

Religious Training

When Jesus Christ was on earth, He said to the Pharisees and teachers of the law, *“These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men (Mat 15:8, 9).* The Pharisees thought they could worship God and completely bypass His Christ. Although the Old Testament is filled with prophecies concerning the Messiah and the work He would perform, they ignored this revelation found in the very word they were so careful to guard. Although they had the truth of God in their hands, it did not benefit them, for when the King of Glory *“came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him” (John 1:11).* Through their religious training, they rejected the only Savior the world would ever know. Their worship had become simply *“rules taught by men.”*

The Jews had received the law under Moses and the prophets added further revelation from God. They were certainly honored by God for, *“they have been entrusted with the very words of God” (Rom 3:2),* says Paul. How could they have been the ones with the precious words of the Creator and end up with their hearts far from God? What was their problem? It would be wise to study their error, for we do not want to repeat it. Think of it, they *had* the word of God! God revealed himself to this people as He had never done previously. Again Jesus says to those religious leaders, *“You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life.”* A few verses later, He added, *“If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me. But since you do not believe what he wrote, how are you going to believe what I say?”* (John 5:39, 40, 46, 47).

Here, we are beginning to see their problem. Jesus appeals to the religious leaders from the very thing they allegedly held in high esteem--the law. They did not believe what Moses wrote, Moses wrote about Jesus; therefore it makes sense to Jesus that they would not believe what He said either. What they had was sufficient for them to be saved but their dependence was not upon the Scriptures. What was it then, that caused them to not come to their Christ, that they might have life? Their dependence was on their religious training. Their worship had deteriorated from worshipping the true God according to His very own Word, to worshipping religious traditions created by man. Our Lord was right there upholding the word of truth, teaching those ignorant, rebuking those arrogant and handling the word recklessly, correcting their misconceptions and errors, and training them in the way of righteousness by being a living illustration of the divine word.

The heart of the problem was a lack of humility and an overflow of arrogance. They had the word of God in their hands but had no humility in their hearts toward that word. With all their religious traditions and training and activities, they did not know God.

They were lost. They did not even know anything about the God they were jumping up and down about. All that human energy expended, time spent in Church, pious prayers offered, and they did not even know God! All because they did not respect the word, they did not submit to the word, they would not be corrected by that precious word entrusted to them. They did not pay careful attention to what it said. They certainly read it, but in their arrogance, they took away from it, they added to it and rationalized it. They added interpretations to it that were of human origin. They allowed themselves to be led away by what seemed reasonable. As a result of many generations of this, they came to believe doctrines the Scriptures did not teach. Can this situation happen to us? YES! We also have the Holy Scriptures, and the completed word of God. What can we do to avoid this error? We can first realize that God reveals Himself to us *through* His word. Second, in order to understand the word, we must have humility, which is a willingness to submit to God and His word. Third, no amount of religious training can cause anyone to come to know God and be saved.

We must remember, before we are saved we all were spiritually dead. We could not understand God or know Him. He was a mystery to us. We all have been exposed to some religious training growing up. We have adopted some belief system about God that could only have been perceived through spiritual death. Even if our belief system was that there was no God, we were still trained in that area. If we were trained by those who had the truth and knowledge of God, being spiritually dead it would have no value. We would just look at it as a system of works. The best training is biblical training of course. Not that you can know God by searching the Scriptures and being spiritually dead, for that was the Jews problem we saw earlier. We can know what the Scriptures say, but not understand what it means, and therefore not know God. This happened to Saul of Tarsus, when he was thoroughly trained in the Scriptures, did not know God, he was lost. However, it is easier if you know what the Scriptures say when you are saved, then the Holy Spirit can use those words in you, to enlighten you about spiritual realities even faster. Again, no amount of religious training can cause anyone to know God.

“For since in the wisdom of God, the world through its wisdom did not know him. God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe” (1Cor 1:21). Religious training is all in the realm of *“the wisdom of this world.”* No matter what your background is, no amount of emotional activity or sincerity can bridge the gap, no amount of religious training can bring anyone to the knowledge of God, *“but God has revealed it to us by his Spirit”* (1Cor 2:10). We may think we have an intimate relationship with God, serving Him with gladness and doing His will; but if we have not allowed God to reveal Himself to us by the Spirit of truth, we are still spiritually dead. Why would God not reveal himself to us, surely He wants everyone to know Him and be saved. The reason is *“God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.”* (1Pet 5:5). God does reach out to everyone, but man in his arrogance disregards God’s hand. Listen to some verses of wisdom: *“How long will mockers delight in mockery and fools hate knowledge? If you had responded to my rebuke, I would have poured out my heart to you and made my thoughts known to you. But since you rejected me when I called and no one gave heed when I stretched out my hand, I will in turn laugh at your disaster, I will mock when calamity overtakes you....Then they will call to me but I will not answer; they will*

look for me but will not find me. Since they hated knowledge and did not choose to fear the Lord....but whoever listens to me will live in safety and be at ease, without fear or harm” (Prov 1:24-33). This is very descriptive language to describe man’s arrogance and resistance to the wisdom of God.

God is ready and willing to reveal Himself to man, but man is not always ready to receive the revelation of God. In many ways, man’s religious training gets in the way of God’s revelation. Religious training gives us misconceptions and pre-conceived ideas about what God is like. Also, it gives false perceptions about how to have a relationship with God or be acceptable to Him. Religion will usually prescribe some system of works that if performed, assure the person God is smiling upon them. Religion bolsters man’s arrogance because it makes him feel important, needed, and if he can just perform some ritual or adhere to some set of rules or commandments, God surely cannot deny him. Religion mocks and maligns grace because it cannot understand it. Since God’s policy towards man is grace, man says it is “*foolishness*” and simply rejects a God who would accept people who did not adhere to his system of religion. Therefore, arrogance and self righteousness is the order of the day in religion. Everyone is touting that their system of works will make God do what they say. “If you just will do this or that, then God will...” Every religious group is just a little more moral than the other, or a little more emotional or sincere than the other, or a little more loving than the other, constantly seeking to enlist those who’s sin natures line up with their brand of morality and self righteous arrogance. The terrible thing about it all is that they know not God!

The god behind religion is not the true God. If it is not God, then the only other influence in the universe is Satan and the angels that sided with him. In fact, Paul calls him the “*god of this age*” in 2Corinthians 4:4, and the “*ruler of the kingdom of the air*” in Ephesians 2:2, and says “*no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light. It is not surprising, then, if his servants masquerade as servants of righteousness*” in 2Corinthians 11:14, 15). What a great deception Satan has come up with, what cunning trickery he has concocted to deceive those who reject grace and God’s word. The god of religion is Satan. He rewards those who worship at his alters, who serve him with a full commitment. Man does feel a certain confidence and assurance when going through those empty rituals and false realities. Satan is a wolf, dressed in sheep’s clothing. How can we possibly avoid this trap?

Compared to man, Satan is a powerful super-creature, far surpassing man in intelligence and might. He knows far more about God and man than unsaved man will ever know by digging up rocks and bones, or by unearthing ancient civilization’s ruins, or even by searching the scriptures. Satan is so smart, he was able to deceive many angels who actually looked into the face of God and beheld His Glory. We are certainly no match for this super creature. After all, our sin natures line up with Satan’s schemes for our natures are patterned after his. Satan is a master deceiver of angels and man. In the tribulation, the man of sin will be revealed and his work will be “*in accordance with the work of Satan displayed in all kinds of counterfeit miracles, signs and wonders, and in every sort of evil* (Satan doesn’t care which deception works, anyone you will accept will do) *that deceives those who are perishing. They perish because they refused to love*

the truth (they had the truth but did not think it was greater than the deception) *and so be saved*" (2Thess 2:9, 10). Notice that the man of sin, who is not here yet, derives his power from Satan. In Revelation 13:3, 4, we read about this man of sin, called the beast, "*The whole world was astonished and followed the beast. Men worshipped the dragon because he had given authority to the beast, and they worshipped the beast...*" (see Rev 13:3, 4, 11, 12). Who is this dragon they were really worshipping? "*The great dragon was hurled down--that ancient serpent called the devil or Satan, who leads the whole world astray*" (Rev 12:9). Why was the whole world astonished and worshipping the beast? Because they saw what they considered a miracle of healing (see Rev 13:3). They were so occupied with what they considered miraculous, they refused to love the truth.

We know that Satan will try to give authority to his false systems of religion by using counterfeit miracles, signs and wonders. He copied this from God who actually performed true miraculous signs and wonders to testify to the true message and messengers (see Heb 2:4). Although we are not in the tribulation now, this is Satan's way of deceiving the masses now. How does Satan perform miracles, signs and wonders? I don't know. But there is a lot of things I don't know about science that I might think are miraculous, but can be easily explained scientifically. I can watch a magician that I *know* is going to deceive me, and still cannot figure out how simple magic tricks are done. Satan is a super genius and knows how to do things man will probably never discover. Hopefully, you will not read this and think I am trying to glorify Satan's powers, but you will see that I am trying to expose them.

How can we avoid this trap? We must have humility to allow God to teach us about Himself through His word. He will do it, and is willing to do it, the problem is with us, we want to tell God what He is like and how to worship from the standpoint of our religious training. We must take great care to see what God is saying through His word, reading the word with humility. Accepting God's wisdom and council even if it contradicts our reasoning or background. If the word of God contradicts our reasoning or understanding, or our circumstances or experience, the Bible is always right and we are wrong! Everybody who is truly saved can say, they thought they knew what God was like, but it was not until God opened up our eyes, enlightened us, caused us to be born from above, saved us by His grace that we truly understood. Now we can look back and see all our false notions, lies, half truths and misconceptions we formerly held in religious training for what they really were. Jesus said it best, "*Then you will know the truth and the truth will set you free*" It will set you free from the lies, and "*if the Son sets you free you will be free indeed*" (John 8:31, 36). What is the truth? "*Thy word is truth*" (John 17).

How can we be true to God? By learning His word, by submitting to His system to learn His word, by accepting the authority of the word over us. I will not take time here to point out each deception, for I don't even know them all. We are not to be ignorant of Satan's schemes, but we are to focus our attention on God's truth. I have pointed out some of the basic deceptions I have encountered as they relate to salvation and the way of salvation in earlier discourses. If we disregard the testimony of God, there is no way we

can come to this wisdom. We are like a ship with no rudder. What we need to do is to examine everything we believe. We need to ask ourselves if the Bible really teaches the doctrines we hold. We must not say “of course it does” for we will be surprised if it does not. We must not hold a high opinion of ourselves or our religious training, we must realize we know nothing and be willing to learn everything. Again, Jesus said it best, “*I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven*” (Mat 18:3, 4). Little children are a perfect illustration. There is no question that their parents are greater than they, so in simple faith, they humbly depend on them for everything. Humility is the soil that God uses to produce the good fruit.

Satan will use anything to undermine our hope in God, and our faith in the word of God. Miracles, signs and wonders are not the test of truth, for if we depend on these things we will certainly be deceived. Satan is using these counterfeit miracles to testify to his false gospel even now. The Bible is the last word as far as truth is concerned. Everyone has some religious training. It does not matter what your background, if you have humility towards the word of God, you can know God. Remember, God is not willing that any should perish, but if we will not listen to the word, we will certainly not be saved or come to the full knowledge of the truth (1Tim 2:3,4). God reveals Himself through His word, that is the true test of any doctrine. Can you believe the word? Can you trust God with your life? What if God is not what you thought He was, will you still look to Him? I may hold a false doctrine, but if I have humility, God will show me the truth. But when He does, will I be willing to accept it, even if it contradicts my reasoning, or religious training? My choice is to let God be the potter and I’ll be the clay, to mold me and shape me according to His perfect will. I don’t know what I will look like when He finishes, but I know “*that when He appears we will be like him, for we will see him as he is*” (1John 3:2).

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