

THE KIND OF CHRISTIAN GOD USES

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on September 26, 1965 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P.M.

There are thousands of Christians scattered throughout the world today. Some of these are filling places of importance in the Lord's kingdom. Others are sitting idly by. What makes the difference? Over the years I have observed several thousand young people, mostly Christians, during the period of their college training. Some have gone on to render great service in the Cause of Christ. Some have done little for the Lord. What makes the difference?

It is my belief that all Christians would like to be useful to the Lord. It is difficult for me to think that anyone would become a Christian, thus giving his allegiance to Christ, without desiring to be as active and as valuable in the the Lord's work as possible. The fact that some are useful and others relatively useless seems to me to be a result of something other than intention or desire. It is because of this feeling that I particularly want to invite you to think with me on the theme, "The Kind of Christian God Uses." It is my hope that some who have hitherto been rather passive and inactive in the Lord's Cause may, by considering certain necessary qualities of life, become more active and more useful to the Lord.

Examples of Those Chosen

Let us begin by considering some New Testament examples of those chosen by the Lord for work of special significance. We open our Bibles first to the sixth chapter of Acts where we read the story of the Grecian Jews whose widows were being neglected in the early Jerusalem church in the daily ministrations of food. This oversight was called to the attention of the twelve apostles who responded, "It is not fit that we should forsake the word of God, and serve tables. Look ye out therefore, brethren, from among you seven men of good report, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business." (Acts 6:2-3). Seven men were to be selected from the vast multitude of members of the Jerusalem church. What were the criteria to be used in selecting the seven? Three things are mentioned: (1) Men of good report. This reminds us of the qualifications of elders as stated in I Tim. 3:7, where the elder is pictured as a man of "good testimony from them that are without." (2) Full of the Spirit. These men must be spiritual-minded men, even though their work was to be primarily the administering of food. (3) Full of wisdom. This quality suggested good judgment or sound ability to think through each phase of the subject to which they were assigned.

A few pages later in the book of Acts, we read the story of the conversion of Saul of Tarsus. At one point in the story, when Ananias was objecting to his going to preach to Saul as a dangerous task, the Lord said, "Go thy way: for he is a chosen vessel unto me ..." (Acts 9:15). We ask, "What made this man a chosen vessel unto the Lord?" Here, I call upon your knowledge of the life of the apostle Paul. He was a man of great natural ability, fine training, deep integrity and loyalty, tremendous zeal, and many other fine qualities. These are the elements that caused him to be a "chosen vessel" to the Lord. After his conversion he was later sent to preach the gospel to the Gentile world. "And as they ministered to the Lord, and fasted, the Holy Spirit said, Separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them," (Acts 13:2). Saul, or, as he was later called, Paul, by these sterling qualities of his life had so stood out among the multitude of people that God called him a "chosen vessel."

Early in Christ's public ministry he selected his twelve apostles. Luke gives this account, "And it came to pass in these days, that he went out into the mountain to pray; and he continued all night in prayer to God. And when it was day, he called his disciples; and he chose from them twelve, whom also he named apostles (Luke 6:12-13). May I suggest that each of us draw upon his own memory of previous study of the lives of the apostles to remember the many fine attributes that led the Lord to choose these particular twelve men from among the multitude of disciples that had followed him. We have insufficient time to name all of the qualities possessed by the apostles which caused them to be singled out for selection to this particularly important work. However, we can get a general impression of the natural abilities, the qualities of life, and the potentialities which made them particularly appealing to the Lord.

A List of Qualities

From a general reading of the New Testament and from careful observation of the lives of those who have been most useful in the Cause of Christ, it is possible for us to make a list of the qualities that appear to be necessary in order for a Christian to be useful in the work of the Lord. While the following list is certainly not exhaustive, it does include some of the most necessary qualities of life--qualities which each of us can strive to achieve and thereby increase his effectiveness as a servant of the Lord.

The Lord uses the talented. The apostle Paul was a man of unusual talent, as were also many of the other apostles, Timothy, Cornelius, Lydia, and many others of whom we read in the New Testament. The Lord seeks those of unusual natural ability for they have great possibilities of usefulness in his work. However, almost before we have uttered these words, we remember the parable of the talents, as told in Matt. 25:14-30. Here the man of five talents was no more acceptable to the Lord than the man of two talents who used his abilities to the full. Even the man with one talent would have been equally acceptable to the Lord if he had used his one talent. We also remember Romans 12 and I Cor. 12 where the illustration of the human body is presented, indicating that while the body of Christ

has many different members all are necessary and important. We realize that our Lord uses men and woman of various capacities and various natural abilities. No one is outside the range of the Lord's acceptability. While those with greater talents may accomplish more in relationship to the work undertaken, those with lesser talents are equally sought in the Lord's work.

The Lord uses the trained. Again we think of the apostle Paul. He was highly trained, for he had studied at the feet of Gamaliel in Jerusalem; he both spoke and wrote the Greek language expertly; he knew the Greek culture well enough to quote from a Greek poem on Mars Hill in Athens; and he was accepted to teach in the school of Tyrannus in Ephesus when he resided there. Not only was Paul one of the best trained men of his generation, but he also saw the need for training others. Constantly he had younger traveling companions who were being trained through their association with him. This included such men as Timothy, Titus, Luke, and others. (Acts 20:4). We are also reminded of the vast amount of training that prepared Moses for his crucial role as law-giver of the Old Testament and his companion role as leader of God's people as they came out of Egyptian bondage. Acts 7:22 says of him, that he was "instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians."

The Lord uses the young. In Acts 16:1-3, we read, "And he came also to Derbe and to Lystra: and behold, a certain disciple was there, named Timothy, the son of a Jewess that believed; but his father was a Greek. The same was well reported of by the brethren that were at Lystra and Iconium. Him would Paul have to go forth with him." The young man Timothy was quite useful to the apostle Paul in his travels. As we think of the entire sweep of the Bible we are impressed with the value that young people have been in God's Cause. Joseph was young when he began his crucial work in Egypt. Samuel was very young when he came to serve at the temple. David was only a shepherd boy when he was chosen to be king. Josiah was one of the youngest of the kings and yet one of the most important. Daniel was yet young when he stood firmly for Jehovah in Babylonia. Again, however, almost before we finish saying that the Lord uses the young, we realize that he also uses the elderly and all those in between. The apostle John was almost one hundred years old when he wrote the book of Revelation. The fact is that God needs both young and old in his service and uses them all. He wants the young as early as they are able to know him and to follow his directions. He wants the old as long as they are able to serve. There is a place for those of every age in the Lord's army.

The Lord uses the pure. In John 1:47, in the story of the calling of Nathaniel to become an apostle, we read Christ's appraisal of him. "Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile!" Those who have pure, clean lives are needed in the Lord's work. I Tim. 3:2 indicates that the elder must be one "without reproach," or "blameless," as mentioned in Titus 1:6. 1 Tim. 5:22 finds the apostle Paul admonishing Timothy, "Keep thyself pure." Only those who have renounced sin and who are guarding their own lives from evil are appropriate for the Lord's work, since it is primarily a battle against evil. However, we hasten to add that the fact that evil has been present in a person's life at an earlier time does not disqualify him for later service to the Lord. If the sin has been renounced and repented of, a person can yet be useful to Christ. This was true in the case of Mary Magdalene and in the case of the apostle Peter. It was also true of David in the Old Testament.

The Lord uses the humble. In Luke 18:9-14, we read the story of two men who went up to the temple to pray. One was a Pharisee who said, "God, I thank thee, that I am not as the rest of men." On the other hand the publican prayed, "God, be thou merciful to me a sinner." The Lord then evaluated the two: "This man went down to his house justified rather than the other: for everyone that exalteth himself shall be humbled; but he that humbleth himself shall be exalted." There is no place in the Lord's service for the arrogant and proud. Only those who are humble and realize their own inadequacy are useful to the Lord. It is not by man's own strength that he accomplishes things for the Lord, but by the Lord's power as it works through him. Hence, there is no place for pride and egotism.

The Lord uses the dedicated. We think of John the Baptist whose life burned brilliantly in the wilderness because of his faithful proclamation of the truths of God. We think also of the apostle Paul whose dedication was obvious from the moment of his conversion. He had been a most effective persecutor of Christians; when converted he became a most effective proclaimer of Christ. He held nothing back. He gave himself, his possessions, his energies, and his time to the work of the Lord. Someone has said that he served the Lord with 150 per cent of everything that he had. This dedication is of a spiritual nature and only those who have dedicated themselves to the spiritual values which Christ came to teach the world can be of great use in his work.

The Lord uses the willing. We now set two passages of scripture before you because each presents a clear-cut action in regard to the Lord. In John 6:66, we read, "Upon this many of his disciples went back, and walked no more with him." On the opposite side of things, we read Luke 5:11, "And when they had brought their boats to land, they left all, and followed him." The former passage is telling about the multitude who had listened to Christ's explanation of his spiritual kingdom. They had failed to understand or to grasp the nature of his call, hence, they turned back. The latter passage tells of the little band of men who were fishing on the Sea of Galilee one morning when Christ performed for them a great miracle. The unusual draught of fishes led them to realize that there was something more important than fishing. When Jesus said, "Fear not; from henceforth thou shalt catch men," it led these men to turn from fishing for literal fish to fishing for the souls of men.

It is of crucial significance that we realize that the Lord can use only those who are willing to let themselves be used. There are many who have fine talent and good training but who are of no value in the Lord's army. They are unwilling to serve. Along with fine talent, fine training, and the other qualities that prepare one for service there must be the willingness to enter upon the Lord's work. It is this deep dedication to Christ that is crucial. Age does not matter; the level of ability is not significant; the place where one lives is of no

special moment. What is significant is one's willingness to work for the Lord. The training can be secured, if there is the willingness to live the pure, humble life that is needed and to spend one's energies in the Cause of Christ.

This is particularly encouraging, for these crucial matters are all under our own control. We cannot determine the level of our abilities because that is given to us at birth. However, we can determine the dedication of our hearts, the willingness of our minds, and the other qualities that enable us to serve the Lord. These we determine. There is no one who wishes to be a useful, faithful servant of the Lord who cannot be such,

Conclusion

It is important for us to remember that no two men have the same talents and that even those whose talents might be of equal importance often find them lying in different realms. One man serves publicly, another privately. One man's greatest avenue of service is through the giving of his material means; another man's service is through personal contact with those who are not yet Christians. One woman serves best by rearing a godly family who will multiply her influence for generations yet to come. Another serves as a teacher of a pre-school class of children and thereby multiplies her influence for those same generations yet to come. Some serve best in business, some in the home, some in the school, some in the professions. No one has the right to say that his is the best area of service. It matters not where nor exactly how we serve, so long as we give to the Lord the best that is in us. This giving of the best that is in us begins when we become Christians. If you have never confessed your faith in Christ before men, you need to do so immediately. You need to repent of your past sins, be buried with your Lord in baptism, then rise to live a life of service to your Lord. This can begin here and now. The effects of what you do here this hour will be felt through all eternity to come. Will you respond to your Lord's call as we stand to sing his invitation?