

EXPOSITORY THOUGHTS.  
ON THE GOSPELS.

FOR FAMILY AND PRIVATE USE.

WITH THE TEXT COMPLETE,

*And Many Explanatory Notes.*

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LUKE III. 7-14

7. Then said he to the multitude that came forth to be baptized of him, O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come?

8. Bring forth therefore fruits worthy of repentance, and begin not to say within yourselves, We have Abraham to *our* father: for I say unto you, That God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham.

9. And now also the axe is laid unto the root of the trees: every tree therefore which bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire.

10. And the people asked him, saying, What shall we do then?

11. He answereth and saith unto them, He that hath two coats, let him impart to him that hath none; and he that hath meat, let him do likewise.

12. Then came also Publicans to be baptized, and said unto him, Master, what shall we do?

13. And he said unto them, Exact no more than that which is appointed you.

14. And the soldiers likewise demanded of him, saying, And what shall we do? And he said unto them, Do violence to no man, neither accuse *any* falsely; and be content with your wages.

WE have, in these verses, a specimen of John the Baptist's ministry. It is a portion of Scripture which should always be specially interesting to a Christian mind. The immense effect which John produced on the Jews, however temporary, is evident, from many expressions in the Gospels. The remarkable testimony which our Lord bore to John, as "a prophet greater than any born of woman," is well-known to all Bible readers. What then was the character of John's ministry? This is the question to which the chapter before us supplies a practical answer.

We should first mark *the holy boldness with which John addresses the multitudes who came to his baptism*. He speaks to them as "a generation of vipers." He saw the rottenness and hypocrisy of the profession that the crowd around him were making, and uses language descriptive of their case. His head was not turned by popularity. He cared not who was offended by his words. The spiritual disease of those before him was desperate, and of long standing, and he knew that desperate diseases need strong remedies.

Well would it be for the Church of Christ, if it possessed more plain-speaking ministers, like John the Baptist, in these latter days. A morbid dislike to strong language,—an excessive fear of giving offence,—a constant flinching from directness and plain speaking, are, unhappily, too much the characteristics of the modern Christian pulpit. Personality and uncharitable language are no doubt always to be deprecated. But there is no charity in flattering unconverted people, by abstaining from any mention of their vices, or in applying smooth epithets to damnable sins. There are two texts which are too much forgotten by Christian preachers. In one it is written, "Woe unto you when all men shall speak well of you." In the other it is written, "If I yet pleased men, I should not be the servant of Christ." (Luke vi.

26 ; Gal. i. 10.)

We should mark, secondly, *how plainly John speaks to his hearers about hell and danger*. He tells them that there is a “wrath to come.” He speaks of “the axe” of God’s judgments, and of unfruitful trees being cast into “the fire.”

The subject of hell is always offensive to human nature. The minister who dwells much upon it, must expect to find himself regarded as coarse, violent, unfeeling, and narrow-minded. Men love to hear “smooth things,” and to be told of peace, and not of danger. (Isai. xxx. 10.) But the subject is one that ought not to be kept back, if we desire to do good to souls. It is one that our Lord Jesus Christ brought forward frequently in His public teaching. That loving Saviour, who spoke so graciously of the way to heaven, has also used the plainest language about the way to hell.

Let us beware of being wise above that which is written, and more charitable than Scripture itself. Let the language of John the Baptist be deeply graven in our hearts. Let us never be ashamed to avow our firm belief, that there is a “wrath to come” for the impenitent, and that it is possible for a man to be lost as well as to be saved. To be silent on the subject is positive treachery to men’s souls. It only encourages them to persevere in wickedness, and fosters in their minds the devil’s old delusion, “Ye shall not surely die.” That minister is surely our best friend who tells us honestly of danger, and warns us, like John the Baptist, to “flee from the wrath to come.” Never will a man flee till he sees there is real cause to be afraid. Never will he seek heaven till he is convinced that there is risk of his falling into hell. The religion in which there is no mention of hell, is not the religion of John the Baptist, and of our Lord Jesus, and His apostles.

We should mark, thirdly, *how John exposes the uselessness of a repentance which is not accompanied by fruits in the life*. He said to the multitude, who came to be baptized, “Bring forth fruits worthy of repentance.” He tells them that “Every tree which bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down.”

This is a truth which should always occupy a prominent place in our Christianity. It can never be impressed on our minds too strongly, that religious talking and profession are utterly worthless, without religious doing and practice. It is vain to say with our lips that we repent, if we do not at the same time repent in our lives. It is more than vain. It will gradually sear our consciences, and harden our hearts. To say that we are sorry for our sins is mere hypocrisy, unless we show that we are really sorry for them, by giving them up. Doing is the very life of repentance. Tell us not merely what a man says in religion. Tell us rather what he does. “The talk of the lips” says Solomon, “tendeth only to penury.” (Prov. xiv. 23.)

We should mark, fourthly, *what a blow John strikes at the common notion, that connection with godly people can save our souls*. “Begin not to

say," he tells the Jews, "we have Abraham to our Father; for I say unto you that God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham."

The strong hold that this notion has obtained on the heart of man, in every part of the world, is an affecting proof of our fallen and corrupt condition. Thousands have always been found, in every age of the church, who have believed that connection with godly men made them acceptable in the sight of God. Thousands have lived and died in the blind delusion, that because they were allied to holy people by ties of blood or church-membership, they might themselves hope to be saved.

Let it be a settled principle with us, that saving religion is a personal thing. It is a business between each man's own soul and Christ. It will profit us nothing at the last day, to have belonged to the Church of Luther, or Calvin, or Cranmer, or Knox, or Owen, or Wesley, or Whitfield.—Had we the faith of these holy men? Did we believe as they believed, and strive to live as they lived, and to follow Christ as they followed Him? These will be the only points on which our salvation will turn. It will save no man to have had Abraham's blood in his veins, if he did not possess Abraham's faith and do Abraham's works.

We should remark, lastly, in this passage, *the searching test of sincerity which John applied to the consciences of the various classes who came to his baptism*. He bade each man who made a profession of repentance, to begin by breaking off from those sins which specially beset him. The selfish multitude must show common charity to each other. The publicans must "exact no more than their due." The soldiers must "do violence to no man, and be content with their wages." He did not mean that, by so doing, they would atone for their sins, and make their peace with God. But he did mean that, by so doing, they would prove their repentance to be sincere.

Let us leave the passage with a deep conviction of the wisdom of this mode of dealing with souls, and specially with the souls of those who are beginning to make a profession of religion. Above all, let us see here the right way to prove our own hearts. It must not content us to cry out against sins to which, by natural temperament, we are not inclined, while we deal gently with other sins of a different character. Let us find out our own peculiar corruptions. Let us know our own besetting sins. Against them let us direct our principal efforts. With these let us wage unceasing war. Let the rich break off from the rich man's sins, and the poor from the sins of the poor. Let the young man give up the sins of youth, and the old man the sins of age. This is the first step towards proving that we are in earnest, when we first begin to feel about our souls. Are we real? Are we sincere? Then let us begin by looking at home, and looking within.

NOTES. LUKE III. 7-14.

8.—[*Bring forth fruit.*] It is worthy of remark, that the word translated “bring forth,” is the same that is used by St. John, when he speaks of “committing sin,” and “doing righteousness.” (1 John iii. 4, 7.) Both there and here is implied a continued habit, and not a single act.

[*We have Abraham to our father.*] A passage in Stella, the Spanish commentator on the Gospel of St. Luke, on this expression, is worth quoting:—“There are many monks who imitate these Jews, saying, we have Benedict, Augustine, Jerome, Francis, or Dominic for our father, just as they said, We have Abraham to our father. They relate to others the marvellous doings of the founders of their order, and cry up their praises with wonderful commendation. They say, our order has so many holy men enrolled in the catalogue of saints, so many Popes, so many Cardinals, so many bishops, so many teachers. In them they rejoice and vain-gloriously boast, while they themselves have degenerated from the true excellencies of their founders, by iniquity and laxity of morals. To all these we may deservedly say what Christ said to the Jews, ‘If ye are Abraham’s children, do the works of Abraham.’”

[*God is able of these stones, etc.*] The meaning of this expression is simply this: “Think not that God will not have a people to show forth His praise, if He cuts you off and does not save you. Even if you were all cast off, He could raise up *a family for Himself* of true believers from these stones.” The calling of the Gentiles was evidently implied.

14.—[*What shall we do?*] Our English version hardly gives the full sense of the original Greek here. It should rather be, “and we, what shall we do?”

[*Do violence.*] The word so translated is found nowhere else in the New Testament. It signifies “to put in fear, or to shake, by violent conduct.”

[*Accuse falsely.*] This word is only found in one other place, and there it is rendered, “take by false accusation.” It occurs in the remarkable profession of Zacchæus after his conversion. (Luke xix. 8.)

Let it be carefully noted that John the Baptist says not a word to show that the work of the tax-gatherer or the soldier is unlawful in the sight of God.