

I Met a Man with Character This Week By Paul R. Blake

(In December 1995 while living in Youngstown, Ohio, I volunteered to help out at the Columbiana County Workshop for the Disabled for one day. I met over a hundred people who had every apparent reason to bemoan their lot; but instead, they chose to make a good, happy life within the confines of their mental and physical limitations. Often, the children of this world shame professed children of God. The following article was written about that experience.)

I met a man with character this week. Let's call him Michael. He and I have some things in common: we are both 35 year old men. But there, the similarity ends.

Michael works in a place where the only jobs to be had are menial, repetitive labor. He does the same thing, hour after hour, day after day, performing tasks that most people would find dull, doing work that many folk would deem unnecessary.

I do not.

Michael has a severe physical disability. He is confined to a wheelchair and must be strapped in an upright position. He cannot walk without the assistance of someone who will walk with him holding him upright. If he wants to stand alone, he must do so in a corner, supported by two walls. His right arm is contracted into the shape of the letter "Z" and completely unusable. Michael must depend on the kindness of others just to move.

I do not.

Michael can only say one word... "Yeahhh!" He simply says 'yes' to any question asked of him, for he cannot hold a conversation with anyone. He has never passed the time of day talking about the weather or his favorite sports team. He has never been able to say, "I love you" to his mother, or "Thank you" to a caring friend, or "Isn't that a beautiful sunset" to a passing stranger. He endures the frustration of never being able to express himself and be understood by others.

I do not.

Michael works to the uttermost limit of his capacity. When asked to use his shriveled right arm, he glares intently at it as if by sheer force of will he can unbind the contracted muscles. Trembling all over, he struggles with the frozen joints and the twisted arm jerks back and forth, up and down. So Herculean are his efforts that his left arm is extended out in the air with the fist clenched in white knuckled defiance of his limitations. When requested to reach overhead to perform a task, he presses his head and shoulders back against a sharply curved spine and works with his left arm upraised until he doesn't have the strength to lift it from the table. And all the while, Michael looks warmly into the eyes of his companion and keeps a pleasant smile on his face. As I watched his intense efforts, my eyes clouded with tears and a lump formed in my throat, because Michael strives to the absolute limit of his existence to do what is asked of him.

And I... I... I met a man with character this week.

Solomon: "Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might" (Ecc. 9:10).

Apostle Paul: "And whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord and not to men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward" (Col. 3:23-24).

Is the Gospel Free?

By Paul R. Blake

(I recently followed a discussion among brethren on the Web about whether or not a preacher is scripturally permitted to charge a fee to download his sermon outlines, articles, and e-classbooks from his own website. While some arguments were spurious, most of it proved to be an interesting exchange. I sent the following as my answer to the question.)

...Actually, this discussion illustrates one of the growing pains of a media transition period. It appears inevitable that hard media (not just printed media, but also portable hard electronic storage) is eventually going to be replaced for the most part with wide spread wireless access to central digital storage. This will require an entirely new means of securing copyrights and paying for usage. What that means for authors is that the classbook, outline book, etc., will go the way of 8-tracks, vinyl albums, and cassette players. Your grandchildren will nostalgically purchase classbooks at antique auctions.

This same kind of objection was encountered when the chalk board was replaced by the overhead projector. One brother told me in 1985, "I hate it when you preach those window blind sermons (He was talking about the pull down screen for the projector - prb). Old brother _____ always used the chalkboard and it ought to be good enough for you." We also remember the fusses created by the advent of the multimedia projector. Now they are practically universal and almost indispensable.

The question of paysites for preacher publications is not so much about "should we have to pay for Bible study materials?". Someone always pays for Bible study materials. If the material is offered free to the public, the author covers the cost (or the local church does if he does his writing and publishing on their time). Rather it is part of a larger question of the economics of fair exchange in a digital world. Christians recognize that work and intellectual property have fair market value, and they are willing to meet God's expectation of honorable exchange for it. All of us have bought classbooks, commentaries, multiple versions of the Bible, et al. The word of God teaches us that the Gospel is free to all; however, to suggest that the means of recording and transmitting it must also be free is to wrest that Bible principle out of context.

On the other hand, for the person who is seeking study materials on a limited budget, or who conscientiously does not wish to pay for Bible study materials, the Internet is bursting with quality Bible freeware. One could spend years collecting and filling a digital library. But be selective. The Internet big bang of available information has opened the door for a lot of men of limited knowledge and ability, who in the age of hard media would have little chance of being published.

My concern with regard to the matter of class material, outlines, and articles used by preachers is this: Why not do your own work? Why is it necessary to depend on the work of others? Does it save time? What do you do with the study time saved by using someone else's work... do you use it to make more contacts for the Gospel?

It is a good thing that brethren share their studies with others. It is a good thing to read another brother's work and learn something. It is something else entirely to go to "Brotherhood" websites at 6:00 PM Saturday and download a couple of outlines to preach the next day. It is a better thing to do your own work.