

CPAS Fellowship Paper

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Re Qualities of a Christian

Metaphorically Speaking —or The Complete Christian

(Notes of an address given by the Rev. J. R. W. Stott at the Whytham Camp on August 7, 1954, based on the second chapter of St. Paul's second letter to Timothy.)

ST. PAUL'S letters to Timothy contain much practical advice from an experienced Christian worker to one who was young, inexperienced, no doubt somewhat lonely, and entrusted with a responsibility too heavy for his youthful shoulders. Many of us are like that. We are called to a task too exacting for us. We need to sit beside Timothy as he reads this letter and hear what Paul has to say.

Paul begins by telling him to be strong. If he had stopped there, it would have sounded silly. You might as well tell a snail to be quick or a horse to fly as tell a coward to be brave or a weakling to be strong. But the verb is passive in the Greek and means literally "be inwardly strengthened". This strength is "in grace": that is we do not deserve it, we cannot lay claim to it. The grace to work like the grace to believe, the grace to be sanctified like the grace to be saved, is free. That is why humility is so essential. We need God's grace desperately. Where is this grace to be found? "In Christ Jesus." The grace by which we are saved, by which we are sanctified and by which we serve is to be found exclusively in Jesus Christ. To be in Christ is of course to be vitally joined to Him and to abide in Him, and nothing can replace this intimate union and communion with Jesus, for in Jesus Christ is grace and in grace is strength for every task.

This is an indispensable introduction to our subject which is the equipment of the Christian worker. St. Paul resorts to many secular metaphors in order to enforce and illustrate spiritual truths. He gives us an illuminating catalogue of seven, each emphasizing a different quality of the effective Christian worker.

1. THE STEWARD (verse 2).

The word is omitted from the text but the sense is clear. The idea of entrusting something to someone to be dispensed to others is not uncommon in the New Testament. This is the task of the

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steward, namely to dispense to others what he has himself received. The quality that is required in stewards is *faithfulness*. So St. Paul makes clear in 1. Cor. 4: 2. He also mentions "*faithful men*" in this verse. St. Paul himself was a faithful steward. He said "I have delivered unto you that which I also received" (1 Cor. 15: 3). Timothy was to be a faithful steward also. "What you have heard from me . . . deliver to faithful men." These faithful men were also to be stewards "that they may be able to teach others also". The sequence then is clear. From God to Paul, from Paul to Timothy, from Timothy to faithful men, from faithful men to others also.

We too are stewards. We have received the same torch and are to hand it on. The Scriptures are true because the writers faithfully recorded what they received. The word of God came to them and they then spoke it. We hear it and must spread it to others.

The Bible then is entrusted to us as the truth was entrusted to Timothy. We are to teach it faithfully, parent to child, teacher to pupil, friend to friend. Further, in teaching, we are to have in mind the fact that the taught may themselves become teachers. We must make sure that what we give is pure and unalloyed in order that what they give to others will be true also. We may neither contradict the Word, nor add to it nor subtract from it. God calls us to pass on to others exactly what we have received, nothing else, nothing less, nothing more.

2. THE SOLDIER (verses 3 and 4).

Timothy was to be a soldier as well as a steward, and the quality required in soldiers is *self-sacrifice*. A man cannot be a good soldier unless he is totally committed. No half measures or reservations are permitted. He cannot lay down conditions on which he is prepared to fight. He is a dedicated man. All of him all the time is available for all that comes. The Christian is a soldier like that. His self-sacrifice is revealed in his willingness firstly to suffer. "Take your share of suffering" (R.S.V.). The Christian worker cannot expect to escape suffering, whether it be discouragement, opposition or unpopularity. The second mark of his self-sacrifice is his willingness to concentrate. "No soldier on service gets entangled in civilian pursuits since his aim is to satisfy him who enlisted him" (R.S.V.). Obviously our Christianity cannot claim an exclusive place, but what place does it occupy in our lives? There are too many Christian workers who suit their own convenience, and whose service is spasmodic and irregular. There is room for more self-sacrifice and unselfishness. The soldier pleases not himself but his commanding officer. The Christian pleases not himself but Jesus Christ.

3. THE ATHLETE (verse 5).

In the New Testament there are several qualities of the athlete which are to be reproduced in the Christian. There is the need for training and for perseverance. Here, however, the quality required is *obedience*. The athlete must keep the rules. Every athletic contest has rules. The athlete must play fair if he is to play well. He must keep the rules to win the prize. The Christian race has rules

too. The Christian runner is supplied with a book of rules. We cannot teach others to run if we do not keep the rules ourselves. We must have a humble resolve to obey God's Holy Word and to model our lives according to its sacred teaching.

4. THE FARMER (verse 6).

"It is the hard-working farmer who ought to have the first share of the crops" (R.S.V.). You will note that the stress is on the word *laboureth*, and that the quality required in the farmer is *industry*. The lazy farmer cannot expect good crops. If his ploughing is incompetent, his sowing haphazard; if he doesn't bother to water, to weed and to hoe; if he's too slack to reap at the right time and in the right way, then he cannot expect to succeed. The first share of the crops goes to the most conscientious farmer.

What care and diligence we need in our spiritual agriculture! We cannot hope to reap a harvest in Sunday School teaching or personal work unless we are diligent. We must remember that ploughing (namely to prepare the soil of people's hearts) is hard work. The sowing must be done carefully. The watering and the weeding must be done regularly. How carefully do we prepare our Sunday School lessons? How much trouble do we take to befriend those we are seeking to win? How much time do we spend visiting the parents of children we are teaching? How much regularity is there in our prayer for the work. He who does not bother does not gather. But he who takes great pains gets great gains.

5. THE WORKMAN (verse 15).

"Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth" (R.S.V.).

Two different kinds of workmen are here implied. The approved workman and the one who is not approved, the one who is ashamed and the one who has no need to be ashamed. What is the difference? It concerns his handling of the Word of God. The Greek word for "rightly divide" is unique here in the New Testament. Literally it means to cut or to lay out in a straight line and is used particularly of laying a road (for instance in Proverbs 3: 6) or of ploughing a furrow. It is also used of a mason cutting stone straight and square to fit into a building. The emphasis here is upon *straightness*. The Word of God is likened to a road, and we as workmen are to lay the road so straight (i.e., to teach it so accurately and explain it so simply) that others coming along may find the way easily and follow it clearly. The quality required in the Christian workman therefore is *accuracy*. St. Paul takes the last metaphor a stage further. The farmer must work hard. The workman must labour carefully. Christian work requires not only sweat but brains; not only toil but skill, and that specially in our treatment of the Bible. The steward must be faithful in handing it on. The workman must be careful in laying it out. This was particularly so for Timothy as many false teachers were about (see verses 14, 18 and 8). We too must learn this lesson. We need discipline in our work at the sacred

text. We must wrestle with it, and puzzle over it, and pray through it, and discuss it with others until it yields its meaning. If the way is to be made clear and easy to others, this will only be at the price of our own painstaking study and meditation.

6. *THE VESSEL* (verses 20—22).

In a great mansion there are different kinds of vessel, gold and silver ones for noble, special use, wood and earthenware ones for ignoble and common use. So, too, in the Church there are Christians whom God can use and whom God can't use. The quality needed in the noble vessel is *cleanness*. The master of the house only uses noble vessels which are cleansed from dirty use. So "shun youthful passions and aim at righteousness, faith, love and peace . . ." (verse 22, R.S.V.). Our sin can hinder God's work. If we covet the privilege of being used by God and want to be described as those who are "meet for the master's use and ready for any good work" we must be noble, clean vessels. We must live near the Cross. We must be filled with the Holy Spirit.

7. *THE SERVANT* (verses 23—36).

The quality required in the servant is *gentleness*. Are we engaged in controversies (v. 23)? No. We must avoid them because they breed quarrels. Have we opponents (v. 25)? Then in manner we must be gentle towards them (vv. 24—25) and in purpose we must be positive in dealing with them. We must teach them (v. 24) and correct them (vv. 25—26). Our desire must be to win not the argument but the soul. We must not just desire to score off our opponent but rather that they may repent of their sin and come to the truth (v. 25b) and that they may escape the devil's snare in order to do God's will (the probable reading of v. 26). The Lord's servant must learn the Lord's way. Gentleness (indeed the very same Greek word) was a characteristic of the Lord Jesus states Paul in 2. Cor. 10: 1. How gentle was He with Peter and James and John and Judas and the rest. How hard do we find it! Have we a child in Sunday School who is particularly quarrelsome? Is there a boy or girl in our Bible Class who is dense or cheeky? Are we seeking to win a friend who is slow in the up-take and shows no insight into the truth? Have we someone at work who is scornful of our Christian profession? We need all the gentleness of Jesus as His servant.

Here then are the qualities required in the Christian worker. He needs the faithfulness of a steward, the self-sacrifice of a soldier, the fairplay of an athlete, the industry of a farmer, the skill and accuracy of a workman, the cleanness of a noble vessel and the gentleness of a servant of the Lord. Who is sufficient for these things? We come back to the first verse. "Be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus." In Jesus there is grace, and in His grace there is strength for every task.