

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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A Godly Example: Purity in Life

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)

As a child and as a young minister, I delighted to hear people from the older generation tell stories about some of the old and quite memorable preachers from the past. Many stories exemplified incredible boldness of faith and character. Others so overflowed with humor that you could hardly contain the outburst of laughter upon hearing about them. As an adult, I recall many of these stories with fondness. However, from my present adult perspective, I must conclude that some of those old preachers were amazingly eccentric. At times their eccentricity glared through their interactions with people. I must conclude that these men were incredible preachers, for no "ordinary preacher," whatever an "ordinary preacher" is, could have survived with his scalp had he done the things that these men did. In both the category of "foot sermons" and in their pulpit preaching, these men were undoubtedly giants in the faith.

When the people in the pew truly believe that the man in the pulpit is sincere and does everything he can possibly do to live what he believes, they will show admirable charity when the man slips up and displays his humanity. As I reflect on Paul's writings in the New Testament, I realize that Paul refused to play the silly and superficial games of pretense that sadly characterize many "Preacherettes"¹ in our day. He occasionally reminded his readers that he was the man who at one time persecuted and wasted the Lord's church and people. He never, even once, ever wrote about what a big sinner he felt himself to be. No, he wrote them about what a big sinner he was. I do not interpret these passages to mean that Paul lived a careless or immoral life, but rather than he lived an honest life. He had no interest in gaining adoring worship to himself from the people. He sought their faith in—and faithful service to—the Lord Jesus Christ. Rather than demanding that the people always refer to him with glowing exaggerated titles, Paul reminded his readers that he was the chief of sinners.

Two notable names from the past will beautifully exemplify this authentic kind of Christian ministry and life. In his early life John Newton served as

captain of a slave ship. He likely fulfilled his duties with zeal and with cruel efficiency. However, when the Lord arrested Newton and turned his life around, Newton became one of England's leading preachers in his day. It was written that he seldom allowed much time to pass without reminding his congregation of his black, sinful past. He knew that he was indeed an example of "Amazing Grace," and he refused to allow his people to forget the point.

William Huntington grew up in abject poverty, so he never enjoyed the benefits of a formal education. He literally shoveled coal for a very small compensation. Yet, when the Lord touched his life and called him to preach, Huntington's authentic preaching and life drew many people who heard and respected the man's sermons, both by foot and by voice. In Huntington's day, a preacher who could not attach multiple abbreviations to his name, representative of the various degrees he had earned in academia, was looked down on as a nobody preacher. Some folks in the established church refused to so much as consider Huntington for ordination. Yet, wherever he preached, people attended in large numbers and listened attentively to his sermons. Poor Huntington, the man never attended college, so he had no titles, no abbreviations to append to his name. Eventually Huntington started signing his letters, "William Huntington, S. S." When someone asked what the letters "S. S." meant, Huntington replied that they depicted him in the only credible and legitimate light he could claim, "Sinner Saved." Huntington's "S. S." carried more weight to the hearts of those to whom he preached than the endless abbreviations of lesser men who preached from pretense and not from the heart.

We might examine any number of behaviors or attitudes that exemplify Paul's requirement that Timothy, despite his relative youth, serve as a godly example of purity in his own life. Let me give you a personal example. After working for large businesses, as well as governmental agencies, I spent the last eighteen years of my business career starting and building my own business. A very generous man helped me get started, and I paid him back fully for his "investment" in me. This man grew up in Chile and came to our country as a young man. He truly lived out the immigrant success story that has so often exhibited our

¹ The old radio preacher, J. Vernon McGee, coined the term to describe the superficial stereotypical preacher of our time, "Preacherettes delivering sermonettes to Christianettes."

country's exceptional opportunities for those who are willing to work hard at what they do. At times this man nudged me to do things in my business that I did not feel wholly comfortable doing, though he always accepted and respected my choices to do business my way. When I decided it was time to retire, as agreed, I offered my business to my friend at the agreed price that we had first discussed eighteen years earlier. We had no contract, but we both gave our word to each other, and we both stuck to our word.

In meeting with various acquaintances during my retirement/exit process, I had lunch on a given day with a man whom I'd learned to know as a sincere Christian man, along with the woman whom my business friend had hired to run my business after I retired. During the lunch, the question of different business attitudes and practices came up. My business friend's well-known attitudes and practices came up in the conversation. While defending my friend for his reliable and consistent honoring of his word to me, I fully acknowledged that he and I did not always share the same business habits. The Christian business man asked, "Joe, why didn't you ever go out on your own? You owned the business, and you could have taken it anywhere you wished." I responded that I had given this man my word, and I felt obligated by my Christian ethic to honor that word, even if it meant extra effort for me. I cited Psalm 15:4, one of several behaviors and attitudes that result in godly people dwelling in God's house and enjoying His blessings in the "here and now." I particularly referenced the closing sentence of the verse.

...He that sweareth to his own hurt, and
changeth not. Psalm 15:4 (KJV 1900)

While I acknowledged that I had every legal right to take my business anywhere I wished, I pointed out that I had given a businessman my word, and that was of equal obligation to me as if I had signed a legal contract. He smiled and agreed. Some four years later, the woman whom my friend hired to manage my business, also one who claimed to be a Christian, broke her signed agreement, and took the agency's business that I had built and that she had managed, to another business, imposing significant financial loss onto my friend. I gratefully have occupied the sidelines in this controversy, and it has cost me nothing. However, I grieve that a person who claimed to be a Christian, and whose claim weighed heavily on my agreement for her to manage my accounts, violated a basic Christian ethic in her business choices. The final result of her failure to honor her word as a Christian is that much of the business that I had cultivated and built became disgusted with the legal hassles, and terminated the services of both people, the man who originally purchased my business, and the woman who had managed it. Refusal to follow

simple Christian ethics resulted in significant senseless legal costs, broken relationships, and loss of respect for both parties in the business. Not only did this breach of Christian ethic tarnish a professing Christian's reputation—and rightly so in my opinion—it also destroyed a profitable business, one that had proved quite profitable for almost two decades.

A second example will further illustrate the comprehensive requirement in our study passage for godly purity.

We are rapidly approaching April 15, the deadline in our country for filing individual income tax returns. Few will question that Scripture clearly requires that a faithful Christian obey the laws of the land, including a number of specific passages that require payment of taxes, so I categorically reject any claim that a Christian is exempted from paying taxes. My specific example goes to another attitude, however. Many tax accountants will add deductions to their clients' tax return that reduce taxable income, and thus the taxes the person pays, based on the tax accountant's familiarity with IRS audit guidelines. They know how much they can claim in various deduction categories that will not raise an audit flag for their clients' return. They may explain what they did to their client, and the client readily accepts their "recommendation," and signs the return. In other cases, a Christian may either purchase tax filing software or in some other way prepare his/her income tax return, including exaggerating various deductions to reduce their tax liability, even though they know the claim is false.

When questioned, both the tax accountant and individual taxpayers who follow this dishonest practice will defend their dishonesty with the adolescent "Everybody's doing it, so why can't I?"

Let's take this example to the next level. You follow this obviously dishonest practice in filing your taxes. Several months after you've filed your tax return and received your liberal refund of overpaid estimated taxes, you receive an audit notice from IRS. You gather up the required tax documents and you meet with the IRS auditor. As the auditor reviews your return, he notices that you gave liberally to your church. He comments on this observation, "I see that you make sizeable donations to your church. You'll be happy to know that I, too, am a Christian." As the auditor pours over your return, he discovers your false claim. A Christian IRS auditor discovers undeniable evidence that a professing Christian knowingly filed a dishonest tax return.

Stay with the scenario. Perhaps this Christian auditor has been studying his Bible and has become intensely unhappy with his present church's beliefs. He's studied the Bible and discovered much of the Bible's true teachings on the doctrines of God's amazing grace. He is searching to find a church whose beliefs are more compatible with his newly discovered beliefs. Do you suppose your dishonesty in filing your return

just might discourage the auditor from even bothering to ask about what you believe? Your failure to maintain an example of godly purity just destroyed your credibility with the seeking auditor.

This clear and consistent New Testament teaching that requires purity of conduct covers a wide swath of life and personal conduct. In fact, I can think of no areas of conduct that it does not cover. If your taxes were audited by this seeking Christian IRS employee, would your tax return invite this person to ask you more questions, or would it reject you wholly as a credible witness to your faith? That, my friends, is the demanding and Biblical question that we need to apply to every aspect of our lives. ***"...be thou an example of the believers...in purity."***

Little Zion Primitive Baptist Church
16434 Woodruff
Bellflower, California

Worship service each Sunday 10:30 A. M.
Joseph R. Holder Pastor