



Gospel / Life

Toward A Spirituality Of Freedom

New Creation Teaching Ministry: Tuesday Night Studies 2011, Seacliff Anglican Church

Study 16: The Fellowship Offering and the Church (1)

The Christian does not exist alone

One difficulty we face in reading the New Testament is that in English the word “you” is the same whether singular or plural in meaning. Given our highly individualised cultural background throughout the Western world, we almost certainly have an automatic tendency to read the “you” as a singular, addressing us as individuals. In fact, the vast, vast majority of the uses of “you” are plural. *The basic understanding of the Christian person in the New Testament is that of a believer in community with other believers.*

When we see that, it can be a real shake up, and a real breath of fresh air in our Christian living. Our evangelical and pietistic culture tends to see the heart of our Christian spirituality in terms of activities we do on our own: our personal prayer life, Bible reading and witness to others. Without in anyway deprecating the importance of these things, and wanting to encourage and help others to pursue these things, it seems to me that in the New Testament they have very little mention. The BIG issue in the picture of Christian life painted there is about how we worship God together and serve one another. We cannot understand ourselves except as we understand ourselves as children together of the same heavenly Father, servants together of the same King Jesus, fellow-soldiers in the same army of heaven. Our relationships are essential to who we are, not secondary.

Jesus was asked what was the most important commandment in the Bible. (In the Old Testament, there are 613 explicit commands given to God’s people.) His answer was:

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.” (Matt. 22:37-40; cf. Mark 12:29-31)

In Mark’s account, the man who asked the question followed up with a statement that showed he really understood what Jesus was saying. He said,

“You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but him. To love him with all your heart, with all your understanding and with all your strength, and to love your neighbour as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices.” (Mark 12:32-33)

The thrust of the coming studies, as we tie the Levitical sacrificial system to our freedom in Christ, is that the burnt offerings and the fellowship offerings gave expression to the love of God (burnt offering) and of neighbour (peace offering) that is Christian life in the freedom of the Spirit. Do these things and you will live (Luke 10:27-28)! Our freedom before God is in living in the flow of His love, loving Him

and loving our neighbour—this law is the royal law that gives freedom (James 2:8,12).

Love your neighbour as yourself

^{19:1} The LORD said to Moses, ² “Speak to the entire assembly of Israel and say to them: ‘Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy.

³ “Each of you must respect his mother and father, and you must observe my Sabbaths. I am the LORD your God.

⁴ “Do not turn to idols or make gods of cast metal for yourselves. I am the LORD your God.

⁵ “When you sacrifice a fellowship offering to the LORD, sacrifice it in such a way that it will be accepted on your behalf. ⁶ It shall be eaten on the day you sacrifice it or on the next day; anything left over until the third day must be burned up. ⁷ If any of it is eaten on the third day, it is impure and will not be accepted. ⁸ Whoever eats it will be held responsible because he has desecrated what is holy to the LORD; that person must be cut off from his people.

⁹ “When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. ¹⁰ Do not go over your vineyard a second time or pick up the grapes that have fallen. Leave them for the poor and the alien. I am the LORD your God.

¹¹ “Do not steal.

“Do not lie.

“Do not deceive one another.

¹² “Do not swear falsely by my name and so profane the name of your God. I am the LORD.

¹³ “Do not defraud your neighbour or rob him.

“Do not hold back the wages of a hired man overnight.

¹⁴ “Do not curse the deaf or put a stumbling-block in front of the blind, but fear your God. I am the LORD.

¹⁵ “Do not pervert justice; do not show partiality to the poor or favouritism to the great, but judge your neighbour fairly.

¹⁶ “Do not go about spreading slander among your people.

“Do not do anything that endangers your neighbour’s life. I am the LORD.

¹⁷ “Do not hate your brother in your heart. Rebuke your neighbour frankly so that you will not share in his guilt.

¹⁸ “Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbour as yourself. I am the LORD.” (Lev. 19:1-18)

This section of Leviticus ties the loving of the neighbour to the issue of the fellowship offering. Loving their neighbours in daily life is the way in which God’s people were to express on a day-by-day basis what eating the fellowship offering together in celebration of the Lord’s mercy and favour symbolised. Loving your neighbour is more than having warm feeling for him or her. It involves very practical determinations in behaviour. It has implications for how we treat the poor—v. 9 (more of that in two weeks). It requires that we be honest and fair with one another in all our business and social dealings: no stealing, no cheating, no lying, and no false testimony (vv. 11-13). We are to be as swift to fulfil our obligations to others as possible, especially when the one we owe needs us to be prompt (v. 13b). When we see some one who is disadvantaged or disabled in some way, we are not to use their situation for our benefit, and nor are we to mock or ridicule them (v. 14). We are to be even-handed in how we relate to all people, whether they are useful to us or not. We are to avoid the temptation that those with more wealth or power be feted by us while we are less concerned for those who have less to give us (v. 15). We are to watch our tongues and to speak as well of people as possible, not slandering them (v. 16). We should in no way endanger the lives of our neighbours (v. 16b). Our love for our brothers and sisters is to be heartfelt, not a sham or pretence which covers over resentment, grumbling and malice, or bitter envy or angry grudge (vv. 17-18).

What are the day to day practical realities of these things for us in our culture and time?

It is a useful exercise to compare this passage with Paul's exhortations in Ephesians 4:17-32, where many of the same issues are taken up: no falsehood, only truth (we are all members of the one body); no harboured anger; no stealing but rather hard work and a willingness to share with others in need; no unwholesome talk, but rather edification; kindness, compassion and forgiveness instead of bitterness, rage, anger, brawling, and malice.

The fellowship of the Holy Spirit

Every person who is in Christ, who has received the gift of the Holy Spirit, has been reconciled to the Father, adopted into the Sonship of Jesus. No person in Christ is any greater or lesser than any other person. There are a few passages that stress this in the New Testament. It was an important matter to stress, because one of the intrinsic and innate thrusts of sinful humanity is to grade, to assess, to discriminate, and all with the purpose of elevating ourselves against those whom we would deprecate. It is an expression of our deep sense of guilt, for we seek to justify ourselves by the judging of others. (This sinful tendency is seen very clear in an age of reality TV, where every viewer becomes a judge, making decisions about who remains in and who gets the flick!)

In Galatians 3:26-29, Paul says:

You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.

The possible divisions that Paul speaks of there are still divisive in our world. There is the antagonism between the genders, there are ethnic divisions, there are denominational and religious conflicts, and there are tensions between workers and bosses. What Paul is saying here is that in the gospel all of these things as divisive factors, by which we seek to make ourselves okay and others not, have been annulled. Faith in Christ puts us all on the same footing—the footing of His saving grace by which we have been justified.

In Acts 10, when the Gospel was taken by Peter to the Gentile Cornelius this was made very clear. It was the first time that this had happened, and the events surrounding it made it clear that this was the imperative of the gospel. Firstly Peter had his dream by which it is made clear to him that the old Jewish – Gentile distinctions had been done away with, and that he could no longer think of Gentiles in terms of uncleanness. He said, “God has shown me that I should not call any man impure or unclean.” (Acts 10:28). Peter had learned that God does not show favouritism (Acts 10:34). As he preached the gospel, God demonstrated this by His pouring out of the Holy Spirit on the assembled listeners, a repeat in this Gentile setting of what had happened in the Jewish gathering at Pentecost, for they all spoke in tongues and praised God (Acts 10:44-46, cf. 2:4,11). There is no difference!

Since this is so, favouritism and distinction making is not to be part of the life of God's people in Christ. See James 2:1-7. When we gather as God's people, we are to make sure that every person knows themselves to be valued and loved by God and His people.