

“MY BROTHER’S KEEPER”

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on November 25, 1962 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P. M.

Of all quotations from the Bible, one of the most familiar is the statement, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” Almost immediately this brings back to the minds of Bible students the story of Cain and Abel, with Cain’s almost complete disregard for any responsibility concerning his brother Abel. Cain’s love for self was so great that it crowded out any love for Abel. After God had rejected his unauthorized sacrifice, Cain’s pride was so wounded that he killed Abel in jealous anger. Then, when God asked, “Where is thy brother?” he replied, “I know not: am I my brother’s keeper?” (Gen. 4:9).

The hard fact is that every individual has a responsibility to the other, with whom and among whom he lives. Although this responsibility is frequently neglected, or ignored, or repudiated, it is still there. Man’s failure to recognize this responsibility grows out of his own selfishness. One of the great problems of our world is man’s unwillingness to accept his responsibility for the welfare of those around him.

Two Areas of Responsibility

In analyzing man’s responsibility to his fellowmen, we discover that it falls into two categories. First, there is his responsibility to help those who are in physical need. In Matt. 25, for example, in the scene of the last judgment, Jesus indicates that those who are invited to enter the kingdom of heaven will be those who have fed the hungry, given drink to the thirsty, clothed the naked, furnished hospitality to strangers, and visited the sick and those in prison. In Gal. 6:10, we read, “So then, as we have opportunity, let us work that which is good toward all men, and especially toward them that are of the household of the faith.” Obviously, God expects his children to provide for those who are in physical need.

The second area of responsibility is that of spiritual need. Immediately, one thinks of the Christian’s responsibility to preach the gospel to the lost. Such passages as Matt. 28:19-20 come to mind: “Go ye therefore, and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit: teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I commanded you: and lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world.” Bringing the lost to Christ is one of the heaviest of the Christian’s responsibilities. Of this we often speak; to accomplish this we constantly work. Although we never do enough, we are fully aware of this responsibility.

There is a second area of spiritual responsibility, however, concerning which we are not well aware. While we are quite concerned about the non-Christian, we are often grossly negligent concerning the Christians who are becoming weak and inactive. This particular study is designed to point out this very grave responsibility. Christians have a heavy responsibility to encourage, strengthen and edify their fellow-Christians. Notice this statement from the apostle Paul, “But let us, since we are of the day, be sober, putting on the breastplate of faith and love; and for a helmet, the hope of salvation. For God appointed us not unto wrath, but unto the obtaining of salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, that, whether we wake or sleep, we should live together with him. Wherefore exhort one another, and build each other up, even as also ye do.” (I Thess. 5:8-11).

Notice particularly the phrase “Build each other up.” In a similar passage Paul said, “So then let us follow after things that make for peace, and things whereby we may edify one another.” (Rom. 14:19). Similarly in Romans 15:1, he said, “Now we that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Let each one of us please his neighbor for that which is good, unto edifying.” These passages will serve to indicate that each Christian has a responsibility to edify--strengthen, encourage, guide, and teach--his fellow-Christians.

In this undertaking, the crucial element that furnishes the motivation for such important action is love of the brethren. Paul put it, “Knowledge puffeth up but love edifieth.” (I Cor. 8:1). If we love our fellowmen enough, we will feed them when they are hungry, we will take the gospel to them when they are lost, and we will edify them when they are in need of spiritual strength as Christians.

In The Area of Worship

Most Christians are quite familiar with Hebrews 10:25, which says, “Not forsaking our own assembling together, as the custom of some is, but exhorting one another; and so much the more, as ye see the day drawing nigh.” This is usually taken as a direct teaching of the Lord that Christians must attend church services. It is that, but it is more. Notice the opening part of the sentence, “And let us consider one another to provoke unto love and good works; not forsaking our own assembling, as the custom of some is, but exhorting one another; and so much the more, as ye see the day drawing nigh.” (Heb. 10:24-25). Notice that the motive or purpose for not forsaking the assembly is that we may “consider one another to provoke unto love and good works.”

In I Cor. 14:26-31, we find a paragraph from the apostle Paul in which he is admonishing the Christians at Corinth not to allow their worship periods to be periods of conflict, disturbance, and chaos. He lays down certain rules for orderly worship and then says, "Let all things be done unto edifying." (I Cor. 14:26). In Ephesians 5:19 Paul says, "Speaking one to another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your hearts to the Lord." Notice that the singing is to include speaking one to another. Similarly, in Col. 3:16, we find, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; in all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts unto God." While it is true that the primary purpose of worship is the glorification of God, there is a second important purpose--the admonition and encouragement of our fellow-Christians.

In the Area of Influence

The church of the first century was made up of both Jews and Gentiles. Many of the Gentiles had come out of paganism, having formerly known idolatry and the various practices of the heathen temples. In this situation, Paul points out, "All things are lawful; but not all things are expedient. All things are lawful; but not all things edify." (I Cor. 10:23). He speaks further in I Cor. 8:7-13, "Howbeit there is not in all men that knowledge: but some, being used until now to the idol, eat as to a thing sacrificed to an idol; their conscience being weak is defiled. But food will not commend us to God; neither, if we eat not are we the worse; nor, if we eat are we the better. But take heed lest by any means this liberty of yours become a stumbling block to the weak. For if a man see thee who hath knowledge sitting at meat in an idol's temple, will not his conscience, if he is weak, be emboldened to eat things sacrificed to idols? For through thy knowledge he who is weak perisheth, the brother for whose sake Christ died. And this, sinning against the brethren, and wounding their conscience when it is weak., ye sin against Christ. Wherefore, if meat causeth my brother to stumble, I will eat no flesh forevermore, that I cause not my brother to stumble." This great apostle to the Gentiles felt deeply his responsibility to those whose pagan background caused them to be weak and in understanding what things were lawful for Christians. Should we not also be concerned about the welfare of others, even to the point of giving up things that within themselves are lawful for our brother's sake?

In writing to the Romans Paul presents a similar situation. In this case the Jews had previously lived under certain restrictions as to clean and unclean meat, while the Gentiles had known no such restrictions. In the church together, the Jews were often critical of the Gentiles because of their lack of scruples along these lines. Paul writes, "Who art thou that judgest the servant of another? to his own lord he standeth or falleth ... But thou, why dost thou judge thy brother? or thou again, why dost thou set at naught thy brother? for we shall all stand before the Judgment seat of God ... Let us not therefore judge one another anymore; but judge ye this rather, that no man put a stumbling block in his brother's way, or an occasion of falling. I know, and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus, that nothing is unclean of itself: save that to him who accounteth anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean. For if because of meat thy brother is grieved, thou walkest no longer in love. Destroy not with thy meat him for whom Christ died. Let not then your good be evil spoken of: for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. For he that herein serveth Christ is well-pleasing to God, and approved of men. So then let us follow after things that make for peace, and things whereby we may edify one another. Overthrow not for meat's sake the work of God. All things indeed are clean; howbeit it is evil for that man to eat with offense. It is good not to eat flesh, or to drink wine, nor to do anything whereby thy brother stumbleth." (Rom. 14:4, 10, 13-21).

These situations remind us also of something that our Lord said while he was still here on the earth, "But whoso shall cause one of these little ones that believe on me to stumble, it is profitable for him that a great millstone should be hanged about his neck and that he should be sunk in the depths of the sea." Again, it is very clear that Christians have a responsibility to their fellow-Christians, lest their examples cause those who are younger in the faith or less favored in background to stumble and fall away from Christ.

In the Area of Those Who Fall Into Sin

What should be the Christian's response when brethren fall into gross sin? Through the years there have been many occasions when there has sat across the desk someone who had formerly been faithful as a Christian, but who had fallen into serious sin of one kind or another. Some of the most heart-breaking experiences that I have known have come out of such moral and spiritual breakdowns. What should the Christian do? Again, let us listen to God as he speaks on this subject.

"Brethren, even if a man be overtaken in any trespass, ye who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; looking to thyself, lest thou also be tempted. Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ." (Gal. 6:1-2). Again, "And we exhort you, brethren, admonish the disorderly, encourage the faint-hearted, support the weak, be long-suffering toward all. See that none render unto anyone evil for evil; but always follow after that which is good, one toward another, and toward all." (I Thess. 5:14-15).

Yet again, "Wherefore lift up the hands that hang down, and the palsied knees; and make straight paths for your feet, so that which is lame be not turned out of the way, but rather he healed." (Heb. 12:12-13). Also, "My brethren, if any among you err from the truth, and one convert him; let him know, that he who converteth a sinner from the error of his way shall save a soul from death, and shall cover a multitude of sins." (James 5:19-20).

But Discipline is Necessary

The Christian is to be sympathetic and helpful to the one who has fallen into serious sin. However, this does not mean that discipline is not to be administered on occasion. Look again at Christ's instructions concerning the settling of matters that divide brethren; "And if thy brother sin against thee, go, show him his fault between thee and him alone: If he hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. But if he hear thee not, take with thee one or two more, that at the mouth of two witnesses or three every word may be established. And if he refuse to hear them, tell it unto the church; and if he refuse to hear the church also, let him be unto thee as the Gentile and the publican." (Matt. 18:15-17).

God's discipline is also clearly indicated in such passages as Romans 16:17-18, as follows, "Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them that are causing the divisions and occasions of stumbling, contrary to the doctrine which ye learned: and turn away from them. But they that are such serve not our Lord Christ, but their own belly; and by their smooth and fair speech they beguile the hearts of the innocent." Paul dealt with the case of incest at Corinth in these words, "It is actually reported that there is fornication among you, and such fornication as is not eyen among the Gentiles, that one of you hath his father's wife ... in the name of our Lord Jesus, ye being gathered together and my spirit, with the power of the Lord Jesus, to deliver such a one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus ... But as it is, I wrote unto you not to keep company, if any man that is named a brother be a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or an extortioner; with such a one no, not to eat."

Still another statement of the disciplinary procedure arranged for the Lord's church is found in II Thess. 3:6, 11, 14, 15, as follows, "Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye withdraw yourselves from every brother that walketh disorderly, and not after the tradition which they received of us ... For we hear of some that walk among you disorderly, that work not at all, but are busybodies ... And if any man obeyeth not our word by this epistle, note that man, that ye have no company with him, to the end that he may be ashamed. And yet count him not as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother."

Christians are to be sympathetic and concerned about sin that creeps into the lives of their fellow-Christians. They are to teach, admonish, encourage, reprove, and exhort. If this should fail, then they are to withdraw fellowship, dealing with the sinner not as an enemy but as a brother who has fallen away. In our day church discipline has fallen into disuse, to the hurt of the body of Christ. It requires a great deal of courage, a great deal of skill, and is fraught with many difficulties, but it must be administered if the church is to remain pure and have the respect of those both within and without. God commanded such discipline; we must obey his commands.

Conclusion

The Christian is one who is concerned for the good of all men, especially those who are brethren. He has a concern for their physical needs; he has an even deeper concern for their spiritual needs. Let us be more alert and more concerned about the needs of those who wear the name of Christ and who are tempted on every side. Let us pray for our brethren that they may remain firm and strong until the Lord calls them home. Let us associate with each other more and talk of spiritual things more often that we may be strengthened. Let us examine ourselves so that we may be worthy examples for others and so that when we talk with others concerning their neglect of the Lord it may have the right kind of influence. Let us work so that the expression often heard in public prayers, "May we all be gathered together with Thee to spend eternity, without the loss of even one," may be a reality.