

SIN, RIGHTEOUSNESS, JUDGMENT.

A STUDY OF JOHN 16:8-11.

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This great passage is not without its difficulties. The general meaning is clear enough, but some of the details and deductions of the teaching are not so clear. Our Lord is describing some elements in the great work which the Paraclete would do after His own departure and in His place. He would come as being sent of the Lord Himself. The expression "when he is come" describes the age of the Spirit, that epoch in which the Holy Spirit, unseen but influential, does His work. The description is of a time when He has arrived in the world and is in action. Evidently there is something new and special. We must not assume that the Holy Spirit has not in some sense been active in the world before this time. But a new start is made, a new era begins. The work done by the Spirit will be upon a new basis, that is, upon the accomplished work of Christ Himself. Our Lord's life, death and resurrection having occurred, the Holy Spirit begins the new phase of His operations upon the basis of those facts. In general terms and briefly, this work is described in the words "he will convince (or convict) the world of sin and of righteousness and of judgment." He, working silently upon and through man's own spiritual nature, namely, consciousness, feeling, thought, and conscience, will set forth and make manifest to the "world," that is, to the general apprehension and intelligence of mankind, the great facts of sin, righteousness and judgment. The fact of sin, the possibility and duty of righteousness, and the necessity and reality of such discrimination between sin and righteousness as that the true nature and fruits of each shall infallibly appear and final award, appropriate to each, be made—all this will be brought convincingly to

the attention of mankind. Under this teaching the "world," the aggregate and abiding intelligence of the human race, can never be the same in its attitude toward the three great realities of sin, righteousness and judgment. Before the bar of the ultimate court of human opinion these three things shall be fairly tried and judicially sentenced, and that human ultimate points to the divine. The court of last resort is the Tribunal of God, and this will affirm the decision of the lower court. After this general declaration our Lord proceeds to specify in each of the three cases.

"Of sin, because they believed not on me." This is a difficult and often misunderstood saying. To say that the "sin of unbelief" is the greatest of sins, and thus in some sort the crowning, comprehensive and only sin is saying too much. There is indeed a measure of truth in this contention, but it is crude and one-sided. Men in general cannot be brought to this view, for the reason that this is essentially a Christian conception, and is only apparent—and then often imperfectly—to a ripe Christian experience. In the case of moral agnostics, noble Jews and lofty-souled Unitarians it is vain to attempt to convince themselves or the general run of mankind that their failure, or even their determined refusal, to accept Christ in the evangelical Christian sense puts them among the criminal and vicious characters in human society. No; the explanation of Christ's teaching must be sought from a different point of view. The rejection of Jesus Christ by both the wicked and the skeptical, who cannot be classed with the vicious, is a demonstration alike of the fact and the character of sin. Sin is shown to exist by the refusal to believe in Jesus who offers the way of escape from it; and is shown in its varying character by the sad fact that this refusal is not the deplorable prerogative of the depraved classes of men only, but is the even more pathetic custom of some of the most enlightened and morally excellent of men. Pride and prejudice, as well as

vice and crime, are sins, though not of the same sort. The very fact that they are less glaring makes them the more difficult to discover. It is only under the convincing operation of the Holy Spirit that this demonstration of sin occurs; without that the sensualist defends his vices as necessary and excusable human weaknesses; without that the skeptic may be even unconscious of his pride of intellect, though it leads him astray from God. With that demonstration of the Spirit the prodigal becomes penitent; and proud Saul of Tarsus becomes less than the least of all the saints. The next item follows.

“Of righteousness, because I go unto my Father and ye see me no more.” Here again is a difficult (because condensed and unexplained) saying. Over against the fact and the varied character of sin is held up the reality and the nature of righteousness. That is to say, the ideal and the possibility of righteousness for sinning man, and the kind and quality of that righteousness it is part of the Holy Spirit’s work to declare and enforce. In the phrase “I go unto my Father” the coming facts of the death, resurrection and intercession of Christ—with all that these mean—are involved. So the intimate relation of these facts, of this whole work of Christ, to the idea of righteousness is here intended. In the second clause, “And ye shall see me no more,” the bodily absence of Christ and the consequent invisible operation of the Spirit are set forth. The absence of Christ on the accomplishment of His work in the world is the Spirit’s opportunity to demonstrate the connection between that work and both the ideal and the attainment of righteousness of men. “Because” Christ has been and is now no longer here, the Spirit will “convince” those upon whom His work takes effect, and will prove (and therefore “convict” those who reject Christ) to all the world that a new ideal and means of righteousness for men is henceforth and forever established. The last item follows.

“Of judgment, because the prince of this world is judged.” The Spirit also works with the human conscience in the sphere of judgment. This includes both the divine and the human expression of opinion against sin and in favor of righteousness. Judgment is discrimination between these, and with that the necessary condemnation of sin. This is the inevitable result when the reality and the character of both are correctly and finally shown. When proved they must be judged. The judgment of mankind, enlightened and guided by the Holy Spirit, must and does tend towards and foreshadow the ultimate judgment of God. Now in the work and the character of Jesus Christ that judgment is made up and pronounced upon the “prince of this world.” This is Satan, the personal and spiritual essence of evil; the seducer and enemy of mankind; the author and teacher of sin. In him all sin is represented and effective, and in his judgment, therefore, all sin is judged, its nature proved, its penalty foreshown and declared. In the character and work of Christ that judgment was pronounced. The work of the Holy Spirit is to make this more and more apparent in the minds of Christians, and therefore more and more clearly show it to the world. Satan’s attack on the character of Christ was repulsed. Satan’s warfare against the soul is counteracted by the cross of Christ. Thus in Christ’s work the “prince of this world is judged.”