

CONSISTENT DISCIPLESHIP

John 13:1-17

This text is a part of an interesting incident that brought a practical message in the long ago, and brings a helpful message today.

I. The Story.

This passage of scripture contains the story of an instructive experience in the lives of Christ's early disciples. By it He taught them a lesson which we need to learn today.

1. An Event. John 13:1-11.

This event took place on the night of the last Passover supper. Christ was under the dark shadow of the coming cross. He and His disciples had taken their places at the table. His public ministry had ended. Soon He had to leave His disciples who had just shown their desire for preeminence in the kingdom. Under the shadow of the cross they were still candidates for greatness.

Since each was contending that he should be accounted the greatest, it is not surprising that neither of them would condescend to wash the feet of the rest. If any one of them had been willing to perform this menial service, it would have been tantamount to saying that he was the servant of all, and none of them was willing to do that. They stood on their dignity, which was a very poor foundation, because each thought that a principle was at stake and he could not afford to compromise himself.

After waiting to see what they would do, and when it became apparent that they would not do anything, suddenly and quietly Christ arose from the table, picked up a towel and tied it around His waist, poured water into an empty basin, washed the feet of His disciples, and wiped them with the towel wherewith He was girded. What they refused to do for one another, Christ did for each of them. Surely they could not have been rebuked more severely than by seeing their Lord do what they thought themselves above doing. They were instantly and greatly humiliated by the fact that, while they were aspiring to a throne, He was willing to take a towel and perform the lowliest service that one could render for another.

2. An Explanation. John 13:12-15.

When He had resumed His place at the table, He gave them an explanation of the event. It was His act of loving service given to them for an example. If He, their Lord and Master, had washed their feet, so ought they to render loving service to one another.

By this incident Christ engraved on the souls of His disciples the truth that primacy means preeminence in service. By His example He admonished them to live lives of service, and make life as easy as possible for others. It was as if He had said, "The only lordship that I have to offer comes through service, the only glory is that of sacrifice, and the only leadership is that of love. Your task in the world is not merely to do great things, but to do even the small things well, to use your talent in the doing of humble deeds.

Christ made it clear to His disciples, and to us who study this passage, that the way to greatness is not how many people one can command, but how many one can serve. By His example Christ accomplished more in a few minutes than He could have accomplished in many hours of urging them to perform their duties

toward one another. When they beheld His condescension, they understood that it was not lowering their dignity to be humble and willing to serve one another.

3. An Estimate. John 13:16.

Explanation passes into estimate of servant and Lord, of Sender and sent. Christ reminds His disciples of a well-known estimate, a proverbial principle, to which He had referred before and will refer again, that a servant is not greater than his Lord, that one who is sent is not greater than He that sent him. They knew this, but they needed more than knowledge.

4. An Ending. John 13:17.

The incident is brought to an ending with the needed message of our text: "If ye know these things, happy are ye if ye do them."

II. The Truth.

This text teems with truth of great meaning and mighty message. It is a beatitude -- "Happy are ye." The word translated "happy" expresses the happiness which belongs to regenerated heart, to saved soul, and to pure character. How a hungry world searches for happiness! Many search for it, but do not find it. They try to find it in money, position, amusement, travel, business, and pleasure. They amass wealth, but find worry. They reach a high place only to be unhappy. They try pleasure and find pain. This world has little to offer, but our text promises happiness -- "Happy are ye".

1. The Condition Before Happiness.

"If ye know these things." What things? Christ had just stated an important principle. "The servant is not greater than his Lord." "These things" include the whole realm of divinely approved truth, life-giving truth, and life-directing truth. The Bible is concerned with men's knowing. Its promises are conditioned upon men's knowing. It nowhere encourages ignorance. Present-day ignorance of the Bible is distressing. Many lives are unhappy because of ignorance of God's will. The Bible calls for knowledge. Its beatitude is fenced in by the condition: "If ye know".

If only the followers of Christ had given strict heed to this teaching, how different would be the story of the past nineteen centuries. At the close of World War I several scholarly gentlemen were discussing the question of what bearing that dreadful ordeal had upon the churches. One of them said, "The war has demonstrated beyond doubt the failure of the church. Christianity has been tried and found wanting." The late Gilbert Chesterton was in the group, and he was ready with a reply. He said, "I disagree. The war has not demonstrated that Christianity has been tried and found wanting. It has rather demonstrated that Christianity has been found difficult and not tried." He was right.

Always we lose our way when we fail to translate Christian knowledge into Christian practice. Christ was balanced, but most of us are unbalanced. Either we try to do without really knowing, or we know but fail to do. It is the recovery of balance at this point that will make our Christianity the convincing thing that Christ intended it should be.

Christ said, "If ye had known me, ye should have known my Father also." "If any man willeth to do His will, he shall know of the doctrine whether it be of God, or whether I speak of myself." Thus Christ speaks of knowledge that runs along two

lines: knowing Christ Himself, and knowing the things of Christ. When we say that discipleship begins with assurance, just what is the idea we intend to convey? Certainly we do not mean that we suddenly come into possession of all there is to learn of God and His revelation in Christ, and the message of the Bible, and the meaning of discipleship, and the mysteries of the future. Many of our Christian insights and convictions come to us gradually and progressively. Discipleship begins with the knowledge or assurance that is more than intellectual apprehension; it is spiritual experience. It is more than information; it is transforming inspiration. "If ye know these things." What things?

(1) The Necessity of Christ's Cleansing.

"Peter saith unto him, Thou shalt never wash my feet". Jesus answered him, "If I wash thee not, thou hast no part with me." Simon Peter saith unto him, "Lord, not my feet only, but also my hands and my head". In that moment of insight and conviction Peter realized what all Christians should realize, that he needed a complete cleansing such as only Christ could give. Christ wants all Christians to submit to Him for a thorough cleansing and an abiding purity.

(2) The Reality of Christ's Lordship.

"Ye call Me Master and Lord; and ye say well, for so I am." In ideal and purpose, yes; but in actual practice, no -- at any rate not at that time. They were yet to be humbled and broken, and, on the day of Pentecost filled with the Holy Spirit before they should come to realize Christ's reigning Lordship in their lives. So it is with many of us: not knowing His actual Kingship over our affections and motives and choices we fail to carry out the high and hallowed meanings of discipleship. We want His grace for our sins, but we do not want His control over ourselves. Yet, this is precisely the thing He is demanding.

(3) The Humility of Christ's Spirit.

In verses three and four we have one of the most beautiful pictures of the Saviour. In the exalted height of His divine consciousness, He stooped to the place of lowliness. The Maker of worlds becomes the menial of men.

(4) The Beauty of Christ's Service.

In addition to assuming the position, He carried out the task of a servant in washing the feet of His disciples. So we have Christ Himself and four great things about Him that we are to know.

Do we know Him as our sanctification, cleansing our hearts? Do we know Him as our Lord governing our affairs? Do we know Him as our humility permeating our Spirit? Do we know Him as our example inspiring our service?

2. The Condition Behind the Happiness.

"If ye know these things, happy are ye if ye do them." Knowledge itself is not enough. It alone will not bring happiness. The beatitude of our text is fenced in on both sides. Before it is a condition of knowing. Behind it is the condition of doing. God's Word promises blessing in the doing. James 1:25 says: "A doer of the work ... shall be blessed in his deed."

Christianity is a life. It is a program of action. When this is forgotten, Christ is dishonored and His church is defeated. Some of the most tragic days in church

history were those in which the members of the churches were sound enough in doctrine but woefully weak in consecration. Such a time was that in England before the revival of the 18th century, when one wrote of that period as a day in which "men would have been equally shocked at hearing Christianity questioned or seeing it practiced."

How many have known and yet been cheated out of happiness! How many church members have fed on God's Word and have known it but have missed its happiness by not doing it! How many professed Christians know the truth but do it not and starve in the midst of plenty!

III. The Message.

Is there a message in our text for us? It treats of three things -- knowing, doing what we know, and being happy. Happiness nestles between knowing and doing. When we know the truth, and do what we know, we can expect to be happy and only then. Do we know God's will for our lives? Are we doing it? God's Word is settled. It fences in its beatitude on both sides. We cannot have happiness on the outside of the fence. Are we willing to know, and to do, in order that we may get? You can have happiness, but only in His way.

"I am resolved to follow the Saviour,
Faithful and true each day;
Heed what He sayeth, do what He willeth,
He is the living way.
I will hasten to Him, hasten so glad
and free;
Jesus, Greatest, Highest, I will come
to Thee."