

# Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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## Charity: The Greatest Gift

*And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity. (1 Corinthians 13:13, KJV)*

We don't normally think of faith, hope and charity as spiritual gifts, but their prominence in this context affirms that they are. Simple question; would you possess any of them apart from God's gracious gift to you? And the answer is no. In one of the New Testament's premier "Salvation" passages, Paul makes this point.

*For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God. (Ephesians 2:8)*

The typical modern view of this verse goes along this line, "God provides the grace, and you provide the faith; together you and God accomplish your salvation." Contextually, this salvation passage deals with eternal salvation, God's moving those whom He saves from death in sins to life in the Lord Jesus Christ. (Ephesians 2:1) Does the God-human synergy rightly explain this verse? A. T. Robertson was one of the leading New Testament Greek scholars of his day. His writings are still used in Christian universities. Robertson (*Word Pictures in the New Testament*) makes this argument. However, he then makes a point that challenges his own belief.

Paul shows that salvation does not have its source (ex humon, out of you) in men, but from God. Besides, it is God's gift (doron) and not the result of our work.

In the body of his explanation of Ephesians 2:8, Robertson makes a powerful grammatical point. Based on the accepted rules of first century Greek grammar, "...that not of yourselves," Robertson emphasizes that the word "that" must refer both to the faith and the grace, to the whole salvation process, not exclusively to the grace. On this basis Robertson concludes with the quoted sentence that contradicts his God-man synergy. God is wholly responsible for both the grace and the faith that results in accomplished salvation.

Frequently contemporary Christian teachers claim that requiring belief or faith of the individual for their new birth/salvation is not requiring "Works" for salvation on the presumption that believing is not a work. Their view of belief contradicts Jesus, so their hair-split has no Biblical support.

*Then said they unto him, What shall we do, that we might work the works of God? Jesus answered and said unto them, This is the work of God, that ye believe on him whom he hath sent. (John 6:28-29)*

The Jews who asked Jesus this question were not asking Jesus to explain what God did, but what they could do to "...**work the works of God.**" And Jesus answered their question. What did Jesus tell them to do? "...that ye believe on him whom he hath sent." The men who asked the question were likely expecting Jesus to answer with some complex set of rules and regulations or temple rituals. Instead He pointed them to the central Person and truth of the gospel. Believe on Him.

Why refer to believing on Jesus as a "Work"? Put yourself in the stead of the men who asked Jesus the question. Jesus grew up in Nazareth. He belonged to the tribe of Judah, but in their eyes He had no other basis on which to claim that He was Messiah, much less God Incarnate, God in human flesh. To believe in Jesus as both God in human flesh and the Messiah prophesied in the Old Testament indeed required serious mental and spiritual "Work." And for someone today to believe in Him, including His death, burial, resurrection three whole days later, and His glorious ascension requires equally heavy "Work."

Ephesians 2:8 and context defines our eternal salvation, God's work that transforms a person dead in sin to being alive in Jesus, as a work performed wholly of God, not as a God-believer synergy or cooperative work. Passages that deal with our present discipleship indeed do define our walk of faith as a cooperative synergy. (2 Corinthians 6:1; Philippians 2:12-13; followed by a specific list of actions that Paul directs the Philippians to do) Paul directs us to "...work out" our own salvation because God is working in us "...to will and to do of his own good pleasure." If the fatalistic view of discipleship were correct, Paul would have written that God was working in us "willing and doing." Further, the list that follows is not an explanation of things that God shall absolutely perform, but rather a list of things that Paul directs the Philippians to do. We work out our salvation in the sense of the passage by choosing to do the things that Paul directs, do them "with fear and trembling." This passage gives no support to

fatalism or to “Passive obedience” as it is sometimes described. Adding one more of multiple possible passages, nothing about 1 Corinthians 9:27 even remotely implies “Passive obedience.” Paul didn’t write that he merely sat back passively and waited for God to do His thing. He described an active and aggressive assault against his body to bring it into subjection. The believer who treats his physical body passively will fail wholly in his attempt to serve God or be a faithful disciple. In Paul’s words, he will instead become a “castaway.”

New Testament teaching consistently teaches that God’s new birth, eternal salvation work is wholly accomplished by God with no contribution of any kind or degree from us. And it further and with equal consistency teaches that the believer’s walk of faith requires our pro-active and faithful personal action to follow Scripture’s teachings. It never teaches us to put our life on auto-pilot and wait for God to do all the doing for us.

In most cases, the idea of passive obedience, that God does all the doing in every act of faith and obedience, grows out of one of two bad ideas. 1) The individual either has practiced or is contemplating inexcusable sin and prefers to blame God than to confess his sin and repent. 2) The individual’s life has been riddled with chaos, and he strives to make sense of nonsense. Rather than deal with the reality, he tries to blame God for the chaos by the pagan, non-Biblical idea that God causes chaos so He can straighten it all out and claim diabolical credit for the change. God indeed may intervene and aid His child in surviving chaos in his life, but God didn’t cause the chaos. We see this pattern of “Blame God for the chaos” in the Book of Jeremiah. Several times in Jeremiah, the prophet specifically rebuked the nation for child sacrifice to pagan gods and other equally abominable sins because they claimed that they were “*delivered to do*” all those abominations. If we follow Jeremiah’s rebuke, no one can blame God for his choice to commit abominable sin, and no one can claim that God “Delivered” them to do those sins by some divine order. (Jeremiah 7:10, 19:5, 23:32, 29:33, 32:35. How can a person believe that God predestinated something when God in Scripture says that it never entered His mind to cause people to do such things?)

In Romans 3:1-8, Paul confronts this fatalistic idea that God in some way causes and always needs/uses our unrighteousness to advance His righteousness as a slander of his teaching, not as affirmation of it, and he further writes that those who so heinously mischaracterize God in these amoral and diabolical ways shall face God’s judgment, “...*whose damnation is just.*” When I encounter this pagan, non-Biblical idea of fatalistic predestination, I am always tempted to remind the advocate that, if his idea is true, he should understand that God “Predestinated” me to despise and to seek occasion to refute such unbiblical ideas. Romans 8:29-30 affirms God’s true, Biblical predestination. **Paul**

**uses the personal pronoun “whom,” not the impersonal pronoun “what.”** “Whom” refers to people; “what” refers to things or events. God predestinated His people to their eternal glory with Him, not evil actions of sinful men. Despite these stern Biblical warnings, sinful people will still prefer to blame God rather than face their sins and repent. They will often contribute to—or create—their own chaos and blame it on God when they dig their hole so deep that they can’t dig out of it. They, not God, are responsible for their personal chaos.

*For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world.* (1 John 2:16. “Of” in this verse denotes source or cause. How can anything be 1) “...*not of the Father,*” and 2) “...*of the world*” if the false premise of fatalistic predestination of all events is true? It can’t. Simply stated, this view of predestination cannot find any Biblical support whatever)

But God, not twisted humans, has the last word, and these passages warn us that God does not kindly regard any human effort to blame Him for man’s sin and chaos. “...*whose damnation is just.*”

With conscious intent, I have reviewed one of the worst and most unbiblical ideas ever to lay claim on spiritual minds to underscore the difference between twisted (2 Peter 3:16) human “Blame God” philosophy and the refreshing, pure, and clean Biblical teaching that reveals the Lord’s true merciful grace toward His beloved children.

*And now abideth faith, hope, charity.* These three principles come from God, and Paul affirms that they are not occasional or temporary. God gave them to His beloved children as a permanent foundation for all other spiritual gifts that He bestows to enrich and to guide His children through their present pilgrimage. God never forsakes any of these three principles, never. He never contradicts them in any way. He gave them to His children, and He ensures that they shall abide, remain permanently for our spiritual health and walk. Let’s focus briefly on each principle.

1. **Faith.** In Scripture faith is not a mere abstract principle. It identifies a foundational character trait of God. In formal human contracts, it is commonplace in the contractual “Boiler plate,” basic language that defines applicable legal principles that govern the contract, to include a statement that the parties to the contract enter into the contract with honest intent of fulfilling the terms of the contract to which they agree. They are said to enter into the contract “In good faith.” They do not enter the contract with deceit, claiming to agree to honor their obligations in the agreement, but secretly intending to do everything in their power to evade their obligations. God’s “Covenant” relationship with His children is wholly a “Good

faith” covenant. God did not enter His covenant with any “Bad faith” or intent not to honor His promises. *“Faithful is he that calleth you, who also will do it.”* (1 Thessalonians 5:24)

The Old Testament frequently reminds us; people are strongly inclined to imitate the god whom they worship. If they worship the God of the Bible, they will be devoted to godly integrity, to “Faithfulness” in all that they say and do. If they worship any of the deceitful false gods that abound in the world, they see no real problem being like their god, in this case, deceitful in their words and deeds. After all, they are merely imitating their god. It has been my observance that people who tend to view God from a fatalistic perspective tend to be far too casual toward their own conduct and sins. What could be wrong with imitating their god? If he is deceitful and diabolical, why not imitate him? However, this mindset contradicts the abiding, permanent principle of faith, of “Good faith” by which God functions and rules His world. In following this abiding faith, we honor our God and His true, Biblical character. Nothing less is ever acceptable.

2. **Hope.** We use the word “Hope” to refer to mere wishful thinking, to things we’d really like, but have no real expectation of realizing. Not so, this Biblical principle. “Hope” as Scripture uses the term refers to joyful expectation, not wishful thinking. Hope logically builds and stands on the solid foundation of God’s faithfulness. If God is firmly committed to “Faithfully” fulfill His covenant and promises to His people, we have no basis for any outlook other than joyful anticipation. (Hebrews 13:5-6) Further, Paul directly links Biblical hope with the indwelling Jesus. (Colossians 1:27; *“...Christ in you, the hope of glory”*) How do these dual traits of God and their dominance in His governance over His world and His family relate to spiritual gifts? Directly so. If we live in a world in which our God remains steadfastly faithful to His covenant and to every promise made to His children, and if that faithfulness provides the solid foundation for joyful expectation of the fulfillment of every divine promise, “Hope,” we have every reason to strive to fulfill our calling and to use every blessing or spiritual gift wholly for our God and for His glory, as well as for the help of His children. Nothing else makes any sense at all.

3. **Charity.** We go back to Paul’s inspired definition of this word in verses 4-7. If God in His administration of His love for His people practices these principles, we must strive to practice them as well. The greatest of the three, this quality must govern the activity of every true spiritual gift.

I have been involved with a number of young ministers through their development, ordination, and subsequent ministry. I’ve seen some praiseworthy successes that glorified the Lord,

and I’ve seen a few abysmal failures. Based on Scripture as well as these observations, I would never knowingly ask any man to fill the pulpit, however well informed in the Scriptures, unless I saw convincing and consistent evidence of the man’s active love for the Lord and for His people. (John 21:15-22; before directing Peter to minister to sheep and lambs, three times Jesus asked Peter the question, “Do you love me?” in three different ways) If Peter failed to manifest his love for Jesus, he had no ministry to the Lord’s people. A man might know as much as John Gill, the old English Baptist theologian, but, if he falls short in living and consistently manifesting his love for the Lord, a love proved by his practicing the verbs of love in this chapter, he has no Biblical position of authority or teaching over the Lord’s people. Before a church allows a man to speak, they should confirm a consistent pattern over time of 1) thorough Biblical knowledge and soundness in the faith, 2) a lifestyle that honors the faith, “Feet” that preach the gospel in his conduct, and 3) above all else, a self-less and passionate love for the Lord and for His people, a love that manifests itself in the actions of 1 Corinthians 13. If any of these foundational qualities is missing or even in question, the man should not be allowed to speak a word to the church.

*...but the greatest of these is charity.* Contrary to the populist attitude of our day, speaking in tongues is not the greatest spiritual gift. “Faith healing” is not the greatest spiritual gift. Sadly in both examples, the man who claims these “Gifts” is often praised far more than the Lord. No one can claim a spiritual gift unless he manifests the qualities of that gift as set forth in the New Testament. In both cases, the modern claim fails to harmonize with Scripture’s description of these gifts, so they cannot be defended or promoted as Biblical in their modern understanding.

When Paul introduced this chapter (1 Corinthians 12:31), he set our expectations by telling us that he intended to *“...show...unto you a more excellent way.”* We have been supremely blessed by this chapter. The Lord gently pulled back the veil and took us into His heart. He has shown us His deepest and most intimate commitment to His covenant, to His promises, and, above all, to His people. He now commands us to faithfully, hopefully, and lovingly practice that more excellent way that He has shown us.

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Worship service each Sunday  
Joseph R. Holder

10:30 A. M.  
Pastor