

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"



Volume 26, Number 25
2010

June 20,

Christianity: Applied to Life

Masters, give unto your servants that which is just and equal; knowing that ye also have a Master in heaven. Continue in prayer, and watch in the same with thanksgiving; Withal praying also for us, that God would open unto us a door of utterance, to speak the mystery of Christ, for which I am also in bonds: That I may make it manifest, as I ought to speak. Walk in wisdom toward them that are without, redeeming the time. (Colossians 4:1-5)

Like most of you, I spent a large segment of my life working for businesses or public institutions for a salary. In most cases, I worked for decent, fair-minded people who tried to compensate me reasonably for what I did. In my last career activity, I started a new career path in my forties. My objective was to build my own business. The man who hired me agreed to compensate me until I made enough to repay him. Interestingly, before and after my relationship with this man, he often hired people with a similar agreement, only to be disappointed and to lose large sums of money. For two long years, I wondered if I would succeed. At the end of that time, I owed the man twice the amount of my home mortgage. Two years later, I was able to pay him back in full. This was my only career experience in which my compensation was my own choice, measured by the success of my work and efforts to gain clients for my services. It was quite frightening in the beginning, but, in the end, also quite rewarding, both financially and personally.

My experience with this man gave me a new perspective on the question of "masters" and "servants," or in our culture, employers and employees. What is "just and equal" compensation for someone who works for another? How do you determine "just and equal"? Typically the "master" and the "servant" have significant differences of opinion about what that amount should be. Paul reasons by the statement that "just and equal" are definable values.

Paul also adds a variable to the equation that most contemporary businesses may not consider. Aside from the owner, the board of directors, or government regulations, the business is its own "boss." It controls its own destiny in the marketplace. Not so fast, according to Paul, there is a far higher and more significant overseer than any of these; yes, even higher than the board of directors. ...*knowing that ye also have a Master in heaven.* A business may comply with every

legal requirement, pay every bill it owes to its vendors, pay its employees a prevailing wage compared with what its competition pays, even pay its investors a rich dividend. But how does God regard this business? What is God's "opinion" of this business' operations? A sense that God overlooks and judges every aspect of our world alters one's ethics immeasurably. That simple knowledge transforms our ultimate criteria from the mundane to the heavenly. During this career path, I worked regularly with both "management" and "labor." In fact, the position required that I maintain a cordial, working relationship with both. I occasionally found myself during collective bargaining sessions being asked to meet with both sides to work out reasonable options that both sides would approve. Some of those experiences convinced me beyond doubt that God watches over and guides His children through the maze of life. One need not embrace radical fatalism, or robotic, all-inclusive predestination to believe in God's superintending providence.

Continue in prayer, and watch in the same with thanksgiving.... Paul requires more than rote prayer. Prayer needs to include more than constantly giving God our sanctified wish list. It also involves worship and thanksgiving. Question: thanksgiving for what? I suggest that Paul's language, so intimately connected with prayer, clearly leads us to an obvious, though typically overlooked point. Let's focus for the moment on our prayer requests. To continue in prayer opens the door for prayer regarding every aspect of our life. We pray for the Lord to protect and to bless our personal health, our family, our career, everything that touches our life. I often wonder. Should we not regard prayer as a personal conversation with God? If so, what kind of conversation do we have with Him? We've all known people who are so busy talking that they never allow you to speak. For them, "conversation" means finding someone who will

listen endlessly to what they have to say, but they show minimal interest in hearing what the other person says. Do we treat God so insensitively in our prayers? We go to Him with our "needs," our wish list of things on our minds, and ask Him to give them to us. Do we ever truly pause after such a prayer and wait for God to answer, to speak back to us? Maybe He'd like to get a word into the conversation. He might suggest an idea or thought that would transform our lives, even if it means not answering many of the requests that we barrage Him with.

Paul's uniting prayer with watchfulness clearly indicates that every prayer needs a watchful response from us. Some of the old Puritans advised their students to maintain a formal list of things they included in their prayers. Literally, keep a list of your prayer requests. They advised that their students regularly review their list, specifically to become aware of prayer answers. How many of the things they asked God to do for them came to pass? How often did God answer prayer? Do you think this might be significant in our prayer life? Interestingly, every report seemed to indicate that around two thirds of the believer's prayer requests were in fact answered. Now that is amazing. A greater consequence of this simple procedure sets the stage for the second component of Paul's "prayer model" in our study passage, "...with thanksgiving." We constantly pass our requests along to God. Do we ever consciously realize how many of those requests He has given us, and simply pause our "request button" long enough to thank Him for the many answers He's given? A wise preacher once cryptically observed, "We often think of God too much like we think of the spare tire in the trunk of our car--only when we need Him." Do we approach God like a spoiled, over-indulged child, always nagging Him for more, but never thanking Him for all the rich blessings He has given us?

...praying also for us, that God would open unto us a door of utterance, to speak the mystery of Christ, for which I am also in bonds: That I may make it manifest, as I ought to speak. Now Paul bores down into a major item that each of us should keep near the top of our prayer list, praying for our pastor, and for every man who fills the pulpit in our churches. Do we pray for God to open doors of utterance, to add His intervening, life-changing providence to the words spoken from the pulpit? Or do we merely listen to the man idealize the potential of blessings, and respond, "That may be possible, but it certainly isn't realistic. You just can't expect people to really put God first." When church slowly becomes a routine of our weekly schedule, how much time do we really spend on our knees, begging God to step into next Sunday's worship

service and grab our unsanctified, over-invested minds with an attention-getting holy yank on our chain? Do we beg God to so sanctify the whole worship service that it would engage our minds and nudge us conscientiously to apply God's Word to our life and to do what He has nudged us to do?

I will always remember the words of a wise preacher from my youth. He grew up in one part of the country, but his ministry moved him to another region. One day he was visiting one of the leading members in the church he served. The man spoke words that would discourage the most devoted of preachers, "Elder, I just don't get as much out of your preaching as I did when you first moved down here." Not to be discouraged, this pastor immediately quipped back, "Are you praying for me as often and as earnestly as you did then?" The man looked as if he'd been shot, but said nothing. The very next Sunday at the end of the church service, this man walked up to his pastor in tears and confessed that the pastor's words rebuked him. They also provoked him to return to earnest prayer for his pastor, prayers that God answered richly that day. When the sound from your pulpit begins to become too routine, too ordinary, examine your own prayer list. Where in your prayer-priority have you placed the request for God to sanctify the preaching of His gospel ***so that it intrudes into your life and drives you to deeper, more passionate Christian living?*** Pray for hungry sheep to be drawn to your church, and for God to send the food, the spiritual "sheep-food" that person needs right now. God just might gloriously surprise you and the pastor!

Walk in wisdom toward them that are without, redeeming the time. Often the feet of the people in the pew preach more loudly than the vocal chords of the man in the pulpit. They "preach" a powerful, convicting message, or they put the observer to sleep. In Ephesians 4:11-16 Paul outlines the divine model for preaching and for a healthy church. We often miss the primary point of the passage. God does not intend the gathering of His church to be Sunday, sanctified entertainment. He intends it to equip and to mobilize every person in the congregation to godly action. Notice that the correct outcome will cause every member of the congregation to action that grows, improves, and enriches the whole body. The whole body works together for the whole body's health, or the whole body becomes anemic and sick. Redeem the time. Never miss a single opportunity to encourage someone. Never ignore "them that are without." They may well be tomorrow's "them that are within" if you bear credible testimony to them with your own "foot-sermon."

Paul requires that a man to be ordained as either minister or deacon have a good report from them that are without. In today's complex world, it would not be a bad idea for any man being considered for either of these offices to be required to give his church a copy of his current credit report. Yes, you "heard" correctly. Should a church ordain a man to either of these positions if the man has a history of not paying his bills, of running up impossible credit card debt by living above his means, by being an unwise steward of his resources? Should a church consider ordaining a man to either office if the man demonstrates a record of not keeping his word, effectively lying? When we "sign" for debt, be it a small credit card purchase or a mortgage for our home, we give our word as a Christian that we will pay the debt. If we do not pay the debt, we are guilty of lying. Oh, we may offer endless excuses, but the fact is the fact. We gave our word to repay the money that we enjoy by our present purchase. If we later do not repay that money, we have lied. If a man lies regarding his debt, why should a church believe he will tell the truth about his office or responsibilities in the church?

My father's generation lived through the Great Depression. One of my uncles told about going to his bank when he learned of the economic crash. He had deposited his life savings in this bank. When he arrived, he found a large crowd of other people with the same problem, and the bank's doors were locked. The bank, a privately owned, local bank, had failed. The bank's owner was standing at the doors of the bank. He patiently explained the problem, a problem far larger than he and his bank could control. However, he did something unique, something that few banks in the country did on this occasion. He told his investors that eventually the depression would end. If there was any way possible, after the depression ended, and he recovered from the crash, he promised every person who stood before him, every person who lost their savings by his bank's closure, that he would not rest until he had personally repaid them. Years went by. The Depression lingered. Eventually the country did recover. My uncle told with a gratified smile of the day when this man personally drove up to his home and gave him a check for the full amount of his lost funds, plus reasonable interest. This man was known before the Depression as a sincere, devoted Christian man. He lived up to his faith. The country's economic laws did not require the man to repay his investors, but his Christian ethic did require it of him, and he honored his Christianity by this noble act. Should we expect--or allow--anything less of a man we might consider for ordination?

What Paul requires that a man prove by life-habit prior to ordination he here applies to every believer. Whether someone is a member of our church or not in no way alters our obligation to treat him/her with Christian grace. If you hire a contractor to do work in your home, and he does something not to your liking, something that you consider to fail his contract, how do you treat him? If he falls short of his contract, you have every right to call the matter to his attention, and to ask him to correct it. The question relates to how you go about this correction, how you treat the contractor. If that contractor were a member of your church, one of your most respected friends in the church, how would you go about asking him to make his work right? Shouldn't we apply the same grace "...toward them that are without" that we apply to fellow-believers? Perhaps this person is at the very moment suffering spiritually and looking for a "real church," a place where professing Christians try to live up to their faith. If you show him Christian grace in your dealings, perhaps he will notice that you walked in wisdom toward him. You might get his attention and draw him to attend your church. Whether he ever darkens the door of our church or not, Paul requires that we treat him with such grace. Paul directly associates "...redeeming the time..." with our wise walk toward them that are without. Life is too short, and our faith is too important to be assigned a lesser priority.

One of our church's members is a mechanic for Toyota. Because of his reputation, two of my daughters have gone to the dealership where he works to purchase their automobiles. One of them lives close enough that she takes her car to Jon for regular service. I also take my Toyota to Jon, because I know he is competent, and he will work at repairing or servicing my car just as he would do if the car belonged to him. I have every reason to believe that Jon treats every one of his customers exactly the same. "May his tribe increase." This is what Paul teaches us in our lesson.

The setting may have changed, but Paul continues to teach us how to "Put off" our grave clothes and to "Put on" our grace clothes. Are we learning from him? What does our wardrobe look like today?

Little Zion Primitive Baptist Church
16434 Woodruff
Bellflower, California

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