

This Test of Love

Corinth was a large, thriving, modern city. The pride of life was far more catered for and excited than in the smaller, simpler communities where Paul labored. The believers there were in constant contact with the spirit of frantic bustle and grasping ambition, which such an environment develops. Prestige and worldly success and a show of surface wisdom glittered constantly before them and a great depth of spiritual perception was necessary to withstand its seduction.

This peculiarity of circumstance is reflected in Paul's letters to them. His very first message, 1 Cor. 1 & 2, is devoted to showing the worthlessness, from an eternal viewpoint, of all the vaunted wisdom and accomplishments of the world. The eternal viewpoint is the only mature and intelligent one, and by that viewpoint—which the world glosses over and refuses to face— all temporal acquisitions and productions are merely childish and time-wasting follies.

The Corinthians tended to glory in appearances and in men who made a good show after the flesh. This led them to look down on Paul, who was a laboring man with no worldly position or flesh-pleasing qualities. Paul purposely humbled and abased himself that he might get near to the poor and simple, and he carefully avoided any appeal to fleshly motive. His great concern was to ground the believers in spiritual things, that they might rest on a solid, eternal foundation.

He said to them,

"Learn in us not to think above that which is written;" that is, "Be not highminded but learn the true scriptural course from our example ... Now ye are full, now ye are rich, ye have reigned as kings without us ... We are fools for Christ's sake, but ye are wise in Christ; we are weak, but ye are strong; ye are honorable, but we are despised. Even to this present hour we both hunger and thirst, and are buffeted, and have no certain dwellingplace: and labor, working with our own hands ... I write not these things to shame you, but as my beloved sons I warn you ... Wherefore I beseech you, be ye followers of me" (1 Cor. 4).

This was their relationship. A prosperous self-satisfied ecclesia, rich, honored and respected—a despised, destitute and humble apostle. They judged by appearances and had not the perception to see that, in the eternal purpose of God and in spiritual values, they were pigmies compared to the giant stature of Paul.

This is the background discernable throughout his letters to them, and it comes out particularly in two chapters (2 Cor. 10-11). —

"Now I Paul myself beseech you by the meekness and gentleness of Christ."

He tries to awaken them to the fact that the house of God is not built according to worldly standards, but that its strength and glory lies in meekness and gentleness and service.

"Whosoever will be great among you," said Jesus, "Let him be your minister; and whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant" (2 Cor 10; Matt. 20).

The way of the world is so ingrained in the flesh that unless we are very careful and alert we take it for granted as the starting point of our reasoning. But God's way is entirely different.

God attaches so much value to loving freewill and individual spiritual enlightenment that He has permitted 6000 years of violence and wickedness in order that out of this fiery crucible a few divine characters may be developed for His eternal pleasure and glory.

This we must always bear in mind. The end could superficially be accomplished a thousand times more easily by enforced regimentation but the vital spark of freewill would be destroyed.

Paul was ever mindful of this one great principle. He says—

"Our authority, which the Lord hath given us for your edification, and not for your destruction."

Paul had great authority. He could strike a man blind with a word when the service of the Gospel required it.

How easy it would have been to use it to bring these shortsighted, rebellious ecclesias into line! But Paul knew, as Jesus knew with the limitless power of the Spirit upon him, and all the kingdoms of the earth stretched before him, that there is only one way that can build with endurance, and it is not the way of force.

He knew that though he could easily silence all opposition and make a big showing in the eyes of the flesh, he would gain nothing this way for God. He knew that only quiet and persistent patience and love could develop what he was seeking to develop—a people prepared for the Lord. This was a very slow and unspectacular work, and exposed Paul constantly to the charge of timidity and weakness.

He spoke of the possibility of having to use his authority with some, but he knew that this would be, at best, a necessary evil—a step backward—a confession that in their case, love had failed to penetrate and persuade.

"Though we walk in the flesh, we do not war after the flesh."

This is what his opponents could not realize. They did not understand the end to which he was driving. He was trying, by the enlightenment of the Spirit, to create freewill desire to draw near to God. Neither force nor fleshly appeal—the two motives they understood—could accomplish this purpose.

"Casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ."

These were the strongholds against which he was waging war. He could see them clearly, although those who were afflicted with them could not. They exist in every heart and mind. He knew where the trouble in Corinth lay, and he knew the only way to correct it, if it ever was to be corrected, and he had to reach their heart to do it.

Each victory must be an individual one. One at a time he would win them over. He was laboring, as he said, to bring into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ. He knew that any victory less than this was a hollow one, not worth winning, for it would not be

reaching deep enough. He knew that if he could not convince and inspire them to the point of eager, anxious submission to the will of God in all things, then he had not really won them at all, and though superficially "in the Truth" they were still outside the life-giving grace of God.

Therefore, in spite of the taunts of those who dared him to use his boasted authority, he patiently continued to beseech them by the meekness and gentleness of Christ.

"They, measuring themselves by themselves and comparing themselves among themselves, are not wise."

Expressed clearly in this way, the folly of this course is obvious. For measurement to have any meaning at all it must be according to a recognized and unchanging standard. There is no point in measuring two things against each other when the measurements of both are in question. Therefore we can never measure one brother against another, or one ecclesia against another. Just because one exceeds the other will be no proof that either is acceptable or begins to measure up to the true standard.

There is only one true rule of measurement, and that is the standard God has laid down. It is a humiliating standard for the flesh. Many complain that it is very discouraging to measure things by this standard, but still it is the only safe and scriptural course. *"If we would judge ourselves, we would not be judged,"* Paul tells them; and James says, *"So speak ye, and so do, as they that shall be judged by the perfect law of liberty"*—the law of perfection that will bring liberty to those that love it—(1 Cor. 11:31; Jas. 1:25 & 2:12).

Let us never be afraid of facing the true measurement, but rather seek it and apply it daily, ever striving, in the power of God, to attain to the full stature of the perfect man in Christ Jesus. Let us talk no more of discouragement, but let us glory in the exalted standards God has set—the standards to which, it is promised, we shall some day attain, if we now strive toward them and confess their truth and desirability, and do not attempt to confuse and obscure them to satisfy the flesh

God will give us no reward we have not honestly labored toward. He will not force perfection upon us if we do not strive after it now.

"He that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord."

There is nothing to glory of outside of God; all outside of God is shame. There are only two kinds of activity—that which is done through God and that which is done contrary to God. In the former, the glory is clearly God's—in the latter, there is no glory at all. There may appear a range of neutral ground between, but the Scriptures rule this out and tell us that what we do not consciously bring into the first category must necessarily fall into the second.

And Paul concludes,

"For not he that commendeth himself is approved, but whom the Lord commendeth."

Those whom the Lord commends are simply those that follow the course He commends according to His standards, for *"God is no respecter of persons."*

"But I fear, lest by any means, ...your minds should be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ."(2 Cor. 11:3).

Real truth is always simple. The deep things of God, though profound, are not complicated. Learning to know God is a gradual process of simplification—of learning the basic principles and the underlying harmony of countless apparently unrelated circumstances. The more clearly the picture is seen, the simpler it appears to be.

Simple Scripture knowledge will clear away all the complicated errors of speculation. The case Paul cites is to the point. The command to Adam and Eve was very clear and simple. The serpent went to work on it and soon had it complicated by half-truths and unrevealed speculations, appealing to the mind of the flesh. The clear issue between obeying God and disobeying Him was lost sight of, and Eve was beguiled. If she had refused to be drawn away from the simple truth, she would have been safe.

Paul warningly speaks of "*another Jesus*." What is "*another Jesus*"? Clearly it means attaching a meaning to the name and personality that is not in harmony with the revealed facts. The name Jesus is on every tongue, but how many really know Jesus? How easy it is to have a form of words without any true conception behind it! We cannot know Jesus without continually reading and thinking upon what is written about him. Mere familiarity with the name and a few surface facts is useless. We must be intimately familiar with the person for whom the name stands. And this familiarity must be actual. It must arise from the fulfilment of the promise—"*If a man love me, he will keep my words: and my Father will love him.*" Although this is spiritual, it is still actual, and must happen if there is to be any hope of salvation—(John 14).

"Though I be rude in speech, yet not in knowledge; but we have thoroughly been made manifest among you in all things."

They had ample evidence of Paul's genuineness and the harmony of his teaching with the Truth. They knew that all he said was true. Why were they then against him? As he said earlier, "*We write none other things unto you, than what ye read or acknowledge.*" They could not deny this. They had to admit he was a faithful teacher of the Truth. How then did they justify their antagonism? By objecting to his manner. In this way they hoped to confuse and side-track the main issue and thereby escape the force of his words.

"What I do, that will I do, that I may cut off occasion from them that desire occasion."

This is an important rule of action.

"All things are lawful, but all things are not expedient."

"Judge this rather," Paul says elsewhere *"that no man put a stumbling block or an occasion to fall in his brother's way. Destroy not him with thy meat for whom Christ died. All things indeed are pure, but it is evil for that man who eateth with offense."*

It is an evil thing to do anything that unnecessarily offends others or causes them to stumble. Here is a searching test of a man's comprehension of the second commandment, "*Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.*" John says, "*He that loveth his brother abideth in the light, and there is none occasion of stumbling in him*"—nothing that gives sorrow to his brother or grounds for reproach to the adversary—(Rom. 14; I John 2).

Jesus and the Spirit-guided apostles attached great importance to this test of love—the careful avoidance of any occasion of friction or offence. A faithful obedience to this command—and it is a positive command—would eliminate most if not all ecclesial sorrow.

The whole law, says Jesus, hangs upon two great commandments—love to God and love to neighbor. John says that if the second is not obeyed, this is proof that a claim to the

first is simply a lie: "*If a man say I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar*"—(1 John 4). Hating here means failing to love in the Scriptural sense—this is clear from the rest of the verse. Here is a very present and practical test of our profession. The test goes into action when it conflicts with our own desires.

As long as it runs in the same channel as our desires it is no test at all. As Jesus says, even sinners do that much. There is much meaningless self-congratulation for doing things that are in full harmony with our natural inclinations. There is no need for self-deception. The Scriptures offer many searching tests which the wise man will apply, regardless of the offence to his vanity or complacency. A few such tests, honestly applied, will reveal how little we are doing for God, and how much labor we cheerfully exert for ourselves.

Paul was willing to give up meat if his partaking of it offended his brother. We know he was sincere for he had already given up practically everything else that men consider makes life worth while. And a large part of the return he received from those for whom he labored was ridicule and repudiation and abuse. He nursed the ecclesias into life, and as soon as they became self-supporting many of them cast him aside. Beside the reactions in such places as Corinth and Galatia as revealed in his epistles, we have his words at one time that "*All Asia is turned away from me,*" at the very time he needed their comfort and support—(2 Tim.1).

If meeting a few brethren on his prison journey to Rome caused him to thank God and take courage, what must have been the effect of the wholesale forsaking in his hour of need by those for whom he had suffered?

But we do not pity Paul. We rather pity those who had not the faith and courage to stand with him. We do not pity Paul as he stands before the condescending scorn of these self-satisfied Corinthians and pleads meekly with them, but we do marvel at the blindness and ignorance of such men claiming to know and love the Truth.

They just did not know it. That is all we can conclude. The Truth is pre-eminently a matter of the heart and character. The doctrine, though essential, is just the outer shell. The Truth is a matter of gentleness and meekness and patience and love, to service and sacrifice and spiritual transformation.

It is impossible to know the Truth without being transformed by it, for that is what knowing it means. People who bicker and quarrel and follow the flesh just do not know the Truth, and there is no use pretending they do.

The heart of the Truth is loving God, and the test of loving God is loving our brother, and loving our brother means making the avoidance of offending him our first concern. We may not have all the deeper doctrines at our finger-tips, but if we haven't got this, we have not even begun.

Let us free ourselves from the common but deadly misconception that "knowing the Truth" means simply a mental acquaintance with the facts of revelation. If such knowledge does not produce a startling and revolutionary change of character and outlook and activity, then it simply has failed its whole purpose and has become merely a "*savor of death unto death*"—a "*ministry of condemnation*."

Let us, if we are inclined to measure ourselves by others, measure ourselves by the stature and experiences of this humble servant of Christ. Let us do it repeatedly whenever the flesh is inclined to whisper congratulations for some puny accomplishment. Let us get a true and healthy perspective.

"Bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ"

—is what Paul labored for among the Corinthian believers. He would not be diverted from this goal. This was the *"mark of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus"* to which he patiently and earnestly pressed forward.

At the beginning of his first letter he said,

"I beseech you that ye all speak the same thing—that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment."

The only way this can be accomplished is, as he says, to—

"Bring into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ."

The essential unity of the body, without which it cannot live and thrive, depends upon a freewill allegiance of each member to the one divine rule of judgment. The opposition of any to any part of the revealed divine mind makes unity impossible.

This is the one characteristic that distinguishes the Ecclesia of God from all human organizations—the mind of God as the basis of union and source of unity. Each member of the body, therefore, shares in the responsibility for the unity and health of the whole, and must make it his primary aim in life to develop and preserve that essential unity on divine things. *"If any man speak,"* says the Apostle, *"let him speak as the oracles of God."* Within those oracles is unity, and if it is ever to be found it must be found there. Everything outside of them is chaos.

(Taken from *"Be Ye Transformed"* Volume 1, Pages 76-83 by Bro. G. Growcott.)