

THE NEW COVENANT NEWS



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News and Notes

THE FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT

(Part 1)

Linton Roe

"But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, meekness, self-control; against such there is no law" (Galatians 5:22,23; ASV).

In his letter to the Galatian congregations, the apostle Paul encouraged his readers to embrace the freedom of their new lives in Christ and to turn away from their former bondage to the law (5:1). He exhorted them to *"walk in the spirit"* (verse 16), to be *"led by the spirit"* (verse 18) and to *"live by the Spirit"* (verse 25). He then reminded them of the works of the flesh and contrasted those works with what he called the *"fruit of the spirit"*.

A fruit is the product of a plant that has had time to develop and grow, and is ready to reproduce itself. It is a sign of maturity. Many fruits are healthy and delicious to eat, and so are desirable to humans.

In the study passage, the *"fruit"* is used as an illustration of the mature product of a life led by God's spirit. One would not expect to see them fully developed in a young Christian, but they should be developed over time.

For the follower of Christ, the fruits of the spirit are profitable for obtaining and holding onto the promise of eternal life, and they are beneficial in this life too, since *"against such there is no law"*. In other words, if we develop these *"fruits"* in our lives, no one can criticize us, take us to court, or hold things against us, since they do good to all. In addition, by developing the *"fruit of the spirit"* we are making ourselves more like our Lord Jesus, as our Heavenly Father desires.

1. Love

The first fruit Paul mentioned was love. It is important to note that the word used is the Greek word 'agape', which means goodwill, affection or benevolence. It is not the romantic love of Hollywood. 'Agape' is the love that is shown when people do good to their enemies.

Perhaps Paul had in mind that love is the greatest and most important attribute that a Christian can develop, and that all the other fruits would develop, once true 'agape' love was present. In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul wrote an entire section on the qualities of love. His

conclusion showed the pre-eminent position of this fruit of the spirit, *“And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love”* (1 Corinthians 13:13).

Elsewhere in the New Testament, we are told that *“God is love”* (1 John 4:8). We are also told that God has shown His love to us through sending His son Jesus to die for us. This is the ultimate example of love, or, as it is expressed in John 15:13, *“Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends”*.

John had much to say about love, especially in 1 John 4:7 to 21, a passage that is well worth exploring. The great challenge to us is to actually practise love in our lives. It is easy to love those who love us, but if we truly seek to develop 'agape' love, then we must learn to be able to do good to our enemies:

“If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even ‘sinners’ love those who love them. And if you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even ‘sinners’ do that. And if you lend to those from whom you expect repayment, what credit is that to you? Even ‘sinners’ lend to ‘sinners,’ expecting to be repaid in full. But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.” (Luke 6:32-36; NIV).

Perhaps in the weeks ahead, we could all make an opportunity to further develop the fruit of love, through doing something practical for someone else. Examples might include: making a phone call, writing a note of encouragement, visiting someone sick or elderly, baking a cake for someone or offering to do something to help another person in need.

2. Joy

The next fruit of the spirit listed by Paul in Galatians is joy. Joy is an emotion of pleasure or gladness. In this life, events do not always bring us pleasure or gladness because of the conflict between the spiritual and sinful natures and the fact that we live in a sinful world. Christians therefore need to view this joy as an inner state, which cannot be shaken, derived from the conviction that God is for us and that all will be well in the end if we continue to try to do His will. With practice, this inner conviction should also lead to outward joy, as we pray, seek to share our hope with others, and become more mature witnesses of God's love.

We need to realise that joy may not be a constant experience. The Hebrews were commended for their steadfast attitude in adversity, *“You sympathized with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions”* (Hebrews 10:34; NIV). We, too, should have that inner joy that comes from a knowledge that our hearts are set on things above and that our treasure is stored up for us in heaven (Matthew 6:21).

Another great example of showing joy despite adversity is the account of Paul and Silas in prison, which we read in Acts 16:23 to 25. *“After they had been severely flogged, they were thrown into prison, and the jailer was commanded to guard them carefully. Upon receiving such orders, he put them in the inner cell and fastened their feet in the stocks. About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them.”*

How many of us truly feel joy in times of distress? Can you imagine having been severely flogged and thrown into prison, only to be inspired to sing? I find that I often allow myself to become caught up with the small difficulties of life and that these difficulties affect my attitudes and emotions. It is often helpful to me, when I have suffered a setback, to stop and look at the ‘big picture’; to realise that all the troubles of this world are really rather trivial and temporary, and that they do not affect God’s ultimate plan of redemption. I should not allow them to affect the inner joy that He has granted to me.

Peter, in his speech on the Day of Pentecost, related David’s words about Jesus’ joy and assurance of His Father’s love during His time of trial. *“David said about him: ‘I saw the Lord always before me. Because he is at my right hand, I will not be shaken. Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices; my body also will live in hope, because you will not abandon me to the grave, nor will you let your Holy One see decay. You have made known to me the paths of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence.’”* (Acts 2:25-28; NIV).

If you have difficulty experiencing inner joy, here are a few practical suggestions that you might like to try.

- Write down and reflect on five things for which you are thankful.
- Read your favourite prophecy of God’s kingdom (e.g. Isaiah 35:5-10).
- Watch a young child at play.
- Sing a favourite hymn or song.
- Do something for someone else, without expecting any return favour.
- Do as Hebrews 12:2 advises and *“look unto Jesus...”*

If Jesus, who suffered so terribly, could experience joy, surely we can learn to look past our own comparatively trivial sufferings to the joy of His future kingdom, when the angel's message to the shepherds will finally be realized by all, *"Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people"* (Luke 2:10; NIV).

3. Peace

The next fruit of the spirit in Paul's list is peace. Peace is generally thought of as a time when conflict is absent, when people generally get along with each other. Yet the peace that is a fruit of the spirit has, I suggest, nothing to do with the absence of war.

Strong's Concordance gives a number of meanings for the Greek word translated as *"peace"*, but I particularly like his fifth definition: 'the tranquil state of a soul assured of its salvation through Christ, and so fearing nothing from God and content with its earthly lot, of whatsoever sort that is'. This concept of a person's tranquil state to me implies that nothing can disturb the love and joy which are in the heart and mind of the believer, and it reminds me of the verse in Hebrews 13:6, *"So we say with confidence, 'The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?'"*.

The peace of God is attainable only through trusting in Jesus, *"Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God"* (Romans 5:1,2).

If peace is a state of the heart and mind, then it should not be lost, even when we do not see eye to eye with those around us. In other words, although our outward lives might not be in a state of peace, our hearts and minds should be, and we will therefore work towards creating greater peace with those around us. We know that it is not always possible to experience peace with everyone, but, as Paul told us, we should *"make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification"* (Romans 14:19). A little earlier in Romans, Paul showed us the attitude we should have towards others, *"If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone"* (Romans 12:18).

So how do we maintain this inner peace when things go wrong and the Lord's promises seem far away? As with love and joy, we must be aware of what we lack and what we need; we must remember that God calls us to peace and that there is great reward offered to those who do their best to keep it.

God assures us that He has taken the first step towards peace by offering His Son: *“For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross”* (Colossians 1:19-20).

Because of God’s plan to restore our relationship with Himself, we are exhorted to live peaceful lives, *“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God”* (Matthew 5:9). What a prospect, to be considered sons and therefore heirs of God; to be on a similar level to our Lord Jesus who is God’s only begotten Son. Can we afford not to be peacemakers?

I suggest that trust in God is the first, essential step in developing and maintaining peace in our lives. *“May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit”* (Romans 15:13). Jesus promised his disciples that they would have His peace, *“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.”* (John 14:27). If we learn to trust in Christ and His love for us, we too will begin to experience peace, knowing that we are cared for and will not be forgotten.

Inner peace in our busy 21st century lifestyles can be a significant challenge. When my life becomes very hectic, I like to remember the way in which God revealed Himself to Elijah, in the *“still small voice”* (1 Kings 19:12; KJV) rather than in the tumult that had preceded it, and I try to listen to Him, who said *“Be still, and know that I am God”* (Psalm 46:10). In practical terms, this might mean planning some personal time into every day. It might mean going for a walk in order to meditate on the 'big picture' rather than being swamped by everyday busy-ness. It might mean breathing deeply and asking for God’s guidance before beginning a difficult task or responding to a pointed question. It might mean a change of attitude; seeing yesterday’s 'problems' as today’s 'character-building experiences'.

4. Longsuffering

The next fruit of the spirit, longsuffering, also requires us to put our trust in God and His promises. The NIV and other versions of the Bible use **patience** instead of longsuffering. Either word gives us the idea of putting up with something for a period of time, or waiting a long while for something to happen.

I'm sure that we have all been in situations that have tried our patience. I am a teacher, and find plenty of opportunities to test my patience in an average day: the computers aren't working; little Johnny's shoelace is undone (again); Sally can't sit still; Bill is poking Sally (for the third time); and Lucy keeps complaining that she feels sick. And there are exactly 35 minutes left to get the rest of the class to finish off both the maths sheet and the writing that were supposed to be finished yesterday, for the reports that are due tomorrow! I'm sure you could find similar circumstances in your everyday experiences.

And yet many verses warn us that there is much to be gained from showing patience, and little to be gained from losing it. As Proverbs 14:29 tells us, "*A patient man has great understanding, but a quick-tempered man displays folly*".

The Bible gives us many wonderful examples of patience or longsuffering. Job comes to mind, in that he lost so much and was tempted to curse God and die, yet he believed that God would ultimately save him from his terrible situation. This, of course, is what happened, with Job receiving twice as much as he had had before all of his calamities, and he also received the reassurance of friendship with God, and the prospect of life in the future.

Jesus is our example in all things, but His patience is of particular note. He was falsely accused, tried, mocked, abused and hung on a cross to die, despite being innocent. And yet His prayer to His father in His final hours was not to bring down vengeance on His accusers, but rather to "*forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing*" (Luke 23:34).

Have you ever thought of the consequences for us, if God had said 'I have no patience in waiting for sinners to come to me. As soon as they do something wrong, I'm going to destroy them'. Where would any of us be? The apostle Paul expressed this so well, when reflecting on his own life and how Jesus had saved him and used him as an instrument of ministry, "*Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners – of whom I am the worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life*" (1 Timothy 1:15).

With this wonderful knowledge of the patience that has been shown to us, let us consider a few practical ways to help us develop patience in everyday situations:

1. Pray to God about situations that try your patience. Ask Him to forgive you your faults, and ask for peace when you feel frustrated.
2. Breathe deliberately, before you speak. Breathe in and count to five, then out and count to five. This act of controlling yourself briefly might give you that little bit of thinking time you need to make a considered response, and help you to be less impulsive.
3. OPV = try to see an issue from (an)Other Point of View. When you are irritated about something, choose to stop and think about it differently. Often when someone is trying our patience, we are only seeing the issue from our standpoint. The other person might be completely unaware of the effect of their actions on us, and might be behaving quite reasonably from their standpoint.
4. Plan to manage time differently. Allow yourself just an extra minute for each activity and don't try to cram in too many jobs at once. Leave for work just a little bit earlier. Anticipate that your toddler will make a mess and that it will take you longer to eat your lunch and clean up afterwards!
5. Modify your expectations. Sometimes we expect other people to live up to our 'high' standards, and they may not be capable of doing that! Remember that each of us is a sinner and has areas of our lives with which God has shown great patience. Having acknowledged this, we should then be able to bear one another's irritating habits with greater compassion.

5. Kindness

What do we understand by the next fruit of the spirit, kindness? Interestingly, the KJV uses the word "*gentleness*". Whichever word we use, it indicates a quality or characteristic that people can have; one of being useful to ourselves and others, or of a standard of moral excellence.

Perhaps kindness is easier to understand by thinking of examples. We usually think of people who are kind as those who give us unexpected gifts, or do something nice for someone else. Others who show kindness might be good listeners, always able to empathise with or support us when we are having difficulties.

When I think about people in the Bible who showed great kindness, a number of key characters come to mind. When Abram and Lot arrived in Canaan there was strife amongst the herdsmen, so Abram offered Lot the choice of the land before them, allowing his nephew to take the most fertile and desirable area (Genesis 13).

Some time later in history, Joseph, having previously been ill-treated and sold as a slave by his own brothers, found them totally at his mercy, bowing before him. Yet his heart yearned for reconciliation and, after testing their sincerity, he invited the whole family to come to Egypt, to share in its abundant food, when they might otherwise have died of starvation in Canaan (Genesis 45:4-7). When anger and retribution could have been on his mind, he showed great gentleness through forgiving them and lifting them up.

The New Testament also has a great many examples of gentleness. On one occasion during His ministry, Jesus went through Samaria, although there was bad blood between Samaritans and Jews, and they tended to avoid each other. A woman with a rather chequered background spoke with Him and drew water for Him from Jacob's well. He did not criticize, chastise or avoid her, but gave her a great gift, telling her that He was the Messiah, and offering her the opportunity of living water, if she would believe in Him. (This event is recorded in John 4:5-26.)

On many occasions, although He was very tired, Jesus got up and went out to heal some of the many sick people who were waiting for Him outside the door (for example Mark 1:32-39). He did not rebuke them for their sins or problems, but healed them of their illnesses, and exhorted them to put their trust in God.

Paul and Silas, ill-treated and locked in prison, were released from their bonds by an earthquake. When the jailer saw that the prisoners had been released he intended to commit suicide, yet the apostles called out to him then preached the gospel to him, and his whole family was baptized (Acts 16:22-34). They showed great kindness towards him, when they could easily have wished for retribution, since he was one of their captors.

The letter to the Romans tells us that God has shown great kindness to his chosen people in this age by selecting them to be part of His family (Romans 11:22). Paul explains, though, that we must continue in God's kindness, otherwise God can exclude us too, as He did to the Jews who rejected Jesus. Hence God's kindness towards us should spur us on to be kind towards one another.

So as we seek to show greater kindness, here are a few practical ideas we could consider.

- Pray – ask God to give you the courage to show kindness when opportunities arise.

- Write – jot down the names of people who might need a helping hand, or ideas for how you could be more kind.
- Listen – allow someone to explain their hardships to you without feeling the need to correct them.
- Speak – consider a kind word that you could say to the next person you meet.
- Act – next time you see a small job needing to be done, decide that you will do it, and then do it!
- Give – offer someone 30 minutes of your time, rather than your money. Visit an elderly person.
- Think – consider how we might serve God better, since He has shown such kindness to us through giving us Jesus and an understanding of the gospel.



OUR REASONABLE SERVICE

Address given at a Memorial Supper by Merv Buckmaster

This is the night on which, nearly two thousand years ago as recorded in scripture and history, the Lord Jesus was betrayed into the hands of those men who did not accept His message of hope for the world of mankind, and His promise to deliver them from unrighteousness, and the curse of everlasting death. We have read the record of history, we have heard the message that Jesus brought to a fallen race so long ago; we have verified the truth of both history and the message, and we have gathered together to obey the Lord's command to partake of a simple ceremony in His memory, just as the Jews were commanded by God to observe the Passover meal in memory of their deliverance from bondage in Egypt.

Our annual observance of the Lord's Supper is our public witness of our faith in Him, of our belief that He came to earth from the heavenly Father to give His life as a ransom for the human race, and of our certainty that He accomplished these things completely. We believe that He was raised from death and was granted the authority and power to restore the entire earthly creation to God's favour.

In the light of the wisdom of Jesus' advice to "*render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's*" (Matthew 22:21), our observance of the Lord's Memorial Supper bears witness to two important aspects of our faith. Firstly, a declaration to God of our heartfelt desire to serve Him by following the example which Jesus set for us, and secondly, we do it in obedience to the second of two commands which our Lord gave to us for the purpose of making a

public witness of our faith. The first command is to undergo the simple service of baptism; an outward show of the inner change, an act of choice made by an individual indicating that he or she has decided to follow Jesus Christ for the rest of their life. The second command is to partake of the Lord's Supper in remembrance of Him, and to thereby demonstrate to God, to each other and to the world at large, our commitment to Him as our saviour, until He returns to carry out the great work of the restoration of all things during the Kingdom age.

It may be that on some occasions the Memorial has to be observed in solitude, or perhaps only with family members, but God knows the intention of our hearts (Jeremiah 17:10) and will recognise the affirmation of our belief in the sacrifice of His son, although it is not made in public.

This outward show of our faith, once by baptism, and annually by observing the ceremony of the Lord's Supper, can be only part of that reasonable service (Romans 12:1) called for by our creator, that we present our bodies to be, as Paul puts it, a living sacrifice.

That which is our reasonable service must include everything we do, because in God "*we live and move and have our being*" (Acts 17:28) and our complex lives result in great difficulty in assigning priorities to the things we have to do, for God, for our families and for others. We have to examine our lives and our actions, whether we be in the faith, and prove ourselves (2 Corinthians 13:5).

It is not easy, just as an example, to put God first, family second and work third in order of importance. Sorting out these obligations is a challenge that we have to take up every day, and that is clearly indicated in the exhortation to "*lay aside every weight, and the sin that doth so easily beset us*" (Hebrews 12:1) so that we can conduct our lives in a manner more pleasing to God. In a long term view, we have to change from the attitude, as the hymn puts it, of all of self and none of thee, to the attitude of none of self, but all of thee. Just as all great works have small beginnings, this change of attitude starts with just a few moments when God becomes the focus of our thoughts, and grows until every action is prefaced by the thought of whether or not it has God's approval. Our attendance here tonight does have His approval because we understand the command the Lord gave us, and we gather together in the light of that understanding.

We know that we should keep ourselves in the love of God (Jude 21), and by love serve one another (Galatians 5:13). The easiest way to do these things is to meet together, and this we are told to do in Hebrews 10:25, "*Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as*

the manner of some is; but exhorting, or encouraging one another ...". As with life's priorities, above, this admonition is also difficult to fulfil, since we are separated sometimes by great distances, or by different timetables in our lives. When these factors make it too difficult to attend regular meetings, we can be comforted to know that where two or three are gathered together in Jesus' name He will recognise that service in His honour. It is not necessary to attend only the centralised meetings where most of the brethren assemble for more formal services. Whenever and wherever such meetings, large or small, may be, the key element of them should be to gather around the pages of the scriptures, and from them gain strength to build up each other in the faith. There are messages for every occasion and circumstance to be found for this purpose in God's Word.

During times when we are unable to meet, we may be able to communicate by telephone or written word. Generally this is done on a personal basis, but it is also a means of participating in Bible study, the greatest contribution in this regard being the sharing of thoughts through the newsletters, which are available freely upon request. We should acknowledge the contributions made to such studies, perhaps just with thanks to those who make the effort to serve in this manner, but acknowledgement can also be given by engaging in further discussion of the topics opened up for consideration in such publications. Let us not dispute that study is a very important way to gain knowledge, particularly when study and discussion are carried out together.

Paul exhorted Timothy to "*Study to show thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly discerning the word of truth*". Of ourselves we know nothing. We have to learn from our parents and siblings, from our teachers, from our peers, and from God. From study we gain understanding so that we can judge in ourselves (1 Corinthians 11:13) as to the proper course to take in all matters pertaining to our daily lives. With the example of our Lord and master to follow, and with the guidance of the word of God, we should be building up ourselves in our most holy faith (Jude 20).

By meeting together, and by reading and discussing God's word we have come to this point, tonight, along the Christian pathway to the promised reward of everlasting life. Each of us has a different distance yet to travel, and every attendance we make at the observance of the Lord's supper proves that another step along that way has been travelled safely. The Lord and the apostles have given us many words of instruction and encouragement to make the travelling easier between the milestones marked by this annual ritual.

We are responding to the call to life when we take up Christian obligations and follow Jesus as He tells us in Mark 10:21, and that response involves many obligations to God and our fellow man every day. We must remember the Lord's reply to the scribe's question "*Which is the first commandment of all?*", when He said, "*... thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength: this is the first commandment. And the second is like, namely this, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself*" (Mark 12:28-31). Then in Luke 6:27 He goes further and says "*But I say unto you which hear, Love your enemies, do good to them which hate you*". And, of course, the good works which the Lord did during His ministry are the supreme examples of the divine attitude to our fellow human beings.

Paul enjoined us to pray without ceasing (1 Thessalonians 5:17). Jesus taught us the manner in which we should pray, saying, "*But thou when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut the door, pray to thy Father which is in secret, ... use not vain repetitions as the heathen do ...*" (Matthew 6:6,7). Then follows the Lord's prayer, His own words given to us as a model for the thoughts in our hearts. Thoughts which God knows, and by which He will judge our standing in His sight.

We know that we must always do good things, for Paul exhorted the Galatians "*As we therefore have opportunity, let us do good unto all men, especially unto them who are of the household of faith. And let us not be weary in well doing, for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not.*" (Galatians 6: 10 and 9).

Give to the poor, Jesus told the rich young ruler (Matthew 19:21). Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake, Peter said (1 Peter 2:13). And to behave in that manner follows naturally from the law of love, demonstrated to all the world in the highest degree by the life and sacrifice of our Lord. Thus Paul's injunction and the Lord's example come clearly to us after almost two thousand years, as part of our reasonable service.

When the Lord Jesus was made to carry the wooden cross on which He would be crucified it was part of the cruelty He suffered following that terrible night in the garden of Gethsemane. Our cross is made up of the things we suffer for His sake, when we give our lives in prayer, in singing hymns, in helping others and in studying God's word. In all these things we must be watchful and prepared for the return of the master as the virgins in the parable were. We must be watchful with respect to our conduct before our creator; we must be prepared for further opportunities for service, remembering always that in God's due time the Lord will

return with salvation for the faithful and judgement for the ignorant. And we must also be watchful in our understanding of the word of scripture so that we do not make the commandment of God of non effect by tradition (Matthew 15:6 and Mark 7:13).

In all these things we have hope of a far better life than we can even imagine, and we are hurt by the sufferings of others who are without this knowledge and this hope. God has made each one of us different from all others. Each of us is unique, and it follows that each of us has a different perception of the same event or idea. This is shown in all our discussions and actions, and it can be a source of discomfiture that can work against the Lord's expectation of us that we do good and meet together for our own benefit, and as a service to Him. Recognising this during the early days of the church, Paul told the Hebrews, "*Follow peace with all men ...*" (Hebrews 12:14) and "*... to be at peace among yourselves ...*".

We are given the freedom to choose our own way in all these matters, and this is shown in Paul's words when he wrote to the Philippians to "*... work out your own salvation ...*" (Philippians 2:12) and therefore we have to carry the responsibility of those choices as the proving of our faith.

This responsibility puts pressure on us with respect to the manner in which we conduct our daily lives, and we know sometimes that we do not get the best balance of all the factors involved. That balance is different for each one of us, and to find it takes time and effort. We need knowledge and sound judgement for the task, but the rewards are great. We are able to go to God in prayer and admit our failings, and then, with deepest gratitude, ask for forgiveness and strength to do better, little by little as the days go by. From small steps taken along the way that the Lord has shown us, and with small corrections from our studies; with words of encouragement and hope from fellow believers and the promises give to us in the word of God, we build up that conviction of knowing that we are entirely in God's care, if we cast our cares upon Him (1 Peter 5:7).

Thus enlightened, guided, strengthened and comforted, we can continue the task of giving our reasonable service to God without fear. Then with confidence we can approach the throne of grace as we do tonight, dependent upon, and secure in the all-atoning sacrifice that Jesus gave so long ago; because we do this in remembrance of Him who died for us that we may live forever in His Kingdom.



WORKERS IN A VINEYARD

by Russell Collins

Matthew 20:1-16

1. *"For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire labourers for his vineyard.*
2. *Now when he had agreed with the labourers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard.*
3. *And he went out about the third hour and saw others standing idle in the marketplace,*
4. *And said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right I will give you.' So they went.*
5. *Again he went out about the sixth and the ninth hour, and did likewise.*
6. *And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing idle, and said to them, 'Why have you been standing here idle all day?'*
7. *They said to him, 'Because no one hired us.' He said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right you will receive.'*
8. *So when evening had come, the owner of the vineyard said to his steward, 'Call the labourers and give them their wages, beginning with the last to the first.'*
9. *And when those came who were hired about the eleventh hour, they each received a denarius.*
10. *But when the first came, they supposed that they would receive more; and they likewise received each a denarius.*
11. *And when they had received it, they complained against the landowner,*
12. *Saying, 'These last men have worked only one hour, and you made them equal to us who have borne the burden and the heat of the day.'*
13. *But he answered one of them and said, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius?'*
14. *Take what is yours and go your way. I wish to give to this last man the same as to you.*
15. *Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with my own things? Or is your eye evil because I am good?'*
16. *So the last will be first, and the first last. For many are called, but few chosen."*

Background Information.

The above parable is found only in the Gospel of Matthew.

Harvesting vineyards in first-century Israel was strenuous work requiring hard physical labour in the heat of summer. It often happened that additional workers had to be hired to get the work done. The owner of

the vineyard mentioned in the parable went to the marketplace early in the morning, perhaps about 7 am, to find workers for the day, offering payment to each of one denarius, a Roman soldier's pay for a day. For those times, a denarius for each was a generous offer. The workers agreed and went off to work in the owner's vineyard.

As the day progressed more workers were hired, resulting in four groups in all, the first at an early hour perhaps 7 am, then three more groups at 9 am, 3 pm and 5 pm. After the hiring of the first group, the specific wage was not mentioned, the owner promising the amount would be fair, and the workers must have trusted him to pay them. When the time came for the workers to be paid, each worker was paid one denarius. The workers who were hired first complained because they had worked all day in the hot sun. The owner defended his action because he dealt with all the workers in all fairness, according to the original agreement he made with them.

The Circumstances In Which The Lord Gave The Parable

In chapter 19 of Matthew, a wealthy young man came to Jesus asking about the way to eternal life. The Lord Jesus said to the young man that if he wished to be perfect he should sell all he possessed and give the money to the poor, and so lay up treasure in heaven, then come and be His follower. The young man went away in sorrow because he was very rich. As we are told no more about him, we must conclude that the young man valued his earthly goods more highly than the proposed heavenly treasure, and so would not at that stage have found the way to eternal life. This matter is described more fully in Matthew 19:16-22.

Then the Master said to His disciples that it is difficult for rich people to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. This surprised the disciples, and they asked, *"Who then can be saved?"* (Matthew 19:25). The Lord Jesus looked straight at them and said, *"With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible"* (Matthew 19:26). Peter then said, *"See, we have left all and followed You. Therefore what shall we have?"* (Matthew 19:27). The Lord Jesus in reply assured them saying, *"Assuredly I say to you, that in the regeneration, when the Son of Man sits on the throne of His glory, you who have followed Me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or lands, for My name's sake, shall receive a hundredfold, and inherit eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last first."* (Matthew 19:28-30).

The Lord Jesus then proceeded with His parable of the workers in a vineyard.

The Meaning Of The Parable

The hiring of workers in a vineyard may be understood, I suggest, as the invitation by the Lord Jesus to the Jewish people to believe Him and believe into Him, and so qualify by faith to enter the Kingdom of Heaven, represented in Philippians 3:14 as the high calling. As Jesus explained to the young man, mentioned earlier, this aim should take precedence in the Christian life over every other consideration, possessions and even family and friends, if necessary, to enable one to qualify by faith for the truly great and wonderful privilege offered in the future Kingdom of God to Gospel Age believers.

As we have seen, the Lord Jesus concluded His parable by saying, *“So the last will be first, and the first last. For many are called, but few chosen”* (Matthew 20:16).

The first in the Jewish nation were the Scribes, Pharisees, doctors of the Law, and people of position and wealth, many of whom professed great piety. They thought of themselves as superior to ordinary Jewish people, and confidently expected that in any distribution of rewards, they would be entitled to something above the ordinary. They were likened by the Lord Jesus to those who *had “borne the burden and heat of the day”* in attending to the Law and its ceremonies, and the traditions of the elders, while the ordinary people, the *“publicans and sinners”* had stood idle in the market place. When the Lord Jesus had shown His willingness to receive ordinary people, publicans and sinners, on equal terms with those who considered themselves superior, they murmured against Him.

But the Lord showed the Jewish people in His sermons and parables that the reward being offered to them through the New Covenant was the privilege of the high calling. Originally they had been offered, through the Old Covenant, to become a kingdom of priests on earth (Exodus 19:5,6). So instead of being annoyed with the Lord Jesus for receiving all on the same terms, they should have had sufficient gratitude in their minds and hearts that God’s mercy and grace had been extended to them, as well as to all people high or low.

The parable, by representing the first workers as being the last paid, may show how some of the Jews who trusted in their riches and ceremonial piety would be disappointed in the expectation that they cherished. *“So the last shall be first, and the first last”*.

Some Lessons For Us

We understand that in this Gospel Age, God is calling out a people for His name (Acts 15:14). He is calling them to share in the blessing of all

nations and all families of the earth in the age to come. Those who are so called are required, as the Lord Jesus said, to do the will of His Father in heaven, the Lord God. While living this life of faith on earth, Christians are promised the necessities of life (Matthew 6:8,32).

In the Scriptures the consecrated life is often compared to a race (1 Corinthians 9:24-26; Philippians 3:13,14; 2 Timothy 4:7; and Hebrews 12:1). In this 'race' the followers of the Lord are not contending against one another, but they are contending against their own fallen nature and against Satan and the evils of the present world in general.

One lesson we may draw from the parable is along the lines of character building. We should not be critical of one another, or be in any way jealous or envious of a sister or brother in the Divine family, but should press on together in faith, and leave all the judgment to the Lord, the righteous judge.



HUMBLE YOURSELVES

(This paper was presented by the late Brother Les Buckmaster in 1962. It is included here because of the current mis-use of the word 'humbled' by many when receiving worldly awards.)

*"Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God,
that he may exalt you in due time" (1 Peter 5:6)*

In the immediately preceding verses of chapter five, the apostle had exhorted the elders of the congregation to discharge their responsibility with diligence and meekness; and the younger ones to submit themselves to the elders. "Yea," he said, "*all of you be subject one to another, and be clothed with humility*" And then follow the words of my text, "*Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God*". This verse has been referred to as being part of faith's witness, this exhibiting of a meek and quiet spirit.

We might ask why the apostle exhorts us to be thus humble. There are several reasons. One of them is found in the apostle's use of the word mighty; the "*mighty hand of God*", which means God's omnipotence; His power, authority and influence. It is not wisdom to oppose anyone or anything that we know to be stronger, mightier than ourselves. There are, of course, several aspects of this matter of God's mighty hand, and my thoughts have run on the lines of a consideration of some of the displays of might recorded in scripture, and the implications of these

exhibitions of God's mighty hand. While we marvel at what is recorded, and bow before the might and power that we see displayed in these records, we come to see something there which touches us more closely, and draws from us something more than just to marvel.

Let us look at some of the passages which tell of God's might. The psalmist wrote in Psalm 82, *"God standeth in the congregation of the mighty; He judgeth among the gods"*. And the psalm goes on to tell how He is mightier than them all, and will one day so act as to convince all that it is so, using His might to overthrow all that is unjust and evil, *"For Thou shalt inherit all nations"*. Psalm 93 says the same thing. In verse 1 we read, *"The Lord reigneth, He is clothed with majesty ..."*. Verse 3 says, *"The floods have lifted up, O Lord; the floods have lifted up their voices"*; but in verse 4, *"The Lord on high is mightier than the noise of many waters, yea than the mighty waves of the sea"*. Job has the same testimony to offer, and the same exhortation as the apostle. In chapter 9, verse 4, he says, *"He (God) is wise in heart, and mighty in strength; who hath hardened himself against Him, and hath prospered"*. No; if we think to do that we will only come to learn that *"He that sitteth in the heavens shall laugh"* as did the nations who thought to oppose Him when He proceeded to accomplish His purpose to set His king on Zion's hill, as Psalm 2 says.

Daniel extolled God's might in these words, *"Blessed be the name of God for ever and ever: for wisdom and might are His. And He changeth the times and seasons: He removeth kings and setteth up kings; He giveth wisdom to the wise, and knowledge to them that know understanding"* (Daniel 2:20,21). It would be an easy matter to multiply such passages as those I have referred to. One more in the book of Revelation comes to mind, chapter 15, verse 3, *"And they sing the song of Moses the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb, saying, Great and marvellous are thy works, Lord God Almighty; just and true are thy ways, thou king of saints"*. With all of this, of course, all true children of God are in agreement - willing to acknowledge His might - and do not think to put themselves in opposition to it.

But now let us look at some of the recorded exhibitions of God's might. The first that we think of is the very creation itself. The present ever-growing understanding of the laws of His universe, and their wonder and extent, serve only to emphasise what we have read of God's power. But I don't propose to dwell on these laws just now, wonderful as they are. I am thinking more of His might as shown in the affairs of His people, and mankind generally. The visitation of the flood on the race was an unfavourable exhibition of His might, one which He has promised never to use again.

We remember the children of Israel who had been delivered from the Egyptians by an extraordinary display of divine power, yet when they came to the barrier of the Red Sea they gave way to despair, and thought that the end of their freedom had come. But no - *"Fear thou not, stand still,"* Moses told them, as instructed by the Lord to do, *"And see the salvation of the Lord which He will show you today"*. And God made a pathway through the sea, so they again experienced the working of His power.

When the three young Hebrew men were cast into the cruelly heated furnace because they would not worship the golden idol on the plain of Dura, they, too, knew and experienced the influence of that power. This is what we read, *"And the three men, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, fell down bound into the midst of the burning fiery furnace. And Nebuchadnezzar the king rose up in haste, and said unto his councillors, Did not we cast three men bound into the midst of the fire? But Lo, I see four men loose, walking in the midst of the fire, and they have no hurt, and the form of the fourth is like unto a Son of the gods"*. And the record is that they came from that severe trial quite unhurt and unharmed; *"Nor was an hair singed, neither were their coats changed, nor the smell of fire had passed on them"*.

That same great king, Nebuchadnezzar, who had been so astonished at the deliverance of the three young Hebrews from his anger, himself was made to feel that power which had wrought that deliverance. He was one of the great kings of the earth, ruling a great empire. To again quote the scripture record, *"All peoples, nations and languages trembled and feared before him, whom he would he slew, and whom he would he kept alive, and whom he would he set up, and whom he would he put down"*. Great power indeed, had King Nebuchadnezzar. And like all (or most) who had been successful in their efforts and work, he thought that he could rightly say, 'I have done it!', but he had to realise, king though he was, that anything which man can accomplish is only by divine permission, and that the natural powers by which he can and does indeed achieve many notable things came from God in the first place, and so the glory belongs to Him. This is something that the scientists of our own day will have to come to realise too, if they have not already done so, because they are doing wonderful things, surpassing anything which has been done before.

And so, the ancient record goes on, the pronouncement came - Nebuchadnezzar was to be removed from his throne and made incapable of ruling his great dominion for seven years - *"Till thou shalt know"* said the prophet, *"That the Most High ruleth in the kingdom of men, and giveth it to whosoever He will"*. It is recorded that the great king profited by his humbling experience, and was restored to his former greatness, to rule more wisely than before.

There was foretold the rise of a great anti-Christian power or system during the gospel age; a system which, while naming the name of Christ, would oppose and destroy truth, and which was to usurp for itself wide and far-reaching authority and, from a human point of view, a seemingly impregnable power and position, so that there would seem to be no hope of that power being broken. So much so that it was said, *"Who is like unto the beast, and who is able to make war with him?"* (Revelation 13:14). But the same prophet who foretold its rise, told also of its ending. We read, *"... and he shall speak great words against the Most High - and think to change times and laws - but the judgement shall sit, and they shall take away his dominion, to consume and destroy it unto the end"* (Daniel 7:25,26). Boastful though the claims of this iniquitous power were, and though its power and position seemed so strong, *"the judgement shall sit"*; the power of God's mighty hand would reach out, and *"they shall take away his dominion"*, and the calm certainty of these words tell again of the influence of God, which could deal with even so evil a thing. *"Yet he shall come to his end, and none shall help him."* We ourselves are seeing the fulfilment of these prophetic words, and are seeing in its fulfilling the working of God's authority.

But it is not only in the larger affairs of men that we can see the working of that authority; we see it also in God's dealings with His people, both individually and collectively. Some I have already referred to; many others come to mind. The barrel and the cruse of the widow of Zarephath which did not fail, thus ensuring food for herself and Elijah during the three years of drought. The preservation of David when so often Saul sought his life. We think of the saving of Jonah when, while fleeing from his appointed mission, he was cast by the sailors into the sea to drown. And others of the people of God of olden times had similar experiences.

We see it working too, in the earthly life of our Lord. When he was so strongly and persistently opposed by the Jewish rulers, they were unable to accomplish their evil designs against him until the appointed time had come, the time for finishing the great and gracious work he came to do. And we can see that same power of God active in the experiences of the apostles, mostly recorded in the book of Acts, who had so many untoward experiences at the hand of both Jew and Gentile.

The apostle Peter too, who wrote the words of my text, experienced more than once God's power. We read how on one occasion he was seized by the authorities and cast into prison because he had witnessed a good confession. While in prison he was closely guarded by soldiers of the military, and it seemed unlikely that he would escape from whatever was in store for him. But at night, while he slept (such was his faith and trust

that Peter was able to sleep even in such circumstances), *"The angel of the Lord came upon him, and a light shined in the prison"* (Acts 12:7). And his chains fell from him, the prison doors opened while the guards still slept, and Peter was restored to those who had been praying for him; and he realised that the power of God had brought about his release, the mighty hand of God he wrote of in my text.

I said earlier that in considering these exhibitions of God's might and power we learn something more than only to marvel at its working; and it is in these experiences of the apostles and prophets which have been referred to that the greater lesson can be found. God is active, not only in the wider sphere of men's affairs, but also in strengthening and supporting and caring for those who trust and serve Him. The instances we have read about are recorded to encourage and comfort all who follow their example of faith and obedience.

Understanding this, we can say with the apostle Paul as he wrote in Romans 8, *"If God be for us, who can be against us?"* (that is, be successful against us). There are many things against those who are of faith: our fallen nature, the world, even Christendom itself; and Satan too, the arch-enemy of God's people; all these things are against us. But the same apostle also says in verse 37, *"In all these things we are more than conquerors through Him that loved us"*.

But I did not read all of the text. Let me now read it in full. *"Humble yourselves, under the mighty hand of God, that He might exalt you in due time."* If we humble ourselves before Him, He will exalt us. This is a very gracious promise, and an encouragement too. Not that our humbling ourselves merits any reward; nothing we do could deserve that. However active we are in obedience to the Lord's commands, we still are only unprofitable servants.

Nevertheless, the promise is there; *"that He may exalt you in due time"*. And the principle of this has applied all down through the ages; those who have been faithful and obedient in the unfavourable conditions prevailing have been encouraged by the promise of rewards. *"To him that hath shall be given"*, our Saviour said; and we call this a principle too, a divine principle; and because it is so, we need only to accept it with thankfulness and humility.

The criticism is sometimes levelled at the Christian faith that it is a poor principle to do something only for the reward, but like so many criticisms and objections, it mistakes the true position. The Christian does not do anything only for the sake of reward. We accept the rewards as evidence

of God's grace and goodness, but we follow the narrow way because we have learned, by the ministry of the Spirit, that it is the best way, the wisest way to live. The Christian learns that it is a simple truth that *"It is more blessed to give than to receive"* (Acts 20:35), that to do acts of kindness, and charitableness, of helpfulness and encouragement to others reacts in a beneficial way on the human spirit; as well, of course, as that it is pleasing to God.

One of the advantages of this course is self-discipline, because we sometimes have to make an effort and suffer some inconvenience to follow it. But it is a truth, too, that virtue is its own reward; we are so made that to do good makes us feel good (our conscience tells us that it is right), and it helps us to be good more and more. I think that this is, in part, what it means when it says that we are made in the image of God. The more good we do, the more kindness we show to those around us, the more our character is developed in that way, which is what is required of us, to be conformed to the image of God's dear Son. Under the guidance of that Holy Spirit by which our minds are made new, we realise that this is the Lord's way; this is how He acted towards us. So, as the apostle said, *"We love because we are loved"*.

The thought of rewards is not the prime motive of these acts of kindness and charitableness. As I said before, we accept the rewards offered as evidence of God's grace and goodness, but we can also say that, because God does offer rewards for faith and obedience and service, the principle is of the very best, because whatever He does is good, supremely good. And so the criticism misses its mark, and need not cause us much concern. Being made by an unbeliever, it is put forward by one who is not really qualified to pass a judgment in the matter.

And so let us follow the apostle's exhortation, and cultivate that submissiveness to the will of God. And the apostle speaks of the lesson we have ourselves drawn from our consideration of the working of God's mighty hand, because he goes on to say in the next verse, *"Casting all your care upon him; for He careth for you"* (1 Peter 5:7).

But thus humbling ourselves before God must be genuine, not just something put on for occasion, as it were, to impress others, to satisfy the outwardness of our profession. We need to remember that though we can deceive those around us in this, and we can, and often do, deceive even ourselves, but we cannot deceive God. He knows the heart, and looks on the heart, and knows whether the action, the course of conduct, springs from a true desire to acknowledge His just claim on our lives and obedience, or whether it is false, merely an outward show. *"Neither is*

there any creature that is not manifest in His sight", Paul wrote in Hebrews 4:13, "but all things are naked and opened unto the eyes of Him with whom we have to do". Psalm 44 verse 21 says, "He (God) knoweth the secrets of thy heart".

Being thus examined in the heart and mind, we can but acknowledge God's power and love with respect and relief that the record of His mighty deeds also gives power to His promise that " *He giveth grace* (unmerited favour) *to the humble*" (James 3:6; Proverbs 3:34).



NEWS AND NOTES

Memorial Supper

The Memorial of the Lord's Supper will be held at 8.00 pm on Friday 30th March in the hall at Bayswater South Primary School, Enfield Drive, Bayswater. All Christian believers are welcome to attend. For further information contact info@newcovenantfellowship.org.au.

Autumn Conference

Our annual conference will be held from Friday 6th to Sunday 8th April, 2018, at the Comfort Inn Main Lead in Ballarat, about 2 hours' drive from Melbourne. Our conference theme is "People of God" and we are looking forward to a time of blessing with talks, Bible studies, devotions and fellowship. For further information contact info@newcovenantfellowship.org.au.

THE NEW COVENANT NEWS

The New Covenant News is compiled by an editor responsible to the New Covenant Fellowship. The thoughts expressed do not necessarily represent the opinions of all of the members of the group, and readers are requested to heed the words: ***"Prove all things"*** (1 Thessalonians 5:21).



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