

LIVING THE NEW LIFE

Romans 12:9-21

"Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good."--`Rom. 12:21`.

WHILE the Apostle Paul was a wonderful logician, and in his writings has set forth the elements of Christian faith along doctrinal lines more than any other apostle, yet we notice that he is in pursuit of a certain object: he is not beating the air, not discussing theological points for the sake of making an argument or showing his own ability. His arguments along doctrinal lines lead the reader in every instance onward and upward, as a stairway, to a grand upper room of perfected Christian character: and nowhere is this more manifest than in his epistle to the Romans. Beginning with the distinctions between the Jew, informed respecting God, and to some extent respecting his will and his plan, and contrasting these with the general ignorance prevailing amongst all classes of Gentiles, "without God and having no hope in the world," he carries the mind forward, pointing out how the degradation had come, and how the knowledge of God had reached Israel first, not because Israelites were better, but because of the divine favor, "grace," "election."

He points out nevertheless that "the Law made nothing perfect," but was merely a pedagogue (a servant whose business it was to take children to school); thus the Law was to bring Israel to Christ, the great Teacher, that they might learn of him. He points out further that, while Israel was seeking divine favor, they failed to get the chief blessing because they were not thoroughly candid with themselves, and hence mistook the mission of Moses' Law. They hypocritically claimed that they kept that Law inviolate and were entitled to its blessings, -- eternal life, etc., --whereas they should have admitted that the Law was so grand and so perfect, and themselves so fallen from perfection, that they were unable to keep it; and they should have looked to the Lord for help. In this attitude of mind, they would have been ready to receive eternal life as a gift, through Jesus Christ our Lord; and would have given up seeking it by the perfection of their own works. So the Apostle points out that Israel failed because they sought the blessing not by faith but by works. Thus "Israel hath not obtained that which he seeketh for; but the election hath obtained it, and the rest were blinded." (`Rom. 11:7`.) He then points out that this fall of Israel into blindness and the calling of a peculiar people from among the Gentiles to complete the "elect" company was foreknown of God and declared by him through the prophets. (`Rom. 9` and `10`.) But he shows that Israel is not cast off forever, and that when the elect class is complete all Israel shall be saved from the blindness into which they stumbled in the rejection of Christ; and that their recovery then will be the signal for blessings upon the whole world. --`Rom. 11:15,25,32`.

It is after eleven chapters of argumentative, logical, beautiful, instructive, blessed reasoning that the Apostle reaches the crown of his argument, saying (`12:1`), "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God [presented in the previous eleven chapters] that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service." He is addressing the "elect" body of Christ, of which a part was being gathered from among the Jews and the remainder being made up from those called from among the Gentiles. These should know what are the terms and conditions upon which God hath "called" them; viz., (1) to suffer with Christ in this present time, and (2) to be glorified and reign with him in the coming age, to bless the world. These should know the reason for their sufferings and the character which God would develop in them, and without which they would not be "fit for the Kingdom." It is concerning some of these characteristics, necessary to those who would make their "calling and election sure," that our present lesson treats.

"Let love be without dissimulation." He had already explained the necessity for love; but he now puts us on guard against a merely feigned love, which would only outwardly appear kind and polite. The true spirit of love, a holy spirit, will not be a dissimulating one, a hypocritical one: the love will be genuine, heartfelt as well as

mouth expressed. This love is to be toward God, and toward all in proportion as they are God-like, or striving to be so. It is to be a love of that which is good, right, pure, true.

"Abhor that which is evil." We are not merely to avoid doing that which is evil, not merely to have no love or affinity for evil; but more than these we are to hate, to abhor evil. And as the love for God and for all things true and pure and making for righteousness is to be cultivated, so the abhorrence of sin and impurity of every kind is to be cultivated, so that the stronger we become in Christian character the more intense will be our love for the good and pure and true, and the more intense will be our opposition to the untrue, the impure, the sinful. The more we learn of the beautiful harmonies of this heavenly grace of love, and the more they become the melodies of our own hearts, the more distressing and repugnant and abhorrent will sin and selfishness, "the spirit of the world," be to us: just as discords in music grate upon our ears in proportion as our knowledge and appreciation of musical harmonies grows. As holiness and sin are opposites, so our feelings toward these must be represented by the sentiments of love and hatred. To grow cool in love for righteousness, is to lose some of the abhorrence for sin. Let us therefore cultivate in ourselves hatred for sin, selfishness impurity and every evil way, that we may find it the easier to cultivate in our hearts the beautiful graces of the holy spirit.

"Cleave to that which is good." The thought is, adhere to, be cemented to, that which is good. There is a constant tendency not only from our own fallen natures, but also from the world and the devil, to separate from that which is good and pure and noble. And we must resolutely determine, that at all hazards and for all time, by the Lord's grace, we will adhere to him, --the truth, the way, the life.

"Be kindly affectioned." The thought here seems to be: Cultivate among yourselves that kind of affection which properly belongs in a family, where the blessing or honor of one member signifies the blessing, honor and advancement of all. Perhaps the Apostle thus delicately suggests the impropriety of any manifestation of affection except such as would be proper between brethren: as we read in another place, "Love as brethren."--`1 Pet. 3:8`.

"In honor preferring one another." That is, rejoicing more if honor come to another than if it had come to self. Our hearts should be so unselfish that we would take pleasure in seeing honor and prosperity come to another, and rejoice in it: and so sympathetic that a brother's failure would cause us as much chagrin as if it were our own failure. This is the holy spirit which unfeignedly rejoices with those who rejoice, and weeps with those who weep.

"Not slothful in your affairs." The word here does not refer specially to mercantile business, but to affairs in general. The class addressed, who are seeking to make their calling and election sure, are to "do all things as unto the Lord;" and nothing done for the Lord should be done in a slovenly manner. We are in a world full of opportunities for good or evil: there are few on our side, the side of God and of righteousness; and whoever realizes this, and is fully consecrated to the Lord, will certainly be aroused from slothfulness which is natural to many in the fallen condition. If the battle of truth against error, of light against darkness, does not awaken us to energy in the Lord's service, it marks an unfavorable condition of heart. And to the consecrated child of God, every affair of life-- eating, drinking and all other business in this present life--is to help us to serve the interests of our Master's cause.

"Fervent in spirit." This is placed in contrast with sloth: if as stewards of divine mercy and truth we are slothful, it is because we are cool in our love to the Lord; hence the Apostle's instruction that we should be hot, fervent in spirit. The Greek word here translated "fervent" signifies to be hot, to boil. We are reminded of our Lord's words to the Church of Laodicea, boastful of its works but lukewarm in the spirit of its love. "I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would that thou wert cold or hot. So then, because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew thee out of my mouth." Let all who have received the Lord's spirit take heed lest they get into a lukewarm condition and lose the Lord's favor: let them cultivate rather a growing appreciation of the mercies of God, which growing appreciation as fuel will add fervency to our love and zeal for his truth, and for purity in our own hearts, and for service to others.

"Rejoice in hope." We are not to expect to have much in the present life to rejoice in, if we are faithful to our "calling;" because "through much tribulation shall ye enter the Kingdom." Our rejoicing is to be in hope--looking into the future. The eye of faith is to see what the natural eye cannot see, the crown of life and all the glorious things "which God hath in reservation for them that love him [ferently]." And here is the advantage of doctrinal knowledge: it inspires hope; it gives a foundation for hope. Knowledge cannot bring us to the Kingdom; but it may be a great help in building us up and preparing us for it, by constantly holding before us the hopes which God designs should stimulate and encourage us while running the race for the great prize. "Patient in tribulation." Our word tribulation is derived from the Latin tribulum, the name of a roller or threshing machine used in olden times for cleaning wheat, removing from it the outer husk or chaff. How appropriate the thought when applied to the Lord's consecrated people, who in the Scriptures are symbolized by wheat. Our new natures are the kernel, the real grain: yet this treasure or valuable part is covered with the husk of earthly conditions. And in order that the wheat may be made properly ready for the "garner" and for usefulness, it is necessary that each grain shall pass through the tribulation necessary to separate those qualities which, until separated, render us unfit for the future service to which we are called of the Lord. In proportion as we are able to realize our own imperfections, and the perfect will of God concerning us, we will be enabled to bear patiently, and even with a certain kind of rejoicing, all the tribulations which the Master shall see best to let come upon us. "We glory in tribulations also."--`Rom. 5:3`.

"Instant in prayer." No advice that the Apostle could give to the class addressed could be more vitally important than this. "Ah, whither could we flee for aid when tempted, desolate, dismayed? Or how the host of sin defeat had suffering saints no mercy-seat.

Prayer, communion with God, is indispensably necessary to our spiritual welfare; and the appreciation of the privilege of communion with the Most High and with our Redeemer, or the lack of such appreciation, as the case may be, indicates tolerably clearly our fervency or our coldness with reference to the things of the Lord. People may be fervent in serving schemes or plans of their own, or human systems and theories, and have little desire for prayer; but those who serve the Lord and his truth from a hot, fervent heart, will so realize their imperfection and their own inability in the divine service, that they will desire and will continually seek the Master's guidance and direction with reference to the service they are rendering to him.

If, therefore, we ever feel a growing indifference, either to private prayer or to public worship or to social prayer-meetings, we may be assured that it is a very dangerous sign of one of two things. (1) Either that our love is growing cold, or (2) that our love is misplaced, misdirected, placed upon some earthly scheme or ambition, and is not fervent toward the Lord. And whichever is found to be the difficulty should be corrected at once. The appreciation of prayer, like the growth of love, and like the increase of fervency of spirit, is a matter for development; and the best fuel, as above suggested, is the consideration of the divine mercies already enjoyed.

"Distributing to the distresses of saints." The Greek word here rendered "distributing" signifies to make common. The thought evidently is, that altho Communism is not encouraged in Scripture, nor is it the best method in this present time, while it is better that each should have the responsibility largely for his own affairs and be the steward of his own talents, nevertheless that feeling of brotherhood is to prevail amongst the saints, which would "make common" to others of the spiritual family, such things as are necessities to them. Love, not Selfishness, is to control.

"Given to hospitality." The Apostle's language here does not signify if requested we should not be inhospitable; but it means much more: literally, it signifies following after hospitality--going out after, or seeking for opportunities for the exercise of hospitality. This principle is as applicable to the poor as to the rich. If what we have is plain or common, the hospitable use of it will just as truly show our heart-intentions as tho it were the best. Some, we fear, fail to cultivate this grace; and if they exercise hospitality are inclined to give better than they have, and perhaps would go into debt in order to entertain more lavishly than their circumstances would

justify. This is wrong. It is not cultivating the grace which the Apostle here inculcates, but is cultivating a very evil weed, --pride. Let us learn not only to love without dissimulation, but also to follow after hospitality without dissimulation, without seeking to show off better conditions than are really ours.

"Bless them which persecute you." This is a quotation from the sermon on the mount. It addresses a mind enlightened by the divine Word, that has thus drawn against it the opposition of Satan, and of those whose understandings he has darkened. It means an opposition of persecution not for wrong-doing, or as busy-bodies in other men's matters, or for nonsensical peculiarities, but persecution for the truth's sake. It implies a heart full of love and sympathy and pity; for no other heart could really and truly bless its persecutors and wish them no evil, but good. This is the kind of a heart, overflowing with the holy spirit of the Lord, that is able to rejoice with those in prosperity, to weep with those who sorrow and even able to forget its own tribulations or adversities.

"Be of the same disposition toward each one." Be sympathetic toward the very humblest brother or sister as well as toward the most refined. "Mind not high things." Do not allow your affections and sentiments merely to go out along ecstatic lines, but bring your mind down so as to enter into sympathy with those of God's people who financially and intellectually are in a low estate.

"Be not wise in your own conceits." This is a further injunction to humility. Those who are always minding high things and overlooking the humbler ones of the Lord's people usually do so because of too high an opinion of their own wisdom and intelligence. Few things more blemish an otherwise developed Christian character than a conceit which separates him or her from the humblest of the Lord's flock. Moreover, there is no more dangerous thing than such an opinion of one's own wisdom. This condition is described as being "heady," "high minded." It naturally leads into error, and to a fall from both the letter and spirit of the truth. "Pride goeth before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall." Let all beware of this terrible disease. Nothing is a greater hindrance and stumbling-block to the ministers of the nominal churches to-day (hindering them from receiving the truth) than this kind of pride in their own wisdom, which leads to and is distinguished by the unscriptural division of believers into "clergy" and "laity." And there is equal and even greater danger along this line for those who have received present truth, and who are seeking to minister it to others. Let all of the Lord's people, especially those who have a little more knowledge, and who attempt to make known the riches of divine grace, be specially on guard against attacks of the enemy from this quarter.

"Recompense no man evil for evil." Much of the previous instruction of this lesson relates to our dealings with the brotherhood; but here the Apostle points out a general line of conduct toward all men. There is a general tendency on the part of well-intentioned people to recognize a line of justice and a desire to vindicate justice and to punish evil doers. The Apostle points out that this is not the rule governing the Lord's family. It is not improper for the world to have laws and regulations for criminals, in the interest of society; and the Apostle is not discussing those, nor finding fault with them. He is treating rather of the minor affairs of life in which various evils may be inflicted and resented without coming directly under the control of civil laws. The policy of the Christian is to be not along the lines of slothfulness, animosities, revenges and perpetual conflicts, but to the contrary of all this; because of his greater knowledge of how sin came into the world, and how all mankind are fallen mentally, morally and physically, and how God has sympathy with the poor groaning creation and has provided a ransom for all, and that in due time a restitution for all shall be possible. And he is to have a heart so full of sympathy with this plan, that he will be generous, and God-like, toward the sin-blinded ones--anxious chiefly for the opening of the eyes of their understandings, and for an opportunity of blessing and helping them, rather than entertaining feelings of revenge.

"Provide things honest in the sight of all men." Realizing that part of the service which the Lord requires of him is an honest provision for the necessities of himself and family, the true Christian will seek to live up to this reasonable requirement. If he cannot obtain employment at that which he prefers, he will be bound in honesty to take some other employment, in order to meet his obligations. Few things are more likely to bring dishonor upon God's people in the sight of the world than dishonesty. Of course, none of the saints would steal; but there

is another way of being dishonest, which seems to slip by many consciences under certain circumstances. This is the dishonesty of purchasing on credit by actually or impliedly promising a payment at no distant date when there are no assurances of ability to pay at that date, as the merchant is led to presume. Some indeed seem to encourage themselves in such dishonest methods, persuading themselves that they are exercising "faith" in God, that he will provide means for the payment of their debts. This is a great mistake. God has never authorized any one to go into debt for him, and such a faith has no backing in God's Word. On the contrary, he instructs his people not to go into debt; but he says, "Owe no man anything." A good plan is to always live within our income and, if possible, to "lay by in store that we may have to give to him that needeth."

"Live as peaceably with all men as lieth within the range of your possibilities." With the various crooked natures of the world, and with our own imperfect dispositions (more and more coming under control of grace however) it will be a difficult matter to avoid all friction. But while in the interest of peace we are to submit to trifling wrongs and injustices with good grace, yet there is a place where we must draw the line; a place where our desire for peace must not control; that is, whenever a principle is involved. Here is a great difficulty: those who are naturally peaceable, will be tempted to pursue peace even at the expense of principle, and in conflict with the divine commands; on the other hand many of those who are firmest in defense of righteous principles are inclined to be combative, and have great need to guard themselves and to cultivate this disposition for peace, which is a part of the divine character which we are to copy. The rule should be, "First pure [truthful and loyal to righteousness] then peaceable."--`James 3:17`.

"Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves"; but preferably get out of the way of your opponents and their wrath, remembering that it is written, "Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord." Hence we do not need to feel that justice needs to be vindicated at our hands. God will take care of the vindication of his own justice. If it were left in our hands to mete out justice to those who mistreat us and say all manner of evil against us falsely for Christ's sake, we would doubtless make many mistakes. We should therefore be glad that the matter is not in our hands at present, and that divine wisdom and justice will repay to evil doers with greater mercy than we would probably be able to exercise. Our feelings, therefore, should be largely those of sympathy and pity for wrong doers, remembering that surely either in the present life or in that which is to come a man shall reap according to his present sowing.

For these reasons and in order to cultivate in us more of the divine mind, we are instructed to be kind to our enemies and not to see them want for necessities of life. Such treatment will be more likely than any other to do them good, and to win them as friends. We are not, however, to treat them kindly in order to see how badly we can make them feel under it. We are to treat them kindly because love is the principle of our nature, the "new commandment" of our Lord and Master, the holy spirit which is more and more actuating us. We are to treat them thus, regardless of whether we ever melt them by our kindness in the present life or not.

"Be not overcome of evil." We are to remember that there is a constant conflict between good and evil, that each has its servants, or soldiers, and that we have enlisted on the side of good, under the Captain of our salvation, with the engagement that we will "fight a good fight." We are never, therefore, to take up or to use evil words or methods or manners. To do so is temporarily to join the enemy, or to admit that his implements and methods are better than those of the Captain to whom we belong. To answer anger with anger, evil report with evil report, bitter words with bitter words, slander with slander, persecution with persecution, blow with blow, or any of these, would be to endeavor to overcome evil with evil. This which is natural to our fallen natures is what we are commanded to avoid, that we may the more thoroughly cultivate the new nature. To be misled by the adversary to use his methods in any of these ways is to be overcome of evil.

"Overcome evil with good." The fact that the Lord so directs us is proof (1) that it is practicable and (2) that it is preferable. Faith accepts these declarations of divine wisdom on the subject; and experience endorses or ratifies them. Whoever has tried, has found that evil can be overcome with good, in many instances. Not infrequently, however, all the good that you can do in return for evil will work no change in the evil-doer; he goes on in his evil way, is more insistent, and more intolerant. Nevertheless, the course of the Lord's people cannot vary; they

are authorized to do only good, and to keep on doing good whether it shall melt the opposition or not. In this, we are but following the divine example. God causes the rain to fall upon the crops of the good and of the evil; he causes the sunshine to come indiscriminately, upon the just and the unjust. "His tender mercies are over all his works." And even by and by, when his vengeance shall be exercised, it will still be in love and kindness; (1) that those who will may be benefited by the discipline of trouble, and (2) that those who will not benefit may be destroyed from among the people; to the end that their baneful influence may be removed forever. Let us all more and more seek to live the new life.