

EXPOSITORY THOUGHTS
ON THE GOSPELS.

FOR FAMILY AND PRIVATE USE.

WITH THE TEXT COMPLETE.

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MATTHEW XVIII. 1–14.

1 At the same time came the disciples unto Jesus, saying, Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?

2 And Jesus called a little child unto him, and set him in the midst of them.

3 And said, Verily I say unto you, Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven.

4 Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

5 And whoso shall receive one such little child in my name receiveth me.

6 But whoso shall offend one of these little ones which believe in me, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and *that* he were drowned in the depth of the sea.

7 Woe unto the world because of offences! for it must needs be that offences come; but woe to that man by whom the offence cometh!

8 Wherefore if thy hand or thy foot offend thee, cut them off, and cast *them* from thee: it is better for thee to enter into

life halt or maimed, rather than having two hands or two feet to be cast into everlasting fire.

9 And if thine eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast *it* from thee: it is better for thee to enter into life with one eye, rather than having two eyes to be cast into hell fire.

10 Take heed that ye despise not one of these little ones; for I say unto you, That in heaven their angels do always behold the face of my Father which is in heaven.

11 For the Son of man is come to save that which was lost.

12 How think ye? if a man have an hundred sheep, and one of them be gone astray, doth he not leave the ninety and nine, and goeth into the mountains, and seeketh that which is gone astray.

13 And if so be that he find it, verily I say unto you, he rejoiceth more of that *sheep*, than of the ninety and nine which went not astray.

14 Even so it is not the will of your Father which is in heaven, that one of these little ones should perish.

THE first thing that we are taught in these verses is *the necessity of conversion, and of conversion manifested by childlike humility*. The disciples came to our Lord with the question, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” They spoke as men half-enlightened, and full of carnal expectations. They received an answer well calculated to awaken them from their day-dream,—an answer containing a truth which lies at the very foundation of Christianity: “Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven.”

Let these words sink down deeply in our hearts. Without conversion there is no salvation. We all need an entire change of nature: of ourselves we have neither faith, nor fear, nor love towards God. We “must be born again.” (John iii. 8.) Of ourselves we are utterly unfit for dwelling in God’s presence. Heaven would be no heaven to us if we were not “converted.” It is true of all ranks, classes, and orders of mankind: all are born in sin and children of wrath, and all, without exception, need to be born again and made new creatures. A new heart must be given to us, and a new spirit put within us; old things must pass away, and all things must become new. It is a good thing to be baptized into the Christian Church, and use Christian means of grace: but after all, “are we converted?”

Would we know whether we are really converted? Would we know the test by which we must try ourselves? The surest mark of true conversion is humility. If we have really received the Holy Ghost, we shall show it by a meek and childlike spirit. Like children, we shall think humbly of our own strength and wisdom, and be very dependent on our Father in heaven. Like children, we shall not seek great things in this world; but having food and raiment and a Father's love, we shall be content. Truly this is a heart-searching test! It exposes the unsoundness of many a so-called conversion. It is easy to be a convert from one party to another party, from one sect to another sect, from one set of opinions to another set of opinions: such conversions save no one's soul. What we all want is a conversion from pride to humility,—from high thoughts of ourselves to lowly thoughts of ourselves,—from self-conceit to self-abasement,—from the mind of the Pharisee to the mind of the Publican. A conversion of this kind we must experience, if we hope to be saved. These are the conversions that are wrought by the Holy Ghost.

The next thing that we are taught in these verses is *the great sin of putting stumbling-blocks in the way of believers*. The words of the Lord Jesus on this subject are peculiarly solemn: "Woe unto the world because of offences!—Woe to that man by whom the offence cometh."

We put offences or stumbling-blocks in the way of men's souls whenever we do anything to keep them back from Christ,—or to turn them out of the way of salvation,—or to disgust them with true religion. We may do it directly, by persecuting, ridiculing, opposing, or dissuading them from decided service of Christ. We may do it indirectly, by living a life inconsistent with our religious profession, and by making Christianity loathsome and distasteful by our own conduct. Whenever we do anything of the kind, it is clear, from our Lord's words, that we commit a great sin.

There is something very fearful in the doctrine here laid down. It ought to stir up within us great searchings of heart. It is not enough that we wish to do good in this world: are we quite sure that we are not doing harm?—We may not openly persecute Christ's servants, but are there none that we are injuring by our ways and our example? It is awful to think of the amount of harm that can be done by one inconsistent professor of religion. He gives a handle to the infidel. He supplies the worldly man with an excuse for remaining undecided. He checks the inquirer after salvation. He discourages the saints. He is, in short, a living sermon on behalf of the devil. The last day alone will reveal the wholesale ruin of souls, that "offences" have occasioned in the Church of Christ. One of Nathan's charges against David was, "Thou has given great occasion to the enemies of the Lord to blaspheme." (2 Sam. xii. 14.)

The next thing that we are taught in these verses is *the reality of future punishment after death*. Two strong expressions are used by our Lord on this point. He speaks of being “cast into everlasting fire.” He speaks of being “cast into hell fire.”

The meaning of these words is clear and unmistakeable. There is a place of unspeakable misery in the world to come, to which all who die impenitent and unbelieving, must ultimately be consigned. There is revealed in Scripture a “fiery indignation,” which sooner or later will devour all God’s adversaries. (Heb. x. 27.) The same sure Word which holds out a heaven to all who repent and are converted, declares plainly that there will be a hell for all the ungodly.

Let no man deceive us with vain words upon this awful subject. Men have arisen in these latter days who profess to deny the eternity of future punishment, and repeat the devil’s old argument, that we “shall not surely die.” (Gen. iii. 4.) Let none of their reasonings move us, however plausible they may sound. Let us stand fast in the old paths. The God of love and mercy is also a God of justice. He will surely requite. The flood in Noah’s day, and the burning of Sodom, were meant to show us what He will one day do. No lips have ever spoken so clearly about hell as those of Christ Himself. Hardened sinners will find out, to their cost, that there is such a thing as the “wrath of the Lamb.” (Rev. vi. 17.)

The last thing we are taught in these verses, is *the value that God sets on the least and lowest of believers*. “It is not the will of your Father in heaven, that one of these little ones should perish.”

These words are meant for the encouragement of all true Christians, and not for little children only. The connection in which they are found with the parable of the hundred sheep and one that went astray, seems to place this beyond doubt. They are meant to show us that our Lord Jesus is a Shepherd, who cares tenderly for every soul committed to His charge. The youngest, the weakest, the sickliest of His flock is as dear to Him as the strongest. They shall never perish. None shall ever pluck them out of His hand. He will lead them gently through the wilderness of this world. He will not overdrive them a single day, lest any die. (Gen. xxxiii. 13.) He will carry them through every difficulty. He will defend them against every enemy. The saying which He spoke shall be literally fulfilled: “Of them which Thou gavest me have I lost none.” (John xviii. 9.) With such a Saviour, who need fear beginning to be a thorough Christian? With such a Shepherd, who, having once begun, need fear being cast away?

MATTHEW XVIII. 15–20.

15 Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother.

16 But if he will not hear *thee, then* take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.

17 And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell *it* unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as a heathen man and a publican.

18 Verily I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.

19 Again I say unto you, That if two of you shall agree on earth as touching anything that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven.

20 For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.

THESE words of the Lord Jesus contain an expression which has often been misapplied. The command to “hear the Church,” has been so interpreted as to contradict other passages of God’s Word. It has been falsely applied to the authority of the whole visible Church in matters of doctrine, and so been made an excuse for the exercise of much ecclesiastical tyranny. But the abuse of Scripture truths must not tempt us to neglect the use of them. We must not turn away altogether from any text, because some have perverted it, and made it poison.

Let us notice, in the first place, *how admirable are the rules laid down by our Lord for the healing of differences among brethren.*

If we have unhappily received any injury from a fellow-member of Christ’s Church, the first step to be taken is to visit him “alone,” and tell him his fault. He may have injured us unintentionally, as Abimelech did Abraham (Gen. xxi. 26). His conduct may admit of explanation, like that of the tribes of Reuben, Gad, and Manasseh, when they built an altar, as they returned to their own land (Joshua xxii. 24): at any rate, this friendly, faithful, straightforward way of dealing is the most likely course to win a brother, if he is to be won. “A soft tongue breaketh the bone.” (Prov. xxv. 15.) Who can tell but he may say at once, “I was wrong,”—and make ample reparation?

If however this course of proceeding fails to produce any good effect, a second step is to be taken. We are to “take with us one or two” companions, and tell our brother of his fault in their presence and hearing. Who can tell but his conscience may be stricken, when he finds his misconduct made known, and he may be ashamed and repent? If not, we shall at all events have the testimony of witnesses, that we did all we could to bring our brother to a right mind, and that he deliberately refused, when appealed to, to make amends.

Finally, if this second course of proceeding prove useless, we are to refer the whole matter to the Christian *congregation* of which we are members: we are to “tell it to the Church.” Who can tell but the heart

which has been unmoved by private remonstrances, may be moved by the fear of public exposure? If not, there remains but one view to take of our brother's case: we must sorrowfully regard him as one who has shaken off all Christian principles, and will be guided by no higher motives than "a heathen man and a publican."

The passage is a beautiful instance of the mingled wisdom and tender consideration of our Lord's teaching. What a knowledge it shows of human nature! Nothing does so much harm to the cause of religion as the quarrels of Christians. No stone should be left unturned, no trouble spared, in order to prevent their being dragged before the public.—What a delicate thoughtfulness it shows for the sensitiveness of poor human nature! Many a scandalous breach would be prevented, if we were more ready to practice the rule of "between thee and him alone." Happy would it be for the Church and the world, if this portion of our Lord's teaching was more carefully studied and obeyed! Differences and divisions there will be, so long as the world stands, but many of them would be extinguished at once, if the course recommended in these verses was tried.

In the second place, let us observe *what a clear argument we have in these verses for the exercise of discipline in a Christian congregation.*

Our Lord commands disagreements between Christians, which cannot be otherwise settled, to be referred to the decision of the Church, or Christian assembly to which they belong. "Tell it," He says, "to the Church." It is evident, from this, that He intends every congregation of professing Christians to take cognizance of the moral conduct of its members, either by the action of the whole body collectively, or of heads and elders to whom its authority may be delegated. It is evident also that He intends every congregation to have the power of excluding disobedient and refractory members from participation in its ordinances. "If he refuse," He says, "to hear the Church, let him be to thee as an heathen man and a publican." He says not a word about temporal punishment, and civil disabilities: spiritual penalties are the only penalty He permits the Church to inflict; and when rightly inflicted they are not to be lightly regarded. "Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven." Such appears to be the substance of our Lord's teaching about ecclesiastical discipline.

It is vain to deny that the whole subject is surrounded with difficulties. On no point has the influence of the world weighed so heavily on the action of Churches. On no point have Churches made so many mistakes,—sometimes on the side of sleepy remissness, sometimes on the side of blind severity. No doubt the power of excommunication has been fearfully abused and perverted, and, as Quesnel says, "we ought to be more afraid of our sins than of all the excommunications in the world."

Still it is impossible to deny, with such a passage as this before us, that Church discipline is according to the mind of Christ, and, when wisely exercised, is calculated to promote a Church's health and well-being. It can never be right that all sorts of people, however wicked and ungodly, should be allowed to come to the table of the Lord, no man letting or forbidding. It is the bounden duty of every Christian to use his influence to prevent such a state of things. A perfect communion can never be attained in this world, but purity should be the mark at which we aim. An increasingly high standard of qualification for full church-membership, will always be found one of the best evidences of a prosperous Church.

Let us observe, in the last place, *what gracious encouragement Christ holds out to those who meet together in His name*. He says, "Where two or three are gathered together in My name, there am I in the midst of them." That saying is a striking proof of our Lord's divinity. God alone can be in more places than one at the same time.

There is comfort in these words for all who love to meet together for religious purposes. At every assembly for public worship, at every gathering for prayer and praise, at every missionary meeting, at every Bible reading, the King of kings is present, Christ Himself attends. We may be often disheartened by the small number who are present on such occasions, compared with the number of those who meet for worldly ends; we may sometimes find it hard to bear the taunts and ridicule of an ill-natured world, which cries like the enemy of old, "What do these feeble people?" (Nehem. iv. 2.) But we have no reason for despondency. We may boldly fall back on these words of Jesus. At all such meetings we have the company of Christ Himself.

There is solemn rebuke in these words for all who neglect the public worship of God, and never attend meetings for any religious purpose. They turn their backs on the society of the Lord of lords. They miss the opportunity of meeting Christ Himself. It avails nothing to say that the proceedings of religious meetings are marked by weakness and infirmity, or that as much good is got by staying at home as going to church. The words of our Lord should silence such arguments at once. Surely men are not wise when they speak contemptuously of any gathering where Christ is present.

May we all ponder these things! If we have met together with God's people for spiritual purposes in times past, let us persevere, and not be ashamed. If we have hitherto despised such meetings, let us consider our ways, and learn wisdom.

MATTHEW XVIII. 21–35.

21 Then came Peter to him, and said, Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? till seven times?

22 Jesus saith unto him, I say not unto thee, until seven times: but, Until seventy times seven?

23 Therefore is the kingdom of heaven likened unto a certain king, which would take account of his servants.

24 And when he had begun to reckon, one was brought unto him, which owed him ten thousand talents.

25 But forasmuch as he had not to pay, his lord commanded him to be sold, and his wife and children, and all that he had, and payment to be made.

26 The servant therefore fell down, and worshipped him, saying, Lord, have patience with me, and I will pay thee all.

27 Then the Lord of that servant was moved with compassion, and loosed him, and forgave him the debt.

28 But the same servant went out, and found one of his fellow-servants, which owed him an hundred pence: and he laid

hands on him, and took *him* by the throat, saying, Pay me that thou owest.

29 And his fellow servant fell down at his feet, and besought him, saying, Have patience with me, and I will pay thee all.

30 And he would not: but went and cast him into prison, till he should pay the debt.

31 So when his fellow servants saw what was done, they were very sorry, and came and told unto their Lord all that was done.

32 Then his lord, after that he had called him, said unto him, O thou wicked servant, I forgave thee all that debt, because thou desiredst me:

33 Shouldst not thou also have had compassion on thy fellow servant, even as I had pity on thee?

34 And his lord was wroth, and delivered him to the tormentors, till he should pay all that was due unto him.

35 So likewise shall my heavenly Father do also unto you, if ye from your hearts forgive not every one his brother their trespasses.

IN these verses the Lord Jesus deals with a deeply important subject,—the forgiveness of injuries. We live in a wicked world, and it is vain to expect that we can escape ill-treatment, however carefully we may behave. To know how to conduct ourselves, when we are ill-treated, is of great moment to our souls.

In the first place, *the Lord Jesus lays it down as a general rule, that we ought to forgive others to the uttermost.* Peter put the question, “How oft shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? till seven times?” He received for answer, “I say not unto thee till seven times, but until seventy times seven.”

The rule here laid down must of course be interpreted with sober-minded qualification. Our Lord does not mean that offences against the law of the land and the good order of society, are to be passed over in silence. He does not mean that we are to allow people to commit thefts and assaults with impunity. All that He means is, that we are to study a general spirit of mercy and forgivingness towards our brethren. We are to bear much, and to put up with much, rather than quarrel. We are to look over much, and submit to much, rather than have any strife. We are to lay aside everything like malice, strife, revenge, and retaliation. Such

feelings are only fit for heathens. They are utterly unworthy of a disciple of Christ.

What a happy world it would be if this rule of our Lord's was more known and better obeyed! How many of the miseries of mankind are occasioned by disputes, quarrels, lawsuits, and an obstinate tenacity about what men call "their rights!" How many of them might be altogether avoided, if men were more willing to forgive, and more desirous for peace! Let us never forget that a fire cannot go on burning without fuel: just in the same way it takes two to make a quarrel. Let us each resolve, by God's grace, that of these two we will never be one. Let us resolve to return good for evil, and blessing for cursing, and so to melt down enmity, and change our foes into friends. (Rom. xii. 20.) It was a fine feature in Archbishop Cranmer's character, that if you did him an injury he was sure to be your friend.

In the second place, our Lord supplies us with *two powerful motives for exercising a forgiving spirit*. He tells us a story of a man who owed an enormous sum to his master, and had "nothing to pay;" nevertheless at the time of reckoning his master had compassion on him, and "forgave him all." He tells us that this very man, after being forgiven himself, refused to forgive a fellow servant a trifling debt of a few pence. He actually cast him into prison, and would not abate a jot of his demand. He tells us how punishment overtook this wicked and cruel man, who, after receiving mercy, ought surely to have shown mercy to others. And finally, he concludes the parable with the impressive words, "So likewise shall my heavenly Father do unto you, if ye from your hearts forgive not everyone his brother their trespasses."

It is clear from this parable that one motive for forgiving others ought to be the recollection that we all need forgiveness at God's hands ourselves. Day after day we are coming short in many things, "leaving undone what we ought to do, and doing what we ought not to do." Day after day we require mercy and pardon. Our neighbours' offences against us are mere trifles, compared with our offences against God. Surely it ill becomes poor erring creatures like us to be extreme in marking what is done amiss by our brethren, or slow to forgive it.

Another motive for forgiving others ought to be the recollection of the day of judgment, and the standard by which we shall all be tried in that day. There will be no forgiveness in that day for unforgiving people. Such people would be unfit for heaven. They would not be able to value a dwelling-place to which "mercy" is the only title, and in which "mercy" is the eternal subject of song. Surely if we mean to stand at the right hand, when Jesus sits on the throne of His glory, we must learn, while we are on earth, to forgive.

Let these truths sink down deeply into our hearts. It is a melancholy fact that there are few Christian duties so little practised as that of forgiveness. It is sad to see how much bitterness, unmercifulness, spite, hardness, and unkindness there is among men. Yet there are few duties so strongly enforced in the New Testament Scriptures as this duty is, and few the neglect of which so clearly shuts a man out of the kingdom of God.

Would we give proof that we are at peace with God, washed in Christ's blood, born of the Spirit, and made God's children by adoption and grace? Let us remember this passage: like our father in heaven, let us be forgiving. Has any man injured us? Let us this day forgive him. As Leighton says, "We ought to forgive ourselves little, and others much."

Would we do good to the world? Would we have any influence on others, and make them see the beauty of true religion? Let us remember this passage. Men who care not for doctrines can understand a forgiving temper.

Would we grow in grace ourselves, and become more holy in all our ways, words, and works? Let us remember this passage.—Nothing so grieves the Holy Spirit, and brings spiritual darkness over the soul, as giving way to a quarrelsome and unforgiving temper. (Ephes. iv. 30-32.)