

An Offering Far Too Small

by: Ronald L. Dart

I am reasonably sure that the Apostle Paul died without any idea of how those in the future would see him. He had no way of knowing the effect of his work on the world in generations to come. I don't mean he thought he was a failure. In his last letter, to a man he considered a son, he wrote:

"I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing" (2 Timothy 4:7-8 NIV).

To us, he is a giant. To the Jews of his own day, he was a pain in the neck. To many of his comrades, he was troublesome, as most zealots are. To the Romans, he was a cockroach to be stepped on.

I don't think Paul ever doubted God for a moment. But I don't think he saw his work as very successful *in his own age*. I am sure Paul took the long view, but there was no way he could see far enough. It is striking that there are only 15 years between his first letter and his last. So little time. Such a great impact.

But, there is a short paragraph in Paul's letter to the Philippians that always hurts when I read it. He was in prison when he wrote this deeply personal letter, and he reveals a great deal about himself: "I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon, that I also may be cheered when I receive news about you. I have no one else like him, who takes a genuine interest in your welfare. For everyone looks out for his own interests, not those of Jesus Christ" (Philippians 2:19-21 NIV).

It is that last sentence that is so sad, and it speaks volumes about the conditions under which Paul wrote. We look upon these early Christians as giants, and stand in awe of them. But, in fact, they were just like us. They made commitments and then quit in the middle of the job. They neglected their gifts and their calling. They gave up when life got on top of them. Those who committed and then stayed the course were few and far between.

This pattern started with Paul when John Mark turned back on Paul's first journey. Luke doesn't tell us much about it, just that it happened (Acts 13:13). This apparently was a major disappointment to Paul. We don't know why Mark went back, but we learn later it was a big enough matter that Paul no longer trusted him. Soon after the Jerusalem conference: "But

Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, where they and many others taught and preached the word of the Lord. Some time later Paul said to Barnabas, 'Let us go back and visit the brothers in all the towns where we preached the word of the Lord and see how they are doing.' Barnabas wanted to take John, also called Mark, with them, but Paul did not think it wise to take him, because he had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not continued with them in the work. They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company. Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus" (Acts 15:35-39 NIV).

The breach with John Mark was later healed, but it must have been a major pain at the time.

It was going to be hard going for the early Christians, and Jesus did not hold back on them. He made it abundantly clear what they would face, and what he expected of them: "Then Jesus said to his disciples, 'If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it. What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?'" (Matthew 16:24-26 NIV).

This seems like such a big thing. So dramatic. We might think that few of us have been up against this. We would be wrong. Luke pulls together a set of Jesus' encounters with potential workers. I suspect they were widely separated, but Luke sees fit to lump them all together. It is fairly revealing that he does. Listen for the underlying principle: "As they were walking along the road, a man said to him, 'I will follow you wherever you go.' Jesus replied, 'Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head'" (Luke 9:57-58 NIV). Jesus was saying: "Are you really sure? This is going to be a long, hard road we have to walk. It will not be easy."

"He said to another man, 'Follow me.' But the man replied, 'Lord, first let me go and bury my father.' Jesus said to him, 'Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God.' Still another said, 'I will follow you, Lord; but first let me go back and say good-bye to my family.' Jesus replied, 'No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God'" (vv. 59-62).

This seems extreme, but it does have a way of dismissing most excuses we have for not fulfilling our calling. Truth is, this was a special circumstance. After all, this was a call directly from Jesus. None of us has had quite so direct a call, nor one so urgent.

Here is the thing about these three special cases. They are grouped together to underline an important principle. There were so many who said they wanted to follow Jesus, but they had *conditions*. What Luke wanted us to understand in this grouping of sayings is the principle that *Jesus expects unconditional service*. Jesus went even further: "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and

sisters—yes, even his own life—he cannot be my disciple. And anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:26-27 NIV).

It is not that you can be half a disciple. You can't be one at all if you retain mixed loyalties. At one time in my life, I had this messed up. It wasn't family, though. It was a church that demanded my loyalty, and it was Scriptures such as this that helped me get this straight. There is yet another Scripture that presents this in stark terms: “Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it” (Matthew 7:13-14 NIV).

When you look at what Paul said in the light of this statement, it is rather sobering. Many people will put their hand to the plow and then turn back. Not a few people will set out on a course of Christian service and then be dissuaded from it by family considerations. I don't know what to tell you about that, except what Jesus said. He expects unconditional service and even more. But close behind the conditional service of Christ come the excuses.

Jesus replied: “A certain man was preparing a great banquet and invited many guests. At the time of the banquet he sent his servant to tell those who had been invited, ‘Come, for everything is now ready.’ But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said, ‘I have just bought a field, and I must go and see it. Please excuse me.’ Another said, ‘I have just bought five yoke of oxen, and I'm on my way to try them out. Please excuse me.’ Still another said, ‘I just got married, so I can't come.’” (Luke 14:16-20 NIV).

I wonder how many of the people who ran off and left Paul alone did so for business reasons. And how many men do not do what they need to do because their wives won't let them? And don't say it is the man's fault. It is the fault of both.

“The servant came back and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry and ordered his servant, ‘Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame.’ ‘Sir,’ the servant said, ‘what you ordered has been done, but there is still room.’ Then the master told his servant, ‘Go out to the roads and country lanes and make them come in, so that my house will be full. I tell you, not one of those men who were invited will get a taste of my banquet’” (vv. 21-24).

I find the tone of this disturbing. It is highly suggestive that we don't get many invitations to join up. And there is a real possibility that Christ will go forward without us. He won't wait until we are ready. In fact, this whole sequence boils down to that. Jesus was saying that he isn't going to wait around for us. We can actually be left behind. We can add to this the parable of the sower and the seed: “When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart. This is the seed sown along the path. The one who received the seed that fell on rocky places is the man who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. But since he has no root, he lasts only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, he quickly

falls away. The one who received the seed that fell among the thorns is the man who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke it, making it unfruitful. But the one who received the seed that fell on good soil is the man who hears the word and understands it. He produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown” (Matthew 13:19-23 NIV).

A funny thing emerges as you pursue this line of thought. You slowly come to realize that it is indeed only a few who are willing to pay the price of service to God. And you begin to see why it is that, while the harvest is plentiful, the laborers are few. It is not that there are no laborers. It is that they aren't willing to work, to pay the price.

Paul's last letter before his death is 2 Timothy, and it is from this letter that I get the feeling Paul had no real idea of what he had accomplished. He wrote to Timothy: “Guard the good deposit that was entrusted to you—guard it with the help of the Holy Spirit who lives in us. You know that everyone in the province of Asia has deserted me, including Phygelus and Hermogenes (2 Timothy 1:14-15 NIV).

Do you realize what Paul thought he had lost? He thought he had lost the support of those at Ephesus, Antioch, Derbe, Lystra, Iconium, Galatia, Pergamos, Miletus, and more. What Paul calls Asia is what we today call Turkey. Later he continued: “Do thy diligence to come shortly unto me: For Demas hath forsaken me, having loved this present world, and is departed unto Thessalonica; Crescens to Galatia, Titus unto Dalmatia. Only Luke is with me. Take Mark, and bring him with thee: for he is profitable to me for the ministry” (2 Timothy 4:9-11).

In the midst of all this pain, there is this one ray of light. Mark had turned around and gained Paul's trust again. He went on to write: “At my first answer no man stood with me, but all men forsook me: I pray God that it may not be laid to their charge. Notwithstanding the Lord stood with me, and strengthened me; that by me the preaching might be fully known, and that all the Gentiles might hear: and I was delivered out of the mouth of the lion” (vv. 16-17).

I have to ask myself if I would have stuck with Paul, or if I would have gone off and left Paul because I had a business trip I *had* to take. Or would I have left because I was afraid?

You may think this is directed at those who neglect the responsibilities left to us, but really, it's not. If they don't hear Jesus, they are not likely to listen to me. The people I was thinking about as I wrote this is all those who are a bit like Paul. People who have taken up the challenge of service and stuck with it. People who sometimes get discouraged because of those who walk away from service. The truth is that there is not one of us who has not dropped the ball, neglected the challenge, or failed at one time or another. So, it is not for us to criticize or condemn. It is for us to get on down the road and do our jobs while we wait for the Lord to do his. Agonizing over people who let us down is a waste of time and energy. It

is better to just suck it up and go on without them. Moving on may be the best chance we have of waking them up. Paul's refusal to accept Mark for the second journey may well have been exactly what Mark needed at that moment in his life. If we wait around for the laggards, we may all get left behind.

I would like to think I would not have left Paul when some others did, and that if I had not, it would have been from a sense of duty. The word "duty" as we use it, refers to *a moral obligation*. If I had stayed with Paul, I think it would have been because I felt a moral obligation to the man. I think Paul wrote the words, "these all died in faith, not having received the promise." And he died the same way—never really seeing the results of all his labor. We have to be able to see further than our own moment in the sun. And we must not be discouraged by those who turn back. Like Paul, we must pray for them and get on down the road. We have work to do.

We are making our contribution, however small it may seem, to the future. And we *will be rewarded*. What we do for Jesus Christ is not in vain: "For God is not unrighteous to forget your work and labour of love, which ye have showed toward his name, in that ye have ministered to the saints, and do minister" (Hebrews 6:10 KJV). There is a wonderful old hymn that says this so well:

When I survey the wondrous cross
On which the Prince of Glory died,
My richest gain I count but loss,
And pour contempt on all my pride.

Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast,
Save in the death of Christ my God,
All the vain things that charm me most,
I sacrifice them to His blood.

Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were an offering far too small;
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all.

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Ronald L. Dart is an evangelist and is heard daily and weekly
on his Born to Win radio program.

You can contact Ronald L. Dart at Christian Educational Ministries
P.O. Box 560 Whitehouse, Texas 75791
Phone: (903) 839-9300 — 1-888-BIBLE-44 www.borntowin.net