

Grace be with you and peace from God, our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ

Rom.12,1: *Offer your very selves to God: a living sacrifice, dedicated and fit for his acceptance.*

Collect: Almighty and ever-living God, you are the author and giver of all good things. Graft in our hearts the love of your name, increase in us true religion – faith active in love –, nourish us with all goodness, and of your great mercy keep us in the same; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. AMEN

LOOK FORWARD IN FAITH

1. Look forward in faith –
All time is in God's hand.
Walk humbly with him
And trust his future plan.
God has wisely led
His people by his power.
Look forward in hope,
He us each new hour.

2. Look forward in faith –
The world is in God's care.
His purpose of love
He calls on us to share.
In our neighbour's need,
The Lord is present still.
He blesses the meek!
The earth will know God's will.

3. Look forward in faith –
God gives us life each day.
Go onward with Christ,
His Spirit guides our way.
Now God lets us live
Within the sphere of grace.
Trust ever in him –
He rules o'er earth and space!

A Scobie

Rom.12,9-21:

“Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in love. Honour one another above yourselves. Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervour,

-serving the Lord. Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Practice hospitality.

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.

Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay', says the Lord. On the contrary: 'If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.' Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

Dear friends, brothers and sisters in our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ

Love must be sincere, says Paul, and is, of course, not speaking about something that is optional for the church and the Christian, but is the very goal of what faith intends and is about. The practical applications which follow this ground-rule are all highly relevant. Noble and beautiful, they bring into our relationships truth and righteousness, affirmation and support, peace, reconciliation and unity. Again, this is the aim of faith, that without which faith in the end is goal-less and pointless. Are these not the deep relationship qualities which we yearn for? Does not every need demand the willing service of love? And does not Jesus Christ say to those who profess to know and belong to him, yet fail to love and care for the needs of those in whom they encounter him: "*Depart from me, you who are cursed ... Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do it for me*"? (Mt.25,41-45)

Sincere love – practical, respectful, patient, persevering, God-honouring, gracious love, willingly given: that is here the appeal to the church, to us all. And while there may be much else that calls for our attention, this appeal comes first.

But how about it? How to avoid the fate suffered by so many on hearing this appeal? Endorsed at first by those to whom the appeal is made, in the process of responding its ideals are then weakened to such a degree that the result in the end hardly matches these ideals anymore. Which is why it is ever so important that we are conscious of the condition on which this appeal and its instructions depend and on which they stand.

The point is this: That these instructions result in you actually doing them rather than disappear without trace into some kind of void after you hear them, is not a matter of your will and of the strength of your resolve. But this goes against the normal pattern, does it not? Normally a command or an instruction is a matter of will and resolve, the way to take it is to put your mind to it. Not here, however, for the simple reason that what you put your mind to when your heart is not in it, that is not sincere. It is pretence. It may have the appearance of love but not the essence, and it will quickly fade.

It is not a matter of your will and resolve, of putting your mind to it - even if, of course, that comes into it at one point -, no, it is a matter before all else of the state of your *faith*. This explains, and is the reason why Paul approaches this matter over the space of 11 chapters by laying out the word of faith. It is why he first sets forth the doctrinal side of faith, dedicating to this chapter after chapter.

If these instructions for sincere love are to go anywhere, they must be preceded by a word which it is necessary to hear, receive and believe. [see Lk.10,41 Jesus to Martha about Mary who is listening instead of doing: "*Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed – or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.*"] What makes us ready for the instructions to sincere love is not that we say 'OK, let's put our mind to it!', but that we know our dependence on the word, that we receive the word of faith, which is Christ, and are in him through faith.

You see, chapters 1 to 11 don't present us with a word that we could equally well say to ourselves and to each other, even though it turns out that this word understands us like none other. All such words – those we can say to ourselves -, and all the ways in which we hear the gospel of Jesus Christ, God's Word, as though they were really our own, do not leave nor come from beyond the realm of who and what we are (and what we make of ourselves!) – creatures of a sinfully weak nature incapable of producing and upholding the goal of these instructions for sincere love. Such words, whatever they may move, leave us as we are, bound to our sinfulness, and can only darken the way and counsel of God's salvation.

But the word of faith, spoken through the Scriptures, announces to us that we are lost, all of us without exception, that we are in need of being redeemed from the ruling principle that is sin within, which makes us enemies of God and haters of His will, endlessly seeking ways not to acknowledge Him and suppressing the truth; it announces to us the holiness and justice of God, that He judges evil and says the righteous shall live; it announces to us the redeemer who is the righteous one, His Son who assumed our flesh and took upon him the sins of the world as they stand in the face of God and died to make us free, the punishment being on him that brought us peace (Is.53,5); it announces to us that God raised him from the dead and that all who believe in him, repenting of their sins, are counted righteous through his righteousness and shall live by their faith in Christ; it announces to us the grace and love of God who justifies the ungodly by condemning sin once and for all on the cross of Christ and declaring: "Your sins are forgiven!"; it announces to us the gift of the Holy Spirit and that he indwells every believer in accordance with faith, making present to us the Lord Jesus Christ and his gracious rule, the love of God and its hope.

It is the hearer of this word to whom these instructions are given, because of what by hearing and believing they have received and do receive. Not the "I shall!" of the will, not the resolve to put your mind to it, but the prayerful hearing of the word of forgiveness and grace in repentance and faith (and *here only* are mind and will so prepared that they are usefully employed in following the instructions!) is the condition from which arises the freedom to obey, the zeal to do so, the heartfelt desire to see it done, to love sincerely, to overcome sin and follow in the way of Jesus, to do it at a cost and begin again when having failed.

The instructions are about putting something together – the life of love. If we compare this to a construction toy, say a Lego model of a Land Rover, we may have a reasonably good illustration. On the box it gives an age reference of 11+, indicating that the capacity to follow the instructions and construct this thing successfully lies beyond the person whose life has not developed sufficiently. Such a person, say a 5-year old, may still put the pieces together, but the construction, process and result, will not be the sincere form envisaged in the instructions. So it is in the matter of putting together the life of love commanded by faith: it requires the capacity of the developed life. And the growth of this life is the gift of God in Christ Jesus and comes by hearing, from faith to faith.

Dear friends, love must be sincere. And it can be, out of Christ's solidarity with us sinners and our attachment to him. As is well captured in Paul's word: *"I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."* (Gal.2,20) Shall we not through him who strengthens all who look to him grow strong in his strength, that is, in love? AMEN

WILL YOU COME AND FOLLOW ME?

1. Will you come and follow me,
if I but call your name?
Will you go where you don't know
and never be the same?
Will you let my love be shown,
will you let my name be known,
will you let my life be grown
in you and you in me?
2. Will you leave your self behind
if I but call your name?
Will you care for cruel and kind
and never be the same?
Will you risk the hostile stare
should your life attract or scare,
will you let me answer prayer
in you and you in me?
3. Will you let the blinded see
if I but call your name?
Will you set the prisoners free
and never be the same?
Will you kiss the leper clean
and do such as this unseen,
and admit to what I mean
in you and you in me?
4. Will you love the 'you' you hide
if I but call your name?
Will you quell the fear inside
and never be the same?
Will you use the faith you've found to reshape the world around
through my sight and touch and sound
in you and you in me?
5. Lord, your summons echoes true
when you but call my name.
Let me turn and follow you
and never be the same.

In your company I'll go
where your love and footsteps show.
Thus I'll move and live and grow
in you and you in me.

J. Bell and G. Maule

Time of prayer / intercession;

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.

Now to him who is able through the power which is at work among us to do immeasurably more than we can ask or conceive, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus from generation to generation for evermore! (Aph.3,20-21)

Keep hold of what is good and avoid all forms of evil. May God himself, the God of peace, make you holy through and through, and keep you sound in spirit, soul, and body, free of any fault when our Lord Jesus Christ comes. (1Thess.5,21-23)

And the blessing of God almighty, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit be among you and remain with you.

AMEN