

Peculiar and Zealous

***“Who gave himself
for us, that he
might redeem us
from all iniquity,
and purify unto
himself a peculiar
people, zealous of
good works.”
—Titus 2:14***

THE WORD “PECULIAR”

has attached to it today the thought of being odd, or strange, but in our text it means that which is very special, or beyond the ordinary. This is also the meaning of the Greek word from which it is translated. It is true

enough that the world looks upon God’s people as being odd. However, our text is not describing the Lord’s people as they appear to the world, but as they are viewed by God. They are to him very special—a treasure in preparation to be a “royal diadem” in his hand, through which his glory will be reflected to all mankind in his own due time.—Isa. 62:2,3

Jesus was the first of these “peculiar,” special treasures, prepared by God to be the channel through which all the families of the earth would eventually be blessed. While on earth, he too encountered the general ridicule and disdain of the world, particularly the religious leaders of the day. In

prophetic words, Isaiah described in advance this viewpoint of Jesus. “He hath no form nor comeliness; and when we shall see him, there is no beauty that we should desire him. He is despised and rejected of men; . . . we hid as it were our faces from him; he was despised, and we esteemed him not. . . . We did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted.” (Isa. 53:2-4)

To God, however, Jesus was a “peculiar,” special treasure. Continuing his prophecy, Isaiah speaks of the Father’s viewpoint of his beloved Son. “The pleasure of the LORD [God] shall prosper in his hand. . . . Therefore will I divide him a portion with the great, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong.” (vss. 10-12) As we strive daily to further develop the “mind of Christ,” we must take note of those things in his character and works which caused him to be considered such a special treasure to the Almighty. By emulating his “mind” and considering the many scriptures bearing on this important subject, we will be enabled, by God’s grace, to be esteemed by him as a “peculiar people,” and found worthy to “divide the spoil” of the heavenly inheritance with Christ Jesus, our Head and Forerunner.

PROMISES OF HELP

Because those called to the heavenly phase of the kingdom to be joint-heirs with Christ are a special treasure unto the Heavenly Father, he has made every necessary provision to supply all their needs. When they are weak, he gives them strength. When they are weary and faint, he refreshes them with the water of truth and the food of his Word. When

they lack wisdom, he supplies their need. When they know not which way to go, his Word is a light unto their pathway, and they hear a voice behind them saying, "This is the way, walk ye in it."—Isa. 30:21

Many are the foes of God's peculiar people, but he has promised to protect them, and for this purpose has provided the armor of truth, and the fortress of his Word. Thus they are assured that no evil can befall them, because greater is he who is on their side than all who are against them. They claim the promise, "He that dwelleth in the secret place of the most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty."—Ps. 91:1

In their present fleshly state, God's people are weak and blemished. They come far short of the perfect standard of righteousness to which they aspire. Even this, however, does not cast them down, for God has redeemed them by the precious blood of Christ. They are thereby purified and set apart to be coworkers with Jesus, who loved them and gave his life that they might live. With Paul, they exclaim, "It is God that justifieth. Who is he that condemneth?" (Rom. 8:33,34) In the comfort of this knowledge they press forward, confident that he who began the good work in them is abundantly able to complete it in his own due time and to his own glory.—Phil. 1:6

CONDITIONS ATTACHED

While it is a great honor to be a part of God's peculiar people, and most satisfying to realize how many exceeding great and precious promises he has made to us, we should ever remember that our standing before him in this position is conditional

upon our faithfulness in doing his will. In this respect, we are in much the same position before God as were his typical people, Israel. To them, he said, “Now therefore, if ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people: for all the earth is mine.”—Exod. 19:5

There are very few of God’s promises which are unconditional. Israel failed to qualify as his peculiar treasure because they did not hearken to his voice and did not keep their covenant with him. It is because of their failure, and ultimate rejection of Messiah, that this opportunity came to believing Gentiles. That is why we have been privileged to hear God’s call and have been granted the opportunity to be his special treasure. We are surely glad for this, but let us remember that the conditions of our acceptance still apply—conditions of obedience.

This thought is emphasized in our text by the statement that the peculiar people referred to are “zealous of good works.” These two thoughts are inseparable. There is no way to qualify as a member of the peculiar-people class apart from being zealous, but simply being zealous is not sufficient. Unless the zeal is for good works, it will count for nothing.

This thought is called to our attention by Jesus. He said that many would come to him saying, “Have we not . . . in thy name done many wonderful works?” However, the Master’s answer is, “I never knew you.” (Matt. 7:22,23) He doubtless knew they were working, but he knew also that the work of these zealous ones was not in keeping with his Father’s plan, nor was it done from a proper condition of heart. Thus, it did not gain for them his commendation.

APPROVED WORKMEN

It is fundamentally important for all who aspire to be of the peculiar people class to make sure that their zeal is properly directed. Paul tells us how to do this. In his letter to Timothy, he writes, “Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.” (II Tim. 2:15) Those to whom Jesus will say, “I never knew you,” will be very much chagrined because they had not sought diligently enough to show themselves approved unto God, even though by men they may have been approved.

The Scriptures speak of a “zeal of God” which is “not according to knowledge.” (Rom. 10:2) Such a zeal might be for wonderful works instead of good works. It could be the zeal to promote one’s own opinions and thus to gain the plaudits of men. It might be a zeal for following a human leader, or to build up an imposing organization. One might even have a zeal for the work that God wants done, and yet his zeal could be kindled by a wrong motive.

Paul calls our attention to this latter possibility, saying that though we bestow all our goods to feed the poor, and give our bodies to be burned, and have not love, it will profit us nothing. (I Cor. 13:3) It is a part of the good works of God to give our bodies figuratively to be burned. Paul invites us to do this very thing, saying, “I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service.”—Rom. 12:1

Jesus pointed out the terms of the narrow way to the rich young ruler, saying, “Go and sell that

thou hast, and give to the poor, . . . and come and follow me.” (Matt. 19:21) Indeed, we are all invited to present ourselves and all we possess to God to be used by him as he may direct. However, if any other motive than love prompts us to do this, it means that we do not have the proper kind of zeal—not zealous of what God regards as good works.

SINCERE STUDY

Paul admonished us, as previously quoted, “Study to shew thyself approved unto God.” This is the only proper motive for Bible study, and it is well to examine ourselves to make sure that we are sincerely endeavoring to learn God’s will. The human heart is deceitful, and we need constantly to be on guard lest we find ourselves misusing the Word of God in an attempt to justify some private viewpoint of our own, or perhaps some special activity in which we wish to engage. This special activity may not be wrong from God’s standpoint. It may be a special service for which we might be naturally adapted. However, if done from the motive of vain-glory or personal honor, and not to the glory and honor of God, then it would be in vain.

It is well in all our study of the precious Word of God to ask ourselves whether or not we are wholly motivated by the desire to know and do God’s will. “Some read to prove a pre-adopted creed,” wrote the poet, “thus understand but little what they read.” We may fancy that we have no pre-adopted creed to prove, but let us be on guard, for surely we do not want to be workmen who shall be ashamed.

It is well to note that proper Bible study in itself is but a preparation for the good works which have

God's approval. We need also to become God's approved workmen. We endeavor, through study, to rightly divide the Word of truth, in order that in our work for God we may be workmen who will not need to be ashamed—workmen to whom he will not need to say, "I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity."—Matt. 7:23

It is necessary to rightly divide the Word of truth in order to know what God wants us to do. We need to divide it dispensationally. For example, there was a time in the plan of God when it was God's will for his people actually to slay their enemies because their iniquity had come to the full. (Gen. 15:16) However, to do that now would certainly not be manifesting a zeal for good works, since Jesus commanded us, "Love your enemies. (Matt. 5:44) Citing another example, Jesus told his disciples not to go to the Gentiles, but that restricted commission does not apply to us today. Indeed, it was changed by Jesus himself, following his resurrection.

WHAT ARE GOOD WORKS?

Fundamentally, no works can be considered good which are not in harmony with the will of God. The young man who came to Jesus and inquired as to how he could attain eternal life addressed him as "Good Master." Jesus replied, "Why callest thou me good? there is none good but one, that is, God." (Matt. 19:16,17) Jesus did not mean by this that he himself was imperfect or a sinner. He was simply emphasizing the fact that the Heavenly Father was the source of all goodness.

Jesus disclaimed inherent goodness. All that he possessed had come from his Father. He explained

that the words which he spoke were not his. They were gracious words, radiating sympathy, kindness and love. Any man could justly rejoice in such words, reflecting as they did such wondrous wisdom and authority. However, Jesus took no credit for them. They were his Father's words, he explained.

The same was true of Jesus' miraculous works. How wonderful it must have been to bring joy into the lives of the people by opening their blind eyes, unstopping their deaf ears, cleansing them from the dread disease of leprosy, and raising their dead to life again. One less perfect than the Master, and less conscious of his utter dependency upon God for everything, might have been tempted to take just a little credit to himself for the good he was doing, but not Jesus.

He was quick to remind the people that the works which he did were not his works, but the Father's. Hence, when the young ruler addressed him as "Good Master," the first essential thing to do, as Jesus saw it, was to turn the young man's mind and heart to God, who is the fountain of all goodness. Upon the same basis of reasoning, we realize that in order to be zealous for good works, we must be fervent for the things which originate with God, the things of his plan, and the work in which he has invited us to collaborate with him.

OBSERVING ALL THINGS

Following Jesus' resurrection, he commissioned his disciples to go into all the world and preach the Gospel, teaching those who believed to observe all things which he had commanded them. (Matt. 28:19,20; Acts 1:8) This commission has not been

changed nor recalled, and obedience to it designates the followers of the Master as lights in the world. In God's providence, and in keeping with the orderly progression of his plan, the results of Christian work vary, but there is little change in the work itself.

For much of the present age, the preaching of the Gospel was like a sowing of grain, but at the end of the age, the result is likened to a harvest of the matured, ripened wheat. The basic principles of the Gospel, however, do not change. During the Dark Ages, very few understood or preached concerning the kingdom, restitution, or other facets of truth because it was not God's due time for a wide disclosure of his plan. However, as these coming events drew nearer, the Lord provided for a great outpouring of the Gospel message as the time of harvest began.

The good work of proclaiming the Gospel of the kingdom means more than to merely give a witness. Those who accept as believing disciples, are to be taught to observe all the things which the Lord has commanded. This means that we are to encourage those who have a hearing ear to present themselves in full consecration to God. Those who do this and thus enter into the fellowship of the saints are to be built up in the most holy faith. Thus we all have a responsibility toward each other, and if we are truly zealous for the good works of God we will delight in the privilege of laying down our lives in this divinely appointed service.

It is well to note the limitation placed upon our work by the Master. We are to proclaim the Gospel, but we are not to impose burdens upon the believers

beyond what Jesus taught us to observe. If we study the Word with the sincere desire to know what the Lord has commanded in order that we may show ourselves approved unto him, it will not be difficult to discern between those things and the various side issues which may be suggested to our minds from time to time.

FUTURE GOOD WORKS

Jesus exemplified a further consideration of God's good works to be done on behalf of men—namely, healing their diseases and giving them life. The footstep followers of Christ are being prepared to share in this future glorious work. Referring to the works which he performed, Jesus said to his disciples, "Greater works than these" shall ye do. (John 14:12) These greater works of healing and restoring mankind to life everlasting are but the logical sequence to the work of this age. The Gospel message is a call to this work and an outline of the necessary qualifications to become partners in it.

One of these qualifications is a consuming zeal in the work of making ready for those future privileges. As Jesus commissioned us, we are to teach believers to observe all things which he commanded, but it is equally important that we observe the divine commands ourselves. We thrill at the thought of God's will being done all over the earth, and we rejoice in the hope of sharing in the work of reconciliation which will bring about this blessed condition. We pray earnestly, "Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven." (Matt. 6:10) However, let us never overlook the necessity of having God's will done at the present

time in our own mortal bodies. This is the great lesson we should be learning now. It is the principal and present result of the good work that should be consuming us, as daily we endeavor to pay our vows of consecration unto the Lord and zealously strive to conform to the “mind of Christ.”

THE EXAMPLE OF JESUS

Should there ever be any question in our minds as to how zealous we ought to be, we can settle that question by observing the example of Jesus. It was prophetically written of him that he would be eaten up, or consumed, by the zeal of God’s house. (Ps. 69:9; John 2:17) The undeniable fulfillment of this prophecy, shown by the Master’s untiring devotion to the work which the Father had given him to do, is a matter of record in the four Gospel accounts of his sacrificial life and death. It would be impossible for any of us to be more zealous than Jesus.

The Master’s zeal was manifested, not only in his service to God, but also in his determination to serve in the manner outlined for him by the Father. His zeal was always according to knowledge, hence resulting in an acceptable sacrifice. We, too, should be concerned about the manner in which we serve, and the spirit in which we do it. We should also be concerned over the extent to which our own lives are conforming to the high standards of righteousness outlined for us in the Word of truth. We should have zeal for doing the right work, in the right way, and at the right time.

“UNDER A BUSHEL”

In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus admonishes us not to hide the Gospel light “under a bushel,”

but rather to put it “on a candlestick” that it may be seen. (Matt. 5:15) There are various bushels under which the light may be hidden. The fear of man is one of them. We may be inclined to keep the Truth to ourselves for fear of what our friends and relatives may think of us. Greater faith in God, more earnest prayers for his help, and a richer indwelling of the Spirit of love for him and for suffering humanity, will help to remove this bushel.

The bushel of limitation is sometimes suggested. Because some have shown a zeal that has not been according to knowledge, the tendency may be to suppose that a safeguard against misguided zeal is to have less zeal. The attitude is adopted that the proper course is to set a limit on what we will do for the Lord. However, this is a wrong way to correct an erroneous practice.

Instead of putting our light under a bushel by a diminished zeal, and a self-imposed limitation on how much time and energy we will devote to the spread of the Gospel, all we need to do is to proclaim the message of truth, and be sure that our activity is motivated by the Spirit of the Lord. If we are doing these two things, then we can safely remove the limitations and give ourselves wholly and zealously to the blessed work of letting our light shine.

The bushel of misinterpretation will also hide the light if we permit it to do so. For example, the parable of the net cast into the sea describes the work of fishing, and later that of sorting the fish. (Matt. 13:47,48) Jesus had also said, “I will make you fishers of men.” (Matt. 4:19) The suggestion is sometimes made that the work of fishing for men was quite proper throughout the age, and even

during the earlier part of the Gospel Age Harvest, but now we are in the sorting time—hence no further fishing should be done.

We should remember, however, that just as it is the Gospel message that catches the fish, it is the same message that sorts them. It is God who decides who are acceptable to him, and his decision is based upon the manner in which each individual responds to the Truth when it is heard, and in order for the Gospel to be heard, even by those who already profess to be Christians, it must be proclaimed. Therefore, it is still the will of God for his people to continue sounding forth his message.

The instructions of God are so definite on the matter of Christian service that we may safely conclude that any interpretation of his Word, the purpose of which is to hold us back from a proclamation of the Truth, is fundamentally in error. Such interpretations can serve no other purpose than that of being bushels to hide the light of the Gospel, hence are contrary to the purpose of God in giving us the Truth.

Letting our light shine involves the sacrificing of the flesh, as represented by the breaking of the earthen vessels by Gideon's little band. (Judg. 7:19,20) Those vessels concealed the light, and not until they were broken could the light be seen. The flesh holds back from being sacrificed. Hence, as New Creatures, we need constantly to be on the alert to detect the false reasoning of our human minds in attempts to find excuses not to be zealous in the service of the Lord, the Truth, and the brethren. We should learn to cast down these imaginations, or reasonings, which exalt themselves above the knowledge of Christ.—II Cor. 10:5

A NARROW WAY

The conditions upon which we may qualify to be God's peculiar people are very exacting. The way that leads to glory is a narrow one. Only the truly zealous and sincere will finally hear the Lord's "well done." The Apostle Paul expressed the proper viewpoint, when he wrote, "This one thing I do." (Phil. 3:13) We cannot hope to win the prize except by giving our undivided attention, first to learning the divine will, and then zealously doing it. Some of self and some of God will not do. None of self and all for God and for the doing of his will is what it means to be his peculiar people, zealous of good works.

We cannot attain to our goal in our own strength, but, as we have already seen, God has promised to help us. He will give us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. We are not a peculiar people to him because of what we are able to accomplish, either in ourselves or for others. God does not need our help. That which he treasures is our willing minds and hearts, our appreciation of his glory, our enthusiasm for his plan. If we are truly zealous toward everything for which he stands, he will make up the rest. He will give us strength, wisdom, and forgiveness, in order that we may be effectual and acceptable coworkers with him. How highly we are honored by God, and what a glorious provision he has made through Christ that we may prove worthy of that honor! ■

*"Thou wilt guide me with thy counsel, and
afterward receive me to glory."
—Psalm 73:24*