

A Word on Christian Intercourse.

1 Corinthians 10: 31.

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It is most needful, when about to offer a word of admonition, to set forth the proper ground on which such a word can be received. The New Testament abounds in admonition, warning, and exhortation; but it clearly lays down the truth as to the position in which the believer is set, before ever he is called to listen to such things; and unless we understand and practically enter into that position, an admonition or a precept may lead to a spirit of legalism or bondage.

Now, as to the position of the believer, as set forth in the Scriptures of the New Testament, it is one of the *most* complete — justification and acceptance. "Justified from *all* things," "*complete* in Him who is the head of all principality and power," "accepted in the Beloved."

These are some of the expressions used by the Holy Spirit to set forth the believer's position before God — a position founded on the accomplished work of Christ, with which, it is needless to say he has nothing whatever to do. God's grace has assigned it to him; the blood of Christ has fitted him to occupy it; and the operation of the Spirit has led him into the understanding and enjoyment of it. His being in it, therefore, is the fruit of the combined action of THE DIVINE THREE IN ONE; nor can aught in him ever interfere with that combined action. The believer's justification, completeness, and acceptance, are as independent of himself and everything in him as is the position of the sun in the heavens. There it is; but who set it there? God. There and thus the believer is; but who set him there? God. Hence one is as independent of him as the other, for both alike are founded on what God is.

It is well to see this — well to have a perfectly unclouded view of what we are, and where we are — well to be led to pause in view of the actings of Divine grace on our behalf — well to allow God to do with us as He will, to make us what He will, and set us where He will; assured, as we may well be, that all is to His infinite glory and praise. We may think it all too good to be true: and too good it would assuredly be, were its truth in any wise dependent on us; but not when its truth depends entirely on God. It might be too good for us to get; but not too good for God to give. This makes all the difference. When God gives, He gives like himself. The blessedness of the gift must depend upon the giver. He GIVES perfect justification — He GIVES complete acceptance. To whom? To *sinners*. On what ground? On the ground of Christ's accomplished sacrifice. For what purpose? That they might be to the praise of His glory (John 17: 2; Acts 13: 39; Rom. 5 *passim*; 6: 23; Eph. 1: 6; Col. 2: 10; Eph. 1: 12).

Hence, therefore, it is clear that no warning, admonition, precept, or exhortation can, in the most remote manner, involve, affect, or interfere with, the believer's position and relationship. So far from this, the very fact of our being addressed in such a way proves, in the clearest manner, God's gracious recognition of our relationship. If God gives me a command, the fact of His doing so proves that He recognizes in me a principle of life and power, whereby I can both hear and obey. He would not call upon one "dead in trespasses and sins" to do anything His command to such a one is to receive, as a free gift, eternal life in His Son Jesus Christ. But when one has gotten this life, is born again, has entered into an eternal relationship, based upon redemption, then, and not until then, is he addressed in the language of warning and exhortation; and on his due observance of such language depends much of his present blessing, comfort, and usefulness.

We are prone to confound two things, which differ very materially, namely, our eternal

relationship to God as His children, and our present responsibility to Christ as His servants and witnesses. The former is the result of the action of the Divine will and power; as we read in James, "Of His own will begat He us by the word of truth, that we might be a kind of first-fruits of His creatures." The latter, on the contrary, is a thing devolving upon us daily, and calling for much holy diligence in the prayerful study of the word, and waiting upon God. Many of us fail in answering our responsibility to Christ, in manifesting Him in our ways, and in our practical testimony for Him; but this, blessed be God, does not touch our eternal relationship with Him, though it may and does most seriously interfere with our perception and enjoyment as children of God; yea, to talk of one without the other, is to be "deceived by vain words."

The train of thought leads us naturally to the immediate subject of this little paper, namely, Christian Intercourse — a subject of much more importance than might, at first sight, appear. By Christian Intercourse, I do not mean that intercourse which we have on the benches of a meeting room, or when gathered, on solemn occasions, for worship or edification. The intercourse to which I allude is of a much more commonplace and familiar character; and for that very reason, it needs much more solemn watchfulness, lest in it the enemy should betray us into anything unbecoming the solemnity, purity, and elevation, which ought to mark the character and path of those who profess to be members of Christ's holy body, and temples of His Holy Spirit.

It is frequently most painful, and deeply humbling, to observe the character of intercourse which prevails now-a-days, amongst those whose professed principles would lead us to look for very different practical results. While marking the intercourse, and hearkening to the conversation which frequently obtains amongst professing Christians of the present day, one feels disposed to ask, Is it possible that these people really believe what they profess? Do they believe that they are "dead and risen with Christ" — that their calling is a heavenly one — that they are part of Christ's body — that they are crucified with Christ — that they are not in the flesh, but in the spirit — that they are pilgrims and strangers — that they are waiting for God's Son from heaven? It may be, that all these weighty principles are items in the creed to which they have given a nominal assent: but it is morally impossible that their hearts can be affected by them. How could a heart, really under the power of such stupendous truths, take pleasure, or even take part, in vain, frivolous, empty talk — talk about people and their circumstances, with whom, and with which, they have nothing whatever to do — talk about every passing trifle of the day? Could a heart full of Christ be thus occupied? It is as impossible as that noon could intermingle with midnight. Yet professing Christians, when they meet in the drawing-room, at the dinner-table, and at their tea-parties, are, alas! too often found thus occupied.

Nor is it only in our intercourse with our fellow Christians that we forget ourselves, or rather forget the Lord; but also in our intercourse with the world. How often, when we meet with unconverted people, do we slip into the current of their thoughts, and find a theme in common with them! Sometimes this is mourned over, sometimes it is defended, and the defence is founded upon an erroneous view of the apostle's expression, "I am made all things to all." This surely, does not mean that he entered into the folly and nonsense of worldly men. By no means. This would be to assert entirely too much. What then does the expression mean? It means, that *Paul denied, himself amongst all classes of men, in order that he might "by all means save some."* His object was to bring sinners to Christ, and not to please himself by entering into their vain and foolish habits of conversation.

Let us look at the Master Himself, our great Exemplar, and inquire how did He carry Himself toward the men of this world? Did He ever find an object in common with them? Never. He was always feeding upon and filled with one object, and of that object He spoke. He ever sought to lead the thoughts of men to God. This, my beloved reader, should be our object too. Whenever, or wherever we

meet men, we should lead them to think of Christ; and if we do not find an open door for that, we should not certainly suffer ourselves to be carried into the current of their thoughts. If we have business to transact with men, we must transact it; but we should not have any fellowship with them in their habits of thought or conversation, because our Master never had; and if we diverge from His path as to this, we shall soon sink into a low and unsanctified tone of spirit. We shall be as "salt that has lost its saltness," and thus be "good for nothing."

I cannot doubt but that much of that lack of deep, settled, habitual peace, of which so many complain, is very justly traceable to the light and trifling habits of conversation in which they indulge; to their reading of newspapers and other light works. Such things must grieve the Holy Spirit; and if the Holy Spirit is grieved, Christ cannot be enjoyed; for it is the Spirit alone who, by the written word, ministers Christ to the soul.

I do not mean to deny that very many feel this lack of peace who do not engage in such things. By no means; but I say that these things must necessarily be productive of much serious injury to our spiritual health, and must superinduce a sickly condition of soul, which is most dishonouring to Christ.

It may be, that many who have long been accustomed to high teaching, will turn away from such plain, practical principles as these; but we must expect this. It will be pronounced legalism; and the writer may be accused of seeking to bring people into a sort of bondage, and of casting them upon themselves. I can only say, God forbid. I trust the opening statements of this paper will furnish a very decisive answer to such an accusation. If it be legalism to direct attention to the matter of conversation, then is it the legalism of the Epistle to the Ephesians; for there we find that "foolish talking and jesting" are amongst the things which are not to be "once named among us, as becometh saints?"* Again, we read, "Let your conversation be always with grace, seasoned with salt." These are plain statements of Scripture — statements, moreover, found in immediate connection with some of the most elevated doctrines of inspiration; and it will be found that where those plain statements are not allowed their full weight on the conscience, the higher truths are not enjoyed. I can neither enjoy nor walk worthy of my "high vocation," if I am indulging in "foolish talking and jesting."

{*The word, which is rendered "jesting," takes in what is commonly called "wit," "humour," "punning," "*repartee*," and such like. It is well to remember this. The word "jesting" would let a great deal pass which should come under the edge of the original word, which is a compound of two Greek words, signifying "to turn well."}

I quite admit the need of carefully avoiding all affected sanctimoniousness, or fleshly restraint. The sanctimoniousness of nature is fully as bad as its levity, if not worse. But why exhibit either the one or the other? The gospel gives us something far better. Instead of affected sanctimoniousness, the gospel gives us real sanctity; and instead of levity, it gives us holy cheerfulness. There is no need to *affect* anything, for if I am feeding upon Christ, all is reality, without any effort. The moment there is effort, it is all perfect weakness. If I say I must talk about Christ, it becomes terrible bondage, and I exhibit my own weakness and folly; but if my soul is in communion, all is natural and easy: for "out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks." It is said of a certain little insect, that it always exhibits the colour of the leaf on which it feeds. So is it exactly with the Christian. It is very easy to tell what he is feeding upon.

But it may be said by some, that "we cannot be always talking about Christ." I reply, that just in proportion as we are led by an ungrieved Spirit, will all our thoughts and words be occupied about Christ. We, if we are children of God, will be occupied with Him throughout eternity; and why not now? We are as really separated from the world *now*, as we shall be *then*; but we do not walk in the

Spirit.

It is quite true, that in entering into the matter of a Christian's habit of conversation, one is taking low ground; but, then, it is needful ground. It would be much happier to keep on the high ground; but, alas! we fail in this; and it is a mercy that Scripture and the Spirit of God meet us in our failure. Scripture tells us that we are "seated in heavenly places in Christ;" and it tells us also not "to steal." It may be said that it is low ground to talk to heavenly men about stealing; yet it is Scripture ground, and that is enough for us. The Spirit of God knew that it was not sufficient to tell us that we are seated in *heaven*; He also tells us how to conduct ourselves *on earth*; and our experience of the former will be evidenced by our exhibition of the latter. The walk *here* proves how I enter into my place *there*.

Hence, I may find in the Christian's walk a very legitimate ground on which to deal with him about the actual condition of his soul before God. If his walk is low, carnal, and worldly, it must be evident that he is not realizing his high and holy position as a member of Christ's body and a temple of God.

Wherefore, to all who are prone to indulge in habits of light and trifling conversation, I would affectionately but solemnly say, look well to the general state of your spiritual health. Bad symptoms show themselves — certain evidences of a disease working within — a disease, it may be, more or less affecting the very springs of vitality. Beware how you allow this disease to make progress. Betake yourself at once to the Physician, and partake of His precious balm. Your whole spiritual constitution may be deranged, and nothing can restore its tone, save the healing virtues of what He has to give you.

A fresh view of the excellency, preciousness, and beauty of Christ is the only thing to lift the soul up out of a low condition. All our barrenness and poverty arises from our having let slip Christ. It is not that He has let us slip. No; blessed be His name, this cannot be. But, practically, we have let Him slip, and, as a consequence, our tone has become so low, that it is at times difficult to recognize anything of the Christian in us but the mere name. We have stopped short in our practical career. We have not entered, as we should, into the meaning of Christ's "cup and baptism;" we have failed in seeking fellowship with Him in His sufferings, death, and resurrection. We have sought the result of all these, as wrought out in Him; but we have not entered experimentally into them, and hence our melancholy decline, from which nothing can recover us but getting more into the fulness of Christ.