"Neither human plaudits nor human censure is to be taken as the test of truth."
—Richard Whately

05-Sep-08

First Things First (Part Four): Faithfully Witnessing

In the Western world, we have unique and sometimes bizarre ways of measuring things. Because capitalism is such a dominant feature of our culture, from birth we are barraged by the belief that "bigger" and "more" are always better. Thus, the American healthcare industry is measured in *billions of dollars* rather than the number of people helped, let alone the number of people made well. The money involved and the size of any given industry or endeavor is what captures our attention. The West's measure of success is in numeric growth and profitability—and the impressive numbers to back it up—rather than in quality and a job well done.

The story of Noah, however, illustrates that God's servants are not always successful by human standards, even when they are highly praised by God. In II Peter 2:5, Noah is called a "preacher of righteousness." He preached righteousness—God's standard of conduct (Psalm 119:172)—but Hebrews 11:7 tells us that the results of his preaching were humanly negligible in that only his family was saved:

> By faith Noah, being divinely warned of things not yet seen, moved with godly fear, prepared an ark for the saving of his household, by

> which he condemned the world and became heir of the righteousness which is according to faith.

God's measure of success for Noah was not how many people he turned around or how many sinners he saved from the Flood. If that were the measure of success, by all accounting Noah would be an absolute failure. Yet, he is counted among the faithful in Hebrews 11 because of his *faithfulness* , not because of the numeric *results* of his efforts.

After all of his toil and preaching, only seven others lived through God's judgment. In fact, it would appear that from the very outset God *knew* that not a single other person would pay Noah any heed. Considering the instructions given for the Ark in Genesis 6, God was intent on saving only Noah and his family, along with the animals. God did not instruct Noah to build an ocean liner to carry hundreds or thousands of people who might repent as a result of his preaching. Noah built an ark for the saving of his household, and by preparing only for the salvation of his household, he in fact condemned the rest of the world. We must remember that God Himself gave Noah the specifications, thus it was God who excluded the rest of the world, for the time being, from the salvation represented by the Ark.

Noah is identified as a preacher, even though in human eyes his preaching was a flop. He was a preacher in the sense of a herald or someone who makes a proclamation. He proclaimed that God's judgment was imminent. He also proclaimed the righteousness of God, which requires the death penalty for the universal unrighteousness of the world. Despite Noah's preaching having no apparent effect whatsoever on the choices of those around him, he is commended for his faith and obedience—his faithfulness—rather than the number of people who flocked to his side.

God could have chosen to soften the hearts of those to whom Noah preached. He could have poured out His Spirit upon them, as He will in the second resurrection. He could have ordained that Noah's preaching be tremendously successful, pricking the consciences of sinners everywhere. Therein resides another principle: No matter what the circumstances, it is *God* who determines the results. This is why His measure of success for His servants is their *faithfulness* in their witness of Him, not what *results* are produced. God can bring about any result He desires. What He wants to see is what His

servants will do with what He has given them. He is looking for *faithfulness* that demonstrates His servants truly believe what He says, regardless of whether the world sees dramatic results.

What does it mean to be faithful? The Greek word translated "faithfulness," "fidelity," or "good faith" has the basic meaning of *trustworthiness*—the characteristic of someone who is reliable. Part of our calling, then, is to be *trustworthy*—literally, worthy of God's trust. That implies having a track record of faithful service so that God knows He can depend on us to faithfully discharge the responsibilities He gives us.

However, *faithfulness* also includes the senses of *loyalty* and *constancy*. We cannot merely be faithful in ourselves; we must be faithful to something or someone. The relevant question, then, is to whom or to what are we faithful? Who or what receives our fidelity, our allegiance, our loyalty, and our constancy? While many objects of faithfulness are possible, it should be a certainty that our faithfulness is to *God*—not to a human leader, past or present, and not to an idea. *God* leads and the church follows—not the other way around.

In this series we have seen that trying to witness to the world without the proper preparation will not bear the fruit God desires. Trying to represent God before fully grasping our standing before Him and before greatly resembling Him may even make a witness *against* God. The lessons of Abel, Enoch, and Noah are sequential and compounding. If we get them out of order, or skip the spiritual preparation to get to the more earth-shaking matters, we risk being unusable by God and unfit for His Kingdom.

- David C. Grabbe

From the Archives: Featured Sermon

Honor Before Love
by John W. Ritenbaugh

There is a definite cause and effect, "reap what you sow" principle

introduced in Genesis 2:16 and radiating throughout the entire contents of the Bible. There is an order into which elements of attitude and conduct will follow. This principle can be seen in the consequences of delayed justice and increased crime, pride preceding a fall, humility preceding honor, and honor preceding love (in both human and God-plane contexts). Agape love will not occur unless we first learn to honor, esteem, and cherish God and the preciousness of Christ's sacrifice for us.

From the Archives: Featured Article

The Christian Fight (Part Five)
by John W. Ritenbaugh

What many religious people do not seem to understand is that justification before God is just the beginning of something far more involved—and that is living by faith. John Ritenbaugh covers the faithful life and work of Noah, illustrating that walking by faith with God is a practical responsibility.

If you would like to subscribe to the C.G.G. Weekly newsletter, please visit our Email Subscriptions page.