

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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A Godly Example: Faith

Let no man despise thy youth; but be thou an example of the believers, in word, in conversation, in charity, in spirit, in faith, in purity. (1 Timothy 4:12, KJV 1900)

On the first Sunday of February, 1956, I spoke before my home church for the first time. At the time, I was a fourteen year-old lad. As I recall, I read Matthew 6:28-29. That young, inexperienced lad could not speak from long experience about God's loving faithfulness to care and to provide for His children, but that young lad did believe in God and in God's Book, the Bible, with all his heart. For many years, my only appeal for authority had to be to the teaching of Scripture. I believed it fully and wholly. Interestingly, that youthful experience did much to mold my lifelong ministry. Although the Lord has richly blessed me and my family over the fifty-five subsequent years, and although I occasionally do appeal to personal experiences that exemplify the Lord's faithfulness and goodness, I still work to make my primary authority the teachings of Scripture. If a preacher deviates from that exclusive authority to any other source, however sincerely, he has compromised his calling and his message. Bad results are sure to follow.

For several decades, I was among the youngest "crop" of preachers in our churches. As I grew in my studies and faith, and as I traveled among our people and expanded my base of experience, I had occasion to observe many older preachers. Fifty-five years of such observations have produced some fascinating conclusions. I observe that a preacher who grows old in his ministry tends either to grow mellow or bitterer than in his youth. Some of the men who fell into the bitter soup of life were men of reputation and high regard in their younger years. The ordinary challenges and disappointments of ministry seemed to turn personal with them. As bitterness took its sad roots in their minds and attitudes, their ministry dried up. How could it be otherwise?

Looking diligently lest any man fail of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble you, and thereby many be defiled. (Hebrews 12:15, KJV 1900)

When any believer allows ego frustrations or disappointments to dominate his mind and life, he has planted, cultivated, and fertilized the devastating root of bitterness of which this passage warns. A wild weed root, once planted, tends to take over the soil all around it. In this analogy the weed of bitterness is allowed to spring up in the

person's life. Instead of digging it up, the person feeds it. What is the inevitable outcome of such a foolish action? It leaves the bitter person "troubled" and "defiled." A "troubled" person will wear a frown on his face like a fresh-pressed suit. It will predict his whole outlook on life, and on his ministry. The sad problem with such a life appears in its contagious disposition. Not only will this person become bitter, troubled, and defiled, but his influence will rub off on all the people around him. It will linger to trouble and defile them long after this man is gone. It becomes his true legacy.

While I do not agree with bitterness in any age, I can understand more about how a young, inexperienced person might be exposed to a few bad experiences that could flavor his/her whole outlook. But a man who has spent his whole life in ministry and in the necessary study of Scripture has no reasonable excuse for bitterness. Perhaps the man allowed ego to get in the way of his servant's heart. Perhaps, as he grew older, he became obsessed with leaving a personal legacy instead of a legacy that testifies to God's faithfulness. Whatever the reason, a bitter old preacher is a sad state to observe.

Similar to my youthful experience regarding appeal to Scripture for authority, many lifelong habits, especially many habits and attitudes that show up more clearly in old age, likely began early in the person's life. A man who reveals more ego and bitterness in his senior years because he feels that his legacy has not been established or fully appreciated, may have subtly invested far more of his entire ministry in a personal legacy than in a New Testament modeled servant's ministry to others.

Paul wisely nudges Timothy in this lesson to form deep-seated and enduring habits and attitudes that will not only serve as a godly example to his hearers now, but that will continue to serve as that noble pattern to the end of his life.

It is the first duty of a minister to display in his own life that which he wishes his people to be.¹⁶¹¹

¹⁶¹ 161. Hiebert, *First Timothy*, p. 85.

¹ Tom Constable, *Tom Constable's Expository Notes on the Bible*, 1 Ti 4:12 (Galaxie Software, 2003; 2003).

The present tense verb in our verse, "...be thou..." addresses a perpetual attitude. Today, fifty-five years after that first speaking effort before the church, I must wake up every morning just as eager and committed to improving my life and my ministry as I did then. We should despise stagnation in our ministry. Every time I walk into the pulpit, I should feel a keen conviction to preach a better sermon that I preached the last time I walked into the pulpit. My preaching "competition" is never some other preacher who has a different personality, a different gift, and a different calling. My one and only competition is the last sermon I preached, and I need to work consistently and faithfully to improve every sermon. We may well reach the point in life where health and circumstances begin to limit our activities, but, until we die, nothing should limit our being, our being what God commands us to be.

The challenge to live the example of faith is probably the most demanding of all New Testament teachings. It involves what we believe about God, about His person, about His work, and about His written revelation to us. It involves teaching that truth to those around us. It also involves the demanding task of applying that belief to our personal experiences in life.

Any time we try to exemplify New Testament teaching, we must constantly rework and refine our effort, always trying to bring it closer to the New Testament model than we in action performed.

Let me give you a personal example. When I was still in my teens, I lost my mother to a prolonged battle with cancer. When my wife was just twenty-nine years old, she had a frightening brush with cancer, at one time classified as "Metastatic Stage Four," meaning that the cancer had spread and that she was terminal. Thanks to dedicated doctors and far more to the Lord's delivering hand, forty years later, my wife is alive and cancer-free. Because of these two experiences, over many decades I had regularly prayed, "Lord, whatever I face with my health, please deliver me from cancer." Until a few years ago, I have enjoyed exceptional health. About nine years ago, I was diagnosed with prostate cancer. The time delay from diagnosis till surgery was about three weeks. I must confess to less than exemplary faith during those three weeks. Try as I might, I wrestled with nearly paralyzing fear. I simply could not shake that dreadful fear. Literally my first waking thought in the recovery room after surgery was for me a true moment of kind blessing from the Lord. In my mind, I saw a large brightly lit sign on the top of a high ridge. The words were simple and clear, "God is good!" Immediately, despite the drugged state of my brain and body, I felt a powerful peace and conviction that, though I did not at that time know the results of the surgery, whatever I faced would be accompanied by the Lord's presence and grace. When they rolled me back to my room, I immediately started telling Sandra about my experience. She later told some of our church

folks, that she heard a promising report from the surgeon, but that I gave her more comfort with this experience than the surgeon had given her. Nine years later, thanks to the Lord's goodness, I remain free of cancer.

Just over two years ago, after an extended problem with my low back, I underwent surgery to fuse three joints in my lower spine. I have to confess that, as I approached surgery, I revisited that wake-up moment from my last surgery with the thought, "What will the Lord tell me this time?" You can imagine my disappointment when, this time, I awoke with no brightly lit sign. I just awoke to the sting of pain in my back. My first thought was "Lord, where is your comfort? Where is your next revelation?" Within moments, the thought occurred to me, fully as much a message from the Lord as my first experience, "Joe, I told you what you needed to know the last time. I haven't changed. I'm still good, and I'll still be with you." I accepted the rebuke and eventually came to view the experience with a nice touch of humor. Instead of being disappointed at no new revelation, I found instructive humor in the Lord's kindness and rested in His faithful assurance.

Recently, I've had to revisit my lower back; more problems more pain. My first surgery was so successful that I lulled myself into thinking that I'd never need more serious attention on my back. In the beginning of the present problem, I struggled with some disappointment and frustration. As tests and evaluations drone on, last week, the Lord paid me an early visit. Again, He reminded me that He is still good, and that whatever I face, He will be with me to deal with it.

An honest reflection of this experience leaves me somewhat disappointed in myself. I should have gripped that first fear of cancer and concluded right then that God is good and will stand by me. I shouldn't have been eagerly looking for another installment in God's reminder when I woke up from back surgery. However, I hope by being honest about my personal experience, as well as my frail humanity, I can better communicate the New Testament model of God's loving faithfulness. However we try, we may never perfectly exemplify the New Testament example, be we preacher or not, but we must ever return to the New Testament's teachings and apply them freshly to whatever we face today.

Interestingly, what I voiced in that first infant message to my home church, God's loving care and provision for His people, remains my message today. He has so faithfully demonstrated His goodness in my life that I cannot, even for a moment, entertain the idea of bitterness regarding my ministry. My legacy, according to Scripture, should not be about me and what I have accomplished. It should be my simple testimony to God and to His goodness. My Biblical task is not to build a personal legacy, but to exemplify faith, faith in God and in His faithful promises.

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Worship service each Sunday
Joseph R. Holder

10:30 A. M.
Pastor