

Dear Friends,

Pastors spend much of their time, and lose much sleep, over members of their churches who stumble through life with too little thought for other members in the church. Without intending to do so, they often "step on toes" and create unnecessary tensions and stresses in the church's culture. And men who have served as a pastor for longer have likely encountered a "Brother Alexander," a member who ignores basic Biblical ethics and deliberately creates problems with other members, often for his/her personal gain. In the case of the inadvertent offense, often the only action necessary is for the pastor to spend some time with the member in simple and honest conversation. The member had no bad motives, so he/she will gladly do what needs to be done to make the relationship right again. The "Alexanders" are another story. They had bad motives from the beginning. Confront them? Rebuke them? Before you do, make sure your armor is in working order. It will get a workout! The "Alexanders" often think themselves far more "spiritual" and mature than anyone else in the church, so they regard themselves as above reproach by any of those "little people" pretend Christians in the church. The wise pastor might need to live with a constant prayer for wisdom to know the difference between the naive believers and the "Alexanders" in the church he serves.

I find the timing of Paul's counsel to Timothy quite instructive. Literally, this letter appears to be Paul's last letter before his imminent martyrdom. He ended his Christian journey as he lived it, steady and leaning on his Savior. When I was fairly young in my ministry, I encountered a number of older ministers who, as they grew older in their lives and their ministry, fell into a bitter resentment toward people in the church they served. Perhaps they didn't feel sufficiently appreciated or recognized for what they had done in service to the church. I don't know, but I saw the fruitless end of a good life and ministry that left me sad beyond words. Seeing these men powerfully motivated me to pray, often and intensely, for the Lord to save me from ending my ministry in such bitterness. Paul's balanced and steady faith as he sees the end close at hand serves a noble example for us. And Paul's response to Timothy regarding Alexander stands near the top of his list of attitudes to help him avoid ending his life and ministry in bitterness. Forget the Alexanders in your life! Turn them over to the Lord, and leave them with Him! If you engage such a person, you will lose far more than you might gain, and you will do nothing helpful for Alexander. His mind is made up. He sees himself as righteously right, and you as unworthily inferior. He simply will not listen.

This is a difficult lesson to learn, but it is also highly important for us, if we hope to be fruitful, fruitful for the Lord and His people.

Lord bless,
Joe Holder

Rewards Worthy of the Deed

Alexander the coppersmith did me much evil: the Lord reward him according to his works: Of whom be thou ware also; for he hath greatly withstood our words. (2 Timothy 4:14-15 KJV 1900)

Second Timothy is generally believed to be Paul's final letter. He would soon be martyred for his faith. His words in 2 Timothy 4:6-8 indicate that he was aware and reconciled. In this final chapter, Paul warns Timothy of men who proved unfaithful under pressure, as well as one who surprised him by proving faithful, Mark. We would profit to study Paul's attitude toward these men, especially given his imminent departure. He was steady and stable, not at all bitter or harsh in his judgments. Instead of

complaining with a bitter attitude, Paul peacefully warned Timothy of the man's disposition and left their judgment in the Lord's hands.

In my younger years in ministry, I was blessed with time in company with a number of respected and wise ministers, many years my seniors. These men freely shared their experiences with me, often including their personal failures. They were godly and worthy teachers, and, like Timothy with Paul, I profited from my time with them.

...for he hath greatly withstood our words. Unfaithful people manifest their carnal nature in predictable patterns. To be thorough, unfaithful people may prove their corruption by advocating errant ideas as well as by opposing godly teachers or leaders in a church. In either case, they typically take on the negative disposition, opposing or contradicting both Scripture and godly teachers. Satan can be quite creative, but, when he uses a strategy that works, why change it? Opposing, or withstanding established truth and/or teachers in the church often works sadly too well. Every church should occasionally refresh its mind with Solomon's wise words.

These six things doth the LORD hate: yea, seven are an abomination unto him: A proud look, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood, A heart that deviseth wicked imaginations, feet that be swift in running to mischief, A false witness that speaketh lies, and he that soweth discord among brethren. (Proverbs 6:16-19)

Sins so black that the Lord hates are bad, but abominable is far worse, and sowing discord among brothers God reserves for just such disdain. Consider the diametrical opposite disposition that Paul teaches.

I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called, With all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love; Endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. (Ephesians 4:1-3)

The abominable person in Proverbs intentionally sows discord, and likely works adroitly to manipulate that discord to his personal advantage. The model believer in Paul's teaching has a different objective, and he works long and hard for it. "Endeavoring" in this lesson was translated from a Greek word which means to make every effort. God's precise wording of Scripture never ceases to amaze me. Notice Paul's language, "*Endeavoring to **keep** the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.*" Often, it is the simple words in Scripture that we overlook and rob ourselves of its richness. Did you notice that simple word, "**keep**"? When we train our minds to the Lord's ways, we understand. When He saved us, He made peace between Himself and us. He also made peace between us and other children of God. As we grow in grace and in the knowledge of the gospel, our task is not to make peace, but to keep it. The "Unity of the Spirit" is a fact, made so by the Spirit. Do we conduct ourselves so as to destroy that unity and create war with other children of God? Or do we labor to "**Keep**" that unity in peace?

Invariably, the combative believer who seeks to dominate other believers will object to this peaceful spirit in the gospel and in their church. While ignoring such passages as Paul's word in Ephesians 4, they will highlight his words in Ephesians 6 regarding the armor of God. Armor, a sword, in their mind, the faithful believer is all about war and fighting. However, they fail the most basic test of a good soldier. Don't sharpen your sword and strike out until you know, know for sure, the identity of your enemy.

For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places. (Ephesians 6:12)

Whoever our enemy, Paul alerts us. It is not "flesh and blood." Every brother or sister in the

faith, or in the church of your membership, is “*Flesh and blood*”! If you declare war against them, or in any way treat them as your spiritual enemy, and strive to cross swords with them, you are, in fact, *working to wound a soldier in your own army!*

Paul did not cross swords with Alexander, despite the man’s fierce opposition to Paul and his ministry. He understood that he was a soldier in the army of Jesus, but that Jesus, not himself, is the “*Captain of our salvation.*” If Alexander deserved the Lord’s judgment for his failures, it was the Lord’s place to deal with him, not Paul’s. ...*the Lord reward him according to his works.* This is a powerful lesson for godly believers who long to honor the Lord in their lives and in their churches.

When I hear or observe the combative, war-like person in church, I struggle not to also think of the early adolescent and rather spoiled child. Children are rather incredible “Psychologists.” Surprisingly early, they learn to pit their parents against each other, manipulating each into their personal advantage or benefit. Sadly, I have observed adult church members who played this adolescent game to their advantage with more skill than a believer should possess in the world of guile. Seldom in my observation, have I observed the combative believer whose conduct was not sadly slanted for personal advantage. No surprise, the adolescent child who practices these games is normally too immature to grow in responsible habits. The believer who practices similar habits manifests similar spiritual immaturity.

Paul did not pretend that Alexander was a noble and faithful believer. He was quite clear and honest with Timothy regarding the man’s low character. However, he was also quite careful to avoid any personal “Combat” with the man. Paul’s “*the Lord reward him according to his works*” manifests Paul’s strong and mature faith. He extracts himself from the judgment seat and is quite content to allow the Lord to deal with Alexander in whatever manner the Lord knows is right and appropriate.

How much of another person’s motives can we truly know? The answer is precious little—how about none. We often approach our judgment of people with a preconception based on our personal relationship with that person. If that person and we have “Crossed swords” on various issues, and we seldom agree, we are liable to view that person’s motives as low and unworthy. If the other person is one of our best friends, we are just as liable to view his/her motives as pure and only honorable. Neither judgment is based at all on fact. If we can’t get to a person’s motives, how can we pass righteous judgment toward them? Immature faith will lunge forward and impute motives, advancing to becoming judge and jury against that person. Mature faith will follow Paul’s pattern. Assess the person based on Biblical, godly criteria and behavior. By making this assessment, you may well choose either to remain close to that person and work to help them grow in their faith, or you may extract yourself from them and “...*avoid them.*” (Romans 16:17) If so, you peacefully retire and turn that person over to the Lord. Stay out of the judge’s seat or the jury box. Trust the Lord to deal with the person righteously.

The closing lesson Jesus taught in Matthew 18 warns us against any form of unfair or unrighteous judgment against another person. A man owed a debt of ten thousand talents. A talent was equivalent to approximately \$1,200. That means the man owed around twelve million dollars! Given that he had nothing at all to pay, it is difficult to imagine him every being able to pay such a debt. He plead for mercy, and the creditor granted full forgiveness of the debt! All twelve million dollars. Amazing. Next in Jesus’ story, the man so graciously forgiven approached a man who owed him a hundred pence, the equivalent of about \$20! He is rigid and demanding. Pay it all or go to debtor’s prison. He had no sense of mercy because of the forgiveness he had received. “Pay or else!” The first creditor heard of this episode, called the unforgiving man to account for his conduct, and reinstated the twelve million dollar debt! Jesus’ words, summarizing His lesson, are sobering, “*So likewise shall my heavenly Father do also unto you, if ye from your hearts forgive not every one his brother their trespasses.*” (Matthew 18:35) We regard a trespass as a fairly minor offense. When someone “Trespasses” against us, are we inclined to forgive or to hold the offensive conduct against them? A \$20 debt is so small, hardly worth being called a “Debt.” How about twelve million dollars? Now that is a

debt!

Jesus didn't tell us anything about the man's possessions, only that, when the debt came due, he had nothing to pay. Given the size of the debt and the fact that he had lost all his resources, one wonders; although he promised to repay the twelve million with time, I wonder how realistic his promise was. For most of us, the largest debt we ever owed was our mortgage on our home. Not twelve million!

We can't grasp the profound weight of our sin debt that Jesus took off us and paid in His death for us. Twelve million dollars, as impossible as it seems, may not be enough money to represent it. One point does agree. The man could not pay the twelve million dollars, and we could not pay our debt of sin. Impossible!

Ponder those trivial offenses you experience at the hands of a thoughtless or preoccupied brother or sister in your church. You may have gotten "Hot under the collar," but weigh that offense against what the Lord forgave you. What value would you place on it? Maybe \$20? So what should you do with it? Is it worth risking the Lord holding you accountable for all of your sins? This lesson is not about losing your salvation, but about losing your "Good credit" with the Lord. And when you do encounter an Alexander, how should you react? Same as Paul. The Lord reward him. That is enough!

Elder Joe Holder