

limits of God's previous revelation, not in order to dissolve it, but to replace the still imperfect by the perfect (Matt. v. 17). Just as He was conscious of the obligation, in harmony with His fuller knowledge of God, to declare unessential large parts of the Old Testament law of worship and ceremony, which in an outward aspect constituted its main substance (Matt. vii. 14-23; John iv. 23 f.), and as He opposed His "But I say to you," in regard to moral requirements, to what had been said to the ancients (Matt. v. 21 ff.), precisely so He might be conscious of the right and the duty to abolish or to alter the Old Testament hopes of blessedness in so far as they did not correspond to the perfect doctrine of God's fatherly will. He was not slavishly subject to the authority of the Old Testament revelation, but He combined with a dutiful, historical recognition of it a consciousness of His right and power to distinguish freely between the essential and the unessential, the abiding and the perishable, the divine and the human in it (cf., e.g., Mark ii. 28, x. 5-9).

Therefore, from the undoubted fact that the Old Testament prophets conceived the blessed state of the last days as an earthly one, with outward gifts and political power and glory, we must

not simply infer that Jesus also as matter of course must have held the same view. But just as little should we conclude, if He departed in this respect from Old Testament prophecy, that He did not hold the Old Testament promises sacred. He held them sacred, acknowledged their divine truth, and felt Himself called to realise them in so far as in them the pious confidence found expression, that God would one day inaugurate a new state of things, in which the good would enjoy full communion with God, and full salvation through Him, whereas everything evil in humanity would be finally judged and condemned. But this did not preclude His declaring these Old Testament promises defective, in so far as, with a still imperfect apprehension of God's gracious will and His power to initiate quite new forms of life (Mark xii. 24), they assumed that the new blessed state of the last days must again be a state of an earthly nature, with earthly blessings and earthly power. He was certain that He introduced the most glorious and perfect fulfilment of these promises, not by realising their defective elements, but by abolishing their defects, and realising them in a way corresponding perfectly to their true idea and the true nature of God.

## Exposition of the First Epistle of St. John.

BY PROFESSOR THE REV. RICHARD ROTHE, D.D.

### CHAPTER III. 19-24.

"Hereby shall we know that we are of the truth, and shall assure our heart before Him, whereinsoever our heart condemn us; because God is greater than our heart, and knoweth all things. Beloved, if our heart condemn us not, we have boldness toward God; and whatsoever we ask, we receive of Him, because we keep His commandments, and do the things that are pleasing in His sight. And this is His commandment, that we should believe in the name of His Son Jesus Christ, and love one another, even as He gave us commandment. And he that keepeth His commandments abideth in Him, and He in him. And hereby we know that He abideth in us, by the Spirit which He gave us."

VER. 19. Vers. 19-22 support the exhortation to genuine, active, brotherly love by pointing to the fact that it alone affords rest and peace of soul, confidence towards God, and more especially boldness in prayer and an answer to prayer. *Hereby*, i.e. in loving in deed and in truth, of which the apostle has just spoken (cf. ii. 5; iv. 17). *That we are of the truth*, i.e. that our being is of the truth; or more plainly, that we are really and truly, and not merely in appearance, what we profess to

be both to ourselves and to others, viz. Christians; believers in the Redeemer, children of God redeemed by Him. We have here substantially the same thought as in John xiii. 35.

*We shall assure our heart before Him* (i.e. before God). What is spoken of here is not our appearing before God in the day of judgment; for ver. 21, which manifestly develops the thought of this verse, compels us to think of our present spiritual appearing before Him. In His presence we shall

even now calm, quiet, persuade (Matt. xxviii. 14; Acts xii. 20; 2 Cor. v. 11) our heart (here in the sense of conscience), when it is disquieted by the thought of God's holiness, which awakens the accusations of conscience, as we realise His spiritual nearness. Even when conscience accuses us most keenly, we shall find peace with God, provided we really actively love the brethren. *Whereinsoever our heart condemn us.* This clause is far from being superfluous, seeing that the object to which this assuring of our heart refers is by no means self-evident. It is the sum total of all possible accusations of our conscience. The accusing is not exactly a condemning (Gal. ii. 11).

Ver. 20. *Because God is greater than our heart, and knoweth all things.* These words state the reason why, in the case assumed, *i.e.* on the assumption of our being possessed by genuine, operative, brotherly love, we shall be able to quiet our heart before God, of whatsoever our conscience may accuse us. There must, therefore, in the statements made regarding God be a distinct reference to genuine, sincere, brotherly love. These statements are two. In the first place, *God is greater than our heart.* The term "greater" receives its specific meaning from the subject, in comparison with which God is represented as being greater, which is here our heart. This "greater" must, therefore, be understood as being predicated of God's heart, or of a quality of God's heart; and, indeed, it must naturally be understood of that quality of the heart of which the whole passage treats, *viz.* compassionating love (vers. 16, 17), which is a function of the heart. John says: if *our* small heart loves and compassionates the brethren in truth, we can confidently believe that God, whose heart is by far greater than ours, cherishes compassionating love towards us, of whatsoever our conscience may accuse us. But if the reality of compassionating love is not certain to us from our own experience, we cannot confidently believe in its reality in God, nor find peace in casting ourselves upon His loving compassion. In the second place, *He knoweth all things,* and therefore also the truth that is in us (ver. 19), the genuine, new, Christian, divine nature that is in us, although it is still so weak and elementary that men cannot discern it, and we ourselves may hardly be able to perceive it within us. John says: if we know from our sincere and active love to the brethren that there must really

be in us, though only as a minimum, the true, divine nature, then, when conscience accuses us, the thought of God's omniscience is a great support to us. For we say to ourselves: this beginning of the true, divine nature, which is well-nigh concealed from ourselves, is well known to God; and therefore, notwithstanding all our trespasses, He will deal with us as being of the truth, and will consequently not reject us.

John points here to the blissful and strengthening comfort, which is to be found by us in energetic brotherly love. He does not mean that by it we should seek to establish any claim upon God's grace and forgiveness, or any desert whatever. But he nevertheless reminds us that in this energetic love of the brethren we have a support, which, considering the knowledge we have of God as Christians, secures us against everything that might come near to despair, even under circumstances when our conscience accuses us most keenly of the greatness of our guilt. To the man who has once learned to know the life of love as something real, the thought of the love of God in Christ is unspeakably blissful. We are sorely tempted to question whether there is a pure love, which is not merely disguised selfishness. To believe in pure, unselfish love is infinitely difficult; and so long as we lack this faith, we also lack faith in divine grace. Only by finding divine love experimentally in ourselves, do we attain to faith in love—we ourselves must really love in deed and not merely in word. It is only when we have thus attained to the faith that there is such a thing as genuine love, that we come to know how much consolation there is in the thought that God in Christ is love.

Until we have attained to genuine love, our faith also lacks reality. Not in our love as such does there lie for us any comfort over against the accusations of conscience; but only in this, that it is a sure token to us of our new filial relation to God through faith. Moreover, we find this consolation in every case, of whatsoever our heart may accuse us. And this is something characteristic of the peace of the Christian with God—it is independent of the measure of the sin of which we must accuse ourselves. Apart from Christ we might be able to appease our conscience in relation to small sins; great sins, however, would remain unforgiven upon our conscience. To the man, however, who has attained to any living

knowledge of his sin, all his sins appear as great ; and he finds no comfort in that natural hope in divine forgiveness. This way of looking at sin and its forgiveness characterises the Christian's confidence in God his Father as free from all self-righteousness. His tranquillity of our heart in spite of the bitterest accusations is grounded upon the assurance that God is greater than our heart, and that, therefore, His love is greater than ours. The greatness of God is on the one hand greatness of power and wisdom ; but with the knowledge of this greatness of God by itself alone we are not helped. We need the knowledge of the greatness of His holiness and grace ; and the knowledge of this, the real greatness of God, we owe to divine revelation alone. Here also there is disclosed to us the uniqueness of God's greatness ; this, viz. that the greatness of His holiness is at the same time the greatness of His grace, and conversely. The perfect interpenetration of grace and truth is the greatest thing that we know of God. Accordingly, we have nothing to fear from the greatness of God. The natural man is interested in representing God as not too great ; for this greatness fills him with fear, and restrains him in the enjoyment of his evil lusts. But the Christian finds in the transcendent greatness of God, and in it alone, the perfect stilling of his heart. The greater God is to him, He is all the more holy and gracious ; and instead of feeling himself limited by the thought of God's greatness, he finds in it an effective means whereby to burst more and more completely the chains of evil propensity, which are the obstruction of his freedom. That God should always be becoming greater to him, and his own heart consequently less, is the main endeavour of the Christian.

*He knoweth all things.* To the natural man there can hardly be anything more terrible than the thought of the divine omniscience. As natural men we would not willingly allow our neighbour to look into our heart ; and we are all the more terrified at the thought that God, the Holy One, sees into its very depths. But to the Christian this is a great support, when the accusations of his conscience tend to make him afraid. For, in the first place, he need not be afraid of having his heart looked into to its very core. As a Christian he can show his heart's core to any one, for it belongs to God, it is full of love to God and the brethren. In his case it is the outside of his life, the whole series of acts, which pass over into external deeds,

which bear most decidedly the stamp of human weakness ; in it there comes to the light the weakness which is the result of the power of the flesh over the spirit. If he is to be judged according to it, he becomes afraid ; and his relation to the brethren is so trying as it is, because these must look mainly at this outward side. He cannot disclose the bottom of his heart to the brethren, who only half understand him, or misunderstand him altogether. Hence he is so pleased to be manifest unto God ; and he would rather fall into the hands of God than into the hands of men. God understands him perfectly, and judges him truly. To His guidance he gladly and absolutely submits himself, and is unwilling to be led by others or by himself. He himself knows very imperfectly what is really good for him ; but God knows it, and God leads him. In another respect also the Christian finds rest and peace—he knows the eye of God as the eye of holiness and grace. He cannot be afraid of the eye of grace. The deeper grace searches into the inmost ground of his life, he can all the more look for tokens of grace from God ; and inasmuch as the eye of the divine holiness looks down into the depths of his heart, it becomes a consuming fire for everything of impurity that is left in him. Nothing else could consume the hidden impurities of his heart like the glance of God's holiness into this hidden depth. So the Christian rejoices that God knows *all* things ; and this joy is a criterion of our standing as Christians. Only if God is in the fullest sense of the word the searcher of hearts, is real fellowship with Him possible. Every recess of our heart must be penetrated by God.

Vers. 21 f. There is added here another blessing of genuine and active brotherly love, a blessing which necessarily issues from the quieting of our heart before God, set forth in ver. 20. This is boldness in prayer. *If our heart condemn us not*, viz. in the manner described in vers. 19 f.—when it is thus quieted in respect of the accusations which it brings against us. There is, therefore, no contradiction with ver. 20, but rather the closest connexion with vers. 19 f. The boldness thought of is freedom in prayer, unreserved access to God, the fearless opening of our heart and mouth before God with our petitions. *Because we keep His commandments, etc.* This clause assigns the reason for the hearing of the prayers presented to God with boldness. It lies in the harmony of such

suppliants with God as regards their way of thinking and acting (v. 14). Such are the suppliants of whom John speaks here—they love the brethren sincerely and actively. The “commandments” meant here are more especially the commandment of brotherly love.

We do not, however, have this boldness in prayer without the express overcoming of obstacles in ourselves, which stand in the way of our access to God. No one can draw near to God with whatever concerns him without some preparation. Every man’s consciousness testifies to him that it is his own sin that comes between him and God. Only through the express forgiveness of this sin and the express quieting of our conscience over against its accusations on account of sin, is real access to God possible to any of us. Hence the mood in which we find access. It is, on the one hand, a feeling of humiliation and unworthiness; and, on the other, a feeling of great and childlike joy at the greatness of God’s heart, in consequence of which He does not need, because of our actual sins, to deny us access to Himself. It may be that the natural man, because his conscience sleeps, does not feel himself to be rejected by God; but he has not really drawn near to God, but only with his understanding and his lips. Accordingly he does not comprehend how the human heart can feel itself drawn to God. He derides the man who ventures to appear before God only with contrite heart; but he should first of all experience something of the blessedness which there is in contrition. He has no impression of the greatness of God, because he does not know His holiness and grace. For that reason he does not feel the honour of being allowed to draw near to the Supreme. For that reason also he has no notion how truly eternal and blessed life can be obtained from God.

This boldness in prayer has now in its train also the hearing of our prayer. At first it sounds paradoxical to say that boldness in prayer must be followed by the hearing of prayer. But for this we have the unqualified promise of the Saviour Himself; and it is also a matter of direct certainty to the Christian in the very moment of genuine boldness in prayer. He has a vague consciousness that the petition is produced in his heart by God Himself, and that it is as sure to be heard as God must say yea and amen to His own word. As to the inner connexion of the matter, John says, in

each case we receive what we ask, for we keep His commandments. All the petitions proceed out of love to the brethren. It is precisely in this that we manifest our filial relation to God; and if we are thus one with Him, our petitions must correspond to the divine will—we will what God wills. The apostle is therefore speaking especially of the petitions which are petitions of genuine love, which proceed from brotherly love, and in which our own interest is inseparably connected with that of our brethren. In such petitions we have the fullest boldness.

Ver. 23. John seems here to desire to anticipate a misunderstanding which might be occasioned by ver. 22. He means to say: although I have just spoken thus of the demand of brotherly love as the commandment of God, this must not be misunderstood, as if I would thereby cast into the shade the demand of faith in the Redeemer. This is rather distinctly implied in the divine commandment of which I speak; it is even the most important element in it, the element out of which the demand of love of the brethren necessarily flows (ver. 16). This faith in Jesus forms the basis of our love of the brethren.—The love of the brethren spoken of here is that which the Redeemer has commanded us (John xiii. 34 f). This kind of brotherly love, which is the same as that with which He has loved us, presupposes faith in Him as the Son of God. It is only when we have this faith in Him that we can duly appreciate His love and understand His demand. We see John concerned here, as elsewhere, lest there should arise a contradiction between the two demands which he makes as the fundamental demands of true Christianity, viz. the demands of faith in the Redeemer and of active love to the brethren. These are, no doubt, the two opposite tendencies of Christianity; but the true unity and vitality of the Christian life depend precisely upon its constantly branching out in these two directions. And in point of fact neither of the two can be neglected without the Christian life suffering most grievously. He to whom this diversity of tendencies seems a contradiction, understands neither of the two; his life does not yet flow from the peculiarly Christian spring in which both tendencies equally arise and into which they return. Such a love of the brethren as Christ demands is wholly impossible without sincere and perfect faith in Him. If it were not so, such a

demand would be a fanatical exaggeration, and impossible to fulfil. If, however, we have recognised such a love of the brethren in Christ, we must endeavour after it in all its greatness and purity.

Ver. 24. John now mentions another blessing which genuine love of the brethren procures, viz. that of abiding fellowship with the Redeemer. The thought is intimately connected with ver. 23. The expression, "keepeth His commandments," seems to have led him to think specially of fellowship with Christ, probably because it reminded him of a definite saying of the Saviour, in which He represents fellowship with Himself and the assured, distinct consciousness of this fellowship as the fruit of the keeping of His commandments (John xiv. 20-24). Of all motives to love of the brethren, this is to the Christian the most significant. He has the experimental certainty that for his sanctification and blessedness there is nothing greater and more effective than fellowship with Christ. If Christ fills his soul, and if his whole heart is occupied with the intuition of Christ and with joy in Christ, he must walk in accordance with God's will. In that case every germ of the new, holy life in him is developed; and he knows no greater bliss than that of his mind being identified with the mind of Christ. He who has as yet no experience of this fellowship with Christ, which is wholly of an ethical nature, should not speak of knowing Christian brotherly love.

*He abideth in Him*, viz. in Christ, in Him who has given us the commandment (ver. 23). Abiding fellowship with God is spoken of in iv. 12; if God were meant here, iv. 12 would be a mere repetition of the thought of this verse.

*And hereby we know*. This abiding of the Redeemer in us is no mere imaginary abiding, nor is the notion of it a fanatical delusion. We know how to distinguish this fellowship from a

phantastically imagined one; for we have a sure token whereby we experimentally discern its reality, viz. the possession of the Spirit which He has given us (Rom. viii. 16). By means of this Spirit He is in us,—by means of His Spirit in our spirit. Our spirit, however, is the product of our ethically normal behaviour, of our keeping His commandments. There is really a new life in us, and that too of a spiritual kind, which we can trace back only to Him. This is an experience which John presumes every Christian has, the experience, viz. that there dwells in him another life than the natural one, and that it is essentially through Christ. The point in question here is whether the Christian can have an assurance of standing in fellowship with Christ. The natural man will not allow to the Christian this assurance, because he does not know the two specifically different conditions in which a man may be. He knows Christianity only so far as it is a certain sum of intellectual convictions and feelings that these give rise to; and that being the case, it is of course impossible to arrive at a fellowship between the believing man and the Christ, who is the main object of these convictions. He, however, who has really been born again, has entered into a new world, in which the barriers which kept spirits apart from one another, have been cast down. To him fellowship with Christ is nothing strange. In the new religious-ethical life in this new world he has the direct assurance of standing in real fellowship with Him to whom he owes this new life. This is no doubt a very dangerous article. To a certain extent we may delude ourselves with the fancy that we have received such a new spirit, and that we stand in fellowship with Jesus; and no one is able to decide with perfect certainty regarding others, whether their fellowship with Him is purely imaginary or real. But each individual can attain to clearness as regards himself, if his heart is sincere.

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## The Great Day of Atonement.

*From the "Christian Commonwealth" of September 21.*

YESTERDAY was the Great Day of Atonement, and impressively solemn were the various services of the day; not less in the *Chevras*, or smaller places of Jewish worship, than in the great cathedral-synagogue in Aldgate. On this occasion a large

proportion of the worshippers wear their grave-clothes—the very shrouds in which they are eventually to be buried. These, and many others less morbidly inclined, but sharing the same heritage of superstition, avoid the wearing of *leather* shoes,