

Christian Perspectives

Have you read the letters of the New Testament? Most of us are familiar with the famous reading about love in 1 Corinthians 13. Perhaps you have read the letter to the Romans, or Galatians which is one of the earliest of the Christian writings. One of the interesting things about the pastoral letters is that they are just that ? letters. They're not carefully organized books with a story line. They aren't fully formed logical arguments like a lawyer would use in presenting a case. They are not even organized like a sermon. Like the letters and or more often now, the emails we write, they are bits and pieces of the things that we decide to talk about. Ideas in a letter flow from one topic to another sometimes ending up in a different place than where they were headed. So what do we find in the pastoral letters of Paul and other apostles? Well, there are discourses of their developing theology, that is, their understanding of the nature of God. There's advice to the early church leaders, sometimes a teaching that addresses a problem particular to a given community of the early church, and there is the gospel message of God's saving love in Jesus Christ running throughout. When we read these letters, we sometimes find it hard to understand why apparently unrelated topics have been put together. It's hard to pull the main message out of a ?dog's breakfast? of ideas. It can be a sort of rich but scattered teaching.

One section from the letter to the Ephesians (5:15-20) begins with the admonition to ?be careful then how you live.? When we think of the word ?careful' most often we connect it with the avoidance of something that can cause us harm. Parents remind their children to be careful on playground equipment, around deep water or when riding their bicycles. As adults we sometimes remind each other to drive carefully or to be careful when we are using potentially dangerous equipment. If we applied this line of reasoning we might come to the conclusion, as I think Christians have at various times over the years, that if we are not careful to live according to the rules, like the law of the codes of Moses or doctrine of the church, we will come to some harm either in this present life or worse, in eternity. There is a lot of talk of judgement in the stories of the Old Testament. The people of that time interpreted the difficult things that happened to them as the result of God judging them. There is a sense of ?be careful, watch out or God is going to gitcha' or worse, the devil is going to gitcha'?.

But Jesus has told us that God is concerned for even a sparrow that falls ? even more so human beings whom God values as many sparrows. God is not out to get us. So, can we think of ?careful? in another way? Perhaps as ?mindful.? God wants us to be mindful of how we live our lives. The message urges us to be purposeful, to plan how we can be of service to others, how we can show forth God's love in our lives.

One of our human characteristics is that we seem to want things spelled out for us, to know specifically what is expected of us. That was what the Israelites found helpful in their law. Much of the code of Moses is very specific. Do this. Don't do that. If you transgress, make an offering of a kid or two turtledoves if you cannot afford the baby goat. If you are grateful, make an offering of grain and a little oil. And so on. Even such a comprehensive law couldn't address every instance so judges or priests could mediate and prescribe the appropriate action. But Jesus blew everything wide open by summarizing the heart of the law as ?love God and love your neighbour.? That puts the responsibility on us to decide what constitutes loving God and our neighbour. And what was the very first question asked of Jesus after he stated the summary of the law? Who is my neighbour? The questioner wanted to know something specific. But Jesus wants us to learn to sort it out and make those decisions ourselves.

This section of the letter to the Ephesians includes two pieces of advice. The first is to use time wisely. Rather than fritter time away on amusements or idleness our lives can be better spent serving others, in responding in some thoughtful way to God's call. The second piece of advice is to come to an understanding of what the will of God is for you in your life.

It all sounds so serious, all work and no play. But no, the writer of the letter to the Ephesians shows that there can be times of great joy as the believers sing when they are together in community. He gives us a very positive and life-giving image of people making melody to God in their hearts. That song to God in our hearts has the power to lift our spirits like bright music on a dull day. It is the background music to lives lived with care and purpose to the glory of God.

By Rev. Stephanie Pellow