

## CO-LABORERS WITH CHRIST

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Most of you have shopped at one of his stores at some or another. J. C. Penney died in 1971 at the age of 95 and left a 1,660 store empire that he built without compromising the principles he had received from three generations of Baptist-preacher ancestors.

J. C. Penney didn't drink or smoke and for many years, demanded the same from his employees. Penney said, "I believe in adherence to the Golden Rule, faith in God and the country." He also said, "I would rather be known as a Christian than a merchant." Apparently, Penney thought that being a Christian was the most important thing in life.

If you had been living 2000 years ago, what kind of a life would you have chosen? The world was much like it is today—full of selfish people bent on pleasure and sensual delight and amusement. There were the Roman overlords living in luxury in their fancy villas on the Mediterranean, flocking to sports events in the amphitheaters, eating luxury food, employing poor people to work for them. These upper crust people got the most out of life—or did they?

And now here comes that Man from Galilee who had not where to lay His head (Matt. 8:20), and He says to you, "Take up your cross and follow Me" (Luke 9:23). Will you do so gladly? Will you turn your back on the pleasures and wealth of the Roman world, and follow Jesus through a life of

self-denial and loving labor for others, spreading the news of justification by faith? Will you join His eleven surviving apostles and others?

Of the two ways of life anciently, which would be the more enjoyable to you? Well, that's exactly where you are today. You have exactly the same choice. Nothing has changed: (1) the same selfish mind-set has captured the world today, and (2) the same pure Gospel of righteousness by faith offers the same alternative to selfish living.

The Bible clearly teaches that we are today living in the antitypical Day of Atonement, the grand climax to the drama of the ages, the great controversy between Christ and Satan. It's the war of all wars. It's not a matter merely of personal survival or personal happiness: it's the honor of God Himself that is at stake. Unless He has a people on earth who "give glory to Him" in this final battle, He will be embarrassed. Every one on earth will be drawn into this conflict on one side or the other; I suggest that taking up that cross to follow Jesus is by far the more exciting, more joyous alternative. Do you agree?

The Lord Jesus Christ is generous in His thanks and even generous in His praise to those who have wanted to serve Him, but have felt very unworthy.

To some He says with great enthusiasm, "Well done, good and faithful servant!"

But they are surprised; they turn around to see if He is not talking past them to other people behind them; they themselves feel very unworthy of such genuine thanks and praise. He responds, No, it's you I mean.

They remonstrate with Him, “Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You drink? When did we see You a stranger and take You in, or naked and clothe You? Or when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?” There must be some mistake here; we are not worthy!

Then they hear the sweetest words anyone can ever hear from the lips of the world's Savior, “Inasmuch as you have done it to one of the least of these My brethren, you have done it to Me” (Matt. 25:35-40).

The generosity of the Lord Jesus shines brightly through all eternity. He speaks to us a positive word through a double negative: “God is not unjust to forget your work and labor of love (yes, the word is *agape*, not *phileo*), which you have shown toward His name, in that you have ministered to the saints, and do minister” (Heb. 6:10).

He remembers every effort you have made to reflect His *agape* to others, weak and tremulous as it may be. That double negative is His assurance to you that He welcomes you as His co-laborer with Himself in His work for the world.

Does the Lord need humans to do things that He wants done “in earth as it is in heaven”?

When we pray the Lord's prayer, we are confessing that His will should be done in earth as it is in heaven”; but who is to accomplish that?

Angels are His “ministering spirits, sent forth to minister for them who shall be heirs of salvation . . .” (Heb. 1:14). But their ministry is not to do things that those “heirs of salvation” should do

themselves. The Father's will never “be done in earth as it is in heaven” until His own people get busy and do it. A prayer that will always be answered is this, “Father in heaven, what do You want me to do?” It may be a phone call that you have shied away from; to make the call will require laying self aside!

It may be a letter that you have been impressed that it is your duty to write; that too will require a denial of self. It may be a personal visit likewise that you need to make.

Welcome to the joyous thrill that is yours when you know you have done what the heavenly Father wants you to do. That means you have become a fellow-laborer with Him!

Can you think of a higher honor you could have but that—as the holy angels all step aside in deep respect to you as you DO what the Father has appointed you to do?

There is almost unbelievable encouragement buried in one of Jesus' parables—a message for parents especially, but yes for teachers and anyone who wants to be a spiritual help to someone else. Ministering spiritual help to others is laying up treasure in heaven—preparing to experience a vast pleasure in God's coming eternal kingdom when you at last see the fruit of your love and life labors.

The parable is in Luke 11. It tells of a man who has had an unexpected guest show up when he has no “bread” in his pantry to feed him. (That's me, by the way! I have nothing of myself to set before people.)

So in his desperation he goes to his neighbor-friend at midnight and bangs on his door, “Please let me have some bread, not to feed myself but that I may share it with a friend of mine who has come in his journey, and I have nothing to set before him” (see Luke 11:5ff).

Maybe you know that desperate feeling in real life—you are not ready for guests yet they’ve come. The parable is beautifully crafted (as only Jesus could conceive of a parable!) to encourage us who want to help others on their path to heaven.

We may wonder sometimes if the prayer we are praying is “according to the will of God.” In this instance, don’t wonder: the Lord wants you to help others and He will give you the spiritual truth you need to make your ministry helpful.

“Asking to give” is an excellent title for this parable: you become a channel through which the blessings of heaven flow to someone else.

In the process, you yourself must be richly blessed; the water of life cannot flow through you unless on the way it refreshes you, the “pipe” through which it flows!

I think we’re all sick and tired of it—this unending litany of news horror and tragedy. It seems almost that some supernatural control mechanism spaces the disasters evenly so they come on us perversely each time just as a little healing has begun in recovering from the last earthquake, or train collision, or airliner crash, or multiple school murders, or savage ethnic cleansing. With up-to-the-minute radio or TV news coverage, we empathize or identify with the suffering victims.

Their agony becomes ours. It’s hard not to feel guilty enjoying the peace and security we spectators temporarily possess.

It’s a morbid addiction that keeps us glued to the screen for the latest tragic details of these multiple horror stories. But can we do something to help? Invent something that will make travel safer? Solve the root causes of ethnic hatreds?

The only real solution is the setting up of the kingdom of God which will be at the personal, visible return of Jesus, the world’s rightful Ruler. This is “the stone cut out without hands” that strikes the image of Daniel on its “feet” of iron and clay, and becomes a “great mountain” to “fill the whole earth.” Every God-fearing heart cries out continually, “Even so, come Lord Jesus” (Rev. 22:20).

If we had the authority, we would tell Him, “Come today!” Revelation 14:15, 16 tells us that this authority resides alone in somebody else, “another angel [who] comes out of the temple” who finally tells Christ, “Thrust in Thy sickle and reap, for the time has come for Thee to reap.” But what “event” can move that “other angel” to decide when to give Him the signal to “come”?

The answer, “The harvest of the earth is ripe.” This simplest imaginable divinely-inspired illustration explains the delay in the return of Christ! But this special farm “harvest” depends on the volition of the “grain.” An entire “crop” can selfishly refuse to let the Lord’s warm sunshine of the gospel and refreshing showers of “the latter rain” perform the

ripening process. It's a "harvest" process God cannot force upon the "field of grain."

So, after wearily processing another inexplicable horror story, we consecrate our all to the recovery and proclamation of that true Revelation 14 "everlasting gospel" which alone can ripen the grain for the blessed "harvest." Something to live for? Oh, yes!

In Bible imagery, rain is usually a blessing. There is "the latter rain" which comes at just the right time to ripen a thirsty crop for harvest. But think of a farmer worried about his crop in Israel long ago. Early rain was a blessing that made the seed sprout. The barley matured to a certain place in plant growth that seemed to promise a rich harvest this year; but now the growth is stunted. Drought came at just the wrong time. An enormous crop that never matures for harvest is an agricultural disaster. The farmer doesn't have modern irrigation; he is dependent on rain from heaven.

You can imagine the distress in the family, the earnest prayers going up day by day for the Lord to send the long-awaited "latter rain." It must come from Him!

In the Bible, this describes the condition of the Lord's church in the last days. The enormity in the size of acreage that the farmer has planted in barley is not good news unless the crop gets that most precious latter rain at the right time. Diligent labor is effort wasted if it doesn't result in a harvest of mature grain ripe for the sickle.

Jesus teaches that "the harvest is the end of the world" (Matt. 13:39). But there are two harvests—

character develops in two kinds of people: those ready to meet the Lord at His return; and those whose rebellion against Him has also matured (Rev. 14:16-20). A "sickle" is used in both harvests, one by Jesus coming in glory, the other by some other "angel" whose "sharp sickle" reaps a harvest cast into the "great winepress of the wrath of God." There must be two kinds of "latter rain." Time to be alert. No time to sleep!

Human beings were created in the image of God, the highest order of created beings on this planet, but they are capable of being permeated with the spirit of Satan himself if they so choose. He is "the prince of this world." That's the Bad News. But humans are also capable of being permeated with the Spirit of God and to be members of the family of God, Christ the Son of God being their Elder Brother. That's the Good News. So, side by side with evil getting worse in the world, "the vine of the earth, . . . her grapes . . . fully ripe [for] . . . the great winepress of the wrath of God," there is also developing a "harvest of the earth" consisting of people who choose to be permeated with the Holy Spirit of God (Rev. 14:14-19).

"The love of God (*agape*) is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who is given to us" (Rom. 5:5). That love is "manifested" in the cross of Jesus. "Herein is love [*agape*] because God sent His only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through Him" (1 Jn. 4:9). We "see" that love at the cross; we "comprehend" its "breadth, and length, and depth, and height" (Eph. 3:18); we appreciate it; we think of it, talk about it, marvel at it. We

choose to let it enter our hearts where it is “shed abroad” therein.

We choose to react to temptation to sin the same way that Christ did in His life on earth: “The grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say ‘No’ to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope—the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness, and to purify for Himself a people that are His very own, eager to do what is good” (Tit. 2:11-14, NIV).

Let the Bad News drive you to the Good News. Satan claims this world as his kingdom; that’s why these horrors happen, but Christ will wrest the throne from him. Fix your mind on that “blessed hope,” and “let” the Holy Spirit come in to your heart. Then whether you face life or death, you will be on God’s side in the great controversy now raging between Christ and Satan. You can be at peace, whatever may come.

There are people in primitive societies (and some in highly developed ones!) who lie down and die when there is no physical illness or cause to die. They think they are under a “curse” imposed by some enemy. This belief in Fate is related to the belief in *karma*. These dear people are among those Paul speaks of who “through fear of death [are] all their lifetime subject to bondage” (Heb. 2:15). There are many children in the Kennedy family; what will they think when they can’t help but

see in the newspapers and newsmagazines constant talk of the “Kennedy curse”?

It can do only one of two things: (a) motivate them individually to seek repentance for themselves and to be right with God and to trust Him to take care of them, believing that the Lord Jesus Christ delivers us from any curse; or (b) become dare-devil “so-what?” people, recklessly-living, who decide to “enjoy” life while they can until the “curse” hits them. This is the philosophy popular in Paul’s day, “Let us eat and drink; for to morrow we die” (1 Cor. 15:32). According to Paul’s context, this was the attitude of gladiators who fought with wild beasts in the Coliseum; their (and to them, others’!) human life was cheap. It is very likely that you are in (a) or (b). If you are in (a), you regard human life as extremely precious because it has been purchased by the life of the Son of God. Your human life is an opportunity for service that will bring blessed results, not only in this life but also in eternity to come. The Bible metaphor is sowing seed that brings a harvest, a gathering of “fruit unto life eternal” (Jn. 4:36).

Another metaphor is that of building a house of materials that are fireproof (1 Cor. 3:12, 13). Another is that of making deposits in a heavenly “bank” that will pay dividends for eternity (Mt. 6:19, 20). One result of this kind of faith is a very high regard for your personal health; as long as possible, you wish to be of service to the One who redeemed you. Category (a) is free of any fear of a curse, for the name of Jesus banishes evil spirits. If you are in category (b), you can be delivered from the

unhappy Fatalism that shadows your soul beneath the constant smile you put on.

The truth of God's Good News sets you free (Jn. 8:32). Christ has conquered Satan, canceled all his curses, taken upon Himself your sin as well as the sins of your ancestors, was "made to be sin for [you] who knew no sin, that [you] might become the righteousness of God in Him" (2 Cor. 5:21). We need not suffer under any "curse" unless we choose to. "Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us."

How? Because He died on a tree (see Gal. 3:13). His cross was the lightning-rod that attracted the ultimate curse, the total that Satan could invent. Live, then, in the light of that cross!

Are you ready for the Latter Rain? For years Christians have been anticipating the Last Day outpouring of the Holy Spirit before the Second Coming of Jesus Christ from Heaven. The promise in Joel 2:23 is that God would send the former rain, or the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, and the latter rain, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Last Day believers. The verse in the Hebrew reads "a teacher of Righteousness, according to righteousness."

What is that righteousness? Paul in Rom. 10:3 said Israel was ignorant of God's righteousness, and were going about to establish their own righteousness. Paul knew the necessity of possessing no legal righteousness of his own, but the righteousness of the faith of Christ, the divine righteousness that rests on the faith of Jesus. "My own righteousness which is of the law" is contrary

to the righteousness of God which is through the faith of Christ (Phil. 3:9).

A realization of what it cost Jesus Christ to redeem our fallen world will be at the foundation of preparing God's people to receive the latter rain. If we begin to know that Jesus Christ completely identified Himself with our fallen human nature, and died and brought us with Him from that doom of an eternal grave, and rose again because of our justification (Rom. 4:25), when this realization dawns on our self-centered consciousness, and "we follow on to know the Lord, He shall come unto us as the rain, as the latter and former rain to the earth" (Hosea 6:1-3).

But there is a problem described by the prophet Jeremiah, because "they do not say in their heart, let us reverently fear and worship the Lord our God who gives the rain, both the former and the latter rain in His season. It is because your iniquities have turned away these things, and your sins have withheld good from you." It will only be when God's people realize that it is their iniquities, their perverseness, their revolting and rebellious hearts, and their continuing on in the rejection of the knowledge of His righteousness, He reserves, keeps back the rain of the appointed days of harvest (Jer. 5:23-25).

When God's people humble themselves and "ask of the Lord rain, in the time of the latter rain" (Zech. 10:1), repenting of their continued rebellion that has delayed it so long, when with earnest prayers we acknowledge that we were the friends in whose house He was wounded (Zech. 13:6), He will pour

upon the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem the spirit of grace and supplication. Then “they shall look upon Me whom they have pierced and they shall mourn for Him” (Zech. 12:10). Then we shall follow on to know the Lord and He shall come unto us as the rain, as the latter and former rain to the earth. The blessed latter rain will fall, and what a refreshing it will be.

That is GOOD NEWS!