

Christianity: Serious Business

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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I give thee charge in the sight of God, who quickeneth all things, and before Christ Jesus, who before Pontius Pilate witnessed a good confession; That thou keep this commandment without spot, unrebukeable, until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ. {1Ti 6:13-14}

What is your personal assessment of Scripture? How do you view it in terms of its value to instruct and direct your life? Have you ever defended a particular action, either in your life or in your church, with the "Well, the Bible doesn't condemn it so it must be okay" argument? This defense is called the "argument from silence." It is the weakest possible argument for a belief or practice. It outright rejects Paul's personal description of Scripture as God's thorough furnisher to all good works. Paul's response to this argument from silence would urge us to look for what we believe and practice in Scripture or to avoid its belief and/or practice. Scripture certainly contains many prohibitions, but it is primarily a positive book that exemplifies the Christian faith and life in terms of what we are to believe and practice, not merely what we are to reject.

However balanced we seek to live out our faith not a one of us has reached the point in our faith-journey that we can say we have arrived. Ever so subtly we allow little things to creep into our thinking and conduct that cannot find Biblical support. If challenged, we typically offer a "What's wrong with it?" defense. My first thought when I encounter something of this nature in my own life is rather "If it isn't taught in Scripture, what's right with it?"

Christianity is not an entertaining hobby to be practiced for our personal recreation. Paul described it as a solemn charge to be observed before God at all times. What an incredible transformation such an attitude would make in our lives today if we simply started practicing this kind of Biblical Christianity. Are you ready to do it? Are you willing to do it? Do you want to do it? There is no better time than today.

Let the transformation begin,

Joe Holder

You occasionally hear people defend their private Christianity. "I answer to God for my faith, not to another man." There is a half truth in the comment, but it misses a major component of New Testament Christianity. One has to wonder. What would have happened if Timothy had responded to Paul with these words? As well as being a personal faith, Christianity is preeminently a community faith. God places high value on community. Within the Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are self-aware, but they are also in perfect harmony and communication with each other. {Joh 3:35; 5:17,20,23; 8:29; 10:15,30; 11:41; 12:27-28; 14:16} New Testament Christianity developed after Jesus' ascension specifically as a community of believers who banded together in worship and mutual support. The isolated, lone Christian will eventually become a lonely, defeated Christian. As Father, Son, and Holy Spirit work in perfect harmony with each other and communicate with each other, so has God commanded His followers to establish and maintain a tight union of communication, fellowship, and community of worship.

Within the community of worshipping believers, this charge establishes the gravity with which all believers should regard their faith and conduct. We might easily deceive other believers into thinking that we are authentic in our faith while living as we wish outside their knowledge. We cannot deceive our God. Far too many contemporary Christians have made love more their God than the God of love. They sidestep the whole Biblical teaching regarding the fear of God in favor of a fantasy of God as

something of a benevolent grandfather. No thinking believer can read these verses without realizing the gravity of our Christian faith.

When most ministers perform a wedding ceremony, they make a point that the charge of the wedding vows is made before God and in the presence of the witnesses gathered to celebrate the occasion. In the case of our passage we might draw a parallel. Our Christian conduct is truly before God, but it is also to be performed in the company of other believers, not in isolated privacy. God wants a marriage commitment from His children for life, not a flirtatious on-again-off-again courtship. He commands our faith all the time, not just when we consider it convenient or in our personal interest. We must not overlook the fundamental principle of Biblical faith. It is not merely a private trusting. It must be accompanied by compatible lifestyle. If you notice the language in any legal contract for a purchase on installments, you will find wording to the effect that you sign the agreement to pay the debt "in good faith." What happens after a few months if you neglect making your payments? You will receive a notice in the mail or a phone call, reminding you of your obligation. "Good faith" means that you pledge faithfulness to your signature and your word to repay the debt according to the terms and conditions of the contract that you signed.

You cannot have faith without faithfulness. Isn't that the point that James makes regarding the hypothetical "faith without works"?

By referring to God "...who quickeneth all things," Paul reminds Timothy that God is indeed the Author of all life and therefore has a Creator's right to direct its course. He also takes the point beyond a Creator's right to a Redeemer/Savior's right. {1Co 6:19-20}

Paul requires that Timothy "witness" his faith with the same devotion and consistency that Jesus exemplified when, at the threat of His life, He witnessed His Person before Pontius Pilate. How can anyone claim to be a New Testament Christian while failing to give voice and credible conduct to his/her faith? Impossible. Peter joins Paul in teaching that the underlying premise of Christian apologetics, presenting and defending one's faith, is based on living so authentically in the ordinary course of life that people see the difference in your conduct and question how and why you live as you do. {1Pe 3:15}

"That thou keep this commandment without spot..." presents us with an interesting challenge. What commandment does Paul have in mind? Is he referring to one or the other of his recent exhortations to Timothy? Or does he begin the conclusion of his letter and include the whole of his letter to Timothy? I suggest that the direction is all-inclusive of the whole letter.

Here we must touch somewhat sensitive ground for many believers. How often do various Christians of every stripe defend their personal favorite doctrine or practice based on the "argument from silence"? If the Bible doesn't condemn the issue in question, why not do it? What can be wrong with it if the Bible doesn't say anything against it? A wiser and more mature spiritual guide for Christian faith and practice takes the mirror opposite view. If indeed Scripture is the "thorough" furnisher to all good works, why would you want to do it unless it appears in Scripture? The foundation of the argument from silence stands on a low view of Scripture, a view that specifically holds that Scripture is not the thorough furnisher that Paul declares it to be. {2Ti 3:16-17} Those who use the supposed silence of Scripture on a given issue as their defense of its practice view Scripture primarily as a negative, not a positive, document. In their perspective Scripture is a complicated list of "Don't do...", so if you can't find anything in Scripture against their favorite idea, there is nothing wrong with doing it. They make Scripture a complicated fence of unending prohibitions, not a fertile field with rich soil in which to grow our lives. This is precisely the attitude that the Pharisees embraced in Jesus' day. Over the generations from the giving of the Law through Moses (around 1500 B. C.) till Jesus came, they gradually modified God's Ten Commandments to some six hundred commandments. Not satisfied with

them, they added additional prohibitions, actually calling them "fences," to bring the number to over a thousand prohibitions. This issue calls for serious soul-searching. Do we want to identify with the Pharisees of Jesus' day or with Jesus? Do we want to make our faith a nearly endless list of prohibitions, or do we want to make it a fertile resource for a fruitful and joyful life? Will we add our "spots" to God's perfect revelation? Or will we devote our faith-faithfully-to preserving God's revealed way of believing and doing things?

Paul adds emphasis by the word "unrebukeable." When we compare our view and conduct of faith with the model of Scripture, not only is there no violation. There is no gray area in which we leave ourselves open to rebuke. Paul makes this rule applicable from the time of his writing till "the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ." He did not intend his writings to Timothy as temporary rules to help the Ephesian church get out of its faltering state. He intended it to be timeless, as applicable to us today as it was to Timothy and the church in Ephesus.

None of us can claim perfect insights and understanding into all New Testament teachings, particularly those that deal with the way we are to live. For this reason, the faithful believer is to "...give attendance to reading...". {1Ti 4:13} The more we read Scripture with a clear devotion to practice what we learn from it the more we will refine our faith and conduct. Conversely, to the extent that we read and understand the teachings of Scripture, but choose to ignore it or even contradict it, the more we compromise our conscience and lose a pure and clear vision of Biblical Christianity as it should be lived out in our lives. Our only effective course is faithfully to live up to all that we understand from Scripture, and to maintain a regular and intense study of Scripture as our positive (not merely prohibitive) rule of life. If we adopt this view of Scripture and of our faith, we will work constantly to grow in our faith and conduct. We will never reach the point of becoming complacent and satisfied with our present conduct and state of spiritual maturity. We will carefully avoid the status quo in our conduct. "Pressing toward the mark" {Php 3:14} hardly describes a complacent status quo believer, does it?

I have known a number of believers who demonstrated admirable reading and study in their spiritual youth, but as they grew older they increasingly neglected in-depth Bible study (a vivid distinction from occasional devotional reading). Never allow rust to grow on your spiritual sword, the "Word of God." Keep it sharp and fresh.