

Exposition of the First Epistle of St. John.

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CHAPTER V. 13-18.

'These things have I written unto you, that ye may know that ye have eternal life, even unto you that believe on the name of the Son of God. And this is the boldness which we have toward Him, that, if we ask anything according to His will, He heareth us: and if we know that He heareth us whatsoever we ask, we know that we have the petitions which we have asked of Him. If any man seeth his brother sinning a sin not unto death, he shall ask and shall give him life, even to them that sin not unto death. There is sin unto death: not concerning it do I say that he should make request. All unrighteousness is sin; and there is sin not unto death. We know that whosoever is begotten of God sinneth not; but he that is begotten of God keepeth himself, and the evil one toucheth him not.'

VER. 13. 'These things' refers back to vers. 6-12, and especially to ver. 11 f. This verse is meant, as it were, to excuse the apostle for having written as he has done to his readers. I have not set forth, he says, the evidence for the Messiahship and Divine Sonship of Jesus, as if I doubted your faith in Jesus as the Christ and the Son of God, but only in order to make you, who, I am well aware, believe in Jesus as this Messiah and Son of God, fully conscious of what you possess in this faith and in virtue of it. The great blessing, the possession of which is involved in faith in Jesus as the Messiah and the Son of God, is eternal life. And certainly the more evident the attestation of Jesus as the Messiah and the Son of God becomes to us, so much the more evident does it also become that the new life in fellowship with Him, which is mediated by faith in Him, can be nothing less than eternal life, the real, blessed life of God Himself. Even in the case of the believing Christian, it is not superfluous to remind him that through faith in Jesus he actually possesses eternal life. For, seeing that as yet he possesses it for the most part only in faith, the immediate experience that he has of the weakness of his spiritual life may deprive him of that assurance. But we must hold it fast; for without it, it is impossible to have a joyous confidence in Christianity. And this assurance is certainly dependent upon Jesus Christ being to our faith really the Son of God; for the Redeemer cannot give more than He Himself has. If He is a mere man, He can give us also only a human life. Only if His own life is the eternal, divine life itself, can He communicate it to us also.

Ver. 14. In this and the immediately following verses John shows his readers how much in earnest he is with the conviction uttered in ver. 13, that he that believes in Jesus as the Son of God

possesses eternal life. He does this by setting forth the greatness of the confidence which he (and along with him every true believer) reposes in the Redeemer. This confidence, as John describes it, is so great, that from the nature of the case it is at the same time the confidence of possessing life and perfect satisfaction in Christ. The connexion of his thoughts is as follows. We have written these things unto you, in order to awaken in you the vivid consciousness, that through your faith in Jesus as the Son of God ye possess eternal life. And (whence ye may infer how earnest we are in making such a statement) our boldness towards Him is so great, that we are certain of possessing through Him the fulfilment of all our desires that are in accordance with His will, and therefore also of possessing life and perfect satisfaction (John x. 10), *i.e.* eternal life, in virtue of our faith in Him. 'Towards Him,' *i.e.* not God, but Christ. Not only is this most natural grammatically; but it would be exceedingly tame to say that God hears us, seeing that, by reason of His omniscience, in God's case this is self-evident. 'We have:' the subject is John and his fellow-apostles; but all that truly believe in the Redeemer are also included. 'This' means 'so great a' confidence. 'According to His will' is substantially equivalent to 'in His name' (John xiv. 13, xv. 16, xvi. 23-27). No special stress falls on these words here; the apostle rather assumes, as something altogether self-evident, that the Christian will present to the Redeemer only such petitions as are in accordance with His mind and will. 'He heareth us:' He lends His ear to our prayers (as in iv. 5, 6; John xviii. 37). It is not yet an express 'He answereth us.' But if only we are sure that what we ask does not escape His notice, we are already full of confidence. For if only He hears us, we know that

He is not lacking in power to grant us our requests ; and we therefore look upon these as already fulfilled.

Ver. 15. 'If we know,' *i.e.* if we are convinced that He hears us. 'We have the petitions : ' we have the answering, the granting of our petitions. The Christian knows that he is already, through faith, in actual possession of the blessing prayed for.

Ver. 16. In order to make it clearer that the Christian, by means of believing prayer to Christ, really possesses in Him a spring of eternal life, John adds that, by means of such prayer, he not only draws life for himself, but even bestows it upon his brother who has sinned, and whose true life has thereby become impaired. Even for his brother he can obtain life from the Redeemer. This is the most striking proof of the greatness of the power which the prayer of the believing Christian to the Redeemer has. John in this passage is by no means thinking of giving a command that we should intercede for our brethren (see such apostolic commands in 1 Tim. ii. 1-4, Jas. v. 14-20, etc.). But supposing that a Christian should see his fellow-Christian (and it is only of a fellow-Christian that the term 'brother' can be understood) sinning, and thereby becoming spiritually sick, he assumes that it will be unnatural for him to do anything else than intercede with the Redeemer for him. And by so doing, he adds, he will give him life, inasmuch as through his intercession his sinning brother will receive from the Redeemer the grace that heals his sin. 'He will give him life : ' to think of God or the Redeemer as the subject would not only be harsh syntactically, but would also weaken the thought of the passage ; for the thought is this, that *the Christian*, by means of his prayer to the Redeemer, can even give life to others. John says, he will give him *life*, because the question discussed here is the power of faith in the Redeemer to bestow life, namely, the true, eternal life.

Here, however, the apostle is not speaking of intercession for sinful brethren in general, but for the brother who 'does not sin unto death.' It is evident that he lays great stress upon this restriction, for in the following verses he expressly discusses it in relation to his thesis. Without this restriction his thesis would be manifestly false. For, whatever the 'sin unto death' may more precisely be, it is at least a sin that issues in the

death of the sinner (John xi. 4). If, therefore, there is really such a sin, as John himself immediately acknowledges, the statement, 'he will give him life,' can evidently not apply to the sinner that lives in it ; for death and life are absolutely mutually exclusive. Seeing that he wished his thesis as to the power of prayer to be undisputed, it was very natural for John to limit it expressly in the manner indicated. Only we must not so understand him, as if by the restricting words 'not unto death,' John regards the two kinds of sin, which he here distinguishes, as being outwardly distinguishable, at least by the Christian. In connexion with these restricting words we must not lay any stress upon *seeing* ; they are a restriction added to 'sinning' taken by itself, and mean : if his sinning is a sinning not unto death. John's aim is not to indicate a condition of the interceding, but of the life-giving. What the *sin unto death* is, is evident to any one who is satisfied with John's own answer. It is the sin which in consequence of *impenitentia finalis* (*i.e.* impenitence stubbornly persisted in), on the assumption of its continuing unto the consummation of Christ's kingdom, has death, *i.e.* the (gradual) annihilation of the individual (Jas. i. 15), the so-called second death, as its result ; whereas the sin of him, who lets himself be healed by the grace of redemption, does not issue in this death, and does not exclude the sinner healed of it from eternal life. This sin unto death may appear outwardly in the most diverse forms ; yea, it never truly comes to a head in the present life. There is, therefore, nothing so mysterious in the sin unto death, as the expositors imagine ; and we must reject all the numerous definitions of it that have been attempted.

Having spoken so expressly of a sin that does not issue in the absolute death (annihilation) of the sinner, and having at the same time distinctly distinguished from it a sin that does issue in the sinner's absolute death, it occurs to John that the notion of a sin of the latter kind might appear very strange to his readers, or at least to many of them. He accordingly expressly affirms that there is certainly such a sin : 'There is sin unto death.' He, however, adds at once that he is not speaking here of that kind of sin. This clause (like the whole passage) by no means contains a definite prohibition of intercession for sinners that sin unto death ; indeed, the apostle does not here *command* that intercession be made for brethren that fall into sin.

He simply declares that, in speaking of intercession for the brethren, he is not thinking of such sins unto death: here, in speaking of the intercession of the Christian for *brethren* that fall into sin, I leave such sins altogether out of account.

Ver. 17. Although John thus distinctly excludes the sin unto death from the sins, in respect of which he here speaks of a Christian intercession, his readers are not to imagine that, after the exclusion of such sin, no sins at all remain, of which one can think in connexion with what he has been saying as to the Christian's intercession for his sinning brethren. He accordingly now shows them how comprehensive the idea of sin is, and how there may also be a sin, which is not unto death. 'All unrighteousness is sin:' the idea of sin, he says, is very comprehensive; it is as comprehensive as the idea of unrighteousness. The emphasis falls upon 'all.' 'Unrighteousness' is any and every defect in respect of righteousness, every way of acting contrary to God's will and law (i. 9, iii. 4; Luke xiii. 27, xviii. 6; Rom. ix. 14; 2 Tim. ii. 19). But every such unrighteousness is not in itself a sin unto death: 'and therefore there is also a sin not unto death.'

In the relation of the Christian to his brother, John sees a special moment, in connexion with which we may estimate the fulness of the life bestowed by Christ. Not only can the Christian, in virtue of the grace bestowed in Christ, fully satisfy his own need; but he has also become rich toward his brother. This riches, however, can only be appreciated in its true significance by him who, like the Christian, knows love and the power of sympathy with one's neighbour. If in his riches the Christian did not possess an abundance out of which he could supply his brother's want, he could not rejoice in it. He would not, and he could not, be blessed alone; his isolation would be to himself the most grievous torment. The power, whereby he can obtain for his brother what the latter needs, is intercession. To the Christian intercession is something altogether natural (hence the future: he shall ask). That which the Christian must above all desire for his brother is precisely that, his possession of which may seem exceedingly problematical, namely, the ability to help him out of his sin. But even in this respect the riches of the Christian can avail for what is lacking on the part of his brother. Even in respect of sin, the Christian has the power

of standing successfully by a brother with his intercession. For the sinning brother, being a Christian, is in the state of grace; and this state cannot be lost. Nowhere in Scripture is the great significance of Christian intercession more clearly set forth than here. Yet here it is expressly made prominent that the main subject of the Christian's intercession for his brother is the latter's sin. And we must admit that our intercession does not bear most urgently upon this point. We sympathise with him more keenly in respect of his other needs than in respect of his sin. This is owing to the fact that the consciousness of sin has not attained its due vividness in ourselves. Now, in order to stir us up to intercession for the sins of the brethren, no thought can be more powerful than this, that in this way we are able to restore life to our sick brother. Even when we do not call in question this efficacy of intercession, our confidence in it is not strong enough. The presupposition of intercession, however, is an actual brotherly relationship, an actual personal union between the intercessor and him, for whom he prays; a comprehensive brotherly fellowship in love. Hence the widespread scepticism as to its efficacy is a symptom that real brotherly love is but little diffused among Christians.

To the Christian sin and death are correlative terms. To him sin is the antithesis of life, and death its naturally necessary result. The *natural* way of looking at sin regards it mainly as weakness, as something that certainly ought to be different, but which cannot be different, and which has no serious consequences. The Christian cannot conceive of a real life of man save as in fellowship with God; but sin excludes such fellowship. In connexion with life the natural man does not think first of all of the relation of man to God, but rather of his relation to himself and to the world around him. He can therefore, without any self-contradiction, conceive of that which he calls life as being infected with sin. In one way, however, he thinks of sin far more hypochondriacally than the Christian; he regards it as something invincible. He looks upon an actual deliverance from it as well as from guilt as a fanatical hope. He imagines that he has been to a certain extent inevitably delivered over to sin. The Christian, on the contrary, has the assured confidence that he can be cured of it, and that completely. He certainly does not regard his own sin as trivial; but

he knows that this sin of his is not sin unto death ; that the sin of the man really converted must not become to him an object of despair ; and that the power of the new life, which is in him through Christ, will ultimately wholly destroy sin. Accordingly, side by side with his earnest sense of sin there is also a confident gladness. Sin does not sever him, in his consciousness, from God. Even with reference to sin he can pray to God ; and he can ask of Him its forgiveness as well as the breaking of its power.

Ver. 18. Having shown in ver. 17 that in the life of the Christian there certainly occur 'sins not unto death,' for which one should intercede, he now makes it plain that, when speaking of intercession for one's sinning fellow-Christians, he could not have been thinking of an intercession for sins unto death, because in the case of the Christian (the brother of ver. 16), as one begotten of God, such sins could not even occur. He does not, however, actually say that, in making the above assertion, he could not have been thinking of such sins, but only that the Christian cannot possibly sin in that way. He asserts this as the clear and distinct consciousness of himself and all true Christians (*we know*). In harmony with John's usual way of speaking (iii. 6, 9), 'sinneth not' must be understood here in the pregnant sense of not 'sinning unto death.' For John cannot mean to say that the Christian can no longer sin at all, seeing that in this same Epistle he has distinctly maintained the very opposite (i. 6-8, ii. 1). Nor does he mean that in iii. 6, 9, a passage which agrees with the verse we are now considering. In that passage also, as here, he denies that the Christian, as one-begotten of God, sins. The psychological reason why the Christian cannot sin in the manner indicated is stated in the words : he that is begotten of God *keepeth himself* ; he so watches and guards himself that temptation to sin finds no entrance within him, and therefore Satan does not touch him—he cannot tempt him to sin, because he can find within him no point at which to assail him. For the presupposition and condition of temptation

on the part of Satan is the lust in man himself (Jas. i. 14, 15).

The consciousness that he is separated from sin, and that indeed by his being begotten of God, is essential to each Christian. It is also logically impossible to think of a human being as standing at once in a relation of inner connexion with God and sin, seeing that between God and sin there is an absolute contradiction. Of course this separateness from sin must not lull the Christian into a sense of security ; it should rather, according to John's way of thinking, urge him to the utmost watchfulness. He who knows himself to be still in the power of sin does not have so strong a motive to guard against it ; for to him a greater or lesser measure of defilement through sin is a matter of no great importance. The Christian, on the contrary, who has actually become free from sin by the forgiveness, which he has received in faith, and who is conscious of really having power over sin, gives heed to himself. With a virgin modesty he gives diligent heed to the maintenance of the new innocence, which has become his through faith, the blessed peace of which he would not miss for anything in the world. And in proportion as he so watches over himself, he is also secured against any relapse into sin. His very personality is separated from sin ; and so temptations to sin cannot come from within him, from his personality, but only from without. Sin is interwoven in the very personality of the natural man ; hence he cannot, strictly speaking, guard himself against sin, for such guarding presupposes that sin is something external. His knowledge of the relation of sin to the world of evil spirits is specially helpful to the Christian in his guarding himself against sin. Any fellowship with sin is fellowship with the world of evil spirits, which is opposed to God. This thought awakens in him a great dread of any contact with sin ; but this dread does not at all dishearten him. For the darkness has no power over him as a Christian ; faith in Christ is a weapon that overcomes it. Accordingly that thought by no means disturbs his joy or damps his courage.