

"WISDOM JUSTIFIED OF HER CHILDREN"

Chapter 5

Studies in the Gospels

by

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Matt. xi. 16-19; Luke vii. 31-35.

As nothing which was wrought among the children of men escaped the notice of the Lord, so nothing was so far beneath Him but that He was content to use it, if it would help Him to set forth the truths of his kingdom. Those truths had in themselves such inherent dignity and grandeur that they had nothing to fear from being brought into this contact. We have a striking example of this, his fearless use of the common and the familiar, in that comparison with which He closes his testimony to the character and work of the Baptist: *'But whereunto shall I liken this generation? It is like unto children sitting in the markets, and calling unto their fellows, and saying, We have piped unto you, and ye have not danced; we have mourned unto you, and ye have not lamented.'* Here the Lord finds in the sports and altercations of boys playing in the streets that which shall serve his turn, shall set forth and illustrate the truth which He has in hand. One group of these children, in that spirit of imitation so characteristic of their age, has been acting now a marriage, and now a funeral; has been piping now, and mourning anon; but in the end complains that another band, whose help they needed, and whom they would fain have drawn into their sports, as mourners at their mock funeral, if they would not be revellers at their mock marriage, have stood peevishly aloof, and refused altogether to take a share in their games: *'We have piped unto you, and ye have not danced; we have mourned unto you, and ye have not lamented.'*¹

Christ proceeds to explain *why* and wherein that generation resembled these to whom He has just compared them: *'for John came neither eating nor drinking'* (cf. Luke i. 80; Matt. iii. 4; ix. 14); *'and they say, He hath a devil.'* We should not have learned except from these words that such a taunt was addressed to the Baptist; that they said of the servant what we know that more than once they said of the Master (John vii. 20; viii. 48); at the same time it is exactly the manner of taunt which his manner of life, exaggerated and extravagant as it must have seemed to many, was likely to provoke. *'The Son of man came eating and drinking'* (cf. Matt. ix. 14; Luke xiv. 1; John ii. 1-11; xii. 2), *'and they say, Behold a man gluttonous, and a wine-bibber, a friend of publicans and sinners'* (Matt. ix. 10, 11; Luke vii. 39; xv. 2; xix. 7).

Few, I think, who at all reflect on the matter, will deny that the ordinary explanation of this similitude is encumbered with considerable difficulties. According to this explanation the children who complain of the wayward humour of their fellows, and that they cannot draw them into any games which they propose, are Jesus and John; and the meaning will then be, This is a generation which it is impossible to please. No ways of God are right in its eyes. If

¹ Vorstius (*De Adag.* N.T. c. xi.): Ea verba Salvator tribuit pueris sedentibus in foro, qui ludendo imitari solent quæ a majoribus natu serio agi viderunt, et nunc nuptias celebrant, nunc funera deducunt; neque tamen quosdam qui morosiores sunt, movere possunt, ut et ipsi talibus operam navent.

He send a prophet, stern, severe, calling to repentance, holding aloof from sinners, a wilderness preacher, a man himself of fasts and austerities, as was John, they say he is melancholy mad; '*He hath a devil.*' If He send One gracious and condescending, who mingles with all the common works, and walks in all the common ways of men, eating and drinking with them, they say, '*Behold a man gluttonous and a wine-bibber,*' with no eminent sanctity about Him. John took up a sadder strain, but the men of this generation would not fall in with it: he mourned to them, but they would not lament. Jesus took up a more joyful note; He piped to them; but neither would they consent with Him; they would not dance; but found as much fault with the graciousness and condescension of the One as with the strictness and severity of the other.

All this is well put by Henry More: 'Such was the perverse and wicked ignorance of those crooked superstitionists, that true goodness in no kind of dress would please them. In John the Baptist there was that eminent severity and austerity of life accompanying an unreprouvable integrity and purity of heart, that he might, one would think, have commanded them to that which was good; but he must have a melancholy devil in him. Our Saviour came in a more pleasant and careless garb, laying aside that awful and rough severity that was in the other, intermingling Himself with all companies, taking not at all upon Him, being as other men are in everything, sin only excepted; (which manner of life as it is of more perfection than the other, as supposing more benignity of nature, and more firm radication in goodness, so fewer men are capable of it, much less unsteady and unresolved youth, who are to fly from suspected company as from the devouring plague;) yet, I say, these wretched Pharisees, as true detesters of real holiness and godliness, whatever they pretend in the shadow thereof, cannot give our Saviour a good word, but interpret his goodnature good-fellowship or debauched company-keeping; and his serviceable intermingling Himself with all sorts of men (publicans and sinners not excepted) for their good, friendship and countenance to what is evil.'²

Such is the common explanation; and the sense which the passage, so interpreted, renders up is in itself a perfectly satisfactory one. The only question is, whether our Lord's words yield themselves to it, whether there be not serious difficulties in this allotment of the several portions of the dramatic action here brought before our eyes. In the first place, Christ says, '*This generation is like unto children;*' but, according to the received explanation as given above, it would be Jesus and John who were like the children complaining that it was impossible to chime in with the shifting moods of their fellows, and not that generation at all. Maldonatus, as is usual with him, manfully acknowledges this difficulty; but seeks to set it aside by urging that not part of a parabolic saying like this must be compared with part, but the whole with the whole; and adduces as a parallel case Matt. xiii. 24: 'The kingdom of heaven is likened unto a man which sowed good seed in his field;' not being, indeed, likened to him alone, but to all which follows. But the case is not exactly in point; for at any rate he, the sower, was included in that whereto the kingdom was compared; while here the perverse generation has no resemblance to the children who complain, and to whom they are likened, but only to the children that are complained of. We cannot then accept this solution. And then, further, since John's ministry *preceded* the Lord's, and in the interpretation (ver. 18) is the first named, we should expect to find '*We have mourned unto you,*' which was St. John's work, adduced the first, and not, as in both Evangelists it is, the last.

2 *On Godliness*, viii. 13.

Would it not then be better to shift altogether the *dramatis personæ*, and, re-allotting the parts, to make, as Euthymius, Stier,³ and Alford have done, the children sitting in the markets, and now mourning and now piping, to be the Jews, the generation of which the Lord just before had spoken; and the companions of whom they complain, to be Jesus and John? The fundamental thought will still be nearly the same, although expressed in a somewhat different manner, although it will not be now any more Jesus and John who are introduced finding fault with that generation, but that generation finding fault with them. The Jews, as according to this explanation the Lord will declare, wanted John to be laxer; they would fain have had him give up his strict ascetic ways, his rigid separation from sinners, his stern summonses to repentance; and complained that he would not do so, that he would not dance to their piping. Christ Himself was equally, as they accounted, at fault, though in an opposite extreme. They could as little understand a prophet such as He was. They mourned to Him, and He would not lament. The bridegroom and the bringer of joy, He would not change for any sadder note, that note of joy to which the Gospel that He preached was set (Luke v. 30-35), any more than John to please them would change and renounce the note of a sterner sadness to which his preaching of the law was attuned.

Each messenger and prophet of God the men of that generation desired to be something other than what he was--their distaste and disaffection extending really far deeper than to the particular manner and fashion of the one or of the other, to the severity of the one, or to the laxity, as they chose to call it, of the other--their objection being indeed to *any* messenger of God, in whatever guise he came. As it was then, so is it at all times. Some exclaim, 'The Gospel is too strict, too severe; it demands too much;' these are the finders of a fault in the Baptist; while others say, 'It is too lax, too free; it encourages sin;' these finding matter of blame in the Lord; the two forms of murmuring and opposition being, strange to say, found sometimes united in the same persons. The ambassadors of Christ, who have to call men alternately to fasts and festivals of the spirit, must expect from the world such a captious and hostile criticism as this; it is part of that which they must bear. They must look for a similar indignation, that they will not at the world's bidding be exactly the contrary of that which they were sent to be; this indignation being indeed the covert under which men escape from the summons, now to a spiritual joy, and now to a spiritual sorrow.

'But,' while it was thus with that generation, '*Wisdom is justified of her children.*' All did not so evade the law by pleading the Gospel, nor the Gospel by pleading the law. Some recognized in these two, and in the harmony of these two, the law being good no less than the Gospel, if only used lawfully (1 Tim. i. 8), 'the manifold wisdom of God;' out of which He sent not a John only, nor a Christ only, but sent one *and* the other, the severe and the mild, the stern and the gracious, the preacher of the law and the preacher of grace, that so He might win men by the one or by the other, or, as most commonly He does, by handing them over *from* the one to the other (Rom. iii. 19-26; Gal. iii. 24; John i. 35-40).

Such seems to me the general drift and tenour of these words; which yet may claim to be more closely examined, presenting as they do, by the acknowledgment of all, more difficulties than one. And first, seeing that the Lord is clearing the dealings of God with men, in other words,

3 *Reden Jesu*, in loco.

clearing his own, why, it might be asked, does He let his own personality fall into the back ground, and affirm, not of Himself, but of Wisdom, that she '*is justified of her children?*' He does not really do this. '*Wisdom*' here is no abstract quality, no attribute of God, any more than at Luke xi. 49; but a person; even the same of whom such glorious things are spoken in the Book of Proverbs, who appears there, as crying in the streets (i. 21; viii. 1-3), as building her mystical house, sending forth her maidens, gathering to herself all those who are willing to hear her voice (ix. 1-6); being, indeed, no other than the Word as yet *not* made flesh, or rather that divine Word in *all* his dealings, both before the Incarnation and after, with the children of men;⁴ who, being this absolute Wisdom, must have chosen wisest ways in which to deal with them, and who therefore should not have been lightly charged with waywardness and folly. This word '*Wisdom,*' which Christ uses here, has the advantage that by aid of it He can include in a common justification both his own dealings and those of John, which last He would fain vindicate not less than his own.

But '*justified of her children*'--what may be the exact force of this phrase? 'To justify,' in the uniform language of the New Testament, is to recognize and declare as righteous--falsely, it may be; that not *being* righteous, which thus declares itself, or is declared by others, to be so (Luke x. 29; xvi. 15); or, and this is far the commoner usage, truly; the realities in the moral world corresponding with the declaration thus made about them. So of course is it here, where Wisdom is contemplated as on her trial, perversely accused by some, and needing therefore to be '*justified*' by others.⁵ When it is said that she is justified '*of her children,*' these last can be no other than as many as have accepted her teaching, and now walk in her ways. It is not that we are to contemplate these as pleading her cause before the world, and so acquitting her of these unjust imputations. She needed not their advocacy, and 'babes' (Matt. xi. 25) as they were, they could thus have done little to serve her. But yet in another sense it was out of the mouths of these babes and sucklings that her praise was perfected. In the fact that there were these children of Wisdom, that she had gathered so many round her, who owned her for their spiritual mother, hereby and herein she was justified, acquitted of all those frivolous charges and all that unrighteous blame which had been heaped upon her.⁶ As Jesus spake these words, He may have looked round at the little company of his disciples. These were his justification and John's; these did themselves constitute a vindication of Wisdom's

4 Hilary (in loc.): *Ipsa se Sapientiam vocavit. Bengel: Non enim jam dicitur Filius hominis, ut versu præcedente, sed Sapientia; quarum appellationum altera convenit statui Christi conspicuo, altera omnibus temporibus (Luc. xi. 49). Porro Sapientia hoc loco dicitur, quod Ipse optime sciat quid faciendum sit, et actiones Ipsius, purissimâ accommodatione ad peccatores plenæ, non debuerunt sub censuram vocari (Prov. viii. 1, 32). Grotius too much lets go that the *Σοφία* is herself a person, when he adduces *βουλή τοῦ Θεοῦ* (Luke vii. 30) as an absolute equivalent; though, this excepted, he has perfectly seized the intention of these words: *ἡ σοφία* hic nihil aliud est quam quod apud Lucam vii. 30, *βουλή τοῦ Θεοῦ*, sapientissimum nimirum Dei consilium Judæos et Johannis severitate et Christi comitate ad pœnitentiam revocantis, ne quid inexpertum relinqueret, atque etiam ne quid illi causari possent . . . Johannes, ut pœnitentiæ præco, ad severitatem compositus, Christus comis ut veniæ largitor.*

5 Bengel: *Sapientia justificata est; hoc est, criminatores illam ream fecere, scandalizati sunt in eâ (ver. 23), eoque rem adduxere, ut demum justificari debuerit ipsa, et justa asseri ostendique, omnes ejus actiones ad absorbendam injustitiam, justitiamque implendam comparatas esse, cum tamen sine exceptione fuisset amplectenda.*

6 So Jerome rightly, with only the fault that he limits the '*children*' too exclusively to the apostles; they properly include *all* the converts whom either John or the Lord had made: *Ego, qui sum Dei virtus et Sapientia Dei, justificasse ab apostolis, filiis meis, comprobatus sum.*

way in the face of a gainsaying world.⁷

⁷ Meyer (in loc.), as it seems to me, has seized the meaning exactly: *Und gerechtfertiget worden* (das heisst als die *wahre Weisheit* drgestellt worden) *ist die Weisheit* (die in Johannes und mir zur Offenbarung gekommen ist) *von Seiten ihrer Kinder*, dass heisst, von Seiten ihrer Verehrer und Anhänger, welche eben dadurch, dass sie sich ihr angescholssen haben und sich von ihr leiten lassen, jene Urtheile des profanum vulgus als unrichtig dargestellt und die Weisheit factisch gerechtfertiget haben. *Die* (factische) *Bewährung ist der Weisheit von ihren Verehrern gekommen* (ἀπό, nicht ὑπό). There is more than one other explanation of these certainly difficult words, which I have not cared to deal with in the text, as they certainly appear to me wholly untenable. That which has found most favour I will give in Gerhard's words (*Harm. Evang.* 56): Divina Sapientia a filiis suis justificatur, hoc est quasi in iudicium pertrahitur, disceptatur cum eâ, de jure accusatur, taxatur, reprehenditur, ut in quâ nunc hoc nunc illus desideretur. Et qui debebant esse filii sapientiae divinae, hoc est obedientes discipuli, illi summunt sibi, quasi pro tribunali sedentes, jus vocis decisivæ, ut pro libitu suo vel pro vel contra divinam sapientiam possint pronunciare. Not to speak of other objections, this explanation rests on the ascription to the verb δικαιῶν of a meaning which, in profane Greek common enough, indeed predominant there, in Biblical Greek it never possesses. It is never there to judge and declare *guilty*, but always, to judge and declare *righteous*. The only exception to this which I know is Ps. lxxiii. 13, where it means neither one nor the other, but is used as = ἀγνίζειν. Gerhard seeks to sustain his interpretation by aid of Isai. xliii. 9; 2 Kin. xv. 4; but neither passage helps him in the least.