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David's Companions and Paul's Friends

2 Samuel 23; Romans 16

How precious are those specific links which are formed by the hand of God! There is the great general link which connects us with all the children of God – all the members of the body of Christ; but there are specific links which we should ever recognize and seek to strengthen and perpetuate, in every right way.

We were lately looking, with much interest and profit, at David's mighty men in 2 Samuel 23, and Paul's friends at Rome in Romans 16. Out of the many thousands of Israel – circumcised members of the congregation, children of Abraham – there were comparatively few who distinguished themselves by personal devotedness and wholehearted consecration. Even among those few there were marked differences. There were 'the thirty,' 'the three,' and 'the first three.' Each gets his own specific place on the page of the book of responsible, practical life, according to what he was or what he had done. Moreover, we are told particularly what each one did and how he did it. Nothing is forgotten, but all is faithfully recorded; and no one can ever get another's place. Each does his own work, fills his own niche, and gets his own reward.

We may observe the same thing in the case of the twelve apostles. We read much more about 'Peter, James, and John' than about the other nine. And not only so, but even in the case of those three we mark a difference, for one is specially named as 'the disciple whom Jesus loved,' and who leaned on His breast at supper. Thus it is all through the Word. Look at Abraham and Lot; Elijah and Obadiah; the

Shunammite and the Sareptan. Christian reader, let us earnestly seek a closer walk with God – deeper intimacy with the mind of Christ.

So also in Romans 16. Nothing can be more marked or striking than the beautiful discrimination which characterizes this exquisite Scripture. First of all, mark the way in which Phebe is commended to the assembly at Rome. 'I commend to you Phebe our sister.' On what ground? Is it that she is 'breaking bread' or 'in fellowship' at Cenchræa? No; but 'she is a servant of the assembly'; and 'she has been a helper of many, and of myself also.'

He presents, in touching and forcible language, the moral basis of her claim upon the hospitality and help of the assembly. To say that a person is 'breaking bread', is no guarantee of personal devotedness. It ought to be; but it is not. And hence, to expect the sympathy, help, and confidence of the Lord's people on that ground is unwarrantable. Even the blessed apostle himself, when he asks for the prayers of the brethren, presents the moral basis of his claim. 'Brethren, pray for us.' On what ground? Is it because we are 'breaking bread' or 'in fellowship'? Nothing of the kind; but because 'we trust we have a good conscience, in all things willing to live honestly.'

Then mark the notice of Priscilla and Aquila. What had they done? They had been the apostle's helpers. They had laid down their own necks for his life. And he adds: 'Unto whom not only I give thanks, but also all the assemblies of the Gentiles.' This is uncommonly fine. They had purchased to themselves a good degree. They had worked their way into the confidence and esteem of the apostle and of all the assemblies. Thus it must be. We cannot jump, all in a moment, into people's confidence and affection. We must commend ourselves by a life of practical righteousness and personal devotedness. 'Commending ourselves to every man's conscience, in the sight of God' (2 Cor. 4:2).

Again, look at the exquisite touch in verse 12: 'Salute Tryphena and Tryphosa, who labor in the Lord. Salute the beloved Persis, who labored much in the Lord.' See what lovely discrimination is here! Why does he not class all three together? The reason is plain: because two had only labored, while the third had labored much. Each one gets his and her place, according to what they were, and according to what they had done.

Nor would Tryphena and Tryphosa have had any cause of envy and jealousy against Persis, because she was characterized as 'beloved' while they were not; or because the word 'much' was added to her labor and withheld from theirs. No; envy and jealousy are the pernicious fruit of a miserable self-occupation; they can find no place in a heart wholly devoted to Christ and His precious interests.

Now, I look upon 2 Samuel 23 and Romans 16 as specimen pages of the book of responsible, practical life, in which each one is written down according to what he is and according to what he has done. It is, of course, all by grace. Each one will delight to say that 'by the grace of God I am what I am.' Moreover, all the children of God and members of Christ, are equally 'accepted in the Beloved,' all stand in one common relationship. The very feeblest member of the body of Christ is loved by God as Christ is loved. The Head and the members cannot be separated. As He is so are they. The feeblest child in the family has his own place in the Father's heart, with which no one can ever interfere (Eph. 1:6; John 17:26; 1 John 4:17).

All this is blessedly true, and nothing can ever touch it. But when we turn to the great question of practical life and personal devotedness, what endless variety! We see 'the three,' 'the first three,' and 'the thirty.' It is one thing to be 'accepted,' and another thing to be 'acceptable' or agreeable. It is one thing to be a beloved child and another thing to be a devoted servant. There is the love of relationship and the love of complacency.

These things must not be confounded. And, most assuredly, it should be the earnest desire of every 'accepted' child of God to be an 'acceptable' servant of Christ. Oh! may it be so more and more in this day of cold indifference and self-seeking, in which so many seem to rest satisfied with the mere fact of being in fellowship, as it is called – the form of breaking bread; and so few, comparatively, are pressing after that high standard of personal devotedness which, we may rest assured, is 'agreeable' to the heart of Christ.

Let us not be misunderstood. True fellowship in the Spirit – the communion of saints – is precious beyond all expression; and the breaking of bread, in truth and sincerity, in remembrance of our adorable Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, who loved us and gave Himself for us, is one of the very highest and richest privileges for those whose hearts are true to Him. All this is clearly understood and fully admitted.

But, on the other hand, we must never forget the strong tendency of our poor hearts to rest in mere forms and formularies when the power is gone. It is one thing to be in nominal fellowship and go through the outward form of breaking bread, and another thing altogether to be an earnest, devoted, pronounced disciple of Christ. This latter is what we should all ardently long for; but to rest in the former is a miserable delusion, deadening the conscience, hardening the heart, and deceiving the soul.

'Bought with a price,' and not my own,
No longer to myself to live,
To be for Him, for Him alone,
Who gave me all that grace could give,
Who gave Himself — for me made sin,
My guilty worthless heart to win.

'Bought with a price,' I now would seek
A living sacrifice to be,
Conformed to Him, pure, holy, meek,
Whom on the throne I now can see;
To walk like Him this desert place,
In truth and love and power and grace.

'Bought with a price,' to wait for Him,
Resting beneath His gracious smile,
Which brightens hope when faith grows dim,
And cheers me through the 'little while,'
Whilst waiting here His face to see,
Who comes Himself to welcome me.

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Oude Sporen 2019

