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“Search the Scriptures” John 5:39

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Studies in the Scriptures appeared without interruption from 1922 to 1953, each issue including six to eight articles addressing a different topic in a series. While virtually unknown to the Christian world when he died, his writings continue to grow in their influence upon God's people around the world, through their clarity, careful exposition, and Christ-centeredness.

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FRIENDS

At the very beginning of human history, God Himself declared, "It is not good that the man should be alone" (Gen 2:18). He was not made for solitude, but society, not to live in isolation, but in company with others. Yet since God spoke those words, sin has entered the world and human nature has become depraved. But Christ too has entered it, and His Spirit is conforming a chosen people unto His holy image. There are therefore two totally distinct classes of people on earth, the regenerate and the unregenerate, and it makes a tremendous difference, both to the formation of character and the ordering of our lives, from which of these classes each of us selects his most intimate associates. Scripture plainly warns us that "the friendship of the world is enmity with God: whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God" (Jam 4:4). To His own people He has said, "Have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather reprove them" (Eph 5:11), and again, "Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers: for...what communion hath light with darkness?...Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing" (2Co 6:14, 17). Thus, though he be a social creature, it is rank disobedience and disloyalty unto his Master for the Christian to be friendly with those who are His enemies.

For wise and good reasons, God has ordained, and orders His providences accordingly, that many of His people shall have considerable contact with the unregenerate, labouring with them side by side as they earn their daily bread, thereby affording them occasion to shine as lights in dark places and to witness for Him by their ways and workmanship (Ti 2:9-10). While it be a Christian's duty to seek to promote their welfare and to heed the injunction, "As we have therefore opportunity, let us do good unto all men" (Gal 6:10), that is very far from signifying that he is to make any of them his bosom companions or seek their company after the day's labour is finished. Great care needs to be taken in the selection of those we propose making free with, and particularly does the young believer need to be much in prayer for discernment that he may make a wise selection of those who are the most suitable companions for him, for nothing is more deadening to the spirit than consorting with the world. It is not the ones who are most congenial to our natural tastes but those who are walking the closest with God, and are most likely to help us spiritually, who should be sought unto.

The choice of our friends is a matter of great practical importance, and therefore much caution and care should be exercised therein. Not only is each person known by the company that he keeps, but, for better or worse, he is morally affected by the same. Voluntarily or involuntarily, we become like those with whom we intimately associate. "He that walketh with wise men shall be wise; but a companion of fools shall be destroyed" (Pro 13:20). As a close observer of human nature expressed it, "Companionships influence us by way of communication and suggestion, by combination and co-operation for good or evil ends, by confirmation or assimilation to our companions themselves." It must be so,

for there are such interchanges of thought and feeling that they serve to mould one another's thinking, regulate their emotions, and direct their aims—and, the closer be the bond of intimacy and the freer the interchange, the greater is the influence of the one upon the other. They will inevitably either elevate or degrade their conceptions, determine the objects of attachment, affect the moral judgment, tendering or dulling the conscience. "Iron sharpeneth iron; so a man sharpeneth the countenance of his friend" (Pro 27:17)—as to associate with those who are well informed serves to stimulate the mind and quicken thought.

"Make no friendship with an angry man; and with a furious man thou shalt not go; lest thou learn his ways, and get a snare to thy soul" (Pro 22:24-25). Such is poor human nature that we are much more easily contaminated by evil company than we are refined by the good. Most essential is it, then, that we fraternize with none but those who will set before us an example of true piety, encourage us in the work of mortification and the denying of self, inspire to heavenly mindedness, provoke unto good works and zeal for the glory of God. The real friend is not the one who humours my fancies and flatters my vanity, but who has my highest interests at heart, and acts accordingly. Our lot is cast in a day when real friends are like genuine jewels—precious, but rare. Each of the Lord's people should be able truthfully to say, "I have not sat with vain persons, neither will I go in with dissemblers. I have hated the congregation of evil doers; and will not sit with the wicked" (Psa 26:4-5). That is the negative side; positively, his testimony should be, "I am a companion of all them that fear thee, and of them that keep thy precepts" (Psa 119:63).

"Faithful are the wounds of a friend" (Pro 27:6). One of the offices of real friendship is to give reproofs where such are seen to be needful, for as the preceding verse tells us, "Open rebuke is better than secret love." This is a task which calls for much grace and wisdom. All reproofs do not proceed from love, nor are they given in a friendly spirit and manner. Only too often do they issue from self-righteousness and a delight in finding fault, and are delivered in a fleshly way. Yet even then we should prayerfully ponder what has been said to us. Genuine godliness desires to have its faults corrected, and often that means they require to be pointed out. "Let the righteous smite me: it shall be a kindness: and let him reprove me; it shall be an excellent oil, which shall not break my head" (Psa 141:5). It may wound my pride and hurt my feelings, but it can do me no harm; yea, with God's blessing, it will do me much good if I receive it with meekness. The spirit and manner in which a reproof be *given* constitute a real test of character, and still more so how it be *received*. The fool will resent it, and the proud be offended, but the truly humble are more willing to be admonished than praised.

The fear of displeasing and severing the ties of friendship is not to suffer us to maintain a guilty silence. I must discharge my duty at all costs, and deliver my own soul. "Thou shalt not hate thy brother in thine heart: thou shalt in any wise [no matter what be the consequences] rebuke thy neighbour, and not suffer sin upon him" (Lev 19:17). Here the deceitfulness of the human heart is divinely exposed. It is not love which causes silence in order to avoid hurting his feelings, but hatred if you rebuke not his sin. Moreover, if he truly hates sin, he will welcome its being pointed out to him; but if he takes it ill and henceforth gives you the cold shoulder, then his "friendship" is not worth having. He may indeed feel keenly your rebuke, and at first the flesh rise up in opposition thereat; but if he be truly spiritual, he will soon recover himself and realize that you acted the part of a true friend

towards him, esteeming you the more highly on account of the same. “Reprove one that hath understanding, and he will understand knowledge” (Pro 19:25). “Yea, rebuke a wise man, and he will love thee” (Pro 9:8); but, “he that reproveth a scorner getteth to himself shame”—will be insulted for his pains (Pro 18:24).

“A man that hath friends must show himself friendly” (Pro 18:24). Friendship is reciprocal. Not only must there be a mutual spirit of give and take, but if it is to be of real service, I must “show myself friendly” when rebuked, by evidencing myself to be amenable¹ and manifesting gratitude for such faithful dealings with me. *That* is part of the spiritual meaning of Proverbs 18:24. “Reproofs of instruction are the way of life” (Pro 6:23), for they are one of the means God uses in convicting us of sins of which we are unconscious. “Ointment and perfume rejoice the heart: so doth the sweetness of a man’s friend by hearty counsel” (Pro 27:9). That is another office of friendship (note its coming right after verse 6!), to advise when the other is in perplexity and trouble. Such tenderness and sweetness will heal the wounds which the reproofs have made! “Sympathy is the balm of friendship” (Thomas Manton, 1620-1677).

All friendship pales into utter insignificance when compared with that of Christ’s. “Greater love hath no man than this: that a man lay down his life for his friend” (Joh 15:13). But though no man ever yet manifested greater love than that, *His* far exceeded it, for He laid down His life for those who were His *enemies* (Rom 5:10). “And what amazing, what everlasting, what unexampled proofs did He give of His friendship! He engaged from everlasting as our Surety. He took our nature, married our persons, paid all our debts, bore the whole weight of our sins and His Father’s wrath; and having died for us, He took up both the person and causes of all His people. He is now carrying on the whole purpose of redemption, and never intermits one moment an unceasing attention to our present and eternal interests. Neither will He, until He hath brought home all His redeemed to glory, that where He is there they may be also” (Robert Hawker, 1753-1827).

The friendship of Christ imports² [*first*] a hearty welcome unto all who respond to His gracious invitation to come unto Him. *Second*, that such will be the objects of His loving ministrations. *Third*, an inestimable privilege on their part to be admitted into such a relationship. *Fourth*, His gracious carriage to treat with them so familiarly—manifesting Himself unto and opening His heart to them (Joh 15:15). *Fifth*, a pressing duty, that they carry themselves as His friends, so valuing communion with Him as to eschew³ whatever would mar it, seeking to please and glorify Him in all things (Joh 15:14).

¹ **amenable** – open and responsive.

² **imports** – means; signifies.

³ **eschew** – avoid.

EXPOSITION OF JOHN'S FIRST EPISTLE

17. Christ Our Exemplar (2:6)

*“He that saith he abideth in him ought himself
also so to walk, even as he walked.”*

That is supplementary to verses 3-5, completing what is set forth therein. The “he that saith” intimates that it is the testing of profession which is still in view—here a yet severer and more searching trial is made. First, a saving knowledge of God must be demonstrated by a keeping of His commandments. Then the scope of our subjection unto God is enlarged upon, by showing it includes the keeping of His “Word”—a being regulated by the entire written revelation He has given us, regarding every jot and tittle in it as of divine authority. Now the nature of that obedience is defined. A mere outward compliance with the divine precepts, no matter how punctilious⁴ and comprehensive it be, is not sufficient. We are required to walk even as Christ walked—to be regulated by the same principles, actuated by the same motives, directed unto the same ends as His were. Thus this verse describes the kind of obedience which is necessary in order to our having fellowship with the Father and with His Son. Walking in the light is not enough: it must be such a walking as marked that of the Lord Jesus.

It has been remarked that to have fellowship with God, to know Him, to love Him, to be in Him, and to abide in Him are expressions which, in John's epistle, all mean substantially the same thing. No doubt this is so, nevertheless there are shades of distinction between them, and it is to our loss if we fail to perceive the same. In our judgment there is a designed gradation and intensification in the several expressions used in the passage we are now studying, just as there is in the different tests of profession there named. First, John shows how we may know that we know Him, then how we may be assured that we are in Him, and now of our abiding in Him. The first signifies a saving acquaintance with God in Christ; the second, that we are one with or united to Him; the third, that we are rooted and grounded in Him. It should be pointed out that the Old Testament saints knew God as truly and intimately as did the New Testament saints (for the latter were certainly not more favoured in this respect than were Enoch, Abram, Moses, David, etc.), and that they blessedly realized they were covered by the wings of El Shaddai (Psa 36:7) and underneath them were the everlasting arms (Deu 33:27).

To come to Christ, to be in Christ, to abide in Christ, and to walk according to Christ express four of the principal aspects and distinguishing features of the Christian life. In 1:7, the walking is with God in holy communion; here it is walking before God, and outwardly before men. In 2:4, profession is made of knowing God in Christ, which is simply an avowal of His name and salvation; but in 2:6 the claim is made of abiding in Him,

⁴ **punctilious** – precise; meticulous.

which signifies a continuation of the same, for perseverance is necessary to confirm it, as our Lord declared, “He that shall endure unto the end, the same shall be saved” (Mat 24:13). As a number of things are included by the term “coming” to Christ, and still more by being “in Him,” so several distinct concepts are imported by abiding in Him. It signifies to rest on Christ alone for the whole of our salvation, to continue in the belief, confession, and acknowledgment of the same, to remain steadfast in His doctrine or teaching, to persevere in obedience to Him. Hebrews 10:23 is an exhortation unto the same: “Let us hold fast the profession of our faith without wavering.” On the other hand, “no man, having put his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God” (Luk 9:62).

Abiding in Christ connotes a lasting experience, in contrast with those evanescent⁵ effects which a hearing of the gospel produces in so many, which are likened to the early dew which soon evaporates (Hos 6:4). Further light is cast upon the term by our Lord in John 15:4-5, “Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine; no more can ye, except ye abide in me. I am the vine, ye are the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing” (and note the two verses that follow). Thus to “abide” in Christ means to live wholly on Him, to be completely dependent upon Him, to cleave thoroughly unto Him, to seek refuge constantly in Him, as in a strong tower, and to be established in Him. Now the onus⁶ resting on anyone who professes to abide in Christ is a very real and pressing one, a present and lasting one, namely to walk himself even as He walked, and thereby own Him as Lord and Master, making it manifest that he is a partaker of His holiness (Heb 12:10), indwelt by the same Spirit. In no other way can he substantiate his profession, and so honour and glorify Him. Such a walk is not optional but obligatory. There is a real necessity of so doing if we are to furnish clear proof that we belong to and are followers of the Lord Jesus.

In addition to our remarks on the figurative force of “walk” in 1:6-7, we would here point out that it has respect principally to the practical side of things—believing in Christ and a hearty enjoyment of Him are to be translated into deeds. “As ye have therefore received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk ye in him” (Col 2:6). Make the reality thereof apparent unto beholders by a gospel practice souring the sweetest sin, making Christ’s yoke easy. Thereby is the trial of faith to be made: not by your degree of confidence, but by the extent of your conquest of sin, subduing your lusts, overcoming of the world. Thereby the beauty of faith is manifested—by letting its light so shine before men that they may see your good works and glorify your Father which is in heaven. Faith cannot be seen by our fellows, but its fruits can in a godly walk. Hereby the comfort of faith accrues to ourselves. It is by gospel conformity that a good conscience is maintained and the smile of the Lord enjoyed. “Great peace have they which love thy law” (Psa 119:165), and the effect of righteousness is “quietness and assurance for ever” (Isa 32:17). Thus a godly walk is an intensely practical thing.

The term “walk” also imports progress, for to stand still is not to walk. Walking denotes growth from faith to faith (Rom 1:17), from strength to strength (Psa 84:7), from glo-

⁵ **evanescent** – quickly fading or disappearing.

⁶ **onus** – burden; responsibility.

ry to glory (2Co 3:18). There is no such thing as remaining stationary in the Christian life. If we do not go forward by the strength of grace we shall go backward by the power of corruption. There are indeed those who maintain the routine of outward religious duties, yet who make no advance—as a spinning wheel goes round but is in the same place still. Spiritual walking is in contrast both with lazy listlessness and useless running around in circles. It signifies an increase in the experiential knowledge of Christ, a closer conformity to His death, and a better acquaintance with the power of His resurrection, a deeper insight into the mysteries of the gospel. It is true a believer may fall, relapse, backslide, so that his feet are so benumbed he ceases to “walk”; but if he really be a child of God he will profit from his falls; for when he gets to his feet again his falls make him more humble, more dependent, more watchful, more circumspect, and thereby he will run faster in the ways of God.

The term “walk” also connotes permanency, both in the ways and the doctrine of Christ, as is clear from “rooted and built up in him, and stablished in the faith” (Col 2:7). A single step is not a walk: the figure expresses steady motion. True, different figures are used to set forth other aspects of the Christian life, as in the verse just quoted. The believer is to be active yet rooted, to walk and yet be stable. On the one hand, “be ye steadfast, unmoveable”; on the other side, “always abounding in the work of the Lord” (1Co 15:58). “Like the two feet of a pair of compasses: the one foot of the compass stands steady in the centre, and the other draws the line and goes round. So it is with the believer: his faith is like the foot of the compass that stands fast in the centre, Christ and His doctrine; but his gospel practice is the part that is like the other foot of the compass—it never stands, but ever moves in the way of the Lord” (Ralph Erskine, 1685-1754). Thus, “walking” is also opposed to leaping, for in the former one foot is stationary while the other moves, whereas in the latter both are employed together—to leap out of one doctrine into another is neither walking nor being steadfast in the faith (Eph 4:14).

“Ought himself also to walk, even as he walked.” This is one of several verses in this epistle which takes it for granted that its readers were already acquainted with John’s Gospel (see the fifth paragraph of the introduction of this book), for to walk as Christ walked assumes that they knew how He walked. Now everything recorded in Scripture of our blessed Lord should engage the devoutest attention of His people, yet it is to be feared that many of them give an entirely disproportionate consideration to His walk. While we should indeed be deeply impressed by what one termed “the crises of the Christ”—such as His incarnation, temptation, transfiguration, death, resurrection, and ascension—yet between His virgin birth and His victorious resurrection lay His virtuous life, and that is described at much fuller length than any of those crises! It was by His holy walk that the divine Law was magnified and made honourable in the very place where it had been so despised and dishonoured. It was by His immaculate life that Christ evinced Himself to be a fit sacrifice for sin, the Lamb “without blemish and without spot” (1Pe 1:19).

In the preceding verses the apostle had spoken of keeping God’s commandments and Word; here he makes reference to the only One who ever perfectly did so on this earth. Preeminently was the life of Christ a walk of obedience. His obedience was the absolute conformity of His entire spirit and soul unto the will of His Father, His ready and cheerful performance of every duty which God had appointed Him. This obedience He flawlessly carried out amid the sorest trials, with infinite respect unto Him whose Servant (Isa 42:1)

He had voluntarily become. The laws which He kept were, first, those to which He was subject considered simply as man, namely the Ten Commandments; second, those to which He was subject considered as Son of David (Mat 1:1), namely the ceremonial laws of Israel (see Luk 2:21-24, Mat 8:4, and His keeping of the feasts for illustrations of His compliance therewith); third, those which devolved⁷ upon Him as Mediator, namely carrying out the stipulations of the everlasting covenant—such as becoming incarnate, preaching the gospel, calling His disciples, putting away the sins of His people and bringing in an everlasting righteousness. The closer the four Gospels be read in the light of this fact, the more clearly will it be seen that obedience to His Father was Christ's supreme mission when He came down to this earth.

Psalm 40:7-10 reveals that it was to comply with what had been written of Him in the volume of God's Book that He became incarnate and delighted to perform God's pleasure. "I came down from heaven, not to do mine own will, but the will of him that sent me" (Joh 6:38). Every act of Christ during the thirty-three years that He tabernacled among men was distinctly and designedly an act of submission to God. He was baptized in order to fulfill all righteousness (Mat 3:15). Satan's design in the temptation was to turn aside the Saviour from the path of complete surrender to God's will. But in vain: each assault of the enemy was repulsed by an "It is written" (Mat 4:1-11)—"I refuse to disobey My Father." The perfect Servant chose His ministerial headquarters in accordance with God's revealed will. It was neither force of circumstances nor personal inclination which moved Christ to dwell in Capernaum, but that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by Isaiah (Mat 4:13-16). Though Christ was tender, sympathetic, and full of compassion, yet the motive prompting Him to heal the sick was the doing of God's will. His miracles of mercy were wrought that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by Isaiah (Mat 8:16-17). The laying down of His life was in obedience to the Father (Joh 10:18).

As the earthly life of the Lord Jesus was a walk of obedience, so also was it one of faith. In becoming incarnate God's Son took upon Him a dependent nature, and therefore did He live a life of trust in His heavenly Father. The varied actings of His faith, in all its diversified phases, may be seen portrayed, not only in the gospels, but also in the Messianic Psalms and the announcements of Him by the prophets. As the kinsman Redeemer of His people Christ became truly "of one" with the many sons He was to bring to glory, and in all things was "made like unto his brethren" (Heb 2:11, 17). Yet as the Firstborn, here too He has the pre-eminence and therefore is He seen not among those of Hebrews 11, but distinguished from them and placed apart in 12:2, as the grand Model for all racers, the supreme Example of their faith. It is in the earthly life of Jesus, and nowhere else, that we have the ideal Pattern. Each of those mentioned in Hebrews 11 displayed some single aspect of the life of faith; but in the Saviour they were all combined in their consummate excellence. In 12:2, the word for "Author" does not mean so much one who originates as one who "takes the lead," while the term "Finisher" is rendered "Captain" in 2:10, and "Prince" in Acts 3:15. Thus it is as the One going in advance that our Lord is to be "looked to," as the perfect Pattern of faith for us to follow.

⁷ **devolved** – were transferred, delegated.

The earthly life of Jesus was one of entire dependence upon the Father. Hear Him saying, "Thou art he that took me out of the womb: thou didst make me hope when I was upon my mother's breasts. I was cast upon thee from the womb: thou art my God from my mother's belly" (Psa 22:9-10). How that brings out His uniqueness! In faith, as in everything else, He has "the pre-eminence!" It was not only in manhood, or even in childhood, but from very earliest infancy that He drew His support from the Triune God. The whole of His prayer life exemplified the same fact, expressing as it did His felt need of divine strength and succor. "I live by the Father" (Joh 6:57) was His express avowal. A life of faith is one lived in communion with God, and never did another enjoy such a deep and constant realization of the divine presence as did the Man Christ Jesus. "I have set the LORD always before me" (Psa 16:8) was His confession. "He that sent me is with me" (Joh 8:29) was ever a present reality to His consciousness. From Bethlehem to Calvary He had, by faith, unbroken and unclouded fellowship with the Father.

So too the life and walk of Jesus was one of hope, which is a sure expectation of desired good—sure because promised by Him who cannot lie (Ti 1:2). Hope is that spiritual grace which enables its possessor to look away from the perishing things of time and sense, above the shows and shams of this world, unto the enduring realities of eternity, and which gives him a present enjoyment (by confident anticipation) of the same. That which entralls and enchains the ungodly had no power over the perfect man. "I have overcome the world" (Joh 16:33), He declared, and when the devil offered Him all its kingdoms He bade him, "Get thee hence" (Mat 4:10). So vivid was His realization of the unseen that in the midst of earth's engagements He spoke of Himself as "the Son of man which is in heaven" (Joh 3:13). It was "for the joy set before him" that He endured the cross (Heb 12:2); that which sustained Him was having respect unto the recompense of the reward. That reward was the bliss of knowing He had finished the work which the Father had given Him to do, of being reinstated in the glory which He had with Him before the world was (Joh 17:5), and having effected the salvation of His Church; and so as He faced the immediate prospect of death He averred, "My flesh also shall rest in hope" (Psa 16:9).

The life and walk of Jesus was one of unbounded love. This supplies another link with the context, for in 2:5 we are told, "Whoso keepeth his word, in him verily is the love of God perfected"—has attained its proper end. Real obedience is nothing more and nothing less than the exercise of love and the directing of it unto what God has commanded. Any external compliance with His precepts which proceeds not from holy affections is worthless. Now as none other kept the Word of God as Christ did, so none other manifested unto Him such pure and transcendent love. When He entered this world He did so declaring, "Lo, I come...I delight to do thy will, O my God: yea, thy law is within my heart" (Psa 40:7-8)—enshrined in My affections. Because He delighted in God's will, His obedience was not only voluntary, but cheerful and universal, extending to every requirement of the divine Law without any omission or violation. "But that the world may know that I love the Father; and as the Father gave me commandment, even so I do" (Joh 14:31). "I do always those things that please him" (Joh 8:29).

"I have manifested thy name" (Joh 17:6)—all that God is in a manifestative and communicative way. The Son came down from heaven with this express purpose, that in His incarnation, person, walk, ministry, and atoning sacrifice He should declare the Father (Joh

1:18). In and through and by the incarnate Son the invisible God has opened to us the Holy of Holies and made known what has been kept secret from the foundation of the world. That which was beyond the reach of the human mind was beheld in the reality of a human life when the Word became flesh (Joh 1:14). Christ has presented to our view all the divine attributes. He unfolded God's wisdom, showed forth His power, revealed His grace, exhibited His faithfulness as the fulfiller of His prophecies and the performer of His promises. Now we cannot do so to the same extent, but we are required to be Godlike in our measure. He is light and we are to "walk as children of light" (Eph 5:8). God is holy, and so must we be in our lives (1Pe 1:15). He is love, and we are to be "imitators of God, and walk in love as Christ also did" (Eph 5:1-2).

Not only did the Lord Jesus honour God in His daily walk by perfectly performing the requirements of the first table of the Law, but equally so in regard to the second table, the demands of which are all comprehended in "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself" (Mat 22:39). Blessedly is that expressed in those words, "who went about doing good" (Act 10:38), which like the "He hath done all things well" (Mar 7:37) is one of the terse but pregnant summaries of His peerless life. It presents to us a general but vivid view of His varied and active ministry, the whole of which consisted in promoting the interests of His fellows. Benevolence characterized His entire course among men. His prayers, His teaching, His miracles, His every movement, were directed unto the well-being of others, ever and always He "went about doing good" (Act 10:38)—unto friends and enemies, intimates and strangers alike, unto their bodies as well as their souls. Of none other could this be said absolutely; of others in their measure, and only as possessed of His Spirit and as they learned of Him.

"He that saith he abideth in him ought himself also so to walk, even as he walked." The "even as" is not a note of equality, but of likeness. To make Christ's life the rule of ours is a pressing Christian duty. But like that word "duty," "ought" has an unpleasant sound to supercilious⁸ ears. Nevertheless, the fact remains that many passages set Christ before us as the Model at which it is incumbent that His people should ever aim. How else shall they distinguish themselves from carnal professors and the unregenerate who walk "according to the course of this world" (Eph 2:2)? Repeatedly did Christ speak of His disciples following Him (Mat 16:24, Joh 10:27, etc.). Paul bids us, "Be ye followers of me, even as I also am of Christ" (1Co 11:1). "Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow his steps" (1Pe 2:21). He displayed in His walk that which He requires from His redeemed, that they "may grow up into him in all things" (Eph 4:15). Conformity unto Him is ever to be our endeavour: not only in our conduct, but also in the spirit actuating it. "Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus" (Phi 2:5).

To walk as Christ walked is a moral obligation resting upon the Christian, for he is not his own, but bought with a price (1Co 6:19-20). The sacrifice of Christ demands nothing less; the honour of His name requires it; His love should constrain us thereto. A life of self-pleasing is utterly inconsistent with our union with Him. The Head was holy and humble; shall His members be carnal and proud? In the routine of our daily lives, in each relation we are called to fill—social, commercial, domestic—we should make it a point of honour,

⁸ **supercilious** – haughty; arrogant.

and esteem it a holy privilege, to ask, “How would Christ act in such circumstances?” and seek by all that is within us to do likewise. We ought to in order that God may find in us every hour that which is a sweet savour of His Son. Only so shall we “walk worthy of the Lord unto all pleasing” (Col 1:10). Only so shall we “shine as lights in the world” (Phi 2:15). Only so shall we “show forth his virtues” (1Pe 2:9, margin). Only so shall we be His witnesses and representatives in this scene. Only so shall we truly glorify Him.

THE LIFE AND TIMES OF JOSHUA

69. *God and War*

The title of this article may possibly shock some of our readers, thinking that “Satan and War” would be a more appropriate and accurate one. There are an increasing number today among churchgoers who repudiate the idea that God has anything to do, designedly and directly, with such calamities as tidal waves, earthquakes, or wars. Since there *are* such things, these people attribute them to, and blame them upon, the devil. Their beliefs differ little from the religious conceptions of the ancient Persians and modern Parsees, for Zoroastrianism teaches that there are two Gods presiding over this sphere, a good and an evil one. That all blessings are to be ascribed unto the former and all our ills unto the latter. And just as that ancient system of philosophy and religion contains no definite statement as to which of the opposing deities will ultimately triumph, so these modern dualists have so little confidence in the true and living God, and are so determined to dissociate Him from the affairs of this scene, that they talk (and even write) about the likelihood of this earth being blown to smithereens by some devilish kind of bomb, instead of this world being (when it has served His purpose) destroyed *by its Creator* with fire (Psa 50:3), as *He* did the antediluvian⁹ world by water (2Pe 3:5-7).

It needs to be constantly pressed upon this skeptical generation that the One who made this world is now *governing* it; and that, not merely in a vague and general way, but most definitely and specifically. The Lord God presides over all its affairs, regulates all its events, directs all its inhabitants. If He did not, if there be some creatures beyond His control, some happenings outside His jurisdiction, then there would be no guarantee that everything which transpires on earth (as well as in heaven) shall redound to His glory (Num 14:21), and that all things are working together for good to them that love Him (Rom 8:28). Instead, all confidence in the future would be at an end, all peace of heart and tranquility of mind an empty dream. But Scripture is far too plain on this matter to be misunderstood. “His kingdom ruleth over all” (Psa 103:19), “who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will” (Eph 1:11), “For of him, and through him, and to him, are all things: to whom be glory for ever. Amen” (Rom 11:36). So far from Satan being able to thwart Him, he could not lay a finger upon Job or any of his possessions until the Lord gave him permission to do so (Job 1:12); and the demons could not enter the herd of swine

⁹ **antediluvian** – of or belonging to the time before the Flood.

without Christ's consent (Mar 5:12-13). Nor can the devil gain the slightest advantage over a saint without his own allowance, and, if he resists him steadfastly in the faith, he is obliged to flee from him (Jam 4:7).

Since "all things are of God" (1Co 8:6), then wars must not be excluded. So truly is this the case that His Word declares, "The Lord is a man of war" (Exo 15:3). Thus deity hesitates not to assume unto Himself a militant title. And again He declares, "The LORD mighty in battle" (Psa 24:8), which is illustrated and demonstrated again and again in the history of Israel, when He showed Himself strong in their behalf and slew their foes. "The LORD of hosts mustereth the host of the battle. They come from a far country, from the end of heaven, even the LORD, and the weapons of His indignation, to destroy the whole land" (Isa 13:4-5). It may be objected that these are Old Testament references, and that the spirit of the New Testament denounces all war as now being unlawful. But the New Testament is far from bearing that out. Its teaching thereon is in full accord with the Old. Thus, when the soldiers came to Christ's forerunner for instruction, asking, "What shall we do?" he did not say, "Fight no more, abandon your calling," but gave them directions how to conduct themselves (Luk 3:14). When the centurion came to the Saviour and drew an argument from his military calling, our Lord did not condemn his profession or rebuke him for holding such an office. Instead, He highly commended his faith (Luk 7:8-9).

When foretelling the destruction of Jerusalem, Christ declared that God would send forth *His* armies (Mat 22:7), so that the Roman legions were but instruments in His hands, directed by Him to effect His judgment. When examined by Pilate, our Lord said, "My kingdom is not of this world: if my kingdom were of this world, then would my servants fight, that I should not be delivered to the Jews: but now is my kingdom not from hence" (Joh 18:36). Those words clearly imply that, though carnal means were then improper for advancing His spiritual kingdom, yet had not His state of humiliation precluded His assumption of the royal scepter, His followers might lawfully have fought to defend His title. Moreover, His qualifying "now" suggests that such a time *would* come, as Revelation 19:11 plainly confirms. When the ten kings determine to make the mother of harlots desolate and burn her with fire, we are told, "For God hath put it in their hearts to fulfil his will" (Rev 17:16-17). How entirely different is the God of Holy Writ from the fictitious one of the sentimental dreamers of this effeminate age!

In our previous comments upon Israel's fighting in Canaan, our principal emphasis has been upon the application thereof unto the *spiritual* warfare in which the Christian is called upon to engage, but our articles would lack completeness if we failed to devote one unto the *literal* side of things. Much of human history consists of a chronicling of wars, and it is a matter of no little concern and importance that we should turn the light of Scripture thereon and ascertain *God's relation* thereto. Is He but a far-distant Spectator thereof, having no immediate connection with the horrible carnage of the battlefield, or is His agency directly involved in the same? To speculate upon such a matter is not only useless but impious. War is ever a frightful calamity, the more so if it be a civil one, when one part of the populace is madly fighting against another, or when *many* nations become involved or embroiled. At such a time, the suffering and anguish experienced rudely shake the belief of many in an overruling providence; and even God's own people find it difficult to stay their

minds on the Ruler of the universe and trust in His goodness and wisdom, unless they be firmly rooted in the truth.

Those who are familiar with history know how many sad proofs it contains that human beings are often more cruel than are the beasts of the jungle. Lions and tigers kill their prey in order to appease their hunger, but men destroy their fellows only to gratify their insatiable lusts of ambition and avarice. During the course of the centuries, wild animals have killed thousands of mankind, but within the last few years, literally millions have been destroyed by the restless wickedness of those who cared not what immeasurable suffering would result from the meeting of their greedy desires. We cannot sufficiently deplore the depravity of human nature which has made men beasts of prey, or rather devils to one another, seeking whom they may devour. The events of this "enlightened" century only too plainly confirm the teaching of Scripture on the thorough corruption of fallen human nature, that, in their unregenerate condition, men are "hateful, and hating one another" (Ti 3:3). But let us not condemn the ferocity and wickedness of our fellows in any self-righteous spirit, but in the humbling realization that we too are clay of the same lump, and that, if a spirit of benevolence now governs us, it is naught but sovereign grace which makes us to differ.

But while we contemplate with grief, shame, and horror the vile works of men of the same vicious natures as our own, we must by no means overlook and ignore the place which divine providence has in all those occurrences in which they are the actors. God is supreme, and all inferior agents are under His government, held by Him in such effectual control that they can do nothing without Him. In the most tremendous evils which they inflict, they are the ministers of His vengeance. Even when whole nations be destroyed, by whatsoever means, the hand of God is in that work of judgment. We briefly alluded unto this in our last, but deemed it necessary to supplement what was there pointed out. "I will set the Egyptians against the Egyptians: and they shall fight every one against his brother, and every one against his neighbour: city against city, and kingdom against kingdom. And the spirit [courage] of Egypt shall fail in the midst thereof; and I will destroy the counsel thereof...and the Egyptians will I give over into the hand of a cruel lord; and a fierce king shall reign over them, saith the LORD, the LORD of hosts" (Isa 19:2-4)—words which ought to cause not a few people to revise their ideas on this subject. When cities are reduced to rubble, when civil war afflicts a country, when kingdoms are destroyed, the agency of God is to be acknowledged therein.

The worst tyrants, when inflicting the greatest outrages, are the instruments of God, accomplishing His will. In Jeremiah 25:9, we find Jehovah referring to Nebuchadnezzar as "My servant"—just as He spoke of "My servant Moses" (Num 12:7) and "David My servant" (Psa 89:3). The king of Babylon was just as truly an instrument in effecting the divine purpose as they were—they in delivering and building up, he in punishing and destroying. "Lo, I will bring a nation upon you from far, O house of Israel, saith the LORD...and they shall eat up thy harvest, and thy bread, which thy sons and thy daughters should eat: they shall eat up thy flocks and thine herds...they shall impoverish thy fenced cities, wherein thou trustedst, with the sword" (Jer 5:15, 17). God brings judgment upon a nation as surely as He gives blessing—uproots as truly as He plants. "Lo, I raise up the Chaldeans, that bitter and hasty nation, which shall march through the breadth of the land to possess the

dwelling places that are not theirs: they are terrible and dreadful” (Hab 1:6-7). How clearly do those words show that heathen nations are under God’s control and *used* by Him when it serves His purpose.

The Babylonians were employed by the Ruler of this world for the chastisement of His people and commissioned by Him to carry the Jews into captivity. Yet in so doing they incurred great guilt and were made to reap as they had sown. Those things may seem utterly inconsistent unto carnal reason, yet they are not so in reality, for Nebuchadnezzar acted with no thought of fulfilling the divine decrees, but rather to satisfy his own rapacity,¹⁰ and therefore was his kingdom providentially destroyed by Him with an unexampled destruction. Others were sent by God to execute His vengeance on Babylon, and, though they in turn were incited by their own passions, nevertheless He it was who called forth their hosts and gave them the victory. “Behold, I will stir up the Medes against them, which shall not regard silver; and as for gold, they shall not delight in it. Their bows also shall dash the young men to pieces, and they shall have no pity on the fruit of the womb; their eye shall not spare children” (Isa 13:17-18). How awful does Providence appear here! Even when savage idolators violate every dictate of humanity, they are the executors of the judgments of the Almighty. While their conduct is most horribly guilty, in the divine sovereignty it fulfills God’s will.

“The LORD of hosts hath purposed it, to stain the pride of all glory, and to bring into contempt all the honourable of the earth...He shook the kingdoms: the LORD hath given a commandment against the merchant city, to destroy the strong holds thereof” (Isa 23:9-11). The demolition of Tyre by the Chaldeans was not only the fulfilment of prophecy, but was accomplished by divine agency. God did it, yet man did it. In unconsciously doing the work of the Lord, men act quite freely, and therefore are justly accountable for doing what it was eternally predestined they should do. Philosophy cannot plumb such a depth by its own line, but Scripture clears up the mystery.

Of Cyrus, God declared, “Thou art my battle axe and weapons of war: for with thee will I break in pieces the nations, and with thee will I destroy kingdoms” (Jer 51:20). What is there said of that mighty conqueror is equally true of all conquerors that ever lived, or shall live, on this earth. Conquerors regard themselves almost as gods, but the axes and saws with which men cut and cleave wood might with far better reason exalt themselves to the rank of human creatures. None of them can do anything but what God’s counsel determined before to be done by their hands, and, therefore, it is our bounden duty to give God the glory for all the judgments which are done by them, and to adore His awful providence in all the miseries they inflict upon the guilty kingdoms.

It is in the light of all that has been said above that the conquest of Canaan by Israel is to be viewed. Joshua 10:30, 42 makes it quite clear that the sword of Joshua was the sword of the Lord—compare “The sword of the LORD, and of Gideon” (Jdg 7:20). Equally so, it is in the light of various passages found in the Pentateuch that we must consider the severity of God’s dealings with those whom His servant was commissioned to slay. The original inhabitants of Canaan were flagitious¹¹ offenders, not only in being gross idolators, but in

¹⁰ **rapacity** – greed.

¹¹ **flagitious** – infamous; villainous.

trampling underfoot the laws of morality and of humanity. If the reader turns to Leviticus 18:3, 27-28, and then ponders what is recorded between verses 3 and 27, he will perceive the horrible depravity which the Amorites exhibited, for in those verses a black catalogue is supplied of the vile abominations of which they were guilty. Those heathen tribes were like a cankerous sore in the body politic, contaminating the surrounding nations, and therefore it was an act of mercy unto the latter, as well as a just punishment upon the former, that God ordered Joshua to destroy them root and branch. The Lord had borne long with them, but now that the iniquity of the Amorites had come to the full (Gen 15:16), naught but summary judgment suited their case.

Not only is no apology required for the Lord in connection with His solemn works of judgment, but He is to be owned and magnified therein. "O LORD, thou art my God; I will exalt thee, I will praise thy name; for thou hast done wonderful things; thy counsels of old are faithfulness and truth. For thou hast made of a city an heap; of a defenced city a ruin: a palace of strangers to be no city; it shall never be built. Therefore shall the strong people glorify thee" (Isa 25:1-2)—as Israel did when Pharaoh and his hosts were overthrown by the waters of the Red Sea, and as the inhabitants of heaven shall exclaim, "Alleluia: Salvation, and glory, and honour, and power, unto the Lord our God: For true and righteous are his judgments, for he hath judged the great whore, which did corrupt the earth with her fornication, and hath avenged the blood of his servants at her hand" (Rev 19:1-2). God is glorious in His works of providence as well as in His works of creation. As He made all things "good" at the creation of the world, so He doeth all things "well" in His government of it. He is to be revered and adored even of those works which He performs by the hand of His creatures. He is glorious in what He does by and through wicked men as well as by His saints—glorious in His acts of vengeance as well as in His acts of grace.

But if the balance of truth is to be preserved on this subject, due place must be given and full regard had to another class of passages, which show that when God deals in judgment—whether it be with individuals or nations—He does so because man's sinfulness calls for it, and not because He delights therein. This is clear from Ezekiel 14, where, after announcing the "four sore judgments" which He would send upon Jerusalem, the Lord God declared, "And ye shall know that I have not done this without cause" (verses 21-23), for as Jeremiah 22:8-9 informs us, "And many nations shall pass by this city, and they shall say every man to his neighbour, Wherefore hath the LORD done thus unto this great city? Then they shall answer, Because they have forsaken the covenant of the LORD their God, and worshipped other gods, and served them." How plain is the testimony of Lamentations 3:33, "For he doth not afflict willingly [from His heart] nor grieve the children of men." Equally so is Ezekiel 33:11, "As I live, saith the LORD God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked: but that the wicked turn from his way and live." Therefore are we told that judgment is "His strange work...his strange act" (Isa 28:21), for it is not as agreeable to Him as His works of mercy.

God approves of righteousness wherever it be found, and rewards the same with temporal blessings, but He ever disapproves of sin, and sooner or later visits His anger upon it (Pro 14:34). Yet even when the dark clouds of His judgment are hanging over a kingdom or an evil system, calamity may be averted by national humiliation before God and reformation of conduct (Exo 9:27-29; Luk 19:41-44; Rev 2:21-22). How much to the point are

those words of the Lord in Jeremiah 18:8, "If that nation, against whom I have pronounced [judgment], turn from their evil, I will repent of the evil that I thought to do unto them"—as was most definitely exemplified in the case of Nineveh. That verse has, of course, no reference to the alteration of His eternal decree, but instead enumerates one of the principles by which God *governs* this world, namely, that He deals with nations as with individuals—according to their conduct, making them to reap as they have sown, for His judgment is ever tempered by His mercy (Jdg 3:8-10).

Now each of the two sides of our subject pointed out above was illustrated in Joshua 11. On the one hand, we are told, "For it was of the LORD to harden their hearts, that they should come against Israel in battle, that he might destroy them utterly, and that they might have no favour, but that he might destroy them, as the LORD commanded Moses" (verse 20)—because they had filled up the measure of their iniquities and were ripe for judgment (compare Mat 23:32; 1Th 2:16; Rev 14:7, 18). On the other hand, we read that, "But as for the cities that stood still in their strength, Israel burned none of them, save Hazor only" (verse 13), by which is meant those who remained passive and fought not against Israel. So that, here too, in wrath God remembered mercy. That is one of several passages which show that Israel did not massacre *unresisting* Canaanites (cf. Deu 20:10-11)—Joshua 24:11 shows that those in Jericho assumed a hostile attitude, and therefore we may conclude that those in Ai did so too.

THE DOCTRINE OF HUMAN DEPRAVITY

7. *Its Enormity, Part 1*

The theology of the last century has failed lamentably at two essential points, namely, its teaching concerning God, and its teaching concerning fallen man. As an Australian writer recently expressed it, "On the one hand, they have not ascended high enough...on the other hand, they do not descend low enough." God is infinitely greater and His dominion far more absolute and extensive, and man has sunk much lower and is far more depraved than they will allow. Consequently, a man's conduct unto his Maker is vastly more evil than is commonly supposed. Its horrible hideousness cannot really be seen except in the light supplied by Holy Writ. Sin is infinitely more vile in its nature than any of us realize. Men may acknowledge that they sin, but it *appears sin* to very, very few. Sin was the original evil. Before it entered the universe, there was no evil. "God saw everything that He had made, and, behold, it was very good" (Gen 1:31). Sin is the greatest of all evils. There is nothing in it but evil, nor can it produce anything but evil—now, in the future, or forever. As soon as sin was conceived, all other evils followed in its train.

We may take a survey of everything in and on the earth, and we cannot find anything so vile as sin. The basest and most contemptible thing in this world has some degree of worth in it, as being the workmanship of God. But sin and its foul stream have not the least part of worth in them. Sin is wholly evil, without the least mixture of good—vileness in the abstract. Its heinousness appears in the author of it: "He that committeth sin is of the devil;

for the devil sinneth from the beginning” (1Jo 3:8). Sin is his trade, and he is the incessant practiser of it. Sin’s enormity is seen in what it has done to man: it has completely ruined his nature and brought him under the curse of God. Sin is the source of all our miseries, all unrighteousness and wretchedness being its fruits. There is no distress of the mind, no anguish of the heart, no pain of the body, but it is due to sin. All the miseries which mankind groan under today are to be ascribed to sin. It is the cause of all penal¹² evils: “Thy way and thy doings have procured these things unto thee; this is thy wickedness, because it is bitter, because it reacheth unto thine heart” (Jer 4:18). Had there been no sin, there had been no wars, no national calamities, no prisons, no hospitals, no insane asylums, no cemeteries! Yet who lays these things to heart?

Sin assumes many garbs, but when it appears in its nakedness, it is seen as a black and misshapen monster. How God Himself views it may be learned from the various similitudes used by the Holy Spirit to set forth its ugliness and loathsomeness. He has compared it with the greatest deformities and the most filthy and repulsive objects to be met with in this world. Sin is likened to the scum of a seething pot, wherein a detestable carcass is being destroyed (Eze 24:11-12). To the blood and pollution of a newly born child, before it is washed, salted, and swaddled (Eze 16:4, 6). To a dead and rotting body (Rom 7:24). To the noisome stench and poisonous exhalations which issue from the mouth of an open sepulcher (Rom 3:13). To the image of the devil (Joh 8:44). To putrefying sores (Isa 1:5-6). To a menstruous cloth (Isa 30:22; Lam 1:17). To a canker or gangrene (2Ti 2:17). To the dung of filthy creatures (Phi 3:8). To the vomit of a dog and the wallowing of a sow in the stinking mire (2Pe 2:22). Such comparisons show us something of the vileness and horribleness of sin, yet in reality, it is beyond all comparison.

There is a far greater malignity in sin than is commonly supposed, even by the great majority of church members. Men regard it as an infirmity, and term it a “human frailty” or “hereditary weakness.” But Scripture calls it “an evil thing and bitter” (Jer 2:19), an abominable thing which God hates (Jer 44:4). Few people think it to be so, rather do the great majority regard it as a mere trifle, as a matter of so little moment that they have but to cry in the hour of death, “Lord, pardon me; Lord, bless me,” and all will be eternally well with them. They judge sin by the opinion of the world. But what can a world which “lieth in wickedness” (1Jo 5:19) know about God’s hatred of sin? It matters nothing what the world thinks, but it matters everything what God says thereon. Others measure the guilt of sin by what conscience tells them—or fails to! But conscience needs informing by the Bible. Many of the heathen put their female children and old folk to death, and conscience chided them not. A deadened conscience has accompanied multitudes to hell without any voice of warning. So little filth do they see in sin that tens of thousands of religionists imagine that a few tears will wash away its stain. So little criminality do they perceive in it that they persuade themselves that a few good works will make full reparation for it.

That all comparisons fail to set forth the horrible malignity which there is in that abominable thing which God hates appears in the fact that we can say nothing more evil of sin than to term it what it is, “but sin, that it might appear sin” (Rom 7:13). “Who is like unto thee, O LORD?” (Exo 15:11). When we say of God that He is *God*, we say all that can be

¹² **penal** – of or relating to punishments.

said of Him. “Who is a God like unto thee?” (Mic 7:18). We cannot say more good of Him than to call Him *God*. So we cannot say more evil of sin than to say it is *sin*. When we have called it that, we have said all that can be said of it. When the apostle would put a descriptive epithet to sin, he invested it with its own name: “that sin by the commandment might become exceeding sinful” (Rom 7:13). That was the worst he could say of it, the ugliest name he could give it—just as when Hosea denounced the Ephraimites for their idolatry. “So shall Bethel do unto you because of the evil of your evil” (10:15, margin). The prophet could not paint their wickedness in any blacker colour than to double the expression.

The hideousness of sin can be set forth no more impressively than in the terms used by the apostle in Romans 7:13. “That sin...might become exceeding sinful” is a very forcible expression. It reminds us of similar words used by him when magnifying that glory which is yet to be revealed in the saints, and with which the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared, namely, “a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory” (2Co 4:17). No viler name can be found for sin than its own. “If we speak of a treacherous person, we call him a Judas; if of Judas, we call him a *devil*; but if of Satan, we want a comparison, because we can find none that is worse than himself. We must therefore say, as Christ did, ‘When he speaketh a lie, he speaketh of his own.’ It was thus with the apostle when speaking of the evil of his own heart, ‘That sin by the commandment might become’—what? He wanted a name worse than its own. He could find none. He therefore unites a strong epithet to the thing itself, calling it ‘exceeding sinful’” (Andrew Fuller, 1754-1815).

There are four great evils in sin: the total absence of the moral image of God, the transgression of His just Law, obnoxiousness to His holiness, and separation from Him—entailing the presence of positive evil, guilt which cannot be measured by any human standard, defilement the most repulsive, and misery inexpressible. Sin contains within it an *infinite evil*, for it is committed against a Being of infinite glory, unto whom we are under infinite obligations. Its odiousness appears in that fearful description, “filthiness and superfluity of naughtiness” (Jam 1:21), which is an allusion to the brook Kidron, into which the garbage of the temple sacrifices and other vile things were cast (2Ch 29:16). Its hatefulness to God is seen in His awful curse upon the workmanship of His own hands, for He would not anathematize¹³ man for a trifle. If He does not afflict willingly (Lam 3:33), then most certainly He would not curse without great provocation. The virulence¹⁴ and vileness of sin can only be gauged at Calvary, where it rose to the terrible commission of deicide.¹⁵ At the cross, it “abounded” to the greatest possible degree. The demerits of sin are seen in the eternal damnation of sinners in hell, for the indescribable sufferings, which divine vengeance will then inflict upon them, are its righteous wages.

Sin is a species of *atheism*, for it is the virtual repudiation of God—to make of God no God, to set up our wills against His. “Who is the LORD, that I should obey His voice?” (Exo 5:2). It is a malignant spirit of independence; whether imperceptibly influencing the

¹³ **anathematize** – curse; condemn.

¹⁴ **virulence** – extreme harmfulness.

¹⁵ **deicide** – killing God.

mind or consciously present, it lies at the root of all evil and human depravity. Man would be lord of himself, hence his ready reception, at the beginning, of the devil's lie, "Ye shall be as gods" (Gen 3:5). His credence¹⁶ thereof was the dissolution of that tie which bound the creature in willing subjection to the Author of his being. Thus, sin is really the denial of our creaturehood, and, in consequence, a rejection of the rights of the Creator. Its language is, "I am. I am my own, and therefore have I the right to live unto myself." As James Thornwell (1812-1862) pointed out, "Considered as the renunciation of dependence upon God, it may be called unbelief; as the exaltation of itself to the place of God, it may be called pride; as the transferring to another object the homage due to the Supreme, it may be called idolatry; but in all these aspects the central principle is one and the same."

An atheist is, not only one who denies the existence of God, but also one who fails to render unto God that honour and subjection which are His due. Thus, there is a *practical* atheism as well as a theoretical one. The former obtains wherever there is no genuine respect for God's authority and no concern for His glory. There are many who entertain theoretical notions in their heads of the divine existence, yet whose hearts are devoid of any affection to Him. And *that* is now the natural condition of all the fallen descendants of Adam. Since there be "none that seeketh after God" (Rom 3:11), it follows that there are none with any practical sense of His excellency or His claims. The natural man has no desire for communion with God, for he places his happiness in the creature. He prefers everything before Him and glorifies everything above Him. He loves his own pleasures more than God. His wisdom being "earthly, sensual, devilish" (Jam 3:15), the celestial and divine are outside of his consideration. This appears in man's works, for actions speak louder than words. Our hearts are to be gauged by what we do, and not by what we say. Our tongues may be great liars, but our deeds tell the truth, showing what we really are.

How little is it recognized and realized that all outward impieties are the manifestations of an inward atheism! Yet such is indeed the case. As all bodily sores are evidences of the impurity of our blood, so our actions demonstrate the corruption of our natures. Therefore is sin so often termed ungodliness, "Behold, the Lord cometh with ten thousands of his saints, to execute judgment upon all, and to convince all that are ungodly among them of all their ungodly deeds which they have ungodly committed, and of all their hard speeches which ungodly sinners have spoken against him" (Jude 1:14-15). How vain it is, then, to deny atheism in the heart when there is so much of it in the life! Here too the tree is known by its fruits (Mat 12:33). As an active and operative principle in the soul, sin is the virtual assertion, not only of self-sufficiency, but also of self-supremacy. Rightly did Stephen Charnock (1628-1680) point out, "Those, therefore, are more deserving of being termed atheists who acknowledge a God and walk as if there were none, than those (if there can be any such) that deny God, and walk as if there were one." To the writings of that eminent Puritan, we are also indebted for part of what precedes and part of what follows.

As all virtuous actions spring from a due acknowledgment of God, so all vicious actions take their rise from a lurking denial of Him. He who makes no conscience of sin has no regard to the honour of God, and consequently none to His being. This is clear from that declaration, "By the fear of the LORD men depart from evil" (Pro 16:6), for it clearly fol-

¹⁶ **credence** – belief; acceptance.

lows that it is in the absence of any awe of Him that they rush into evil. Every sin is an invading of the rights of God. When we transgress His laws, we repudiate His sovereignty. When we lean unto our own understanding and set up reason as the guide of our actions, we despise His wisdom. When we think to find happiness in gratifying our lusts, we slight His excellence, and deem His goodness insufficient to satisfy our hearts. When we commit those sins in secret which we would be ashamed to do in public, we virtually deny both His omniscience and omnipresence. When we lean upon the arm of flesh or put our trust in the means, we disbelieve His power. Sin is called a turning the back upon God (Jer 32:33), a kicking against Him (Deu 32:15), i.e. a treating of Him with the utmost contempt.

People do not like to regard themselves as practical atheists. No, they entertain a much better opinion of themselves than that. They pride themselves on possessing far too much intelligence to harbour so degrading an idea that there is no God. Instead, they are persuaded that creation clearly evidences a Creator. But no matter what their intellectual beliefs may be, the fact remains that they are secret atheists. He who disowns the authority of God disowns His Godhead. It is the unquestionable prerogative of the Most High to have dominion over His creatures, to make known His will unto them, and to demand their subjection thereto. But their breaking of His bands and their casting away of His cords from them (Psa 2:3) are a practical rejection of His rule over them. Practical atheism, my reader, consists of an utter contempt of God, a conducting of ourselves as though there were none infinitely above us, who has an absolute right to govern us, to whom we must yet render a full account of all that we have done and left undone, and who will then pronounce sentence of eternal judgment upon us.

The natural man renders that homage to himself which is due alone unto God. When he obtains something which makes him glitter in the eyes of the world, how happy is he, for they "receive honour one of another, and seek not the honour that cometh from God only" (Joh 5:44). They dote upon their own accomplishments and acquisitions, but delight not in the divine perfections. They think highly of themselves, but contemptuously of others. They compare themselves with those lower than themselves, instead of with those above. He who deems himself worthy of his own supreme affection regards himself as being entitled to the supreme regard of his neighbours. Yet it is naught but self-idolatry to magnify ourselves to the virtual forgetfulness of the Creator. When self-love wholly possesses us, we usurp God's prerogative by making self our chief end. This consuming egotism appears again in man's proneness to ascribe his achievements unto his own virtue, strength, and skill, instead of unto Him from whom cometh every good and perfect gift (Jam 1:17). "Is not this great Babylon, that I have built?" (Dan 4:30). God smote Herod for not giving Him the glory, when instead of rebuking the people, he accepted their impious adulations (Act 12:23).

The same profane spirit is evidenced by man's envying the endowments and prosperity of others. Cain was wroth with God, and hated and slew Abel, because his brother's offering was received and his own refused (Gen 4:3-8). Since it be God who assigns unto each his portion, to look with such a grudging eye upon that enjoyed by our fellows has much of practical atheism in it. It is an unwillingness for God to be the proprietor and distributor of His favours as He pleases. It is assuming the right to direct the Creator what He shall bestow upon His creatures, and a denial of His sovereignty to give more unto one than to an-

other. God disposes of His benefits according to the counsel of His own will, but vain man thinks he could make a better distribution of them. This sin is to imitate that of Satan's, who was dissatisfied with the station which the Most High had allotted him (Isa 14:12-14). It is a desiring to assume unto ourselves that right which the devil lyingly asserted was his—to give the kingdoms of this world to whom he would (Mat 4:8-9). Thus would man have the Almighty degrade Himself to the satisfying of *his* whims, rather than His own mind.

There is in fallen man a disinclination unto any acquaintance with God's rule. He hates instruction and casts His words behind his back (Psa 50:17). God has revealed unto man the great things of His Law, but they are counted as a strange thing (Hos 8:12). What He accounts valuable, they despise. The very purity of the divine rule renders it obnoxious to an impure heart. "Water and fire may as well kiss each other, and live together without quarreling and hissing, as the holy will of God and the unregenerate heart of a fallen creature" (Charnock). Not only is man's darkened understanding incapable of perceiving the excellency of God's commandments, but there is a disposition in his will which rises up against it. When any part of God's revealed will is made known to men, they endeavour to banish it from their thoughts. They like not to retain God in their knowledge (Rom 1:28), and therefore do they resist the strivings of the Spirit unto an obedient compliance (Act 7:51). How can a fleshly mind relish a spiritual Law? Since the palate of man be corrupted, divine things are unsavoury to him, and for ever remain so until his taste be restored by divine grace.

The same atheistic spirit is seen again in man's denials of divine providence. They will not allow that God presides over this scene, directing all its affairs, shaping the circumstances of each of our lives. Rather do they ascribe their lot to fortune or fate, to good or ill "luck." Even where intellectually convinced to the contrary, they continually quarrel with God's government of this world, and particularly with His dealings with them. Whenever His will crosses theirs, they rebel and rave. Yet if our plans be thwarted, how fretful are we! Men appraise themselves highly, and are angry if God appears not to value them at the same rate—as if *their* estimation of themselves were more accurate than His. What an evidence of practical atheism is this, that, instead of meekly submitting to God's will and adoring His righteousness, we declaim Him as an unjust Governor, and demand that His wisdom be guided by our folly, and asperse Him rather than ourselves!

What proof is the whole of the foregoing of the fearful enormity of human depravity!

INTERPRETATION OF THE SCRIPTURES

Part 10

It is of first importance that the expositor should constantly bear in mind that not only are the substance and the sentiments expressed in Holy Writ of divine origin, but that the whole of its contents are verbally inspired. Its own affirmations lay considerable emphasis

upon that fact. Said holy Job, "I have esteemed the words of his mouth more than my necessary food" (Job 23:12). He not only venerated God's Word in its entirety, but highly prized each syllable in it. "The words of the LORD are pure words: as silver tried in a furnace of earth, purified seven times" (Psa 12:6). We believe that is more than a general statement concerning the preciousness, purity, and permanence of what proceeds out of the mouth of Jehovah, for it is to be duly noted that the divine utterances are not simply likened to silver tried in a furnace, but to "a furnace of earth." Though the Holy Spirit has employed the vernacular of earth, yet He has purged what He uses from all human dross, giving some of His terms an entirely different force from their human original, investing many of them with a higher meaning, and applying all with spiritual perfection—as the "purified seven times" purports. Thus, "every word of God is pure" (Pro 30:5).

The Lord Jesus repeatedly laid stress on this aspect of the truth. When making known to His disciples the fundamental requirements of their receiving answers to prayer, He said, "If ye abide in me [maintain a spirit of constant dependence upon and remain in communion with Him], and my words abide in you [forming your thoughts and regulating your desires], ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you" (Joh 15:7)—for in such cases they would request only that which would be for God's glory and their own real good. Again, He declared, "The words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life" (Joh 6:63). God's Word then is made up of words, and each one in it is selected by divine wisdom and positioned with unerring precision. It therefore behoves us to spare no pains in seeking to ascertain the exact meaning of each of its terms and most diligently to scrutinize the exact order in which they are placed. For the right understanding of a passage turns first upon our obtaining a correct understanding of its language. That should be so obvious as to require no argument, yet it is surprising how often that elementary principle is ignored and contravened.

Before stating several more rules which should direct the expositor, particularly those which relate more directly to the interpretation of words and phrases, let us mention several warnings which need to be heeded. *First*, do not assume at the outset that all is plain and intelligible to you, for often the words of Scripture are used in a different and higher sense than they are in common speech. Thus, it is not sufficient to be acquainted with their dictionary meaning, rather do we have to ascertain how they are used by the Holy Spirit. For example, "hope" signifies very much more in the Word of God than it does on the lips of men. *Second*, do not jump to the conclusion that you have arrived at the meaning of a term because its force is quite obvious in one or two passages. For you are not in a position to frame a definition until you have weighed *every* occurrence of it. That demands much toil and patience, yet such are necessary if we are to be preserved from erroneous ideas. *Third*, do not conclude that any term employed by the Spirit has one uniform signification, for that is far from being the case. The force of these cautions will be made the more apparent in the paragraphs that follow.

13. *The limitation of general statements.* General statements are frequently to be limited, both in themselves and in their application. Many examples of this principle occur in the book of Proverbs, and obviously so, for a proverb or maxim is a broad principle expressed in a brief form, a moral truth set forth in condensed and universal language. Thus, "He that is surety for a stranger shall smart for it; and he that hateth suretiship is sure"

(11:15) enunciates the general rule, yet there are exceptions thereto. “Children’s children are the crown of old men; and the glory of children are their fathers” (17:6), though that is far from being the case in every instance. “Whoso findeth a wife findeth a good thing, and obtaineth favour of the LORD” (18:22), as many a man—the writer included—has discovered; yet the experience of not a few has been quite to the contrary. “Foolishness is bound up in the heart of a child; but the rod of correction shall drive it from him” (22:15), yet God reserves to Himself the sovereign right to make that good to whom He pleases—where He blesses not this means, the child is hardened in his perversity. “Seest thou a man diligent in his business? he shall stand before kings” (22:29), though sometimes the most industrious meet with little material success.

General statements must be qualified if to interpret them in an unlimited sense clashes with other verses. A case in point is our Lord’s prohibition, “Judge not, that ye be not judged” (Mat 7:1), for if that injunction be taken without any restriction, it would flatly contradict His precept, “Judge righteous judgment” (Joh 7:24). Yet how often is this precept hurled at the heads of those performing a Christian duty. The capacity to weigh or judge, to form an estimate and opinion, is one of the most valuable of our faculties, and the right use of it one of our most important tasks. It is very necessary that we have our senses “exercised to discern [Greek “thoroughly judge”] both good and evil” (Heb 5:14) if we are not to be deceived by appearances and taken in by every oily-mouthed impostor we encounter. Unless we form a judgment of what is true and false, how can we embrace the one and avoid the other? We are bidden to “beware of false prophets” (Mat 7:15), but how can we do so unless we judge or carefully measure every preacher by the Word of God? We are prohibited from having fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness (Eph 5:11), but that requires us to determine *which* are such. Christ was not here forbidding all judging of others, but was reprehending an officious or magisterial, a presumptuous, hypocritical, rash or hasty, unwarrantable, unfair, and unmerciful judgment. Much grace and wisdom are required by us to heed rightly this word of our Master’s.

Another pertinent example is found in our Lord’s “swear not at all” (Mat 5:34). In the section of the sermon on the mount in which those words occur, Christ was freeing the divine commandments from the errors of the rabbins and Pharisees, enforcing their strictness and spirituality. In the instance now before us, the Jewish doctors had restricted the Mosaic statutes upon oaths unto the simple prohibition against perjury, encouraging the habit of swearing by the creature and the taking of oaths lightly in ordinary conversation. In verses 34-37, our Lord inveighed¹⁷ against those corrupt traditions and practices. That He never intended His “swear not at all” to be taken absolutely is clear from His bidding men to swear by no creature, and from His reprehending all oaths in ordinary conversation. The general analogy of Scripture reveals the need for oaths on certain occasions. Abraham swore to Abimelech (Gen 21:23-24) and required his servant to take an oath (Gen 24:8-9); Jacob (Gen 31:53) and Joseph (Gen 47:31) each took one. Paul repeatedly confirmed his teaching by solemnly calling God for a witness (Rom 9:1; 2Co 1:23, etc.). Hebrews 6:16 indicates that oaths are both permissible and requisite.

¹⁷ **inveighed** – protested or disapproved vehemently.

There are many expressions used in the Scriptures indefinitely rather than specifically, and which are not to be understood without qualification. Some of them are more or less apparent, others can only be discovered by a comparison and study of other passages treating of the same subject. Thus, “the salvation of God is sent unto the Gentiles, and that they will hear it” (Act 28:28 and also 11:18) did not signify that every one of them would do so. Similarly, “The glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together” (Isa 40:5), and “I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh” (Act 2:17) were simply announcements that the grace of God was to overflow the narrow bounds of Israel after the flesh. So too “the world” has a variety of meanings and is very rarely synonymous with all mankind. In such passages as John 7:4 and 12:19, only a very small part of its inhabitants were included. In Luke 2:1, the profane world is in view; in John 15:18-19, the professing world, for it was the religious sections of Israel which hated Christ. In John 14:17 and 17:9, it is the non-elect who are referred to—compare “the world of the ungodly” (2Pe 2:5), whereas in John 1:29 and 6:33, it is the world of God’s elect, who are all actually saved by Christ.

Another word which is used in the Bible with considerable latitude is “all,” and very rarely is it found *without* limitation. “All things, whatsoever ye shall ask in prayer, believing, ye shall receive” (Mat 21:22) obviously means whatsoever we ask that is according to God’s will (1Jo 5:14). When the apostles said unto Christ, “All seek for thee” (Mar 1:37), that “all did marvel” at His miracles (Mar 5:20), and that “all the people came unto him” in the temple (Joh 8:2), those expressions were far from signifying the sum total of the inhabitants of Palestine. When Luke tells his readers that he “had perfect understanding of all things from the very first” (Luk 1:3), and when we are informed that Christ foretold all things (Mar 13:23) unto His apostles, such language is not to be taken absolutely. In like manner, such statements as “all glorified God for that which was done” (Act 4:21), “this is the man, that teacheth all every where against the people, and the law” (Act 21:28), “thou shalt be his witness unto all men” (Act 22:15), are to be regarded relatively. Consequently, in the light of those examples, when he deals with “He died for all” (2Co 5:15) and “gave himself a ransom for all” (1Ti 2:6), the expositor must ascertain from other Scriptures (such as Isa 53:8; Mat 1:21; Eph 5:25) whether they mean all mankind or all who believe.

The same is true of the expression “every man”; see for instance Mark 8:25; Luke 16:16; Romans 12:3; and compare 2 Thessalonians 3:2; 1 Corinthians 4:5. So too the words “all things.” Neither “all things are clean unto you” (Luk 11:41), nor “all things are lawful unto me” (1Co 6:12) can be taken at face value, or many Scriptures would be contradicted. “I am made all things to all men” (1Co 9:22) must be explained by what immediately precedes. The “all things” of Romans 8:28 has reference to “the sufferings of this present time,” and the “all things” of 8:32 means the “all things that pertain unto life and godliness” (2Pe 1:3). The “times of restitution of all things” (Act 3:21) is at once modified by the words immediately following, “which God hath spoken by the mouth of all His holy prophets since the world began”—and most certainly none of them predicted the restoration of the devil and his angels to their pristine glory. “To reconcile all things unto himself” (Col 1:20) must not be understood to teach undiluted universalism, or every passage affirming the eternal damnation of the Christless would be contradicted.

14. *Positive statements with a comparative force.* Many injunctions in Scripture are expressed in an absolute form, yet are to be understood relatively. This is evident from those examples which are there and thus explained, "Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth" (Mat 6:19) is expounded in the next verse, "But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven." "Labour not for the meat which perisheth" (Joh 6:27) is not an absolute prohibition, as the "but for that meat which endureth unto everlasting life" shows. Likewise, "Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others" (Phi 2:4). We must love our neighbours as ourselves. "So then neither is he that planteth any thing, neither he that watereth" is to be taken relatively, for God frequently employs both the one and the other as instruments to do those very things. "But God that giveth the increase" (1Co 3:7) shows where the emphasis is to be placed, and the One to whom the glory is to be ascribed. "Whose adorning let it not be that outward adorning of plaiting the hair, and of wearing of gold, or of putting on of apparel: But let it be the hidden man of the heart, in that which is not corruptible... a meek and quiet spirit, which is in the sight of God of great price" (1Pe 3:3-4).

There are, however, numerous examples that are not immediately explained for us, but which the Analogy of Faith makes clear. "And God spake unto Moses, and said unto him, I am the LORD: And I appeared unto Abraham, unto Isaac, and unto Jacob, by the name of God Almighty: but by My name JEHOVAH was I not known to them" (Exo 6:2-3). Yet it is quite plain from the words of Abraham in Genesis 15:6, 8, from his calling the altar "JEHOVAH-jireh" (Gen 22:14), from Genesis 26:2, 24, and from God's words to Jacob in 28:13, that the patriarchs *were* acquainted with this divine title. But they did not know Him as the Fulfiller of His promises or in His actual covenant faithfulness. Whereas Moses and the Hebrews were now to be given proof of His word in Genesis 15:13-14, and be brought into the land of Canaan. "Mine eyes are ever toward the LORD" (Psa 25:15) must be understood in harmony with other Scriptures which show there were times when David's eyes were turned away from the Lord, and, as the result, he fell into grievous sins; nevertheless, that was *the habit* of his heart, the general tenor of his spiritual life. See 1 Kings 15:5 for another comparative statement about David.

"Sacrifice and offering thou didst not desire" any longer continued, as what follows shows—the shadows giving place to the substance, "burnt offering and sin offering hast thou not required" (Psa 40:6). Those last words are obviously to be understood relatively, for such offerings *were* then required by divine appointment. But the presentation of the most costly sacrifices (the ram, or a bullock) were unacceptable unto Him unless they proceeded from those who sincerely desired to obey and serve Him, as is clear from such passages as Proverbs 21:27; Isaiah 1:11-15. Comparative conformity to the precepts of the *moral* Law was of much greater importance than compliance with the ceremonial (see 1Sa 15:22; Psa 69:30-31; Pro 21:3; Hos 6:16; 1Co 7:19). Worship is rejected unless proffered by love and gratitude. Similarly are we to understand, "For I spake not unto your fathers, nor commanded them in the day that I brought them out of Egypt, concerning burnt offerings or sacrifices" (Jer 7:22)—those were not the primary or principal things I enjoined. No. "But this thing commanded I them, saying, Obey my voice." The design of the whole revelation at Sinai being to inculcate practical subjection to God's will, the Levitical ritual being a means to that end.

Words that are used to express *perpetuity* are not to be stretched any farther than the known duration of the things spoken of. As when the Jews were commanded to keep certain institutions throughout their generations to be ordinances forever (Exo 12:24; Num 15:15), it was not signified they were to do so throughout eternity, but only during the Mosaic economy. Likewise the everlasting mountains and perpetual hills of Habakkuk 3:6 spoke only of *comparative* permanency and stability, for the earth is yet to be destroyed. "But when thou doest alms, let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth" (Mat 6:3). Neither is this to be taken absolutely, otherwise any act of beneficence which came under the cognizance of our fellows would be prohibited, and that would be contrary to the Analogy of Faith. The primitive Christians did not always conceal their donations, as Acts 11:29-30 demonstrates. Secrecy itself may become a cloak of avarice, and under the pretence of hiding good works, we may hoard up money to spend upon ourselves. There are times when a person of prominence may rightly excite his backward brethren by his own spirit of liberality. This divine precept was designed to restrain the corrupt ambition of our hearts after the praise of men. Christ meant that we are to perform deeds of charity as unobtrusively as possible, making it our chief concern to have the approbation of God rather than the applause of our fellows. When a good work has been done, we should dismiss it from our minds, and instead of congratulating ourselves upon it, press on to other duties which are yet before us.

We are not to conclude from the terms of Luke 14:12-13 that it is wrong for us to invite our friends and relatives to partake of our hospitality, though a comparative is there again expressed in positive language; but rather must we see to it that the poor and needy are not neglected or slighted by us. "For the law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ" (Joh 1:17). How often have those words been misunderstood, yea, wrested, for it is a serious mistake to conclude from them either that there was *no* grace under the Mosaic economy or that there is no law under the Christian. The fact is that the contrast is not between the messages of Moses and Christ, but the characteristics of their ministries. "Ye see me no more" (Joh 16:10), said Christ to His apostles. Yet they *did!* What then did He mean? That they should not see Him again in a state of humiliation, in the form of a Servant, in the likeness of sin's flesh—compare "like unto the Son of man" (Rev 1:13) because then in His *glorified* state. Acts 1:3 definitely informs us that Christ was seen of the apostles for forty days after His resurrection, and of course He is now seen by them in heaven. When the apostle declared, "I determined not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and Him crucified" (1Co 2:2), he did not mean that that was his sole theme, but rather that such was his dominant and prominent subject. When we are exhorted "Be careful for nothing" (Phi 4:6), we certainly are not to understand that care to please God is excluded, or that we are not to have deep concern for our sins.

The above examples (many others could be added) show that constant care is needed to distinguish between positive and comparative statements, and between words with an absolute force and those with merely a relative one. ❧

