

SUNDAY MORNING NO. 14

1 Corinthians 12. —It will be observed, brethren and sisters, that this chapter addresses itself to a state of things which does not exist among us, and, therefore, to some extent, it may not have special interest for us. Nevertheless, it is profitable for two reasons. It is well we should understand the state of things existing in apostolic days, and it is well we should apply to our circumstances the lessons which Paul here administers to ancient believers in their circumstances. Rules of conduct are the same in all ages. We differ in circumstances from those who received the word at the mouth of the apostles, but we are under the same law. The principal circumstance in which we differ is the fact brought before us in this chapter that there brethren among the ecclesias in the apostolic age who were endowed with the gifts of the Spirit; who exhibited all those powers that are mentioned in the 8th verse.

“For to one is given by the Spirit the word of wisdom; to another, the word of knowledge by the same Spirit; to another, faith by the same Spirit; to another, the gifts of healing by the same Spirit; to another, the working of miracles; to another, prophecy; to another, discerning of spirits; to another, divers kinds of tongues; to another, the interpretation of tongues.”

These powers are not now bestowed, because the purpose for which they were given was served in the confirmation of the testimony of the apostles, who were set forth before men as the personal witnesses of the resurrection of Christ. General belief of their testimony having been produced, and made effectual in the development of a people for the name of the Lord, the powers of the Spirit subsided with the death of the apostles. After their decease there were none who had power, by the laying on of hands, to impart the gift. While the apostles were alive, the powers of the Spirit were in full play, and this chapter shows that human nature is the same under all circumstances—that the gifts of the Spirit were as fruitful of division in the early ecclesias as the gifts of nature, as we may call them, are now; and when I say division, I mean division in the apostolic sense—schism **in a meeting**—not schism in the modern and false sense of one part of a body withdrawing from the fellowship of another part. This may be a righteous and commendable thing. It all depends upon circumstances. In the days of John, the anti-christian element, in particular cases, seceded from those who were true.

“They went out from us,” says he, *“because they were not of us.”*

This was good for the faithful left behind, but a great crime on the part of those seceding.

Sometimes, circumstances shaped the other way. The faithful had to *“withdraw”* from those who walked otherwise. This was a thing enjoined by Paul. This was not the division or schism he condemned. The schism he condemned was such schisms as existed among those he was writing to, and exemplified in the 11th chapter of this epistle in the 18th verse, where he says—

*“But first of all, **when ye come together** in the ecclesia, I hear that there be divisions (or schisms) among you.”*

This is what Paul condemns—the existence of a divided state of feeling in a community that ought to be one. He does not condemn that which he on other occasions commanded and exhorted them to do, viz. that where men professing to be the ecclesia of God do not consent to the wholesome words of the Lord Jesus Christ, they were to withdraw from them and not meet with them. This is a duty which is necessary to the preservation of the faith, and its recommendation is the tower of our present strength and our weapon of defence.

If there were no such apostolic recommendation, what answer could we make to the charge of schism this morning? Here we are, an isolated community. We have withdrawn ourselves from the great religious bodies of the country, who, as a matter of words, profess

the faith of Christ. They say “we believe in Jesus Christ, we believe in the gospel,” and if we were bound by verbal profession, we should be bound to identify ourselves with them; but the apostolic exhortation gives us liberty. It commands us to try the spirits, and to hold no fellowship with any spirit that is not of God. By the obedience of this command, we are here assembled, and by the obedience of this command, we are enabled to obey the other command, to have no schism, because by the common exercise of our judgment in the matter, we come to be—

“Perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment.”

Indeed, by no other course can we comply with the apostolic requisition to have no schism, than by carrying out the apostolic injunction to withdraw from those who consent not to sound doctrine. The division or schism to be reprobated is a schism, or division, or faction, or party **in the meeting**. This is the subject of Paul’s animadversion; and it would seem that the existence of spiritual gifts tended to this evil. One can easily see how this was, remembering that human nature then was the same as human nature now.

The gifts varied; some were more extraordinary than others, while some of the brethren had no gifts at all. This state of things afforded scope for evil in a carnal-minded community. A brother able to do more wonderful things than the rest, would be liable to feel himself of more consequence in the ecclesia than another brother, who, perhaps, did nothing at all. A wise man largely gifted would see that what he possessed he had received, and was therefore no matter of boast or credit to him, and he would therefore play a modest part; but others in the ecclesia not so wise would think differently and exalt him, and so cause schism, because the exaltation of one would involve the depreciation of another not so highly gifted. This is the schism that Paul says is not to exist. Paul’s argument about these diversities of gifts is, that they were all needful in their place—the most humble as much as the highest. He contends that it was quite an unnatural state of things, for any man having a superior gift to look down upon or disregard, or think small of one who was less liberally endowed; and that, on the other hand, it was equally unreasonable for a brother possessing a small gift to suppose he was nobody.

He deprecated the idea that a man must be an important member of the body before he can be a consequential part of it. He draws attention to the fact, that the most obscure members of the body are quite as important as those that are more visible and ornamental, and further reminds them that when any single member is exposed to suffering of any kind, all the rest suffer with it. What he advocates is, that robust understanding that can see all things to be equally important in their proper place, and that will therefore observe a cheerful, loving, intelligent modesty, whether the place occupied or the office fulfilled be high or low. He desired the Corinthians to see that they (that is, all true members of the Christ bride elect) were parts of a social unity of the highest order, and that it was acting unkindly to themselves and in opposition to the spirit of their calling, to make their necessary differences the occasion of disunion of feeling.

Now, although we cannot apply this lesson where Paul has given it, because we are not endowed with the gifts of the spirit, we can apply it with regards to gifts of another sort. We have all diversities of gifts, and they all proceed from God. No one made himself. No one should think highly of himself, because he has a gift that may distinguish him from the rest. He ought rather to think that as he did not make himself, it is no credit to him that he can do certain things which others cannot do. There is lack of reasonable ground for boasting or self-compliment. The feebly-gifted should also have it in mind that if they are part of the true body of Christ, they are as truly important as the greatest in that great body. Between the well-gifted and the ill-gifted, there should be no schism. The one should be modest and kind, and the other, contented, cheerful and kind. There should be no schism in the body. Loving cooperation ought to be the rule all round. It is highly necessary to remember these things.

The object of Christ in gospel operations is to provide a community actuated by a common sentiment, not only in doctrine, but in affection, interest, and love. Unity of doctrine is only the beginning of their unity; the end is good brotherhood. Unity of doctrine in the absence of moral and sympathetic unity, is a very poor thing. It is beautiful in its way, — good and excellent in these days when so difficult to get at, but a mockery if unaccompanied by that higher unity which comes as the fruit thereof when the soul is not barren. Alone, its beauty is the beauty of a cold day; the sun may shine brightly, but we are chilled to the heart by the cold. We have other faculties beside the intellect, and into these must the truth penetrate with warming ray. It must permeate and purify the whole man, and fire the heart as well as enlighten the head. The head and the heart are united, and—

“What God hath joined, let no man put asunder.”

It is an ugly rupture of partnership when the head goes one way and the heart another. All must be laid at the feet of Christ, and in such case, there will be true love of the true brethren, for—

“He that loveth him that begat, loveth also him that is begotten.”—(1 John 5:1.)

But all are not true. The net of the word let into the sea of population, encloses good fishes and bad. For this reason we must never expect in the present state to realise the ideal of perfect Christian fellowship. The presence of bad fish disturbs the water. Our experience will be a mixture of gratification and endurance, edification and discipline. By the one class, we shall be refreshed; by the other tried. To the one, our love will go out; to the other, benevolence. There is a great difference between love and benevolence. Love is drawn out of us, whereas benevolence is brewed within. Love is a state of mind engendered by circumstances without, and is alike gratifying to the subject and the object. Benevolence, on the other hand, when exerted towards an unlovely object, is an impulse of kindness created by the will in spite of deterrent influences. The exercise of it is a trial, an improvement. Love is the best, but this is not yet the age of love. It is delightful to be in the circle of love. All people wish to be in it, but nearly all miss their way. They don't go in at the door, but try and climb up some other way. The secret of entrance is to be lovely, but this means more than is possible with most. Yet the majority of those professing the truth are surely capable of some of the conditions. Be patient; minister to others; do your duty and love is sure to grow. If it does not grow, take higher ground.

Go to the mountain of God, and if you must stand alone—

“Do good unto those that hate you and say all manner of evil things against you;”

“Be kind to the unthankful and the evil.”—

A difficult thing, doubtless, for the natural man, but with perseverance, the new man will grow strong enough to get at it. You will then be enabled to endure, to wait patiently, to exert yourself in a firm and tranquil state of mind towards one another. We must cultivate this. It is impossible to get on in this evil world without it; because the world is so evil, that if we wait to be acted upon for good by other people, we shall never be good at all. The best way is to exercise the apostolic maxim, and overcome evil with good. To fail in this, is to come short.

We may pursue a certain straight and steady course of well-doing in the sense of not doing wrong, and yet be deficient in the positive kind of well-doing that overcomes evil with good. Nay, the case may be worse, and the evil in the way may occasionally frighten us off the path. We are tempted into impatience and malevolence, through the offences of others. This were a calamity, for we ought at least not to allow the victory to be on the side of evil. Let it be at least a drawn battle. Let us not give in to the flesh: do not be overcome, whether in yourself or the conduct of others, by its influence; always pursue a tranquil and unfaltering

course of duty and kindness, with Christ in full blazing view. As Jesus said concerning a certain exhortation,

“He that is able to receive it, let him receive it.”

Let all those who mean to be like Christ, who are for being part and parcel of that glorious community that will survive the existence of flesh and blood on earth, try to put these principles into practice. It is rather a high endeavour for our poor nature, but it is astonishing what a man can do under the power of the truth. The lesson taught in this chapter is part of the power—that those who are feeble, are not always to despair, but to make the most of their abilities, knowing that in the great house of Christ, there will be places for small as well as large. To act otherwise—to do nothing because all cannot be done that we should like—to waste the time in unavailing regret that we are not better than we are, is to miss the little opportunity we have, and secure for us the displeasure of Him who is our judge.

Let us lift up the hands that hang down, and strengthen the feeble knees and make straight paths for our feet. On the other hand, those who are better furnished than their fellows have their duty laid down in the chapter. It is the lesson expressed in the remark of Paul that no man should think of himself more highly than he ought to think. What we have, we have not made, but have received. We therefore ought to wear it with condescension. By condescension is not meant patronage. There is a very great difference between patronage and condescension. Patronage means “I am high and you are very low down, and it is a great act of humility for me to take any notice of you.” Condescension on the other hand expresses itself thus: “I am nothing at all of myself, and therefore I have no right to carry myself haughtily towards you, though you may be different from me; God has made us both; let us try to be happy together.” If those who have it in their power (by privilege of mental endowment or greatness of pocket), would take this part, there would be a great advance towards true community. However, we must never lose heart if we fail to arrive at such a state of things. We shall never in the flesh attain to all we may consider desirable in an ecclesia, because there will always be an ingredient of the old leaven till it is purged out at the judgment.

Our ideal must therefore be stored in the future. We may nurse it in that relation without stint, but nursing it now, we are doomed to failure, and if not prepared for this beforehand by knowing the impracticability of achieving it, we are liable to lose heart, to go into the corner and give up the strife with evil, which will be a mistake. If we will but remember that the ecclesia in the present state is but the workshop in which the stones are being shaped and polished for the great building of God that is to be hereafter erected, we shall be greatly enabled to preserve our souls in patience.

Let every man bend his strength to the saving of himself. Look to no man: lean on none. Fight your way through the darkness; there is light beyond. By and bye our highest aspirations will find their goal in the perfection of the kingdom of God. When God makes up his jewels, our souls will luxuriate in excellence. From all ages, and all ecclesias will those be gathered who please Him and meet His purpose. And we know that in that great body—in the one glorified body of Christ, there will be no schism, no jar, no imperfection. Meanwhile, we must remember that this is a time of imperfection, and we shall never get at what we yearn after; it is a time of trial, a time of patient endurance, a time of evil in which our highest wisdom is to make the best of a bad job.

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