

Ephesians - Commentaries by Thomas Blackburn Baines

The Christian Home, Christian Home, The (5:22-33)

Eph. 5:22; 6:9

The next class of household relationships differs from the others in being one instituted by social rather than natural causes. The servants here named were bondsmen. Whether slavery is right or wrong, humane or cruel, is not the point here. Christianity takes men in the social position in which it finds them, and shows how they may live Christ in that place. It is not occupied in remodeling society, but in teaching the believer to exhibit Christ. He was to be subject to the powers that be; and as these authorized slavery, he was to obey the laws in this as in other matters, seeking freedom lawfully if he could, but if not, to be content with his lot. The service rendered under present social conditions differs in its legal basis, but this does not alter the obligations on either side named by the Apostle. No, if there is any difference, the obligation is even stronger; for service rendered for wages should surely be given as cheerfully and performed as thoroughly as service exacted by bondage.

"Servants," therefore, are exhorted to "be obedient to them that are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in singleness of your heart, as unto Christ; not with eyeservice, as menpleasers, but as the servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart; with good will doing service, as to the Lord, and not to men." vv. 5-7. Here again the obligation is taken out of the range of the old creation and connected with Christ in glory. Like wives and children, the servants are exhorted to render their obedience "as unto Christ." This at once transfers their duties to a higher region than either the legal compulsion of the old system or the legal contract of the present. Even a slave's duties were at once ennobled and sweetened if he could say, I am doing this not for reward or to escape punishment, but to please Christ. It was not to be a question of whether the task imposed was reasonable or unreasonable, light or arduous. Wrong endured, or severe labor performed for Christ's sake, might be cheerfully borne.

How beautifully our Lord Himself furnishes the example of this. He "took upon Him the form of a servant." Though entitled to be free, He submits to tribute lest He should offend them. So the believing servant under the cruelest and most tyrannical treatment, was to show out the life of Christ in him. "For this is thankworthy, if a man for conscience toward God endure grief, suffering wrongfully.... For even hereunto were ye called: because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow His steps." 1 Pet. 2:19-21. And as the cheerful and diligent obedience of the servant was the means of showing forth Christ, so any failure in the respect or subjection here enjoined would bring reproach on His name. Hence the Apostle in writing to Timothy said, "Let as many servants as are under the yoke count their own masters worthy of all honor, that the name of God and His doctrine be not blasphemed." 1 Tim. 6:1.

Nowhere is the honor of Christ spoken of as bound up with the conduct of the believer so remarkably as in the case of the servant. The very hardships of his lot, the very injustice and cruelty with which he was liable to be treated, only rendered the power of the life of Christ in him more conspicuous. And before none other is the reward of his conduct so distinctly set: "Knowing that whatsoever good thing any man doeth, the same shall he receive of the Lord, whether he be bond or free." v. 8. How cheering to the suffering bondsman, to look beyond the drudgery and unrequited labors of his earthly lot, and to know that the faithful toil endured with good will for the Lord's sake here, is not and never will be, forgotten, but will all "be found unto praise and honor and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ" (1 Pet. 1:7).

And if Christ as the Lord of the inheritance holds out the hope of reward to the servant, so he utters words of warning to the master: "And, ye masters, do the same things unto them, forbearing threatening: knowing that your Master also is in heaven; neither is there respect of persons with Him." v. 9. "The same things" probably mean what is called in the Colossians, "that which is just and equal." The principle here is the counterpart of that in the last verse. Even a Christian master might forget that social distinctions though recognized and sanctioned on earth, have no existence in Christ's judgment. Master and servant will all answer to Him. To the one whose low position might cause discouragement He holds out, therefore, the prospect of reward for faithful service; to the one whose high position might lead to oppression, He holds out the judgment that will follow an abuse of power. Though the law might give the injured servant no redress, the master was reminded of another tribunal before which he must stand, and in which his conduct to his servant would be judged, not according to man's laws, but according to the estimate of Him that is holy, Him that is true. Thus Christ is made the standard of everything in the Christian's walk. Whether as wife or husband, as child or parent, as bondsman or master, the rule is that having Christ's life, the walk of Christ is to be shown forth in the believer's ways. "He that saith he abideth in Him ought himself also so to walk, even as He walked."

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The family is especially dealt with in the epistles which treat of the Church. Those epistles which take up Church order and rule take up also the order and rule of the family; and those epistles which show the Church as the body of Christ, show also how this relationship and the principles it involves affect the family life. Family relationships were instituted by God in Eden, and confirmed after the fall. Christianity does not change their outward character, but infuses into them new and divine principles. The husband is the responsible head of the house, and

the mutual obligation subsisting between him and his wife, his children, and his servants, is the subject of the portion now before us. The question is not one of rights on either side, but rather of the way in which each, as having the life of Christ, should exhibit this in his conduct toward the other.

"Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church: and He is the savior of the body. Therefore as the church is subject unto Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in everything." vv. 22-24. Part of the curse pronounced on the woman at the fall was, "Thy desire shall be [subject] to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee" (Gen. 3:16). Christianity confirms this order, but so remodels it that all trace of the curse disappears. The subjection of the believer to the Lord, or of the Church to Christ, is no curse or bondage, and these are now the models of wifely subjection; for she is to be subject to her own husband, "as unto the Lord," and as "the church is subject unto Christ." How beautiful to see a human relationship, and one too which derives a part of its character from the fall, thus transformed into a type of the mystery in which God displays His "manifold wisdom" unto "the principalities and powers in heavenly places."

The subject is expanded in dealing with the other side. "Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave Himself for it; that He might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, that He might present it to Himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish." vv. 25-27. Here, though natural affection is owned, a far higher order of love is brought in, so that the earthly relationship is re-cast, as it were, in a heavenly mold. The past, present, and future love of Christ to the Church are all made to bear on the duty of the husband to his wife. And how beautiful the unfolding of this love is! Christ loved the Church—not only saints, but the Church—and gave Himself for it. It was the "pearl of great price" for which He sold all that He had. Now He watches over it, cleansing it from defilement by the application of His Word. Soon He will present it to Himself in His own beauty, "prepared as a bride adorned for her husband," the object of His own eternal delight.

And here the order of creation is brought in and made to blend, as it were, with that love of Christ of which it furnishes so beautiful a type. "So ought men to love their wives as their own bodies. He that loveth his wife loveth himself. For no man ever yet hated his own flesh; but nourisheth and cherisheth it, even as the Lord the church: for we are members of His body, of His flesh, and of His bones. For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall be joined unto his wife, and they two shall be one flesh." vv. 28-31.

The peculiar mode of Eve's creation out of Adam, both gives marriage a special sanctity, so that the wife is to be cherished as a part of the husband's own being, and furnishes an exquisite type of Christ's relationship with the Church. As Adam was not complete without Eve, so Christ, though Head over all, is not complete without the Church, "the fullness of Him that filleth all in all." As Adam fell into a deep sleep, so Christ went into death. As Eve was formed out of Adam, so the Church is quickened with Christ and has His own life. As Adam acknowledged Eve to be bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh, so does Christ acknowledge the Church. As Adam was bound to care for and cleave to the woman thus formed out of himself, so Christ delights in nourishing and cherishing the Church which is His own body. How wonderfully all that belongs to this divinely instituted relationship is raised by being thus linked up with the tender, watchful love of Christ over the Church!

This, of course, is the grand subject, and therefore the Apostle writes, "This is a great mystery: but I speak concerning Christ and the church." Still the relationship of husband and wife is also in his view; so he adds, "Nevertheless, let every one of you in particular so love his wife even as himself; and the wife see that she reverence her husband." vv. 32, 33. Though the believer is not promised his portion in this life, yet he is told that "godliness is profitable unto all things, having promise of the life that now is, and of that which is to come" (1 Tim. 4:8). We have an illustration here. Who cannot see the happiness that would reign in the house where the relationship of husband and wife was formed on the godly model here furnished!

The subjection of children to their parents is part of God's order as seen in nature; and under the law a special blessing was attached to the observance of the commandment in which this duty was enjoined. Christianity takes up the obligation, but transplants it from natural to divine ground. "Children, obey your parents in the Lord: for this is right. Honor thy father and mother; which is the first commandment with promise; that it may be well with thee, and thou mayest live long on the earth." Chap. 6:1-3. Thus the obligation of children, as of wives is connected with "the Lord." It is not merely the dictate of nature, though perfectly right, but the acknowledgment of the Lord's claims as represented in the parents. The blessed Lord Himself, who "learned obedience," was the beautiful example of this. Of Him in His lifetime it is recorded that He went with His parents "to Nazareth, and was subject unto them." The law is not here introduced as showing that believers are under it, but as proving the special value which God attached to this duty, so as even to depart from the ordinary character of law by coupling it with a promise which makes known the connection between this duty and earthly blessing.

But the duty is not one-sided. The Apostle adds, "And, ye fathers, provoke not your children to wrath: but bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord." v. 4. Both parents are to be obeyed, but this admonition is addressed only to the fathers. This may be partly because fathers are more likely to err in the provoking of their children to wrath than mothers; but the principal reason is that the father, as the head of the house, is responsible to God for the bringing up of the children, and he is treated on the ground of this responsibility. This principle, as seen in Eli's case, runs throughout Scripture. It is all the more solemn because under Christianity the children are already holy, as belonging to the house of God; and the obligation is therefore the greater to "bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord."

The Israelites were holy by birth—not personally, but as belonging to a nation set apart to God—and therefore the fathers were to instruct the children in the law, their then link with God. So Christian parents are to instruct their children as to what becomes the holy character which attaches to them as members of a Christian family.

Living Christ in the World, Living Christ in the World (4:17-29)

Another result is seen in the next admonition, "Be ye angry, and sin not: let not the sun go down upon your wrath: neither give place to the devil." vv. 26,27. Our Lord was angry with certain persons, "being grieved for the hardness of their hearts" (Mark 3:5). There is therefore an anger which is of God, but the abiding wrath which springs from vindictive feeling is not of God. Even the anger kindled by godly indignation against evil may too readily degenerate into fleshly passion. We must beware therefore that in anger we "sin not," and guard against vindictive feeling by watching that the sun goes not down on our wrath. Otherwise the tempter may come in, and we are not to "give place to the devil."

The next exhortation is a little startling from its very obviousness; "Let him that stole steal no more: but rather let him labor, working with his hands the thing which is good, that he may have to give to him that needeth." v. 28. We must remember that the early assemblies were formed of persons just brought out of heathenism with all its abominations, and consisted in part of slaves, an oppressed and degraded class, among whom theft was practiced without scruple or shame. The exhortation too goes beyond open theft, and in principle condemns all taking of unfair advantage, such as even the fuller morality of our own day often but feebly condemns. But the interest of the exhortation lies rather in the motive than in the course of conduct enjoined. If believers had been under the law, a simple appeal to the eighth commandment of the decalogue would have been enough. But we are not under the law, but under grace. What is the obligation then imposed by this position? Not only to do "the righteousness of the law," but a great deal more. Did Christ stop with doing the righteousness of the law? On the contrary, He went far beyond it. The law requires that we should love our neighbor as ourselves, but it does not require us to lay down our lives for our neighbor. This, however, was what Christ did; and if the life of Christ is in us, "we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren" (1 John 3:16). So extreme a sacrifice may indeed be rarely demanded, but the spirit of it may always be shown. Christ not only did not injure man, but "though He was rich, yet for our sakes He became poor, that we through His poverty might be rich." 2 Cor. 8:9. His whole life was one of self-sacrificing love. How beautifully this reappears in Paul—"I will very gladly spend and be spent for you" (2 Cor. 12:15). The Christian should walk in the same path, as he has the same life, not only refraining from stealing or taking unfair advantage, but working to have the means of ministering "to him that needeth."

Thus the Holy Spirit, by one of the simplest exhortations in Scripture,—an exhortation which from its commonplace character might to our blind reasoning seem hardly worthy of a place in such an epistle—brings out one of the most striking differences between law and grace. Law simply prohibits evil; grace delights in doing good. Law is what God demands from man; grace is what God is in Himself. How sad then to see believers who have been brought into liberty and associated with Christ, falling back into the lower class of motives and principles, and putting themselves again in bondage under a system to which they are declared to be dead by the body of Christ. The whole "righteousness of the law" shone out in the ways of Christ, and will shine out in the ways of one who is abiding in Christ. But how infinitely beyond the grace revealed in every action of that perfect life! And this is what will appear, of course in a vastly inferior degree, but still is a real fruit of abiding in Him and walking in the power of the new life in which we are quickened together with Him.

The same thing may be observed in the next exhortation. "Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth, but that which is good to the use of edifying, that it may minister grace unto the hearers." v. 29. A special class of corrupt communications, such as might be expected from Gentiles who wrought "all uncleanness with greediness," is alluded to in the next chapter; but here the exhortation has a wider scope. "How can ye, being evil, speak good things?" asks our Lord of the Jews (Matt. 12:34). A corrupt tree can only bring forth corrupt fruit. The words as well as the works will bear the character of the heart from which they proceed. But it is not enough that the believer merely abstains from corrupt communications, such as naturally belong to "the old man, which is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts." He has put on the new man, of which Christ is the perfect representative. Did Christ merely refrain from evil in His conversation? No; His words, like His life, ministered "grace unto the hearers." And so will the words of one who is in communion with Christ. Just so far as we walk after "the new man" will our words resemble the words of Him of whom it is written, "Grace is poured into Thy lips: therefore God hath blessed Thee forever" (Psalm 45:2).

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The believer, "through the law," as shown by the Apostle Paul, is "dead to the law," that he may "live unto God." He can say, like Paul, "I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me." This is his standing before God, and the result upon his outward conduct should be, as with the Apostle, "The life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave Himself for me." (Gal. 2:19, 20.) He has no longer the law, but Christ for his standard. To live Christ; that is, to reproduce as it were the life of Christ in our own, is true Christian walk. Christ always walked in the Spirit, and if we are walking in the Spirit we "shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh," but shall bring forth those fruits of the Spirit—that "love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance," which adorn in such rich clusters the life of the blessed Lord. (Gal. 5:20-23.) It is impossible to gather grapes from the thorns of the old nature. Christ is the true vine, the one stock from which fruit for God can be brought forth. Only as we are branches abiding in Him can we bear fruit like His own; only thus is it possible for us "so to walk, even as He walked." (John 15:5 John 2:6.)

These truths are beautifully brought out in the passage now before us. The Apostle having shown how a believer can walk worthy of the vocation wherewith he is called in the Church, next goes on to indicate how he should carry out the same principle in his conduct toward his fellow men, whether believers or unbelievers. He does not put Gentile converts under law; but while not bringing them onto Jewish ground, he carefully removes them from Gentile. "This I say therefore, and testify in the Lord, that ye henceforth walk not as other Gentiles walk, in the vanity of their mind, having the understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God through the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness [or hardness] of their heart: who being past feeling have given themselves over unto lasciviousness, to work all uncleanness with greediness." v. 17-19.

Such is man, as fallen and left to the guidance of natural conscience and reason. Truly he is "without excuse," for the ignorance is not a guiltless one. "When they knew God, they glorified Him not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their

foolish heart was darkened." It was because "they did not like to retain God in their knowledge" that He "gave them over to a reprobate mind," or a mind void of judgment (Rom. 1:21, 28). So in the passage we are considering. It is "because of the hardness of their heart" that their understanding is darkened, and in their ignorance they are alienated from the life of God. Thus they walk "in the vanity of their mind," the vain, sinful desires and feelings of the natural heart being their only guide. Nor is this all. Corrupt appetites, followed without restraint, soon deaden the conscience and poison the affections so that all right natural feeling is lost. This is the lamentable condition of the Gentile world. They are "past feeling," the restraints of conscience and even decency are removed and, giving themselves over to depraved appetites they "work all uncleanness with greediness." Thus it was with the world before the flood, when the whole earth was filled with "corruption and violence." Thus it was with the cities of the plain till God rained upon them fire and brimstone from heaven. Thus it ever has been when man has been left to Himself to follow the leading of his own evil heart.

But the Ephesians had, through grace, been brought out of this state of things. They had another guide, as widely removed from mere natural conscience on the one side as from law on the other. "But ye," says the Apostle, "have not so learned Christ; if so be that ye have heard Him, and have been taught by Him, as the truth is in Jesus: that ye put off concerning the former conversation the old man, which is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts; and be renewed in the spirit of your mind; and that ye put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness [holiness of truth]." vv. 20-24. These Ephesians had learned not law but Christ. They had by faith heard Him and been taught by—or rather in—Him, according to the truth of which His own life as man had been the perfect and divine manifestation. The truth as it is in Jesus does not mean the doctrinal truth of salvation, but the perfect, holy walk of truth as shown in His Person; for when Jesus is spoken of in this way, it refers to His life and walk here in the world.

The Ephesians had "learned Christ" in the only way in which He can be learned. The natural man may learn of Christ; the spiritual man alone can learn Him. For "The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned." 1 Cor. 2:14. There must be the hearing ear before Christ's words can be understood. As Jesus said to the Pharisees, "Why do ye not understand My speech? even because ye cannot hear My word." John 8:43. The Ephesians had heard Christ, and been instructed in Him. The words that He spoke, "They are spirit and they are life," and they had produced their quickening power on the hearts of these saints. Hence they knew the truth as it showed itself in the spotless, holy life of Jesus.

This was to be practically manifested in their own lives. They belonged no more to the flesh, and therefore their walk was not to be according to the old model—"the old man, which is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts." They had done with the old creation as to their standing before God, and were seen in a new creation as quickened together with Christ. This then was to be their new model. Being "renewed" in the spirit of their mind, they were to walk after a new fashion, not according to the law of the old nature, but as having "put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness [holiness of truth]." The new man is man in the new creation—the creation which has its head in Christ, the creation which draws its character from Christ. To walk as having put on the new man is therefore to walk as Christ walked; for this new man is created according to God's nature in righteousness and holiness suited to His own truth.

This standard once acknowledged, practical results are to follow; and it is interesting to see how even the most commonplace acts are submitted to this new test. Thus the Apostle says, "Wherefore putting away lying, speak every man truth with his neighbor: for we are members one of another." v. 25. Moral philosophers have discussed the question why men should not lie, and wide differences have existed among them on the subject. But moral philosophy never assigned as a reason anything like what is given here. The life of Christ is to be our rule, not worked out through imitation, but worked out by the fact that we are quickened together with Him, and created anew on His model. This settles the whole question. Who can imagine falsehood from the lips of Him whose words were the words of God, and whose truth was the truth of God? Just as little could falsehood be found in the lips of one who walked in His spirit, showed forth His life.

There is, indeed, another reason given, also characteristic of this epistle, "for we are members one of another." How practical the "one body" is. No man would lie to himself; no man could imagine the hand trying to deceive the foot, or the ears trying to deceive the eyes. Just as little should believers in Christ deceive each other. Being members of Christ, "we are members one of another"—parts, as it were, of the "one new man" which Christ has made us "in Himself."

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