

Zealous of Good Works

“So built we the wall; and all the wall was joined together unto the half thereof: for the people had a mind to work.”
—*Nehemiah 4:6*

THE APOSTLE PAUL, WRIT-ing about Jesus and his foot-step followers, said, “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 faith-

ful people of God in every age have been zealous of good works which have been authorized by God and blessed by him. Those who have merely professed to be his people, yet have been lukewarm toward the things he has asked them to do, have not been pleasing to him and are warned of the possibility of being removed from divine favor.—Rev. 3:16

In the Old Testament we find notable examples of zeal in the work of the Lord. One is that which is referred to in our opening text. The work in hand at that time was that of rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem after the Jews had returned from their seventy years of captivity in Babylon. There had been much delay in getting this work started, as

the enemies of the Jews had thrown hindrances in the way. Finally, however, Nehemiah, cupbearer to King Artaxerxes, came to Jerusalem with written authority from the king to proceed with the work, and this faithful servant of God did not permit further delay.—Neh. 1:11; 2:1-8

The Jews who were loyal to Nehemiah caught the spirit of the occasion and although they hazarded their lives to cooperate in the work, they zealously undertook the project, and the walls were built, “for the people had a mind to work.” The Lord’s work is never accomplished without difficulty, and certainly Nehemiah and his faithful company of co-laborers had to proceed in the face of much hardship, and even danger to their lives. Material was not plentiful, their supply of stones being limited to what they could find in the pile of rubble which was still there from the time the former walls of the city were destroyed.—Neh. 4:1-3

In addition to this handicap, the enemies of the Jews threatened to attack them in an effort to stop the work. Despite these difficulties, the people “had a mind to work.” Encouraged by Nehemiah and having confidence in his ability to plan the work properly, they labored on until it was finished. However, confidence in Nehemiah was not their only source of strength and courage. Nehemiah himself reveals the real source of their inspiration, saying, “We made our prayer unto our God, and set a watch against them [their enemies] day and night.” (vs. 9) The fact that they prayed indicates that the basis of their confidence, and the inspiration of their zeal, was Israel’s God.

THE GOSPEL AGE WORKS OF GOD

The work of God during the present age has not been the construction of literal city walls, but rather the building up of his people in their most holy faith—that is, their spiritual development as “new creatures” in Christ Jesus. (Jude 1:20; II Cor. 5:17) The foundation upon which we build, Paul explains, is Christ, and we are encouraged to erect an enduring structure by the use of gold, silver and precious stones, representing God’s precious promises, our faith structure, and character development. (I Cor. 3:11-13; I Pet. 1:7; Rev. 3:18) Contrariwise, we are not to build a superstructure of character with perishable material such as wood, hay and stubble, denoting false human traditions, theories, creeds, along with a lack of true faith and proper Christian character.—Col. 2:8-23; I Tim. 4:1-3; Matt. 15:8-9

In concluding his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, “Whosoever heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them, I will liken him unto a wise man, which built his house upon a rock: And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell not: for it was founded upon a rock.” (Matt. 7:24,25) Here the Master compares zealous obedience to his teachings to a work of building solidly upon a rock.

What are “these sayings of mine” referred to by the Master, obedience to which is so fundamental to success in God’s work? Going back to the beginning of his sermon we first of all find the Beatitudes. These emphasize many vital character qualities: the need for humility of heart—“poor in spirit”; heartfelt sympathy for the groaning creation—those who “mourn”; teachableness—the “meek”; a desire above

all else to know God and be pleasing to him—to “hunger and thirst after righteousness”; divine mercy and love—the “merciful”; sincerity—the “pure in heart”; faithfulness in the ministry of reconciliation —“peacemakers”; zeal in light-bearing which results in persecution—“they which are persecuted.”—Matt. 5:2-10

Continuing, Jesus said, “Ye are the salt of the earth,” and warned against losing our “savour.” (vs. 13) We have no “savour” of ourselves, so it is evident that the reference is to that which the Lord has given us—namely, his Truth and the Spirit of the Truth. Though we may be very zealous, if we lose the Truth and its spirit, like salt which has lost its taste, the Lord states that we would be “thenceforth good for nothing.”

The Master also said, “Ye are the light of the world,” and then bids us, “Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven.” (vss. 14,16) Certainly we have no good works of our own, for the best show of righteousness we could ever hope to make would be as “filthy rags” in God’s sight, and obviously would not cause men to glorify God. (Isa. 64:6) These good works, then, must be, just as the Master indicates, the letting of our light shine. While Jesus refers to the light as though it is ours, in reality it is the light of divine Truth which the Lord has caused to shine into our hearts, and which he here bids us to make known to others.—II Cor. 4:6; II Pet. 1:19; I Pet. 2:9

How wonderfully does this light glorify our Father in heaven! It is the Truth of his plan, in which is revealed his infinite wisdom, his almighty power, his

perfect justice, and his boundless love. These attributes of the divine character harmoniously working together reveal his glory, and those who see the Truth behold this glory. Holding forth the Word of life is therefore one of “these sayings” of Jesus which we are to joyfully obey if we are to be true builders of righteousness.

Continuing, Jesus not only spoke against breaking even the “least” of his commandments—those commandments which magnified the Law and made it honorable—but also against teaching others to do so. (Matt. 5:19) This is an admonition against compromise in connection with any part of the Word of God. Since there is no part of God’s divine plan and purpose which does not have a bearing on how we serve him, the principle underlying this “saying” of Jesus is loyalty to his Word, not only in our own lives, but also in teaching it to others.

THE MODEL PRAYER

Among “these sayings” of the Master is also the model prayer which his followers have been using throughout the entire Christian age. (Matt. 6:9-13) Those who “have a mind to work” as God desires them to do, and who are faithful in watching and praying, will be guided by this outline of the fundamental principles of Christian prayer. We will delight to pray to “our Father,” and we will recognize the sacredness of his name. Prominent in our prayers will be the desire to see the world blessed by the setting up of the kingdom—“Thy kingdom come.” We will not make elaborate requests for ourselves, but ask only for the needful things, both temporal and spiritual—“Give us this day our daily bread.”

Realizing how far short we come of the glory of God, and our great need for divine forgiveness, we will petition God for his mercy, knowing meanwhile that we cannot expect his forgiveness unless we forgive those who trespass against us. We have the assurance that God does not tempt his people—that he tempteth no man. (James 1:13) Thus we will also claim this promise and ask God also to “deliver us from evil,” knowing how liable we are to stumble into the many pitfalls set for us by the Adversary.

HEAVENLY TREASURES

We are not to lay up treasures on earth, but in heaven. (Matt. 6:19-21) This “saying” of the Master is perhaps one of the most exacting. Earthly treasures are the source of fallen man’s security, and it requires great faith to realize that true security is to be found only in the promises of God. Other scriptures indicate, of course, that reasonable provision is to be made for those dependent upon us. (I Tim. 5:8) However, too liberal an interpretation of what is reasonable might well result in a lack of faithfulness on our part in God’s sight.

Jesus further explained that the light of the body is the eye, and then adds, “If therefore thine eye be single, thy whole body shall be full of light. But if thine eye be evil, thy whole body shall be full of darkness.” (vss. 22,23) This immediately follows Jesus’ admonition to lay up treasure in heaven and his explanation that where our treasure is there shall our hearts be also. The “single” eye, therefore, might well be a symbolic reference to a wholehearted setting of our affections on things above, rather than a compromising attitude between earthly and heavenly

treasures. A single eye would suggest seeking “first the kingdom of God,” in the assurance that all our legitimate material needs will be furnished.—vss. 25-34

JUDGE NOT

We are not to sit in judgment of others. We are not qualified to do that. Jesus in another saying indicates that the urge to criticize and condemn others might well represent a hypocritical attitude on our part, and that there is more wrong with ourselves than with those we attempt to judge. We are to “have a mind to work,” not to “cast out the mote” from our brother’s eye, but to “cast out the beam” from our own eye. This beam may be a “holier than thou” attitude toward others. The sin of spiritual pride is a flagrant one in God’s sight. If we are not on guard, it can easily fasten itself upon us, causing us to take pride in our development and in what we feel is our more “mature” judgment.—Matt. 7:1-5

Jesus also urged us to “ask,” to “seek,” and to “knock,” with the assurance that our Father will reward us if we ask for that which he has promised to give. (vss. 7,8) In Luke 11:13, Jesus indicates that the chief burden of our petitions should be for a greater infilling of the Holy Spirit. If we are filled with God’s Holy Spirit and influence, all our spiritual needs are supplied, because the Holy Spirit cleanses us, leads us, strengthens us, quickens us, and fashions us into the divine image. How blessed is the promise that our Heavenly Father is more willing to give us these “good things” than earthly parents are to give good gifts to their children.

THE STRAIT GATE

Those who have “a mind to work” will not be seeking an easy way out when serving the Lord, but instead they will “strive to enter in at the strait [Greek: narrow] gate.” (Luke 13:24) To keep this saying of Jesus is not an easy task, but requires much effort. Many difficulties are encountered, and it is because of this that few find the true way—the way of service and sacrifice—to glory, honor, and immortality. It is found only by those who desire to work at the cost of weariness, sacrifice, and finally of life itself.

We are to beware of false prophets—wolves in sheep’s clothing—using the test suggested by the Master in another of his sayings, which is, “By their fruits ye shall know them.” (Matt. 7:15-20) Love, in its various manifestations, is the all-encompassing “fruit” of the Spirit. (Gal. 5:22) Thus, it is usually not difficult to detect whether would-be leaders are selfishly seeking their own interests, or are sincerely concerned over the welfare of the flock. A true sheep of the Master’s fold, one who is keeping his sayings, should be easily recognized in contrast with any who might be self-seeking exploiters of the Lord’s people, or desirous of being pleasing to men through “flattering words.”—I Thess. 2:4-6

AFTER PENTECOST

Subsequent to Pentecost, the apostles filled in many details of the divine will, but in “these sayings” of Jesus in his Sermon on the Mount, all the great principles to be followed by true Christians are to be found. It is, as it were, the blueprint by which we build the super-structure of character likeness to Christ, and blessed are all those who follow

implicitly these instructions. In this sermon, we are commanded to let our light shine, to be filled and controlled by love, to be faithful in prayer, to refrain from judging others, but to take ourselves in hand and make sure of our own standing before God.

Having “a mind to work” implies zeal in the application of the principles of divine righteousness in our daily lives, and of thus being transformed by the “renewing” of our minds and the “working out” of our own salvation. (Rom. 12:2; Phil. 2:12) In doing this, however, the Apostle Paul assures us that God is also working in us “to will and to do of his good pleasure.” (Phil. 2:13) The task is too great for us to accomplish alone, so we are glad to be assured that God works in us.

The Apostle Peter speaks of girding up the loins of our minds. This suggests a long and arduous undertaking. (I Pet. 1:13) When Nehemiah and his co-laborers were rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem, they did not so much as take off their clothes at night. They had to be ready always to meet the enemy, and at the same time carry on with the work. (Neh. 4:21-23) Such is our position today. Our Adversary, the devil, is seeking to devour us, and while we resist him by being steadfast in the faith, we must continue the work of building upon the “rock” of Christ.—I Pet. 5:8,9

It is important to remember that “these sayings” which we are to keep and by keeping them build our house upon the rock, include the necessity of being “ambassadors for Christ” by faithfully proclaiming the Gospel of the kingdom. (II Cor. 5:20; Matt. 24:14) This is not merely a suggestion from the Lord, but a requirement, and is a part of the “holy

conversation and godliness” of every Christian’s life. (I Pet. 1:15; II Pet. 3:11) Faithfulness in proclaiming the Gospel does not interfere with the work of applying the other sayings of Jesus, but augments it; for the more we tell the Truth to others, the greater will be its power in our own lives.

THE GREAT OBJECTIVE

The work of God from Pentecost until now has been in preparation for what he has promised to do in the next age—that is, the blessing of all the families of the earth. (Gen. 22:18; Acts 3:25; Gal. 3:8) Thus we are being trained for that future purpose. Through the application of the divine principles of righteousness in our own lives, we are being prepared to administer God’s law to the poor groaning creation in the time of the world’s trial, or judgment day. (Acts 17:31) How wonderfully divine wisdom is displayed in the methods he has chosen for our training to be kings and priests unto God. (Rev. 5:9,10; 20:6) By these arrangements we are brought into actual contact with the people in our work of proclaiming the glad tidings of the kingdom!

As we have seen, our work of “building” is an individual one as well as collective. Collectively we work, for example, in our local groups, or ecclesias. When we are faithful in our witness efforts, they may result in attracting newly interested persons to our fellowship. These mingle with us, and we seek to help them grow spiritually. Some make progress, and remain. Others perhaps, after attending for a while, do not continue with us.

Throughout the Christian age every group of the Lord’s people has been a mixed one, and it is still so.

In Paul's day, for example, he indicates the varying degrees of spiritual development which existed in the churches at Corinth, Rome, and other places. He did not, however, suggest that witness efforts cease so that all in the individual congregations could ultimately become fully matured in Christ, and thus enjoy one another's fellowship the more. No, instead, he indicated that there would always be some in the church who were more weak and immature than others. Furthermore, he admonished that those who were strong should bear the infirmities of the weak, and not to please themselves.—Rom. 15:1

How better could the Lord's people be trained to deal with all the various elements of society in the next age than by coming into actual contact with them now and endeavoring to help them understand something of the great principles of the divine character! It is the experience of all Christians who are faithful in trying to help their fellows understand the Word of God, that never is the message of divine love so precious and such a great power of regeneration in their own lives, as when they tell it to others.

Admonishing the church collectively, Paul writes, "So we, being many, are one body in Christ, and every one members one of another. Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, whether prophecy, let us prophesy according to the proportion of faith; Or ministry, let us wait on our ministering; or he that teacheth, on teaching; Or he that exhorteth, on exhortation: he that giveth, let him do it with simplicity; he that ruleth, with diligence; he that sheweth mercy, with cheerfulness."—Rom. 12:5-8

After emphasizing that all these services should be rendered in love, Paul adds, "Not slothful in business;

fervent in spirit; serving the Lord.” (Rom. 12:11) The “business” here referred to is unquestionably the Lord’s business, his work, the various phases of which the apostle had just outlined. In this business we are to be “fervent in spirit,” which is Paul’s way of describing that same kind of zeal for the work of God which Nehemiah referred to when saying that his co-laborers had “a mind to work.”

When Nehemiah and his co-workers had just about completed the rebuilding of Jerusalem’s walls, except for erecting the gates, their enemies subtly made overtures to Nehemiah asking to have a conference with him. However, Nehemiah sent messengers to them saying, “I am doing a great work, so that I cannot come down: why should the work cease, whilst I leave it, and come down to you?”—Neh. 6:1-3

This is a good thought to apply in our own lives. More than ever before, the enemies of the Lord, the Truth, and his people, are endeavoring to attract us away from the job. All sorts of temptations to ease, and myriads of misleading distractions and sophistries are being presented. In response to all these, though, may we always have the courage to say that by the Lord’s grace and with his help, “I am doing a great work, so that I cannot come down.”

Ours is not the boasted “many wonderful works” of those to whom the Lord says, “I never knew you.” (Matt. 7:22,23) Rather, ours is the work of keeping “these sayings” of the Master. By so doing, we are preparing ourselves and one another for glory, honor, and immortality in the kingdom with Jesus, whose image we are endeavoring to reflect as we lay down our lives as his ambassadors of light.—Rom. 2:7; II Cor. 3:18 ■