

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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A Godly Example: Spirit

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)

Our culture often imposes a mystical quality to this word "spirit." Hollywood movie producers have made fortunes on movies that developed this idea into the bizarre. Our human nature seems quite receptive to such things. Even in the conservative Christian culture of the deep South where I grew up, eerie graveyard tales abounded. On a wooded hill in the farm adjacent to my father's farm was a small wrought iron fence and a few headstones, the remains of a once larger cemetery. All of the markers remaining inside this little fence carried the name Crocket. One marker of a child who died before reaching ten years of age was named David S. Crocket. The family was directly related to the Davy Crocket who gained fame in our country's pioneer days. Often during warm summer nights, my father would take his beagles out into the forest to enjoy hearing them discover the scent of a rabbit or a red fox and chase it for two or three hours. Anytime we walked anywhere near that little cemetery I have to admit that I became anxious. Some of my father's hunting buddies told strange and frightening stories about this little plot. For example, they would tell about their dogs chasing an animal through this plot, only to become distracted from the animal and to engage in ferocious fighting with "something." When the hunters arrived, the dogs had chased this "something" up a tree, but the hunter's strong flashlights could never see anything in the tree. As a young child hearing these stories, I would feel the chill of fear run up and down my spine.

Our imaginative and warped humanity seems drawn to such silliness. We entertain and frighten ourselves with glee as we repeat such stories. They seem to abound in almost every culture.

Although Scripture occasionally deals with the vivid reality that we indeed wrestle with an unseen spiritual foe, it never leaves us in the clutches of such powers. Scripture consistently reminds us.

Ye are of God, little children, and have overcome them: because **greater is he that is in you, than he that is in the world.** (1 John 4:4, KJV 1900; bold emphasis added)

How is the minister of the gospel to be an example of believers in "spirit"? Scripture firmly takes our hands and leads us away from the silliness of our warped imagination, back to the

reality of God and His truth. Let's begin with a basic definition of the word as Paul uses it in this lesson.

30.6 πνεῦμα^f, τος n: (compare πνεῦμα^e 'inner being,' 26.9) an attitude or disposition reflecting the way in which a person thinks about or deals with some matter—'disposition, attitude, way of thinking.' ὑμεῖς οἱ πνευματικοὶ καταρτίζετε τὸν τοιοῦτον ἐν πνεύματι πραΰτητος 'those of you who are spiritual should set him right, but in an attitude of gentleness' Ga 6:1. In some languages πνεῦμα^f may be regarded as implicit in the context itself, so that the last part of Ga 6:1 may well be translated as 'but do it with gentleness.'¹

One of my favorite preachers, Elder David Montgomery, exemplifies this disposition. When I hear David preaching, I get the sense that he is raising all the window shades of his mind, opening all the windows, and is freely sharing his innermost thoughts with me. It is indeed refreshing. When I hear a man preach who carefully crafts and frames his message in platitudes and veiled double-speak, I want to wring my hands and shake the man into reality. While Paul wrote that "...we preach not our selves, but Christ Jesus the Lord; and ourselves your servants for Jesus' sake," (2 Corinthians 4:5) he never indicates that the preacher is to preach behind a carefully crafted pretense that hides his true character or his true intent in the sermon.

In dreadful contrast to David's transparent and refreshing preaching, I sometimes shudder at what I hear conned off on people as Bible preaching, but I have far more respect for the preacher's personal integrity who tells you what he really believes, however strongly I disagree with his errant beliefs, than I have for the man who believes the same thing, but hides his true belief behind a deceptive veil. A two word term first caught my attention in the movie "Independence Day," that sadly describes all too many sermons, "...plausible deniability." You

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¹ Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, vol. 1, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains*, electronic ed. of the 2nd edition., 349 (New York: United Bible societies, 1996).

hear a man preach a sermon and you try to understand what he is really saying, what he really believes. So you do the obvious thing. You ask the man. If he thinks you agree with him, he'll be fairly candid about explaining his belief. However, if he thinks you disagree with him, he will go to torturous lengths to twist and to explain away what he said in the sermon. Getting such a man to clearly explain what he actually believes would require the investigative skills of Dr. Sherlock Holmes and Mr. Watson. Any man who enters the pulpit owes his congregation the simple and ethical (In this sense a synonym for moral integrity) obligation of making his true belief as simple and as clear as he can possibly make it. If he believes something that is not popular, so be it. If he has fallen into grave error that he knows will be promptly rejected if the people truly understood what he believed, so be it. He owes his congregation transparent, clear, and simple explanations of his beliefs. What does Paul write about his preaching and writing not being presented in the typical form of "...the wisdom of this world"? The preacher who finishes a sermon that leaves people wondering what he really believes has failed his most fundamental charge.

This word "spirit" nudges us to explore the innermost motives and thoughts of our minds as we preach to people. Popular or not popular, acceptable to the congregation or not acceptable, when I sit down after delivering a message, have I given the people "...an attitude or disposition reflecting the way in which I think about or deal with some matter..."? And have I presented my thoughts "...with gentleness..."? A lesson or so back, we dealt with the New Testament term "moderation," a term that many New Testament linguists define as "sweet reasonableness." Even in the gospel's rebukes and reproofs, we must deliver our message with such simple clarity and with such unveiled transparency that everyone in the congregation goes away knowing what we said, knowing what we meant—no "plausible deniability" whatever—and knowing that we truly believe what we taught in the simplest terms we could use.

While we might not consider Paul's opening salvo in the Galatian letter as being especially gentle, he was indeed transparent. Further, no one in the Galatian churches could possibly fail to understand Paul's strong convictions, and, by the end of the letter, his reasons for those convictions. Before we get to the end of Galatians, we see the gentle pastor's heart reaching out to correct even this group of errant churches who had "...so soon removed..." from the Jesus ("him" in Galatians 1:6) and the gospel that Paul had preached to them.

At times we've heard that dreadful sermon that, though technically presenting the truth, did so with such a hateful or unkind attitude that it leaves only a very bad taste in our mouths. We feel an incredible reluctance to agree with the content because we so strongly reject the "spirit" of the message.

Paul reinforces this point in his letter to Titus.

But speak thou the things which become sound doctrine.... (Titus 2:1, KJV 1900)

To say something that is "becoming" to you or to your ideas is to say what is "fitting and right" about it. What you say is the truth, but it is also a "fitting" or proper assessment of the idea. It invites acceptance and belief. It doesn't turn people off or cause them to feel that the idea is repulsive.

Many years ago a friend and preacher from another region phoned me to ask my thoughts about a particular preacher, a man who has made it his lifetime objective to find ways to say things from the pulpit or in conversation in a shocking and derogatory manner. This man had visited my friend's area and, when asked to preach, shocked the congregation by stating, "Jesus was the biggest loser who ever lived." I can't imagine what the man intended to convey, but, had I been pastor of the church where he spoke those words, I'd probably have found it quite difficult to sit quietly in my seat when he spoke the words. That just might be the time for the pastor to stand up, walk up to the pulpit, take the man by the hand, and escort him out of the pulpit, explaining his reasons to the congregation. We find no Bible example for a preacher to frame Biblical truth in the most offensive and derogatory terms possible. Paul's admonition to Titus in the above passage rather condemns this attitude.

I recall once when I preached on Romans 8:29-30 when I knew at least one or two people in the congregation had a wrong idea about what Biblical predestination was, but they were receptive to reasonable Bible teaching. Rather than ignore the likely objection to the term, or worse, ignore their misunderstanding of it, I acknowledged that many people have a wrong idea about the term and how Scripture uses it. Our King James Bible never uses this term to refer to the pagan idea of fatalism or of the gods micromanaging every thought, word, and deed that occurs. I appealed to Paul's precise words in the passage. Then I asked the simple question, "Do you object to arising from your grave at the Second Coming without your sins and glorified in the image of the Lord Jesus Christ? That, my friends, is what Paul says predestination is all about." I happened to glance at one of the people in the congregation who had voiced her objection to this word. I was delighted to see tears of joy streaming down her cheeks. In a simple way, in that message, I tried to do what Paul directed Titus to do—and Timothy. I tried to present the Biblical "spirit" of the doctrine, and to do so in a manner that would "...become sound doctrine." We could avoid so much misunderstanding—and so much bad reputation—of edifying, God-honoring Bible truth by faithfully practicing these two passages in every sermon and in every sentence we speak regarding our faith and our understanding of Scripture's teachings.

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Worship service each Sunday
Joseph R. Holder

10:30 A. M.
Pastor