

Third Sunday in Advent

Matthew 11:2-10 ;

Christ's Answer to the Question John Asked Him; His Praise of John, and the Application of This Gospel The History or Story.

I. THE QUESTION JOHN PUTS TO CHRIST.

1. The most I find on this Gospel treats of whether John the Baptist knew that Jesus was the true Christ, although this question is unnecessary and of little import. St. Ambrose thinks John asked this question neither in ignorance nor in doubt; but in a Christian spirit. Jerome and Gregory write that John asked whether he should be Christ's forerunner also into hell, an opinion that has not the least foundation, for the text plainly says, "Art thou he that cometh or look we for another?" This looking or waiting for Christ, according to the words, relates to his coming on earth and pertains to the Jewish people, otherwise John ought to have asked, or do those in hell look for thee? And since Christ with his works answered that he had come, it is certain that John inquired about Christ's bodily coming, as Christ himself thus understood it and answered accordingly, although I do not deny that Christ also descended into hell, as we confess in our creed.

2. Hence it is evident John knew very well that Jesus was he that should come, for he had baptized him and testified that Christ was the Lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world, and he had also seen the Holy Spirit descending upon him as a dove, and heard the voice from heaven: "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." All is fully related by all four Evangelists. Why then did John ask this question? Answer: It was not done without good reasons In the first place, it is certain that John asked it for the sake of his disciples, as they did not yet hold Christ to be the one he really was. And John did not come in order to make disciples and draw the people to himself, but to prepare the way for Christ, to lead everybody to Christ and to make all the people subject to him.

3. Now the disciples of John had heard from him many excellent testimonies concerning Christ, namely, that he was the Lamb of God and the Son of God, and that Christ must increase while he must decrease All this his disciples and people did not yet believe, nor could they understand it, as they themselves and all the people thought more of John than of Christ. For this reason they clung so strongly to John, even to the extent that they for his sake became jealous and dissatisfied with Christ when they saw that he also baptized, made disciples and drew the people to himself. They complained to John about this because they feared that their master would grow less in esteem, as we read in John 3, 26, "*And they came*

unto John and said to him, Rabbi, he that was with thee beyond the Jordan, to whom thou hast borne witness, behold, the same baptizeth, and all men come to him."

4. To this error they were led by two reasons, first, because Christ was not yet known to the people, but only to John; neither had he as yet performed any miracle, and no one was held in high esteem but John. Hence it appeared so strange to them that he should point them and everybody else away from himself and to some one else, inasmuch as there was no one living beside John who had gained a great name and enjoyed great fame. The other reason was because Christ appeared so very humble and common, being the son of a poor carpenter and of a poor widow. Neither did he belong to the priesthood, nor to the learned; but was only a layman and a common apprentice. He had never studied, was brought up as a carpenter apprentice just like other laymen; hence it seemed as though the excellent testimony of John concerning Christ and the common layman and apprentice, Jesus of Nazareth, did not at all harmonize with each other. Therefore, though they believed that John told the truth, they still reasoned: Perhaps it will be some one else than this Jesus; and they looked for one who might appear among them in an imposing way, like a highly learned leader among the priests, or a mighty king. From such delusion John could not deliver them with his words. They clung to him, and regarded Christ as being much inferior, meanwhile looking for the glorious appearing of the great person of whom John spoke. And should he really be Jesus, then he had to assume a different attitude; he must saddle a steed, put on bright spurs, and dash forward like a lord and king of Israel, just as the kings aforetime had done. Until he should do this they would cling to John.

5. But when Jesus began to perform miracles and became famous, then John thought he would point his disciples away from himself and lead them to Christ, in order that they might not think of establishing a new sect and becoming Johnites; but that all might cling to Christ and become Christians, John sends them to Christ so that from now on they might learn not only from the witness he bore of Christ, but also from the words and deeds of Christ himself that he was the one of whom John had spoken. It should not be expected that the works and coming of Christ would be attended by drums and bugles and like worldly pomp; but by spiritual power and grace, so that there would be no riding and walking on streets paved and carpeted; but that by virtue of such power and grace the dead would be raised up, the blind receive their sight, the deaf hear, and all kinds of bodily and spiritual evil be removed. That should be the glory and coming of this king, the least of whose works could not be performed by all the kings, all the learned and all the rich in the world. This is the meaning of the text. *"Now when John heard in the prison the works of the Christ, he sent by his disciples and said unto him, art thou he that cometh, or look we for another?"*

6. As though John would say to his disciples: There you hear of his works, such as I never accomplished, nor anyone else before him. Now go to him and ask him, whether or not he is the one that cometh. Put away the gross worldly deception that he would ride on steeds in armor. He is increasing, but I must now decrease; my work must cease, but his must continue; you must leave me and cling to him.

7. How necessary it was for John to point his disciples away from himself to Christ is very

clear. For what benefit would it have been to them if they had depended a thousand times on John's piety and had not embraced Christ? Without Christ there is no help or remedy, no matter how pious men may be. So at the present day what benefit is it to the monks and nuns to observe the rules of St. Benedict, St. Bernard, St. Francis, St. Dominic and St. Augustine, if they do not embrace Christ and him only, and depart also from their John? All Benedictines, Carthusians, Barefoot-Friars, Ecclesiasts, Augustinians, Carmelites, all monks and nuns are surely lost, as only Christians are saved. Whoever is not a Christian even John the Baptist cannot help, who indeed, according to Christ, was the greatest of all saints.

8. However, John deals kindly with his disciples, has patience with their weak faith till they shall have grown strong. He does not condemn them because they do not firmly believe him. Thus we should deal with the consciences of men ensnared by the examples and regulations of pious men, until they are freed from them.

II. CHRIST'S ANSWER; GIVEN IN WORDS AND DEEDS.

"And Jesus answered and said unto them, go and tell John the things which you hear and see; the blind receive their sight, and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good tidings preached to them. And blessed is he whosoever shall find no occasion of stumbling in me."

9. Christ answered John also for the sake of his disciples. He answers in a twofold way: First, by his works; secondly, by his words. He did the same thing when the Jews surrounded him in the temple and asked him, "If thou art the Christ, tell us plainly," John 10,24. But he points them to his works saying, "I told you, and ye believe not, the works that I do in my Father's name, these bear witness of me," John 10, 25. Again, "Though ye believe not me, believe the works," John 10, 38. Here Christ first points them to the works, and then also to the words saying "And blessed is he, whosoever shall find no occasion of stumbling in me." With these words he does not only confess that he is the Christ, but also warns them against finding occasion of stumbling in him. If he were not the Christ, then he who finds no occasion of stumbling in him could not be blessed. For one can dispense with all the saints, but Christ is the only one that no man can dispense with. No saint can help us, none but Christ.

10. The answer of his works is more convincing, first, because such works were never before accomplished either by John or by anyone else; and secondly, because these works were predicted by the prophets. Therefore, when they saw that it came to pass just as the prophets had foretold, they could and should have been assured. For thus Isaiah had said of these works: "The Spirit of the Lord Jehovah is upon me, because Jehovah hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the weak; he hath sent me to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound," Is. 61, 1. When Isaiah says, "He hath anointed me," he thereby means that Jesus is the Christ and that Christ should do all these works, and he who is doing them must be the Christ. For the Greek word Christ is Messiah in Hebrew, Unctus in Latin, and Gesalbter (anointed in German). But the kings and priests were usually anointed for the kingdom and priesthood.

But this anointed king and priest, Isaiah says, shall be anointed by God himself, not with real oil, but with the Holy Spirit that should come upon him, saying, "*The Spirit of the Lord Jehovah is upon me.*" That is my anointment with which the Spirit anointed me. Thus he indeed preaches good tidings to the weak, gives sight to the blind, heals all kinds of sickness and proclaims the acceptable year, the time of grace, etc. Again Isaiah says: "*Behold, your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God; he will come and save you. Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped. Then shall the lame man leap as a hart, and the tongue of the dumb shall sing,*" etc. Is. 35, 4-5. Now, if they would compare the Scriptures with these works, and these works with the Scriptures, they would recognize John's witness by Christ's works, that he was the true Messiah. Luke says that Christ at that time, when John's disciples asked him, healed many of their diseases and plagues and evil spirits, and bestowed sight on many that were blind. Luke 7, 21.

11. But here we must take to heart the good example of Christ in that he appeals to his works, even as the tree is known by its fruits, thus rebuking all false teachers, the pope, bishops, priests and monks to appear in the future and shield themselves by his name, saying, "We are Christians," just as the pope is boasting that he is the vicar of Christ. Here we have it stated that where the works are absent, there is also no Christ. Christ is a living, active and fruit-bearing character who does not rest, but works unceasingly wherever he is. Therefore, those bishops and teachers that are not doing the works of Christ, we should avoid and consider as wolves.

12. But they say, Why it is not necessary for everyone to do these works of Christ. How can all the pious give sight to the blind, make the lame walk and do other miracles like those of Christ? Answer: Christ did also other works, he exercised himself in patience, love, peace, meekness, etc.; this everybody should do. Do these works, and then we also shall know Christ by his works.

13. Here they reply: Christ says, "The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat; all things therefore whatsoever they bid you, these do and observe; but do not ye after their works; for they say, and do not. Math. 23, 2-3. Here Christ commanded to judge the doctrine, but not the life. Answer: What do I hear? Have you now become Pharisees and hypocrites, and confess it yourselves? If we would say this about you then you would indeed become angry. Be it so, if you are such hypocrites and apply these words of Christ to yourselves, then you must also apply to yourselves all the other words Christ speaks against the Pharisees. However, as they wish to shield themselves by these words of Christ and put to silence the ignorant, we will further consider the same, inasmuch as the murderers of Christians at the Council of Constance also attacked John Huss with this passage, claiming that it granted them liberty for their tyranny, so that no one dared to oppose their doctrine.

14. It must, therefore, be observed that teaching is also a work, yea, even the chief work of Christ, because here among his works he mentions that to the poor the Gospel is preached. Therefore, just as the tyrants are known by their works, so are they known by their teachings. Where Christ is, there surely the Gospel will be preached; but where the Gospel is not preached, there Christ is not present.

15. Now in order to grant our Pharisees that not the life, but the doctrine should be judged, be it so, let them teach, and we will gladly spare their lives; but then they are a great deal worse than the Pharisees who taught Moses' doctrine, though they did not practice it. But our blockheads are idols, there is neither letting nor doing, neither life nor doctrine. They sit on Christ's seat and teach their own lies and silence the Gospel. Hence this passage of Christ will not shield them, they must be wolves and murderers as Christ calls them, John 10, 1.

16. Thus Christ here wants them to hear the Pharisees; but only on Moses's seat; that is, if they taught the Law of Moses, the Commandments of God. In the same place Christ forbids to do according to their works he mentions their teachings among their works, saying: *"Yea, they bind heavy burdens and grievous to be borne, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with their finger."* Math. 23,4. Observe here that Christ first of all forbids among their works their teachings grievous to be borne, as being of chief import, so that finally the meaning of the passage is: All that they teach according to Moses, you should keep and do; but whatever they teach and do besides, you should not observe. Even so should we listen to our Pharisees on Christ's seat only when they preach the Gospel to the poor, and not hear them nor do what they otherwise teach or do.

17. Thus you perceive how skillfully the rude Papists made this passage the foundation of their doctrine, lies and tyranny, though no other passage is more strongly against them and more severely condemns their teachings than this one. Christ's words stand firm and are clear; do not follow their works. But their doctrine is their own work, and not God's. They are a people exalted only to lie and to pervert the Scriptures. Moreover, if one's life is bad, it would be strange indeed if he should preach right; he would always have to preach against himself, which he will hardly do without additions and foreign doctrines. In short, he who does not preach the Gospel, identifies himself as one who is sitting neither on Moses' nor on Christ's seat. For this reason you should do neither according to his words nor according to his works, but flee from him as Christ's sheep do, John 10, 4-5: "And the sheep follow him, for they know his voice. And a stranger will they not follow, but flee from him." But if you wish to know what their seat is called, then listen to David: "Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the wicked, nor standeth in the way of the sinner, nor sitteth in the seat of scoffers, Ps. 1,1. Again: "Shall the throne of wickedness have fellowship with thee, which frameth mischief by statute?" Ps. 94, 20.

18. But what does it mean when Christ says: "The poor have good tidings preached to them?" Is it not preached also to the rich and to the whole world? Again, why is the Gospel so great a thing, so great a blessing as Christ teaches, seeing that so many people despise and oppose it? Here we must know what Gospel really is, otherwise we can not understand this passage. We must, therefore, diligently observe that from the beginning God has sent into the world a two-fold word or message, the Law and the Gospel. These two messages must be rightly distinguished one from the other and properly understood, for besides the Scriptures there never has been a book written to this day, not even by a saint, in which these two messages, the Law and the Gospel, have been properly explained and distinguished, and yet so very much depends on such an explanation.

The Difference between the Law and the Gospel.

19. The Law is that word by which God teaches what we shall do, as for instance, the Ten Commandments. Now, if human nature is not aided by God's grace, it is impossible to keep the law, for the reason that man since the fall of Adam in Paradise is depraved and full of sinful desires, so that he cannot from his heart's desire find pleasure in the law, which fact we all experience in ourselves. For no one lives who does not prefer that there were no law, and everyone feels and knows in himself that it is difficult to lead a pious life and do good, and, on the other hand, that it is easy to lead a wicked life and to do evil. But this difficulty or unwillingness to do the good is the reason we do not keep the Law of God. For whatever is done with aversion and unwillingness is considered by God as not done at all. Thus the Law of God convicts us, even by our own experience, that by nature we are evil, disobedient, lovers of sin, and hostile to God's laws.

20. From all this either self-confidence or despair must follow. Self-confidence follows when a man strives to fulfil the law by his own good works, by trying hard to do as the words of the law command. He serves God, he swears not, he honors father and mother, he kills not, he does not commit adultery, etc. But meanwhile he does not look into his heart, does not realize with what motives he leads a good life, and conceals the old Adam in his heart. For if he would truly examine his heart, he would realize that he is doing all unwillingly and with compulsion, that he fears hell or seeks heaven, if he be not prompted by things of less importance, as honor, goods, health and fear of being humiliated, of being punished or of being visited by a plague. In short, he would have to confess that he would rather lead a wicked life if it were not that he fears the consequences, for the law only restrains him. But because he does not realize his bad motives he lives securely, looks only at his outward works and not into his heart, prides himself on keeping the law of God perfectly, and thus the countenance of Moses remains covered to him, that is, he does not understand the meaning of the law, namely, that it must be kept with a happy, free and willing mind.

21. Just as an immoral person, if you should ask him why he commits adultery, can answer only that he is doing it for the sake of the carnal pleasure he finds in it. For he does not do it for reward or punishment, he expects no gain from it, nor does he hope to escape from the evil of it. Such willingness the law requires in us, so that if you should ask a virtuous man why he leads a chaste life, he would answer: Not for the sake of heaven or hell, honor or disgrace, but for the sole reason that he considers it honorable, and that it pleases him exceedingly, even if it were not commanded. Behold, such a heart delights in God's law and keeps it with pleasure. Such people love God and righteousness, they hate and fear naught but unrighteousness. However, no one is thus by nature. The unrighteous love reward and profit, fear and hate punishment and pain; therefore they also hate God and righteousness, love themselves and unrighteousness. They are hypocrites, disguisers, deceivers, liars and self-conceited. So are all men without grace, but above all, the saints who rely on their good works. For this reason the Scriptures conclude, "All men are liars," Ps. 116,11. "*Every man at his best estate is altogether vanity,*" Ps. 39, 5. "*There is none that doeth good, no, not one,*" Ps. 14, 3.

22. Despair follows when man becomes conscious of his evil motives, and realizes that it is impossible for him to love the law of God, finding nothing good in himself; but only hatred of the good and delight in doing evil. Now he realizes that the law can not be kept only by works hence he despairs of his works and does not rely upon them. He should have love; but he finds none, nor can have any through his own efforts or out of his own heart. Now he must be a poor, miserable and humiliated spirit whose conscience is burdened and in anguish because of the law, commanding and demanding payment in full when he does not possess even a farthing with which to pay. Only to such persons is the law beneficial, because it has been given for the purpose of working such knowledge and humiliation; that is its real mission. These persons well know how to judge the works of hypocrites and fraudulent saints, namely, as nothing but lies and deception. David referred to this when he said, "*I said in my haste, all men are liars,*" Ps. 116, 11.

23. For this reason Paul calls the law a law unto death, saying, "And the commandment, which was unto life, this I found to be unto death," Rom. 7, 10; and a power of sin. I Cor. 15. 56: "And the power of sin is the law," and in 2 Cor. 3, 6 he says, "For the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life." All this means, if the law and human nature be brought into a right relation, the one to the other, then will sin and a troubled conscience first become manifest. Man, then, sees how desperately wicked his heart is, how great his sins are, even as to things he formerly considered good works and no sin. He now is compelled to confess that by and of himself he is a child of perdition, a child of God's wrath and of hell. Then there is only fear and trembling, all self-conceit vanishes, while fear and despair fill his heart. Thus man is crushed and put to naught, and truly humbled.

Inasmuch as all this is caused only by the law, St. Paul truly says, that it is a law unto death and a letter that killeth, and that through the commandment sin becomes exceedingly sinful, Rom. 7, 13, provoking God's wrath. For the law gives and helps us in no way whatever; it only demands and drives and shows us our misery and depravity.

Concerning the Gospel

24. The other word of God is neither law nor commandments, and demands nothing of us. But when that has been done by the first word, namely, the law, and has worked deep despair and wretchedness in our hearts. then God comes and offers us his blessed and life-giving word and promises; he pledges and obligates himself to grant grace and help in order to deliver us from misery, not only to pardon all our sins, but even to blot them out, and in addition to this to create in us love and delight in keeping his law.

25. Behold, this divine promise of grace and forgiveness of sin is rightly called the Gospel. And I say here, again, that by the Gospel you must by no means understand anything else than the divine promise of God's grace and his forgiveness of sin. For thus it was that Paul's epistles were never understood, nor can they be understood by the Papists, because they do not know what the Law and the Gospel really mean. They hold Christ to be a law-maker, and the Gospel a mere doctrine of a new law. That is nothing else than locking up the Gospel and entirely concealing it.

26. Now, the word Gospel is of Greek origin and signifies in German Frohliche Botschaft, that is glad tidings, because it proclaims the blessed doctrine of life eternal by divine promise, and offers grace and forgiveness of sin: Therefore, works do not belong to the Gospel, as it is not a law; only faith belongs to it, as it is altogether a promise and an offer of divine grace. Whosoever now believes the Gospel will receive grace and the Holy Spirit. This will cause the heart to rejoice and find delight in God, and will enable the believer to keep the law cheerfully, without expecting reward, without fear of punishment, without seeking compensation, as the heart is perfectly satisfied with God's grace, by which the law has been fulfilled.

27. But all these promises from the beginning are founded on Christ, so that God promises no one this grace except through Christ, who is the messenger of the divine promise to the whole world. For this reason he came and through the Gospel brought these promises into all the world, which before this time had been proclaimed by the prophets. It is, therefore, in vain if anyone, like the Jews, expects the fulfilment of the divine promises without Christ. All is centered and decreed in Christ. Whosoever will not bear him shall have no promises of God. For just as God acknowledges no law besides the law of Moses and the writings of the prophets, so he makes no promises, except through Christ alone.

28. But you may reply, is there not also much law in the Gospel and in the Epistles of Paul? and, again, many promises in the writings of Moses and the Prophets? I answer: There is no book in the Bible in which both are not found. God has always placed side by side both law and promise. For he teaches by the law what we are to do, and by the promises whence we shall receive power to do it.

29. But the New Testament especially is called the Gospel above the other books of the Bible. Because it was written after the coming of Christ, who fulfilled the divine promises, brought them unto us and publicly proclaimed them by oral preaching, which promises were before concealed in the Old Testament Scriptures. Therefore, hold to this distinction, and no matter what books you have before you, be they of the Old or of the New Testament, read them with a discrimination so as to observe that when promises are made in a book, it is a Gospel-book; when commandments are given, it is a law-book. But because in the New Testament the promises are found so abundantly, and in the Old Testament so many laws, the former is called the Gospel, and the latter the Book of the Law. We now come back to our text. *"And the poor have good tidings preached unto them."*

30. From what has just been said it is easily understood that among the works of Christ none is greater than preaching the Gospel to the poor. This means nothing else than that to the poor the divine promise of grace and consolation in and through Christ is preached, offered and presented, so that to him who believes all his sins are forgiven, the law is fulfilled, conscience is appeased and at last life eternal is bestowed upon him. What more joyful tidings could a poor sorrowful heart and a troubled conscience hear than this? How could the heart become more bold and courageous than by such consoling, blissful words of promise? Sin, death, hell, the world and the devil and every evil are scorned, when a poor heart receives and believes this consolation of the divine promise. To give sight to the blind and to

raise up the dead are but insignificant deeds, compared with preaching the Gospel to the poor. Therefore Christ mentions it as the greatest and best among these works.

31. But it must be observed that Christ says: "The Gospel is preached to none but to the poor only, thus without doubt intending it to be a message for the poor only. For it has always been preached unto the whole world, as Christ says, "Go ye into all the world, and preach the Gospel to the whole creation," Mark 16, 15. Surely these poor are not the beggars and the bodily poor, but the spiritually poor, namely, those who do not covet and love earthly goods; yes, rather those poor, broken-hearted ones who in the agony of their conscience seek and desire help and consolation so ardently that they covet neither riches nor honor. Nothing will be of help to them, unless they have a merciful God. Here is true spiritual weakness. They are those for whom such a message is intended, and in their hearts they are delighted with it. They feel that they have been delivered from hell and death.

32. Therefore, though the Gospel is heard by all the world, yet it is not accepted but by the poor only. Moreover, it is to be preached and proclaimed to all the world, that it is a message only for the poor, and that the rich men can not receive it. Whosoever would receive it must first become poor, as Christ says, Math. 9,13, that he came not to call the righteous but only sinners, although he called all the world. But his calling was such that he desired to be accepted only by sinners, and all he called should become sinners. This they resented. In like manner all should become poor who heard the Gospel, that they might be worthy of the Gospel; but this they also resented. Therefore the Gospel remained only for the poor. Thus God's grace was also preached before all the world to the humble, in order that all might become humble, but they would not be humble.

33. Hence you see who are the greatest enemies of the Gospel, namely, the work-righteous saints, who are self-conceited, as has been said before. For the Gospel has not the least in common with them. They want to be rich in works, but the Gospel wills that they are to become poor. They will not yield, neither can the Gospel yield, as it is the unchangeable word of God. Thus they and the Gospel clash, one with another, as Christ says, "And he that falleth on this stone shall be broken to pieces; but on whomsoever it shall fall, it will scatter him as dust." Math. 21, 44.

Again, they condemn the Gospel as being error and heresy; and we observe it comes to pass daily, as it has from the beginning of the world, that between the Gospel and the work-righteous saints there is no peace, no good will and no reconciliation. But meanwhile Christ must suffer himself to be crucified anew, for he and those that are his must place themselves, as it were, into this vise, namely, between the Gospel and the work-righteous saints, and thus be pressed and crushed like the wheat between the upper and nether millstones. But the lower stone is the quiet, peaceable and immovable Gospel, while the upper stone is the works and their masters, who are ranting and raging.

34. With all this John contradicts strongly the fleshly and worldly opinion his disciples entertained concerning Christ's coming. They thought that the great king, whom John extolled so highly, namely, that the latchet of whose shoe he was not worthy to unloose (John 1, 27), would enter in such splendor that everything would be gold and costly

ornaments, and immediately the streets would be spread with pearls and silks. As they lifted up their eyes so high and looked for such splendor, Christ turns their look downward and holds before them the blind, lame, deaf, dumb, poor and everything that conflicts with such splendor, and contrariwise he presents himself in the state of a common servant rather than that of a great king, whose shoe's latchet John considered himself unworthy to unloose, as though Christ would say to them: "Banish your high expectations, look not to my person and state, but to the works I do. Worldly lords, because they rule by force, must be accompanied by rich, high, healthy, strong, wise and able men. With them they have to associate, and they need them, or their kingdom could not exist; hence they can never attend to the blind, lame, deaf, dumb, dead, lepers and the poor.

But my kingdom, because it seeks not its own advantage, but rather bestows benefits upon others, is sufficient of itself and needs no one's help; therefore, I can not bear to be surrounded by such as are already sufficient of themselves, such as are healthy, rich, strong, pure, active, pious, and able in every respect. To such I am of no benefit; they obtain nothing from me. Yea, they would be a disgrace to me, because it would seem that I needed them and were benefitted by them, as worldly rulers are by their subjects. Therefore, I must do otherwise and keep to those who can become partakers of me, and I must associate with the blind, the lame, the dumb, and all kinds of afflicted ones. This the character and nature of my kingdom demand. For this reason I must appear in a way that such people can feel at home in my company.

35. And now very aptly follow the words, "And blessed is he, whosoever shall find no occasion of stumbling in me." Why? Because Christ's humble appearance and John's excellent testimony of Christ seemed to disagree with each other. Human reason could not make them rhyme. Now all the Scriptures pointed to Christ, and there was danger of misinterpreting them. Reason spoke thus: Can this be the Christ, of whom all the Scriptures speak? Should he be the one, whose shoe's latchet John thought himself unworthy to unloose, though I scarcely consider him worthy to clean my shoes? Therefore, it is surely true that it is a great blessing not to find occasion of stumbling in Christ, and there is here no other help or remedy than to look at his works and compare them with the Scriptures. Otherwise it is impossible to keep from being offended at Christ.

Two Kinds of Offenses

36. Here you observe that there are two kinds of offenses, one of doctrine, and the other of life. These two offenses must be carefully considered. The offense of doctrine comes when one believes, teaches or thinks of Christ in a different way than he should, as the Jews here thought of and taught Christ to be different than he really was, expecting him to be a temporal king. Of this offense the Scriptures treat mostly. Christ and Paul always dwell upon it, scarcely mentioning any other. Note well, that Christ and Paul speak of this offense.

37. It is not without reason that men are admonished faithfully to remember this. For under the reign of the pope this offense has been hushed entirely, so that neither monk nor priest

knows of any other offense than that caused by open sin and wicked living, which the Scripture does not call an offense; yet they thus construe and twist this word.

On the contrary, all their doings and all their teachings by which they think to benefit the world, they do not consider to be an offense, but a great help; and yet these are dangerous offenses, the like of which never before existed. For they teach the people to believe that the mass is an offering and a good work, that by works men may become pious, may atone for sin and be saved, all of which is nothing else than rejecting Christ and destroying faith.

38. Thus the world today is filled with offenses up to the very heavens, so that it is terrible to think of it. For no one now seeks Christ among the poor, the blind, the dead, etc.; but all expect to enter heaven in a different way, which expectation must surely fail.

39. The offense of life is, when one sees an openly wicked work done by another and teaches it. But it is impossible to avoid this offense, inasmuch as we have to live among the wicked, nor is it so dangerous, since everybody knows that such offense is sinful, and no one is deceived by it, but intentionally follows the known evil. There is neither disguise nor deception. But the offense of doctrine is that there should be the most beautiful religious ceremonies, the noblest works, the most honorable life and that it is impossible for common reason to censure or discern it; only faith knows through the spirit that it is all wrong. Against this offense Christ warns us, saying, "But whoso shall cause one of these little ones that believe on me to stumble, it is profitable for him that a great millstone should be hanged about his neck, and that he should be sunk in the depth of the sea," Math. 18, 6.

40. Whosoever does not preach Christ, or who preaches him otherwise than as one caring for the blind, the lame, the dead and the poor, like the Gospel teaches; let us flee from him as from the devil himself, because he teaches us how to become unhappy and to stumble in Christ; as it is now done by the pope, the monks and the teachers in their high schools. All their doings are an offense from head to foot, from the skin to the marrow, so that the snow is scarcely anything but water; nor can these things exist without causing great offense, inasmuch as offense is the nature and essence of their doings. Therefore, to undertake to reform the pope, the convents, and the high schools and still maintain them in their essence and character, would be like squeezing water out of snow and still preserving the snow. But what it means to preach Christ among the poor, we shall see at the end of our text.

III. HOW AND WHY CHRIST PRAISES JOHN.

"And as these went their way, Jesus began to say unto the multitudes concerning John, What went ye out in the wilderness to behold! a reed shaken by the wind? But what went ye out to see? A man clothed in soft raiments? Behold, they that wear soft raiment are in kings' houses. But wherefore went ye out? To see a prophet? Yea, I say unto you, and much more than a prophet."

41. Inasmuch as Christ thus lauds John the Baptist, because he is not a reed, nor clothed in soft raiment, and because he is more than a prophet, he gives us to understand by these figurative words, that the people were inclined to look upon John as a reed, as clad in soft

raiment, and as a prophet. Therefore we must see what he means by them, and why he censures and rejects these opinions of theirs. Enough has been said, that John bore witness of Christ, in order that the people might not take offense at Christ's humble appearance and manner.

42. Now, as it was of great importance for them to believe John's witness and acknowledge Christ, he praised John first for his steadfastness, thus rebuking their wavering on account of which they would not believe John's witness. It is as though he would say: You have heard John's witness concerning me, but now you do not adhere to it, you take offense at me and your hearts are wavering; you are looking for another, but know not who, nor when and where, and thus your hearts are like a reed shaken by the wind to and fro; you are sure of nothing, and would rather hear something else than the truth about me. Now do you think that John should also turn his witness from me and, as is the case with your thoughts, turn it to the winds and speak of another whom you would be pleased to bear? Not so. John does not waver, nor does his witness fluctuate; he does not follow your swaying delusion; but you must stay your wavering by his witness, and thus adhere to me and expect none other.

43. Again, Christ lauds John because of his coarse raiment, as though to say: Perhaps you might believe him when he says that I am he that should come as to my person; but you expect him to speak differently about me, saying something smooth and agreeable, that would be pleasant to hear. It is indeed hard and severe that I come so poor and despised. You desire me to rush forth with pomp and flourish of trumpets. Had John thus spoken of me, then he would not appear so coarse and severe himself. But do not think thus. Whoever desires to preach about me, must not preach different than John is doing. It's to no purpose, I will assume no other state and manner. Those who teach different than John, are not in the wilderness, but in kings' houses. They are rich and honored by the people. They are teachers of man-made doctrines, teaching themselves, and not me.

44. Christ lauds John, thirdly, because of the dignity of his office, namely, that he is not only a prophet, but even more than a prophet, as though to say: In your high-soaring fluctuating opinion you take John for a prophet, who speaks of the coming of Christ, just as the other prophets have done, and thus again your thoughts go beyond me to a different time when you expect Christ to come, according to John's witness, so that you will in no case accept me. But I say to you, your thoughts are wrong. For just as John warns you not to be like a shaken reed, and not to look for any other than myself, nor to expect me in a different state and manner from that in which you see me, he also forbids you to look for another time, because his witness points to this person of mine, to this state and manner, and to this time, and it opposes your fickle ideas in every way and binds you firmly to my person.

45. Now, if you want to do John justice, then you must simply accept his witness and believe, that this is the person, the state and manner and the time that you should accept, and abandon your presumption and your waiting for another person, state and time. For it is decreed that John should be no shaken reed, not a man of soft raiment, and above all, not a prophet pointing to future times, but a messenger of present events. He will not write as did the prophets, but will point out and orally announce him, who has been predicted by the

prophets, saying: *"This is he, of whom it is written, Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, who shall prepare the way before thee."*

46. What else can this mean than that you dare not wait for another, neither for another manner of mine, neither for another time. Here I am present, the one of whom John speaks. For John is not a prophet, but a messenger. And not a messenger that is sent by the master who stays at home, but a messenger that goes before the face of his master and brings the master along with him, so that there is but one time for the messenger and for the master. Now if you do not accept John as such a messenger, but take him for a prophet who only proclaims the coming of the Lord, as the other prophets have done, then you will fail to understand me, the Scriptures, and everything else.

47. Thus we see Christ pleads, mainly for them to take John as a messenger, and not as a prophet. To this end Christ quotes the Scriptures referring to the passage in Mal. 3,1, "Behold, I send my messenger, and he shall prepare the way before me," which he does not do in reference to the other points, namely, his person and manner. For to this day it is the delusion of the Jews, that they look for another time; and if they then had believed that the time was at hand and had considered John a messenger and not a prophet, then everything could easily have been adjusted as to the person and manner of Christ, inasmuch as they at last had to accept his person and manner, at least after the expired time. For there should be no other time than the days of John, the messenger and preparer of the way for his Master. But as they do not heed the time, and look for another time, it is scarcely possible to convince them by his person and manner. They remain shaken reeds and soft-raiment-seekers as long as they take John for his prophet, and not for his messenger.

48. We must accustom ourselves to the Scriptures, in which angel (angelus) really means a messenger; not a bearer of messages or one who carries letters, but one who is sent to solicit orally for the message. Hence in the Scriptures this name is common to all messengers of God in heaven and on earth, be they holy angels in heaven, or the prophets and apostles on earth. For thus Malachi speaks of the office of the priest. "For the priest's lips should keep knowledge, and they should seek the law at his mouth; for he is the messenger (angel) of Jehovah of hosts." Mal. 2, 7. Again: "Then spake Haggai, Jehovah's messenger (angel) in Jehovah's message unto the people," Hag. 1, 13. And again: "And it came to pass, when the days were well nigh come that he should be received up, he steadfastly set his face to go to Jerusalem, and sent messengers (angels) before his face," Luke 9, 51.

Thus they are called God's angels or messengers and solicitors, who proclaim his word. From this is also derived the word gospel, which means good tidings. But the heavenly spirits are called angels chiefly because they are the highest and most exalted messengers of God.

49. Thus John is also an angel or word-messenger, and not only such a messenger, but one who also prepares the way before the face of the Master in a manner that the Master himself follows him immediately, which no prophet ever did. For this reason John is more than a prophet, namely, an angel or messenger, and a forerunner, so that in his day the Lord of all the prophets himself comes with this messenger.

50. The preparing here means to make ready the way, to put out of the way all that interferes with the course of the Lord, just as the servant clears the way before the face of his master by removing wood, stones, people and all that is in the way. But what was it that blocked the way of Christ and John was to remove? Sin, without doubt, especially the good works of the haughty saints; that is, he should make known to everybody that the works and deeds of all men are sin and iniquity and that all need the grace of Christ. He who knows and acknowledges this thoroughly is himself humble and has well prepared the way for Christ. Of this we shall speak in the following Gospel. Now is the opportunity for us to receive a blessing from this Gospel lesson.

IV. THE APPLICATION OF THIS GOSPEL.

The Doctrine of Faith and Good Works.

51. As we have said touching the other Gospels, that we should learn from them the two doctrines of faith and love, or accepting and bestowing good works, so we should do here, extol faith and exercise love. Faith receives the good works of Christ, love bestows good works on our neighbor.

52. In the first place, our faith is strengthened and increased when Christ is held forth to us in his own natural works, namely, that he associates only with the blind, the deaf, the lame, the lepers, the dead and the poor; that is, in pure love and kindness toward all who are in need and in misery, so that finally Christ is nothing else than consolation and a refuge for all the distressed and troubled in conscience. Here is necessary faith that trusts in the Gospel and relies upon it, never doubting that Christ is just as he is presented to us in this Gospel, and does not think of him otherwise. Nor let any one persuade us to believe otherwise. Then surely we learn Christ as we believe and as this Gospel speaks of him. For as you believe, so you will have it And blessed is he, who finds here no occasion of stumbling in Christ.

53. Here you must with all diligence beware of taking offense. Who stumbles at Christ? All that teach you to do works, instead of teaching you to believe. Those who hold forth Christ to you as a law-maker and a judge, and refuse to let Christ be a helper and a comforter, torment you by putting works before and in the way of God in order to atone for your sins and to merit grace. Such are the teachings of the pope, priests, monks and their high schools, who with their masses and religious ceremonies cause you to open your eyes and mouth in astonishment, leading you to another Christ, and withholding from you the real Christ. For if you desire to believe rightly and to possess Christ truly, then you must reject all works that you intend to place before and in the way of God. They are only stumbling blocks, leading you away from Christ and from God. Before God no works are acceptable but Christ's own works. Let these plead for you before God, and do no other work before him than to believe that Christ is doing his works for you and is placing them before God in your behalf.

In order to keep your faith pure, do nothing else than stand still, enjoy its blessings, accept Christ's works, and let him bestow his love upon you. You must be blind, lame, deaf, dead, leprous and poor, otherwise you will stumble at Christ. That Gospel which suffers Christ to be seen and to be doing good only among the needy, will not belie you.

54. This means to acknowledge Christ aright and to embrace him. This is true and Christian believing. But those who intend to atone for sins and to become pious by their own works, will miss the present Christ and look for another, or at least they will believe that he should do otherwise, that first of all he should come and accept their works and consider them pious. These are, like the Jews, lost forever. There is no help for them.

55. In the second place, Christ teaches us rightly to apply the works and shows us what good works are. All other work, except faith, we should apply to our neighbor. For God demands of us no other work that we should do for him than to exercise faith in Christ. With that he is satisfied, and with that we give honor to him, as to one who is merciful, long-suffering, wise, kind, truthful and the like. After this think of nothing else than to do to your neighbor as Christ has done to you, and let all your works together with all your life be applied to your neighbor. Look for the poor, sick and all kinds of needy, help them and let your life's energy here appear, so that they may enjoy your kindness, helping whoever needs you, as much as you possibly can with your life, property and honor. Whoever points you to other good works than these, avoid him as a wolf and as Satan, because he wants to put a stumbling block in your way, as David says, *"In the way wherein I walk have they hidden a snare for me,"* Ps. 142, 3.

56. But this is done by the perverted, misguided people of the Papists, who with their religious ceremonies set aside such Christian works, and teach the people to serve God only and not also mankind. They establish convents, masses, vigils, become religious, do this and that. And these poor, blind people call that serving God, which they have chosen themselves. But know that to serve God is nothing else than to serve your neighbor and do good to him in love, be it a child, wife, servant, enemy, friend; without making any difference, whoever needs your help in body or soul, and wherever you can help in temporal or spiritual matters. This is serving God and doing good works. O, Lord God, how do we fools live in this world, neglecting to do such works, though in all parts of the world we find the needy, on whom we could bestow our good works; but no one looks after them nor cares for them. But look to your own life. If you do not find yourself among the needy and the poor, where the Gospel shows us Christ, then you may know that your faith is not right, and that you have not yet tasted of Christ's benevolence and work for you.

57. Therefore, behold what an important saying it is, "Blessed is he, whosoever shall find no occasion of stumbling in me." We stumble in two respects. In faith, because we expect to become pious Christians in a different way than through Christ, and go our way blindly, not acknowledging Christ. In love we stumble, because we are not mindful of the poor and needy, do not look after them, and yet we think we satisfy the demands of faith with other works than these. Thus we come under the judgment of Christ, who says: *"For I was hungry, and ye did not give me to eat, I was thirsty, and yet ye gave me no drink,"* Math. 25, 42. Again: *"Inasmuch as ye did it not unto one of these least, ye did it not unto me,"* Math. 25, 45. Why is this judgment right, if not for the reason, that we do not unto our neighbor as Christ has done to us? He has bestowed on us needy ones his great, rich, eternal blessings, but we will not bestow our meager service on our neighbors, thus showing that we do not truly believe, and that we have neither accepted nor tasted his blessings. Many will say, *"Did*

we not do wonders in thy name, did we not speak and cast out devils?" But he will answer them, *"Depart from me, ye that work iniquity,"* Math. 7, 23, and why? Because they did not retain their true Christian faith and love.

58. Thus we see in this Gospel how difficult it is to acknowledge Christ. There is a stumbling block in the way, and one takes offense at this, another at that. There is no headway, not even with the disciples of John, though they plainly see Christ's works and hear his words.

59. This we also do. Though we see, hear, understand and must confess that Christian life is faith in God and love to our needy neighbor, yet there is no progress. This one clings to his religious ceremonies and his own works, that one is scraping all to himself and helps no one. Even those who gladly hear and understand the doctrine of pure faith do not proceed to serve their neighbor, as though they expected to be saved by faith without works: they see not that their faith is not faith, but a shadow of faith, just as the picture in the mirror is not the face itself, but only a reflection of the same, as St. James so beautifully writes, saying, *"But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deluding your own selves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like unto a man beholding his natural face in a mirror: for he beholdeth himself, and goeth away, and straightway forgetteth what manner of man he was,"* James 1, 22-25. So also there within themselves many behold a reflection of true faith when they hear and speak of the Word, but as soon as the hearing and speaking are done, they are concerned about other affairs and are not doing according to it, and thus they always forget about the fruit of faith, namely, Christian love, of which Paul also says, *"For the kingdom of God is not in word, but in power,"* I Cor. 4, 20.

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