

A Conscientious Ministry-A Healthy Church

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Neglect not the gift that is in thee, which was given thee by prophecy, with the laying on of the hands of the presbytery. Meditate upon these things; give thyself wholly to them; that thy profiting may appear to all. Take heed unto thyself, and unto the doctrine; continue in them: for in doing this thou shalt both save thyself, and them that hear thee. {1Ti 4:14-16}

How does a preacher "neglect" his ministry? What impact does his negligence have on the church where he serves? Vine defines the Greek word translated "neglect" in this verse as not to care, to make light of. Years ago I heard a very conscientious preacher who served in small churches and had to work at a secular job to support his family make a powerful observation. It is one thing to be a full-time professional in your secular job. It is quite another thing to work in a secular job out of necessity, but despite that work to be a full-time pastor/minister. One man takes his ministry lightly. For him it is something akin to a hobby. The other man takes his ministry seriously. Like Paul, on occasion he may need to work at secular activities, but he never stops thinking of himself as a minister of the gospel. A preacher who views his ministry lightly, as something of a sanctified hobby, will cultivate a similar attitude in the people who hear him preach. They will join him in viewing their church and their personal discipleship as their own sanctified hobby. I suggest that blessings will always come proportionate to our devotion to our faith. If you view your Christianity or ministry as a hobby, you will receive about as much true blessing as you do out of other worthy hobbies. A far graver problem lies below the surface here. We engage in hobbies for personal gratification. The "hobby" preacher or "hobby" Christian will likely drift into the attitude that their faith or ministry is primarily for their personal gratification. They will wholly lose the vision that ministry is for the service of others, not for personal gratification. How can a man with this attitude preach a convicting sermon on self-denial and discipleship in the model of cross-bearing?

"Meditate upon these things; give thyself wholly to them; that thy profiting may appear to all." Christian meditation is not emptying one's mind and allowing free-thought to rule. It is filling one's mind with godly, Biblical truths. According to Paul's formula, meditation is not an end in itself. It sets the stage for the meditating Christian to apply the truths in our meditation to life; "Give thyself wholly to them." New Testament Christianity is intrusive, invasive, and consuming. It does not allow us to carve out any quarter of our life as off limits to its governance. It demands consideration in every dimension of our life. And so it should be.

We have lived to see the sad-indeed, the deplorable-situation in which people who profess Christian ministry engage in shameless fund-raising strategies to enrich their own bank accounts instead of giving of themselves to the spiritual service of others. Several years ago a national news program investigated a television preacher who lived in a luxurious suburb of a major city. He routinely made passionate pleas on his program for believers to send him their donations along with their prayer requests. He claimed nearly absolute ability to intervene with God to gain acceptance of the prayer requests that were sent to him. The news program planted hidden cameras in this television preacher's facilities and captured the organization's daily routine on film. The staff faithfully opened the mail and processed the checks. However, without ever reading the prayer requests, the staff routinely dumped the prayer requests in the garbage along with the envelopes and other office trash. Neither this man's staff nor he ever bothered to look at these requests, much less make a conscientious effort to read them or give them any personal attention. This shameless example speaks volumes regarding the state of commercial Christianity in our time. It runs diametrically opposite to New Testament Christianity that gives itself to others rather than extracting from others by fraud and deceit. The profit of which Paul writes is spiritual profit, the value of a godly leader who spends his time in study, meditation, and godly teaching, both by words and by his personal example. He gives of himself to others. It is interesting

that on at least one prolonged occasion Paul made tents and sold them to pay the rent on a large home where he received and ministered to a number of less fortunate believers. {Ac 28:30}

"Take heed unto thyself, and unto the doctrine." First every man in ministry must consider himself and put his own house in order. Only then can he profitably teach others. He must demonstrate a long consistent pattern of this selfless conduct, "...continue in them."

"For in doing this thou shalt both save thyself, and them that hear thee." The Bible uses the term "salvation" or its various forms in a wide variety of ways. We use the word similarly. At a baseball game a base runner decides to steal a base. As he slides into the base, the umpire spreads his hands and shouts "Safe." Someone trapped in a high rise building that is on fire might stand in an open window and cry out to the people below, "Save me, save me." A surgeon performs a variety of tests and operates on a patient in order to "save" the patient from the dangers of a spreading disease. None of these examples in our current language and culture have anything to do with going to heaven when you die. If we were explaining this word to someone who is trying to learn our dialect of the English language, we would likely explain the generic character of the word. Perhaps we would suggest that our non-English student ask a clarifying question, "Saved from what?" in order to know the intent of the word in a given context. In most cases those of us who are familiar with our dialect and our culture understand the context of the word and have no need for the clarifying question. The same principle applies to the word as it appears in Scripture. If you want to eliminate much of the typical confusion regarding this word in Scripture, as you read the word in a given passage, ask yourself the question, "Saved from what?" It is highly doubtful that the Philippian jailer intended to ask his Christian prisoners what he should do to go to heaven when he died when he cried out, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" {Ac 16:30} Without question when the disciples became fearful of the growing waves, their "Lord save us: we perish" {Mt 8:26} hardly referred to where they expected to spend eternity. And clearly the idea that a woman who has children is "saved in childbearing" {1Ti 2:15} does not get a free ticket to heaven because she had a baby. All of these New Testament examples, and many more, could be offered to confirm that the New Testament's use of the term is as broad as our contemporary use. The idea that a conscientious preacher can save both himself and his hearers in the sense of where they will spend eternity rejects the foundational truth of Jesus' sufferings, death, and resurrection for our salvation. We cannot consistently claim both Jesus as our Savior along with a preacher, however conscientious he may be. The popular interpretation of this passage cries out the question, "Who is your true Savior? Is it Jesus or is it the preacher?"

Paul's intent cannot reasonably be interpreted as supplanting Jesus' sacrificial life, death, and resurrection. What did he have in mind? There is a true "salvation" to believers who hear and apply the gospel to their lives. It saves them from ignorance, from anxiety, from countless fears. It saves them to an indescribable peace of mind through fostering their trust in Christ.

I must confess that I have lived on both sides of this fence. At times in the midst of stunning difficulties, I have found incredible peace through casting my cares upon Christ and trusting Him to stand by me through the trials. I must sadly confess that at times the difficulties of life have surprised me and sent me reeling in fear and doubt. In one instance I saved myself, and in the other I did not. Neither situation relates to where I will spend eternity, but both relate to my peace and joy in Christ. In one case I saved myself to His blessing; in the other I did not save myself.

We often talk about trusting in Christ through our trials, but we occasionally wake up in the middle of the night with intense worry over our trials, a dead-give-away that we are not trusting Him as we should. We thus lose a certain "salvation" that our Lord has provided to us. In those sleepless anxious moments we are not meditating on the things that Paul taught to Timothy. We are not giving ourselves "wholly" to them. And we are certainly not saving ourselves in the true sense of what Paul intended with this lesson. May we learn to be more trusting disciples.

Elder Joe Holder