

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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A Godly Example: Purity

Let no man despise thy youth; but be thou an example of the believers, in word, in conversation, in charity, in spirit, in faith, in purity. (1 Timothy 4:12, KJV 1900)

The first sermon a preacher must preach is the "foot-sermon." If he fails the "foot sermon" category, he shall never be effective, even minimally, in the pulpit in his church. When a church is considering a man as a potential preacher, the first test they should apply to him is the "foot sermon" test. If every member of the church dealt with life exactly as this man does, in what shape would their behavior leave the church? Would this scenario create a strong, mature, balanced, healthy church, or would it leave you with a church full of prima donnas? The example of purity that closes Paul's exhortation to Timothy goes to this question of "foot sermons."

The whole perspective of examples and the preacher's age permeate this passage. Constable makes some notable points.

The Greek word translated "youthfulness" described people up to 40 years of age.¹⁶⁰ As a comparatively young man Timothy may have felt reluctant to instruct the elders in the Ephesian congregation, who were probably older than himself. Furthermore most people regarded older people with great respect in his culture. Paul promised that no one in the church would discredit his teaching ministry if he backed it up with a godly lifestyle. In his words as well as by his actions, by his love for people and his trust in God, and by his moral cleanness he should provide an example of godliness. Purity includes sexual purity and integrity of heart.

"It is the first duty of a minister to display in his own life that which he wishes his people to be."¹⁶¹

Our culture considers a person in his/her forties in mid-life. Up to that age, based on the citation above, a person might be considered "young," as in "Let no man despise thy youth." Wow! Now that should get our attention. Growth and maturity of spirit should never stop for the faithful.

In the intimate setting of a local church, few secrets can last for long. They have a way of oozing out into the bright sunlight of common knowledge. Often the more a person tries to hide his/her secrets the more those very secrets become well known. I have been preaching for fifty-five years this month. For fifty-five years I have been, and continue to this day to be amazed at God's quiet, but very intimate and effective management of preaching. We live in His church, not ours. We preach to His people, not ours. If He isn't pleased with the way we minister, whether we minister from the pulpit as preachers or pastors, or from the pew as members lovingly ministering to each other, He regularly, though often quietly, reminds us that He, not we, is in charge.

On any given Sunday, as I preach, I can observe a world of information in the body language of the people in attendance. I see each personality and enjoy the non-verbal interaction that goes on between me and the people in the pew. Pity the sad-sack preacher who fears intimate eye contact with his audience, preferring to deliver whole sermons disconnected from the people and staring at floor, walls, windows, and ceilings. He misses one of the most intimate, exciting, and blessed experiences of true preaching. He also misses the golden opportunity, by observing his congregation, and by interacting with them in his sermon, to mold his sermon out of the starchy form of his own mind, research, and studies into the real fabric of people and their daily lives. How can he expect to connect and to apply his message to people's lives when he refuses to make simple and personal eye contact with them during his preaching? He can't, and he won't.

Occasionally I will observe changes in body language and in a person's degree of attention. One Sunday this particular person may hang on every word, reacting with joy and conviction to the words preached. On another Sunday that same person will hear a sermon from the same preacher, and sit there with as much interaction as a rock on the side of the road. Why? Yes, there can be a difference in the pulpit. But when you see the congregation reacting with joy and active engagement to the sermon, but this one person's mind is obviously miles—worlds—away from the sermon, the problem may well be in the pew, not in the pulpit. The dynamic of the congregation that so

¹⁶⁰ 160. Lea, pp. 137–38; Knight, p. 205.

¹⁶¹ 161. Hiebert, *First Timothy*, p. 85.

¹ Tom Constable, *Tom Constable's Expository Notes on the Bible*, 1 Ti 4:12 (Galaxie Software, 2003; 2003).

noticeably changes every time the church gathers for worship and fellowship speaks volumes to this point. As the problem appears on one Sunday with one member, on another Sunday that member may be as engaged and spiritually involved as ever in his/her life, but another member will show similar disengagement. God uses His church to draw His people close to Him in their lives and conduct, but He also uses it to change their lives and to nudge them to live Monday through Saturday so as to give Him more glory when they gather on Sunday. Much of the variable dynamic that I here describe serves as a public chalk board, clearly displaying the individual believer's life during the last week. If you become too involved in the drudgery of life and of self during the week, don't be surprised when you show up in church on Sunday and wonder why you aren't enjoying blessings and worship as in former days. Did you spend the last six days preparing for the day of worship? Or is the day of worship just one more day and one more demanding duty that consumes your precious time? Does your Monday-Saturday attitude and conduct have any bearing on your joy and edification from your time in worship at church on Sunday? Indeed it does.

And let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works: Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching. For if we sin wilfully after that we have received the knowledge of the truth, there remaineth no more sacrifice for sins. (Hebrews 10:24–26, KJV 1900)

Do not miss the obvious point in the passage. Or should I say "points." There are several points made in the passage that folks tend to gloss over.

1. When a member of a church, fully knowing when the church gathers, doesn't bother to attend, he/she is clearly forsaking the assembly.
2. No one who fails to attend a gathering of the church can in any way exhort, provoke to love, good works, or anything positive, or in any way help anyone else in the church when they are not even present at the gathering.
3. Now for the frequently missed point of the passage. "...and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching." Our whole demeanor in church is shaped during the week by our time away from the church. Our preparation for the gathering is essential. Every conservative, Bible respecting church faces the problem of people who attend, join, and then become too involved with the world around them, and disappear from the assembly. The point of the passage gets far more in our

face than this obvious neglect. How many people faithfully, regularly show up at church every time the church gathers, but they failed to make the necessary, and Biblical, preparations for their time with God and His people in the church? That is the major issue in the passage that we tend to neglect.

4. What does the passage require of us "...as we see the day (I believe in this context, the day of worship) approaching"? What are the personal consequences to us if we neglect these things?
5. The "willful sin" of the passage contextually deals specifically with the sin of failure to attend and support the church of one's membership regularly and faithfully. No, God doesn't consider church a nice, but optional activity. He considers it a necessity to godly and faithful discipleship, and He considers its neglect a sin, not a justifiable convenience.
6. Clearly from this passage, more exhortation, admonition and example setting occurs in church than what you hear from the pulpit, and every member of the congregation must actively support the church to fulfill his/her obligation in this regard. Significant preparation is as necessary for the people in the pew as for the man in the pulpit.

I grew up in an era when many rural southern churches in our fellowship met only once or twice a month. They survived admirably, but I suggest that this passage from Hebrews, not to mention many others, teaches that they survived despite their meeting schedule, not because of it. I believe the New Testament requirement for at least weekly gatherings is no less binding for the New Testament church as such regular gatherings were required for Old Testament Jews on the Sabbath. As one wise preacher has observed, "Since when does the Law outdo grace?"

Let's follow our steps on a normal Sunday morning as we prepare for church. We probably awaken earlier than we might have awakened on Saturday. We go about the routine of bathing and dressing for the church gathering, of trying to anticipate the travel time to get us there for the **beginning** of the singing, not later. Singing in the New Testament is no less part of the church's schedule and obligation for worship than praying or preaching. Now let's take a detour. You arrive on time this Sunday. You look at your watch as you park your car and celebrate quietly for your timely arrival. You speak to the people present, and visit with them for a few minutes. **At the appointed time, you try to be seated in your pew, Bible nearby, and hymnal in hand**, eager and ready to begin your participation in the church's worship of the day. As the singing begins, and the people are singing today like canaries, you look around. They

really sound good. You're happy to be there. But you suddenly notice that the pew where your pastor normally sits is empty. Where is he? You look around, and you also do not see his family. Where are they? You lean over to the person next to you and ask, "Where is the pastor?" The person shrugs his/her shoulders and replies, "Oh, I don't know." The time to begin the preaching service arrives, but no pastor. What do you do? What happens now? Can you just ignore his absence and pretend that he is a nicety, but you can carry on your worship routine just as well without him as if he were present?

The necessity for advance preparation and attendance of the church's gathering by every member makes a powerful point. When a believer consciously eliminates the influence of the church from his/her life, it is only a matter of time till the influences of this fallen, broken world weigh more heavily on their decisions and actions than the teachings of Scripture or the examples and good exhortations of other believers.

Few preachers would be so cavalier about attending their church and filling their assignment. However, what is different for the pastor than for any member of the church? Do you really think your presence is optional? Can the church gather and conduct its functional worship just as well in your absence as they can when you are present? If you think this, try revisiting the missing pastor scenario and see how it flies. I enjoy time off my ordinary activities, vacation or not. I enjoy visiting other churches and attending special meetings as much as the next person, but I work hard to avoid missing my Sunday assignment. And if I agree to attend a meeting away from home that requires my absence, I work to ensure that a preacher is present to fill the pulpit who, with the Lord's blessings, will preach to the church's edification. That, my friends, is only one small part of the preacher's "example" responsibility. If you are absent on a given Sunday of worship, who fills your position? What impact does your absence have on the assembly? Why is your obligation any different from the pastor's? I suggest that it is not at all different. We'll visit some other areas before we leave this powerful passage. How are you doing? How is your personal example going?

Little Zion Primitive Baptist Church
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Worship service each Sunday 10:30 A. M.
Joseph R. Holder Pastor