

# The Gospel of Practicality

## (vv. 1-25)

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In 1889 there was discovered a piece of literature containing a remarkable comment regarding the behavior of Christians circa A.D. 130.

Now the Christians, O King. . . They know and believe in God, the Maker of heaven and earth, in whom are all things and from whom are all things. . . They do not commit adultery or fornication, they do not bear false witness, they do not deny a deposit, nor covet what is not theirs; they honour father and mother; they do good to those who are their neighbors, and when they are judges they judge uprightly . . . and those who grieve they comfort, and make them their friends; and they do good to their enemies; and their wives, O King, are pure as virgins, and their daughters modest; and their men abstain from all unlawful wedlock and from all impurity, in the hope of recompense that is to come in another world; but as for their servants or handmaids, or their children, if they have any, they persuade them to become Christians for the love they have towards them; and when they have become so they call them without distinction brethren.<sup>1</sup>

Do you see the lifestyle revealed in this comment? Christianity for our brethren in A.D. 130 was for real! It was practical. It was just as useful on Tuesday morning as on Sunday morning. It was a lifestyle. It touched everything from worship to family, to job, even to the pots and pans! Nothing was more practical in their lives than the gospel of Christ! No mere intellectual faith divorced from practice. No mechanical rituals left behind in the shadows of a darkened cathedral. No theological debates on issues of no concern. To them the gospel was for real.

The tiny book of Philemon provides an amazing insight into the lifestyle resulting from the gospel's practicality. The basic message of Philemon is that of restoring peace between people. How much more practical can it get?

Several observe that the book of Philemon contains no eloquent doctrinal discourse (cf. John 1; Philippians 2:5ff.; etc.), but deals with the nitty-gritty business of living Christianity. In a sense, this book presents the best kind of doctrinal exposition—application of the gospel's doctrine to Tuesday morning!

The book of Philemon is a gem. Tucked neatly between Hebrews and Titus it is neglected as most readers pass over its single page and twenty-five verses. But it is a strong and lovely letter instructing its readers about how real Christian doctrine is in day-to-day living. When you read the book of Philemon, you are forced to lay aside theological jargon and stuffy discussions. In this short book you come face to face with basic facts, simple terms, and practical application. The great doctrines of inspiration, the incarnation, the Godhead, and redemption are vital and must be understood—but Philemon shows us how to *practice* these doctrines. And, it is in this practical application that this small book's value is found.

If you really want to know what it means to be a Christian on Tuesday morning as well as on Sunday morning, the book of Philemon is for you! Carefully consider the following observations which show that the "gospel of practicality" must be practiced in our lives.

## LIVING HABITS OF THE PRACTICAL GOSPEL

From a general study of Philemon we are able to observe that practical Christianity involves the following living habits.

Practical Christianity practices *Christian love*. Repeatedly throughout this book is an emphasis upon love. There are at least three specifics regarding love that Paul stresses. *First*, it ties us together in fellowship (vv. 1, 2, 12, 16). "Love" is the unalterable tie that binds godly hearts together (John 13:35; Romans 12:15; Colossians 2:2). Such gives strength, joy, and solace. *Second*, it edifies brethren (vv. 7-9). "Refreshed" literally means "rested." The tired hearts of the poor and persecuted found a wonderful respite, cheer, and gladness in Philemon's presence (cf. 1 Samuel 23:16; 1 Thessalonians 5:11-14). *Third*, it accepts unconditionally (vv. 7, 22). The word "accept" refers to a special interest in and a fully acceptance of another. It is a special "welcome" that is extended to another. Because of this quality of love, brethren will take special interest in one another.

This threefold practice of love will clearly mark brethren as followers of God. These actions require effort and energy, and it is easy to neglect them. But they must be practiced if the gospel is to become "real" in our lives.

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Practical Christianity practices *service* (vv. 9, 14). The upper room revealed this critical aspect of Christianity (Luke 22:24-27). Jesus, the Great Servant founded a kingdom whose citizens were willing to assume the lowest positions, whose power was to be found in humility, and whose success was to be measured, not in the control of others but, in submission to others (Philippians

2:3-8). Paul and Philemon served others and because of their serving attitude Christianity became real in their lives.

Practical Christianity practices *forgiveness* (vv. 17-19). Philemon had legal rights to prosecute Onesimus to the fullest extent of the law. He had been wronged, embarrassed, and robbed. The very thought of the runaway slave's treason must have stirred the worst feelings in Philemon's heart. But he was asked to forgive! And evidently his character was known to be forgiving (v. 21).

Forgiveness is assisted by remembering that we also suffer failings. Those who are aware of their personal faults know better than anyone else how unchristian it would have been for Philemon to have been harsh on Onesimus! There is no practice more practical to Christianity than forgiveness (Luke 23:34).

Practical Christianity practices *assembling with brethren* (v. 2). In Philemon's house, the assembly of the Colossian saints provided encouragement to brethren struggling with trials and on the verge of desertion. Assemblies are vital to practical Christianity (cf. Hebrews 10:19-25). Assemblies help us encourage and exhort one another. They help us study God's Holy Book and understand how the matters of inspiration are to be applied in life.

Practical Christianity practices *providence* (v. 15). "For perhaps. . ." refers to the maneuvers of God accomplishing His will on earth through "mysterious ways" (cf. Philippians 1:12; 2:13). Christians ought to be aware of the fact that God's presence is found in all aspects of life. Because of his "ever presence," we should constantly consider God's will in all we do. The practicality of the Christian faith is summed up well in the concept of Providence (cf. Acts 21:14; James 4:15). A proper understanding of Providence will cause us to thank God for His continual care and guidance.

Practical Christianity practices *respect toward all* (vv. 11, 16). Whether a slave or free man, Onesimus deserved respect as a human being (cf. Acts 10:28, 34). Pride, leading to prejudice and derogatory remarks about others, is foreign to practical Christianity (Philippians 2:3). To believers *all* men are to be treated with equal respect, and even more so our fellow saints (Galatians 6:10).

Practical Christianity practices *evangelism* (v. 6). Paul's prayer was that Philemon's faith be

shared with others. Philemon was not to keep it all to himself. Philemon possessed a “knowledge” of all spiritual blessings, and this obligated him to inform others about the wonderful blessings “in Christ.” This practical exercise of Christianity is an imperative duty. All believers must, somehow, tell others about the faith that was once for all delivered. How wonderful it is to see brethren practice this aspect of Christianity (Acts 8:4).

Practical Christianity practices *praying* (vv. 4, 5). Central in any believer’s faith is prayer. Prayers feed our souls and provide an access to heaven’s throne where answers can be found. Far too few practice a habit of praying and not the reality of praying! Trite expressions, thoughtless phrases, and wandering thoughts will never produce the genuine joys of sincere praying! (Luke 18:1).

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*God’s gospel cannot be cloistered within our minds; it must be practiced!*

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Practical Christianity practices *peacemaking* (v. 10). You cannot get more practical than this! (Cf. Ephesians 2:14.) Christians are to be ever alert for opportunities to create peace and terminate friction (Matthew 5:9).

### ONE VITAL FACT OF THE PRACTICAL GOSPEL

From these general observations, one fact needs brief emphasis—in order for Christianity to become profitable *it must be practiced!* (Matthew 23:2).

God’s gospel cannot be cloistered within our minds; it must be practiced! As eagerly as you practice it on Sunday morning, you must practice it on Tuesday morning! This must be done if Christianity is to become a personal blessing.

How practical is *your* practice of Christianity? Suppose a man should sail all the boiling and blazing day in a dingy, going round and round an old Dutch ship in a harbor. The next day you see him creeping up and down the masts and spars, examining the rigging. You ask him what he is doing, and he replies, “I have heard that this ship

is a dull sailer, and I want to look at it and see.” Could he ever find out in the way he is going about it? No. Let him weigh anchor, spread canvas, take the wind, and bear away if he wants to know how the ship sails. In the same manner is Christianity. If a Christian wants to find the joys of faith, let him not row round and round the hull and creep up and down the masts and spars of feelings. Let him spread the sails of resolution and bear away on the ocean of duty. Only by practice will he discover the joys of the practical gospel!

### CONCLUSION

One person came out of the church building and met a passing friend who asked, “What? Is the sermon done?” “Done?” said the other. “No. It is ended, but it remains to be done!” Such is the case with the gospel passing from practicality—it is ended, the message is completed, but it is far from done!

Will you examine *your* practice of faith? Is the gospel “done” in your life? Remember, to our brethren in the first century, the gospel was real because it was practiced. Listen once more to a description of the practical gospel in the lives of our brethren in the first century.

The church grew stronger and won out over the other religions for a number of reasons: because of what the Christians believed and wrote down in the New Testament about Christ and the apostles; because of the way the Christians showed the power of the risen Christ in their midst. Those who formerly had forsaken their wives now lived with them faithfully. Those who had valued riches above all else now shared their goods. Those who had murdered and would not live with men of another tribe now prayed for their enemies. Earnings were placed in a common fund to care for the widows, the orphans, the aged, and the shipwrecked. Above all else the heathens were moved by the courage with which the Christians died for their faith. “Among us,” said one of the early Christians, “you will find uneducated persons, workingmen, old women who are not able to explain in words the good of our teaching, but they show it in deeds. They do not make speeches but do good works. When struck, they do not strike again. When robbed, they do not go to law. They give to those who ask of them and love their neighbors as themselves.”<sup>2</sup>

—John Kachelman

### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>*Texts and Studies; The Apology of Aristides*, Cambridge, 1891, p. 49.

<sup>2</sup>Roland H. Bainton, *The Church of Our Fathers*, pp. 26, 27.