

Editorial: Following the Guidance

From early on in the pandemic, official guidance on what to do to stay safe and keep others safe has been readily available on sites such as GOV.UK and NIDirect. This guidance covers many situations, and of necessity is frequently updated to take account of amendments to regulations, emerging scientific evidence, current prevalence of COVID-19, and so on. In reading the guidance, two words occur very frequently: 'must' and 'should'.

In a similar vein, when we turn to God's word, the Bible, we find that 'command' and 'commandments' occur often in the Old Testament, as does 'law' (meaning direction or teaching). It is essential for us to realise that these are the Commandments of the LORD, and the Law of the LORD. Likewise in the New Testament, we come across the words 'must' and 'ought'. It is worth noting that the Holy Scriptures are unchanging: "For ever, O LORD, thy word is settled in heaven" (Psalm 119:89). They are also of great practical help for day-to-day living; the psalmist goes on to say, "Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto to my path" (Psalm 119:105).

Digressing a little: some of the 'musts' of the Bible apply to the Lord Jesus Christ, e.g. "I must be about my Father's business" (Luke 2:49); "Even so must the Son of man be lifted up" (John 3:14); "he must rise again from the dead" (John 20:9); "he must reign" (1 Cor. 15:25).

Another 'must' applies to those who do not believe in Him: Peter said to his fellow countrymen, "Neither is there salvation in any other [than Jesus Christ]: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). See also John 3:7.

However, many of the occurrences of 'must' and 'ought' refer to obligations on those who do belong to the Lord Jesus Christ. Examples include: "Men ought always to pray, and not to faint" (Luke 18:1); "We ought to obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29); and "We ... that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak, and not to please ourselves" (Romans 15:1). In the remainder of this article, we will consider in a little detail some occurrences of the word 'ought' in the writings of the apostle John.

"Ought ... to walk ... as He walked" (1 John 2:6)

In considering this verse, and indeed the verses in the headings below, it's helpful to realise that the Greek word here translated 'ought' has a

greater force than ‘recommended’ or even ‘strongly advised’ – it means to owe, and speaks of a moral obligation. The verse is saying that one who claims to abide in Christ needs to walk as Christ walked. In scripture, walking signifies ‘the whole round of the activities of the individual life’¹. The Lord Jesus Christ was able to say “I do always those things that please him [The Father]” (John 8:29).

“Ought to wash one another’s feet” (John 13:14)

In the upper room, the Lord Jesus washed the feet of the disciples. This was a customary practice in that part of the world, but it was usually done by a slave! The Lord was showing great humility in what He did, and thereby leaving an example to be followed. It has been suggested that Peter had this in mind when he wrote “Yea, all of you be subject one to another, and be clothed with humility” (1 Peter 5:5). As the Lord Jesus indicated to Peter, the need for feet to be washed is a picture of the inevitable defilement of the believer in their daily walk (John 13:8-10). Foot-washing can therefore be associated with restoration. In regard to foot-washing in this figurative sense, one commentator quotes Gal. 6:1: “Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness”.

“Ought to lay down our lives for the brethren” (1 John 3:16)

This verse starts: “Hereby perceive we the love of God, because he laid down his life for us”. The Lord Jesus Christ speaks of laying down his life, in John 10. He laid it down voluntarily, and purposefully (John 10:15-18). He again speaks of laying down His life in John 15:13: “Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.” How we rejoice that “Christ died for our sins” (1 Cor. 15:3)! He, and He alone, was qualified, as the Just One, to suffer in our stead, “that he might bring us to God” (1 Peter 3:18).

In our verse (1 John 3:16), His laying down His life for us is given as an example to be followed – being willing to self-sacrifice (ultimately, if necessary, even to die) for fellow Christians. From the first century onwards, being a follower of Christ has sometimes been very risky. In Romans 16:3-4, Paul pays tribute to Priscilla and Aquila, “who have for my life laid down their own necks”. They were still alive, but had clearly

¹ From WALK, *peripateō*, in *Vine’s Amplified Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*.

put themselves in great danger. I confess that I find all of this extremely challenging.

“Ought to love one another” (1 John 4:11)

To understand the force of this verse, we need to read the previous one: “Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins”. God loved us when we were in rebellion against Him, to the extent of sending his own Son to be an expiatory sacrifice for our sins, on the basis of which He has delivered us from the wrath we deserved to suffer eternally. Our verse essentially says, “if (i.e. since) God so loved us, we too ought to love one another”. Once again, the standard is extremely high. Read 1 Corinthians 13:4-8 for a description of this love.

May I, and each Christian who reads this, be given the necessary divine help to so live.

Amen.