

EXPOSITORY THOUGHTS
ON THE GOSPELS.

FOR FAMILY AND PRIVATE USE.

WITH THE TEXT COMPLETE,
And Many Explanatory Notes.

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LUKE V. 33-39.

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| <p>33 And they said unto him, Why do the disciples of John fast often, and make prayers, and likewise <i>the disciples</i> of the Pharisees; but thine eat and drink?</p> <p>34 And he said unto them, Can ye make the children of the bride-chamber fast, while the bridegroom is with them?</p> <p>35 But the days will come, when the bridegroom shall be taken away from them, and then shall they fast in those days.</p> <p>36 And he spake also a parable unto them; No man putteth a piece of a new garment</p> | <p>upon an old; if otherwise, then both the new maketh a rent, and the piece that was <i>taken</i> out of the new agreeth not with the old.</p> <p>37 And no man putteth new wine into old bottles; else the new wine will burst the bottles, and be spilled, and the bottles shall perish.</p> <p>38 But new wine must be put into new bottles; and both are preserved.</p> <p>39 No man also having drunk old <i>wine</i> straightway desireth new: for he saith, The old is better.</p> |
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WE should observe in these verses, that *men may disagree on the lesser points of religion, while they agree on its weightier matters*. We have this brought out in the alleged difference between the disciples of John the Baptist, and the disciples of Christ. The question was put to our Lord, “Why do the disciples of John fast often, and make prayers, and likewise the disciples of the Pharisees, but thine eat and drink?”

We cannot suppose that there was any essential difference between the doctrines held by these two parties of disciples. The teaching of John the Baptist was doubtless clear and explicit upon all the main points necessary to salvation. The man who could say of Jesus, “Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world,” was not likely to teach his followers anything contrary to the Gospel. His teaching of course lacked the fulness and perfection of His Divine Master’s teaching, but it is absurd to suppose that it contradicted it. Nevertheless there were points of practice on which his disciples differed from those of Christ. Agreeing, as they doubtless did, about the necessity of repentance, and faith, and holiness, they disagreed about such matters as fasting, eating, drinking, and manner of public devotion. One in heart, and hope, and aim, as they were about the weightier matters of inward religion, they were not entirely of one mind about outward matters.

We must make up our minds to see differences of this kind among Christians so long as the world stands. We may regret them much, because of the handle they give to an ignorant and prejudiced world. But they will exist, and are one of the many evidences of our fallen condition. About Church government, about the manner of conducting public worship, about fasts and feasts; and saints’ days, and ceremonials, Christians have never been entirely of one mind, even from the days of the Apostles. On all these points the holiest and ablest servants of God have arrived at different conclusions. Argument, reasoning, persuasion, persecution, have all alike proved unable to produce unity.

Let us, however, bless God that there are many points on which all true

servants of God are thoroughly agreed. About sin and salvation, about repentance, and faith, and holiness, there is a mighty unity among all believers, of every name, and nation, and people, and tongue. Let us make much of these points in our own personal religion. These, after all, are the principal things which we shall think of in the hour of death, and the day of judgment. On other matters we must agree to differ. It will signify little at the last day what we thought about fasting, and eating, and drinking, and ceremonies. Did we repent, and bring forth fruits meet for repentance? Did we behold the Lamb of God by faith, and receive Him as our Saviour? All, of every Church, who are found right on these points, will be saved. All, of every Church, who are found wrong on these points, will be lost for evermore.

We should observe, secondly, in these verses, *the name by which our Lord Jesus Christ speaks of Himself*. Twice He calls Himself “the Bridegroom.”

The name “bridegroom,” like every name applied to our Lord in the Bible, is full of instruction. It is a name peculiarly comforting and encouraging to all true Christians. It teaches the deep and tender *love* with which Jesus regards all sinners of mankind, who believe in Him. Weak, and unworthy, and short-coming as they are in themselves, He feels towards them a tender affection, even as a husband does towards his wife.—It teaches the close and intimate *union*, which exists between Jesus and believers. It is something far nearer than the union of king and subject, master and servant, teacher and scholar, shepherd and sheep. It is the closest of all unions, the union of husband and wife,—the union of which it is written, “what God hath joined together, let no man put asunder.”—Above all the name teaches that entire *participation* of all that Jesus is and has, which is the privilege of every believer. Just as the husband gives to his wife his name, makes her partaker of his property, home, and dignity, and undertakes all her debts and liabilities, so does Christ deal with all true Christians. He takes on Himself all their sins. He declares that they are a part of Himself, and that he who hurts them hurts Him. He gives them, even in this world, such good things as pass man’s understanding. And He promises that in the next world they shall sit with Him on His throne, and go out from His presence no more.

If we know anything of true and saving religion, let us often rest our souls on this name and office of Christ. Let us remember daily, that the weakest of Christ’s people are cared for with a tender care that passeth knowledge, and that whosoever hurts them is hurting the apple of Christ’s eye. In this world we may be poor and contemptible, and laughed at because of our religion. But if we have faith, we are precious in the sight of Christ. The Bridegroom of our soul will one day plead our cause before the whole

world.

We should observe, lastly, in these verses, how *gently and tenderly Christ would have His people deal with young and inexperienced Christians*. He teaches us this lesson by two parables, drawn from the affairs of daily life. He shows the folly of sewing “new cloth on an old garment,” or of putting “new wine into old bottles.” In like manner, He would have us know, there is a want of harmony between a new dispensation and an old one. It is vain to expect those who have been trained and taught under one system, to become immediately used to another system. On the contrary, they must be led on by degrees, and taught as they are able to bear.

The lesson is one which all true Christians would do well to lay to heart, and none perhaps so much as Christian ministers and Christian parents. Forgetfulness of it often does much harm to the cause of truth. The hard judgments and unreasonable expectations of old disciples have often driven back and discouraged young beginners in the school of Christ.

Let us settle it in our minds, that grace must have a beginning in every believer’s heart, and that we have no right to say a man has no grace, because it does not come to full ripeness at once. We do not expect a child to do the work of a full-grown man, though he may one day, if he lives long enough. We must not expect a learner of Christianity to show the faith, and love, and knowledge of an old soldier of the cross. He may become by and by a mighty champion of the truth. But at first we must give him time. There is great need of wisdom in dealing with young people about religion, and, generally speaking, with all young disciples. Kindness, and patience, and gentleness, are of the first importance. We must not try to pour in the new wine too quickly, or it will run over. We must take them by the hand, and lead them on gently. We must beware of frightening, or hurrying them, or pressing them on too fast. If they have only got hold of the main principles of the Gospel, let us not set them down as godless, because of a few lesser matters. We must bear with much weakness and infirmity, and not expect to find old heads on young shoulders, or ripe experience in those who are only babes. There was deep wisdom in Jacob’s saying, “If men should over-drive them one day, all the flock will die.” (Gen. xxxiii. 13.)

NOTES. LUKE V. 33–39.

- 33.—[*Thine eat and drink*] We must not suppose from this expression, that the disciples of our Lord were charged with neglecting to pray. A careless reader might fancy it was so. It is evident from the whole tone of our Lord’s answer, that this was not the charge brought against them. The real charge was, that our Lord’s disciples “did not fast.”
- 34 —[*Bridechamber . . . bridegroom.*] There is a peculiar beauty in our Lord’s use of these figures about Himself and His people, when we remember that John the Baptist himself had used them when speaking of Him to his own disciples. (John iii. 29.) If any of John’s disciples were among those who questioned Him on this question, His expression would doubtless remind them of their Master’s teaching.

35.—[*Then shall they fast.*] This expression has led many to suppose that from the time when our Lord Jesus Christ left the world, literal fasting from meats and drinks at certain seasons, was to be the duty of all Christians.

There seems no ground for this sweeping conclusion. That fasting and abstinence were occasionally practised by believers after our Lord's ascension is clear and plain. That all who may find the practice useful and helpful to their souls at the present day are right in fasting, if they do it without ostentation, is also plain. But the utter absence of any direct injunction, or command to keep fasts in the Church of Christ, either in the Acts or Epistles, and specially in the Epistles to Timothy and Titus, makes it clear that the matter is one which should be handled with caution, and on which every one must be "persuaded in his own mind."

The words before us appear to have a deeper meaning than any mere abstinence from food. They seem to foretell that the period of time between our Lord's first and second advent must be a time of mourning and humiliation to all true believers. They describe the state of mind in which all true Christians should live until their Lord returns. It is a time for daily and hourly self-denial and mortification. The time of fulness and satisfaction cannot be till we see the Bridegroom amongst us again.

36.—[*He spake also a parable.*] The parables of the new piece on the old garment, and the new wine into old bottles, are not without difficulty. It is curious to observe how variously they are interpreted and applied to the subject matter in dispute between our Lord and the Pharisees, by commentators on this passage.

It appears to me that, as in many of our Lord's parables, so in the two before us, we must be careful not to press particular expressions too far, or to seek a spiritual meaning for each individual portion of the whole.

The general truth our Lord desires to enforce on His hearers is the acknowledged incongruity between things old and new, and the unreasonableness of expecting persons accustomed to one system immediately to adopt another as soon as it appears. If we insist on going beyond this point, and must assign a meaning to "the patch," "the rent," and the like, I think we shall only darken counsel, and take nothing by our toil. At any rate all who have attempted it, appear to me to have failed.

39.—[*The old is better.*] It seems very likely that in this concluding verse our Lord specially refers to the disciples of John the Baptist. They had drunk of the "old wine" of John's teaching, and could hardly be expected to become straightway attached to the "new wine" of our Lord's kingdom.

Wordsworth remarks, that the beginning of this sentence is a pure Iambic verse, and may perhaps be a poetical proverb adopted by our Lord, of which St. Luke here gives the Greek form. He reminds us that even when our Lord appeared to Saul, on the way to Damascus, He condescended to use a Gentile proverb. (Acts ix. 5.)