

# ROPE HOLDER & WELL DIGGER (01).

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## Introduction.

**William Carey** is known as the father of modern missions. He was also a firm Calvinist and Baptist. This fact, however, says nothing to those who accuse Calvinists of not preaching the gospel and of having no burden nor interest in missions. **Charles Spurgeon** wrote concerning **Carey**, *“Carey was the living model of [Jonathan] Edwards’ theology, or rather of pure Christianity. His was not a theology which left out the backbone and strength of religion – not a theology, on the other hand, all bones and skeleton, a lifeless thing without a soul; his theology was full-orbed Calvinism, high as you please, but practical godliness so low that many called it legal.”*

**Carey’s** gospel vision was for India. The work the Lord used him to accomplish in India bears fruit even to this day. But **Carey** was not a one man show. **Carey** could not go to India and accomplish all that he did without the help of many. Among the many, a few were his closest friends. These close friends were **John Sutcliff**, **John Rylands Jr.** and **Andrew Fuller**. They stood with him in the birth of the vision for missions, in the articulation of this vision and in the defense of this vision. They formed the committee that would ensure that **Carey** got to India. The story is that **Andrew Fuller** told **Carey** : you are going down into the well to do the digging. I will be your rope-holder.

The sermon I preached in our first missions’ service was entitled **“The Call of Abraham”**. And I ended that sermon as follows : “Your choice is as follows : **(1)** you can spend your life working to build and protect your own physical welfare and future or, **(2)** you can spend your life working to build and protect your

generation's spiritual welfare and eternal future. The questions are : which is God's will for you? And which will you choose?"

Our study today is rooted in that final statement I made. But I want to change it just a bit and set the challenge before you as follows : Are you a rope-holder? Or are you a well-digger? Which is God's will for you?

### **The No – Can – Do – Crew.**

There are basically three different groups of Christians in any given church. There are the well-diggers. There are the rope-holders. And then there is the no-can-do-crew. I want to begin with the no-can-do-crew. But before I do, I want to take a moment and remind you that the Great Commission was given to every Christian. Every Christian is under the marching orders of Jesus' command to go and make disciples. (*Matt.28:18-20*). Every Christian is under Jesus' marching orders to be His witness. (*Acts 1:8*). Every Christian is commanded to be ready to give an answer to everyone who asks you about the hope you have in Christ. (*1Pet.3:15*).

Having reminded you of this truth, let us turn our attention to the no-can-do-crew. Who is the no-can-do-crew? The no-can-do-crew is those church members who come to church to warm the pews. These are the spectators. More than often they also become arm-chair critics. They know everything that must be done. They know **how** everything must be done. And they can do anything in the church and do it better. But they dare not take up a bat and face the bowler. They are afraid of the result because they know the result will knock them off the high know-it-all do-nothing critic's chair they have chosen to sit on.

If you belong to the no-can-do-crew, I want you to understand a few things. **Firstly**, God has no time for talkers who are not doers. In *Jas.1:22* we read, "But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves." Let us tweak

that just a little because the principle applies. “But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely talkers who delude themselves.”

Note the word “delude”. It means “*to deceive through fallacious reasoning*”. The reasoning is fallacious, that is, it is filled with errors and thus misleading. Note also who is being deceived. God says the one who is merely a talker is deceiving himself / herself. You are not deceiving your friends in the church. You are not deceiving the members of the church. You are not deceiving the leaders in the church. Most certainly you are not deceiving God. You are deceiving primarily yourself. James added in *vs.25* that the blessed man is the man who is the doer.

In *Jas.2:14-16* we read the following : “What use is it, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but he has no works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food, and one of you says to them, “Go in peace, be warmed and be filled,” and yet you do not give them what is necessary for their body, what use is that? Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself.”

Here is the mark of the talker, the one who belongs to the no-can-do-crew. He can be very pious in what he says. But that’s all he does. He says; he talks; he may even pray for you with a most fervent prayer; but he does not do. James says the talker’s professed faith in Christ is dead. It is useless. It is of no good to himself or to anyone else. The idea that the talker’s faith is dead is very serious because it raises questions about the talker’s salvation in Christ.

In *Matt.23* Jesus pronounced woe after woe upon the scribes and Pharisees. In *vs.2* Jesus said the scribes and Pharisees tell you to do and observe, but they themselves do not do. They are the talkers. They are the expert theological theoreticians. They know what you are supposed to do. They can tell you what you have to do. But they are not going to join you in doing the same. And woe to them, Jesus said.

*Secondly*, those who belong to the no-can-do-crew are cowards who try to wrap a bad conscience in what is supposed to be “*good theology*”. (**Bruner**). This fact is clearly seen in the parable of the talents Jesus told in *Matt.25:14-30*. Our focus is on the man with the one talent and his failure to invest the one talent his Master gave to him. In the parable, the Master represents God. The one-talent man explained his failure to his Master as follows, “Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow and gathering where you scattered no seed. And I was afraid, and went away and hid your talent in the ground.” (*vss.24-25*). What is this man saying?

This man is saying that God is absolutely sovereign. He is a God who can do anything He wants, independent of human work, moral agency or spiritual zeal. In the final analysis, God does not need you or me. We are little people who must not take ourselves too seriously and think that the little we do can mean anything in God’s infinitely great overall plan and purposes.

This is exactly what **William Carey** was told. One day, after sharing his vision for missions, **John Ryland Sr** is reputed to have told **Carey**, “*Sit down, young man; when God chooses to save the heathen He will do so without your help or ours!*” This one-talent man thought his Master would be impressed by his show of pious awe, his humble sense of himself and his works and his sense of the Lord’s greatness. And so, he was expecting to be commended. What a surprise he must have gotten when his Master’s response began with, “You wicked, lazy slave....”

Lastly, those who belong to the no-can-do-crew are cursed. In *Judges 5:23* we read, “‘Curse Meroz,’ said the angel of the Lord, ‘Utterly curse its inhabitants; because they did not come to the help of the Lord, to the help of the Lord against the warriors.’” As we have seen in past studies, the angel of the Lord is no ordinary angel. The angel of the Lord is divine.

The inhabitants of Meroz were bitterly cursed because they failed to join with Israel’s army when the army was in peculiar need of help in its battle against the Canaanite

armies. The Canaanite armies were not to be taken lightly. Their armies had many seasoned warriors. The inhabitants of Meroz were afraid of becoming casualties in this war. They wanted to save their lives. But they ended up being bitterly cursed.

The church is waging war against Satan's hosts of fallen angels, against the gates of Hades, against the false religions of this world, against all the haters of Christianity, against the persecutors of Christians, and against heretics and false teachers within its own ranks. The church is always in need of peculiar help in this war that is being waged on so many fronts. But the crisis the church is facing is that so many of its members are like the inhabitants of Meroz. They are standing on the sidelines, refusing to get involved. They do not want to become casualties in this war. They want to save their lives.

Jesus said, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel's will save it." (*Mark 8:34-35*). In other words, the person who does not embrace the cross, who is afraid of dying for Christ, who is afraid of becoming a casualty in this war against the forces of darkness and wickedness, that person is not a disciple of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Now Brethren, one final, word here before we move to the second point. There are some very serious implications in the verses I have set before you for the no-can-do-crew. I will not take the time today to work out those implications. But I want to say to you, if you are conscious of the fact that you belong to the no-can-do-crew, I want to press upon you with great urgency to re-examine these verses and my few comments, and earnestly pray that the Holy Spirit would help you see and understand the implications for your soul. I repeat the warning : beware of deceiving yourself.

## The Rope Holders.

This brings us to our second point – The Rope Holders. We have seen that every Christian is under the marching orders of Jesus' command to go and make disciples. We have seen also that in any given church there are three groups of people : the no-can-do crew; the rope holders; and the well diggers. This should not be. A church should have only two groups of people : the rope holders and the well diggers. As we shall see, the rope holders and the well diggers are all involved in carrying out the Great Commission.

The questions that need to be answered are : (1). How are they involved in carrying out the Great Commission? (2). Which group do you belong to? I want to begin by dealing firstly with the rope holders in the church. Who are the rope holders in the church? To answer this question, I want to use a variety of illustrations from God's word. I want to make it clear that for the few that are named, there are thousands who are unnamed. But their names are written in heaven and the Lord will reward them on the great and glorious day for the work of rope-holding that they faithfully did.

1). The **first** example I want to set before you is **Martha**. Martha was a rope holder in the life and ministry of our Lord Jesus Christ. Now I know that Martha has had a lot of negative publicity. I know that in *Lk.10:38-42* the Lord gently rebuked her for making a poor choice. But I want you to understand also that Martha was concerned about Jesus and His welfare and the welfare of His disciples. Martha's home in Bethany was something of a home away from home for Jesus and His disciples. In Martha's home they had a place to rest. In Martha's home they always had a meal ready for them. Given the time period and the context, what Martha did was vitally important for those who were itinerant preachers.

Without the likes of Martha's rope-holding hospitality, itinerant preachers would have to endure what Paul endured time and again in his ministry. In *1Cor.4:11* Paul said, "To this present hour we are both hungry and thirsty, and are poorly clothed, ... and are homeless." In *2Cor.11:23-32* Paul summarized his ministry and its many trials.

In *vs.27* Paul wrote, “I have been in labor and hardship, through many sleepless nights, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure.” The word “**exposure**” refers to being poorly clothed. “**Cold**” may refer to those times Paul had to sleep under the open skies. Being poorly clothed, he would be very cold.

**2).** In *Lk.8:1-3* we are told about a group of **women** who were rope holders in the ministry of the Lord Jesus and His disciples. We are told that these women “**were contributing to their support out of their private means.**” This was an interesting group of women. We are told that Jesus had healed these women of evil spirits and sicknesses. Among them were Mary Magdalene, Joanna and Susanna. Joanna was the wife of Chuza, Herod’s steward.

**3).** In *Acts 4:36-37* **Barnabas** surfaced as a rope holder in the ministry of the early church. The church was growing very fast and facing challenging needs. Barnabas owned land. We are told that he sold the land and gave the money to the church. Barnabas’ rope-holding ministry extended beyond the giving of money. He was named “**Barnabas**” by the apostles. “**Barnabas**” means “**Son of Encouragement.**” Behind the scenes Barnabas engaged in a ministry of encouraging, exhorting and consoling. This kind of rope holding ministry would have done a whole lot to relieve the apostles from some of the pressures of pastoral labors.

When the apostles needed someone to go and check out the reports about the spread of the gospel in Antioch, they sent Barnabas. (*Acts 11:22*). Barnabas had proven by his gifts, the voluntary and initiative-taking exercise of those gifts, his integrity and trustworthiness that he was the man for that job. Barnabas did not disappoint the apostles. Because of the vision he formulated and the initiatives he took, the church at Antioch became the mother church for missions to the Gentile world, for the planting and establishing of churches, and for the training and development of local leadership in those churches. It was Barnabas’ vision and initiative that launched Paul into his missionary labors that would impact the Roman Empire.

4). In *Acts 16* we find another rope holder whose name was Lydia. When the Lord saved Lydia she quickly turned her home into the hospitality center for Paul and his fellow laborers. (*vs.15*). Her home also became the meeting place for the church in Philippi. (*vs.40*). The Philippian church as a whole would become a rope holder for the ministry of the apostle Paul. They used every opportunity they had to financially support Paul. (*Phil.4:10-20*). They also knew that Paul would need more than money. So they gave up one of their leaders to be their on-the-spot rope holder to Paul. In *Phil.2:25* Paul described Epaphroditus as “your messenger and minister to my need.”

5). In *Acts 18* we find another set of rope holders in Paul’s ministry. They are the husband and wife team of **Aquila and Priscilla**. We are told in *Acts 18:3* that while in Corinth Paul lived in their home and worked with them in the trade of tent-making. But Aquila and Priscilla did more than this. In *vs.24-28* we are told that they helped Apollos with some theological training. *Vs.26* says, “they took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately.” Here was a husband and wife team who knew the word of God well enough to take an eloquent preacher like Apollos and enlarge and sharpen the rough edges of his theology.

Aquila and Priscilla were originally from Rome. They had to leave Rome when Claudius expelled all Jews from Rome. Eventually they would return to Rome. Note now what Paul said about them in *Rom.16:3-5*. Paul wrote, “Greet Prisca and Aquila, my fellow-workers in Christ Jesus, who for my life risked their own necks, to whom not only do I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles; also greet the church that is in their house.”

6). In *Rom.16:1-2* we find another rope holder in Paul’s ministry. This person is a lady from the church at Cenchrea. Her name is **Phoebe**. Paul wrote, “I commend to you our sister Phoebe, who is a servant of the church which is at Cenchrea; that you receive her in the Lord in a manner worthy of the saints, and that you help her in whatever manner she may have need of you; for she herself has also been a

helper of many, and of myself as well.” These two verses are so packed with teachings and applications; one can preach at least two sermons from them.

The first fact to be noted here is that we know absolutely nothing about this church in Cenchrea. We only know there is a church in Cenchrea because Phoebe’s Christian service in that church brought her to prominence. Let us take note of the Christian character of Phoebe. She is a saint in the household of God who has chosen to be a servant in the household of God. As a servant, she is a helper of many. She is also a helper of Paul. She is a rope holder in the life and ministry of the apostle.

**7).** In *Rom.16:13* there is a rope holder who is not identified by name. Paul wrote, “Greet Rufus, a choice man in the Lord, also his mother and mine.” Here is a woman who is recognized because she became a mother to a servant of God who needed the support of a Christian mother. And Paul was most grateful for the mothering ministry she supplied in his life. As an aside, **Hendriksen** wrote, *“the apostle again proves that he appreciates what the female members have done and are doing for himself and for the church, to the glory of God.”*

**8).** Another rope holder in the ministry of Paul would be the household of **Stephanas** (*1Cor.16:15-18*). Paul said, “they devoted themselves for ministry to the saints.” And he described Stephanas as one who has “refreshed my spirit.” The verb “**refresh**” means to give intermission from labor. Stephanas provided physical refreshment for Paul that positively impacted his spirit. I am sure Stephanas also provided spiritual fellowship during those periods when he cared for Paul’s physical needs. The fact to note is that what Stephanas did for Paul was not unusual. Paul wrote to the Corinthians, “[he] refreshed my spirit and yours.” The people in the church at Corinth had also been the beneficiaries of this refreshing ministry provided by Stephanas and his household.

**9).** In *2Tim.1:16-18* we find the Ephesian rope holder named **Onesiphorous**. Paul wrote, “The Lord grant mercy to the house of Onesiphorous, for he often refreshed me and was not ashamed of my chains; but when in Rome, he eagerly

searched for me and found me – the Lord grant to him to find mercy from the Lord on that day – and you know very well what services he rendered at Ephesus.”

This was a most dangerous time to identify oneself with Paul in Rome. Paul was in prison the second time. Nero was Caesar. Paul was facing certain execution. In **2Tim.4:16** Paul wrote, “At my first defense no one supported me, but all deserted me; may it not be counted against them.” The Christians in Rome ran for their best hiding places when Paul came to trial. But not so with Onesiphorous. From Ephesus to Rome, Onesiphorous was a faithful rope holder in the life and ministry of the apostle Paul. Note the verb “**refresh**”. This time Paul used a different verb. The verb means that Onesi’s visits and presence with Paul provided a special tonic to Paul’s soul in the face of his trials and impending execution.

**10).** Another rope holder in the life of Paul was **Philemon**. Philemon had a church in his house. (**Phile.1:2**). In **vs.7** Paul wrote, “I have come to have much joy and comfort in your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, brother.” The verb “**refreshed**” means refreshment as a preparation for the renewal of labor and / or suffering. Philemon’s home was like a kind of retreat for any and every Christian. He provided help to brethren in Christ who were going through the rigors of laboring in the ministry and / or who had suffered at the hands of persecutors.

In **vs.22** Paul wrote, “At the same time also prepare me a lodging, for I hope that through your prayers I will be given to you.” The context of this letter to Philemon is Paul’s first imprisonment. Paul felt that after his release from prison he would need a place to relax, be cared for physically and to have his own soul refreshed. He knew he would be able to have his needs met in Philemon’s home.

**11).** The final Biblical example I want to set before you is **Gaius**. Please turn to **3Jn.1:1-8**. (**read**). Gaius was a godly man. He loved the Lord. He was burdened for

the spread of the gospel. And he was deeply concerned for the welfare of ministers of the gospel. In God's will, he was a man of means. And Gaius became a rope holder in the work of the ministry. He was an important rope holder in the life of the apostle John. But he was also a rope holder to many others in the ministry. Gaius' home was a home for every itinerant preacher and missionary. There was also a place for every itinerant preacher and missionary at Gaius' table. He fed them. He clothed them. He refreshed them. And he never sent them away empty-handed.

Gaius had a reputation for rope-holding hospitality for men in the ministry. But he also had a reputation for knowing the truth, loving the truth and walking in the truth. And he had a reputation for standing firm for the truth. The primary leader in the church was Diotrephes. Diotrephes was an ungodly man who resisted the truth and was leading the church away from the truth. Diotrephes had declared war on men like Gaius who were obeying the truth. Gaius stood like an unshakeable rock against Diotrephes and his wicked deeds.

When it comes to the work of the ministry, every Christian without exception ought to be a rope holder. As a church, you have been led to be rope holders to various men and ministries around the world with financial support, providing gifts of Bibles and study books, providing refreshing through conferences, providing theological training, providing hospitality for Brethren visiting us from other islands and countries, etc., etc. If I were to give you an exhaustive list that spans the years, it would be a long list.

The challenge before you today is this : you should begin by evaluating your ministry gifts, your circumstances, your abilities, your potential, your station in life, and make a prayerful plan before God. In making your plan, you should seek godly counsel. Keep in mind the word **“ministry”** means **“service”**. Ministry gifts are not limited to teaching and preaching. They cover every service ministry in the church. Now a number of you will be in a position where there are unchanging factors in your life. If that is God's providential dealing with you, I do not want you to bring any unnecessary guilt upon your conscience.

Let me use the extreme example of **Ma Lake**. Taking all factors into consideration, Ma Lake is not in a position to volunteer to provide hospitality for any of our visiting sisters who may come to our church for a training module. Her inability to do this and / or to prepare her home to provide such hospitality should not make her leave this service with guilt on her conscience.

Let me ask you, have you ever taken the time to prayerfully and seriously evaluate your ministry gifts, your circumstances, your abilities, your potential, and your station in life in order to determine how you can be used by God for His glory and the building up of His church? Or are you, even as a Christian, caught up in a rich fool kind of mentality and lifestyle where your focus is on you, your concern is for you and your plans are only for you? In all that the Lord Jesus did, He had one primary focus – that focus was you and your eternal salvation. In all that the rope holder Gaius did, he had one primary focus – the salvation of sinners. Gaius' focus was not on personal reputation. His focus was not on how well he cared for the itinerant preachers and missionaries. His focus was on making sure that preachers and missionaries were cared for, ministered to, encouraged and were given some means to continue their good work of preaching the gospel and seeing sinners saved.

We see this very clearly also in the lives of Aquila and Priscilla. Turn to **Rom.16:3-5**. (**read**). These verses make it absolutely clear that Paul and all the churches of the Gentiles were thankful for the rope holding ministry of Aquila and Priscilla in the life of Paul. It would seem that in serving Paul, Aquila and Priscilla did more than provide a home and support for him. One day they placed their lives at great risk for Paul. Paul's Greek literally means to put your neck on the block under the executioner's axe. Aquila and Priscilla were prepared to make the ultimate sacrifice and die so that Paul could live and preach the gospel. Their focus as rope holders was not on themselves and their personal safety but on the gospel being preached and sinners being saved.

Aquila and Priscilla were prepared to sacrifice their lives as rope holders to the apostle Paul. The Philippian believers chose to sacrifice and continue living in abject poverty

below the starvation line as rope holders to the apostle Paul. Their focus was not on their financial security but on Paul being able to continue his ministry of preaching the gospel and establishing churches. *2Cor.8:1-5* describes for us the deep or rock-bottom poverty of the Philippian believers and their overflowing liberality for the cause of the gospel.

In *Acts 18:1-4* Paul is in Corinth making tents to support himself and preaching. But in *vs.5* we read, “But when Silas and Timothy came down from Macedonia, Paul began devoting himself completely to the word, solemnly testifying to the Jews that Jesus was the Christ.” What made it possible for Paul to devote his full time to preaching? The answer is in *Phil.4:15-16*. (**read**). The simple answer is the rope holding financial support he received from the Philippians. It was to these rope-holding sacrificing Philippians the promise was given, “And my God will supply all your needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus.” (*Phil.4:19*).

As a Christian, what is your focus? Is your focus the salvation of sinners? Is your focus the glory of God in the building up of the church of our Lord Jesus Christ? Let us assume that the Lord has not called you to the full-time well-digging ministry. Are you preparing yourself to be a rope holder in the church? You young people, this is what I want you to think about.

Why are you pursuing that education and career? Is it so that you can live the pampered life of eating well, dressing well, buying yourself whatever technological toy you want, traveling, taking vacations, etc., etc.? Or is it so that you can become increasingly involved in a more effective rope holding ministry? What about that dream house you are planning to build? Is it so that you can live in the lap of luxury? Or is it so that your house can become a hospitality station or even a recuperation station for the servants of God?

Let me make it clear that there is nothing wrong with living in luxury if the Lord has blessed you with the means to do so. There were rope holders in Paul’s life who lived in luxury and there were rope holders who lived in poverty. How do we know? In

*Phil.4:12* Paul wrote, “I know how to get along with humble means, and I also know how to live in prosperity; in any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of being filled and going hungry, both of having abundance and suffering need.” Paul knew how to live in luxury in Lydia’s home, in Philemon’s home, in Aquila’s and Priscilla’s home and Paul knew how to sleep under the open sky poorly clothed and shivering in the cold. Paul knew how to eat sumptuous meals, how to share a meal with a poor Gentile believer and how to go hungry.

Why are you planning to buy that vehicle? Is it to satisfy the pride of youth? Is it to prop you up in your mid-life crisis? One day I heard a young Christian businessman say, “*You would know when I have made my first million. I would treat myself to a Porsche.*” He did. And then the Lord took it all away and today he and his wife must work to pay outstanding bills and survive day to day. Is the Lord giving you strength to make money to satisfy the pride of youth, to prop you up in your mid-life crisis or to become the kind of rope holder that will bring great glory to His name?

Well Brethren, I need to stop. We did not get to the third point of the well diggers. And I need to set before you and work out the practical applications of the second point. But as I close I think of Rufus’ mother and her rope holding ministry in Paul’s life. We hear nothing about Paul’s parents and very little about other close relatives. Most likely Rufus’ mother was in her golden years and some believe she was a widow. But she recognized that Paul needed a mother in his life, someone who would love him as a mother would and pray for him as a mother would. She decided to become that mother. We do not know her name. But what she did was very important to Paul and the Holy Spirit made sure that her works were recorded in Holy Scripture as a testimony.

In thinking of Rufus’ mother, another person comes to mind. He is a rope holder in my life. According to his own testimony he has prayed for me daily for the last **49** years of my life. How much of his prayers the Lord has answered in my life, heaven alone will reveal.

The church of our Lord Jesus Christ needs rope holders. Without them, what would the ministry of Paul be like? Yes, the Lord is sovereign and no one can thwart His will and purposes. This is the approach the man with the one talent took. But our sovereign God is also committed to working through means. More than often those means are people, rope holders in the church. This is the approach the man with the five talents took and he gained five more talents. This is the approach the man with the three talents took. And he gained three more talents. They became rope holders in God's sovereign purposes and work in this world. Which approach are you taking?