

The Ministry of Letter Writing

by A.B. Simpson

The sermon emphasizes the importance of humility, Christian friendship, faithful living, and true missionary motives in our daily lives, and warns against the dangers of backsliding and worldliness.

Scripture: 2 John 1:1

Topics: "Faithful Living", "Christian Humility"

Description

A.B. Simpson emphasizes the significance of letter writing in the Christian faith, illustrating how personal correspondence reflects the character of both the writer and the recipient. He highlights humility as a key lesson from John's letters, where John identifies himself simply as an elder, contrasting with the self-importance often seen in ecclesiastical circles. Simpson also discusses the importance of Christian friendship, the responsibility of families in faith, and the need for vigilance against error and evil. He further explores the themes of divine healing, faithful living, and the role of laypeople in supporting missionary work, while warning against the dangers of pride and backsliding within the church. Ultimately, he calls for a return to genuine Christian values and a commitment to truth in both personal and communal life.

Transcript

"The elder unto the elect lady and her children, whom I love in the truth.... The elder unto the well beloved Gaius, whom I love in the truth." (2 John 1; 3 John 1.)

The letters we write are a mirror at once of the character of the writer and the person addressed. We can usually form a fair picture of both lives from a confidential correspondence between two human friends. The best biographies in literature are largely made up of personal letters. And so the New Testament consists, to a great extent, of personal correspondence. The epistles were all written to churches or individuals, and had a direct and local coloring as well as a general application. Many of them, however, were written to single persons. Happy for us if all our letters were as wisely and nobly conceived, and as finely expressed. These two letters of the apostle John, form a necessary supplement to his first epistle, and bring home to our hearts some additional messages in the less conventional form and the more direct and personal channel of his private correspondence. The first of these letters is addressed to an honored sister in the primitive church, the mother of a family, and the intimate friend or relative of some Christian lady with whom John was at the time residing.

I

1. The first lesson we learn from this letter, and indeed from both, is the lesson of humility. John might have called himself an apostle, or the last of the apostles, as he probably was at this time, and certainly the dearest to Christ of all the twelve. But he says nothing of all this, but modestly speaks of himself as one of the very humblest officers in the Church of Christ, just an elder. Surely, this is in fine contrast with the self-importance and lofty pretensions of ecclesiasticism through every age. When we find men announcing themselves by a long array of titles, and even in some cases with glaring fanaticism claiming to be the very apostles of the Lord to speak with the authority of divine inspiration, we may well lower our estimate in inverse proportion to their self-exaggeration. These claims belong to the school of Simon Magus and Lucifer, rather than the meek and lowly Jesus. Modesty will always be found to be the badge of merit, both in the literary and spiritual world.

2. The next lesson we learn, is a Christian friendship. John addresses this sister in the terms of the tenderest regard, and yet as a regard sacredly guarded. "Whom I love in the truth, . . . For the truth's sake, which dwells in us, and shall be with us forever." This is a love that is founded on spiritual bonds, and will be as lasting as the truth itself, which is eternal.

3. We have an example of a Christian family, for this sister had children and John especially refers to them that they were walking in the truth. And so it is the privilege of the child of God to claim the same salvation for his family as for himself. "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you shall be saved, and your house." And yet not all her children were saved, for the expression here is, "I found of your children walking in the truth"; that is, I found many of your children, but there were still some lost lambs even in this fold; that no doubt, a mother's faith and an apostle's faith were gently and patiently bringing in.

4. An example of a true Christian life. Two things especially enter into it, practical obedience and holy aspiration. Christian life is first of all obedience to God. For "this is love, that we walk after his commandments. . . . That, as you have heard from the beginning, you should walk in it." (2 John 6.) But it is not all plod. There is a lofty plane of noble ambition and a great reward to win. And so he adds: "Look to yourselves that we lose not those things which we have wrought, but that we receive a full reward." There is a prize to be obtained, and a constant vigilance and courage are essential to the victory, and the final recompense.

5. We are especially taught here our attitude toward error and evil. The Antichrist is described in almost the same terms as we noted in the first epistle, and all who bring false doctrine are to be avoided and renounced so distinctly that we can have no complicity with their errors nor responsibility for their evil courses. This is a most emphatic and needed prohibition. "If there come any unto you, and bring not this doctrine, receive him not in your house, neither bid him God speed: For he that bids him God speed is partaker of his evil deeds." We cannot be partners in error. We cannot cooperate with those with whom we are not of one accord. It is not enough merely to love the Lord, but we must hate evil. We cannot say God bless you to every person with whom we talk or pray. We are to lay hold suddenly on no man nor to be partakers of other men's sins. But we must always take such a stand in gentleness and love.

II

The second letter was addressed to the well-known disciple of whom we read elsewhere in the New Testament, that he was the companion of Paul, and the host of the Church of God. He was probably a man of sufficient means to be at least independent, and to be able to do much to help the brethren. It is needless to dwell on the many beautiful points in this letter which are identical with the previous one.

There is the same spirit of personal love, Christian fellowship, and beautiful modesty. But there are five distinctive and important points.

1. We have the apostle's views upon divine healing, and temporal blessing, in answer to prayer, very fully brought out in the second verse. Literally translated it is, "Beloved, I pray above all things that you may prosper and be in health, even as your soul prospers." This is very strong language and yet very safe. He does not put divine healing and outward blessing above spiritual things, but he makes them conditional upon our spiritual state. He prays for his friend that he may prosper and be in health just as much as his soul prospers. The word prosper, here, denotes more than mere sanctity and soundness. It expresses rather a condition of spiritual fullness, and rich and abundant blessing, and it implies that we cannot expect the Lord's blessing upon our bodies and our business, if we cherish in our hearts those spiritual conditions which bring divine chastening and produce misery and pain. When the heart is overflowing with the love of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit, then the blessing will reach every fiber and extremity of our mortal frame, and the providence of God will cover our temporal interest, protecting and providing for all our conditions and needs. Let us not, therefore, hesitate in the face of this bold announcement to come to our heavenly Father as freely for our temporal needs as for our spiritual conditions, for, He "is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us." The inworking will always bring the outworking.

2. We have a fine testimony to a faithful life. "Beloved, you do faithfully whatsoever you do to the brethren, and to strangers." It is not a brilliant life, but it is a faithful one. He is true to every obligation, trust, and relationship. He is a faithful servant to his Master. This is not only true of his Christian relationships, but in his dealings with strangers and the world outside. What a world this would become if this were always true of every disciple of Christ. Here is a pattern for you business men. You may never be great, brilliant, nor marvelously useful, but you can be faithful, and we know that in the great day when the rewards shall be given, the commendation will be not for our services or our talents, but "Well done, good and faithful servant, enter you into the joy of thy Lord."

3. We have the picture of a missionary at home. "Which have borne witness to your charity before the church: whom if you bring forward on their journey after a godly sort, you shall do well. Because that for his name's sake they went forth taking nothing of the Gentiles. We therefore ought to receive such, that we might be fellow-helpers to the truth." Here we have a fine example of a Christian layman, who cannot himself go forth to preach the Gospel to the heathen, living and working to send others, and like good old Gaius bring them forward on their journey after a godly sort. Perhaps Gaius did it by his hospitality, and his personal gifts as they visited him on their way. We can do it through the organized missionary movements of our time, as well as the individual opportunities afforded us in the providence of God. It was stated by one of our most successful missionary workers, that many hundreds of the missionaries of the Presbyterian and American Boards, now in the field, were supported either by individual congregations or single persons at home. It was added that the number of churches and individuals, who might easily assume the support of a missionary, might be extended to the thousands and tens of thousands, and thus the number of missionaries on the field multiplied many times over. At a session of the Ecumenical Council, it was stated by the president and others in the great meeting of laymen, that if the business men of this country would supply the means, the number of missionaries sent forth to the heathen fields could easily be doubled, or even still more largely multiplied within a very short time, as there were thousands of earnest young lives ready to go out but were depressed and discouraged by the constant cry of retrenchment, and the lack of financial resources on the part of the missionary societies. Let us pray, let us

plead, let us labor until the Church of Jesus Christ awakens to realize the responsibility of those in the home land, whom God has raised up in order that we may be trustees of His bounty, and His grace to our perishing fellow men.

4. We have a picture of the true foreign missionary. "For his name's sake they went forth, taking nothing of the Gentiles. We therefore ought to receive such, that we might be fellow-helpers to the truth." Here is the true missionary motive, "for his name's sake." Nothing less than love to Christ, and a sense of His supreme call, can ever sustain a successful missionary life. "Taking nothing of the Gentiles." This is the spirit of true missionary self-sacrifice. The most difficult task of the missionary is to convince the heathen that he is disinterested. They cannot really believe that anybody can love them well enough to leave home and country, and every prospect of earthly gain and pleasure, simply for the purpose of teaching and helping them, and when at last they become convinced of the sincerity and unselfishness of the messenger, they accept the message and they become themselves the most beautiful examples of self-sacrifice and devotion. In China, to which today, the eyes of the world are turned with the deepest concern, almost every heathen mind believes that our missionaries have some ulterior motive, and are seeking to make something out of them, and this is the real secret of the anti-foreign prejudice, and the wild stories that are everywhere circulated about our missionaries, digging out the eyes of babies to make medicine, and discovering gold by a process of second sight behind every rock and river bed. The answer to all this must be an unselfish life, and a spirit of devotion, such as is exhibited today in that dark land, which is ready to give all, even life itself, for the sake of the people that do not even appreciate their love. It is very sad, when missionaries use their opportunities to promote their selfish interest and aggrandizement, and it seems most unfortunate when they allow themselves to be tempted to go into the service of the wealthy natives for the sake of large emoluments. Nothing can repay the loss of influence sustained by a surrender of independence, and the suspicion of any sordid or selfish motive. But the self-sacrifice of the missionary should not be confined to him but shared by the missionary at home, who stands behind him, and by self-sacrifice in living and giving, carries out the apostle's exhortation "We therefore ought to receive such, that we might be fellow-helpers to the truth."

5. We have one more picture in this letter; namely, a backsliding church. Already the spirit of declension, that afterwards culminated in the great apostasy, had entered the primitive churches. Paul tells us that "All they that were in Asia" had turned away from him, and now John makes the still more painful confession "I wrote unto the church: but Diotrephes, who loves to have the preeminence among them, receives us not. Wherefore, if I come, I will remember his deeds which he does, prating against us with malicious words: and not content therewith, neither does he himself receive the brethren, and has forbidden them that would, and casts them out of the church."

It was out of this spirit of ecclesiastical ambition and pride, contending for preeminence and earthly honor, that apostasy first arose, and the same cause is destroying the purity and separation of many in the Church today. We must not blame the pulpit for it all, although it takes its most hideous form in ministerial pretensions, high sounding titles and selfishness and luxury on the part of the preachers of the Gospel. The spirit of the pew will soon be reproduced in the pulpit.

And why should there be a severer standard for one than for the other? If the church warden, the official steward, the wealthy trustee, and the fashionable parishioner insist upon going to the opera and taking part in the dance and the card party, do not be surprised if the General Conference shall itself some day begin to talk about modifying the Book of Discipline, and make it easier for the people to live up to the advanced spirit of our cultured age. It is said that a minister who had grown tired of preaching against all

these things, at last thought he would give his people an object lesson in worldliness, and so he announced one day, that the prayer meeting would be omitted that week, as the pastor and his family had a prior engagement at the opera.

The following week he begged to be excused from Board meeting of the Trustees, as his wife and he had to entertain a card party. Before the third announcement could be made, however, the Church Board had been called, and that preacher tried and deposed from the ministry for conduct unbecoming a preacher of the Gospel. It was in vain that he pleaded that he was only doing what his people did. They could not see the rightness of it when presented in such a striking object lesson.

But his logic was sound, and the lesson, if ineffectual, was at least consistent. The spirit of selfishness and worldliness, which is sapping the vitals of modern Christianity, is but the outgrowth of a lower standard of Christian living, and the demand of the people for a liberty which would shock and disgust them, if they saw it carried out to its legitimate fruit on the part of those to whom they look up as examples of true Christianity. It is very seldom to find that even as early as the days of John, the doors of the Church were shut against true spiritual testimony. Let us not be surprised if we often find that we must stand alone. But it is blessed to be in the minority with John the Beloved, Paul the Apostle, and Jesus the ascended Lord.

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