

Luke 17

by John Nelson Darby

The sermon emphasizes the importance of individual faith, forgiveness, and faithfulness to God in a world that opposes Him.

Scripture: Luke 17:1

Topics: "Faith", "Divine Grace"

Description

John Nelson Darby emphasizes the contrast between divine grace and self-righteousness, illustrating how the rejection of Christ by the Jewish economy opens the way for the gospel. He warns of the inevitability of offenses and the need for personal accountability and forgiveness among believers, urging them to avoid being stumbling blocks to others. Darby highlights the importance of faith in overcoming obstacles and the necessity of recognizing God's work in the world, even amidst trials. He reflects on the gratitude of the Samaritan leper who returned to Jesus, illustrating the difference between mere obedience to the law and true faith that seeks communion with God. Ultimately, he calls for vigilance against deception and encourages believers to focus on their relationship with Christ rather than worldly distractions.

Transcript

We have seen the great principle of divine grace in contrast with self-righteousness, and the Jewish economy, which refused its Messiah, the Son of God, set aside to make way for bringing to light life and incorruption through the gospel. "Then said he unto the disciples, It is impossible but that offences will come; but woe unto him through whom they come" (v. 1). We enter here on the spirit and way of serving, now that the world to come was let in upon the conduct and faith of the disciples in this world, for none could serve two masters. God is carrying on a work - in a little child perhaps - but it is His own work and individual faith is needed in the path of a rejected Christ. Among those who professed to follow Him and His glory on the principles of faith, there would be alas! many scandals. It was not now, nor yet to be, a reign of judicial power when the Son of man would gather out of His kingdom all scandals and them which do iniquity. Satan's power is permitted, the exercise of faith is required. It is a time of proving, by the prevalence of evil, that which lasts because of God. The cross must be taken and self denied. It is a hard lesson, but blessed when learned. The cross and the glory are always connected. The cross must be on the natural man, not on sin merely, so as to break the will. Christ had no will, shewing perfectness; but we need the cross practically, as the means of communion by breaking down that which hinders.

149 Then, again, the whole system of the world is a stumbling-block: there is not one thing in it which is not calculated to turn the heart from God. Take the merest trifle - dress, vanities in the street, flattery of man, of brethren, perhaps, etc. - all tend to elevate the flesh. What a different thing is heaven opening on a rejected Saviour! And this is our light and pathway through the world, for now the heavens are open to faith, as we pass through it to Him whom we see in glory. There is an active energetic flow of God's love in carrying on souls. Is our walk a witness? Take care you are not a stumbling-block. You may say, A person must be very weak to feel such or such a thing, but it is the very reason why he is to be cared for. The Lord give us never to hinder but to help the weak! These things are the stumbling-block of the enemy, and the man by whom they come is so far an instrument of Satan. The Lord loves His little ones. Better for that man that a millstone were hanged about his neck and he cast into the sea, than that he should offend one of them.

Verse 3. But suppose a person does something to stumble you, what then? "Take heed to yourselves." Your part is to forgive. Take heed to yourselves, jealous and self-judging. "If thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him; and if he repent, forgive him." What! if he trespass often - "seven times in a day?" Yes, if he "seven times in a day turn again to thee, saying, I repent, thou shalt forgive him." Watch incessantly yourselves and see to it that the spirit of love (the power of unity and the bond of perfectness, as we know from elsewhere) be not broken, nor the spirit of holiness, that the peace be not false. Blessed path! what condescension to our weakness and danger in the introduction of grace, and the moral judgment of present things, which are the aliment of the flesh and the domain of the world! Watchfulness against self and grace to others bring us through, rising like a life-boat above all breakers.

150 Verses 5-10. In such a position there would be need of faith and the energy proper to it. The apostles (led of God, though perhaps seeing but a petty part of the difficulty and with a confused sense of this new position) pray for an increase of faith. The Lord answers by setting forth the fulness of its energy: for faith realises a power which is not in the person and thus acts without limit. He applies it also, though in general terms, to the removal of the obstacles of a system, which might present the form of what was good and great, but fruitless. In every need we may draw upon God. All consists in looking simply to Him. All things are possible to him that believes. For it is God accomplishing His will, and He has willed to accomplish it by man and to honour Himself in man, after being dishonoured of Satan in and by man; but this in faith according to His will, till the Lord Jesus returns in power and glory. God is at work, and if you are co-workers under Him, you could believe that He is and say, Let this be done and this. Is it nothing to wield God's power? If you know what it is to be opposed by Satan, you will feel how blessed it is to call in the power of God. Your place and work may be very humble - outside - no matter what: still you need God's power to be little. What the Lord says in verses 7-10 is not applicable to a careless servant. If he has neglected his work, he is a slothful one. But I am an unprofitable servant when I have done all that I am commanded. Am I neglected? It is to try me. Something needs it. Perhaps I want to learn that God can do without me. Now that Christ is rejected, God is at work. If He uses me, it is a great honour; if He lays me by because self was elated, it is a great mercy. He is saying, as it were, Be satisfied with Myself, be content to know I love thee. Are you content with His love? Do you want man's honour or your own? Remember that when you have done all, it is the time to say, "unprofitable servant!"

151 Verses 11-19. The history which follows shews that when God brings in new power, those who have had the previous privileges are the last to rise above them into what is better. But there is a faith wrought of God in the heart which sets free from the subsidiary forms thrown around God's will in the past economy. Thus, recognising God in Jesus, it carries the soul beyond the law of a carnal commandment

and associates it with Him in whom is the power of an endless life. It occupies us with His person who is above all, planting us not in dishonour of the law ("yea, we establish the law" through faith), but in the liberty wherewith the truth - the Son - makes free. All were cleansed by the word of divine power. The nine went on to shew themselves to the priests, acting on the word of Jesus and thus far in faith. But the Samaritan stranger perceived God's glory in what had taken place, and so turned back to Jesus and aloud glorified God. The others owned the power which had come, but remained in their religious habits and associations. He, less pre-occupied with outward institutions, returned to the source of power, not to its shadow and witness, which nature always uses to hide God. He had experienced divine power in Jesus, and instead of merely enjoying the gift, he most humbly, but in the boldness and propriety of faith, went back to own the Giver. "He fell down on his face at his feet, giving him thanks." He wanted no priest. The priest did not, could not cleanse, but only discern and pronounce a man clean. Evil had levelled the Jew and the Samaritan. They were alike cast out of the presence of divine communion by the leprosy which afflicted them. But He who healed lepers under the law was He who gave the law, and the word of Jesus at once recognised the law and manifested the Jehovah who gave it. The gratitude of faith was a readier reasoner than the instruction of the law; for the blessing afforded by the work and presence of Jesus was to the nine the means of keeping up Jewish distinction, to the tenth it was the evidence of divine goodness. To him, therefore, it was complete deliverance. He was by faith arrived in grace at the fountain-head from which the law itself proceeded, and was let go in peace, made whole by his faith, having liberty from God and with God, giving thanks and glorifying Him, and withal knowing how acceptable it was in His sight.

152 How many reasons might have been pleaded for going on and not returning to Jesus! How might the nine Jews have said, You are ordered to go and shew yourself to the priest! But faith goes straight to the heart of God, and there finds all grace and a dismissal in the liberty of grace. To him who returned to Jesus, cleansed and with heart-felt thanks, the priests were left behind. In spirit and figure the healed Samaritan was passed into another system by faith - the grace and liberty of the gospel. It is blessed thus to be at the source of power and goodness, and there only does God put now those who believe. If under the law before, we are become dead to it by the body of Christ that we should belong to another-to Him who is raised from the dead. It is this way alone that glorifies God, however men may plead the letter. Thus only can we joy in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom we have now received (not the law, but) the reconciliation. In Him, thus known and enjoyed, we have all and more than all then the priests ever conceived. We have communion with the Father and the Son by faith in God fully revealed. We have to do with Him in heaven now, not with a temple and priests on earth. "Arise, go thy way." You have found the person and glory of the Lord. You are beyond the priests and the temple, your faith has pierced the veil and found One greater than both. The rest went their way, cleansed, to be under the law. Stupefied by Judaism, they did not return to glorify God. All this, at the point of the gospel we are arrived at, is full of importance. It is another light thrown on the passing away of the law and of that dispensation.

In the next verses, from verse 20 to 37, the question was actually raised as to the coming of God's kingdom. The Pharisees asked when it should come, and the Lord places them on their plain responsibility. "The kingdom of God cometh not with observation," or outward show. It should not be said, Lo here! or Lo there! for that kingdom then was there among them. The King was speaking to them. Ought they not to have known Him because He came in grace? If He had humbled Himself to know their sorrows and to die for their sins, was that a reason for not discerning His greatness and moral perfection manifested in ten thousand ways? Did not His holy love to the poor and guilty prove, plainly enough, who He was? If man's heart had not been opposed to all that was the delight of God in the kingdom, if his eye

had not been blind to all that was lovely and of good report, he would have felt that the lower Christ stooped, the more wonderful were His works.

153 To His disciples He had other things to say. He was rejected and leaving them. Suffering awaited them. Trying as their position might now be as the companions of His rejection, the days would come when they would long in vain for one of those days when they had enjoyed blessed and sweet intercourse with the Son of man. They would, as Jews in the land, feel the difference. Then Satan, to allure and deceive in that day, would lead men to say, "Lo here," or "Lo there"; but the disciples would know its falsehood. There was no hope for the nation which rejected Christ. The King had been there but refused; He was no longer "here" or "there." This day the Son of man would be as the lightning flashing from one quarter under heaven to another. But first He must suffer many things and be rejected of this generation, that is, the unbelieving Jews.

It is evident that while the Lord takes this name of Son of man to His disciples as revealing a relation higher and wider than that of Messiah (the link of which was broken and gone in the nation's ruinous rejection of Him), the whole of this instruction is Jewish and shall find its accomplishment properly in a godly remnant of the latter day. The Christian part is not spoken of here, for that is association after a heavenly sort with Christ, and we have its great moral outlines, at least in Luke 12. Here we are on the ground of responsibility, not of heavenly grace. We must separate the church's place with Christ from the government of the world by Christ. The very character of the predicted delusion confirms this distinction. For if men said to the Christian, "Here is Christ," he would instantly know that it was of Satan, because we are to meet Him, not here or there on earth, but in the air; 1 Thess. 4. But this is not the case when you come to the government of the world. There the hope rests on Jewish ground, and then the witnesses for God must go through tribulation such as has never been. Now, unless expressly forewarned, they would naturally look here or there for the Deliverer: for in that character His feet shall stand upon the Mount of Olives, and He shall come to Zion and shall come out of it. "Jehovah shall send the rod of thy strength out of Zion; rule thou in the midst of thine enemies." All this differs from the Christian's hope and his desire meanwhile; for we do not want our enemies destroyed, but converted, and we are looking to be taken from them all to heaven with the Saviour, instead of waiting for Him to join and exalt us under His reign upon the earth.

154 But, again, the subject here is neither the past siege of Jerusalem nor the future judgment of the dead. Titus's capture of the city was not like the lightning, but a long, fierce, hardly-contested struggle. Nor were the Jews, up to the moment of the final stroke, in a state of ease and carnal security, resting on the continuance of things as they were, as in the days of Noah and Lot. Suddenness of judgment is its first feature, certainty is the next, discriminating certainty, neither of which things could be fairly said of the Romans. Without or within, at rest or at work, men or women, it mattered not, God would burn up the chaff and preserve the wheat: the one should be taken, and the other be left. Next, there is a local and earthly stamp, which excludes the scene from that of the great white-throne judgment. For there is no resemblance between the judgment of the dead and the deluge or the fate of Sodom. It is the end of the age, not of the world, and is a judgment on a temporal people, and more especially on their city; for they were not to return into the house, if on the housetop; and if in the field, they were not to turn back. None of these things could be said of the dead, any more than the bed or the mill. It would be no time for human motives, artifices, or concessions (v. 33). Faithfulness to the Lord and His testimony would be the true and saving wisdom. The day of the Son of man's revelation was in question - His judgment of the quick, and especially of a generation which has rejected and caused Him to suffer. If they asked, "where?" the

solemn word for conscience was, where the body, the corpse, was, the swift inevitable judgments of God would fall.

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