

Buzz King

buzz@BuzzKing.com

<https://BuzzKing.com>

Acts 4:13, ESV

¹³ Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated, common men, they were astonished. And they recognized that they had been with Jesus.

They were astonished.

When I was a boy going to Catholic grammar school, the sisters did a lot more than teach the kids. They used a group of volunteers to help provide free breakfast and lunch for kids who might not otherwise eat. One older woman, and we'll call her Mrs. Rivers, led the volunteers. Parents and other adults collected used uniforms that children had outgrown, cleaned and patched them, and made sure that every kid had a uniform. They visited families in crisis, organized after-school and summer programs for kids, and helped people navigate social systems. One day, I was with a buddy of mine. We'll call him Tony. His family had five kids and very little money. His father had a chronic medical condition and hadn't worked in years. That day, I was hanging out with Tony on the playground after school, when Mrs. Rivers came along and asked Tony if he had enough clothes for after school. I imagine that Mrs. Rivers or one of the other volunteers had

noticed that Tony was wearing undersized or tattered clothes to church on Sunday. He said that he could use something new. She asked him what he needed most, and he said pants. So, she put us both in her car and drove us downtown to a men's shop. It was a long, narrow store, with racks of clothing for men and boys at the front, and a back area where tailors worked. As soon as we walked in, I wondered why we were going to this store, as it was clearly quite fancy. Then I realized that the big man in the back of the store who was being measured for a suit was John Wayne. I'll get back to this. I want to talk about how Mrs. Rivers reflected a key biblical theme that is repeated many times in the Bible in many different contexts.

Let's start with a passage from Colossians. The letter to the Colossians was written to a city called Colossae, in what is now Turkey; it was a prosperous city, with a textile and wool-dyeing industry. The church there was probably founded by a follower of Paul. Although Paul is the stated author of the letter, many scholars question this, as it contains a vocabulary not found in his other letters, and the letter doesn't focus on Paul's favorite topics of righteousness and justification by faith. So, it's likely that the letter was simply attributed to Paul as a way of honoring him. Also, we don't believe that Paul had ever been to Colossae at the time the letter was written. One purpose of the letter is to argue

the divinity and saving powers of Jesus Christ. Another is to teach us how to live in this world as faithful people, and in a way that honors God. In our old way of doing things, we competed viciously with each other, but now we are to have compassionate hearts, and to live with humility and kindness. We are to be forgiving, always. In the part of the letter where our passage comes from, our pseudo-Paul is arguing that Christianity is not a way of hiding from the world in some sort of spiritual isolation. Our faith demands that we be shining lights in the world. We must be on good relations with our neighbors and run our households and our lives in honorable ways. Much of what the author teaches us reflects the ethical standards of Hellenistic and Jewish authors of the day. But in this part of the letter, we see a specifically Christian slant to this: the point is that we live this way because it is what Jesus Christ expects from us. We are to live for our God, and we are to live, not for the approval of humans, but in service of Jesus Christ.

The author of the letter says, in Chapter 3:

²³ Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, ²⁴ knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ. ²⁵ For the wrongdoer will be paid back for the wrong he has done, and there is no partiality.

I want to focus on this word “*heartily*”. Some translations say to work from your “*soul*”, which is a more literal translation. In other words, don’t just work for

God, give everything you have to your work and leave nothing in reserve. This is what Mrs. Rivers did. This was why Mrs. Rivers, who had grandkids the same age as Tony and me, had decided to help some kid in the congregation, a kid she didn't know. This was her way of serving God, and as you will see, she did not hold back. Her grandkids, I knew, were well off; they had parents who could easily provide for them, and Mrs. Rivers was aware that this wasn't true of Tony's parents – and so she had a duty in the eyes of God. She worked heartily, putting her entire soul into it. This also motivated her to help all the kids at the school.

Consider a second passage, from Proverbs. The Book of Proverbs is a collection of short sayings that give advice on how to live a virtuous life. It is one of a collection of Old Testament Books that are collectively called the Books of Wisdom; they also include Psalms, the Book of Job, the Song of Songs, and Ecclesiastes. Although most Protestants don't include them in the Bible, Catholics and a few other denominations also include a Book that is itself called Wisdom and the Book of Sirach, for a total of seven books of Wisdom. A "proverb" in biblical literature is a compressed, instructional statement that makes use of artistic language, rather than normal conversational language. A proverb is pithy. The Book gets its name from the opening verse of the Book, which is: "*The proverbs of Solomon.*" Solomon might not have written very many, or any of

them, however. Over the course of the history of ancient Israel, there arose these groups of religious leaders: Pharisees, Sadducees, priests, prophets, and wise men, also known as sages. It is this last group of people who wrote the Proverbs. Pharisees heavily influenced the teachings of the synagogues and interpreted the law. Sadducees were wealthy aristocrats who controlled the temple. The priests issued laws. The prophets spoke in the place of God. Scholars believe that the sages or wise men, the people who wrote the Proverbs, were a professional class in Israel, and that the Book of Proverbs was carefully collected from the writings of these people. The sages were highly educated and were respected for their practical insights into morality and psychology. The sages promoted a happiness that was attainable through maintaining high moral standards. They knew that staying connected to God is a joyous experience. Here is Proverb 22:6:

*⁶Train up a child in the way he should go;
even when he is old he will not depart from it.*

The meaning of this is obvious: if you start early with kids, and teach them moral ways of living, they will be far more likely to live that way and to pass it on to their children. A society must maintain an ethical standard of living by focusing hard on how it instructs children, and parents need to know this. Well, many years after Mrs. Rivers took Tony and me out to get some clothing for him, I

happened to go to Tony's home. We were in our late twenties, I believe, at the time. He started talking about Mrs. Rivers, and he reminded me of what she had done for him. I had forgotten the incident until he started talking about it. I said something like, well, it sure was nice of her to do that. What he said to me has stuck with me all these decades. He said that his parents were good people. They loved their children and they loved God. But his mother in particular was bitter at the hard life they had lived. As a boy, he had heard his mother complain repeatedly about other parents in the church who could drive fancy Chryslers and eat steak every night. Tony said that he might have grown up just as bitter as his mother if it hadn't been for Mrs. Rivers. I didn't know it, but Mrs. Rivers took him shopping a lot more than that one time. She more or less adopted him as another grandchild and took care of him all through high school. Tony said it was Mrs. Rivers who made a compassionate, empathetic person out of him. I think she knew she had the power to do this and saw it as her obligation to make it happen. I still have something more to say about Mrs. Rivers.

I'd like to look at a few verses from Chapter 1 of the Book of Joshua. Joshua was a military and political leader who took over from Moses after he died and as the people were entering the Promised Land. Joshua was not a prophet. He did not write the Book of Joshua, and we have no idea who did write it. The

book chronicles the settling of Canaan, the division of land between the twelve tribes, and Joshua's work to keep the Chosen People faithful to God. The context of this passage is that God is commissioning Joshua right after the death of Moses. He is telling Joshua that inhabiting the Promised Land will be arduous and dangerous. In verse 7, God tells Joshua to follow -

"all the law that Moses my servant commanded you. Do not turn from it to the right hand or to the left, that you may have good success wherever you go."

Then in verse 9 God says:

⁹Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened, and do not be dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go."

It's not that God is giving Joshua a motivational speech; rather, God is saying that if he is going to follow God's command, if he is to serve as a person of faith, then he must act with courage and not be frightened as he proceeds to serve God. In return, Joshua is assured that God will guide him every step of the way.

Let's jump from the founding of Israel to the founding of the Christian Church. Timothy is a young pastor in charge of the very important church at Ephesus. Like 1 Timothy, the author of 2 Timothy identifies himself as Paul, which would make sense, as this is a letter from a mentor to a mentee, and Paul was an older, more experienced pastor, and the two of them are together in the Book of Acts. But in truth, we are not sure that Paul wrote either of these letters. It might

be that Paul wrote parts of these letters, and that a follower of Paul's put the pieces together into complete documents. Either way, our more experienced pastor is encouraging Timothy as Timothy builds a church in a hostile, pagan environment. He must face persecution with courage. Our Paul or pseudo-Paul says:

⁶For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands, ⁷for God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control.

These verses, 6 and 7 of the first chapter of 2 Timothy, are poetic. The metaphor of fanning a fire, with the fire being the gift of faith, inspires Timothy to build his own faith to the point of going about his mission with love instead of fear.

Let's look at one more passage, from Acts, the Book that details the movement of the faith outward from Jerusalem to Africa, Asia, and Europe. In Acts, Chapter 4, two of the key founders of the Christian Church, Peter and John, are confronted by the local Jewish authorities. The two Apostles have been arrested for preaching. They stand before the Sanhedrin, the Jewish judicial council. Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, gives a bold speech where he declares that Jesus, the stone that they have rejected, will become the cornerstone of all faith. We might think that the members of the Council would get angry and then execute the two Apostles. But, in verse 13, we are told this:

¹³ Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated, common men, they were astonished. And they recognized that they had been with Jesus.

The men judging Peter and John, the members of the Council, are educated, powerful religious leaders, many of whom were Sadducees from largely from wealthy, influential families. But we see that these two poor men with no rabbinical training have been transformed by whatever power emanates from Jesus. We know this is the Holy Spirit. We see how faith has enabled Peter and John to behave with extraordinary courage – and how God has led them.

I'd like to get back to Mrs. Rivers, the men's shop, and John Wayne. Remember that John Wayne was in the back of the store, being fitted for a suit. While Tony was trying on various pairs of pants, a tailor was running a tape measure all over John Wayne's body, pinning this and that, offering recommendations on what shirts and ties would go with the suit. I realized at one point that John Wayne had noticed us. He flashed a smile our way. Mrs. Rivers nodded back, and then, with great confidence, walked over to Mr. Wayne. She introduced herself as a volunteer at our church, and that she was just helping out one of the boys in the parish. John Wayne complimented her, saying that what she was doing was a very good, and then he offered to pay for whatever she was buying the boy, and when she said it was pants, he suggested that she get the boy

a belt, too, and a shirt. I believe he said something about his family facing some tough times economically when he was a kid. He said that he was sure that what Mrs. Rivers did would change the lives of many children. That was all the invitation that Mrs. Rivers needed: she proceeded to whip out a donation envelope from our church, and without the slightest hesitation, she said that there were a lot of other kids in the parish who were in need, and that she regularly took up a special collection for them. He nodded and pulled out his wallet. He gave Mrs. Rivers a big handful of cash. When I saw this, I was as astonished as the members of the Sanhedrin.

Mrs. Rivers lived her faith the way the Bible repeatedly tells us. We are to *work heartily, not turn from our path to the right hand or to the left, be strong and courageous, and not be frightened.* We are to *fan into flame the gift of faith.* And if we do this, then whatever godly mission we are on, the *LORD our God* will be with us and will guide us. We'll find ourselves as inspired and as uninhibited as Mrs. Rivers.