



What familiarity must not breed

It is a very great honour to meet a Christian in this life. Many kings and honourable men have lived, flourished and died without ever having seen one of God's dear children in this world. We are highly favoured therefore if we know even one or two of those who walk with God; and more blessed still if we are able regularly and habitually to enjoy the company of a group of men and women who bear upon their brow the sacred name of Christ.

We may easily become so familiar with Christian company that we forget how essentially precious it is. But a moment's thought should be enough to remind us that to know a true Christian is a very great privilege. There are many reasons why this is so. A Christian is a holy person in an unholy world. He is a light in the prevailing darkness, a witness for heaven and for truth in an earthly society largely based on lies. He is an object of God's eternal love. He is the purchased possession of a dying Saviour's agony. He is a temple of the Holy Spirit and an heir of the coming kingdom. A Christian is the subject of constant angelic care and protection. He has access at any time to the ear of God. He will one day shine with a glory brighter than any earthly eye could now bear to see. This, in few words, is what we all too casually call 'a Christian'.

It is our misery and our tragedy on earth to live very largely oblivious to the privilege which God has so richly given us of having fellowship with his people here and now. The root of this misery and tragedy is in the sin of our hearts. For it is only because we are evil and sinful that familiarity with great blessings breeds contempt. If we remembered how great is our favour to be at any time in the presence of saintly persons, we should all doubtless esteem them more highly in love and consequently come away from their company with greater pleasure and profit.

Our fault as believers is to be too like the world around us in our attitudes to one another. There should be more spiritual excitement in us when we meet a Christian, especially a Christian of note. It was doubtless wrong of Cornelius to fall down at the feet of Peter and to worship him (Acts 10:25) but the respect and sense of honour he felt was not itself a vice. It was virtue taken too far. We are to '*render ... to all their dues: ... fear to whom fear; honour to whom honour*' (Romans 13:7). In such a state of mind the Galatian church at first received Paul when they were ready to pluck out their own eyes and make a present of them to him (Galatians 4:15). Indeed, their reception of him was then so marked by affection for his person and reverence for his apostolic authority that they '*received him as an angel of God, even as Christ Jesus*' (Galatians 4:14). This excitement and this devotion were right things. It was their shame not to have kept up their first love for Paul in this way. But it is clear that an influence later came among them which bred familiarity with an apostle's authority and along with familiarity, contempt for it.

There are several touching scenes in Scripture which ought to make us realise the privilege we have whenever we meet one of God's saints. One such scene is where Joseph makes himself known to his brethren in Egypt. Does anyone object that the circumstances were very unusual and special? They were not more wonderful than the circumstances we all ought to recognise as present at the meeting of Christians today. If Joseph and his brethren were all sons of one father, so (in a better sense) are all believers. Was it wonderful that one of them should be honoured to feed and support all the rest? So it is similarly whenever a congregation greets its own beloved minister and pastor whose calling and care it is to feed their souls in a world of spiritual famine. Is it astonishing that Joseph and his brothers should be united in a foreign land? So it is now with the people of God. They are 'strangers and pilgrims' in this world and yet they are given to one another for their mutual joy and strengthening. If we only realised it more we should experience in all our fellowships a good deal more of that idyllic and beautiful affection which makes the meeting of Joseph and his brothers an inspiring and very moving story to read.

Another biblical scene depicting the joy of meeting is that of David with Jonathan. Dull is the soul that can read dry-eyed the words which express their spiritual affection and holy friendship:

'And as soon as the lad was gone, David arose out of a place toward the south, and fell on his face to the ground, and bowed himself three times: and they kissed one another, and wept one with another, until David exceeded.'

(1 Samuel 20:41)

It was not congeniality of nature or compatibility of temperament which drew such expressions of delight from these two men. It was the bond of divine grace in their hearts, together with a mutual confidence because one loved the other in the Holy Spirit *'as his own soul'* (1 Samuel 18:3). To this heavenly and gracious affection David refers when he laments for Jonathan's death in these words: *'Thy love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women'* (2 Samuel 1:26). The spiritual love which exists between the people of God is stronger and more wonderful than all merely natural affection between those of the opposite sex.

The delight which believers may have in company together is also to be measured by their sorrow at having to part for a time with one another in this life. This bitter-sweet experience is witnessed on those frequent occasions when they must give one another up till they meet on the other shore of death and of eternity. It was in such a spirit that the younger prophet, on seeing Elijah about to ascend to his heavenly rest, cried out: *'My father, my father, the chariot of Israel and the horsemen thereof'* (2 Kings 2:12). It was in this same spirit that the Ephesian elders took their leave in this world of the beloved Apostle Paul: *'And when he had thus spoken, he kneeled down, and prayed with them all. And they all wept sore, and fell on Paul's neck, and kissed him, sorrowing most of all for the words which he spake, that they should see his face no more'* (Acts 20:36-38).

The most poignant parting of all our human history partakes of this same essential element. When our blessed Lord Jesus was about to go away, he soothed the hearts of the forlorn disciples with words of sublime hope and consolation:

'Let not your hearts be troubled: ye believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house are many mansions ... I go to prepare a place for you ... I will not leave you comfortless: I will come to you ... Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you ... Let not your heart be troubled ... my Father is greater than I ... Ye are my friends ... But now I go my way to him that sent me ... because I have said these things unto you, sorrow hath filled your heart ... A little while, and ye shall not see me: and again, a little while, and ye shall see me, because I go to the Father ... be of good cheer; I have overcome the world.'

(John 14:1-2, 18, 27, 28; 16:5-6, 16, 33)

Every word of Jesus here breathes the atmosphere of love and heavenly compassion. Well he knows the hearts of his people when they face the prospect of losing him. In partial measure it is the same when they lose one another. Christians belong together. In the end they will be together forever. The sorrow of parting, even if it is but a temporary parting, goes all the way down to the bottom of a Christian's heart. The Bible does not pretend it to be otherwise and in this fact of our experience we learn the meaning of that mysterious theology which states that, as believers, we are *'members one of another'* (Ephesians 4:25).

O, if only we might as believers have the grace to value one another's presence with us now more than we commonly do! Would it not go far to mending our strained relationships? Would it not do much towards promoting that charity *'which shall cover the multitude of sins'*? (1 Peter 4:8). Would it not sweeten our times of fellowship with the aura of heaven to remember things which we ought never to have forgotten in the first place: that we are only to have one another for a very brief time here below; that the faults we see in one another are not to be compared with the faults God saw in us and which brought Christ to the Cross; that we are very soon to be together eternally in the presence of God and that we are commanded by our Lord himself to observe a new commandment of mutual love which consciously copies his own love to us (John 13:34)?

The things which alienate true Christians have too much to do with the corruption of our nature as fallen sinners. There is a 'pope' in every man's heart. If we are to have *'peace one with another'*

(Mark 9:50) it can only be by crucifying our love of pre-eminence, and by strangling that spirit within every sinful heart which instinctively prefers itself to everyone else.

The way of love is the way of self-demotion. Love begins where self-love ends. The manner of sin's operation is to begin by looking up to others, then looking at them on a level and shortly after in looking down on them. It is the sinner's instinct. It is found in every school classroom at the beginning of a new year under a new teacher. It is found in every office and on every factory floor. It too often finds its way into the church and the fellowship. Only the man who knows this of himself can begin to correct it in himself. It is a laborious task and one which will call for huge exertions of the soul. But the rewards are those of a truly sanctified life: *'Blessed are the peace-makers'* (Matthew 5:9). It is a real evidence of our progress when we have learnt not to be contemptuous of those with whom we are familiar.

In glory there will be none of this hateful excess of self-love in us. And glory is begun in the fellowship of God's people when they have learnt to practise the Apostle's rules: *'Let each esteem other better than themselves'* (Philippians 2:3) and, *'In honour preferring one another'* (Romans 12:10). That it is possible to go very far in the attainment of such selflessness is evident from the words of the Apostle himself, who could say more than most men can say of their genuine feelings to others: *'We are glad when we are weak, and ye are strong'* (2 Corinthians 13:9).

Why did God allow such strength of evil to remain in us as regenerate men, except to give us something to hate in ourselves and to fight against? And why do we as regenerate men require to fight so long and so hard against our indwelling corruption with such small success, except to be taught that sin is ineradicable apart from the last great divine act of final glorification? The lesson for us while still here below is to distrust our heart as long as we live and to watch over its tortuous workings with unsleeping vigilance. If ever we perceive our heart becoming contemptuous of a brother for whom Christ died, we must remind ourselves that we sin in doing so against Christ himself. Our judgments of fellow-believers need to be screwed up to a much higher notch. Our levels of affection and of service also need to be broadened and deepened by the thought that Christ is in his people and takes special notice of the way we treat them on earth. What else can his words mean which we quote so often: *'Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me'* (Matthew 25:40)?

The formula then for a wholesome church or Christian fellowship is the exact reverse of the world's attitude. It should be familiarity without contempt. Let us forget the skeleton in every cupboard and the story behind every human face. Our privilege is to meet with those who are to be the jewels in the Redeemer's crown. Whenever we meet together, let there be in every heart a heavenly, holy thankfulness that we are among them. David could say that they are *'the excellent, in whom is all my delight'* (Psalm 16.3).

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