

Articles and Sermons :: MAN OF GOD by Alan L. Barrow

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"But thou, O man of God, flee these things; and follow after righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, meekness." 1 Timothy 6:11.

WE have already considered this passage, with its appeal to the man of God, and have noticed that he is a man of purpose, a man who has a reason and objective, a man who knows the significance of being here on the earth for God. Such a man has a certain course of the deliberate shunning of what is wrong. His life, however, is not characterised by mere negatives, so he hears a call not only to turn away from the things which are hindrances but to follow after, or aim at the positive qualities. We now consider these positive virtues on which Timothy was advised to concentrate.

It is as well to recognise straight away that Paul's advice is not just offered to young Christians. It is true that Timothy was a relatively young man but, after all, he was an apostolic delegate who had been selected for responsible tasks and in fact seems to have been the best man available for such responsibilities. What is more, he was no novice in the things of God, for he had been given a very sound grounding in the Scriptures and had a real experience of Christian living. And yet he needed this injunction to aim for positive virtues. So as we approach the subject, we do so not so much as those who are concerned with advice for young people as those who recognise that this concerns the experienced and mature. Both young and old need this encouragement to have a steady spiritual aim, to be aware of the direction we should be moving towards and to have the target clearly in view. There is nothing casual about the activity of aiming. Only in fiction can a man adopt a nonchalant approach and hit without aiming. In real life those who do not want to be aimless must take careful and continuous effort if their weapon, their vehicle or their life is to be accurately guided.

Taking aim is always to be associated with the assessment of what has already been achieved, with a careful observation of where one is coming short or straying, either to the right or to the left. So for us any sense of aim in life involves a continual process of checking up and making any necessary readjustments. We who live in a world of trivialities and distractions, a world whose behaviour shows that it has little or no definite aim in terms of eternal values, do well to pay attention to the spiritual targets which the Lord has set before us. Hence this verse.

1. Aim at Righteousness

What a vast subject righteousness is! What an objective, this of having everything right and true. God has His perfect standards, what is right in His sight, and this righteousness is to characterise the life of the one who is a man of God. We note that the breastplate of righteousness is the very first piece of armour which should be worn by the Christian soldier. We shall never achieve righteousness if we do not aim at it. There is nothing automatic about practical righteousness; we do not drift into it, but have to be always alert to divine direction in this matter. Of course we are able to rejoice in God's gift of the perfect righteousness of Christ through the gospel. We are among the justified who have received God's righteousness as a free gift. Nevertheless the same God urges us to take careful aim at the practical outworking of this righteousness in our daily lives.

2. Aim at Godliness

In our previous article we noticed how, as Paul approached the end of his earthly life, the subject of godliness seems to have assumed a prominent place in his consciousness. This virtue includes righteousness, for a godly man must be a righteous one too, but it emphasises the importance not only of right behaviour but of a right relationship with God. In our day there seems to be little or no interest in the matter of godliness, but that is because life has become shallow and earthbound. In an interesting passage in 2 Corinthians Paul draws a comparison between worldly sorrow and godly sorrow. It is not that there are two kinds of grief but that so much depends on the way in which grief is borne. Worldly sorrow is p

profitless, it leads on to death; whereas godly sorrow leads on to life and a new and deeper understanding of God Himself. Nobody becomes godly automatically. There is no simple formula for this virtue. Rather must it be a matter of constant pursuit -- we are to follow after, to aim at godliness.

3. Aim at Faith

We must aim at faith. Now we all know something of faith and have learned to rejoice in the reality of trusting in Christ. If we were asked, we would certainly claim to have faith in the Lord Jesus. Timothy would have said the same. He was justified by faith and had been walking by faith for some years. Yet here he is enjoined to aim at faith if he is to justify this title of man of God. There is no other way of living a godly life than by continually growing in faith. We have not been provided with a schedule or rule book of Christian behaviour: we have been told that we shall be guided by the Spirit through the Word. As we pursue righteousness and godliness we find ourselves in situations which call for a new seeking of God's face and a new trust in Him.

What is more, such a life inevitably involves loss of one kind or another. If we follow righteousness, we do not yield to self-interest, and if we shun self-interest we have to be ready to incur losses, and actually we discover that we do lose. In such circumstances we need faith to survive. A good example of a man who faced loss as a result of his godly walk was Abraham. As a consequence of his righteous decision to avoid overcrowding and strife, he allowed Lot to choose and appropriate the best pasture land. For him this meant a serious loss and as he was human and must have felt this loss keenly he needed to be sustained by faith. At that particular point God spoke to him and confirmed the past promises, so that Abraham was able to go on, encouraged to a fresh reliance on God. Apart from faith he could never have taken the original decision.

4. Aim at Love

Somehow love is always closely associated with faith. It certainly must never be absent from our list of aims. In some ways it is our loftiest aim, for the target we are to concentrate on is much more than human; it is divine love. With hearts filled with a sense of God's love to us, we are to shun everything which contradicts or is a rival to that love, so that we can devote all our attention to the proper response to love, which is love. How we lament the poverty of our love to God, and rightly so. But with our sense of shortcoming there must always be a resolve to keep a steady aim at love to God as our target of faith and prayer. There are some who feel that really faith and love embrace all else.

But if love is our loftiest aim, it must also be our immediate aim, for the Word of God insists upon love for our fellow Christians as evidence of our real love to God. And what is more, that love must be exercised first of all to those who are nearest to us. We are not only to love our brothers, we are to love our neighbours and even our enemies. There is today, in certain circles, an emotional concern for issues and people who are far distant from us, and although this often passes for love it may well be nothing more than sentiment. The New Testament lays its stress on love for those who are near us, those with whom we have constant contact, whether they be Christians, non-Christians or even enemies. We pass from the realm of practical spiritual realities if we set our sights at distant and largely unknown needs while failing to exercise concern, care and forbearance to those who are near at hand and who may often in themselves be unromantic and unlovely. So our aim must be the kind of love that Christ commanded rather than the emotional impulses of human sentiment.

5. Aim at Steadfastness

This seems to be the real significance of what our Bible calls patience. This is not the virtue of a moment, it cannot be conjured up in a day. Only time can show whether our actions are inspired by the enthusiasm of the moment or by steady faith. It is time, too, which will reveal the difference between sentiment and love. All too often God's people have a sudden flush of enthusiasm about their own life, or their church life, or some particular project in the service of the Lord; but later their enthusiasm fades. Things always seem so wonderful and full of promise at the first, but in the course of time they tend to take on a different aspect. It may be that we begin to look at ourselves and lose heart or are overcome by self-pity. Or it may be that we look too much at others and are either irked by them or even become absorbed with envy of them. What we should really do is to keep our eyes always on the Lord so that aiming at His steadfastness, we ourselves endure and keep going on.

Time as it passes will give us the opportunity to check up on our direction. If we use it wisely we will observe just where we are moving, not only in activities but in development of character. Is the course which we are pursuing one of self-pleasing? Are we using spiritual things for our own carnal satisfaction? Are we maintaining our initial commitment to the will of

God and not drifting or driving into self-interest? No doubt fierce tests will come our way as time goes on, and these will beset us with temptations to lessen our devotion or alter our direction. To aim at steadfastness means to resist such temptations and to make sure that the passing time is drawing us ever closer to the Lord. It is right to lay emphasis on the start of anything but in reality it is the continuance and finish which really matters. Many a game begins well, many a battle has a promising start, many a life looks good in its early stages, but what everybody waits to see is, how does it end? The better the beginning, the more important is the grace of steadfastness to ensure that this good start is carried through to its proper conclusion. This is especially true of the Christian life and of the decision given at the judgment seat of Christ, so the man of God must never cease to keep aiming steadily at the virtue of patience, or continuance.

6. Aim at Gentleness

Finally we are to follow after the virtue of gentleness. We are to aim at meekness. The man who has aimed at righteousness and godliness, who has been steadfast in always aiming at faith and love may well be a tough individual. After all he has been forced to face and overcome many powerful foes. His ability to move only with God and to be unmoved in purposeful pursuit of the goal will of necessity make him a strong type. It is therefore of great importance that he should not be lacking in a gentle consideration for others. The man of God must indeed be strong, but he must be strong in the Lord and then he will be capable of meekness, and his endurance will not produce self-righteousness. He will be a man of gentle and considerate strength. This is our target. Much more could be said, but the immediate call is for us to aim at these virtues and then the many other aspects of our Christian life will fall into place. If we do not aim for these, then the best of our endeavours will only result in a fiasco.

Now the command to aim reminds us that the virtues under consideration will not be acquired overnight. Nevertheless there is an immediacy about each one of them which demands our careful consideration. Such aims must be a part of every activity every day; they always have a significance and a relevance which must not be lost sight of. Whatever we are involved in, in work or play, in things obviously spiritual or in what may seem very ordinary, we must be aiming at this complete target. If there are any areas of our life which give no scope for such a pursuit then we do well to enquire if they are not wrong occupations which should be avoided. Not sometimes but always, not in some things but in all things, the man of God should keep a steady aim at the things that please God.

We always aim by keeping our eyes on the target. There is no other way, unless it be by some very sophisticated electronic device. In the spiritual realm we have no such devices, and so must concentrate our gaze on the divine target. Now we know what this is, for we are told to move forward "looking unto Jesus ..." (Hebrews 12:2). When we look to Him we see all these qualities exemplified in perfection. It is true that we do not read very much about the faith of the Lord Jesus because He had such a very close relationship with the Father, but there was something in Him which provoked the disciples to ask that He would increase their faith. We must make Christ our target in everything. When we look at Him we see what we should always be aiming at. Yet there is a sense in which He is more than a target, for we know that He is not so much a distant objective as a present indwelling power. So we can be assured that He is more committed to us than we are to Him for the securing of these spiritual virtues. The more we aim at Him, the more do we become aware of our shortcomings. Our hope must be that He is our indwelling life, and that He alone can carry us through to the spiritual perfection at which we are aiming. He it is who will make us men and women of God.