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RAISING EXPECTATIONS

by Kevin W. Rhodes

Low expectations ensure failure in practically every human endeavor, and our spiritual lives demonstrate the rule rather than providing an exception. Low expectations in the home, in the pulpit, in the leadership, in the classroom, and in life prove fatal to souls and congregations everywhere. We do not get much from ourselves because we do not expect much of ourselves. This is a sad commentary on a people who are to have their minds focused on spiritual things and on heaven (Col. 3:1-2; Phil. 3:13-14). However, brooding over the past will not improve the future. That will take intentional effort and vision founded in God's Word. When Jesus began teaching, He did not limit Himself to the expectations provided by years of tradition or the authoritative assumptions of the various sects or Rabbis. Instead, he called on everyone to recognize the need to raise their expectations to where they should be: "For I say unto you, That except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and the Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 5:20). We as His people, should follow suit.

First, we as both individuals and as a people, must begin planning for the ideal rather than what is currently accepted. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus repeatedly said, "Ye have heard that it was said ... but I say unto you" (Matt. 5:21-25). Current teaching did not match the standard of God's Word; therefore, Jesus did not in any way feel bound by it, and neither should we. Instead, we need to become innovative within the confines of God's Word. We must think scripturally, but we must also think about how to do it better than we are currently doing it. Once we have figured out what is scriptural in general, we tend to stop thinking. As a result, we stop short of doing things the most effective way. Therefore, we do not really have a clue why we are doing it in the first place, which means that we are not really doing it by faith (Rom. 10:17; 2 Cor. 5:7).

Second, we must raise our expectations for ourselves and for the congregations of which we are a part. If you were to plant a congregation, would you just try to recreate what you already knew in your previous experience? Many have done exactly that in mission work. In fact, they recreated it so well that the flaws stick out like sore thumbs. We must learn to start from the very beginning in forming what a congregation should be, using the Bible rather than our own experiences or the congregations' collective experience as a guide.

Third, we must raise our expectations of spiritual activity. We should strive for the ideal in every aspect of spiritual activity. Therefore, when evaluating the preaching the question does not revolve around what you enjoyed, how dynamic the preacher was, or whether he said what you wanted him to say, but rather what – scripturally and spiritually speaking – makes a sermon good. If we do not know, is it any wonder that many preachers don't either? Surely we can recognize that having our ears tickled and staying awake are far below the expectations God has for a sermon. We must also consider the ideal in a Bible class program. We are teaching.

The real question, however, is: Are they learning? The purpose of a Bible Class program is to train children to be strong, knowledgeable, faithful Christians once they leave home. What is our current success rate? We ought to question whether our current teacher rotation and current curriculum are helpful or harmful? We need to know who is really teaching and who is just holding a place. And then we need to do something about it. Now, what if we were to evaluate the assembly? Would we be able to identify its purpose and meaning easily? Is every action filled with spiritual content? Does it reflect God's character (John 4:24)? How sad it is that the only way that most congregations evaluate the assembly is based upon attendance. Surely we can admit that we currently fall far short of the ideal of biblical fellowship! It seems that today some people are willing to abandon fellowship before they are willing to study about fellowship. Of course, others have such low standards regarding fellowship that they would accept a parrot into fellowship if it could be taught to say "Jesus." However, the fact that some have strayed from the light as the standard of fellowship does not excuse the rest of us from our abuse of fellowship. We should work to restore a real willingness to work together in the kingdom instead of constantly playing detective and seeking to find fault with others. We ought to work things out scripturally (Matt. 18:15-20) instead of playing politics. We should return to the biblical ideal of leadership in a full way. The spiritual qualifications for elders and deacons (and preachers and teachers as well) should be our guide rather than the pragmatism of the moment. Elders should lead with vision, care, knowledge, and wisdom, shepherding the flock of souls rather than just the budget and worship assembly. We should expect more of ourselves in our work and service than the worldly standard in the 80-20 principle in which twenty percent of the people do eighty percent of the work. While some are limited due to their health, knowledge, maturity, and time, the Lord's people should always strive for higher expectations than a worldly company. "Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye steadfast, unmovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord" (1 Cor. 15:58). Finally, we should raise our expectations when it comes to training the next generation of preachers, teachers, and elders. It is a sad commentary that we seem to believe we are doing this in the best way possible today – especially considering the amount of evidence to the contrary. Why are we so afraid of examining preacher training in a real way? After all, if directors are required to bring in and graduate large numbers of students by elders and supporting congregations, who can blame them for graduating people who are less than capable? And do we really believe that we can do no better for our teachers than taking whoever volunteers, slapping a book in their hands, and then expecting them to perform admirably? And how dare we complain about our leaders when we do not provide adequate training in real leadership, do not stay true to the qualifications provided in the gospel, and do not respect their leadership after they take it upon themselves to get better training!

Brethren, so long as we just accept our current condition and refuse to consider the idealism of God's Word, we can never rise above spiritual mediocrity. And that, my friends, is not even close to holiness! Quoting from Leviticus, Peter wrote, "But as he which hath called you is holy, so be ye holy in all manner of conversation: Because it is written, Be ye holy; for I am holy" (1 Peter 1:15-16). If we are to start afresh, we must raise our own expectations to match Gods.