

Christ's Friends—John 15

We must all be much impressed by the words of the Apostle Paul that are so often read in these meetings on the occasion of the breaking of bread, who said: "I have received of the Lord that which also I delivered unto you; how that the Lord Jesus Christ the same night in which he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks he brake it and said, Take eat, this is my body which is given for you, this do in remembrance of me."

Those words are unique in the whole of the Bible. There are many words like them, but there is nothing exactly the same. The Apostle Paul would have us to understand it was in the night that Jesus was betrayed that this ordinance we keep was instituted. Our minds go back to that dark and dreadful night. It was the last of many sleepless nights in a life of labour and toil; and humiliation, set at nought, spit upon, harangued about from court to court by a heartless mob, and ahead of it all the terrible ordeal; of crucifixion. But the Apostle apparently passes by all those incidents; he singles out just this one incident out of a terrible accumulation of agony concentrated into one night, the night in which he was betrayed, betrayed by a brother, by a friend as it was said in the Psalms: "It was not an enemy, then could I have borne it; but it was thou, my equal; we did eat bread together, took sweet counsel together, walked together in the house of God. Mine own familiar friend, in whom I trusted, hath lifted up his heel against me." We know to whom it all referred, we know what Jesus said about it, "It were good for that man if he had never been born." Those words provoke much thought, especially on this occasion at the breaking of bread. We are professedly the friends of Christ. It is a great privilege and carries with it a corresponding responsibility. Friendship is the highest and purest form of love; it is more than love; it is more than affection. It is an intelligent, affection, when the mind of the one can answer to the mind of the other in perfect understanding, when heart answers to heart, perfect reciprocation.

If you turn to the Gospel record of John, Jesus has something to say concerning our position as his friends. He defines it in the 15th chapter and verse 13: "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. Ye are my friends, if ye do whatsoever I command you." There are other verses in the chapter that convey the same idea. Verse 7: "If ye abide in me, and my words abide in you, ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you." There is perfect reciprocation if you analyze the words. Perfect love does not exist between a servant and a master, for there must be always on the part of the servant that sense of inequality and on the part of the master that same sense of inequality which forbids him to express the whole of his mind to his servant. If he does so he ceases to be a servant, he bestows upon him the confidence of a friend; as the Proverb has it: "He that delicately bringeth up his servant from a child shall have him become his son at the length." And so here Jesus not merely calls us friends but treats us as friends, "All things that I have heard of my Father I have made known unto you." That is a privileged pronouncement most appreciated by those who have more deeply studied divine revelation. It is one of the privileges of our position as friends of Christ that we have the mind of the Father revealed to us, especially in the book that we so much treasure, the last book that is a great comfort and enlightenment to us in these days. But let us remember it is only in as far as we reciprocate Christ's wishes that we are his true friends. "Ye are my friends if ye do whatsoever I command you." "if my words abide in you ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you."

Let us beware, brethren and sisters, that we are not influenced by the loose indolent manner in which friendship for Christ is so largely professed. We may profitably enquire in the time at our disposal, what does it involve to be a true friend of Christ? There are at least two points that we can consider this morning. It involves first of all an intelligent comprehension of the mind of Christ, because it is certain if we do not understand the mind of Christ, if we do not understand what his commands are, we cannot reciprocate, and therefore our professed friendship is a vain show. And the second point—it involves the love of brotherhood. That is a greater task than it at first appears, for it is Christ's commandment that "ye love one another as I have loved you."

Take the first point. Jesus says, "If ye love me keep my commandments." How can we keep the commandments of Christ unless we understand them, unless they are ever present in our memory as a light to our path and a lamp to our feet. Therefore the word of Christ should dwell in us richly in all wisdom and understanding. What a constant exhortation this is; that of all things that are necessary in this life of rush and chafing and vexation, one thing is needful, and that is that we give attention, daily attention, to the counsel of God. We give attention to reading, for if we are ignorant of the counsel of God then we cannot keep the commandments of Christ and we are not reciprocating his desires or his requests of us. Much could be said upon that point.

And if we are true friends of Christ we shall love the brotherhood. The whole of the Apostolic counsel is permeated with this exhortation, that we love one another as Christ has loved us. A man who has comprehended the mind of Christ as revealed in the Scriptures instinctively loves the brotherhood. We love them for Christ's sake. Paul beautifully illustrates the principle upon which we act in his letter to Philemon, speaking of Onesimus. "If thou count me a partner", that is the issue—"receive him as myself, if hath wronged thee, or oweth thee ought, put that on mine account." That illustrates the principle, the basis, the foundation upon which we love one another; even thus must we act one toward the other as the friends of Christ.

We have to beware upon what principle our friendship is professed. There are many influences in many names. Affection for each other in the ecclesia of Christ is regulated by the wishes of Christ. We are not at liberty to compromise his appointments for personal harmony, love of approbation, or mere sociability. Our fellowship which is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ, should be a union of noble aspirations, a conjoint of reciprocation of the affections of Christ, a companionship of purity and of holiness. Where these are lacking there is no true unity so far as the body of Christ is concerned. There are plenty of assemblies in which there is a fine social spirit, but very little real unity of the spirit in bonds of peace. If our association with the ecclesia of Christ is governed by mere sociability, formality, or even convenience, then that association is a mockery and it will only rebound upon our own heads to our destruction. The Apostle Paul writing to the Colossians in his second chapter and the second verse, uses these words in this connection. He speaks of being "comforted, being knit together in love, and unto all riches of the full assurance of understanding, to the acknowledgment of the mystery of God, and of the Father, and of Christ; in whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. And this I say, lest any man should beguile you with enticing words."

"Knit together in the full assurance of understanding," not in admiration of each other's powers of understanding or honor of association or abilities, or in any sense like that, but in a common understanding of the truth. There must be one common aim in our fellowship, in which one is not greater than the other so far as being friends of Christ are concerned. There are other counsels in another direction which we need not now refer to. "One hope, one faith, one body, one mind. Till we

all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.

On that basis we have an exhortation like this: "Let us be kindly affectioned one toward another with brotherly love; in honour preferring one another." Remember the words of Jesus, "He that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen."

There have always been in the brotherhood false and true friends. The Scriptures give us many examples of both classes, and seeing that human nature has not changed, it is interesting to consider by way of warning and exhortation to ourselves one or two of them. Take for example that remarkable incident at the close of the Apostle Paul's life. You know how he was apprehended and finally brought before that cruel tyrant the Emperor Nero, and anticipating his near martyrdom he wrote his letter to Timothy. Turn to the second epistle, chapter 4 and verse 9—this is what he says to Timothy in these circumstances: "Do thy diligence to come shortly unto me; for Demas hath forsaken me, having loved this present world, and is departed unto Thessalonica; Crescens to Galatia, Titus unto Dalmatia." Verse 16: "At my first answer no man stood with me, but all men forsook me: I pray God that it may not be laid to their charge." He adds this: "Notwithstanding the Lord stood with me, and strengthened me; that by me the preaching might be fully known, and that all the Gentiles might hear; and I was delivered out of the mouth of the lion."

Now when we turn back to the letter to the Colossians we find that Paul says there: "Luke, the beloved physician, and Demas, greet you." Demas—why the change? Here at the end of the Apostle Paul's life, "Demas hath forsaken me, having loved this present world." There is a great exhortation here for us all. It was possibly very nice for Demas to be associated with Paul a great and faithful servant of Christ in the days of his freedom and his influence; but now, apprehended, a doubtful prisoner, some of them members of Caesar's court—open association with this man would jeopardize their temporal interests; so this was too much, their friendship snapped. They were like the friends of Job, like waters that ran down the mountains but when they came to the dry plain, they withered away and the thirsty companies which looked with joy towards them were disappointed. Let us see to it that our friendship is well considered, vigorous, deep rooted.

You will remember that one came very hurriedly to Christ and said: "Lord, I will follow thee whithersoever thou goest." Jesus said, "The birds of the air have nests, and the foxes have holes, but the Son of man hath not where to lay his head." We are not told what the Scribe said to that—the inference is obvious, "will you follow me there?" Possibly the Scribe was too hurried and had not sufficiently considered the issues involved in following Christ whithersoever he went. Demas was one of them; his friendship was not well grounded, deep rooted, it was on the surface.

Judas was another case of a false friend—what a hypocrite he was. Well might he hang himself when he heard the words, "Friend betrayest thou the Son of man with a kiss?"

We have the case of Peter. Here is a case of a one-time false friend, and then his repentance secured his forgiveness and fitted him for the rest of his life in the work God gave him to do. How emphatic was Peter at one time in his profession, "Though I should die with thee, yet will I not deny thee." Again, "Though all men forsake thee, yet will not I." It was hardly fair to the other disciples; evidently they were provoked, for it is written, "Likewise said they all." But as yet Peter's love was mixed with fear, and when the dark hour came the test was applied, and Peter failed. It was a terrible failure under trial, but as we say his repentance secured his forgiveness and fitted him for the work which Christ gave him to do. It humbled him for the rest of his life. You will call to mind after Christ was risen

from the dead he appears to the disciples on the sea shore. Peter is there and addressing Peter he says to him, "Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me more than these?" At one time Peter thought he did love Christ possibly more than the other disciples, but they all forsook Jesus in the moment of his greatest trial. "Lovest thou me more than these?" Peter said; "Thou knowest that I love thee." He said it three times, "Feed my sheep." It would possibly remind Peter of what he said when on one occasion at supper Jesus leant over the table and said to Peter, "Simon, son of Jonas, I have somewhat to say unto thee," to which Peter said, "Master, say on." "Satan hath desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat, but I have prayed for thee that thy faith fail not, and when thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren." Peter was sifted, and Peter did strengthen the brethren. Peter wrote these words: "Love the brotherhood," and he gave the rest of his life to the care of the churches. He was a true friend to the last.

But we are all agreed that we should love the brethren. We might enquire, to what extent? How far shall we go? We have it in the words of Jesus, "As I have loved you". Christ's love for the brethren is unfathomable, and as he said those words he was about to illustrate it in that he lay down his life for us. We ought to be prepared to endure much self-denial for the benefit of the friends of Christ. The apostle John in his epistle tells us to what extent we should go. In the 1st epistle, chapter 3 and verse 16: "Hereby perceive we the love of God, because he laid down his life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren ". We do not understand from those words that we should heedlessly rush to ruin like a Stoic to the stake. That would not be laying down our lives for the brethren in the best sense. It is illustrated in the life of Christ. Every act of his life was a laying down of his life in a purpose in which we all profit. The Apostle Paul illustrates a laying down of his life for the brethren. Before him—the highest honors of the nation, profited in the Jews' religion above many his equals, but he laid it all aside to become a follower of the despised Nazarene, and takes upon him voluntarily the care of all the churches, enduring all those trials and privations that he did to the very end—a laying down of his life for the brethren.

There have been brethren in our own times and in our fathers' times who have laid down their lives for the brethren, who have voluntarily relinquished many legitimate opportunities for secular emolument and success. They have endured much discomfort, disadvantage, privation, for the benefit of the ecclesia of Christ in, this our day. These, many of them, have denied themselves many legitimate privileges in their solicitude for the existence and prosperity of the work of the Truth. Those who never put themselves out, who never suffer any discomfort or self-denial in order that work of Christ may be done efficiently and that the friends of Christ may be comforted and strengthened in their most holy faith; those who never put themselves out either in the work of the Truth or in the equipping of their minds to be an influence among the brethren and sisters—to say the least they have not laid down their lives for the brethren.

In the evil time that is now upon us and which we think will increase (for it is written it will be a time of trouble such as never was), if the ecclesias of Christ are to be kept intact, it will require that brethren arise of pure energetic enthusiastic and devotional character, to help to weld together the body of Christ. If the work of the Truth is to survive and prosper in these difficult times when the Truth is perverted in a clever fashion on every hand, and false teachers abound; if the weak are to be cared for, the feeble-minded comforted, and the hands that hang down are to be lifted up, and the weak knees strengthened; it will require that we each one arise and help to do it. If the body of Christ is to receive that sound exhortation that it received in the early days of the Truth from the older brethren whose labors have ended in many cases; if it is to be an ecclesia presented to him without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, if that is our standard, to present every man perfect in Christ Jesus, then it will require that we equip ourselves, and take our proper portion in the work that is given us to

do. It is said that when Jesus went away he gave to every man his work, and it is our duty to find out what our work is and see to it that we perform it with enthusiasm and faithfulness, not as men pleasers but as servants of Christ looking to the great reward. We should all endeavor to perform our due portion of the work of Christ, and we thank God there are many brethren who do it. We take comfort from their presence and work. Upon many of them the grey hairs are multiplying; let us who are younger try to follow their example, determined to see the work of the Truth prosper. If there are any shirkers it will make the burden all the greater; let us therefore all seek to do our due portion and so promote each other's interests.

The Apostle Paul speaks of equality—that there may be equality in work and service. If there are any drones in the hive, it makes the task harder for those who are endeavoring to carry on the work.

Just a word by way of conclusion. We are called Christ's "fellows", a great privilege, we all understand that. It is written "He hath anointed him with the oil of gladness above his fellows". What a close association, what a grand privilege. Let us see to it that we do this work as true friends, that when he meets us he will be able to say to us, " You have been faithful to a very little, I will make thee ruler over much, enter into the joy of thy Lord." May we be able to say when he comes, as many will say in the words of Solomon: "This is my beloved, and this is my friend".

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