

SHALL WE KNOW ONE ANOTHER?

AND OTHER PAPERS.

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LESSONS FROM NERO'S HOUSEHOLD.

LESSONS from Nero's household! How strange that sounds. The master of that household was a bad man, if ever there was one. Nero, the Emperor of Rome, was a very proverb for cruelty, profligacy, tyranny, and wickedness of every description. Yet this is the man to whose household the Bible sends us for instruction!

Lessons from Nero's household! It seems almost incredible. In the households of Abraham, or Moses, or Samuel, or Daniel, or Sergius Paulus, or Gaius, or Stephanus—in such houses we might well expect there was something to be learned. But who would ever dream of lessons from the household of the worst emperor that ever ruled over Imperial Rome?

But what are these lessons? and where are they to be found? They are to be found at the end of one of St. Paul's Epistles. They form almost the last words which the great Apostle of the Gentiles wrote to his beloved Philippian church when he was a prisoner at Rome. He had probably dipped his pen in the ink for the last time when he put down those simple words, "All the saints salute you, chiefly they that are of Cæsar's household" (Phil. iv. 22).

I frankly confess that I have long read that verse with deep interest. I am one of those old-fashioned people who believe that every word of Scripture is given by inspiration of God; and that every verse is full of instruction, if we had only eyes to see it. I see in the verse before us two weighty lessons, which I should like to impress on every reader's mind. Who these saints were we are not told. Their names, their rank, their history, their difficulties, their work, their lives, their deaths, all are completely hidden from our eyes, and we shall know nothing more till the last day. We only know that there were "saints" in Nero's "household," and that they were courteous saints. Out of these two facts we will draw two lessons.

We see them, for one thing, in Nero's household, the *almighty power of our Lord Jesus Christ*. He could enable people to be Christians even in Nero's palace. By the grace of the Holy Spirit, which he planted in their hearts, he could give them power to be "saints" in the most unfavourable position that mind can conceive. With the Lord Jesus nothing is impossible; nothing is too hard for Christ's grace.

There is something to my mind most important in this lesson. It ought to come home with power to all who live in great towns. It ought to ring in their ears like a trumpet every day they live. It is possible to be a saint in a great city!

Great cities and towns, as a general rule, are most unfavourable places to a man's soul. Those who live in London, Manchester, Liverpool, or Glasgow, know that very well. The whirl of business in which every one seems to move, the incessant hurry to be rich in which all seem to be rushing along,

the intense struggle to “get on,” which seems to be the absorbing thought in everybody’s mind—all this seems to make religion nearly an impossibility. Let a believer walk through Cheapside, or the Strand, in an afternoon—let him mark the careworn faces that he will meet at every step—faces in which money, money—business, business—is so plain that you could almost fancy you saw it—and if he does not ask himself, “How can the soul thrive here?” I shall be much surprised.

Now, if this be true of towns in Christian countries, what must be said of towns in heathen lands? What can we imagine more trying to the soul than the position of a Christian at Rome?

A believer at Rome would have all those trials which are the portion of the household of faith in every age—the trials which you and I find it so hard to bear—an evil heart, an ensnaring world, and a busy devil.

But a believer at Rome would have trials over and above these, of which you and I, living in quiet England, by God’s mercy, know nothing.

He would live in a city where he might expect persecution any day, and where the name of Christ was scarcely known, and if known despised.

He would live in a city where idolatry was the fashion, where the temples of false gods would meet his eye on every side, where the mere fact of not bowing down to dumb idols would be an unusual thing.

He would live in a city where the gospel standard of morality was utterly sneered at; where the excellence of truth, purity, meekness, and gentleness would be unknown.

And yet, in spite of all this, God had a people at Rome. Here, in the midst of the darkest superstition and idolatry—here, in the midst of immorality and profligacy, the grace of God was proved all-powerful. Even here there was a Church which could value the longest epistle Paul ever wrote. Even here there were “saints in Nero’s household.”

Can any one of us imagine the difficulties of a Christian in Nero’s household? I suspect not. I believe that in a Christian country like this, amidst all the insensible restraints and benefits of Scriptural religion, we can scarcely have the faintest conception of a heathen emperor’s household eighteen hundred years ago.

We should have seen justice, purity, and truth daily trodden under foot. We should have had around us hundreds who neither knew nor valued the sixth and seventh commandments. Our eyes would have been saddened by fearful sights, and our ears tortured by vile and defiling words. And even if our souls escaped damage, our lives and liberty would have been in constant peril. We might have felt every morning when we rose from our beds, “There is but a step between me and death.” Yet even in a position like this the grace of God triumphed. By the grace of God there were saints even in Nero’s household.

The grace of God can make a man a Christian anywhere, in any position, under any circumstances, however unfavourable those circumstances may seem to be; and not only make him, but keep him so too. It can give him power to follow the Lord alone, while all around him are following sin and the world. It did so for Daniel at Babylon, for Obadiah in Ahab's court, for Lot in the midst of Sodom and Gomorrah, and for the saints in Nero's household.

It can enable a man to serve God amidst a family of ungodly relations. It can call him out and make him a witness for Christ, while all his kindred are walking in the broad way. It did so for Jonathan the son of Saul, for Abigail the wife of Nabal, for Josiah the son of Amon.

It can enable a man to serve God in the most dangerous professions. It can keep him unspotted, while all around him are defiled. It did so for Cornelius the centurion in the Roman army, and for Zenas the lawyer.

I know the thought that is in many hearts. I know you fancy your position in life prevents your being a decided Christian. You say to yourself, "Had I a different master, or a different dwelling, different fellow-servants, or different friends, a different position in life, or different children, then I would serve the Lord." I warn you against this delusion. I tell you, it is not change of condition that you want, but grace.

It is not learning, nor money, nor the favour of the rich, nor the company of the saints, nor plenty of privileges; it is none of these things that makes a Christian. It is the grace of God that is wanted, and nothing else. It is the work of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost in the soul.

When the Spirit comes into a man's heart, he will be a Christian, notwithstanding any disadvantages. I defy the world, the flesh, and the devil, to keep them back. He will follow Christ, glorify God, and be saved in spite of them all.

Till the Spirit comes into a man's heart, he will never be a Christian, however great his privileges. No! not though he be servant to a prophet: Gehazi served Elisha. No! not though he be companion to a man after God's own heart: Joab was always with David. No! not though he be an apostle and a friend of apostles: Demas went about with Paul, and Judas followed Christ. Without grace no man ever will serve the Lord.

It is grace, grace, nothing but grace, that makes a Christian. You that would be saved remember this. Let this be your first step, your starting-point—Come to the Lord Jesus Christ and ask for grace.

After studying human nature for twenty-four years as a minister, I feel that I ought to know something of it. I believe that one grand reason why many never take up decided religion is a dread of the difficulties connected with it. You say to yourselves, "It is no use; I never can alter; I never can break off from my old ways; I never shall be saved." I charge you, and entreat

you, not to give way to such notions. I tell you that the grace of God can do anything. With grace nothing is impossible.

I have learned never to despair of any one as long as he lives, and is within the reach of the Gospel. I may see no change in many at present. I may die, and see little or nothing done. But still I will hope on. I shall hope to meet in glory, at Christ's appearing, many of those who now walk in the broad way. They may be far off, but grace can yet bring them in; they may seem hardened, but grace can make them tender as a weaned child.

I do not despair of hearing that the most careless have learned that "one thing is needful"—the most formal, that baptism and church-membership are useless unless a man becomes a new creature—the most self-righteous, that other foundation but Jesus no man can lay—the most scoffing, to delight in nothing so much as prayer.

I cannot despair with this verse of Scripture before me. I read this little sentence. I remember what Rome was. I remember what Nero was, and yet I see what grace can do. So long as I live I must and will hope on.

We see, for another thing, in Nero's household, a *bright example of Christian courtesy*. Many as the trials of these saints must have been, countless as their daily vexations and distractions, they did not forget to think of others. They had large and sympathising hearts. They remembered their brethren and sisters at Philippi, though, perhaps, they had never seen them in the flesh. And so, when they heard that the great Apostle of the Gentiles was writing to the Philippian church, they took care to send a kind message: "All the saints salute you, chiefly they that are of Caesar's household."

There is something to my mind inexpressibly beautiful in this little message. It gives me a most pleasant idea of the ways and manners of the early Christians. It shows me that there was nothing rough, and hard, and stern, and harsh, and austere about their Christianity. Oh, no! They were a feeling, warm-hearted, loving, genial, considerate people. They were not entirely taken up with themselves and their own duties, crosses, conflicts, and trials. They could think of others.

Courtesy and consideration for others are Christian graces which receive far less attention than they ought to have. All like to be remembered by others, even if it is only in the postscript of a letter. None like to be altogether forgotten. "Little attentions," as people call them, are anything but little in reality; and that man knows little of human nature who fancies they are of no importance. None are above being pleased by them, whatever they may profess to the contrary. Courtesy, and civility, and manners may doubtless be made too much of; but, for all that, they are not to be despised. They are everything with some, and they are something with all. The Christians of the New Testament day did not despise them, neither should we.

I fear there is a fault among Christians in this matter. Some behave in such a manner that one might fancy they thought it a Christian duty to be rude. But they have utterly mistaken the spirit of the Gospel when they act so; and I tell them so now.

There is no true religion in rudeness. A man who is led by the Spirit ought to be more courteous and polite than others. “What do I more than others?” should be his question. Certainly not, “What do I less?” He will have within him the roots of all true courtesy—humility and charity. He will be lowly in his own eyes, willing to count every one better than himself, and more worthy of honour, attention, and respect. He will be ready to take the lowest place, if need be. He will not be always thinking of self, self’s ways, self’s desires, and self’s wishes; his great aim will be to make others comfortable and happy. Selfishness and pride are the two chief enemies of courtesy, and they are feelings to which a real Christian should feel ashamed to give way. Reader, depend upon it, to be uncivil and un courteous is no mark of grace.

Do we seek for examples of courtesy and considerateness in the Bible? Let us study the conduct of Abraham, as recorded in Gen. xiii. See how he gives Lot the choice of the land:—“If thou wilt take the left hand, then I will go to the right; or if thou depart to the right hand, then I will go to the left.” Lot was a much younger man than himself, and could have found no fault if he had been left to take what Abraham rejected. Lot had no promise of the land for his inheritance, and had received no special marks of God’s favour. Yet Abraham treats Lot as the most deserving of the two, declares himself willing to make any sacrifice, and is ready to make any arrangements by which peace and good feeling may be kept up between them. And he lost nothing by it at last. God loves to honour practical charity and humility.

Do we ask for another example of courtesy? Let us study the character of the Apostle Paul. Let us mark how he frequently sends kind messages to individuals in the epistles that he writes to the churches. Amidst the constant thought and attention which the care of churches demanded—with all the anxieties of doctrinal and practical questions coming daily upon him—troubled on one side by Corinthian immorality, on another by Galatian false teaching, on a third by Hebrew scruples—who, I say, would have expected an apostle to remember so many persons, and to have sent them so many kind messages as are recorded in the last chapter of the Epistle to the Romans? And he reaped his reward. No wonder that Christians loved him tenderly, when they saw such largeness and sympathy of heart. No wonder that a great writer has called him “the most finished gentleman” the world has ever seen—the most complete combination of charity and humility.

I wish, with all my heart, that this subject received more attention than it does from the churches of Christ in the present day. I wish that Christians

thought more of “adorning their doctrine,” and making their religion lovely, beautiful, and attractive in the eyes of men.

I fear, even now, that many will think this lesson from Nero’s household a matter of small importance. I fear that some reader is saying in his heart, “What waste of space is this! How much better to speak to us about inspiration or justification—about election, or grace, or the Millennium, or unfulfilled prophecy! Who knows not such things as these?” Reader, if this be your thought, I am sorry for you. I think you have much yet to learn.

I call nothing *little* in religion which may be practised every hour of the day. From morning to night there is always room for exercising Christian courtesy and consideration.

I call nothing *little* which tends to make religion more beautiful in the eyes of the world. Little arrangements make all the difference in the appearance of a room; little adornments make all the difference in the looks of a bride; little attentions make all the difference in the comfort a master feels in a servant. I am very jealous for my Master’s cause. Anything, anything, to make it more lovely before man!

Cease, I beseech you, to think these things matters of little importance. The practice of them costs little, but the value of them, in the long run, is very great. A kindness of manner and demeanour—a readiness to sympathise with others, to weep with them that weep, and rejoice with them that rejoice—a forwardness to offer assistance when it seems likely to be wanted—a kind message in time of trouble, or a kind inquiry in time of sickness—all these may seem very small matters, but they are not so small as you think. They are not forgotten. They tend to increase your influence; they help to open a door of usefulness; they make people more willing to hear what you have got to say for your Master’s cause. When people see that you care for them, they are more disposed to care for you.

Reader, study to be courteous and considerate. Pray for grace to be so. No man is so by nature. Few children can shut a door behind them without being desired, or say “if you please” unbidden, or “thank you” without being taught. By nature we are all for ourselves.

I leave the subject now to calm consideration. Circumstances, no doubt, make a difference. Early habits, peculiarity of temperament, a solitary life, forgetfulness of mind—all these are things that will have an influence. It seems more easy to some people to be courteous than it does to others. But that all professing Christians should aim at courtesy, I am fully persuaded. Well indeed would it be for the cause of Christ if all Christians walked in the steps I have tried to trace in this paper, and were like the “saints in Nero’s household.”