

Exposition of the First Epistle of St. John,

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CHAPTER III. 4-8.

“Every one that doeth sin doeth also lawlessness; and sin is lawlessness. And ye know that He was manifested to bear our sins; and in Him is no sin. Whosoever abideth in Him sinneth not; whosoever sinneth hath not seen Him, nor know Him. Little children, let no man lead you astray. He that doeth righteousness is righteous, even as He is righteous. He that doeth sin is of the devil; for the devil sinneth from the beginning. To this end was the Son of God manifested, that He might destroy the works of the devil.”

VER. 4. The development of the special motive for the doing of righteousness, with which the demand expressed in ii. 29 is supported, ends in ver. 3, and John again resumes his exhortation, continuing it, and presenting it in the more specific form of an exhortation to turn away from sin even in its most trivial manifestation. The stress lies upon the words “every one”; whoever doeth sin, be he whosoever he may, be he even a Christian, one who calls himself a believer in Christ. Probably, however, what he really means is this: whosoever doeth a sin, any sin whatever, let it be ever so trivial. *Lawlessness*, that which is contrary to the law (Matt. xxiii. 28; 2 Cor. vi. 14; Heb. i. 9; 2 Pet. ii. 8), is the direct antithesis of righteousness. John says: the doing of righteousness, acting in accordance with the demands of the law, involves abstaining from *every* sinful deed; for the doing of sin is essentially acting in opposition to the law; and it is sin and nothing else that is opposed to the law. The thought rests upon the similarity and yet difference in meaning of the two terms “lawlessness” and “sin,” viz. upon their formal difference and material identity. “Sin” denotes an ethically abnormal act according to its material quality, apart altogether from the concrete form which it may assume, while “lawlessness” denotes the same act apart from its material character, and simply according to its formal quality, viz. as an act which is a refusal to be bound by a law, or as rebellion against such a law, for which reason it is used to designate wickedness and gross heinous transgressions. John accordingly says: in the doing of righteousness, *i.e.* in acting in accordance with the law, we must allow ourselves absolutely nothing that is materially anti-moral, even although it does not seem to us to be expressly forbidden by the law. For everything that is materially anti-moral is also against the law; and whatever is

materially anti-moral, *that* is what is against the law, *i.e.* it is precisely what the law seeks to exclude—whatever the law may oppose, it opposes it simply because it is something materially anti-moral, *i.e.* sin; nothing save what is materially anti-moral (*i.e.* sin) is really contrary to the law (according to its real meaning and purpose). The law, to which lawlessness is made to refer in this passage, cannot possibly (in this Epistle) be the Old Testament law—at least, not simply as such. In the various circles in which his readers, some of whom had been heathens, moved, a great many things were generally regarded as divinely commanded or forbidden. By the law, to which he refers here, John no doubt understands the totality of such commandments, as well as each of them in particular. We have here an assertion of the complete identity of positive Christian morality with native human morality. The Christian law knows no other ethical demands than those that are grounded in the nature of man; all these, however, it asserts without exception and with inexorable stringency. No one may avoid the Christian law by means of any self-chosen virtue; no one may in any respect lower its demands.

Ver. 5. This verse states another reason why the readers ought to turn away from sin even in its most trivial form. As Christians, viz. their consciousness embraces these two facts: first, that the aim of the manifestation of the Redeemer is to atone for our sins, and to do away with them by this atonement, so that we are enabled and under obligation to give up sinning; and, secondly, that He Himself is without (the least) sin. “Ye know:” the author appeals expressly to his readers’ own consciousness. Every notion that Christ could in any way be a servant of sin, every dallying with sin is excluded most decisively by the consciousness of the Christian, for the Redeemer’s purpose

is to do away altogether with sin. The *manifestation* of Christ refers to His first appearing as Redeemer. John thinks of the earthly life of Christ as the revelation of the Son of God, of the divine Logos in the flesh (1 Tim. iii. 16; 1 Pet. i. 20). "To bear sins" is a purely biblical, Old Testament term, and, in accordance with the twofold sense of the Old Testament word (*nasa*), denotes, sometimes, to bear one's sin, to pay the penalty for it (Lev. xxiv. 15; Isa. liii. 12, etc.); sometimes, to take it away, do away with it, destroy it, but always with the specific notion of doing so by atoning for it. In this latter sense it is used in the Old Testament especially for the priestly expiation as the means whereby the divine forgiveness of sins is mediated (e.g. Ex. xxxiv. 7; Lev. x. 17). Both significations are connected together in the closest manner. For "to make atonement" means to do away with sin by taking it upon oneself so as to pay the penalty for it. Seeing, therefore, that the two significations, so far from excluding one another, rather mutually include each other, it is certainly most natural to find them both implied here also. If we would admit only one of them, we should have to decide (as in John i. 29) in favour of the first; for in our Epistle redemption is certainly thought of as propitiation. The second signification in isolation from the first, *i.e.* apart from its mediation by means of atonement, is altogether inadmissible, and can nowhere be proved to be the real meaning (Heb. ix. 26). Nor may the Christian separate one of these two thoughts from the other. He knows of no doing away of sin otherwise than upon the ground of its propitiation; nor of a sanctification, which does not rest upon this same ground. On the other hand, he knows of no propitiation for sin, which does not aim directly at its doing away; nor of any forgiveness of sin experienced by him, which is not directly at the same time a slaying of sin. Whoever knows that such a doing away of sin by means of propitiation was the aim of the manifestation of Christ, that upon this aim His whole human activity was concentrated, cannot but aim at absolute freedom from sin.

"In Christ is no sin." The fact that He is absolutely sinless is adduced as a second moment of the Christian consciousness. It follows from this that the Christian is under obligation to endeavour after a similar sinlessness. The sinlessness of Jesus is regarded here as a sinlessness still present to faith.

Ver. 6. If in Christ there is no sin, then naturally neither can he sin who is abidingly in Christ. Only in consequence of a falling away from fellowship with Christ would sinning be possible for a Christian (ver. 9; v. 18). Whoever, therefore, sins has never learned to know Him in a way that establishes a real fellowship with Him. John draws this conclusion, because he holds it impossible to fall away from the state of grace when once really established (ii. 19). In connexion with this "whosoever," we must, because of i. 8-10, think of some qualification present to John's mind, else he falls into self-contradiction: whosoever is still a sinner, every one whose personality is still at peace with sin. "Hath not seen Him;" whosoever sins does not only not abide in Him, but has never stood in spiritual connexion with Him. The *seeing* spoken of is the beholding of Christ with the spiritual eye, whence all faith in Him proceeds. The result of this is the *knowing*, the understanding of Christ. "Seeing" denotes the direct, immediate impression which one receives from the (ethical) manifestation of Christ; "knowing," the intellectual insight into the nature and character of this manifestation. The "knowing" is neither something greater nor something less than "seeing"; it is merely what belongs to the latter, the other side of the latter.

The impression which the actual beholding of Christ produces upon us is an impression which separates us completely from sin. If such a separation from sin does not take place, either the Christ beheld is not the truly historical Christ, or the beholding of Christ is not a real beholding; it is not really the inner eye of the spirit that has been directed towards Him; the beholder has been satisfied with a merely external glance. The understanding of Christ, the intelligent knowledge of Him, which is the natural consequence of inwardly beholding Him, intensifies that impression. Just as our feeling receives from Christ the direct impression that He forms the absolute antithesis to sin, so it becomes clearer to our understanding, the more it occupies itself with Him as its object, that through Him there has appeared for us also a necessary separation from sin. It is, therefore, of the utmost importance that we grow in this comprehension of Christ. It is altogether characteristic of Christ that the comprehension of Him is incompatible with sin in the person that beholds Him. This fact throws special light upon the per-

fect uniqueness of the Redeemer. Our Christianity must, therefore, take a radical bent towards the person of Christ; we must not let it consist in a Christian doctrine. Above all, we must make it our study to establish a personal relation between ourselves and Christ. If the direct beholding of Christ is a means of overcoming sin, it is the ever-growing and ever closer personal fellowship with Him that gradually tears it up by the very roots. Where this is not being accomplished, the fellowship with Him is not of a personal nature. In how few surely of those who call themselves Christians must there be a clear beholding or a distinct knowing of Christ!

Ver. 7. The exhortation to do righteousness is repeated in the form of a warning. It is a warning against seducers, who would fain persuade the readers that moral laxity is compatible with Christianity. They seem to have also been docetic heretics. There are never wanting those who would fain justify carnality and worldliness on the part of the Christian; and John also knows how tempting this notion is for every one on account of the sinful bias that still remains in some measure in every breast. Hence the urgency of his warning, which owes its origin to his deep-seated love. That false principle is in radical contradiction to their own salvation. Perhaps it sounds sweet to them; but it is a sweet poison, an altogether fatal deception, to think of making Christianity more agreeable to us by desiring to combine with it moral laxity. We thereby lose the pure blessedness and divine power of Christianity. "No man," whosoever he may be, and from whatever point of view he may do it. That principle is altogether false—only he who doeth righteousness is righteous, even as Christ is righteous. Connivance with sin is altogether excluded by Christianity. Christianity demands a doing of righteousness in accordance with the new ability which God in His grace has given us. It demands this righteousness in all the stringency which we find it to have in Christ. If the world maintains that a perfectly pure and entire morality is not possible to man, Christianity protests against such an assertion in the most unqualified manner. Whoever should measure his morality in accordance with a lower criterion would soon slide into that lax principle. It is only when we set the demand so high that it becomes possible for us really to work at our sanctification with love

and zeal; whereas the common, so-called human righteousness cannot kindle us to genuine zeal in the matter of holiness.

Ver. 8. The thought of the previous verse is now further developed negatively, and is thereby made still more prominent. To go on sinning is so far from being compatible with Christianity, that whoever doeth sin is of the devil, belongs to the devil, to destroy whose works is the direct aim of the manifestation of Christ, to whom, therefore, Christianity stands in the relation of absolute opposition. "Is of the devil": he is a child of the devil, derives his origin from him, is of his nature, belongs to him—an ethical filial relationship, which is at the same time of a very real character, and not merely an "as it were." It is certainly a horrible thought that man can enter into the same relation to the devil as that in which he naturally stands to God; that there is a being born of the devil, just as there is a being born of God, in virtue of which man enters into homogeneity with God, and is also dwelt in and filled by God. Our Lord has expressed Himself to the same effect in John viii. 44. If anything can do so, this ought to fill us with horror of sin. This relationship also involves man in the fate of the devil, and makes him participate in his misery.

Why he who doeth sin is a child of the devil, is explained by the words, "for the devil sinneth from the beginning." The expositors explain these words in two essentially different ways, although they all find the key to their interpretation in John viii. 44, of which passage the one we are considering naturally reminds us. Some (Lücke, de Wette) understand them of the beginning of sin: since there has been sin since the fall of man (Gen. iii.). Others (Paulus, Jachmann) understand them of the beginning of the existence of the devil: so long as there has been a devil—thus making sin belong to the essence of the devil. The first interpretation is certainly altogether violent; compared with it, the second is decidedly to be preferred. Still the latter is not altogether correct, although it comes very near the apostle's meaning. According to the apostle, the words "from the beginning" are not to be understood with reference to time, but, logically, in the sense of "in principle" as opposed to sinning in a secondary or derived manner. Satan sins *par principe*, he sins for sinning's sake; other sinners

sin only for the sake of something else. Compared with him, all human sinning is only derived. In the devil is to be found the ultimate principle of all sinning in the world. Thus the human sinner does not stand isolated with his sinning; he has a principle of sin within him; he is a child of another sinning one. Here John presents the notion of the devil under the point of view from which that notion has its practical importance. We should not be satisfied with merely considering our own sin; but in order rightly to understand it, we should go back upon the idea of sin in all its distinctness, and turn our attention to that form of it in which it has reached its height. When we look at our own sin, we find much in it that extenuates it in our eyes. It seems to be weakness; and accordingly we do not feel due abhorrence of it. When, however, we are looking at the sin of our neighbour, we should not overlook anything that might tend to excuse him.

The sinning of the devil is to be understood of his own sinning, not of the sinning of man through his tempting activity. If now, says John, the devil is the sinner from principle, and therefore the real sinner, the sinner in the full sense of the term, he who doeth sin belongs to *him*. He cannot belong to Christ (ii. 29), for He was

manifested for the express purpose of making a thorough end of all sinning, *i.e.* of all the works of the devil (John xii. 31, xvi. 11). The ultimate aim of the appearing of the *Son of God* is the thorough-going destruction of sin by the destruction of the kingdom of sin and of the prince of this kingdom. Only the Son of God could accomplish this destruction. The use of this expression (Son of God) emphasises the greatness of the might that in Christ has been opposed to Satan. This, it is true, is only the negative aspect of His work; but it is essentially involved in all that He did. The founding of the kingdom of God is always accompanied by an attempt to destroy the kingdom of the devil, which is opposed to it. It is therefore, also, an essential feature of the morality of the Christian, that in all he does and suffers he aims at a complete annihilation of sin. He must not only labour positively at the realisation of the good; his morality must also include this opposition to sin. In this there is no doubt something humbling to the Christian. It would be pleasant to be able to turn one's attention merely to what is good; but this pleasure and comfort is meanwhile absolutely denied to the Christian. In his loftiest endeavours, he always keeps his eye upon sin.

Table Fellowship (*Tischgemeinschaft*) of Jew and Gentile.

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THIS question is one of historical interest in its bearing on the social life of the Jewish people, and especially on the relation of Jew and Gentile in the primitive Christian Church; but it is somewhat obscure and difficult, and has not, so far as we know, been thoroughly discussed. The following is offered as a contribution to its settlement. In dealing with the matter, we treat it chronologically, and distinguish two main features. (I.) The Jew eating with the Gentile in the Gentile's house; (II.) The Gentile eating with the Jew in the Jew's house.

I. *The Jew eating with the Gentile in the Gentile's house.*—(a) In early Bible times we find eating with certain heathenish nations altogether forbidden, as is clear from Ex. xxxiv. 15, 16, "Make

thou no covenant with the inhabitants of the land (of Canaan), lest, when they go astray after their gods, and sacrifice unto their gods, any one call thee, and thou eat of his sacrifice. And lest thou take of his daughters who, going astray after their gods, make thy sons also go astray after their gods." This passage, in forbidding the Jew to celebrate the feasts of the aborigines of Palestine and to eat with them, gives a very weighty reason for it, *sc.* lest the Israelites, becoming too intimate with these heathens, might marry their daughters, who, as the great lawgiver justly fears, and as experience teaches, might lead their Jewish husbands astray from the service of the only one eternal God, and cause them to worship idols, and thus commit all kinds of abominable customs that were rampant among the Canaanitish nations.