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CHARACTERISTICS OF A FAITHFUL CHRISTIAN LABORER

Acts 18:24-21:16

(14 of 17 in a series through Acts)

In college I was a business minor. I'm not entirely sure how I arrived at that minor specifically, but I do know generally what was in my mind. My major was in biblical languages, and so I was thinking something like, "When this fails to provide me with a way to provide for my family I should probably have something to fall back on." And the other factor was that I liked numbers and problem-solving and trouble-shooting, so somehow I landed on a business minor.

Within this, I was made to read a number of books on business, but my favorite book I ever read on business was one I read a year or so after I graduated. It was called *Good to Great* by Jim Collins. Collins wrote the book after having spent years studying the dynamics of businesses that were good businesses and then at some point took a leap to become a great business and sustained that greatness. He looked at companies like Walgreens and Gillette among others. But I remember the most fascinating chapter in the book was the one that focused on leaders. Collins argued that the profile of a leader who was at the helm of a company that had transitioned from good to great was the same across the board. But surprisingly the profile of a leader that emerged from his study wasn't what you or I might expect. Honestly, I thought it would be a person who was extremely extroverted, easily controlled a room, was charismatic, and the like. But they weren't. Here's how Collins characterized these leaders. He said they were individuals who blend "extreme personal humility with intense professional will . . . self-effacing individuals who displayed the fierce resolve to do whatever needed to be done to make the company great."¹ He would go on to say that "those who worked with or wrote about the good-to-great leaders continually used words like *quiet, humble, modest, reserved, shy, gracious, mild-mannered, self-effacing, understated, did not believe his own clippings*; and so forth."²

Again, my guess is that this is not what we'd think. And it got me to thinking at the time I read it, "I wonder what the characteristics of faithful Christian laborers look like?" Do we make the same (wrong) assumptions about what they look like as we do when we think of good business leaders? In other words, if you think of a faithful Christian worker what image comes to mind? Is it somebody who is flamboyant or well known, with a mass following on Twitter or the like? Or is it better pictured in someone whom we may have never heard of?

I thought of that question again this week as I looked at Paul's third missionary journey (which is recorded in Acts 18:24-21:16) because Luke's recording of Paul's mission gives us a good glimpse into what characteristics make up a faithful Christian laborer. And seeing that this is what we all

¹ Jim Collins, *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap . . . and Others Don't* (New York: HarperBusiness, 2001), 21.

² *Ibid.*, 27.

most certainly want to be—one who faithfully labors as unto our Lord—it should be greatly helpful for us to consider these characteristics.

But, as I did last week, since this is a lengthy section of text, I would like to give us a bit of an overview before highlighting these characteristics. Chapter 18 ends with the introduction of Apollos, a powerful preacher of the gospel who'll make an appearance in Paul's letters to the Corinthians. At this point, he still needs some training, and Aquila and Priscilla pull him over to the side and give him that instruction. Chapter 19 begins with Paul meeting some disciples who had known the baptism and teaching of John the Baptist but had somehow missed the developments of the day of Pentecost. Paul instructs them, they are baptized, and receive the Spirit. Chapter 19 ends with Paul working miracles and a riot breaking out because the gospel was overturning the entire economy at Ephesus. Much of the economy was driven by goods of devotion to the pagan goddess Artemis, but with many becoming believers, they were no longer interested in those goods. But eventually the riot comes to an end. Chapter 20 includes the story of Paul preaching so long that a boy named Eutychus falls asleep, falls out the window, and dies before Paul goes down and raises him from the dead—which of course is a good reminder that unless you think I can work like Paul, you shouldn't risk falling asleep in the sermon like Eutychus. And finally, in the latter half of chapter 20 and in the first half of 21, Paul meets with the Ephesian elders one last time, as he's spent years with them, and tells them that he's going to Jerusalem, even though he knows it will result in his suffering. So, that's an overview of these chapters. What characteristics of a faithful Christian laborer do we see in these chapters? Let me name four.

A faithful Christian worker is teachable

I want to start here because this is where the text starts. Apollos is introduced to us in 18:24 as Luke tells us, "Now a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He was an eloquent man, competent in the Scriptures." In other words, this was a man of exceptional gifting. You know how there's mention in the gospels of Jesus being around sinners, and you think, "Why use that designation? We're all sinners." Well, it means that these were known, notorious sinners. In a similar way, why mention that Apollos was eloquent and competent in the Scriptures when we've been going through a book that is filled with gospel preaching and teaching and expositing of the Scriptures? It's because this man was exceptionally gifted.

And yet look what Luke tells us as he continues to speak of Apollos, saying, "He had been instructed in the way of the Lord. And being fervent in spirit, he spoke and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus, though he knew only the baptism of John. He began to speak boldly in the synagogue, but when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately" (18:25-26).

In other words, Apollos's exceptional giftedness did not mean that he had learned all he needed to learn. There was something he needed to understand more accurately. And I'm not even sure what details Aquila and Priscilla needed to provide or supplement for Apollos, but I'm grateful they did, and I'm grateful he took them in because he continues to make appearances in

the New Testament, was a huge benefit to the church at Corinth, and some have suggested he may have been the author of Hebrews.

But this leads us to reflect on a characteristic that needs to be true of all of us. We must be teachable. I think we all know that the believer needs to be characterized by humility rather than pride, but we sometimes fail to see that one of the clearest reflections of pride in our lives is demonstrated when we're not teachable. If we're not teachable we can't grow as a believer, we can't understand more accurately, and I would even say we will ultimately serve as an unloving and divisive person in the body of Christ. My prayer for all of us is that we might be able to learn more, be corrected, and come to greater understanding because we're teachable.

And I'll add something specific to us here at Cornerstone if I might address our past, present, and future interns a bit. One of the most important characteristics your pastors look for when we consider whether someone is able to be a pastor or church planter is whether or not that person is teachable. It's not giftedness, passion, knowledge, or willingness to commit to a task that rises to the top. It's whether or not you're teachable. Because we know that if someone has all these other great qualities but is not teachable, then not only can we not serve and help them as a church but ultimately God himself will bring them down because he promises us that he will oppose the proud. So let us all pray that we will be teachable as believers, always looking to be corrected and shaped by the Word of God.

A Christian worker is willing to instruct and correct others

Now, you might hear that last point and think that if we're faithful Christian laborers, then perhaps we must always be passive and quiet, but that's not the case. Kind and patient, yes. Those are fruits of the Spirit. Always passive and quiet, not necessarily. And the reason why is because faithfulness to Christ will require us to instruct and on occasion even correct others.

We've already seen this with Aquila and Priscilla. Had they been unwilling to instruct and correct Apollos, it would have been at great cost to the church because Apollos became a powerful tool in the hand of the Lord. But we also see it with Paul and in Paul's instruction to the Ephesian elders. Let's first take Paul. In 19:1-10 he encounters some disciples who only knew the baptism of John, which means that they may have been unaware of Christ's death and resurrection or were at least unaware of the events of Pentecost. So, they were either unbelievers who come to faith or believers who fall in this weird transitional period in redemptive history like the early church on the day of Pentecost (this is the last episode of someone believing in Christ only to receive the Spirit at a later time if indeed they are believers). Either way, note that Paul instructs them. It seems to me that Luke includes this story right after the Apollos story to show individuals in need of further instruction and correction and Aquila, Priscilla, and now Paul providing that instruction and correction.

And this isn't exceptional or rarely needed. Rather, we find when we skip ahead to chapter 20, Paul stressing the need for continued instruction and correction. As Paul is heading to Jerusalem, he calls for the elders of the church there to come to him. Interestingly Luke calls

these men elders, then tells that Paul identifies them as “overseers” and shepherds of the “flock” (20:28), which is to say, they are pastors. And this is just one example of how the NT uses elder, pastor, and overseer interchangeably, which is why we sometimes identify the pastors of CCC as elders or (though more seldom) overseers. But back to the point at hand.

As Paul speaks to the elders there, highlighting for them their role as pastors, he tells them, “Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made your overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears” (20:28-31)

Here’s what I think Paul is doing with this. He’s warning them that even from within the church individuals will rise up saying, teaching, and living unbiblically. Therefore they need to be on the look out for this—“pay careful attention”—as Paul says. But then he holds himself up as an example by pointing to the fact that he admonished them for three years night and day. In other words, just as Paul continually taught, instructed, and even corrected in order to care for the church of God, so they will need to do the same. The faithful Christian worker must be willing to instruct and correct. We will do this in our evangelism. We will do this in the church. And we will do this because we love Christ and love his church. Third:

A faithful Christian worker exalts God’s Word

The priority of God’s Word shines forth in Paul’s third missionary journey. First, we see Apollos ministering the Word, as Luke tells us that “he powerfully refuted the Jews in public, showing by the Scriptures that the Christ was Jesus” (18:28). Then, even after noting the miraculous works that were taking place with Paul—such as people taking handkerchiefs that had touched his skin and being healed—Luke characterizes the missionary success by saying, “So the word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily” (19:20). And finally, after Paul was ready to leave the Ephesian elders, he told them, “And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified” (20:32). Again, at every point, Apollos, Paul, and Luke, labor to exalt God’s Word. And I think there are no exceptions to this—every faithful believer exalts the Word of God. It is our sustenance. It is as necessary to us as eating and drinking.

Brothers and sisters, it doesn’t matter how zealous, able, or persuasive we are, if we fail to hold up and exalt the Word of God, we are going to fail in loving people as the Lord instructs us to love them. Let us never try to be wiser than God by exalting our own wisdom or pointing people to us, but let us exalt the Word of the Lord. And as a church this must be our commitment as well. As long as we allow the Word to be our guide, we’ll be okay. That’s why we gather Sunday after Sunday and read the Word, pray the Word, sing the Word, preach the Word, and respond to the Word. And should we ever turn away from God’s Word, then we need to be willing to

shut our doors as a church because unless we are willing to give people the Word, we simply have nothing to give them. And finally, let me note one more characteristic.

A faithful Christian worker is willing to endure, suffer, and even die

Obedience in the life of a believer must be persevering obedience, and what we see in Paul is perseverance. He gives himself to the task of making disciples. Paul's missionary journeys aren't simply glimpses of him dropping into an area overnight. He is settling in and investing in people's lives. Luke consistently gives us time frames in this third missionary journey that Paul takes. We read that "he entered the synagogue and for three months spoke boldly" (19:8), that "this continued for two years" (19:10), that he "spent three months" in Greece (20:3), and finally he reminds the Ephesian elders that "for three years [he] did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears" (20:31). Clearly Paul is willing to endure for the good of the Lord's people.

But it's not just endurance; we also see that he is willing to suffer and even die. There is an interesting development that takes place in chapters 20-21. In 20:22-23 Paul tells the Ephesian elders, "Behold, I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me." In other words, the Spirit has already shown Paul that he is to go to Jerusalem *and* that he will suffer in Jerusalem.

Then, we read something odd as he is about to head off to Jerusalem. Luke tells us in 21:4, "And through the Spirit they were telling Paul not to go on to Jerusalem." Now, what's odd about that is that Paul had already noted that he was going to Jerusalem because he was "constrained by the Spirit," so why is Luke telling us now that individuals were telling Paul "through the Spirit" *not* to go to Jerusalem? I think the answer becomes clearer when a prophet Agabus comes onto the scene. Here's what we read in 21:10-12, "While we were staying for many days, a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. And coming to us, he took Paul's belt and bound his own feet and hands and said, 'Thus says the Holy Spirit, 'This is how the Jews at Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.' When we heard this, we and the people there urged him not to go up to Jerusalem."

Here, then, is what I think is going on. The reason Luke said "through the Spirit" they were telling Paul not to go to Jerusalem is because he is indicating to the reader that the Spirit really was revealing something to them. What was he revealing? He was showing them the same thing he had already shown Paul ("in every city . . . imprisonment and afflictions await me") and would show Agabus ("The Jews at Jerusalem will bind [Paul] and deliver him into the hand of the Gentiles"). However, when the Spirit reveals this, the people interpret it as a reason for Paul *not* to go to Jerusalem, and they tell Paul that. Indeed, they *plead* with him not to go. That, of course, makes sense. We want those whom we love not to suffer.

However, the Spirit had already revealed this reality of suffering to Paul as well, and I think Paul discerned that this was a gracious comfort from the Spirit. That is, instead of being tempted to think he'd done wrong when he encountered suffering, he could think, "The Spirit already

showed me this would happen.” He didn’t see it as a reason not to go to Jerusalem. Yet Paul also knew that his friends were misinterpreting this prophetic word not because they were evil but because they were blinded *by their love for him*. Therefore, Paul does not rebuke them as if they’re evil. Rather, he tells them that they’re “breaking [his] heart” (21:13) because he knows it is driven by love. But, what they need to understand is—as Paul says—“I am ready not only to be imprisoned but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus” (21:13). And this accords with his earlier word to the Ephesian elders when he told them, “I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God” (20:24).

Brothers and sisters, doesn’t that make your heart leap up within you? That heart that Paul reflects in these words must be true of us as well. As Bonhoeffer has rightly said, “When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.” The glory of the gospel is that when we were hopelessly condemned and dead in our sins, Jesus lived, died, and was raised so that by faith in him we might have forgiveness of sins and eternal life. But it is also true that if we have indeed come to know Christ, then we *belong* to him. He purchased us with his blood. We have died to ourselves in order to live unto him. Therefore, our stance must be that we are willing to endure, suffer, and die if it is required in order to honor his name and testify to his glory.

If you read Paul’s letters, one of the things he often does is hold up the example of himself before exhorting others. We’ll see this in Philippians as we start that book in a few months. In this text, we simply see his example—an example of humility, a willingness to teach, a desire to exalt God’s Word, and a willingness to endure, suffer, and die for Christ’s sake. Luke doesn’t fill this narrative with exhortations for the reader. But isn’t it hard to see this example without also hearing an exhortation to do the same? May we indeed answer that call today and visibly demonstrate it as we come to the table. Amen.