

"The Brotherhood" 1 Thess. 5:23-28 October 8, 1995

Text Comments

- v. 23 "spirit, soul, and body" should be taken rhetorically -- "i.e. the whole entire person in every aspect of life" rather than as a description of man in tripartite form ("trichotomy"). As with "love the Lord...with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind [plus body!]" When speaking of the nature of man the Bible clearly teaches that there are but two parts: the body and the soul.
- v. 25 He had just prayed for them (vv. 23-24), now asks them to pray for him in return. "Force out of heaven a blessing for me!" It is pride not to ask prayer of others, a lack of charity not to offer it.
- v. 26 "The Holy Kiss" The simple sense is "give everyone a kiss for me." He isn't so much telling the Thessalonians how to greet one another as he is sending his own affectionate greeting to them all. The kiss was not a Christian invention, it was the customary usage of that society, though the Christians added the sense of deeper affection and purity suggested in the phrase "holy kiss." By the middle of the second century, we learn from Justin Martyr, the kiss had become a part of the liturgy of the Lord's Supper. It is usually thought that, at first, given the customs of those days, kisses -- certainly on the cheek -- were exchanged only between members of the same sex; but in course of time members of the opposite sex exchanged the kiss as well. Understandably, this led to abuses and some of the early church councils had to issue regulations governing the circumstances under which the kiss could be exchanged.
- v. 27 Strong language. Many have taken, I think rightly, as a measure of Paul's understanding of his own authority. This letter is to be read just as the Scripture is to be read to the church. There is no command to "test" this teaching; this is the Word of God, hot off the presses, as it were!
- v. 28 The benediction. A demonstration that the NT ministry, in its representative form, the apostles, had taken over from the OT priesthood its functions and authority. Num. 6:23: "this is how you are to bless the Israelites..." (God be gracious unto you...)

Did you notice that Paul used the word "brother" to refer to the Christians in Thessalonica three times in those three brief verses, 25-27. "Brothers, pray for us." "Greet the brothers..." "Have this letter read to all the brothers."

It is, of course, a biblical commonplace to speak in such a way, of fellow Christians as brothers. The OT refers to Israelites as a spiritual brotherhood and the Lord Jesus himself speaks similarly (Matt. 23:8). You find the idea then everywhere in the NT and in some dramatic passages illustrating the power of the idea, as when Ananias came to Saul, the persecutor of the church the head of the Jewish secret police, but now blinded by the Lord on the road to Damascus and

began his conversation with him, "Brother Saul..." Or when Paul sent Onesimus, the runaway slave but now a Christian, back to his owner, Philemon, "no longer a slave, but a dear brother."

I spent a most fruitful day, last week, listening to the Rev. Dick Lucas speak to preachers about preaching. Mr. Lucas is the pastor of one of central London's great churches, St. Helen's Bishopgate, and is well-known throughout Britain as a preacher of the Word of God. He gets some 500 London businessmen to a preaching service once a week at lunch time. I found him a man of keen insight, of terrific wit, and of real godliness and spiritual authority. It was refreshing to listen to him.

At one point he spoke of a certain condition to which congregations are subject which he referred to as "The Glazed Look." The glazed look is the look a preacher gets from a congregation that finds nothing particularly surprising or new or glorious in the truth that is being proclaimed because the truth is so familiar to them, so much a commonplace, that they cannot see it any longer for the amazing, surprising, wonderful, terrible, painful, demanding, punishing, ravishing truth that it actually is.

Well, the brotherhood of believers is a truth like that. If I were to tell you that all Christians are brothers, you would not likely sit up straight in your pew and stare back at me in astonishment and look worriedly at one another wondering what in the world I meant by such a statement, what in the world had happened to your pastor that he should say such an outrageous thing. You would not gasp at the idea that you were a brother or a sister to all the other believers in this room. You know that already. You have known that, most of you, for years. There is nothing new, nothing surprising in that.

But you should not think so! This is an utterly remarkable thing and a terribly difficult truth to embrace, no matter how strongly we believe it to be true, and, it is a glorious and wonderful truth as well. What is more, it is a very controversial truth. Were you aware of that?

Liberal theology, Christianity recast in its modern form to conform to contemporary tastes and thinking, is deeply offended by this idea of the brotherhood of Christians. Did you know that? Oh they have no objection to the idea of brotherhood or that it is experienced in the church. But the great fact of **Christian** brotherhood as it has always been understood in the church offends them deeply. The great statement of modern liberal Christianity was Adolf von Harnack's What is Christianity?, published for the first time in the year 1900. In that influential book Harnack reduced the essence of the Christian faith to two propositions: The Fatherhood of God and the Brotherhood of man.

Now many will say that Harnack's summary has been discredited and that liberalism is no longer so simplistic. But the fact is, this continues to be, at bottom, the view of Christianity and its message embraced by vast multitudes of people, both those who would consider themselves Christians and those who would not: God is the Father of us all and we are all brothers. The Roman Catholic Catechism says as much these days as do the pulpits of vast multitudes of protestant churches. And, if often it is not so overtly said, nowhere is it denied.

But, as G.K. Chesterton once said, "the acid test of a religion is what do they deny."

And what biblical, classical, evangelical Christianity denies is that all mankind are brothers. We deny it absolutely. We Christians are brethren, brothers and sisters of one another, but we are not the brothers or sisters of anyone who does not have faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. In this exclusive and excluding sense the entire notion of Christian brotherhood -- such a commonplace to us today -- was controversial and highly inflammatory from the beginning.

In the ancient world there was no place in the catalog of virtues for two of the greatest virtues of the Christian life: humility and brotherly love. Humility, in classical usage, refers to a mind that is miserable and lacking in self-respect. They knew of friendship, of course, and praised it, but friendship, it was freely admitted, rested on an utilitarian and egoistic basis and was only possible among persons of equal rank in society. For the stranger, the barbarian, the Greek and Roman knew only contempt. In the imperial age of Roman, according to Plutarch himself, society was so controlled by the coldest selfishness, that friendship had died out even in families and the love of brothers was supposed to be possible only in a heroic age long gone by.

Then came the Christians claiming that, among themselves, slaves and masters were brothers, men and women were brothers, rich and poor, Barbarians and Romans. "[That love that works among us]" Tertullian wrote early in the third century [Apology, xxxix] "exposes us to many a suspicion. 'Behold,' they say, 'how they love one another!' Yea, truly this must strike them; for they hate each other... And even that we call one another 'brethren,' seems to them suspicious for no other reason than that, among them, all expressions of kindred are only feigned."

Seeing in this new sect of folk who called themselves Christians nothing but a childish and innocent fanaticism, the satirist Lucian, in the mid-second century, wrote of the early believers: "It is incredible to see the ardor with which the people of that religion help each other in their wants. They spare nothing. Their first legislator has put it into their heads that they are all brothers."

We can be sure, brothers and sisters, that if we practiced the Christian brotherhood, as faithfully as it once was practiced, we would also find ourselves the object of a certain suspicion and would find ourselves patronized as the early Christians did.

So, let's banish "the glazed look" when we are speaking of Paul's use of the term "brother" to refer to his fellow Christians. This was an absolutely revolutionary principle when it first burst on the scene of the world and it is no less so today.

And most of us know, from our own experience, what a world of impossibly high and searching obligations this fact that we are brothers lays upon every Christian. We know the difference, we know it painfully enough from our own experience, between believing that all Christians are our brothers and acting like it and treating them like it. Don't we!?

This past week I happened to be glancing through an account of Presbyterian missionary work in the West during the period of its settlement and came across a great example of what I am talking about.

It seems that in 1828 a self-appointed missionary by the name of Sumner Bacon began evangelistic work in Texas. He was a layman of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church and when, in 1826, dressed in buckskins, he applied to that church's Arkansas Presbytery to be taken under care as a candidate for the ministry, he was rejected.

Now the Cumberland Presbyterians had broken away from the main Presbyterian Church largely in protest of two things: the Presbyterian Church's high Calvinism -- most of the Cumberlands were Arminians -- and the church's insistence on an educated ministry. Many of those who came to belong to the Cumberland Church were Appalachian folk who resented having to send their sons off to seminaries in the big cities and distrusted book learning anyway. Ministerial learning and education was not a high priority for them.

So, the fact that **they** turned Mr. Bacon away suggests that he must have been a most unpromising candidate. The fact that he had no formal theological education and that he was dressed like an outdoorsman wouldn't have counted against him in their circles. The fact that he presented himself before the presbytery a second time sometime later and was again rejected only strengthens this suspicion.

But with that typical buckskin self-confidence, sure that God had called him even if he couldn't get a church to do it, he simply became a self-appointed missionary to Texas. He traveled with a supply of Bibles and tracts knowing full well that he would be a target both of Roman Catholics and the ruffians who were everywhere in Texas those days.

Now, people like Sumner Bacon **really irritate us** today. We think of them as unsubmitive, as disrespectful to the church, as cocksure in the worst kind of way. What is more, he wanted to be a Cumberland Presbyterian, **the worst kind of Presbyterian**, we think silently to ourselves! Those mountain hill-billys, and Arminians to boot! And, what is even worse, the worst kind of Arminians -- the kind that used to be Calvinistic Presbyterians! This is the way we think, so often. And if not about Cumberland Presbyterians, then about others for other reasons. We all know well enough how deeply entrenched is the principle in all of our hearts that inclines us to despise those who disagree with us, brethren or not.

Well, I kept reading about Sumner Bacon. It seems, on one occasion, some west Texas outlaws attacked him on one of his preaching trips and made sport for themselves by terrifying him and making to kill him. Before they shot him down, however, Bacon asked for the opportunity to pray. Well, the outlaws no doubt thought that would be magnanimous on their part and probably good sport as well, so they let him. But Bacon, falling to his knees, prayed so eloquently for his would-be murderers that their hearts were touched and unable to kill a man as good as that, they let him be and went on their way.

That's our brother, brethren and so many like him today. He's part of our family, we are joined at the hip, for the grace that is both in our hearts and his. And you and I both know very well how hard it can be to feel that to be so, even when we know very well that it is; to ignore the differences because the things in common are so much more important. How hard it is to love and admire a Sumner Wells **before** he covered himself with glory before those outlaws! But he was our brother as well before as after!

Someone has said that Christians are an acquired taste. Well so it is. But then, when it comes to brothers and sisters, it really isn't up to us or our tastes, it is, it is a matter of blood, blood thicker than any water. We don't choose our relatives.

Augustine said of himself and his lifelong friend, Alypius, who became a Christian after Augustine did, that they were washed in the same blood. And so it is with all Christians.

Now, there are two things to help us think more dearly and positively about all this, two things that wise Christians have always remembered about our brethren and the fact that among them are many we find difficult to like, to want to be with, to treasure as members of our own family.

1. **First, while it is true that some unbelievers are more attractive people than some Christians, that some who are not our brothers and sisters are more of a pleasure to be around than our own family members, you cannot judge people in that simple way.**

You may find an old Christian who is cantankerous who compares unfavorably with a pleasant fellow who hasn't the whisper of a Christian faith. But you cannot compare people quite that way. Who knows how much more cantankerous the old brother or sister would have been but for the grace of God and how much more delightful and useful the unbeliever would be if he were a Christian. In the world of grace more careful analysis must be made before we too glibly compare our brethren with unbelievers we like better. Given the raw material the Holy Spirit is working with, in the case of a Christian brother or sister it may be a miracle of grace that he or she is anything of a Christian at all, and it may be, on the other hand, a terrible shame and evil that the unbeliever, with so much going for him or her, does so little of any importance with it.

2. **Second, as with everything else in the world of grace, judgments must be made in view of the world to come and not merely in terms of the present.**

This is a point C.S. Lewis made so memorably in his immortal essay, "The Weight of Glory."

"It may be possible," he wrote, "for each to think too much of his own potential glory; it is hardly possible for him to think too often or too deeply about that of his neighbor. The load, or weight, or burden of my neighbor's glory should be laid daily on my back, a load so heavy that only humility can carry it, and the backs of the proud will be broken. It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly

tempted to worship.... It is in the light of these overwhelming possibilities, it is with the awe and the circumspection proper to them, that we should conduct all our dealings with one another... There are no ordinary people, you have never talked to a mere mortal."

Well, think of that as you look around you in the church at your brothers and sisters. They may not be much to think of now, --though if God and Christ love them, how wrong for us not to!-- but what they will one day be would take your breath away if you could see it today! That very person who so fails to impress you now, that very person who gets under your skin, that very person who disagrees with you, -- your brother, your sister in Christ.

Well, then, no wonder Paul had no difficulty thinking of every Christian as his brother or sister and of the church of God as a family knit together by the bond of blood thicker than that which unites any human family in this world.

Greet **all** the brothers -- there are no distinctions here. And greet them **with a holy kiss**, affectionately, warmly, sincerely, as is appropriate to the bond which God's grace has forged between us all.

And how much happier must that Christian man or Christian woman become who begins **really and sincerely and thoughtfully** to treat his or her fellow Christians as brothers and as sisters.

Had I a choice of anything that might make my life happier, what could be better chosen than this -- to have my heart really drawn to my fellow Christians **as my brethren**. You see, as a member of the Rayburn family, I really do enjoy the blessings that come to my brother and my two sisters. Their happiness becomes mine, their blessings become mine, when others praise and compliment them I feel as though I have been complimented and praised myself -- **because they belong to me -- and I belong to them. I am their brother.**

Well, suppose we came to feel that way about all our brethren here. And all of their successes and happinesses and all that benefited them brought us happiness, satisfaction, and honor as well. How much more happiness, honor, and satisfaction we would enjoy in life, would we not. Paul did. He was an extraordinarily happy man -- and a lot of his happiness was the share he had in the happiness of his brothers and sisters. And then, feeling as close to them and one with them as he did, he also felt he could, at any time call on them to help him -- that is the way brothers are with their family members; you ask of your family what you would never ask of strangers or mere friends.

Brothers, brothers, we are all brothers. No more of the glazed look, brothers and sisters. This is an astonishing thing -- also highly controversial and offensive to many -- also extraordinary. The world knows nothing like it and the more we practice it, this brotherhood, the more the world will know that there really are two communities in this world -- the Christian family and everyone else.

Early on in his Christian life, before he had come to be a preacher, Martin Lloyd Jones, the

urbane London physician had an experience of this. He was out one night to see a play in the theater district of London, out with some of his sophisticated friends. But when they came out of the theater and were walking down the street in their evening dress, a Salvation Army band came along playing some hymn tunes. You know how you have often felt about Salvation Army bands. Well, it came to him in a moment of crystal clarity that these people, these band members, so out of step with the sophisticated culture of the London theater district, **were his people**. That is what the gospel meant and that is the bond of blood the gospel creates between all who believe in Jesus Christ.

And so it is for us, brothers and sisters. And all the words in the world cannot describe how remarkable and wonderful and supernatural that reality is, and also how difficult and bracing a life's work and a life's calling.

"Greet **all** the brothers with a holy kiss!