EXPOSITORY THOUGHTS

ON THE GOSPELS.

FOR FAMILY AND PRIVATE USE.

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

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ST. LUKE. VOL. II.

LONDON:
WILLIAM HUNT AND COMPANY, 23, HOLLES STREET.

CAVENDISH SQUARE

IPSWICH: WILLIAM HUNT, TAVERN STREET.

MDCCCLVIII.

LUKE XVIII. 15–17.

15 And they brought unto him also infants, that he would touch them: but when *his* disciples saw it, they rebuked them.

16 But Jesus called them *unto him*, and said, Suffer little children to come unto me, and forbid them not: for of such is the kingdom of God.

17 Verily I say unto you, Whoso­ever shall not receive the kingdom of God as a little child shall in no wise enter therein.

LET us observe, for one thing, in this passage, *how igno­rantly people are apt to treat children in the matter of their souls.* We read that there were some who “brought infants to Jesus that he would touch them: but when his disciples saw it, they rebuked them.” They thought most probably that it was mere waste of their Master’s time, and that infants could derive no benefit from being brought to Christ. They drew from our Lord a solemn rebuke. We read that “Jesus called them unto him, and said, Suffer little children to come unto me, and forbid them not.”

The ignorance of the disciples does not stand alone. On few subjects, perhaps, shall we find such strange opinions in the Churches, as on the subject of the souls of children. Some think that children ought to be bap­tized, as a matter of course, and that if they die unbaptized they cannot be saved. Others think that children ought not to be baptized, but can give no satisfactory reason why they think so. Some think that all children are regenerate by virtue of their baptism. Others seem to think that children are incapable of receiving any grace, and that they ought not to be enrolled in the Church till they are grown up. Some think that children are naturally inno­cent, and would do no wickedness unless they learned it from others. Others think that it is no use to expect them to be converted when young, and that they must be treated as unbelievers till they come to years of discretion. All these opinions appear to be errors, in one direction or another. All are to be deprecated, for all lead to many painful mistakes.

We shall do well to get hold of some settled Scriptural principles about the spiritual condition of children. To do so may save us much perplexity, and preserve us from grave false doctrine.

The souls of young children are evidently precious in God’s sight. Both here and elsewhere there is plain proof that Christ cares for them no less than for grown up people. The souls of young children are capable of receiving grace. They are born in sin, and without grace cannot be saved. There is nothing, either in the Bible or experience, to make us think that they cannot receive the Holy Ghost, and be justified, even from their earliest infancy. The baptism of young children seems agreeable to the general tenor of Scripture, and the mind of Christ in the passage before us. If Jewish children were not too young to be circumcised in the Old Testament dispen­sation, it is exceedingly hard to understand why Christian children should be too young to be baptized under the Gospel. Thousands of children, no doubt, receive no benefit from baptism. But the duty of baptizing them remains the same. The minds of young children are not unequal to receiving religious impressions. The readiness with which their minds receive the doctrines of the Gospel, and their consciences respond to them, is matter of fact well known to all who have anything to do with teaching. Last, but not least, the souls of children are capable of salvation, however young they may die. To suppose that Christ will admit them into His glorified Church, and yet maintain that He would not have them in His professing Church on earth, is an inconsistency which can never be explained.

These points deserve calm consideration. The subject is unquestionably difficult, and one on which good men disagree. But in every perplexity about it we shall find it good to return again and again to the passage before us. It throws a strong light on the position of children before God. It shows us in general terms the mind of Christ.

Let us observe, for another thing, in this passage, *the strong declaration which our Lord Jesus Christ makes about infants.* He says, “Of such is the kingdom of God.”

The meaning of these words no doubt is a matter of dispute. That they were not meant to teach that children are born sinless, and innocent, is abundantly clear from other parts of Scripture. “That which is born of the flesh is flesh.” (John iii. 6.) A threefold lesson is probably contained in our Lord’s words. To that threefold lesson we shall do well to take heed.

“Like such as little children,” all saints of God should strive to live. Their simple faith and dependence on others,—their unworldliness and indifference to earthly treasures,—their comparative humility, harmlessness, and freedom from deceit,—are points in which they furnish believers with an excellent example. Happy is he who can draw near to Christ and the Bible in the spirit of a little child!

“Out of such as little children,” the Church of God on earth ought to be constantly recruited. We should not be afraid to bring them to baptism even in their earliest infancy, and to dedicate them to Christ from the beginning of their days. Useless and formal as baptism often is, it is an ordinance appointed by Christ Himself. Those who use it with prayer and faith may confidently look for a blessing.

“Of such as little children,” the kingdom of God in glory will be largely composed. The salvation of all who die in infancy may confidently be expected. Though sin has abounded, grace has much more abounded. (Rom. v. 20.) The number of those in the world who die before they “know good from evil” is exceedingly great. It is surely not too much to believe that a very large proportion of the glorified inhabitants of heaven will be found at length to be little children.

Let us leave the whole passage with a deep sense of the value of children’s souls, and with a settled resolution to “put on the mind of Christ” in all our dealings with them. Let us regard children as a most important part of Christ’s professing Church, and a part which the great Head of the Church does not like to see neglected. Let us train them from their earliest infancy in godly ways, and sow the seed of Scripture truth in their minds, with strong confidence that it will one day bear fruit. Let us believe that they think more, and feel more, and consider more, than at first sight appears; and that the Spirit is often working in them, as really and truly as in old people. Above all, let us often name them before Christ in prayer, and ask Him to take them under His special charge. He never changes; He is always the same. He cared for boys and girls when He was upon earth; let us not doubt that He cares for them at the right hand of God in heaven.

NOTES. LUKE XVIII. 15–17.

15*.—*[*And they brought, &c.*]The connection between this passage and the parable preceding it should not be overlooked. Our Lord had just been speaking of humility. He now gives a practical illustration of His delight in humility, by His treatment of little children.

[*Infants.*]Let this word be carefully noted. The Greek word admits of only one sense. It is children of the youngest and tenderest age. It is the same word used in Luke i. 41, 44; 12, 16; 1 Peter ii. 2. It is impossible to interpret the expression as meaning young persons come to years of discretion.

[*Touch them.*]There is reference here in all probability to the Jewish habit of laying hands on a child and blessing it. We have an instance in the case of Jacob blessing Joseph’s children. (Gen. xlviii. 14.)

[*They rebuked them.*]Comparing this passage with the parallel one in St. Mark, we see that it was the persons who brought the children who were rebuked by the disciples.

16.—[*Jesus* *called them.*]The word “them” in this place applies to the infants, and not to their parents and friends. Our Lord specially addressed himself to the children.

[*Of such is the kingdom of God.*]Considering the verse which follows these words, and the parable which precedes it, it seems probable that the principal idea in our Lord’s mind was to set before us the beauty of a humble and child-like spirit, and to commend such a spirit to His disciples for imitation. We need not however exclude from this sentence the other and further meanings which I have mentioned in the exposition.

Undoubtedly the expression is not a proof of infant baptism. To establish the right of infants we must look elsewhere: to the circumcision of children under the law,—to the baptism of whole families in the Acts,—to the striking absence of any hint in the New Testament that children were not to be formally admitted into the Church by an outward ordinance under the Gospel, as they had been under the law; and, not least, to the remarkable fact mentioned by Lightfoot: that the children of all proselytes admitted into the Jewish Church by baptism, before our Lord’s time, were always baptized together with their parents.

Nevertheless the passage before us will always remain a strong testimony of our Lord Jesus Christ’s care for little children. There is a deep significance in His rebuke of those who would have kept infants from Him, which deserves serious consideration.

17.—[*Verily I say unto you, &c.*]The lesson of this verse admits of only one interpretation. It describes the spirit and frame of mind which are absolutely necessary to salvation. Pride, high thoughts, and self-righteousness, must be laid aside: we must be converted and become as little children. (Matt. xviii. 3.)