addresses them, as He had done at the beginning of the last chapter. The parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus had been specially spoken to the Pharisees. Christ now turns away from them to His own followers.

It is not easy to trace the connection between the beginning of this chapter and the end of the last. Yet the two chapters seem to contain a continuous discourse of our Lord’s, without any pause, break, or intermission. It is possible that our Lord may have had in His mind the stumbling block that conduct like that of the Rich Man towards Lazarus put in the way of weak believers, and meant to warn His disciples not to be discouraged if they met with similar treatment. It is possible that our Lord may be referring again to His lesson about “faithfulness in little things” in the parable of the un­just steward, and be warning His disciples not to give occasion to the enemy to blaspheme. Both these conjectures, however, may perhaps be needless. A great teacher, like our Lord, has an undoubted right to open up entirely new subjects at His discretion. Perhaps this is the case here.

[*It is impossible...will come.*]This expression means, that human nature is such, and the world is such, that it is useless to expect there will be no offences. There will be, as long as the world stands. Yet this does not lessen the guilt of those who cause them. Human infirmities are no excuse for the evil that is in the world, though they may explain its presence.

[*Offences.*]The Greek word so translated is rendered else­where in the New Testament, “stumbling block;” “occasion to fall;” and “occasion of stumbling.” (Rom. xi. 9; xiv. 13. 1 John ii. 10.)

[*Woe unto him, &c.*]This woe has probably a wide appli­cation. It includes all who cause Christ’s people to stumble and be discouraged, from the fiercest persecutor, like Nero, down to the least inconsistent believer.

2.—[A *mill-stone hanged about his neck, &c.*]This is a proverbial expression. Anything is better than to give offence to a believer and make him stumble.

[*These little ones.*]This expression means here “believers.” They are God’s children, and as tenderly cared for by Him as the little infants in a man’s family. (See Mark x. 42.) It is probable that our Lord pointed to some of the weak and unestablished followers who accompanied Him and the twelve Apostles. There are always many who are “babes in Christ.” (1 Cor. iii. 1.)

3.—[ *Take heed to yourselves, &c.*]The connection of this verse with that which precedes it is, again, not very clear. It would seem to imply that the “offences” of which our Lord had just been speaking, where such as are specially occasioned by the want of a charitable and forgiving spirit among Christians. It is like St. John’s expression, “He that loveth his brother abideth in the light, and there is none occasion of stumbling in him.” (1 John ii. 10.)

[*Rebuke him.*]This expression shows the Christian duty of plain, straightforward, faithful dealing with those who injure us. To say that of a brother behind his back which we are not prepared, if needful, to say before his face, is not the conduct of a true servant of Christ.

[*If he repent, forgive him.*]This expression is remarkable. It doubtless cannot mean that we are not to forgive men unless they do repent. At this rate there would be much bitterness constantly kept alive. But it does mean that when there is no repentance or regret for an injury done, there can be no renewal of cordial friendship, or complete reconciliation between man and man.

*4.—*[*Seven times in a day.*]Here, as in other places, we cannot doubt that the number “seven” must be taken indefinitely. It means, “very frequently:” “very often.” (See Matt. 2; xii. 45; xviii. 22; and Luke xi. 26. See also 1 Sam. ii. 5; Ruth iv. 15; Isa. iv. 1; Psalm xii. 6; Micah v. 5.)