

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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Dear Friends,

This week's Gleanings calls for self-examination and quiet reflection. Our culture is slowly emerging from a social crisis not seen in over 100 years, and I fear that we were not prepared to deal with it in a spiritually mature or Biblical manner. Buying into the fads of anger and polarizing divisive rhetoric with other believers is not the Biblical approach to any problem we face. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus calls on us to follow Him and be a "Light" in a dark world, not join the darkness and feed it. To be a city set on a hill, not foster the darkness in the carnal valleys below.

Early in the COVID "Era," I encouraged our folks to respect and obey civil authority. Romans 13 allows nothing less. Later as regulations became less clear and imposing, I told them that I had no desire to be their "COVID cop." That remains my posture. I will not tell others what to do, and I ask them not to tell me what I should do. When I was younger, as many of them are, I would likely have responded much differently than I do today. I am still recovering from a serious health problem, and my immune system and stamina are not back to normal. Rather than tempt the Lord, I choose to do what I can to protect myself and the person most dear to me in this world.

Although we are not under the Old Testament Mosaic law, its teachings reflected God's wise instructions to His people on issues that civil and medical authorities would not understand for many centuries. For example, His quarantine and cleanliness teachings when dealing with sick people were not fully accepted by the medical community till late in the nineteenth century. So if I choose to practice some of those Old Testament teachings to protect my health and to reduce the risk of disease for myself and the people who are nearest me, the people I love, I am not walking in unbelief. I choose not to tempt the Lord, one of His moral teachings in the Ten Commandments. Although the New Testament teaches that we are not under that law, we cannot question that those ten rules do reflect God's timeless moral commandments for humanity. For example, though Moses lived and received that law around 1500 BC, God held Cain responsible for murder shortly after creation.

On the political front, I grew up in the southern region of our country during an era when it was referred to as the "Solid South" by one of the political parties that influence the politics of the country. In my young adulthood, I sadly acknowledged; I did not leave that party. It left me. In recent years, I have said the same thing regarding the other political party. Today I far more agree with many of the founding fathers who feared political parties and the inevitable divisiveness which they foster. In my youth, both parties reached out to the other and worked to find workable compromises, usually quite healthy for the country. Today each party regards the other as their mortal enemy and refuses to work for compromise, and we are paying a dear price for the ensuing chaos they create. Our generation is sadly fulfilling the founders' fear of political party-ism.

I offer personal information regarding my personal state of mind for the two most divisive issues in our country today. How I wish I could find answers and solutions that godly people would follow instead of turning blind eyes and deaf ears to what our God teaches us in Scripture. From my heart, and with no ill will toward anyone, I urge each of us to invest much of our Bible study time seeking God's answers in Scripture for how we should live in a dark and dangerous world. The Bible is full of just such instruction.

Paul confronted Peter and the Galatians for their compromise of the truth of the gospel. Total passivity is not the Biblical pattern. Neither is joining the forces of darkness in this world. When the world around us is tense with rage and divisive shouts, godly believers have a golden opportunity, and a Biblical directive, to be a quiet voice of peace and grace. And to that objective I offer the thoughts of this week's study. I do not support one or another posture for COVID. I do not advocate for one or the other political party. I want to speak and write for my God and for what He teaches us in His Word, for believers to be that light in a dark world, that city situated on a hill, not in the valleys of human schism. I sadly confess; I have not been as firm in this posture as I should have been, and I likewise acknowledge that I wrestled with the Lord's conviction for those failures. Both from Scripture and from experience, I believe we face a crucial time for Biblical Christianity in this country. The solution is not to be found in which divisive habits we adopt regarding an infectious disease. It is not to be discovered by our embracing the angry schism of one or the other political party. We shall see godly faith

survive in our country only if we turn to God and His word in Scripture and follow His Word and His ways to the higher ground of His shining light of Biblical ethics.

Whatever time I have remaining in this world, I pray for the Lord's kind grace to be a voice for Him and His ways only. Will you join my prayer for this effort? How well I know I can't do it alone. I need you and your prayers. What I ask of you I demand of myself. Lord help us all.

Love in Jesus,
Joe Holder

Our Goal? Harmony or Discord?

But why dost thou judge thy brother? or why dost thou set at nought thy brother? for we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ. For it is written, As I live, saith the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God. So then every one of us shall give account of himself to God. Let us not therefore judge one another any more: but judge this rather, that no man put a stumblingblock or an occasion to fall in his brother's way. (Romans 14:10-13 KJV)

The entire fourteenth chapter of Romans deals with the safe godly culture the Lord commands His people to work to attain and to maintain in His church and His kingdom. In our study verses for this week, Paul drives some major points home with clarity and force. We may proudly claim, "I don't judge other believers," but do you truly live up to your boast? Paul wrote this letter to believers in the City of Rome, a melting pot of cultures, races, and languages. That he was inspired to include this whole chapter says some ungodly judging was present. When we speak critically of people who are different from us, we do, in fact, judge them. To criticize someone who differs from us in ideas, especially non-Biblical ideas, is as sinful as it is to criticize someone because they differ from us in race, culture, or language.

If we practice Paul's teaching in this chapter, we will work tirelessly to promote harmony in our churches and our culture, not discord or personal causes and opinions. I fear this chapter is as neglected, and therefore as urgently needed as any in the New Testament in our time. The more contentious our culture on any issue the more sincere believers face the Biblical teaching to be "...**quiet and peaceable**," (1 Timothy 2:2 KJV) not join the contention with the loudest and angriest voice. Consider.

1. How do you regard other Christians who hold a different view to yours regarding COVID? And the habits necessary to prevent catching it? If you believe that COVID has been overly promoted and is not as threatening as its reputation, you might look down on other believers who practice wearing a mask and/or social distancing in public gatherings as being weak in the faith. Are you not thereby judging them? How do

you treat them? Do you speak words of dishonor to them—or worse—to others about them? Is a different opinion regarding COVID worth straining the godly fellowship of your church? I haven't found a single New Testament verse that so much as mentions "COVID." And Moses' Law, Old Testament, strictly sets forth various practices intended to avoid the spread of contagious disease. We are not obligated to follow those health habits, but perhaps some of them might wisely improve our health. I encourage you to read "None of These Diseases," written by medical doctors who were believers. Regardless our view of COVID, we should regard the bond we share in the faith of Jesus as the controlling influence in all we say and do toward—or about—each other.

2. Which political party do you belong to? How do you regard other believers who belong to the other political party? Do you think less of them because they do not share your political perspective? The founding fathers of our country feared political parties. They regarded them as "Factions," as fertile soil for contentious divisiveness, even a threat to the country's survival. Increasingly, I respect their wise concerns. Our generation is proving their fear of political parties to be wise indeed. New Testament teaching abounds regarding a believer's attitude and obedience to civil government, for example Romans 13. However, I have yet to find a single verse in the entire Bible that teaches us to practice the same regard for one political party or another. Wise Christians in our culture need

to avoid the tension and divisiveness that rules our political climate, not join the war and strive to be the loudest voice for one or the other party. If believers invest what the New Testament teaches we should be about in our walk of faith, we don't have time—and we definitely don't have the distracting interest—to invest more zeal and personal energy in political issues and parties than we invest in our faith.

At the heart, how strongly do we, in conversation, energy, and personal, private devotion, foster the godly and safe, peaceful culture Paul teaches in this chapter? Or does our conduct and conversation contribute to a divisive and hostile-if-you-don't-agree-with-me culture in your church?

But why dost thou judge thy brother? or why dost thou set at nought thy brother? Do we understand? Scripture warns us that, if we criticize our brothers and sisters who do not agree with us on non-Biblical issues, speaking ill about them or treating them coldly, we have in fact already judged them in violation of this lesson? Often believers naively (I hope naively and not deliberately and knowingly) speak ill about believers who do not lock-step agree with them on such non-Biblical ideas as I named above, never thinking their actions and words in fact do judge their brothers and sisters. Which is more important to us, our particular view of COVID, of medical treatment in general, of divisive political party-ism, or our faith and our fellowship with our brothers and sisters in Jesus? Which is more important to us, our political perspective, loyalties, and alliances, or our fellowship with Jesus and with our brothers and sisters in the faith? Does our conduct and our words prove what we say about our faith? Do we honor our brothers and sisters for our common faith in Jesus? Or do we “set at nought,” regard as nothing, as useless, any brother or sister who believes or acts differently from us in such issues?

...for we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ. For it is written, As I live, saith the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God. So then every one of us shall give account of himself to God. If we judge our brothers and sisters, we supplant the Lord's judgment. In our self-focused belief that we are always right and they always wrong if they disagree with us on such non-Biblical matters, we thereby put ourselves in danger of the Lord's judgment against us, not them. Who can better judge such matters, you or Jesus? Who should discern who should be blessed and who should be chastened, you or Jesus? This matter of taking judgment into our hands effectively tells the Lord we do not trust His judgement to be right. Is this attitude the result of faith or of unbelief? The judgment seat of Christ, I believe, deals with His daily judgment among His people in the here and now, not in eternity. Whatever we think or do, however right we may think ourselves

to be, every thought, word, and deed we indulge shall stand or fall before Him in judgment in this life before we leave for glory. **He has the last word, not you or me. He allows no exceptions.** None whatever. (Romans 11:22 KJV)

Let us not therefore judge one another any more: but judge this rather, that no man put a stumblingblock or an occasion to fall in his brother's way. If we truly believe the Lord is “LORD” of our life, do we submit our opinions and judgments to Him and to His word in Scripture? If so, why do we invest the greater volume of our emotions, energy, and often words, to ideas and issues that never appear in Scripture, such as the two I mentioned at the beginning of this study?

A legitimate question for all believers. What involvement should I have in the governmental issues of my country? In Romans 13, Paul devoted most of the chapter to his inspired teaching that believers should respect and obey whatever civil government is steward in the part of the world where we live. At the time Paul wrote this inspired letter, the Roman government, by no means a pristine moral force in the world, controlled the entire region where he lived and ministered. Therefore, despite all we know of the sinful decadence of the Roman government and culture, Paul taught the Romans to respect and obey the civil authorities in Rome, as well as to pay their taxes to Rome. Paul wrote Timothy one of Scripture's clearest guidelines for the believer's right, faith-walking responsibility and conduct toward civil government.

*I exhort therefore, that, first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks, be made for all men; For kings, and for all that are in authority; **that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty.*** (1 Timothy 2:1-2 KJV, not one word about praying that our political party might prevail)

Every believer owes, in addition to taxes and civil obedience set forth in Romans 13, abiding prayer for whatever civil government happens to rule the country where they live. And to what end? “...**that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty.**” To so many over-invested believers of our time and culture, where in any of these passages did Paul write us to pray for one party or the other? To foster schism among believers over political party-ism? Such teachings do not appear on the pages of inspired Scripture. What does Scripture name and require of believers? Obey civil authority. Respect it. Pay your taxes. And, above all else, pray for your civil government that, whatever party or interests rule it, believers in Jesus will be allowed to lead quiet, peaceable, and honest godly lives within that government's geological area of authority.

Let us not therefore judge one another any more. In our culture Christians occasionally quote this sentence or Jesus' words in Matthew 7:1, “*Judge*

not, that ye be not judged,” ignore context and claim that they can never judge anyone or anything whatever. Both passages forbid ungodly judgment based on our emotions or opinions and not on Scripture. These folks conveniently ignore the many passages that direct believers to judge with discernment by Biblical principles. For example, Paul “Judged” the Galatian churches to have departed from Jesus and the true gospel to another Jesus and another gospel. The Biblical prohibition against judging other believers relates to non-Biblical issues and attitudes.

When we either refuse to judge or think we can ignore the Lord’s judgment and judge by our personal opinions and wishes, we magnify our personal judgment above the Lord’s judgment, provoking Paul’s warning in 1 Corinthians 10:22, “**Do we provoke the Lord to jealousy? Are we stronger than he?**”

What then should believers judge? Paul answers the question, “...*but judge this rather, that no man put a stumblingblock or an occasion to fall in his brother’s way.*” And how do we practice this judgment? We neutralize, as much as possible, our opinions and rationalizations that are not taught in the New Testament, first and foremost by ensuring that we never do or say anything to—**or about**—our brothers and sisters in Christ that does not follow New Testament stated teaching, only things that edify. We choose to follow Biblical precedent, not ignore it, when Scripture contradicts our opinions, either by silence or by stated prohibition.

So, you think differently than I about COVID. What does that have to do with our Biblical fellowship in Jesus? You think differently about the contemporary political chaos than I. What does that have to do with what Jesus and His chosen men teach us in Scripture? He and His Word should govern our thoughts, words, and deeds, not our varied opinions about disease or politics. Other than the admonitions to respect, obey, pay taxes, and pray for civil government that we find in the New Testament, what does Scripture teach us about our involvement in civil government? **How much time did Paul or the other apostles invest in how the Roman government did things?** Godly wisdom urges us to follow their example. My fellowship with my brothers and sisters, and, above all, my fellowship with Jesus, is far more important than a contagious disease or the latest political chaos. **No stumbling blocks, only edification.** If what I’m saying or doing regarding these or any other issues doesn’t edify other believers by following New Testament stated principles and examples, why am I saying or doing it?

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Worship service each Sunday, 10:30 A. M.
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