

EXPOSITORY THOUGHTS ON THE GOSPELS.

FOR FAMILY AND PRIVATE USE.

WITH THE TEXT COMPLETE,

And Many Explanatory Notes.

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LUKE VII. 24–30.

<p>24 And when the messengers of John were departed, he began to speak unto the people concerning John, What went ye out into the wilderness for to see? A reed shaken with the wind?</p> <p>25 But what went ye out for to see? A man clothed in soft raiment? Behold, they which are gorgeously appavelled, and live delicately, are in kings' courts.</p> <p>26 But what went ye out for to see? A prophet? Yea, I say unto you, and much more than a prophet.</p> <p>27 This is he, of whom it is written, Be-</p>	<p>hold, I send my messenger before thy face, which shall prepare thy way before thee.</p> <p>28 For I say unto you, Among those that are born of women there is not a greater prophet than John the Baptist: but he that is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.</p> <p>29 And all the people that heard him, and the publicans, justified God, being baptized with the baptism of John.</p> <p>30 But the Pharisees and lawyers rejected the counsel of God against themselves, being not baptized of him.</p>
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The first point that demands our notice in this passage, is *the tender care which Jesus takes of the characters of His faithful servants*. He defends the reputation of John the Baptist, as soon as his messengers were departed. He saw that the people around him were apt to think lightly of John, partly because he was in prison, partly because of the inquiry which his disciples had just brought. He pleads the cause of His absent friend in warm and strong language. He bids His hearers dismiss from their minds their unworthy doubts and suspicions about this holy man. He tells them that John was no wavering and unstable character, a mere reed shaken by the wind. He tells them that John was no mere courtier and hanger-on about king's palaces, though circumstances at the end of his ministry had brought him into connection with king Herod. He declares to them that John was "much more than a prophet," for he was a prophet who had been the subject of prophecy himself. And he winds up his testimony by the remarkable saying, that "among those that are born of woman there is not a greater prophet than John the Baptist."

There is something deeply touching in these sayings of our Lord on behalf of his absent servant. The position which John now occupied as Herod's prisoner was widely different from that which he occupied at the beginning of his ministry. At one time he was the best-known and most popular preacher of his day. There was a time when "there went out to him Jerusalem and all Judæa,—and were baptized in Jordan." (Matt. iii 5.) Now he was a solitary prisoner in Herod's hands, deserted, friendless, and with nothing before him but death. But the want of man's favour is no proof that God is displeased. John the Baptist had one Friend who never failed him and never forsook him,—a Friend whose kindness did not ebb and flow like John's popularity, but was always the same. That Friend was our Lord Jesus Christ.

There is comfort here for all believers who are suspected, slandered, and falsely accused. Few are the children of God who do not suffer in this way, at some time or other. The accuser of the brethren knows well that character is one of the points in which he can most easily wound a Christian. He

knows well that slanders are easily called into existence, greedily received and propagated, and seldom entirely silenced. Lies and false reports are the chosen weapons by which he labours to injure the Christian's usefulness, and destroy his peace. But let all who are assaulted in their characters rest in the thought that they have an Advocate in heaven who knows their sorrows. That same Jesus who maintained the character of His imprisoned servant before a Jewish crowd, will never desert any of His people. The world may frown on them. Their names may be cast out as evil by man. But Jesus never changes, and will one day plead their cause before the whole world.

The second point which demands our attention in these verses is, *the vast superiority of the privileges enjoyed by believers under the New Testament, compared to those of believers under the Old.* This is a lesson which appears to be taught by one expression used by our Lord respecting John the Baptist. After commending his graces and gifts, He adds these remarkable words, "He that is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he."

Our Lord's meaning in using this expression appears to be simply this. He declares that the religious light of the least disciple who lived after His crucifixion and resurrection, would be far greater than that of John Baptist, who died before those mighty events took place. The weakest believing hearer of St. Paul would understand things, by the light of Christ's death on the cross, which John the Baptist could never have explained. Great as that holy man was in faith and courage, the humblest Christian would, in one sense, be greater than he. Greater in grace and works he certainly could not be. But beyond doubt he would be greater in privileges and knowledge.

Such an expression as this ought to teach all Christians to be deeply thankful for Christianity. We have probably very little idea of the wide difference between the religious knowledge of the best-instructed Old Testament believer and the knowledge of one familiar with the New Testament. We little know how many blessed truths of the Gospel were at one time seen through a glass darkly, which now appear to us plain as noon-day. Our very familiarity with the Gospel makes us blind to the extent of our privileges. We can hardly realize at this time how many glorious verities of our faith were brought out in their full proportions by Christ's death on the cross, and were never unveiled and understood till His blood was shed. The hopes of John the Baptist and St. Paul were undoubtedly one and the same. Both were led by one Spirit. Both knew their sinfulness. Both trusted in the Lamb of God. But we cannot suppose that John could have given as full an account of the way of salvation as St. Paul. Both looked at the same object of faith. But one saw it afar off, and could only describe it generally. The other saw it close at hand, and could describe the reason of his hope particularly. Let us learn to be more thankful. The child who knows the story of the cross, possesses a key to religious knowledge which patriarchs and prophets

never enjoyed.

The last point which demands our attention in these verses is, *the solemn declaration which it makes about man's power to injure his own soul*. We read that "The Pharisees and Scribes rejected the counsel of God against themselves." The meaning of these words appears to be simply this, that they rejected God's offer of salvation. They refused to avail themselves of the door of repentance which was offered to them by John the Baptist's preaching. In short they fulfilled to the very letter the words of Solomon: "Ye have set at nought all my counsel and would none of my reproof." (Prov. i. 25.)

That every man possesses a power to ruin himself for ever in hell is a great foundation truth of Scripture, and a truth which ought to be continually before our minds. Impotent and weak as we all are for everything which is good, we are all naturally potent for that which is evil. By continued impenitence and unbelief, by persevering in the love and practice of sin, by pride, self-will, laziness, and determined love of the world, we may bring upon ourselves everlasting destruction. And if this takes place, we shall find that we have no one to blame but ourselves. God has "no pleasure in the death of him that dieth." (Ezek. xviii. 32.) Christ is "willing to gather" men to His bosom, if they will only be gathered. (Matt. xxii. 37.) The fault will lie at man's own door. They that are lost will find that they have "lost their own souls." (Mark viii. 36.)

What are we doing ourselves? This is the chief question that the passage should suggest to our minds. Are we likely to be lost or saved? Are we in the way towards heaven or hell? Have we received into our hearts that Gospel which we hear? Do we really live by that Bible which we profess to believe?—Or are we daily travelling towards the pit, and ruining our own souls? It is a painful thought that the Pharisees are not the only persons who "reject the counsel of God." There are thousands of persons called Christians who are continually doing the very same thing.

NOTES. LUKE VII. 24–30.

24.—[*What went ye out to see?...a reed, &c.*] Let it be noted that both here and in the two following verses the question is equivalent to a strong and positive affirmation. It is as if our Lord had said, "John the Baptist was not a reed shaken by the wind,"—"was not a man clothed in soft raiment,"—"was not merely a prophet."—Such a form of expression is not uncommon in the Bible. A striking example is to be seen in the famous question, "what shall it profit a man to gain the whole world and lose his own soul?" It is equivalent to saying "It shall profit him nothing at all."

[*A reed shaken by the wind.*] Chemnitius observes that this is the very same expression which is used by the heathen satirist, Lucian, in describing the unsettled opinion of the philosophical sects.

25.—[*They which are gorgeously apparelled ...delicately.*] The literal translation of the Greek

words here would be, “they that are in gorgeous apparel, and delicate living.”

The words translated “delicate living,” is only used in one other place in the New Testament, and there rendered, “riot.” (2 Peter ii. 13.)

28.—[*Among those...born of women.*] Chrysostom thinks, that by this expression our Lord “tacitly excepted himself. For though He too was born of a woman, yet not as John, for He was not a mere man, neither was He born in like manner as man, but by a strange and wondrous kind of birth.” This is not a satisfactory interpretation, and seems to involve dangerous consequences.

[*He that is least...greater than he.*] There are many diverse and strange opinions among the commentators about the meaning of these words. Those who wish to examine them, will find a full account of them in Chemnitius and Barradius.

Some think, that the “least in the kingdom of God,” means the least of those who receive Christian baptism, and that John the Baptist never having been baptized, was never regenerated by the Holy Spirit, and therefore was inferior to the humblest person baptized by the Apostles. This is the opinion of Cyril It is too absurd to require refutation. To say of John who was “filled with the Holy Ghost from his mother’s womb,” that he was not born again of the Spirit, is preposterous, and revolting to common sense.

Some think, that the “least in the kingdom of God,” means the least saint in heaven. This is the opinion of Jerome and Beda.

Some think, that the “least in the kingdom,” means the least angel. This is the opinion of Ambrose, Bonaventura, and Thomas Aquinas.

Some think, that the “least in the kingdom,” means our Lord Jesus Christ Himself, who humbled Himself and said, “I am a worm and no man.” Psalm xxii. 7. This is the opinion of Augustine and Chrysostom, and has been maintained by many in every age. But it seems a strained and forced sense to place upon the words.

I believe the true interpretation to be the one I have maintained in the exposition. I believe the “least in the kingdom of God,” to mean the least believer who lived after the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ. I believe the weakest member of the Churches planted by St. Paul, had a clearer knowledge of the exact manner in which God would justify the ungodly than John the Baptist, or anyone who lived before the crucifixion ever could have. The contrast our Lord is drawing, is between the privileges of those who lived to see the great fountain of sin opened by His blood-shedding, and those who died before that blood was shed. We do not realize the enormous difference in the position of these two classes of persons. We do not sufficiently remember how very dimly and indistinctly many great saving truths must needs have been apprehended, before Christ died and the veil was rent in twain. The “way into the holiest was not made manifest,” while John the Baptist lived, and for that reason Jesus says that the least member of the Gospel Church was “greater than he.” His grace and gifts were not greater, but His knowledge and privileges decidedly were.

29.—[*And all the people that heard, &c.*] It is a disputed point whether this verse and the following one contain the words of Christ or of St. Luke, whether they are a continuation of our Lord’s speech or a remark of the Evangelist’s. The question is discussed at length by Maldonatus.

The ancient commentators, including Ambrose, Beda, Euthymius, and, according to Thomas Aquinas, Chrysostom also, regard the two verses as the words of our Lord. Chemnitius supports this opinion.

Lyranus and the modern commentators regard the two verses as the inspired comment of the Evangelist on what our Lord had just been saying.

The question, perhaps, is not one of much importance. To me the two verses appear to

read awkwardly and unnaturally, if taken as the words of the Lord. I should never have thought of regarding them as anything but the words of St. Luke, if the idea had not been suggested to me by others.

[*Justified God...being baptized.*] The meaning of this expression appears to be, that “they declared their belief that John was a prophet sent from God, by submitting to his baptism.” Burkitt says, “Those who believe the message that God sendeth, and obey it, justify God. They that do not believe and obey, accuse and condemn God.” Burgon says, “They acknowledged God’s justice, mercy, truth, and goodness.”

Let it be noted, that here as elsewhere in the New Testament, it is impossible to interpret the word “justify” in the sense of “to make just.” Man cannot make God just, see Ps. li. 4. The word means always, “To declare, count, or reckon just.” “Justified” persons are not persons who are *made* righteous, but persons who are *reckoned* and counted righteous.

30.—[*Rejected the counsel of God against themselves.*] The meaning of this expression appears to be, that they despised, and frustrated, and made of no avail the gracious offer of repentance and salvation, which God sent to them by John the Baptist.

The Greek word translated “rejected” is more frequently translated “despised.” It is also rendered by the words to “disannul,” to “cast off,” to “frustrate,” and to “bring to nothing.” Luke x. 16; Gal. iii. 15; 1 Tim. v. 12; Gal. ii. 21; 1 Cor. i. 19.

The “counsel” spoken of here can in no wise be interpreted as the everlasting counsel of God, whereby He has decreed to save His own elect by Christ. This counsel shall stand. It is not in the power of man to disannul or frustrate it. It probably means here God’s gracious purpose in sending John to preach repentance, and that will of benevolence which God declares Himself to have towards all mankind, and reveals in the Gospel.

The words “against themselves” might equally well have been translated, “towards themselves.” The marginal reading is “within” themselves, which seems less probable than either of the other two senses. The general meaning of the whole sentence, which ever sense of the three we take, remains unaltered.

