

# LESSON 194

## FELLOWSHIP IN THE CHURCH

Related Scripture: I Peter 4:8-19

**KEY VERSE:** "As every man hath received the gift, even so minister the same one to another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God."—I Peter 4:10.

Lesson Scripture: Acts 4:31-37; Romans 15:1-7, 30-32

### Introduction:

There is in a genuine church such as the Lord Jesus organized during His personal ministry and authorized to carry on His work until He comes again a fellowship of the saints of God that can be found nowhere else on earth. Let those who will have their pipe dreams of an imaginary "church" that never meets, and most of whose imaginary "members" never even see each other, much less have any personal interest in each other. Simple children of God rejoice rather in the fellowship of real believers in a real church in real life.

Of course, there is a spiritual family relationship of all the people of God of every time and place, but this does not constitute a church or house of God, any more than a natural family constitutes a home. A family may be scattered around the world (my own brothers and sisters are scattered from Pennsylvania to California), but a home requires a definite location. So does a church, assembly, or congregation of the saints.

For a study of this lesson on church fellowship, we can use the following outline:

1. Praying Power, Acts 4:31
2. Parting Possessions, Acts 4:32-37
  - a. Generosity and grace, 32, 33
  - b. Dedication and distribution, 34, 35
  - c. Land and love, 36, 37
3. Pleasing People, Romans 15:1-3
  - a. Enduring Christians, 1
  - b. Edifying Christians, 2
  - c. Example of Christ, 3
4. Patient Pattern, Romans 15:4-7
  - a. Pattern for learning, 4
  - b. Pattern from the Lord, 5
  - c. Pattern of likeness, 6
  - d. Pattern of love, 7
5. Prayerful Provisions, Romans 15:30-32
  - a. Strife in prayer, 30
  - b. Service in prayer, 31
  - c. Success in prayer, 32

### Notes on the Printed Text:

#### Praying Power, Acts 4:31.

Peter and John had been arrested and threatened by the Jewish rulers for preaching the resurrection of Christ. The rulers had "called them, and commanded them not to speak at all nor teach in the name of Jesus." (Acts 4:18.) In this situation, the prayer of the church was not for safety or compromise, but rather: "Lord, behold their threatenings; and grant unto thy servants, that with all boldness they may speak thy word" (v. 29). Their prayer was answered.

#### Parting Possessions, Acts 4:32-37.

We may make two or three observations on this New Testament experiment in communal life. First, it was limited to the membership of the church at Jerusalem, and so far as we can tell from the record was never tried in any other church. Second, it was completely voluntary. (Acts 5:4.) Third, from Acts 11:29 and Romans 15:26 it appears that within a few years the church at Jerusalem was in need of financial "relief" from other churches, where individual members were still handling their own finances and so were able to continue their contributions.

#### Generosity and Grace, 32, 33.

Common ownership can work for the common good so long, and only so long, as all the partners are "of one heart and of one soul." In this first church, material considerations were completely subordinated to the support of the apostles in their "witness of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus."

#### Dedication and Distribution, 34, 35.

"From each according to his ability and to each according to his need" is an excellent principle when each one freely dedicates his full ability and no one is greedy. Attempts to impose such a system by force of a dictatorial government are something else. Again, let us remember that this was a purely voluntary arrangement among kindred souls. Even so, may we note from the next chapter that it did not work perfectly.

#### Land and Love, 36, 37.

Barnabas is mentioned as an example of a disciple who loved his Lord and his church more than he loved his land. Surely it is not God's will that every believer in Christ should thus dispose of his possessions; but if in special circumstances He does so lead, we can only stand in admiration of a disciple so devoted.

#### Pleasing People, Romans 15:1-3.

We ought to please God first, other people (especially our brethren) second, and ourselves last. To put people before God is gross idolatry; to put self before others is shortsighted selfishness. In eternity we shall find that those have provided best for themselves who have pleased God first and self last.

#### Enduring Christians, 1.

Of necessity the weak are preoccupied with their own infirmities; the strong are able to help, and ought to do so. Spiritual strength, like physical strength, increases with use; if we fail to make good use of whatever strength we have, we are likely to find our own infirmities increasing.

#### Edifying Christians, 2.

Keeping God first puts definite limits on the extent to which we can please others. We are to please them only "for good to edification." Some people might be pleased to see us do wrong, but we cannot afford to sin to please them.

#### Example of Christ, 3.

Christ's faithfulness to His Father brought upon Him the reproaches of those whose hatred really was directed against God, and so it will be with us. Our efforts to help others will often be misunderstood and unappreciated. Nevertheless, if we would follow the example of Christ, we must still go about doing good. (Acts 10:38.)

#### **Patient Pattern, Romans 15:4-7.**

God has provided a pattern of the patience we need if we would receive the promise. (He. 10:36.) Genuine believers in Christ do not profess faith in Christ and then abandon that faith. They may have a hard time learning to be patient, but they do learn.

#### **Pattern for Learning, 4.**

Reference here of course is to the Old Testament scriptures. Even more, now that we have the New Testament, the word of God is an inexhaustible source of the patience and comfort through which we have our hope.

#### **Pattern from the Lord, 5.**

Thank God, He is patient; He is the Comforter; and He is able to make us "likeminded one toward another according to Christ Jesus."

#### **Pattern of Likeness, 6.**

For our invisible and universal friends, we may note that the expressions "one mind" and "one mouth" cannot be taken too literally. There is no reference to a universal invisible mouth. Rather, the members of the church at Rome (while it was still one of Christ's churches) were admonished to be so likeminded, and so alike in their testimony, that it would be as if they all had the same mind and spoke through the same mouth.

#### **Pattern of Love, 7.**

"God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." (Ro. 5:8.) "Him that cometh to me," said Jesus, "I will in no wise cast out." (Jn. 6:37.) Christ received us as we were: let us so receive one another, "to the glory of God."

#### **Prayerful Provision, Romans 15:30-32.**

From the context we learn that Paul was on his way to Jerusalem for a ministry to the saints there, planning to visit Rome later. His plans did not work out quite as he expected; yet "through the will of God" his prayers were answered with divine provisions that Paul might not have chosen for himself.

#### **Strife in Prayer, 30.**

Prayer is a vital part of the good fight of faith. The battle is the Lord's; we must have His help; and through prayer we can help one another in getting that help from above. Paul called upon the Roman saints "through our Lord Jesus Christ, and through the love of the Spirit." The words "love of the Spirit" can be interpreted to mean the Spirit's love toward us, or our love toward the Spirit, or love that comes from the Spirit. It is good doctrine any way we take it.

#### **Service in Prayer, 31.**

Deliverance from persecuting enemies and acceptance by the people of God to whom we would minister—both are necessary to effective service such as every true servant of God desires to perform. All who pray with and for the servants of God have a very real part in their service.

#### **Success in Prayer, 32.**

Paul did get to Rome—as a prisoner. Sometimes God answers our prayers in unexpected ways. But when we trust and pray and serve "through the will of God" we are always successful, even when our success looks like failure to the world. Even as a prisoner, and even when he faced a martyr's death, Paul retained his joy in the Lord and shared in the spiritual refreshing of God's people.

#### **Key Verse:**

"As every man hath received the gift, even so minister the same one to another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God."—I Peter 4:10.

No comment of ours can sum it all up as well as the words of Jesus: "Freely ye have received; freely give." (Mat. 10:8.)