

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

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## Characteristics of a Godly Church: Devotion to God and to Each Other

*Moreover, brethren, we do you to wit of the grace of God bestowed on the churches of Macedonia; How that in a great trial of affliction the abundance of their joy and their deep poverty abounded unto the riches of their liberality. For to their power, I bear record, yea, and beyond their power they were willing of themselves; Praying us with much intreaty that we would receive the gift, and take upon us the fellowship of the ministering to the saints. And this they did, not as we hoped, but first gave their own selves to the Lord, and unto us by the will of God. (2 Corinthians 8:1–5, KJV 1900)*

Throughout our study, now in excess of a year, we have focused far more on the behaviors of a faithful New Testament church than on the traditional ideas of "Ecclesiology," the Bible's teachings on the doctrine of a New Testament church. Although we continue this emphasis, this study will shift our focus somewhat more deeply into the practical traits that should define and describe a godly church.

Any church that hopes to honor Christ as a church that He would care to claim must grow beyond the sadly common bond of a social services club or a fraternity that binds people solely based on ties of common interest or common beliefs. Certainly the members of a godly church share these traits, but they must possess far more than this to rise to the noble stature of a godly New Testament church. We'll likely invest an extended time with the New Testament's description of these traits.

A common cliché from good folks who simply do not make church a regular part of their life is "I can worship God anywhere. I don't need to go to church to worship God." The statement presents a half-truth. God indeed does not confine His worship to inside the walls of a particular building. However, you don't often read or hear of Sunday morning golfers, tennis players, bowlers, etc. stopping in the middle of their morning game for worship, do you?

The simple fact of New Testament teaching reminds us that we need a community of faithful believers to encourage us and to remind us of the good things that God commands us to practice in our lives. Avoid the reminder, and it becomes increasingly easy to avoid the activity, or to perform it at such a low priority level as to require little or no active focus. Many of the people who cite this cliché to you sincerely try to practice the Golden Rule, treat others as you would have them treat you. They wouldn't entertain the idea of robbing a bank, stealing from others, or murder. Most of them almost certainly wouldn't consider, even remotely ignoring their marriage vows and committing infidelity. Why? Where do they find these moral behaviors taught with such emphasis that they

practice them? While I would quickly observe that the indwelling Holy Spirit in every born-again child of God convicts and witnesses to this godly behavior, many of these people also consciously read their Bible and understand that it teaches them to live according to these tenets. Have they not read in that same Bible about a thing called "Church"? Why ignore one major teaching of the Bible, a teaching that directly invades personal behaviors and habits, while clinging to others? Does the Bible they read give them—anyone—the liberty to pick and choose from the Bible the things we like and to ignore the things we dislike? How would these folks react to this precise attitude if someone told them that he deeply believed in the first six commandments, but he had decided to ignore the last four? The moral principles of the Ten Commandments are no less part of the Bible and part of God's Biblical teaching to us than that same Bible's teachings regarding church.

Traditional, New Testament kind of Christianity, is becoming increasingly rare and distasteful to our contemporary culture. Rapidly replacing the lifestyle of Biblical ethics are two insidious attitudes that strike at the taproot of New Testament Christianity.

1. Self-glorification/gratification. Put self and one's personal gain above all else. What is in it for me?
2. Blame shift. Never acknowledge that you did something wrong. Never step up and openly accept responsibility for what you did and for the consequences of what you did. When things go wrong, someone else is always responsible. Always keep a dirty villain handy so you can point the accusing finger at him/her/it. Do anything other than acknowledge the simple prodigal's confession, "I have sinned."

Given the growing prevalence of these two cultural attitudes, it is no surprise that many churches increasingly cater to one or both of these broken, sinful appetites. Try convincing a person who has

become intoxicated and addicted to these two attitudes that Biblical Christianity requires self-denial, not self-indulgence and self-satisfaction. Try reminding someone drunk on these behaviors that confession of one's sins and repentance, actually changing the way he/she lives, is a prerequisite that Jesus commanded before anyone can begin to truly follow Him. How popular will your message be?

*...we do you to wit of the grace of God bestowed on the churches of Macedonia....* A godly church manifests God's grace in actions and attitudes that defy the normal human response. The church that warms her hands by her own fire will soon fall into cold darkness for lack of fuel. (Isaiah 50:11)

*...How that in a great trial of affliction the abundance of their joy and their deep poverty abounded unto the riches of their liberality.* Here we see the appearance of this God-given grace. How would we normally react to intense personal trial? Most of us have never faced trials of the gravity that first century Christians suffered. How do we react to our frustrations or to the occasional life-shaking trials that come our way? Do we manifest joy? Do the trials nudge us to share the riches of that grace liberally with those around us? Yes, "Liberality" may refer to money, but no one will share financially in the heat of trial unless they comprehend the grace that sustains them through the trial. Few of us indeed can look into the mirror and see this kind of grace, but lessons such as this from Scripture serve to remind us of the presence and faithfulness our God always shows in His care and keeping of His beloved children. (Matthew 6:25-34; God's tender care of lilies can teach us this lesson far better than Solomon in all of his glory and wealth. What do lilies teach us?)

*For to their power, I bear record, yea, and beyond their power they were willing of themselves; Praying us with much intreaty that we would receive the gift, and take upon us the fellowship of the ministering to the saints.* Paul uses the "churches of Macedonia" as his example of a "grace-church." He doesn't further describe the specific incident of their grace. At least one prominent candidate to illustrate this example appears in Paul's letter to the Philippian church.

*For even in Thessalonica ye sent once and again unto my necessity.* (Philippians 4:16 KJV)

The Philippian church was located in Macedonia. On a few occasions in life I have encountered a poor saint who, despite abject poverty, found joy in giving. And on a few of those occasions I have protested, "You need this money. Why don't you keep it to help with your own needs?" To my shame, these grace-filled, godly people gently reminded me that God provides for His people, and they lived daily in the assurance that He would provide for their needs. Shortly after I started preaching, a poor widow walked up to me and gave me a quarter. I knew her destitute condition, so I

accepted that quarter in the spirit of the widow who gave her two mites. (Luke 21:2) To this day, over fifty six years later, that precious quarter remains in my jewelry box. It has taught me far more valuable lessons as a godly reminder than anything it could have purchased. To appreciate the gift of grace, you must understand the power of grace—and grace's source.

*And this they did, not as we hoped, but first gave their own selves to the Lord, and unto us by the will of God.* Whenever a preacher preaches a sermon, he prays and hopes for godly fruit in the lives of his hearers. Sometimes the preacher may be disappointed at the oblivion some of his hearers show to the gospel. Ah, but there are times when a man preaches, and someone goes above and beyond in their response. Talk about a preacher coming alive with joy! In this case, Paul allows us to see his personal joy at one such moment in his life. These Macedonians didn't just live up to Paul's hopeful expectations. They did more.

*...first gave their own selves to the Lord, and unto us by the will of God.* We have all heard the senseless refrain, "I keep my religion private between God and me." Scripture repeatedly reminds us that we manifest our attitude toward God in our attitude toward the people around us.

*If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar: for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen? (1 John 4:20 KJV)*

No one can be a prickly pear with the people in his/her life and claim with any validity that he/she loves God or serves God. Of all people, preachers should exemplify this other-centered spirit in their lives. Few things are as inspiring in this world as the sight of a godly preacher who, despite the trials of life, goes right to the end with loving grace and tender affection for the Lord's people. I've seen such men, and their memory to this day excites me. Sadly, I have seen a very few preachers who forgot their own sermons, becoming increasingly bitter in their senior years. The sad sight of these few men has prompted me to pray for the Lord's grace to keep my heart loving and tender to my last breath. The contrast between the two attitudes is amazing—and amazingly instructive.

One of the most significant and abiding traits of a godly Christian—and also of a godly church—appears in this truth. Rather than fighting tooth and nail for our own way, the course of the mature believer appears in giving, not getting. We cannot give ourselves to each other unless and until we give ourselves to the Lord, but, to the extent that we truly give ourselves to the Lord, we shall find the power, passion, and joy of giving ourselves to His people. This trait may well be the single most important trait of a godly church. (John 13:35) How may I serve you?

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Worship service each Sunday  
Joseph R. Holder

10:30 A. M.  
Pastor