

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"



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Our Ministry: Fulfilled or Failed?

And say to Archippus, Take heed to the ministry which thou hast received in the Lord, that thou fulfill it. (Colossians 4:17)

While we normally associate the term "ministry" with a preacher or pastor, Scripture often applies the term to every active believer in a church. The people in the pew no less have a ministry than the man in the pulpit. Consider just one notable example. In the eighth chapter of Acts, we read of a fierce persecution against the Jerusalem Church. From a large church of likely several thousand members, based on the record in Acts of those who were baptized there, the persecution drove all except the apostles away into other regions. For the most part, then, we may safely conclude that the majority of those dispersed by persecution were not preachers. However, notice the inspired record of their conduct as they went into other regions.

Therefore they that were scattered abroad went every where preaching the word. (Acts 8:4)

Did these early believers give up because of their trials? Hardly! They took their faith with them and taught it to any and all who would listen. "Preaching" is not always pulpit preaching. Aquila and Priscilla, the famous husband and wife team of faithful believers who appear later in Acts, joined to instruct Apolos more perfectly in the truth of the gospel. (Acts 18:24-26) I offer these points to emphasize that, despite focusing much of this study on the work of ministry, God assigns each of us a ministry, and He commands us, no less than the most effective preacher, to fulfill our divine assignment. How much "preaching" do we do to our friends? How effectively do our feet add credibility to our preaching?

We find only two references to Archippus in the New Testament, our study verse and Philemon 1:2 where Paul refers to him as "...our fellowsoldier..." Clearly Paul held this rather obscure man in high regard, his "fellow" in the King's army of faith. The man's history is not nearly as important as the man's faith, and his faith-walk.

Soldiers often face intense hardship and may easily become discouraged in the heat of battle. How a soldier responds in training is not nearly as important as how he responds on the battlefield. When the battle is raging and he stands side by side with his "fellow-soldiers" on the front line, how will he deal with the hardship of battle? Will he cut and run, blame other soldiers for his own failures, or will he stand faithfully at his post? Paul offers our study verse as a special encouragement to Archippus, a reminder that he stands on behalf of another, the "Captain of his salvation," not for his personal interest or benefit.

I recently visited a website of a church meeting where a particular preacher preached a meeting. I could sit in my study and listen to each sermon the man preached at this meeting. My disappointment and surprise at the theme of the man's messages startled me. Instead of preaching powerful, Christ-centric sermons on a Bible theme, my normal expectation of this man's preaching, I was disappointed to note that most of his preaching focused on his personal exploits. Instead of concluding at the end of his sermons that he preached a powerful God, I concluded my thoughts in the words of Paul, "For we preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord; and ourselves your servants for Jesus' sake." (2 Corinthians 4:5) Sadly, this man preached himself, not the Lord Jesus Christ. This experience reminded me of a personal experience from a few years back. A preacher whom I barely know sent me a recording of a Sunday morning sermons at his church in which he spent the whole discourse disagreeing with me, naming me repeatedly and somewhat misrepresenting, straw-man like, what I believed so as to make my belief appear to be unbiblical and absurd. I'm human; at first I had to struggle with a bit of anger. But then I realized how sad this whole episode really was. If this man had nothing better to preach on that Sunday morning than me, he was in a sad state indeed. Hungry sheep went to that church on that morning, hoping to hear about their great and good Shepherd, only to hear their pastor disparage a man they'd never met. We have a whole Bible from which to draw our sermons. Some of that Bible includes examination and refutation of error, but the primary theme it follows is focused on God and His righteous and gracious character and His successful and finished work. In the analogy of preaching as feeding sheep, we may arm our sheep to reject any and all error, but leave them starving to death and hungry. In both cases, these two men disappointed the godly and Biblical expectations of the people who heard them preach. Shame on any preacher who wastes his pulpit time by not feeding the sheep present with spiritual truth that feeds their souls and instructs their discipleship.

Paul tells us nothing about Archippus' background or, for that matter, about the man's specific ministry, only that he has received a ministry in the Lord. If we were to choose and ordain men to the ministry based on their winsome personality, their superior knowledge, their exceptional public speaking ability, or other personal traits, we'd likely eliminate the first twelve men that Jesus called without any serious consideration. Scripture teaches

that preaching is something unique that God bestows on men of His choosing, not of their own desire. Occasionally a sincere and well-meaning Christian may decide he'd like to preach. Once such a man told me that this was his desire. He explained his perception of preaching, "After all, you just stand up and say whatever comes to your mind about God. That's all that preaching is, isn't it?" I had to spend some time explaining to this naïve young man that he didn't at all understand what preaching was about. Scripture clearly teaches that preaching is a spiritual gift, a calling that God bestows on men of His choice. (Ephesians 4:7-16, particularly Verse 11) First Corinthians 1:26 and context leads us to conclude that God often calls the unexpected and least predictable of men, demonstrating through grace's transformation of the man that his calling is from God, not of his own accomplishment.

Paul singles out two rather strong and focused terms to emphasize his charge to Archippus.

1. **Take heed....** The word translated "take heed" highly instructs us. "...notice carefully, to be ready to learn about future dangers or needs, with the implication of preparedness to respond appropriately—to beware of, to watch out for, to pay attention to.' ...'watch yourself, so that you too will not be tempted' Ga 6:1."¹ Ministry, whether we apply the term to the man in the pulpit or to the people in the pew, is not a thing to be taken lightly. Our charge did not originate with our personal preferences or wishes. We received it from God. We must therefore discharge it with the constant sense that we also must answer to Him for the way in which we perform it. We may discharge it so as to gain applause and approval from our fellow-soldiers, but their opinion fades away quickly. How will the Lord who assigned us this ministry react to our actions? Will He approve or disapprove? "Take heed."
2. **...that thou fulfill it.** Complete it. Do not start and leave it half-finished. Do not measure up in the first skirmish, but walk away when the battle heats up or when your personal ambitions nudge you in another direction. We often praise George Washington for his courage in leading the Continental Army against the British. We seldom appreciate that one of his most daunting obstacles to victory was not that he fought an army whose home was on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean. It was not that he lead farmers and inexperienced men against one of the world's best trained and best equipped armies. Those problems were quite enough to discourage any man of lesser heart than Washington. However, Washington's greatest obstacle in the war was a problem within his own troops. Many of Washington's soldiers came and went, showed up or simply walked away and went back home at will. These on-again-off-again soldiers originated the phrase "sunshine patriots." When things looked encouraging and nothing at home required their attention, these men quite freely joined in the fight. But when hardship hammered at their door, or when the men had things they'd rather do at home, they simply walked away and deserted Washington. They failed to "fulfill" their obligation as soldiers. Paul instructively applies the soldier at war analogy often in his writings of the Christian life, of discipleship in all of its demanding components. Biblical Christianity is not the proverbial "Walk in the park," the convenience-rules "sunshine patriot" mindset that we may either observe or ignore at will. When Jesus set the foundation for true discipleship, He had no reference to a piece of decorative jewelry by His reference to the necessity to take up our cross, first denying self, before following Him. In the first century, the cross was the symbol of Roman capital punishment. The faithful disciple must daily die to self and replace that death with a life devoted to God and to the service of His people.

In one verse Paul both encourages our admired Archippus, and he lays a heavy charge on this "fellow-soldier's" shoulders. "Take heed...." "...fulfill it." Paul's life exemplifies New Testament Christian conduct. Despite having to walk away from career (a potential member of the Sanhedrin, Judaism's "supreme court" of religious authority), family (Jews routinely disowned and regarded as dead any family member who left Judaism and became a Christian), and any other personal opportunity, Paul gladly embraced his faith and his Lord. At the end of his course, Paul could rejoice that he had remained faithful to the end. (2 Timothy 4:6-7) When he lists the things that he could have claimed, as forsaken because of his faith in Christ, Paul characterized them as "...forgetting those things which are behind...." What Paul forgot was not his failures, the typical application of this verse, but rather his successes. (Philippians 3) How many of your accomplishments, how many of your potential successes that would embellish you so that you could "preach" your exploits, are you willing to give up for your Lord? How will you and I "Take heed...fulfill..." our ministry before the Lord? Whether in the pulpit or in the pew, do we "preach" our personal exploits, or do we preach "...Christ Jesus the Lord; and ourselves your servants for Jesus sake"? (2 Corinthians 4:5)

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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., 332 (New York: United Bible societies, 1996).

Worship service each Sunday
Joseph R. Holder

10:30 A. M.
Pastor