EXPOSITORY THOUGHTS

ON THE GOSPELS.

FOR FAMILY AND PRIVATE USE.

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

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LUKE XVII. 5–10.

5 And the apostles said unto the Lord, Increase our faith.

6 And the Lord said, If ye had faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye might say unto this sycamine tree, Be thou plucked up by the root, and be thou planted in the sea; and it should obey you.

7 But which of you, having a servant plowing or feeding cattle, will say unto him by and by, when he is come from the field, Go and sit down to meat?

8 And will not rather say unto him, Make ready wherewith I may sup, and gird thyself, and serve me, till I have eaten and drunken; and afterward thou shalt eat and drink?

9 Doth he thank that servant because he did the things that were commanded him? I trow not.

10 So likewise ye, when ye shall have done all those things which are commanded you, say, We are unprofitable servants: we have done that which was our duty to do.

﻿LET us notice, in these verses, the important request which the Apostles made. They said unto the Lord, “Increase our faith.”

We know not the secret feelings from which this request sprung. Perhaps the hearts of the Apostles failed within them, as they heard one weighty lesson after another fall from our Lord’s lips. Perhaps the thought rose up in their minds, “Who is sufficient for these things? Who can receive such high doctrines? Who can follow such a lofty standard of practice?” These, however, are only conjectures. One thing, at any rate, is clear and plain. The request which they made was most deeply important: “Increase our faith.”

Faith is the root of saving religion. “He that cometh unto God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him.” (Heb. xi. 6.) It is the hand by which the soul lays hold on Jesus Christ, and is united to Him and saved. It is the secret of all Christian comfort, and spiritual prosperity. According to a man’s faith will be his peace, his hope, his strength, his courage, his decision, and his victory over the world. When the Apostles made request about faith they did wisely and well.

Faith is a grace which admits of degrees. It does not come to full strength and perfection as soon as it is planted in the heart by the Holy Ghost. There is “little” faith and “great” faith. There is “weak” faith and “strong” faith. Both are spoken of in the Scriptures. Both are to be seen in the experience of God’s people. The more faith a Christian has, the more happy, holy, and useful will he be. To promote the growth and progress of faith should be the daily prayer and endeavour of all who love life. When the Apostles said, “Increase our faith,” they did well.

Have we any faith at all? This, after all, is the first question which the subject should raise in our hearts. Saving faith is not mere repetition of the creed, and saying, “I believe in God the Father,—and in God the Son,—and in God the Holy Ghost.” Thousands are weekly using these words, who know nothing of real believing. The words of St. Paul are very solemn: “All men have not faith.” (2 Thess. iii. 2.) True faith is not natural to man. It comes down from heaven. It is the gift of God.

If we have any faith let us pray for more of it. It is a bad sign of a man’s spiritual state when he is satisfied to live on old stock, and does not hunger and thirst after growth in grace. Let a prayer for more faith form part of our daily devotions. Let us covet earnestly the best gifts. We are not to despise “the day of small things” in a brother’s soul, but we are not to be content with it in our own.

Let us notice, for another thing, in these verses, what a heavy blow our Lord gives to self-righteousness. He says to His Apostles, “When ye shall have done all these things which are commanded you, say, We are unprofitable servants: we have done that which was our duty to do.”

We are all naturally proud and self-righteous. We think far more highly of ourselves, our deserts, and our character, than we have any right to do. It is a subtle disease, which manifests itself in a hundred different ways. Most men can see it in other people. Few will allow its presence in themselves. Seldom will a man be found, however wicked, who does not secretly flatter himself that there is somebody else worse than he is. Seldom will a saint be found who is not at seasons tempted to be satisfied and pleased with himself. There is such a thing as a pride which wears the cloak of humility. There is not a heart upon earth which does not contain a piece of the Pharisee’s character.

To give up self-righteousness is absolutely needful to salvation. He that desires to be saved must confess that there is no good thing in him, and that he has no merit, no goodness, no worthiness of his own. He must be willing to renounce his own righteousness, and to trust in the righteousness of another, even Christ the Lord. Once pardoned and forgiven, we must travel the daily journey of life under a deep conviction that we are “unprofitable servants.” At our best we only do our duty, and have nothing to boast of. And even when we do our duty, it is not by our own power and might that we do it, but by the strength which is given to us from God. Claim upon God we have none. Right to expect anything from God we have none. Worthiness to deserve anything from God we have none. All that we have we have received. All that we are we owe to God’s sovereign, distinguishing grace.

What is the true cause of self-righteousness? How is it that such a poor, weak, erring creature as man can ever dream of deserving anything at God’s hands? It all arises from ignorance. The eyes of our understand­ings are naturally blinded. We see neither ourselves, nor our lives, nor God, nor the law of God, as we ought. Once let the light of grace shine into a man’s heart, and the reign of self-righteousness is over. The roots of pride may remain, and often put forth bitter shoots; but the power of pride is broken when the Spirit comes into the heart, and shows the man himself, and God. The true Christian will never trust in his own goodness. He will say with St. Paul, “I am the chief of sinners.” “God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.” (1 Tim. i. 15; Gal. vi. 14.)

NOTES. LUKE XVII. 5–10.

5.—[*The* *apostles said.*]Both Stier and Alford remark, that this is the only instance we have of the “Apostles,” as a body, saying anything to our Lord, or making any request. Yet I venture to doubt the correctness of the remark. I think it a high probability that in Matt. xvii. 19, and Acts i. 6, those who spoke to our Lord together were the “Apostles.”

[*Increase our faith.*]The literal rendering of the Greek word here would be, “add to us faith:” that is “give us more faith.” The reason why this request was made, I have given in the exposition. It follows a discourse extending from the begin­ning of the fifteenth chapter, and containing no less than five most important parables, beside other things. No wonder that the disciples said, “Increase our faith.”

6.—[*As a grain of mustard seed.*]This is a proverbial expression for something very small and insignificant in size.

[*Say ...sycamine tree...plucked up.*]This is a proverbial ex­pression, apparently common among the Jews for doing great works and overcoming apparently insuperable difficulties. St. Paul’s expression is like it: “Though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains.” (1 Cor. xiii. 2.) Major remarks, “When the Jews intended to extol any of their doctors, they said of him, that he plucked up mountains by the roots.” Whether the tree mentioned is a mulberry tree, or a sycamine, commentators are not agreed.

[*Which of you, &c.*]Our Lord’s object in this and the three following verses appears to be to check any idea of merit or worthiness in the disciples’ minds. However great their faith might be, and however mighty their works, they were not to suppose they would have any claim on God, or any right to His favour.

7.*—*[*Feeding cattle.*]The Greek word so rendered does not necessarily mean feeding *cattle.* It might as well have been *sheep.* The Greek word for “shepherd” is the substantive from which it is taken.

[*By and* by.] The Greek word so rendered is translated in seventy-five other places in the New Testament, “immediately,” “straightway,” “forthwith,” and in only one place “by and by.” (Luke xxi. 9.) It admits of doubt whether the expression “by and by” did not mean something more immediate at the time of our own Bible translation than it does now. It certainly seems so in the expression, “The end is not by and by.” (Luke xxi. 9.)

It is questionable whether the verse altogether is rightly stopped in our version, or whether the word “by and by “or “immediately,” should not be connected with the expression “go and sit down,” &c. It would then be, “Which of you will say unto him, when he is come from the fields, immediately go and sit down to meat.” This construction seems more natural and in keeping with the next verse. The expressions “immediately,” or “by and by,” and “afterward,” are evi­dently meant to be in contrast to the other.

8.*—*[*Gird thyself.*]The garments of people in Eastern countries are generally loose and flowing. Before doing anything re­quiring bodily exertion, the first thing necessary was to “gird up the loins;” or tie the garments tightly round the waist, after gathering them up.

9.—[*I* *trow.*]The Greek word so rendered is generally translated “think,” or “suppose,” in a sentence like that before us. The word which our translators have used here they have not used anywhere else in the Bible.

10.—[*Say,* *We are unprofitable servants,*] The doctrine laid down by our Lord in this verse is plain and evident to any impartial reader. He overthrows entirely all idea of creature-merit. When we have done all that Christ commands, we have done no more than our duty. Yet even what we do is only from grace given to us, and not from natural strength. And even then in what we do there are countless imperfections. To talk therefore of merit or claim to God’s favour, in the face of such a verse as this, is absurd and preposterous.

In the fourteenth Article of the Church of England this verse is very properly used as an argument against the Romish doctrine of works of supererogation.

The Greek word translated “unprofitable,” is only used in one other place: in the parable of the talents. (Matt. xxv. 30.) Major renders it, “Servants who have conferred no benefit.” It may be doubted whether it does not mean even more: “worthless: valueless.”

The words of Hooker are worth reading on the doctrine of this verse. “We acknowledge a dutiful necessity of doing well: but the meritorious dignity of doing well we utterly renounce. We see how far we are from the perfect righteous­ness of the law. The little fruit which we have in holiness, it is, God knoweth, corrupt and unsound. We put no confidence in it at all. We challenge nothing in the world for it. We dare not call God to reckoning, as if we had Him in our debt book. Our continual suit to Him is, and must be, to bear with our infirmities, and pardon our offences.” *(Discourse on Justification, s.* 7)

The contrast between what we must say of ourselves: “We are unprofitable;” and what Christ will be graciously pleased to say at the last day (Matt. xxv. 21, and xxv. 34-40) is very striking.