

Our Path and our Associations

2 Timothy 2: 20-22.

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It is a very simple, and yet a very important thing, to realise that the path for each of us must be an individual one. Many may, in fact, be in company with us, but to be right it must be the *identity* of the path that brings us together, not in any wise the desire of companionship, save with One alone. If others walk with Him, then we shall be together; but this is not, and must not be, ever what makes the path for us; this must be before God, and with God alone.

It should be needless to insist upon it, but doctrine and practice, alas! may be widely asunder; and conscience may be at a much lower level than the *theory* (for it is then really that) of which we have got hold.

And there will be a great many delicate points to consider, which nothing but real nearness to God will enable us to have settled; for are we not members of Christ's body together, and not mere individuals? and does not this impose limits on the individuality of the path? Here we must answer, No; in no wise. It is by the careful preservation of our individuality alone that the church's welfare can be realised and maintained.

But our dissociations and associations are both prescribed for us in the text which heads this paper; and that in full view of the disorder which so soon came in and disfigured, and has never ceased to disfigure, the church of God on earth, while it has made the path of the true saint only more manifestly individual, as this scripture (speaks it. For if "in a great house" such as Christendom has now become) "there are not only vessels of gold and of silver, but also of wood and of earth; and some to honour, and some to dishonour;" it results that only "if a man purge himself from these, he shall be a vessel unto honour, sanctified and meet for the Master's use, and prepared unto every good work." Thus our *associations*, of which it is the fashion of the day to think so lightly, are put in the forefront here, as affecting our own spiritual condition and fitness for being used of God. There may be, and are, vessels to honour, which are mixed up with the vessels to dishonour, as we know, but you cannot say, according to this scripture (and "scripture cannot be broken"), that they are "sanctified and meet for the Master's use" while in such a condition. Sovereignly he may of course use them, as He can use a vessel to dishonour even, if He will; but that is a totally different thing.

Who can say, then, that a man's own condition may be godly, while in open-eyed association with ungodliness around? The second Epistle of John is no plainer than the second Epistle to Timothy is here. Both say we are responsible for, and partakers of, the sins of others, with whom we knowingly associate ourselves. Concord between Christ and Belial there cannot be — this will be granted. Then for half-hearted following, which would in effect unite them, toleration there cannot be. The *fiftieth* link with evil is as real an one as the first; and to maintain our link of fellowship with Christ, we must refuse the fiftieth as we would refuse the first. Dissociation is the first thing here enjoined, that we may be free to walk in that individual path with God to which the Apostle is here exhorting.

Now as to association on the other side, "Follow righteousness, faith, love, peace, with them that call on the Lord out of a pure heart." How are we to find these? How are we to test the heart? Why, by their ways. And I find my companions as I walk myself in the path of righteousness, and faith, and love, and peace, to which I am called. Suppose I wanted to find the people going by a certain train to the next town, what more simple than to put myself in the train? Ourselves upon the road, we find the

people that are upon the road, and it is the only practical way. The individuality of my path is preserved with distinctness, and that path it is which governs my associations, not my associations the path.

Now what am I to follow, if I may not follow people? I am to "follow righteousness, faith, love, peace." *Leaders* I may own, and rightly if, and only as, they can show me that the path they lead in has these marks. But I must be shown the marks or refuse the path, no matter what else may commend it to me. Nor will it do to take counsel with humility, and walk by the judgment of others, when God is bidding us hearken to His Word.

Now for the marks: the first is "righteousness." Here, as it is our own path that is in question, we cannot be too rigorously exact. We are under grace, blessed be God, is to our relationship with Him, and to be witnesses of that *grace to others*, but wherever our own path is in question it is no matter of grace at all; the first and peremptory demand we must make upon ourselves is, is it righteous? This will be as far as possible from leading to hardness as to others; for even from this side of righteousness we must take them into account. Exaction is not this, but its opposite. On the other hand, no real love to others will ever lead me to put my foot down there where I cannot be sure it is of God, or according to Him. "By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and *keep His commandments*." It must not even be doubtful if we are keeping His commandments; to doubt and do is to make light at least of disobedience; and if we should thus stumble, even in the right path, we should not ourselves be rightly on it.

We are to judge our own ways. If in this the judgment of others becomes necessary, the necessity is its sufficient justification. "Do not ye judge them that are within? But them that are without God judgeth; wherefore put away from among *yourselves* that wicked person.

He was among themselves, and being among them their association with him gave sanction to his wickedness. Toleration was thus unrighteousness in them, and even to eat a common meal with such was this.

Righteousness is then the first requisite here, and the severity we have to exercise is upon ourselves rather than others. If it be really upon others we are sitting in judgment, we are not really righteous according to the standard of the kingdom of heaven I forgave thee all that debt, because thou desiredst me: shouldst not thou also have had compassion on thy fellow servant, even as I had pity on thee?"

Righteousness being secured, there is still further question. Not every righteous way is a way of "*faith*." Here then the path becomes still further narrowed. "Faith" supposes a having to do with God as a living God; with Christ the Shepherd of the sheep as a living Guide. It supposes, not a "king's highway," such as Israel might have had in passing through the land of Edom (Num. 20), but that trackless desert path which was God's choice rather for them; there where the pillar led, fire by night and cloud by day, that they might go, independent of nature, by day or by night.

A *righteous* path merely may, after all, be of the nature of the "fold," a hemming between certain limits, outside of which I may not be, but within which I may do my own will. A path of *faith* is a path which I recognise as God's for me, not my will any longer, save as following His. This makes it, looking from one point of view, as narrow as it can be. For as there can be but one step at any time, which He really has for me to take — one and no other — there is no permission for self-acting for a single moment. This for the legalist would be intolerable legality. Only grace can make it as broad a way as it is safe; for it is always broad enough for another to walk with us, whose presence is all for strength, for comfort, for satisfaction; and our own will means sorrow, defilement, and the ditch. Think of a way which eternal Wisdom has taken counsel of, eternal Love to mark out for us! Think of the eye

of love never withdrawing its tender interest in the path we take! Would we desire it? Are we wiser, better, or more careful for ourselves, than He who counts every hair of our heads?

Yet a path of faith is just the one for plenty of exercise and searching of heart. It is one as to which more seldom than we think can one pronounce for another, and when the need for spirituality is absolute and necessary. "The spiritual man discerneth all things." He "*discerns*." It is not internal feeling or blind impulse which controls, but the knowledge of one whose mind and ways of thought are formed by the word, and who is in the presence of God, so as to be guided by His eye. This guidance infers present nearness and knowledge of Himself — the instruction of the word; but where the soul waits upon God, and occupies itself with Him, so as to see and interpret every look of His.

Faith then requires God's word to justify it, in a path whence self-will is absolutely excluded. It thus guards the "love," of which the Apostle next speaks, from being taken for the "liberality," so miscalled such on every hand. True love finds within the sphere which the word thus marks out for it, its amply sufficient field of exercise. "Seeking not its own," it teaches no soul to do its own will, or to show large-heartedness by setting aside, even for a moment, its Master's constant claim. It supposes no possible accomplishment of good to others by swerving from the good and the right way oneself; and this whether it be in one line of things or in another; "faith" having taught it, there is, and can be, no matter of "ecclesiastical policy," if you will, or anything else which affects His people in any way which He, who his thought of the covering of a woman's head, has not thought of and provided for. To swerve from His mind by way of accommodation to others, or for whatever purpose, would be but the unseemly "liberality" of a servant in things that appertain to his master — not liberality, but carelessness or worse.

Righteousness and faith however being maintained as to our course personally, "love" is next surely to be followed — safely under these conditions. Our hearts are to embrace not only the brethren, still less only those whom we find walking on the path with ourselves, but, as in "fellowship with the gospel," all men. There is nothing however in which we are so apt to make mistake as we are with regard to "love:" there are so many and subtle imitations. We *like* people who please us — who minister to our selfish gratification, and we call that "love." And if these are the people of God, this may help still more effectually to deceive us. How often does this kind of feeling betray itself by fermenting, on occasion given, into the most thorough animosity! True love, seeking not its own, holds fast its objects with a pertinacity of grasp which never falls: "having loved His own which were in the world, He loved them unto the end." We may be forced to separation, forced to walk alone, forced to judge and condemn the ways of those whom nevertheless we cling to before God with desire which will not admit of giving them up even for a moment. Thus if judgment be passed, it will be expressed as the Apostle, "even weeping:" truest and most solemn judgment, where it is not that of an enemy but of a friend; and blessed they, who in the spirit of mourners find themselves thus in company with the "Man of sorrows."

We must be content here to point out the order, and the meaning of the order, in which "love" occurs in connection with our path. It does not form this (*divine* love has formed it for us, not our own): it is the spirit which is to animate us rather in the path — not the rails, but the motive power — and here, of course, love to God first, as that from which all other springs.

"Peace" closes the catalogue. It is the necessary issue to which all this tends. "The fruit of righteousness is peace." While love seeks the peace of the objects of it, and satisfies itself with what it finds in blessing for them. Every way peace is reached; and only here as the end of the rest — guarded and defined by what precedes it — can it be true or safe as an object to be sought after. Here it comes

in seemly order and due place. May God grant us more attainment of it, such as it is here presented.