

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

Volume 27, Number 18

May 22, 2011



Wise Judgment: Quick or Delayed

Drink no longer water, but use a little wine for thy stomach's sake and thine often infirmities. Some men's sins are open beforehand, going before to judgment; and some men they follow after. Likewise also the good works of some are manifest beforehand; and they that are otherwise cannot be hid. (1 Timothy 5:23–25, KJV 1900)

If you wish to become involved in a heated debate, just raise the question of drinking to a group of Christians. No one can reasonably—and no one certainly should not try to—make a Bible case for excessive drinking. Scripture strongly and consistently rejects the practice. If you have any doubt whatever, just read the twenty-third chapter of Proverbs. In balance, however, we read of Jesus turning some hundred fifty gallons of water into wine at a wedding feast.

The more relevant point to our study lesson clearly is not dealing with drinking wine in any kind of social setting. Rather Paul admonishes Timothy to drink "...a little..." wine due to Timothy's physical weakness. To underscore the point, the same Greek word that is here translated "little" was translated "almost" in Acts 26:28. The point of this passage is not that Agrippa was ninety-five percent persuaded to become a Christian. It was rather that he saw very little in Paul's preaching that he considered as convincing or persuasive. The hymn, "Almost Persuaded" builds its whole sentiment on a house of cards in a strong breeze, aside from its fundamental theological error.

Why would Paul seemingly insert this verse into a prolonged discussion regarding Timothy's need to be wise and discerning regarding both existing preachers and those who might aspire to preaching in the future? I suggest that the point is quite relevant. A conscientious pastor who cares for the church that he serves takes his position to heart. Anything that threatens even one of the members of this congregation he takes deeply and personally. He cares for them, and He prayerfully labors for their spiritual peace and maturity. When a pastor encounters either an established preacher who has fallen away from his steadfastness or a young, aspiring man who demonstrates either beliefs or character traits that disqualify him from the ministry, this man will take the problem to heart. It will keep him awake nights. It will linger heavily on his heart during his waking hours. Eventually the spiritual burden is liable to impact his physical health. Stress or anxiety quite often goes directly to the digestive system. Paul's instructions to Timothy nudge him to drink a small portion of wine occasionally to calm the digestive tract and help him maintain good physical health, as well as

spiritual health and godly perspective. The verse is located precisely where it is most needed.

Some men's sins are open beforehand, going before to judgment; and some men they follow after. Given the obvious point that these verses appear in the midst of Paul's discussion of preachers and of preacher faithfulness or failure, the strongest contextual interpretation of the passage points us in this same direction.

We may well apply the passage to an established preacher who fails his ministry, either by doctrinal departure or by moral failure. In this case, the man demonstrated a stable, godly disposition for an extended time, likely resulting in his being ordained to the ministry. However, eventually the man's core flaw surfaced. His sin was not so open as to be readily and early observed. It only appeared at a later time. In the language of the passage, the man's sin "...followed after." However, Paul has already instructed Timothy regarding how to apply the principles of sound doctrine to all men without in any way showing partiality toward one man over others.

In the case of the young, aspiring "wannabe preacher," his sin that disqualifies him from the ministry may well surface early in his speaking. When this occurs, the pastor and church see the man's sin openly. It goes before the man in public display so that the church may examine—judge—the sin and curb the man's pursuit of ministry. If, at the church's judgment, the man shows grace and repentance, he may in time recover and, if called of the Lord, grow into a healthy ministry. If he fails, he should be removed from any consideration by the church for ministry.

This passage underscores the wise and Biblical necessity for a church to observe a man who believes the Lord called him to preach over an extended period of time. Is he faithful "...in season..." as well as "...out of season..."? Does he show faithfulness under pressure, or does he buckle to the pressure and react to it in a very unchristian manner? If he were ordained and serving as pastor to a local church, should a problem arise in the church, what would be the impact of his reaction to pressure and frustration on the members of that church? Does he exemplify godly faithfulness under pressure? Or does he,

fallen, broken humanity-style, seek frantically for someone to blame for the problem?

In the last couple of years our local church faced the need for a deacon. The church talked and prayed about the need for some time. During some of those conversations, various names would surface. Some of them were younger men who indeed show great promise for the future. On one such occasion, I was talking with one of our older and very wise sisters in the church. As we assessed a number of men, eventually some of these younger men surfaced. Wisely, she acknowledged their potential, but—even wiser—she concluded that these young men needed more time to grow through some of life's trials and to mature. If, during this season, the men remain faithful and steadfast, her conclusion was that they should then be considered for the position. If they do not demonstrate faithful steadfastness, they should not be considered. How very wise! Over time the "long list" will become the "short list" when the church then needs a deacon.

This wise saint's reasoning regarding a deacon properly applies no less to ministry. The first time a young man walks into the pulpit and puts together a coherent and instructive message on a Bible topic does not mean that the church should immediately ordain him. The man needs to experience time and varied trials and difficult seasons. How he reacts during these seasons will either affirm his calling and qualifications, or it will demonstrate that he is not qualified, called or not called.

The point of the passage for either the seasoned preacher or for the young "wannabe" preacher is wisely the same. The church must maintain constant and wise observation of the man, not just give him a cursory assessment after he spends a few minutes in the pulpit. Such wise observation will manifest the man's disposition and affirm his qualification for the ministry, or it will display his sins and thus disqualify him. Only time will satisfy our study passage's requirement.

What motivates a man to show any interest in the ministry? If he views the position superficially, he might think that ministry is the only way in which he can fulfill his ambition to be a "shaker and mover" in the church's culture. In this case, raw ambition, not unselfish, sacrificial calling, drives his desire.

Let me give you one of a very long list of indications of human ambition. In our church culture a man who appears to be called will be asked to speak briefly to the church. During these brief seasons before the church, how does he handle himself? How does he deal with the Bible topic he is presenting? Too much ambition might nudge the man to complain that he has so many good things to say about his topic that he needs far more time than he has been given. I have occasionally observed men invest significant time out of their precious allotment, bemoaning their lack of time, when they were, by this very action,

wasting the precious time they had. Instead of wasting the time given, a man in this position should study long and hard to sharpen his thoughts and his presentation so that he can present his thoughts constructively within the time allowed.

Does a preacher need thirty minutes or an hour to preach a sermon? Not at all. Read Jesus' Sermon on the Mount with a stopwatch. You can read the whole sermon in around ten minutes. Try the same exercise with Peter's sermon on the Day of Pentecost (Acts the second chapter). For that matter, apply the same exercise to one of Paul's sermons recorded in Acts. How long did they preach? Do we find even one instance in which Jesus, Peter, Stephen, or Paul complained that they had so much more to say if they only were allotted more time? Not even once did any of them ever make such a complaint. A wise preacher once made a pertinent point. Sometimes a preacher will encounter a situation in which he has a golden opportunity to speak his convictions to people, but perhaps he only has five or ten minutes. Rather than complaining, the man should sharpen his meditations so that he can present an exciting and notable message in the time allowed. My wife has occasionally observed that my best sermons are often my shortest sermons. When you know you have a brief time, you work to put your thoughts into clear, concise focus, thus making your message clearer and easier to understand by your audience.

A wise, seasoned preacher knows well that he will never get the whole gospel told, so he works at telling what he has occasion to preach well, not wasting his time complaining about how little time he has. Does the complaining preacher think that God has given him something so essential and unique that life will not go on unless he speaks those words? Think about it. Does this attitude remind us more of Biblical preaching or of sinful human ego?

Every time I meet a young man who shows promise of a calling, and who demonstrates a mature, godly commitment to that calling, I get really excited. The Lord is not finished with us; He is still calling men to preach His gospel, and He shall surely continue to nudge His children to belief and obedience to the man's preaching. When the young man demonstrates spiritual maturity and growth, the congregation shall likewise become excited about the young man's time with them, and they will look forward to it. When this is not the case, the congregation will increasingly dread the prolonged time the man seems to consume—to waste—without edifying them with his words.

The wise church and the wise pastor are willing to take their time. Over time, every man's labors will manifest themselves, some quickly, and some only after an extended time. Any effort to shorten the time exposes the church to the risk of an unqualified or uncalled man wasting his and their time. God always gives us wise instructions. Let us be careful to follow it.

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Worship service each Sunday
Joseph R. Holder

10:30 A. M.
Pastor