

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

Volume 27, Number 21

June 12, 2011



God's Peaceful Assignment

But godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out. (1 Timothy 6:6-7, KJV 1900)

May I make a sincere confession? Some of the passages that we've studied over the last few weeks are among the most challenging and difficult in the Bible for me as a minister and pastor. The directions are so clear and so simply stated that I cannot misunderstand them. My challenge is how to implement them. There is a simple alternative, though it in no way diminishes the difficulty with which I struggle. In fact, this simple alternative has often made me struggle even more with the directions of the passage. Here is the dilemma. You can't practice sin and make it turn out right. It simply never does—in fact, it never can do so. When people make the calculated decision to ignore Scripture's teachings, regardless of the reasons they rationalize to justify their actions, the outcome is never good. And, to be honest, the outcome never matches the rationalized justification in the sinner's mind. We should draw a powerful lesson from this truth. God's way always works, though it may well be fraught with difficulty along the way, and any other way never works when examined from the long-term perspective.

Through much of the fifth chapter and the first five verses of the sixth chapter of First Timothy, Paul has dealt with strong instructions that focus on how the pastor and the church should deal with people who rationalize and implement these bad, sinful practices. If we consider Paul's strong words from our broken, human perspective, they seem a bit stern. However, if we regard them from God's wholly righteous and wise perspective, they clearly reveal the facts of righteousness and sin in terms of consequences, and not in terms of the endless ways that people try to rationalize their sins.

Before engaging our present study passage, let us address one central point of God's teachings in Scripture regarding sin, the wrong choices that His children make and try vainly to justify. We love the parable of the two (Yes, two, not one) prodigal sons. (Luke 15:11-32) Although I suspect that true repentance did not occur till later, the far-away son at least started in the right direction when he resolved to return home and confess to his father, "I have sinned." Our human pride will go to absurd lengths in a sinful effort to avoid those three simple words, but God promises incredible healing, restoration, and blessing to His children who face their sins and are willing to speak those simple words from the heart. To those of us (Is anyone

missing from this list?) who have at some time found ourselves on the wrong side of the ledger from Scripture's teaching, there is a solution to our "mess." It starts with those three words. Perhaps this is the reason that Paul is so bluntly "Black-and-white" in the verses leading up to our present lesson. Rather than presenting a harsh and hopeless dilemma, the Holy Spirit directed Paul to be as direct as God is against any and all sins, committed by any and all of His children.

Repentance will not erase the damage our sins wove into the fabric of our lives, and it will not remove that damage from the lives of those close to us whom we harm by our sins. However, confession—those three glorious words—and repentance—changing our sinful behavior—will always improve the moral and personal landscape of our lives. However "messed up" our lives may be, they will be better as we walk down the path of confession and repentance than they will be if we choose any other course of action. Simply stated, **however heavy the cross of discipleship, it is always lighter than the burden of sin.**

Let me give you a simple example. When abortion became so popular in our culture, many of us read Psalm 139, and many other Scriptures, readily concluding that abortion destroys a life that has started to grow in God's image. No surprise, we preached long and hard against it. During one such moment in my preaching, a sudden realization dawned on me that shocked my senses. If abortion is as common as it seems, we may well often preach against this sin to women who at some earlier time in their lives chose abortion over their baby. How does such preaching impact them? The point that abortion is a sin is not something new to this person. Her conscience reminds her of it constantly. We must continue to preach the moral truth of abortion's sin, but, with every mention of the sin, we must remind our hearers of God's healing grace that heals the soul through confession and repentance. Since that realization, I never mention the sin of abortion apart from some compassionate words about God's healing love.

But godliness with contentment is great gain. As a minister/pastor for over fifty years, I have had my share of encounters with believers who fell into major sins and faced the dire consequences of their conduct. However, by far the most common problem that I've encountered often never

acknowledged or resolved by the person who suffers under it, is the state of mind that contradicts this passage. The person is godly. He/she fiercely opposes the typical shameful sins that disgrace the godly. You'd never find this person in a compromising situation. "Squeaky clean" would more likely describe your assessment of the person. But the sad reality that this passage addresses dominates this person's life. **Despite the godliness, there is no contentment.**

The state of mind that Paul here describes as "...godliness with contentment..." is not an automatic outcome of anything that we say or do. You can't connect the dots of upright living and see it. Notice Paul's words, "...great gain." The compromised believer (Verse Five) thinks that "...gain is godliness..." In other words this faulty thinking believes that the more you make in your salary, the more money you have in the bank or in your retirement fund, the higher the assessed value of your home, the more godly you must be. Paul contradicts this carnal mindset with the mirror opposite to its reasoning. While the carnal Christian wrongly concludes that gain is godliness, Paul teaches that in reality godliness itself is the great gain that we should pursue. "Isn't there something else?" the carnal Christian might question, while **the godly Christian appreciates the value of godliness in terms of glorifying God, not gaining more for self.** He/she strives daily to live closer to the Lord and to more glorify Him in both body and in spirit. (1 Corinthians 6:19-20) We sometimes mistakenly create an extreme dichotomy between the physical body and our spirit, our born-again nature. Paul indicates in this lesson that our objective should always be to so follow the leading of the Holy Spirit that our regenerated spirit dominates our physical body, resulting in both body and spirit glorifying God.

Not that I speak in respect of want: for I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content. (Philippians 4:11, KJV 1900)

The fine art of contentment with godliness must be gained at great expense and with great effort. Here Paul acknowledges that he did not come to his contented state of mind naturally. He learned it. Nor did he come to it because he simply did not possess material things, "Not that I speak in respect of want..." Poverty or lack of things did not coerce Paul into this state of mind.

A business doesn't make a profit from its operations by coasting or by simply flowing with the currents of the business world. Neither does a Christian "gain" the contented treasure of this passage by passivity. Scripture directs us to strive toward contented godliness in our daily lives.

In my business career, I worked with a number of highly successful men. Most of them, despite their success, seemed more driven and discontented than peacefully contented. The key

factor in our lesson appears in that elusive, but sought-for mindset, contentment.

For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out. Many years ago I was asked to preach the funeral of a good friend whose directions to his children for his funeral specifically requested that he be buried in a simple pine box, no clothes (He wanted to be buried in his "birthday suit," just as he came into this world; no open casket for this one), and he wanted his old worn out Bible to be firmly placed in his hands. He was content with this exit. The very idea that Paul presents in this thought alarms many people. They strive to leave their mark on this world, but they sadly fail to grasp the point of the passage. The more we strive to leave our own mark the less we leave marks of honor for the Lord, and the more contentment eludes us, for we shall never find contentment through building our own personal legacy. The legacy we should build is God's, not ours. How will the people who knew us react to our life in terms of their relationship to God? After all else fades, what else is worth anything at all?

By way of contrast between "...gain is godliness..." and "...godliness with contentment is great gain," Paul emphasizes the point. When we teach people to practice godliness on the premise that they will be paid for it, regardless of the payment, we actually subvert Biblical truth into the error of "...gain is godliness." To discover that amazing quality of contentedness in godliness, we must eradicate the personal gain mindset, replacing it with a profound appreciation for the value of godliness that glorifies God as the chief end of everything we think, say, or do.

Paul had learned this lesson of healthy detachment from material things in his own life (Phil. 4:10-13). We must learn it too.¹

This attitude of mind is Paul's conception of "great gain."²

Interestingly, the Greek word translated "disciple" primarily identified a student. A disciple of Jesus does not have all the answers, but he/she does know which textbook to check for the answers, and he/she also knows the teacher in this class. In the case of our lesson, we are not to gain statistical or historical knowledge. We are rather taught that the only "passing grade" from this class comes through our learning the lesson and applying it to our minds and lives. We take the exam as we live out life's experiences. What is your grade? How deep does your godly contentment run? Does it need to go deeper?

¹ Tom Constable, *Tom Constable's Expository Notes on the Bible*, 1 Ti 6:6 (Galaxie Software, 2003; 2003).

² A.T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, 1 Ti 6:6 (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, 1997).

Little Zion Primitive Baptist Church
16434 Woodruff
Bellflower, California

Worship service each Sunday
Joseph R. Holder

10:30 A. M.
Pastor