

The Christian Company

John 15: 9-16.

Hamilton Smith.

As we listen to the Lord's gracious words, recorded in John 13 and John 14: telling of His service for believers in feet-washing, to keep us in communion with Himself; telling us that He has gone to prepare a place for us in the Father's house; that He is coming again to receive us unto Himself in the glory, and that between His going away and coming again for us, He will come to us and manifest Himself to us through the Holy Spirit — as these blessed truths pass before us — we realise that the leading truth therein is that *Christ is for us*. Then, as we pass to John 15 and John 16, and listen to the Lord tenderly exhorting His disciples to bear fruit, to follow Him as His disciples, and witness for Him in a world in which He is hated and rejected, and hear His warning that in this world we may expect persecution and tribulation, we further realise the great underlying truth is that we are *to be for Christ*. Moreover, there is surely a divine order in the way in which the truth is presented, for we must first be thoroughly established in the great truth that Christ is for us before we can, in any little measure, be here for Him.

In the first eight verses of Ch. 15, the great truth brought before us is fruit-bearing. This division of the discourse closes with the words, "Herein is my Father glorified, that ye bear much fruit; so shall ye be my disciples." Then, at the close of the chapter, the Lord refers to the coming of the Holy Spirit, with the result that the disciples become witnesses for Christ. Fruit is the lovely character of Christ reproduced in the lives of believers in the power of the Holy Spirit. In as far as this fruit of the Spirit — "love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, fidelity, meekness and self-control" (Gal. 5: 22, 23) — is found in us, the Father will be glorified and it will be manifest that we are disciples of Christ, and, in as far as we follow Christ we shall become witnesses to Christ in the world from which He was cast out. Thus we realise that it is the Lord's desire that believers should be in this world for the glory of the Father, known as disciples of Christ, and witnesses for Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. Fruit-bearing, discipleship, and witnessing, are the great themes of chapter 15. Moreover, in verses 9 to 16 the Lord sets before us a most beautiful picture of the new Christian company, with the outstanding moral characteristics of that company according to the mind of the Lord. These express, indeed, the desires of the heart of Christ for the whole Christian company, but what should mark the whole company should surely be true of any little local company of His people. Therefore in a day of ruin when the great Christian profession has wandered far from the Lord's revealed mind, it is still possible for two or three gathered to His Name in any locality to seek to be marked by the characteristics that are pleasing to Him. We may well challenge our hearts as to how far we have done so.

The Lord opens this part of His discourse with the words: — "*As the Father hath loved Me, so have I loved you: abide in my love* (N. Tn.). Thus, the first great outstanding mark of the Christian company is that it is *loved by the Lord*, and the desire of His heart is that believers should walk together in the realisation of His love, and thus answer to His words, "Abide in my love." The Lord gives the love of the Father to Himself as the measure and manner of His love to believers. The Lord speaks, not of the Father's love to the Son in eternity, but the love of the Father to the Son incarnate — to Jesus as Man. This was a love that entered into all the sorrows of His path, all the enmity He had to meet, and the sufferings He had to endure. In the same way we are loved by Christ with a love that enters into all our trials, feels for us in perfect sympathy in all our sorrows, and, in our case bears with us in all our failures, and restores our souls when we have wandered far from Him. Whatever we have to meet we

can count upon a love that never changes and will continue to the end. In the conscious sense of this love the Lord would have us to continue.

The exhortation to abide in His love leads to the second great mark that the Lord desires to be found in the Christian company. He would have His people marked by *obedience to His commands*. His words are: "If ye keep my commandments, ye shall abide in my love; even as I have kept My Father's commandments, and abide in His love" (V. 10). Very happily one has said, "The love of Christ rests on the way of obedience, and shines along the path of His commandments. The keeping His commandments does not create the love, any more than walking in sunny places creates the sunshine; and accordingly the exhortation is not to seek or merit or obtain the love, but to *remain in it* by continuing in the state arid life to which alone it belongs."

Again, the Lord sets Himself before us as the One who, in His path as a Man, is the perfect example of obedience. He could say, "I do always those things that please Him" (John 8: 29). Whatever the cost to Him, be it insult, shame and spitting, He was obedient even unto death, and that the death of the cross. Never seeking His own will, ever walking in obedience to the Father's will, He abode in the sunshine of the Father's love!

The third great mark of the Christian company is "joy", as the Lord can say: "*These things have I spoken unto you, that my joy might remain in you, and that your joy might be full*" (v.11). The Lord speaks of this joy as "My joy," and further that it may be "in you." As regards outward circumstances, He was the Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief, but He ever walked in the inward joy of the Father's love, and the glorious prospect before Him. He could rejoice in spirit in carrying out the Father's will, and for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross and despised the shame, and the contradiction of sinners, that He had to meet (Luke 10: 21; Heb. 12: 2, 3). The Psalmist could say, "Thou hast put gladness *in my heart*, more than in the time that their corn and wine increased" (Ps. 4: 7). The world's joy depends upon prosperous circumstances — the increase of the corn and wine. The believer's joy is that inward gladness of heart that finds its springs in the unchanging love of the Lord, and the glorious prospect that only faith can enter into. In these verses the Lord speaks of, "My love," "My commandments," and "My joy," and these marks follow in beautiful order. The Lord's unchanging love is over all; walking in obedience to His commands we shall abide in His love, and abiding in His love we shall taste of His joy.

The fourth great mark of the Christian company comes before us in the Lord's words: — "*This is my commandment, That ye love one another, as I have loved you. Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends*" (Vv. 12, 13). The Christian company is not only loved by the Lord, but it is His command that they should love one another. As with the previous marks, Christ is the perfect pattern of what He enjoins upon His people, so now, this love to one another finds its perfect expression in Christ's love to His people. We are loved as He was loved; we are to obey as He obeyed; we are to rejoice with His joy, and to love one another as He loved us.

Such was His love that He could lay down His life for His friends. Here His death is not viewed in its atoning character, which could be no pattern for us, but as the highest expression of love for one's friends. It has been truly said that in these verses there "is condensed a whole history of love in the love of the Father to the Son, the love of Jesus to His people, the love of His people to one another; each stage being both the source and the standard for the next."

The fifth great mark of the Christian company is that they should be distinguished as being treated by the Lord as *His friends*. He can say: — "*Ye are my friends, if ye do whatsoever I command you. Henceforth I call you not servants for the servant knoweth not what his Lord doeth: but I have*

called you friends; for all things that I have heard of my Father I have made known unto you" (v. 15). It will be noticed that this high privilege of being treated as the friends of the Lord is contingent on our obedience to His commands. He has told us that His command is that we love one another. The company in which love prevails is the company that the Lord will treat as His friends. A friend is one in whom we confide; to whom we can freely unfold our thoughts, our feelings, and the purposes of our hearts. Obviously we only open our hearts to those in whose love we can trust. Believers have the true privilege to be the servants of the Lord. The Apostles Paul, Peter, John and James, as well as Jude, delight to describe themselves as the servants of the Lord Jesus (Rom. 1: 1; 2 Peter 1: 1; Rev. 1: 1; Jude 1). But if the privilege of being servants is great, the privilege of being friends is yet greater. Viewed simply as servants we only need the plain directions of the Lord to carry out our allotted task. Treated as friends we are let into the secrets of the Lord's heart as to the great end of all service. Thus, treating His disciples as friends, the Lord can say, "All things that I have heard of my Father I have made known unto you." Thus service can be taken up in the intelligence of the Lord's mind, in fellowship with the glorious end in view — the carrying out of the deep eternal counsels of the Father's heart.

A sixth mark of the Christian company is that they are *chosen by the Lord*. He can say: — "*Ye have not chosen Me, but I have chosen you, that ye should go and bring forth fruit, and that your fruit should remain*" (v. 16). How blessed to realise that our eternal links with Christ do not depend upon our choice, but His. Knowing His absolute perfection, and that He is "altogether lovely," we might well have chosen Him. The wonder of grace is, that knowing all our imperfection, and foreseeing all our failures, He should have chosen us. Having chosen us, He will never go back on His choice. He may, indeed, have to deal with us because of our failures, but He never flings away His pearls because of the specks of dirt that may be found upon them. But not only has He chosen us to share with Him His home and Kingdom glories, but, in the meantime He has set us to serve Him and bring forth fruit that may abide, whether that fruit be souls saved by grace, or saints established in all the counsels of the Father's heart. Writing to the Colossian saints, the Apostle Paul can speak of the gospel of the grace of God coming to them and bringing forth *fruit* in the conversion of sinners. Writing to the saints at Rome, he expresses his desire to see them and impart some spiritual gift to them to the end that they might be established in the truth and that thus he might have "some fruit" among the saints (Col. 1: 6; Rom. 1: 11-13).

The seventh great mark that should characterise the Christian company is *dependence upon the Father*. The Lord desires that every other mark that we have considered should lead up to this, that there may be found a company on earth of whom He can say: "*That whatsoever ye shall ask of the Father in My Name, He may grant it you*" (v. 16). If we are to be the servants of the Lord, if we are to bring forth fruit that shall abide, it can only be as we are kept in dependence upon the Father — a dependence which finds its expression in prayer in the Name of the Lord. Moreover, behind our prayers the Lord's words imply that we are in the condition set forth in this part of His discourse. Then, indeed, we should pray in accord with His mind and thus be able to count upon answers to our prayers.

Thus we learn that during the time of His absence the Lord would have a people on earth, (1) Abiding in the conscious sense of His love, (2) Obeying His commands, (3) Enjoying His joy, (4) Loving one another, (5) Treated as His friends, (6) Chosen by Him for His service, and (7) Dependent upon the Father. Let us remember that in all this beautiful picture there is no mention of great gifts that might bring particular individuals into prominence amongst the saints and make a display before the world. It is rather the moral conditions that should mark the life of the whole Christian company, that the Lord sets before us, and that are of such value in His eyes, and without which all activity in service will be of little value. Moreover, though, alas! we have so little answered to the Lord's mind let us

remember that there is nothing in the Lord's instruction that is not possible for any little company of saints to carry out in a day of ruin. May we then have grace to judge our condition in the light of the perfect pattern and seek, by that same grace, to answer to the expressed desires of the Lord, and thus, in some little measure become witnesses for Him in the time of His absence. H. SMITH.