

Workers Together with God

*“We then, as
workers together
with him, beseech
you also that ye
receive not the
grace of God in
vain.”*

—II Corinthians 6:1

OUR PRIVILEGES AS WORK-

ers together with God begin in the present life, as we follow in Jesus’ footsteps of sacrifice and develop the “mind of Christ.” If faithful, our work will continue into the future, and will include the awakening of those who are asleep in death, as well as teaching them during God’s kingdom, under the leadership of Christ. This is a blessed hope, and we rejoice in the assurance that the Heavenly Father will preserve his people who are now coworkers with him—that he will help them in their every time of need.

Paul points out in our lesson, however, that we have responsibilities in this matter. We are to give “no offence in any thing, that the ministry be not blamed.” (vs. 3) The matter of giving “no offence” pertains primarily to our relationship with the Lord. We are to conduct ourselves and our ministry in a manner which will be approved by God, according

to the standards laid down in his Word. We cannot do this perfectly, but we have the blessed assurance of the wonderful provision he has made for us through the blood of Christ, whereby our imperfect works are made acceptable to him.

By contrast, we cannot hope to receive the approval of the world in general. Rather, from the world we expect to receive ridicule, misunderstanding, tribulation, and perhaps even hatred. The world responds to us even as it did to Jesus. However, we are not to give the world any just cause for reviling or hating us. Jesus did not, yet he had tribulation in the world, and indicated that this would also be true with us. To the extent that we receive the disapproval of the world, it should be for the same reason that Jesus did—namely, that we are faithful in letting the light of truth shine out for the blessing of those to whom the Lord may give a hearing ear.

“In all things approving ourselves as the ministers of God.” (vs. 4) From here through verse 10, Paul mentions many items associated with our being approved as ministers of God. In the same verse, he lists four of these: “in much patience, in afflictions, in necessities, in distresses.” Being a minister of God—a worker together with him—is not an easy task. First, Paul says it requires “much patience.” This will be needed to meet the daily problems which may confront us. Since ours is a vocation which is a lifetime in length, it requires patient endurance, lest we become weary in well doing.

If we are faithful to the ministry we will also encounter a certain number of “afflictions.” Paul ministered in “labours more abundant,” and testified of suffering “stripes above measure, in prisons

more frequent, in deaths oft. Of the Jews five times received I forty stripes save one. Thrice was I beaten with rods, once was I stoned, thrice I suffered shipwreck, a night and a day I have been in the deep; In journeyings often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils by mine own countrymen, in perils by the heathen, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; In weariness and painfulness, in watchings often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness.”—II Cor. 11:23-27

Paul was indeed an example of an ambassador for Christ and a worker together with God, and because of his faithfulness, he suffered “afflictions,” “necessities,” and “distresses.” In the seemingly more tolerant world in which many of the brethren live today, it may be difficult to imagine how so much tribulation could touch the life of one servant of God. One reason for it was Paul’s wholehearted determination to be faithful to the cause for which he had been called and chosen by God, and to which he had gladly dedicated his life.

The apostle continues enumerating his afflictions, showing that they were all related to his being an approved minister of God: “In stripes, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labours, in watchings, in fastings.” (chap. 6:5) Paul could have avoided all these simply by settling down in his home town of Tarsus. Perhaps he could have enjoyed to a point the wonderful vision of truth which the Lord had given him. He knew, however, that this was not why the Lord had called him, so he went forth into the ministry, not turning aside for anything, even though he knew many times that suffering and

perhaps death awaited him. He was willing to suffer physical pain, to become weary of flesh, to go without sleep and food, that he might be faithful to the ministry to which he had been called.

ASPECTS OF AN APPROVED MINISTRY

Beginning with II Corinthians 6, verse 6, Paul sets forth various facets of an approved ministry. We not only need to endure patiently the many afflictions and distresses which come upon us in the world, and from our great Adversary, the Devil, but we are also to regulate our own lives in keeping with the Lord's provisions for us, and in harmony with the righteous principles of his laws.

Paul says that we approve ourselves as ministers of Christ and workers together with God "by pureness." We must shun those things which God, through his Word, has declared to be impure. Here we must be guided by the divine standards, not by the standards of the world. How ineffective our ministry would be, and how displeasing to the Lord, if we did not carry on our ambassadorship in the spirit of purity.

"By knowledge," Paul continues. How important it is that we have a clear knowledge of the one with whom we serve as coworkers. We must understand the plans and purposes of our Heavenly Father, the author of the great plan which his Son, Jesus, executes. It is a mistake to suppose that a knowledge of the Truth is not essential for those who are workers together with God. How many there are who, not knowing the truth of the Father's Word, think they are serving him by preaching eternal torture for the wicked, and other erroneous doctrines.

“By longsuffering.” It is not enough that we are to be faithful in this ministry today, and when circumstances are favorable. Our consecration is until death, and we are to be faithful to our covenant of sacrifice regardless of the hardships we may encounter. In terms of human tranquility and ease, the ministry of reconciliation to which we have been called is a costly one. Notice again in the earlier verses of this chapter how costly it was to Paul.

The Lord gave Paul strength and courage to endure the suffering which came upon him because of his faithfulness, and he testified that he could endure all things through Christ who gave him strength. The same is true with us. Though our trials may not be so severe as those that came upon Paul, still they are more than we could bear without the Lord’s help. However, with his help we can endure and suffer “long,” even unto death. Indeed, it is those who are faithful unto death who receive the crown of life.

“By kindness.” The true minister of God and of Christ must be kind. To testify to the Gospel in any other manner than the spirit of kindness would render our ministry very ineffective so far as those to whom we witness are concerned, and very displeasing to the Lord. The Gospel of Christ beautifully reflects the loving-kindness of our God, and how out of place it would be to present it in an unkind manner.

“By the Holy Spirit.” It is by the Holy Spirit of anointing that we are authorized to proclaim the glad tidings of the kingdom. It was written of Jesus, “The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me; because the LORD hath anointed me to preach good tidings

unto the meek; he hath sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound; To proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD.”—Isa. 61:1,2

This same anointing has come upon us as members of Christ’s body. It is this anointing that constitutes us his ambassadors, and ministers of reconciliation. Since we carry on his ministry by the authority of the Holy Spirit, it is implied that this work will be conducted in keeping with the Spirit of the Lord—that is, humbly, patiently, and lovingly. No other attitude would be pleasing to God and result in a ministry approved by him.

“By love unfeigned.” Love, an unselfish desire to bless and help others, must be the motive for a ministry approved by God. Paul says it is to be an “unfeigned” love—sincere in its motivation. It would be possible to deceive our brethren, or any to whom we minister, as to our sincerity, but not the Lord. He knows whether or not there is any element of selfish or worldly ambition in the sacrifices we make to promulgate the glad tidings. Paul stated it correctly when he said that though we may speak with the tongues of men and of angels, if we have not love, it profits us nothing.—I Cor. 13:1-3

“By the word of truth.” We are not to preach our own opinions, or the opinions of others. The Word of truth, the Bible, contains the Gospel of Christ which we are to proclaim. We should be able to prove what we proclaim by a “thus saith the Lord.” Otherwise our preaching would be in vain. The truth of God’s Word as it is centered in Christ Jesus our Lord is the “word of reconciliation.” It is by this

that people are drawn to the Heavenly Father, and it is under the influence of the Word of truth that they are led to dedicate themselves to his service.

“By the power of God.” A ministry of the Truth which is conducted solely by the power of oratory, or the influence of numbers, or on the basis of human prestige, is not acceptable to God. The power of God—his Holy Spirit—also works through the hearts and lives of those who, so far as their natural talents are concerned, can speak only, as it were, with a lisping, stammering tongue. Where his servants humble themselves and allow his power to work in and through them, their ministry is approved, regardless of their abilities and talents, according to the flesh.

“By the armour of righteousness on the right hand and on the left.” In Ephesians 6:13-17, Paul urges us to put on the whole armor of God, that we may be able to stand against the wiles of the Devil in this evil day. He also identifies the various parts of this symbolic armor. He speaks of the girdle of truth, and the “breastplate of righteousness.” He says that we should have our “feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace.” “Above all,” he admonishes, “taking the shield of faith, wherewith ye shall be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked.”

Another item of the Christian’s armor mentioned by Paul is the “helmet of salvation.” Since the helmet was worn on the head, it suggests our knowledge of the Truth—the things we know about God and his glorious design for the recovery of the lost race from sin and death. Another point we should by all means know is that “all things

work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose.” (Rom. 8:28) This knowledge is essential in order to conduct a ministry which requires much patience and longsuffering.

The last item of the armor mentioned by Paul is “the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.” Every part of the armor represents one application or another of the truth of God’s Word. The sword is chiefly an offensive weapon. However, we are not to slay others with the Word of God. Chiefly, it should be turned toward our own imperfections, and when used in the ministry of reconciliation, it should be with the thought that through imparting a knowledge of the Truth, our enemies may perchance appreciate it and become friends. The sword of the Spirit is directed against error, not personalities. When used properly, as it should be in our ministry of reconciliation, it will help to reveal the length, breadth, height, and depth of God’s love.

IN ALL CIRCUMSTANCES

Continuing our lesson from II Corinthians 6, Paul points out, beginning in verse 8, various situations in which we will find ourselves, and admonishes preparation to meet them in the spirit of the Gospel which we proclaim: “By honour and dishonour, by evil report and good report: as deceivers, and yet true.” There is, on occasion, some honor attached to the ministry. Even some in the world appreciate the message up to a point, and respect us as we present it to them. However, we are not to become puffed up in these experiences. Neither should we be discouraged when

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(Continued from page 31) our message is rejected, and we find ourselves looked upon with dishonor. Both the evil reports and the good reports are to be accepted as of the Lord.

When Paul speaks of our being “deceivers, and yet true,” he is not implying that followers of the Master will actually practice deceit. Rather, it is the Truth that is looked upon by those in darkness as being deceitful and untrue. We may well be referred to as “false prophets,” yet in reality, if we are conducting a ministry which is based upon the Word of God, it will be true, for it is the Gospel of Christ, which is “the power of God unto salvation.”—Rom. 1:16

“As unknown, yet well known.” The Lord’s people, as a rule, are not well known. Often, however, through circumstances brought about by faithfulness in the ministry, we may for a time stand out in the eyes of our neighbors. As true Christians, we should accept both of these situations with the constant desire that, regardless of what people may think of us, our Heavenly Father is to be glorified. How we rejoice to know that in God’s due time the knowledge of his glory will indeed fill the whole earth “as the waters cover the sea.”—Isa. 11:9

“As dying, and, behold, we live.” We are dying daily with Christ—sacrificially—yet we live because Christ lives in us. Additionally, by faith we rejoice in the hope of living with him in the kingdom, and sharing in the great future work of blessing all the families of the earth.

“As chastened, and not killed.” As we are “workers together” with God, and conduct our share in the

ministry of reconciliation, we are being trained for the future and glorious work of the kingdom. God may well use our trials in connection with the present ministry to thus chasten or train us, but we will not be “killed” by these, for we will realize that they are among the “all things” which are working together for our good.

“As sorrowful, yet always rejoicing.” In this chaotic world of suffering and death, if we are truly a tenderhearted Christian, we are sure to view with a measure of sorrow the plight of the groaning creation around us. Even our own experiences as an ambassador of Christ are bound to make us sorrowful at times. However, shining above these conditions, which might tend to discourage and sadden us, are the promises of God. These are a source of joy to us which the world can neither give nor take away. Thus, we should be able to rejoice, not in ourselves, nor in our surroundings, but in the Lord.

“As poor, yet making many rich.” We are all “poor” in the sense that, as consecrated followers of Jesus, we have laid our all on the altar of sacrifice. If we are sacrificing our lives in the Lord’s service, however, we are sure to be making others rich. We do not make others rich in worldly goods, but in their knowledge of God and of his plans. We provide riches by giving the promise that in God’s plan there is an assurance of health, happiness, and the opportunity for everlasting life for all mankind. If any embrace this message fully, and accept the invitation to the High Calling, then they too will partake of the legacy of joy which Christ left for his followers, which will make them rich indeed.

“As having nothing, and yet possessing all things.” As followers of the Master, and as workers together with God, we should realize that nothing which we seem to possess really belongs to us. The earthly goods which the world treasures so much, we have laid upon the altar of sacrifice. We possess much, however, of the spiritual things of God. We have his promises, his assurance of care and guidance, the hope he has provided to us of a part in the heavenly phase of the Messianic kingdom. How boundless are the possessions—“all things”—which belong to us, if we have made a covenant of sacrifice.

ENLARGED HEART

In the items of truth which we have considered from II Corinthians 6, it is evident that Paul desired to present us with various details involved in living wholly for the Lord, devoting our all to his service, and doing this in a way that the “ministry” will have divine approval. It would seem that as Paul considered these truths, one by one, he became awestruck with their grandeur, and exclaimed, “O ye Corinthians, our mouth is open unto you, our heart is enlarged.”—vs. 11

Paul had labored much toward the brethren at Corinth. Unlike the brethren at Philippi, for whom he had no words of correction, there was still much to be desired from the Corinthian brethren. In his first epistle to them, he reminded them of their carnality as reflected in the divisions among them which were based upon personalities—some claiming to be the follower of one, and some of another of God’s messengers. In addition, there was moral

laxity in the ecclesia which Paul condemned, and instructed them to remedy.

In his second letter, there is evidence that much improvement had been achieved. Perhaps Paul had some of this in mind when he said that his heart was “enlarged” toward them. How glad he was to be able to speak to the brethren at Corinth of their having made significant spiritual progress. It was for this joy that his heart had grown in love on their behalf.

This attitude on Paul’s part reveals his own maturity as a Christian. Whatever the Corinthian brethren had done in the past, he loved them, and in his heart a great joy welled up as he instructed them in the ways of the Lord more perfectly, and saw their positive response. Sometimes we may be slow to show such enthusiasm toward brethren who in the past, perhaps, had a wrong viewpoint on some point of truth, or some other defect which was displeasing to us. Let us, however, follow Paul’s example, who was genuinely joyful when his brethren showed progress in the narrow way.

Paul spoke these words as he concluded his lesson: “(I speak as unto my children,) be ye also enlarged.” (vs. 13) The details of an approved ministry, as presented by Paul, must have tended to enlarge the Corinthian brethren’s hearts, as they did his. These great truths of the Word, which reveal the wisdom and love of God, should enlarge our hearts as we, too, lay down our lives in his service. Therefore, let us rejoice at every evidence of spiritual progress in our lives, and in the lives of our brethren, as we continue to develop the mind of Christ and become workers together with God. ■