

The Christian's Personal Life

Deuteronomy 7:22–26, Acts 20:32–38

This is our second sermon on this text. Last week we preached from verse 32 on “The Believer’s Heavenly Inheritance.” We saw that when Paul spoke to the Ephesian elders he *commended* the brethren to the Lord for his care; he *showed humility*, identifying with his fellow elders, not insisting on preeminence because of his apostolic office or considerable gifts, but calling himself simply a fellow-elder; he *heaped praise* upon the Holy Scriptures, commending the believers to the “Word of God,” which is “able”—powerful!—to build up the saints to fight the good fight of faith. Fourthly, he *drew attention* to the believer’s heavenly inheritance which cannot be taken away from us. Today, we will consider the rest of the text. I have three points—all nouns—“contentment,” “industry” and “charity”; first,

1. Contentment

Paul says, “I have coveted no one’s silver or gold or apparel” (v. 33). In our Old Testament text too there is a reference to silver and gold. As Israel was about to inherit the land of promise Moses tells the people, “You shall burn the carved images of their gods with fire; you shall not covet the *silver or gold* that is on them, nor take it for yourselves, lest you be snared by it.” Israel was not to covet the silver or gold of the heathen. In both Paul’s and Moses’s words there is a reference to the tenth commandment. The Ten Commandments are a summary of the moral law, God’s revealed will for all men and nations. The Ten Commandments are not the totality of the moral law but a summary of what God requires of every man, woman and child on the face of the earth—a summary of the behavior God requires to enter his blessed presence forevermore. The Holy Scriptures make plain that the obedience that God requires is not merely outward but from a heart that loves him supremely. The Shorter Catechism teaches, “The moral law is *summarily* comprehended in the ten commandments”; “summarily” means *in a summary manner*: the moral law (in contrast to the ceremonial law, which has to do with animal sacrifices, among other things, is *summarized* in the Ten Commandments. The moral law requires (1) perfect loyalty and fidelity to God, every moment of our lives; (2) purity in worship; (3) sanctifying God’s holy name; (4) keeping one day out of seven to the Lord; (5) honoring our neighbors: superiors, inferiors and equals; (6) all lawful endeavors to preserve our own life, and the life of others; (7) sexual purity; (8) respect for and care for private property; (9) speaking truth and upholding our own and our neighbor’s good name; and finally, (10) contentment.

Paul’s statement “I have coveted no one’s silver or gold or apparel” is clearly a reference to the tenth commandment, “Thou shalt not covet.” His assertion reflects the claims of other men of God. When Korah led a rebellion against Moses,

accusing him of taking too much honor for himself, Moses defended his good name, telling God, “Do not respect their offering. I have not taken one donkey from them, nor have I hurt one of them” (Num. 16:15). Moses was in essence saying, “I have not abused my leadership position, I have not used the power of my office for personal enrichment.” Using a political office for personal enrichment, such as by accepting bribes, or demanding money under the table in order to get a government contract, is corruption, and, sadly, it is practiced the world over. The U.S. State Department from time to time names corrupt officials in foreign countries—but there is corruption in the U.S. too. But using an ecclesiastical office for personal enrichment is even worse, for it dishonors the name of God and makes people conclude that religion is nothing but a big con—a racket. When a little Jewish servant girl sent Naaman the Syrian to Israel to be healed of his leprosy by Elisha, the man of God in Samaria, and Naaman came and, though initially reluctant, was finally persuaded to go down and dip himself seven times in the Jordan—and when he did so, according to the instruction of the man of God, and his flesh was restored like the flesh of a little child, and he was cleansed of his leprosy, Elisha’s servant Gehazi couldn’t help but notice that Naaman and his entourage had brought with them “ten talents of silver, and six thousand pieces of gold, and ten changes of raiment”—a fabulous fortune. And when the prophet Elisha sent Naaman away utterly free without charge, Gehazi thought to himself, “Behold, my master hath spared Naaman this Syrian, in not receiving at his hands that which he brought.” So Gehazi ran after Naaman’s chariot and fabricated a story and told Naaman that Elijah had changed his mind, that two sons of the prophets had just come unexpectedly from Mount Ephraim; could he have one talent of silver and two changes of clothes? When Elijah heard of it, he was incensed! He told Gehazi, “The leprosy therefore of Naaman shall cleave unto thee, and unto thy seed forever!” And Gehazi went out from his presence a leper as white as snow (2 Kings 5). The leprosy of Naaman the Syrian would destroy the body of Gehazi the Israelite! Why was Gehazi so severely judged? Because the reputation of God had been defamed. Naaman and the government of Syria had been led to conclude that the religion of Yahweh was nothing more than a confidence game, a racket for extracting money from the gullible. But that is a big lie! God’s people are to offer the gospel without charge: “freely ye have received, freely give” (Matt. 10:8). Ministers are to preach the gospel without charge. A Christian minister should never connive and think, “I’ll take this call that pays well rather than another call that pays less.” That should never be the motivation for going into the ministry. God’s servants should go forth and speak the truth, trusting in God’s promise to supply all our need according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:19). God’s servants, preaching God’s message according to God’s manner, will not lack God’s provision. God will be no man’s debtor. He will open

up the windows of heaven and pour out a blessing such that there will not be room to receive it! That is the divine promise. But that should never be the motivation for ministry.

There's one more biblical example. When the prophet Samuel was getting old and about to go off into retirement, passing on the baton of leadership on to King Saul, he said, "Here I am. Witness against me before the Lord and before His anointed: Whose ox have I taken, or whose donkey have I taken, or whom have I cheated? Whom have I oppressed, or from whose hand have I received any bribe with which to blind my eyes? I will restore it to you" (1 Sam. 12:3). Samuel had served the Lord for many years. He wanted to make clear that he had behaved honorably and had not cheated anybody. So likewise the apostle Paul in our Acts text testifies to the elders of the church at Ephesus, "I have coveted no one's silver or gold or apparel." He is challenging the Ephesian elders to speak up if he has at any time used the power of his apostolic office to enrich himself personally. He is affirming that he has exercised the power of his office honorably in the performance of his duties. "I have *coveted* no one's silver or gold or apparel"—here is an explicit reference to the tenth commandment, "Thou shalt not covet." This is not Paul's only reference to the tenth commandment. There is another. In Romans 7 he says, "I would not have known sin except through the law. For I would not have known covetousness unless the law had said, 'You shall not covet.'"¹ In his pre-conversion days Paul—then known as Saul of Tarsus—had been a murderer targeting Christians. His persecution of Christians was feared—and something he regretted the rest of his life. But after the Lord of glory changed his heart on the road to Damascus, it was not the sixth commandment that brought conviction to him, but the tenth: "Thou shalt not covet." As explained in the Shorter Catechism, "The tenth commandment requireth full *contentment* with our own condition, with a right and charitable frame of spirit toward our neighbor, and all that is his."² Hebrews says, "Let your conversation be without *covetousness*; and be *content* with such things as ye have: for he hath said, I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee."³ Notice how the writer to the Hebrews links "be content" with "covetousness." Covetousness is the polar opposite of contentment. But remember, brothers and sisters, the Christian has absolutely no reason *not* to be content, for he has God's solemn promise that he will never leave him or abandon him. If *God* is his possession, then everything else is icing on the cake. *God* is his portion forever; he can never be taken away from the believer. If you belong to Christ, then "neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor

¹ Rom. 7:7

² Shorter Catechism 80, <https://opc.org/sc.html>

³ Heb. 13:5

things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”⁴

Christian, are you content—content with what our Lord has given you? Or does your behavior implicitly say, “I’ll be content if I just have a little more”? Is the focus of your attention on enriching yourself rather than growing in grace? “They that will be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and hurtful lusts, which drown men in destruction and perdition” (1 Tim. 6:9). If our whole focus is on getting rich, if that is our obsession and top priority, then we will never have enough; we will never be satisfied; our focus is on the things of this world rather than our heavenly inheritance. If that is your preoccupation, then you will never be satisfied. You may achieve wealth, but you will never achieve happiness. You will die a miserable old fool, a miser who never valued what is most important. Child of God, pray that your heavenly Father will reveal to your heart what is most important—a knowledge of him who is eternal blessedness. May each of us experience the joy of true contentment. Secondly,

2. Industry

Again, the words of Paul: “Yes, you yourselves know that these hands have provided for my necessities, and for those who were with me. I have shown you in every way, by laboring like this, that you must support the weak” (vv. 34–35). When Paul speaks of “laboring” he uses a word that means *to grow weary, tired, exhausted with toil, to labor with wearisome effort, to toil with bodily labor*.⁵ Paul is speaking of hard work! God made us and gave us bodies capable of hard work. When he created man, he put him in the Garden of Eden to till the soil and dress and keep it. This was part of his original design for humanity before sin entered into the world. Now I have never been much of a farmer. Norma has often reminisced about her childhood, and how in the summertime she and her three siblings were sent out into the family garden and given the assignment of hoeing a certain number of rows before the sun began to beat down in full force. I have done my share of hoeing and weeding over the years and I know that it is hard work. However, when the plants come up with their beautiful flowers and tasty vegetables, it is well worth it. But in the meantime, hard work produces sweat, it gives us blisters, it sometimes leaves us with stiff muscles and sore backs. Some Christians are averse to hard work, and easily give up. But there is reward in a job well done, to have taken part in an activity that is part of our human destiny. The Bible says, “And whatsoever ye do, do it heartily, as to the Lord, and not unto men; knowing that of the Lord ye shall receive the reward of the inheritance: for ye serve the Lord Christ” (Col. 3:23–24). Christian, did you hear that? “Whatsoever ye do, do it heartily, *as to the Lord*.” As you go to work, you are not working just to

⁴ Rom. 8:38–39

⁵ Enhanced Strong's Lexicon, κοπιᾶω (Logos Bible Software)

please your boss, but to please the *Lord*. You are not working hard at your job to receive praise, to advance in your career, but to please your heavenly Father, who takes note of all we have done and will give a reward at the final day. At the final day, when we stand before God, may it be our goal to be able to say, “I labored for your glory, Lord, I did my best to serve you.” In a fallen world work is not always pleasant. I have spoken to some of you, and sometimes you have had to work in a toxic work environment where you have not been affirmed, where you have been undercut, undervalued, hectored, belittled for your accomplishments. Some of you have endured outright abuse. But you have carried on, for your family was depending on you for survival. Don’t for a minute think that your heavenly Father is oblivious to your suffering! In fact, the Bible assures us that if we suffer for Christ’s sake, happy are we. At the final day we will surely not lose our reward. Each of us must stay the course, knowing that we “serve the Lord Christ.” His “well done” is the ultimate reward for our labor.

The word used in our text can be used in the sense of working hard in preaching and teaching. Paul says in 1 Timothy 5:17, “Let the elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honour, especially they who *labor* in the word and doctrine.” To preach and teach well requires labor. A man may be gifted for teaching, but to do it well requires study. The author of Ecclesiastes correctly observed that “of making many books there is no end; and much *study* is a weariness of the flesh.”⁶ To do the work of a ruling elder, pastor or preacher requires *labor*, and Paul was not unaccustomed to such labor. Rightly interpreting the word of God requires mental labor, comparing Scripture with Scripture, using reasoning and logic, understanding the lessons of church history, using commentaries, grappling with the meaning of creeds and confessions, endeavoring to discern the mind of the Spirit, and much more. Some passages of Scripture are much more difficult than others; all must be understood in light of the whole, and in light of Scripture’s overarching purpose, which is to give all glory to God. Truly, much study *is* weariness of the flesh, to stand before people and teach publicly is a daunting task, and to make a mistake invites criticism. Paul says, “Study to show thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.”⁷ The word for “study” means *be diligent, take pains, make every effort*. The conclusion is unavoidable that handling, interpreting and applying Scripture is, like tending a garden, hard work. God’s people ought to pray for their pastors and elders, that they may be given insight to understand the Scriptures, but also that they may be given grace to labor to produce messages that are profitable to the spiritual interests of their people. God doesn’t want us to “wing it,” but to prepare diligently.

⁶ Eccl. 12:12

⁷ 2 Tim. 2:15

Clearly, Paul labored in the gospel, but in this text Paul is speaking of working with his *hands*—manual labor. He says, “Yes, you yourselves know that *these hands* have provided for my necessities, and for those who were with me.” Paul’s labor as a tentmaker and leather worker enabled him to provide for the necessities of life for himself and also for his co-workers. The fact that God allows man to reap a reward for his labors, even in a fallen world, is an aspect of common grace, and we all ought to give thanks for that. After the fall Adam was told, “cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life; thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee; and thou shalt eat the herb of the field; in the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground.” In a fallen world we deal with thorns and thistles—I think of the prickly nettles that have begun growing in my backyard the last couple years. Yet even in a fallen world God has arranged it so that labor brings increase and value, and we praise him for that. This second point is “industry,” defined as *diligence in an employment or pursuit*. May we each dedicate ourselves to be industrious in our calling, seeking always the glory of God. Thirdly,

3. Charity

Consider Paul’s words “you must support the weak” (v. 35). If your eyes are glazing over right now, I order you to snap to attention by noticing that little four-letter word “must”: “you *must* support the weak.” Brothers and sisters, this is our Christian *duty*. This was not just for the Ephesian elders; it is the duty of all Christians—yea, of all men. Man is naturally selfish, focused on self. Each of us naturally thinks of himself or herself first of all: *my* needs, *my* wants, *my* happiness, *my* fulfillment. From the time that we are little babies our thoughts are focused on our own needs. The idea of serving others seems too altruistic and unattainable; it is furthest from our minds. But God tells us to support the weak: those who lack strength, those who are sick, those who are providentially indisposed.

I read a story yesterday that was published in the *Lansing State Journal* on Thanksgiving Day. It seems that around Labor Day a most unusual thing happened: *two* mothers gave birth to triplets at Sparrow Hospital the same week. Now this is a very rare occurrence; on average Sparrow sees the birth of triplets about once in three years, but here were two mothers giving birth to triplets the same week. None of the Sparrow nursing staff can remember this ever happening before. By the way, I purposely used the phrase “*mothers* giving birth.” That’s factual biologically. The LORD God himself speaks through the prophet Jeremiah and says, “Ask now, and see, can a *man* bear a child?” (Jer. 30:6 ESV).⁸ The LORD God, the Creator of all and the one who made us all in his own image, specifically uses the word זָכָר, which means *man* or *male*. He says, “Can a *man* bear a child?” That is a rhetorical

⁸ שְׂאֵלָה נָא וְיָרֵא אִם-יֵלֵד זָכָר

question, and the answer is *no*, a man cannot bear a child; it is an impossibility. In the wokeism that is becoming so popular, people who ought to know better are actually saying with a straight face, “people giving birth,” while even nature itself teaches us that only *mothers* give birth. But back to the article. The reporter spent a little time with one of the couples who had suddenly seen three new little people in their family. I was glad to see that they are lawfully married—that does not always happen, you know. Furthermore, they are Christians and part of a church family. And when they first brought their new little triplets home, they were overwhelmed by the love of their church family—bringing meals, giving monetary gifts, offering to help. That’s the way a church ought to work: serving the Lord as we serve one another in charity—in love.

The word *charity* refers to *the voluntary giving of help to the needy*. But the dictionary gives another definition: “the love of humankind, typically in a Christian context: *faith, hope, and charity*,”⁹ referencing Paul’s exquisite words “And now abideth faith, hope, *charity*, these three; but the greatest of these is *charity*” (1 Cor. 13:13 KJV). How wonderful that the world notices that charity is a uniquely Christian virtue! The church remembers “the words of the Lord Jesus, that He said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’” When evolutionists and secularists show charity, they are borrowing from the Christian worldview. For if there is no God, and everything happened purely by chance, and there is only survival of the fittest, why should any individual go out of his way to help another? It doesn’t make sense. Only in the Christian worldview does charity make sense! The Lord of glory came to this world to help the weak—yea, to help those who were dead in sins, those who were on their way to hell, who could not help themselves. “He hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him.”¹⁰ “For when we were yet without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly.”¹¹ When we were weak—without strength, spiritually helpless—our mighty Savior intervened to save us. Greater love hath no man than this! Praise his holy name!

Here, then, is our Christian duty: contentment, industry, charity. These are some of the good works that spring out of a sincere faith. Amen!

⁹ *New Oxford American Dictionary*: “charity” (MacOS Monterey)

¹⁰ 2 Cor. 5:21

¹¹ Rom. 5:6