

OBEDIENCE

2 Corinthians 1. —These letters of Paul, brethren and sisters, are excellent models. I do not think we can do better in writing and speaking than to be practically followers of Paul as he was a follower of Christ. How excellent a beginning he makes of this second letter to the Corinthians. After stating whom the letter is from and to whom it is addressed, he salutes the latter thus:

“Grace be to you and peace from God our Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ.”

There is great sweetness about that salutation. It is not an empty form of words; it is a genuine wish on the part of Paul, that grace or favour might rest on those to whom he was writing, and that peace might remain with them; peace from two sources which are yet one—God the Father, the Creator, the supreme head of the universe, and the Lord Jesus, who is the appointed channel of His dealings with our fallen race; peace out flowing from them in the tranquillizing influence of divine favour; a real peace which none can invade; as saith the scripture,

“When he giveth quietness, who can make trouble? and when he hideth his face, who then can behold him? whether it be done against a nation, or against a man only?” (Job 34:29)

There was, of course, another element in Paul’s good wishes; an unexpressed principle underlying his benediction, which we do well to recognise, that, namely, expressed in the saying of James,

“FIRST PURE, then peaceable.”

His wishes for their peace were based on the fact that they were a community of men and women walking in obedience to the apostolic commandments; built on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets; men and women of pure hearts and pure lives—purity of thought, purity of action, purity of intention, purity of aspiration; a prevailing purity engendered by the knowledge of God, and faith in His glorious promises, and love of the Lord Jesus as the centre of those promises. Now as believers of the Gospel we occupy a similar position to the Corinthians, and we may venture this morning, as on all mornings on which we assemble round the table, to take to ourselves the peace which Paul desired to rest upon them; and which he would no doubt desire us to have, if he were writing to us. But whilst looking at the sweetness, let us look at the purity. Jesus says,

“Ye are clean through the word spoken to you”;

but we may know the words and not be clean by them. If those words fail to produce purity, they fail in their effect, and that is what we have to consider on a Sunday morning. We come together on such an occasion as sons of God, and we have to be reminded of our position. We do not assemble in the same capacity as when we come together to present the truth to the hearing of the public. We have no need of argument as to our position in nature, and God’s purposed goodness, inasmuch as we all humbly recognize the standard to which we stand related. We believe in the Lord and have submitted to His yoke, and are here while looking at the favour of our position, to realize the duties it brings with it. We are not called upon to afflict ourselves too much, though there is less danger of our doing that than of our afflicting ourselves too little. There is great danger that people may not afflict themselves enough; may not judge themselves sufficiently in the sight of God. Yet let us not run into the excess of some, and deprive ourselves of the true comfort of our position as heirs of the grace of life. Some have been unduly weighed to the earth by a sense of their insufficiency, and have failed

to be supported by those comforting thoughts that spring from the faith of God. Paul says to such,

“Lift up the hands that hang down, and the feeble knees; make straight paths for your feet.”

He also says,

“Comfort the feeble minded; support the weak.”

Let there be comfort where there is purity; repentance and supplication where there is failure. If there is no purity—if there is disobedience, let there be no comfort; let there be affliction, and mourning, and weeping, and refusal to lay hold of the joys of the truth until the purity comes. As James says,

“Cleanse your hands, ye sinners; and purify your hearts, ye double minded. Be afflicted, and mourn, and weep: let your laughter be turned to mourning, and your joy to heaviness.”

But if we have the answer of a good conscience; if we know that we are walking in the way Christ has marked out for us, in the many commandments he has given, entering minutely into all the duties of life—then we may take to ourselves comfort.

There is one commandment I should like to mention—a commandment having relation to many others, and one which Christ repeats several times and in various ways:

“Be kind to the unthankful and the evil”;

and which he also puts into another form:

“Whosoever will be great among you, let him be your minister...even as the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister.”

And again,

“He that humbleth himself shall be exalted; but whosoever exalteth himself shall be abased.”

In this he points to his own example, saying,

“If I, your Lord and Master, take such an attitude, much more may ye.”

That is a distinct and imperative commandment—as much so as baptism; and the reason why it is necessary to emphasize it is, that we are so liable to overlook and act in opposition to it—it goes so much against the grain of the natural man. The commandments not to steal, not to lie, not to commit fornication, are such as a man’s own sense of honour would help him to abide by: but to be kind to the unthankful and the evil is something opposed to all natural feeling, and contrary to the moral philosophy of the world. There is nothing more usual than to hear persons justifying unkindness on the ground that the object of it is unworthy. Some one is in need: the need is not denied, but it is said that the man is undeserving, and this is accepted as a reason why assistance should be refused. Some one asks a favour who has proved ungracious in former transactions, and this is made the ground of refusal. Some one is ill, who in health was savourless, useless, and perhaps hurtful; and goodness is denied on this ground.

A complaining widow is neglected because she refreshes not the soul. These things ought not so to be. We are in such matters to act from allegiance to Christ, and not from our own tastes. We are to minister because he has commanded us so to do, and not because it is sweet to do it. It is our discipline, and though oft-times bitter, sweetness will come even now from being kind to “the unthankful and the evil.”

There are some people who do not go anywhere unless they can obtain enjoyment; they have always open mouths in a mental sense. They will go where they can drink. They will go where they can be entertained. They will visit people who are in health and prosperity. They will do kindness to the thankful and the good, invite friends able to invite them again. There are not many who visit where they can get no gratification beyond that

which comes from obeying the commandments of Christ, to visit the fatherless and the widow in their affliction. There are not many who bestow their kindness upon the repulsive; there are not many who call to their feasts the poor, and the halt, and the maimed, and the blind, who can give no recompense; and yet none others are Christ's true servants. Jesus says,

"Why call ye me Lord, and do not the things which I say?"

Let us remember this. It is not sufficient to hear the truth and like it. There are many who sit and listen with pleasure to the beautiful sentiments of the Gospel, to whom the words spoken to Ezekiel are applicable (33:32):

"Lo, thou art unto them as a very lovely song of one that hath a pleasant voice, and can play well on an instrument: for they hear thy words, but they do them not."

You will not forget that Jesus likens this class

("who hear these sayings of mine and do them not")

to men building their houses on the sand, which when the rains descend, and the floods come, and the winds blow, fall with great ruin (Matt. 7:26). If, therefore, we are to be associated with Jesus, and the glorious band that constitute the kingdom of God, we must distinguish ourselves by the present and actual performance of his commandments.

Some people are always more or less regretting the dearth of the time in which their lot is cast. They feel like David when he says,

"As the hart panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul after thee, O God." "My flesh longeth for thee in a dry and thirsty land, where no water is."

This is a natural and legitimate sentiment, but the situation is not purely a misfortune. There is another side to the question. These evil times bring with them our opportunity. If there were no unthankful people, if we were not placed in relation to evil people, and if all things around were spiritually prosperous and refreshing, what opportunity should we have of carrying out the commandments of Christ, which expressly pre-suppose the existence of surrounding evil conditions? If all were sweet and plentiful, we should be bemoaning ourselves that we had no opportunity of being tried whether we should keep his commandments or not. I have seen this very sentiment in another form: I have heard brethren and sisters who had a strong wish to do something in the service of Christ. I have heard them speak as if at a loss what to do. If such would just bethink themselves, they would find that this present evil gives the opportunity they profess to desire; and would be enabled to make a very good use of the situation. Out of every evil would come good. They would be very much enabled to endure; for it would fall to them to consider that all the accepted of God have had to live alone as it were. Take Lot in Sodom; Moses in the unbelieving congregation which fell in the wilderness; the Lord Jesus who, although surrounded by disciples, was, in one sense, called upon in solitude to endure the contradiction of sinners against himself; he was not appreciated even by his friends—they could not rise to his great height. They looked merely on the outward aspect of his mission. The crowds that rushed to see the wonderful works he performed, were attracted by the prospect of temporal benefit. So he poured cold water on their enthusiasm when he said:

"If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple."

He had to go on his solitary way, for the joy set before, enduring the cross. Take that view, and you will be greatly strengthened. Remember that all this submission to evil is but probationary. It is not in human nature to accept it as a finality. Without some assurance of the comfort of God, it would be too much to bear. God does not wish us to bear otherwise

than as Jesus bore it, who for the joy set before him despised the shame. Therefore we are warranted in looking at the beautiful idea contained in the words of Paul:

“Grace be to you, and peace, from God our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ.”

After which come those equally beautiful words,

“Blessed be God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies, and the God of all comfort; who comforteth us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God. For as the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation also aboundeth by Christ.”

Paul’s sufferings were pre-eminently the sufferings of Christ, and the sufferings of the Corinthians were indirectly the sufferings of Christ. Just as Paul was poor and unpopular as the result of the course he pursued, so were they as the result of identifying themselves with him; therefore they shared the sufferings of Christ, and we have to do likewise. We have to accept unpopularity and the imputation of madness, and many other disagreeables incident to such a position as ours, if we are faithful to the truth. But if the sufferings of Christ abounded in the Corinthians, so also did the consolation. What is the consolation of Christ? It is that referred to by Christ himself when he said,

“Blessed are ye that mourn: for ye shall be comforted.”

It is a future comfort as the subject of a present contemplation. Christ’s joy, Christ’s consolation is ours, if Christ’s sufferings are ours; for when the time comes to develop the result of all the sufferings and the trials, he asks his servants to

“enter into the joy of their Lord.”

“He shall see of the travail of his soul, and shall be satisfied.”

He shall see a glorious state of things established as the result of his travail, when there shall spring from the earth an immortal generation ascribing their victory over death to him. He will see a very different state of things from that in which he lived when he was the scorn of the Pharisees. All the joy and riches, the life and the honour of the earth will be his; and when that comes to pass the sufferings that God appointed for him will be looked back to as the means of bringing it all about. And we shall have a share in the glory if we fellowship the sufferings of Christ now. The cross now; the crown then. We must make up our minds to the self-denial. We must make up our minds to forgo many things that are in themselves legitimate, but hindrances in the race. We must lay aside every weight; giving all diligence to make our calling and election sure.

Young women called to the race will refrain from ornamental trifling, and consecrate the hours thus wasted in the production of mere trinkets, redeeming the time, knowing that the days are evil. They will rather turn Dorcases, spending their leisure time in making clothing for the poor, or in some other occupation of goodness. Men of high calling will leave the engrossments of merely literary or scientific or any other kind of life apart from the Gospel, which, though interesting in some respects, has a tendency to take up all the time and absorb all the mind, and which when life is gone, is worth nothing at all. There will be plenty of time for intellectual sweets, when we have attained to life eternal. To gain this, we have now to neglect many other things. We have to choose the disagreeable. We are not fools in doing so. A man will always choose the disagreeable if he sees something good at the end; a man will go down into a mine and endure darkness, and fatigue, and danger, if he thinks it will enrich him for the rest of his life. And a person who sees in his mind’s eye, Christ, THE FUTURE RULER AND POSSESSOR OF THE WORLD, will be very glad to share in the sufferings of Christ in this present time; knowing that this is extracted as one of the conditions of participating in the glory to be revealed. There are many ways of sharing in the

sufferings of Christ. Let each one choose the way next to him; let it not be slothfully done, for Christ will approve no slothful servant. Let it not be our aim to make and keep ourselves comfortable; but to do his work and help his need. He can be assisted in an abundance of ways. The honour of his name, the interests of his truth, the well-being of his people, present us many opportunities of writing an account that we shall not be ashamed to confront in the day of reckoning. While, then, we comfort ourselves, let us be quite sure we are entitled to the comfort, by obedience; first, by purity in all things, and second, by seeking out and performing the Master's will in all things, and occupying ourselves in the execution of it. And let us make up our minds that this will not always be necessarily agreeable. Sometimes it will be exceedingly otherwise; occasionally there will be a little uprush of the true nectar of heaven from the bottom of the spring around which we are working, but at most times it will be hard, and trying, and toilsome work. Then we are not to lose confidence because we sometimes lack joy. The truth is calculated to impart joy, but the absence of joy is no necessary indication of the absence of favour in his sight; for if we take David and Jesus, we find them both overborne with suffering. Take the Psalms of David; see how much they have to do with sleepless pillows, and Christ himself was a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. Therefore we must not conclude that, because we do not see the sun all the time, God is not smiling upon us. We may do well and suffer. The principle holds good,

"If thou doest well, shalt thou not be accepted?"

That was said to Cain, and is said to every servant of Christ.

"But if thou doest not well, sin lieth at the door."

Gladness in that case is of no use; the gladness of the transgressor will turn to weeping, and wailing, and gnashing of teeth in the day of Christ's glory.

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