



THE COLLECTION

Two Plates

A dug Union plate, a Confederate plate stamped 1862, and what we were supposed to learn.

CHRIS VALLETTA

Union US and Confederate CS plates
Civil War

I FOUND THESE TWO in an antique shop in Pennsylvania, the kind with a back room full of military history. One is stamped US. The other is stamped CS. I was told they were Civil War, one from each side.

I thought they were belt buckles. They're plates. A Union soldier wore an oval brass plate like the top one on the flap of his cartridge box, the leather case that carried his ammunition, and a similar one on his belt. The face was stamped from thin brass and the back was filled with lead, with wire loops to hold it on.

The US plate came out of the ground. You can see it in the metal. The face is eaten through at the edges and the back is crusted with rust. Somebody carried it, and it ended up in the dirt.

The CS plate is a different story, and I'll tell it straight. It's clean, and the back is stamped 1862. Collectors will tell you Confederate ovals were made in small numbers and copied in large ones. I can't prove this one ever saw a battlefield. I keep it anyway, next to the one that did, because of what the two of them say together.

Americans wore these against each other. Families did. More Americans died in that war than in any other war this country has fought.

I want to be clear about one thing. The war was fought over slavery, and I know which side was right. This is not a story about two equal causes. It's about what we were supposed to learn after the shooting stopped.

I look at these plates and think about now. Every year we find more ways to sort ourselves into sides. Party. Region. The news we watch. The language we grew up speaking.

But ask almost anyone, from any background, whether they want more of these in their life and in the people around them: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. I've never met anyone who said no. Not everybody lives them. I fall short of them every day. But nearly everyone agrees they are good.



That list comes from a letter Paul wrote to churches in Galatia that were tearing each other apart.

“But the Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against these things!”

GALATIANS 5:22-23 (NLT)

I think that list could be the floor we stand on together. Not a platform. A floor.

Here is the hard part. The list doesn’t start with the other side. It starts with me. Before I tell anyone what is wrong with them, I have to look at my own agenda and my own ego. A leader who is busy being right has stopped serving.

Leadership is service, and that includes serving the people who don’t see the world the way you do. Two men once wore these plates against each other. We don’t have to.

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