

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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Christian Grace

Rebuke not an elder, but intreat him as a father; and the younger men as brethren; The elder women as mothers; the younger as sisters, with all purity. (1Timothy 5:1-2)

Someone has said that the Christian army is the only army in the history of mankind that kills its wounded. Unfortunately we sometimes live up to that bad reputation. We live with a deep tension between the legitimate command to maintain purity, both in our own lives and in the lives of fellow-believers, and the equally legitimate command to show grace, support, and forgiveness toward those who fall. Both sides of this tension have their place in a balanced Christian life. Either directly or more often with deceiving subtlety the antinomian spirit finds its way into the thinking of many Christians. "We are not under the law but under grace," a Biblical statement for which we should thank God daily, is sometimes followed by a daring rejection of the Biblical command to live above reproach. Occasionally I have actually heard professing Christians claim that Jesus' sinless life, imputed to us, relieves us of any obligation to live according to the moral code of Scripture. I have yet to see a single Scripture offered by these folks that supports their idea, and I can think of a large number that contradict it.

It is altogether likely that the most common fault among Christians is not the highly publicized moral scandals, but the ethical failure of one Christian to treat others with grace, the model conduct described in this passage. We continue to assassinate our wounded.

The Greek word translated "Rebuke" implies to strike or beat with words. It refers to the war of words, to literally beating up on a person with words instead of your fists. As children we were taught the cliché, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never harm me." The sad truth is that words are far more harmful than sticks and stones could ever be.

As Primitive Baptists we typically use the title "Elder" to refer to a minister of the gospel. In Scripture the same reference appears, but the same word often appears to identify someone who is either older in years or spiritual maturity.

I hold that this passage uses the term in this broader sense.

How do we implement and faithfully practice Paul's instructions in this lesson? Two clues appear in the passage.

1. Entreat [Intreat] is translated from the Greek word "parakaleo," to call alongside. Unless we are living so that we may safely and ethically call an elder in the faith to stand alongside us exactly where we stand and how we stand, we have no Biblical basis for confronting any supposed error in him. We stand where we encourage him to stand.
2. The second clue appears in the word "father." Your older and more mature Christian brother is not a stranger whom you meet at the mall. He is not the driver of the car that cut you off on the freeway. You are to view him with the same Biblical respect and deference as if he were your father. "He ain't heavy; he's my brother" captures the spirit of this lesson. Some families live with acrimony and hatefulness, but the Biblical family builds on a respectful and gentle mutual respect that equally infiltrates every family member and governs the conduct of the whole family.

Implied specifically in this interaction is the fact that you do not approach an elder in the faith as a supervisor on the job might approach an erring employee with the "Shape up or ship out" attitude. You have no Biblical authority over your brother, much less your elder in the faith, beyond living a respectful and gracious example before him. The Christian life has little space for authoritarian strong-armed attitudes. Even the pastor is to take his oversight of the church as an example to them, not as "lords over God's

heritage.” When a Christian starts barking orders and making gruff demands on others, he/she has stepped outside the bounds of Biblical Christianity. The only proper influence we have on another believer grows out of a respectful and gracious relationship among equals in the faith. Even the deacon or minister who functions from the authoritarian perspective will alienate people more often than instruct them. It is often this very person who has alienated people who then complains because no one volunteers their help with a church project when asked. The authoritarian church leader will then complain even louder, “I guess I have to do it myself; no one else cares enough to do it.” The reality is that others care fully as much about the health of the church, but they dislike the “bully pulpit” of the authoritarian leader. Soften your touch and lead by a gentle example, and volunteers will show up when asked.

Paul then extends this familial gentleness to younger men, to older and to younger women. He creates a true model of a “church family.” In our culture so many different brands of Christianity and church fellowships exist that the idea of a committed familial loyalty to one’s church is a rare attitude. If someone doesn’t get their way out of one church, they simply go down the street to the next church. Do you see the obvious problem? They take their faulty attitude with them. Before long, they’ll complain about the same kind of problems with this church that they criticized in their last church. Church leaders call these people “church hoppers.” They simply hop from one church to another, never staying anywhere very long. Their attitude is the equivalent of the husband or wife who demonstrates little loyalty to their marriage vows. They will stay in the marriage as long as it serves their needs. They have almost no sense of the Biblical model of marriage that serves one’s partner, considering others as better than themselves. The historical and Biblical motto, “God wants me to be holy,” has been replaced by “God wants me to be happy.” The self-absorption of these people will never allow them to reach happiness.

According to the Biblical model, the family is a permanent institution. Scripture does not force a godly partner to remain in an abusive relationship. However, it does impose high demands on both partners. When both partners honor these demands, a blessed marriage will result. This model of Biblical family life is to govern the conduct of believers toward each other in the “church family” culture that Paul

establishes in this lesson. When we develop his concept of “widows indeed” that follows, we will see even more clearly the depth of this familial spirit in the model New Testament church.

Paul qualifies both the relationship with younger women or with the whole church family unit by the term “with all purity.” We readily grasp that we should live so as to exhibit purity, moral conduct that is above question, toward all people in our church culture. I suggest that Paul expects us to apply it no less to our assessment of motives and attitudes in others as toward our own conduct. If someone in the church says or does something that offends me, I will feel the hurt, and perhaps even the anger, of my fallen disposition. In my anger I am liable to impute low sinful motives on that person’s conduct. In the family setting that Paul defines we must impute the highest of motives to others, even when their conduct offends us, not the lowest. My personal obligation to “all purity” applies no less to my mental processes in judging the motives of others than to my conscious actions toward them.

Some thirty years ago when two little churches in the Los Angeles area were discussing the possibility of merging into one church, a precious sister in one of the groups asked me a question, “If we merge, that group has more members than we have. What if something important comes up and they outvote us?” Without delay I responded, “As the pastor of this new church, I would strongly recommend that the church take no action on the matter till all could comfortably agree.” Somewhat startled, she said, “You’d really do that?” When I affirmed my answer, she showed a comfort with the idea that had not been there before. Over a rather brief time these two groups grew together so that there was no longer an “us and them,” but a delightful “we” in the church. Two families really became one happy family. We could immediately eliminate many of the nagging and painful problems of our faith if we embraced this familial spirit more sincerely and profoundly. Problems will surface. Differences will exist. Will we follow Paul’s instruction in this lesson? The blessings are amazing.

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Worship service each Sunday 10:30 A. M.
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