

"HOLDING FORTH THE WORD OF LIFE"

"Do all things without murmurings and disputings: That ye may be blameless and harmless, the sons of God, without rebuke, in the midst of a crooked and perverse nation, among whom ye shine as lights in the world; Holding forth the word of life; that I may rejoice in the day of Christ, that I have not run in vain, neither laboured in vain." Philippians 2:14-16.

Here is a tremendous charge to any sincere Christian. "Do all things without murmurings and disputings." This is not a command which is impossible for a Christian to obey, or it would not have been given. Murmuring is a sin and is displeasing to God. A murmuring spirit is to be shunned by the Christian. God works in us to will and to do of His good pleasure. Whenever He moves in us to do something that is of His good will and pleasure, we are to do it without a question or a complaint. The thing that God may work in us to do may be distasteful to our wishes; it may cross our own will, but we are to do it. There may be some habits of life that are not pleasing to God, and He is moving in us to put them away. We are to do it "without murmurings and disputings."

At the very time Paul wrote this verse, "Do all things without murmurings and disputings," he was practicing what he preached. He was a prisoner in Rome. He was a prisoner for preaching the gospel of Christ. But, he neither murmured against God, nor against man. Instead of murmuring at his lot, Paul tells us that he had learned how to be content in any state. He could "rejoice in the Lord" under all circumstances. Even in prison he could write this epistle of joy. His example is one that all should seek to follow.

Cheerfully and cooperatively, we are to do God's service. The word for "murmuring" is expressive; it means "the cooing of a dove." In it we catch the suggested strain of its monotony--that undertone of grumbling. Sooner or later, if permitted to persist, murmurings break out into disputings. The growl of discontent often causes disputes and divisions. One may spend his energies in fault-finding and disputing, but such a person certainly cannot shine for the Lord while doing so. When people pout, they do not shine. When they do things for the Lord without murmuring and disputing, their lives are radiant. Instead of whining, Christians are to be shining as lights in the world. Are you shining or whining? Are you a shiner or a whiner? It takes more power to give light than to make sound. It takes a lot more grace to manifest Christ than to murmur about things; it takes a lot more Christianity to shine than to whine. Be shiners instead of whiners!

As the moon and the stars appear in the night, so the Christians come out to give light in the darkness. A church is a lighthouse in a dark place. The darker the place the more its light is needed. A lighthouse is certainly fascinating. There it stands--a sentinel against storm and darkness--sending out its beam of light into the darkness, warning of danger and guiding to the safety of a clear channel and a friendly port. Out of the writings of Wayland Hoyt comes the story of a visit to a lighthouse at Calais in France. Someone said to the keeper of the light, "What if one of your lights should go out at night?" "Never!" cried the keeper. "Yonder ships sail to all parts of the world. If tonight one of my lights were out, within a short time I should hear from America, or India, saying that on such a night the lights at the Calais lighthouse gave no warning, and some vessel had been wrecked. Ah, sir, sometimes I feel, when I look upon my lights, as if the eyes of the whole world were fixed upon me."

The feeling of responsibility which that lighthouse keeper had about his lights is exactly the feeling which followers of Jesus Christ are to have about their lives. On the Eddystone lighthouse in England is this inscription: "To give light and to save life." This mission held up by those words for the lighthouse is exactly the mission which is held by the New Testament for Christians. A child of God is to shine as a light, and by shining hold forth the Word of Life.

Verse sixteen has a direct application to the inner life finding outward expression in Christian conduct. The Word of Life has been received into their hearts and through holy living is to have a salutary effect on others. Children of God are to consider themselves as on display before a hostile world. In our text there seems to be an allusion to torch-bearers, who in the night went before others to show them the way. It is as if he had said, "You are bound to shine upon the darkness around you, and this you can do, for you are furnished with a lamp or torch, even the word of life, which you ought to hold up to view, that those who are in darkness might be attracted by its light and be induced to walk in it." As a hand holds up a torch or as a beacon flings forth its beam, so the Christian is to let his light of testimony and witness, in word and life, shine before men.

The analogy which Paul uses here is a very good one. A light cannot burn except it be connected with the source of power. A lamp cannot burn unless it be filled with oil. A Christian must always be in contact with the light-giving source. The foolish virgins in the parable said, "Our lamps are going out." The oil supply was gone. A Christian can only keep his light burning, his testimony bright and his influence powerful as he steadily receives from Christ the oil of grace and strength. A Christian who does not consistently and earnestly pray cannot shine; he has no oil. A Christian who does not study the Word of God and assimilate it cannot shine; he has no oil. A Christian who has no interest in the church, who does not give himself in the service of his church, cannot shine; he has no oil.

The Christian who shines for the Lord will not limit his light-giving to one particular area of life. He will recognize that the gospel of Christ is complete, not only affecting the totality of his own personality but the total of the world in which he moves. In his business, the Christian will shine. So many church members today are gloomy with complaint, harsh with criticism and bitter with animosity. So many church members enjoy an argument or a fight more than they do a spiritual meeting.

We should cheerfully and earnestly seek to shine for the Lord and to serve Him in the midst of our churches, permeating the entire atmosphere with a spirit of compassion and love and devotion to Christ.

There are multitudes of people who have never had a genuine Christian experience. They have wandered through life, some of them identified with a church and its work, but they have never experienced any intimate, heart-warming contact with the living Christ. There are also many who have had such an experience and have stored it away and never shared it with anyone else. The Christian, whose light shines, will be constantly and consistently sharing what he has discovered about Christ with others all about him. Remember Paul's words, "Among whom ye shine as lights in the world, holding forth the word of life."

What of our lights? We claim to be Christians, followers of that same Christ who saved, blessed and used Paul. Yet there are far too many times when our light is dim indeed. At times people have real difficulty in discerning the spirit of Christ in us. Sometimes it is hard for them to see Him in us at all.

Remember the lighthouse keeper at Calais. He said, "Ah, sir, sometimes I feel, when I look upon my lights, as if the eyes of the whole world were fixed upon me. Go out! Burn dim! I cannot let them do that! I would rather die first!" We need to come to the place in our Christian faith where we would rather die than let the light of our testimony burn dim. We may never have to die for our faith, but, by the grace of God, we can live for it.

There has never been and never can be but one gospel, one life-giving Word to hold forth. All the modifications man has devised has not altered the original or changed its power one particle. "Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and today, and forever," the only Saviour, the great Lover of humanity, the perfect Substitute for the sinner, the risen Lord, and the Coming King. Who would not be willing to hold forth the Word of Life for Him?