

A Gospel People

LIFESTYLE

“We will be good stewards of our time, talents and possessions.” How are you doing?

“Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.” Philippians 1 v27. That’s a challenging statement isn’t it? Whatever happens...! Whatever happens...conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel. We can never be sure what’s going to happen can we? Life is full of twists and turns, unexpected changes, unwanted changes, unhelpful changes. The credit crunch has certainly taught us that nothing is really secure, and sometimes life takes turns that leaves us thinking there is no way forward. As M. Scott Peck in his book “The Road Less Travelled” said: “Life is difficult.” Yet Paul writes: “Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.”

Paul was writing to the Christians in Philippi. Philippi was what was called a *Colonia* – that meant the people living there were expected to live first and foremost as Roman citizens. The idea was that retired Roman soldiers would live there and help Philippi to be a little Rome. Life in Philippi was meant to be lived just as it was in Rome. But Paul urges the Christians there not to live first and foremost as citizens of Rome, but as citizens of the kingdom of heaven. There must have been times when that seemed impossible. The pressure to conform must have been severe. Whatever happens...conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.

A missionary society wrote to David Livingstone and asked, “Have you found a good road to where you are? If so we want to know how to send other men to join you.” Livingstone wrote back, “If you have men who will come only if they know there is a good road, I don’t want them. I want men who will come if there is no road at all.” How do you live?

My best guess is that for most of us, probably all of us, living a life worthy of the gospel, and being a good steward, sometimes feels like there is no road at all. Maybe, with the credit crunch our financial situation is very difficult and being a good steward is hard. Maybe we feel there is no way we can afford to be a good steward. Maybe our time is so pressured, just surviving is all we can think about. Maybe we simply take on too much and have a very pressured time. Perhaps we know the truth is that other things have gradually drawn us away from living for Christ. Perhaps the thought of finding the balance between work, home and church seems out of your reach.

Livingstone wanted only men who would come if there was no road at all. He wanted only men who were passionate enough to walk into an uncertain future. He wanted only men whose values would enable them to set aside comforts and luxury and expose themselves to danger and hardship. Why? Because he knew it would be tough, he knew it would be anything but easy, he understood it would require great personal sacrifice. He understood it may even cost these men their lives. But he also knew that if they were prepared to come even if there was no road at all – it may just be the greatest adventure of their lives.

We will be good stewards of our time, talents and possessions...even if there is no road at all? Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. The story of Nehemiah is the story of a man who goes where there seems to be no road at all.

“The words of Nehemiah son of Hacaliah: In the month of Kislev in the twentieth year, while I was in the citadel of Susa, Hanani, one of my brothers, came from Judah with some other men, and I questioned them about the Jewish remnant that survived the exile, and also about Jerusalem. They said to me, “Those who survived the exile, and are back in the province are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been burned with fire.” When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven.” Nehemiah 1 v1-4

Nehemiah is a captive in Susa, an exile. He hears about the state of the people and the walls of Jerusalem and he is moved to respond, and yet there seems to be no road at all to be able to do anything about it. He has heard how the walls of Jerusalem are broken and in ruins. He understood how the people, the city and God himself were the subject of ridicule among the surrounding people. What kind of God is the God of a city with broken walls? So he sought God in prayer – weeping and fasting and God laid on his heart the desire that would take Nehemiah on the most extraordinary adventure.

Maybe God said: “Nehemiah, if you are prepared to go where there is no road at all, you can be assured that I will be with you. I will give you success because you desire to bring honour to me, and to bring honour to my name by rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem, and together Nehemiah and God began a great adventure.”

“In the month of Nisan in the twentieth year of King Artaserxes, when wine was brought for him, I took the wine and gave it to the king. I had not been sad in his presence before; so the king asked me, ‘Why does your face look so sad when you are not ill? This can be nothing but sadness of heart.’ I was very much afraid, but I said to the king, ‘May the king live for ever! Why should my face not look sad when the city where my fathers are buried lies in ruins and its gates have been destroyed by fire?’ The king said to me, ‘What is it you want?’ Then I prayed to the God of heaven, and I answered the king, ‘If it pleases the king and if your servant has found favour in his sight, let him send me to the city in Judah where my fathers are buried so I can rebuild it.’ Then the king, with the queen sitting beside him, asked me, ‘How long will your journey take, and when will you get back?’ It pleased the king to send me; so I set a time.” Nehemiah 2 v 1-6.

Nehemiah was given success in the presence of the king to rebuild the walls, and he was given everything he asked for! Does that mean that Nehemiah wasn't afraid of the road ahead? No it doesn't. In chapter two it says, “I was very much afraid...”

Living a life worthy of the gospel of Christ often begins with fear! When there appears to be no road at all – we will most likely experience some fear. When you choose the lifestyle of a good steward, my guess is in some element or other

there will be some fear, mainly because, when there appears to be no road at all, we simply do not and cannot know what lies ahead!

Some weeks ago during the series on money, I told you Lisa and my testimony when Lisa effectively lost her job as a freelance journalist. I told you of my personal battle to be a good steward in the area of possessions – in this case money! I told you of the conviction in my heart as I was out running, that we should not stop giving at the level we already were. I told you of how God seemed to speak immediately afterwards through a song on an MP3 player down a country lane in Dorset as I was running. Question: Was I without fear? No, absolutely not! There seemed no road at all through this and I had fear in my heart. My prayer was blunt: “OK God, we’ll take you at your word and trust that somehow you will provide.” But I was afraid!

Sometimes, to live a life worthy of the gospel of Christ seems too hard. Sometimes it feels like it is just out of reach – I would love to live like that but... Walking with God, where there seems to be no road at all can lead me to be very much afraid. Do you remember the words about Aslan from *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*? “Safe...who said anything about safe! But he’s good I tell you.... he is profoundly good!”

You see I am also convinced of this: “I will see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living.” Psalm 27 v 13. That’s mine and Lisa’s testimony – the more I am prepared to go where there is no road at all, the more I see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living. Why is that? Because the more I do that – the more I put myself in the places where God can pour out his blessing on my life. Choose to live a life worthy of the gospel of Christ. Choose to be a good steward of your time, talents and possessions.

I wonder what kind of response Livingstone got to his letter. I wonder how many men were prepared to go where there was no road at all. Nehemiah was prepared to go! He was a good steward of his time, his talents and his possessions, and he led the people of Israel to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem in 52 days!

For you to live a life worthy of the gospel of Christ, for you to be a good steward, what road do you need to take? Will you go only if there is a good road, or will you go even if there is no road at all? Nehemiah walked his road in the face of great opposition. There were plenty of people who wanted him to fail, lots who told him he'd never succeed. In fact you might say that Nehemiah succeeded against all the odds. Friends, there are plenty of people who will tell us that to be a good steward is foolish! There are plenty of people who laugh at people like us – trying to live a life worthy of the gospel, and plenty of people who think if you live that way, you set yourself up to fail. If you choose to live a life worthy of the gospel, if you choose to be a good steward you can expect that. Nehemiah went where there was no road at all because of what he knew of the God he served. How about you?

If your God is Nehemiah's God, then perhaps you too will have the courage to live a life worthy of the gospel and to be a good steward of your time talents and possessions. Once Lisa had lost her job, she started looking for new ones! On 1st June she started work as the Executive Administrator at CCVS. It has meant some big changes to our lifestyle, but here's the thing: in the deepest financial crisis of my lifetime, we are better off now than we have ever been! This all began as I was about to preach on tithing! Don't you think God has a bit of a sense of humour sometimes? We chose to try and live a life worthy of the gospel, to be good stewards, and take God at his word, and he has blessed us in a way we never expected and now our challenge is to figure out how we respond to a God who is lavishly generous. A God who has given us the opportunity to be lavishly generous, and three months ago there seemed to be no road at all.....

We will be good stewards of our time, talents and possessions. If you want to resolve again to live a life worthy of the gospel of Christ, you could say "Amen!" to the following statement.

- I will be a good steward of my time, talents and possessions.
- I will seek to live a life worthy of the gospel.
- I will walk with God even when there seems to be no road at all.
- I will withhold nothing.

- I will not try to cut corners.
- I will not try to find an easy or comfortable way out.
- I will not settle for compromise.
- I will not try to cheat on what God has given me.
- I will not squander my gifts, talents or abilities.
- I will not keep for myself that which God has generously blessed me with.
- I will live by truth, integrity, generosity, gratitude, fidelity, love and hope.
- And.... I resolve to live this way, whatever happens.

Amen.

Preached at Crawley Baptist Church on Sunday 5th July 2009 by Rev. Ian Phillips.