

The . . .

Moral Features

of

Christian Fellowship.

By W. JOHNSON.

Notes of an Address.



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LONDON:
G. MORRISH, 20, PATERNOSTER SQUARE.

THE MORAL FEATURES OF CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP.

(Luke vii. 44-50; viii. 1-3. I Cor. i. 9.

MY thought is to take up the important subject of Christian Fellowship, although in so doing I do not intend to present the whole of it in such a short address as this, for it is indeed a very large subject, but it is on my mind to present a few practical thoughts in connection with it, which I trust will be of value to souls.

My object is not so much to explain Scripture, or to expound certain truths with which we are more or less familiar, but my point is to try and show the moral side of it. I often say, and would again repeat it, our real danger is holding truth in the abstract while our hearts and consciences remain unaffected thereby; because if God gives us light, it is that there might be produced in us a moral answer which will be for His pleasure, otherwise it is practically worthless.

We sometimes do not distinguish enough between the joy of title and the joy of possession. There *must* be the joy of title—do not misunderstand me—but the joy of possession must come through exercise.

I now come to this very important subject, Christian Fellowship. In Corinthians you will observe we have set before us very clearly what constitutes Christian fellowship. The verse which is quoted above is the key to the epistle. The faithful God had called them into "the fellowship of His Son Jesus Christ our Lord." Now there was at Corinth that which was unworthy of this fellowship, although they had been called into it. Therefore the apostle is writing in a corrective manner, as also in a spirit of jealousy. There are two corrective epistles in which the spirit of jealousy is found, the epistles of Corinthians and Galatians.

Let me here make another remark. The *bond* of fellowship is the Lord; the *boundary* is the death of Christ; the *power* is in the Spirit. What lies at the root of the whole matter and what properly leads to fellowship is *appreciation* of Christ.

The appreciation of Christ is the first start, it is what makes the fellowship. If we come together into Christian fellowship it is because we have been taught to appreciate Christ. Indeed, the beauty of Christianity does not lie in individuality, but in the word mutuality. I do not here speak of things as they exist before our eyes at the present time, for if we are to get

God's thoughts about it we must keep clear of all the confusion which we see around us in Christendom. Here in Scripture we have God's account of Christian fellowship—what is according to His thoughts. Keep that in mind. We must get away from the thoughts of men—the principle of expediency—and turn to Scripture to see God's thoughts in regard to this momentous question.

The appreciation of Christ lies at the root of the whole matter and for that purpose I read that passage in Luke vii. The chapter is a remarkable one. In it we have three incidents. The first is the healing of the centurion's servant. The Jews come to the Lord beseeching Him that He would heal his servant, saying, "He is worthy for whom he should do this. For he loveth our nation and he hath built us a synagogue." But the centurion sends his friends to say to the Lord, "I am not worthy." How far removed, morally, was the centurion from those who were under Jewish prejudices. "Speak the word and my servant shall be healed." I am not worthy, but I own you to be Lord. It is the faith of a Gentile confessing Jesus to be Lord.

The next incident is the raising of the widow's son at Nain. The Lord comes to the city and at the gate He meets a dead man carried out. Death had cast its dark

shadow over the city of pleasantness. He speaks the word, the dead man rises. He is declared to be the Son of God by resurrection of the dead. Then comes the third incident, the passage which I read in which Jesus is presented as the Christ, the One in whom the grace of God is set forth. God's disposition to man is set forth in that blessed anointed Man who is in the Pharisee's house. Thus, in the chapter we have Jesus presented to us as Lord, as Son of God, and as Christ. He is the anointed vessel of the grace of God towards man. God's attitude towards all is set forth in Christ. "And when they had nothing to pay he frankly forgave them both." He was gracious to them both. But I want to show you the difference between Simon and the woman who was wisdom's child. There was a great difference subjectively. The question naturally arises, what induced Simon to invite the Lord into his house? On what principle did he ask Him? We want to get at that. To my mind this has been somewhat over-looked, because he represents in principle thousands around us at the present time. In Scripture, especially in the Gospels, persons represent certain principles. Take this chapter for example, where we find *indifferentism* clearly set forth. "We have piped unto you and ye have not danced; we have mourned to

you and ye have not wept.” That principle is much abroad in the world to-day. But Simon represents a far more subtle principle, that is patronage. He sought to be a patron in the invitation to eat with him. He had no kindly feelings towards the Lord, but was in that wretched environment of self-complacency which ever keeps God at a distance. The Lord felt it, for He had all the true sensibilities of a man in marking the neglect. Simon would be a patron, but wisdom’s child was there. She comes on another line entirely, and that is the way in which we come. We all love Christ who are Christians, but we have come along the line this woman came. We have been taught to appreciate Christ on the line of self-judgment—*I am nothing*. “To this man will I look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit, and trembleth at my word.”

We can only learn the blessedness of what God is on the line of self-judgment, and we have to be kept on that line. She does not utter a word, but the attitude of her soul proclaims her to be wisdom’s child. Simon is there in all his pride of heart and disappointed in his guest. What an awful gulf between the woman and Simon. What is of value to God is a heart that appreciates Christ. He does not value anything else. If people appreciated the truth they would

appreciate Christ, because Christ is the truth. The One I love is the One in whom the truth is. Everything else is vapid and worthless.

The Lord draws the contrast between Simon and the woman. "Seest thou this woman? I entered into thine house, thou gavest me no water for my feet: but she hath washed my feet with tears and wiped them with the hairs of her head. Thou gavest me no kiss: but this woman since the time I came in hath not ceased to kiss my feet. My head with oil thou didst not anoint: but this woman hath anointed my feet with ointment." "*For she loved much.*" He has done with Simon and turns to the woman whose heart was attached to Him, and says to her, "Thy faith hath saved thee; go in peace." Where was she to go? She must go somewhere. The atmosphere of Simon's house was not congenial to the Lord, He could not be at home where He was treated with neglect and even contempt. My heart is grieved when I hear people pleading for charity at the expense of Christ's glory, and I refuse this principle. No, He is not to be put out in the cold, for He is the *bond* of Christian fellowship. Apostasy has set in. Men stand up in so-called Christian pulpits and insult Christ. If your mother were insulted, what would

you do?—why, rise and walk out; but when Christ is insulted, few care. That is not fellowship. God appreciates a heart that loves Christ and is true to Him.

“Go in peace”—where? The three verses in the next chapter show us the Christian company. It is pictured in chapter viii. You may depend upon it, the Spirit has put in juxtaposition these three verses with the previous chapter—Simon’s house and the place where the woman was to go and live. These are moral thoughts. In Luke’s Gospel we have moral order. The woman was to go to this company. You cannot have Christian fellowship without the twelve apostles. Christian fellowship is based on apostolic teaching: “They continued in the apostle’s doctrine and fellowship.”

In Scripture, the men always represent the doctrine or *position* and the women the *condition*. You have the women here, but with the twelve, so you cannot have fellowship apart from apostolic teaching. The prayer of the Lord in John xvii. 11, “that they may be one, as we are,” was answered, and apostolic unity was maintained. We have the apostles teaching in Holy Scriptures and there could not be Christian fellowship apart from the apostles.

The women represent to us the beautiful subjective side, whose hearts had been

taught to appreciate Christ. Here were women drawn together out of the world as it appears from different stations in life, yet held together by one common bond, the Lord who had so graciously delivered them being their object. *They ministered unto Him.* Do you not see in that a contrast to Simon's house? The Spirit intends it to be a contrast. In the one the Lord is neglected, in the other He is appreciated. Their hearts are knit together by one common object. "They ministered unto Him." So is it in Christian fellowship. Our hearts have been taught by the Spirit to appreciate that blessed One in whom all the grace of our God is set forth. We each gladly confess Him to be our Lord, and He has become our bond; but for this we should probably have never known each other. Let us ever keep this in mind. It is interesting to note in this connection what is said of the assembly at Antioch in Acts xiii. It seems to be the mind of the Spirit to show a contrast to the assembly at Jerusalem. In the latter, decline had evidently set in: "there arose a murmuring of the Grecians against the Hebrews because their widows were neglected in the daily ministration."

It seems to indicate spiritual decline; they were more or less self-occupied. While

in contrast to this, it is said of the assembly at Antioch: "as they ministered to the Lord and fasted the Holy Spirit said." It was from such an assembly the glad tidings went forth with fresh energy and power by Barnabas and Saul. Service here is seen in connection with the assembly from which they were sent by the Holy Ghost in full fellowship, and it is interesting to notice they returned to the place from which they had been committed to the grace of God for the work they had fulfilled (chapter xiv. 27). The happy spiritual condition at Antioch is set forth in the words: "they ministered unto the Lord and fasted"—two great moral features of Christian fellowship.

I was remarking before in connection with the passage in Corinthians, that the *bond* of fellowship was the Lord and the *boundary* the death of Christ. Now if you are under the influence of the love of Christ, if you are responsive to it, you will be true to that in which His love was expressed. I am very much afraid of mere human sentiment or the working of natural feeling in God's things. It is blessed to be enabled to sing of Christ and his love, but if you are really under this influence you will be true to His death. It is a great moral reality.

You remember the passage where the Lord had been speaking of His death and

the disciples could not understand that saying, and were afraid to ask Him (Mark ix. 31, 32). How different it should be with us who have by the Spirit the knowledge of *where He is*, and the love which brought Him to *where He was*, even to death. *We* should not be afraid to ask Him. At Corinth they were not true to the boundary, therefore the apostle writes to them in the spirit of jealousy: "Do we provoke the Lord to jealousy, are we stronger than he?" At the close of the epistle, in the midst of warm Christian salutations, there comes one of the most solemn passages in scripture: "If any man love not the Lord Jesus Christ let him be anathema maranatha"—let him be accursed at the coming of the Lord. It is the spirit of jealousy.

It seems to me the Spirit not only saw the possibility of some at Corinth not loving the Lord, but looking along the vista of time when vast numbers would come into the fellowship—the Simons who would be found nominally there—utters these solemn words. Let us not shrink from them. Through grace we can say with Peter: "Lord, thou knowest all things, thou knowest that I love thee." The Lord by the Spirit has written Himself on "the fleshly tables of our hearts." The Writer knows what He has written.

Will you now turn with me to Numbers

v. 15-18, as I desire to show you from this passage how it answers to what the apostle is doing in the epistle to Corinthians :

“Then shall the man bring his wife unto the priest, and he shall bring her offering for her, the tenth part of an ephah of barley meal ; he shall pour no oil upon it, nor put frankincense thereon ; for it is an offering of jealousy, an offering of memorial bringing iniquity to remembrance. And the priest shall bring her near and set her before the Lord ; And the priest shall take holy water in an earthen vessel ; and of the dust that is in the floor of the tabernacle, the priest shall take, and put it into the water. And the priest shall set the woman before the Lord, and uncover the woman’s head, and put the offering of memorial in her hands, which is the jealousy offering : and the priest shall have in his hand the bitter water that causeth the curse.”

Here we find the law of jealousy ; the question is raised as to the fidelity of the wife. The priest places her before the Lord, puts the dust of the tabernacle in the holy water in an earthen vessel. “Thou hast brought me into the dust of death.” It was here the love of the husband was fully proved, and she is to be tested by that in which His love was expressed ; if she be faithful, the bitter water which causes the

curse becomes the means of fruitfulness. She is made to drink of death. In like manner the apostle by the Spirit brings the Corinthians before the Lord. He presents to them the testimony of the death of Christ, as meeting the allowance of that which was unworthy of the fellowship into which they had been called. Of the Cross, as setting aside the wisdom of man, in chapters i. and ii. In chapter v., the demand in righteousness to purge out the old leaven, for "Christ our passover was slain for us." Then in chapter x., the separation from a false fellowship: "The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ."

To this testimony there was an answer in measure, as we see in the second epistle. There was fidelity to Christ and the testimony of His death was responded to, thus proving that Christ was "written on the fleshly tables of their hearts."

I now desire to draw your attention to Numbers vi. 22-27. "And the Lord spake unto Moses, saying, Speak unto Aaron and unto his sons, saying, on this wise ye shall bless the children of Israel, saying unto them: The Lord bless thee and keep thee. The Lord make his face shine upon thee and be gracious unto thee. The Lord lift up his countenance upon thee and give thee peace. And they shall put my name upon the

children of Israel ; and I will bless them.”

I suppose no sweeter words than these are to be found in the Old Testament : God’s proposal for Israel, His benediction ; and in a future day it will be their portion, as the Psalms and Prophets plainly foretell. Note the spiritual order here—the benediction is appended to the law of the Nazarite. Surely a lesson for us ; we must accept the separation to be in the benediction—a most important principle for this present moment. As in Luke xxiv. 50, “He led them out as far as to Bethany, and he lifted up his hands and blessed them.” He separated them to bless them. So the apostle in Galatians vi. 14 : “But God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me and I unto the world.” The apostle has before him not the world of pleasure, as we should speak ; the world he speaks of here is evidently the religious world—the place man after the flesh has religiously. This is plainly seen in the former part of the epistle. Satan’s ministers, “transforming themselves as ministers of righteousness,” had been busy seeking to get them circumcised and to keep the law, thus to glory in their flesh.

But the apostle accepts the separation of the Cross from such a world. Once he had

been a great man in it, but now this double crucifixion had entirely separated him from it and he sets before us a new condition and rule: "For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision availeth anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creature." Now the apostle by the Spirit gives the benediction: "And as many as walk according to this rule, peace be on them and mercy, and upon the Israel of God." We must accept the separation and walk according to this rule to be in the benediction. It is on this line the apostle presents the death of Christ, in Corinthians x., as the true boundary line: "The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ?" All the blessing was inside this boundary in the power of the Spirit. To go outside was to provoke the Lord to jealousy. "Do we provoke the Lord to jealousy, are we stronger than he?"

I now come to my last point and would read Numbers viii. 1-4: "And the Lord spake unto Moses, saying, Speak unto Aaron, and say unto him, When thou lightest the lamps, the seven lamps shall give light over against the candlestick. And Aaron did so; he lighted the lamps thereof over against the candlestick, as the Lord commanded Moses. And this work of the candlestick was of beaten gold, unto the shaft thereof, unto the

flowers thereof, was beaten work: according unto the pattern which the Lord had shewed Moses, so he made the candlestick.”

This is a remarkable passage as coming here, and could not possibly be understood did we not see the spiritual design and teaching. It is found between the previous chapter which gives us a long account of the dedication of the substance of the prince in Israel to the service of God, and the next chapter which gives us the account of the dedication of the Levites to the service of God. The instruction about the candlestick comes between as teaching us a great lesson: “the light is to be over against the candlestick.” The thought is that the light is to show the beauty of the candlestick.

“Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven.” As also in 1 Peter iv. 10, 11. Verse 10 would answer to Numbers vii.—the dedication of substance, and verse 11 more to Numbers viii.—the dedication of the Levites, but it was in order “that God in all things may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom be praise and dominion for ever and ever.”

Now turn to 2 Thessalonians i. 10. “When he shall come to be glorified in his saints, and to be admired in all them that believe (because our testimony among you

was believed) in that day.” Here the apostle is setting before us “that day” when there will be a perfect answer to the testimony. “He shall be glorified in his saints.” The light should be over against the candlestick in that day. How the beloved apostle, who was surely marked by divine compassions towards men in his gospel testimony, ever kept in view the glory of the One who was the subject of that testimony. Thus he could pray in view of the future that it might be morally true of them now. “Wherefore also we pray always for you that our God would account you worthy of this calling and fulfil all the good pleasure of his goodness, and the work of faith with power, that the name of our Lord Jesus Christ may be glorified in you and ye in him according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.”

It is his desire that the light be over against the candlestick *now*. The climax of Christian fellowship is the glory of the Lord.

The grace of the Lord is the bond, the death of Christ is the boundary, and the object in the power of the Spirit is the glory of the Lord. The subject is a large one for the compass of our address, but I have endeavoured to show you some moral features of Christian fellowship, which I trust may lead to exercise and thus to profit.

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