

GENTLE SHEPHERD MINISTRIES

CONTENDING FOR THE FAITH ~ MAKING DISCIPLES ~ EQUIPPING THE SAINTS FOR MINISTRY

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DISCERNMENT

Part 2

TYPES OF DISCERNMENT

By Rayola Kelley

Last month I started a series on discernment. I made a statement that the greatest virtue and gift missing in the church is **discernment**. In an article by Marvin Rosenthal in the magazine, *Zion's Fire*, he made a similar observation, "History will record that the gift of discernment is perhaps the most neglected gift of the twenty-first-century Church, and it is only going to get worse as we approach the end of the age."

Discernment is a subject that has been allowed to go to the wayside in many churches for two reasons. The first reason is discernment is a topic that has been presented with negative connotations because it is constantly being associated with self-righteous judgment and hate propagated by political correctness. It is sometimes discouraged, put down, shunned, ignored, and berated by church leadership.

The second reason is because the word "discernment" has often been used as a fake cover-up by those who do unmercifully judge. These individuals cannot afford discernment to properly operate among Christians because they would be identified as wolves promoting their own wicked agenda. They are like the false prophets whose first words that come out of their mouths are a warning "to beware of false prophets" in order to disarm the people. Likewise judgmental people exalt their cruel judgment as being discernment, while pouncing on those with true discernment as being judgmental. These individuals run around trying to take the sliver out of the so-called "culprit's eye" while maintaining the board in their own deceitful eye (*Matthew 7:1-6*).

These two unbalanced presenta-

tions of discernment have caused much confusion in the church. Christians who have this gift often see themselves as being strange because they are treated like misfits due to the fact they cannot simply go with the crowd about the latest Christian fads or gurus. They sense something is wrong and may even try to warn leadership or certain people, only to be met with a steely intolerance that makes them regret they even said anything, but at the same time the need to speak up is so strong they are unable, for the most part, to remain quiet.

There are two types of discernment. The Apostle Paul mentioned the gift of discernment in *1 Corinthians 12:10*. In the gift of discernment a person has the ability to spiritually sense what is happening in the unseen world. This unseen world includes the spirit that is in operation and the type of idolatrous environment that is being set up by the wrong spirit and/or heretical teaching. This sense is not based on logic, emotions, or opinions, but on the Holy Spirit. It is reasonable to conclude if something is unseen, only the unseen can properly classify it for what it is.

The Apostle Paul clearly brings this out in *1 Corinthians 2:10-16*. He states that man can only spiritually know a matter by the Spirit of God. He explains how the Holy Spirit is the real teacher and enables believers to compare spiritual things with spiritual things. In other words, a believer is able to properly classify something after testing matters out.

People who judge are operating according to their own take on something, but a person who discerns is able to classify something based on what it actually is. For example, the ability to tell an apple from an orange, a duck from a goose or a deer from an elk or a moose from a cow



is a matter of discernment, not judgment. Discernment means you have the necessary understanding of being able to know what you are looking for so you can properly classify it when you see it. For example, from a distance it might be hard to discern if the bird I see floating on the river is a duck or a goose, but once I hear it honk and see its full size as it flies off, I will be able to correctly identify the fowl as being a goose.

It is important to realize we do not judge an apple as being so, because it has already been established as an apple; therefore, only an ignorant person who does not know what an apple looks like would not be able to properly discern it. This is the biggest problem in the church. People do not know what they are looking at because they don't know what to look for to properly discern a matter.

Hebrews 5:11-14 talks about the second type of discernment: the ability to discern between good and evil. Most Christians might think that discerning between good and evil is a no-brainer, but that's not true. The Bible is clear that such discernment must be exercised for a person to properly operate in it. In other words, spiritual discernment is developed as righteousness and its ways are properly implemented into one's life.

It is important to note that there is a beautiful side to evil and an abrasive side to good, which is the truth. We are reminded in *2 Corinthians 11:13-14* that Satan can present himself as an angel of light and his ministers as ministers of righteousness. There are those who have a form of godliness, but deny the power thereof (*2 Timothy 3:5*). It is hard for people to realize that Satan seduces people with that which outwardly appears to be religious and right into a strong delusion that has the power to eventually make experience seem more real than the Word of God, delusion appear as truth, and true righteousness as being untrustworthy and evil (*1 Timothy 4:1-2*).

When you consider the scriptures in *Hebrews 5:11*, the first thing you will note is the warning about being dull of hearing. The main thing that causes one to be dull of hearing is an unhealthy relationship with the world. The more agreement one has with the world, the duller of hearing a person becomes.

The second condition that *Hebrews 5:12* speaks of is the fact that such a person is still spiritually immature. Such an individual has never graduated from the milk of doctrine to the place of being able to partake of the strong meat of the Word without choking on it or spitting it out. Jesus stated in *John 4:34*, "My meat is to do the will of him that sent me, and to finish his work."

The concept of meat is attached to the will of God. Those who have not graduated from the milk of the Word are unskillful in discerning the will of God in a matter. To ensure this type of maturity involves consecrating self as a living sacrifice for the sole purpose of proving what is the good, acceptable, and perfect will of God in a matter (*Romans 12:1-2*).

There are many well-meaning Christians striving to do the will of God, but who miss the mark because they are unable to discern what the will of God is in a particular matter. They may do various works for God, and still have no idea if they are in His will. Such people figure if it is for God that it will be okay, but the truth is God is not looking for works, but for the type of service that brings Him honor and glory in the end. Clearly, these individuals cannot discern what God's good pleasure is, what He would consider to be an acceptable sacrifice, and whether their activities and service will place them in the perfect will of God.

Hebrews 5:13 gives us insight into the ingredient that is missing from those who are unskillful when it comes to properly applying the Word of God, "For every one that useth milk is unskillful in the word of righteousness: for he is a babe." The key word in this verse is "righteousness."

People who are still drinking milk may know doctrine, but they do not understand the ways and workings of righteousness in a matter. They may have right standing before God be-

cause of redemption, but they may not understand what it means to do right by God and right in regard to others. They may quote the creed of their church, but they have no consensus about how God views a particular matter. The truth is a person cannot discern between good and evil unless they know how to recognize the ways of righteousness. People can wear outside cloaks of religion and self-righteousness, but they ultimately will fail to exercise the ways of righteousness in their lives. Even though they put on a good show for everyone else, there is something that is off center in their conduct and attitude.

This brings us to what constitutes "righteousness." If a person is born again, positionally a person has right standing with the Lord. However, that does not mean a person is doing right when it comes to his or her Christian walk.

This brings us to the sin of omission. Most people know about the sins of commission. These are sins that are done in the body as far as hatred, stealing, adultery, coveting, and so forth. However, the sin that ranks high in Christendom is the sin of omission. This is where right attitude, right actions, or right conduct have been omitted. Sins of commission find their source in rebellion, but the sin of omission often finds its source in unbelief. People fail to believe the Word and respond accordingly to it, which is sin (*James 4:17*).

Faith comes from hearing and hearing from the Word of God (*Romans 10:17*). A person who responds in faith, whether it is to the salvation message or an instruction found in the Word of God, can be assured that God will count such action as being righteous. Genuine faith is active in its response, and this is why faith without acts of obedience is dead (*James 2:17-26*). The Apostle Paul said it best in *Romans 14:23b*, "...for whatsoever is not of faith is sin." Everything we as believers do must be because we believe that God is true; therefore, everything in His Word is also true and we need to respond accordingly. It is up to each of us to choose to believe what is in the Word as being true, with the intent of properly applying its principles, exam-

ples, and instructions to our lives so that we become living, walking epistles for the world to read, see, and observe (*2 Corinthians 3:1-3*).

This brings us back to the ways of righteousness. New believers usually start out intellectually believing a matter, but to apply it to one's life in order to walk it out, it must first reach into the very depths of our heart. As *Romans 10:9-10* tells us we must believe the Gospel is so in our heart. For some Christians there is an intellectual agreement with the Word, but such an agreement does not usually translate to walking the walk. Our walk must be in step with the Lord Jesus Christ in light of His Word. This means obeying the Word. In the two types of discernment, the gift of discernment, the Spirit of God must be giving the impression, sense, or insight into the unseen, but when it comes to discerning between good and evil it takes the Spirit and the Word of God to establish the validity of intention and/or action.

To discern the difference between good and evil, one must be able to recognize what is righteous as established in the Word in order to confirm the spirit behind it. Attitudes, approaches, and actions must be inspired by the right spirit in light of the Word of God. The Word is clear about what constitutes wicked actions, but when it comes to something being evil, it is not as obvious because it is more of an inward state than an action.

For example, people who have evil designs can prove to be good game players, but lack real godly submission to the ways of righteousness. There are also people who know the Word, but their spirit is wrong and will lead people astray. This is why *1 John 4:1* instructs us to test the spirits. If the spirit is wrong, actions will fall short, causing confusion, ultimately producing unacceptable fruit. If a spirit or a matter fails to line up to the counsel of the Word of God, it must be counted as being of the flesh and the world, and not of the Spirit of God.

Hebrews 5:14 gives us the last key in discerning, that of spiritual maturity. Those who are coming to full age have become skillful in the Word of God. In *Hebrews 5:14*, we are told, "But strong meat belongeth to them

that are of full age, even those who by reason of use have senses exercised to discern both good and evil.”

One of the problems is that many Christians fail to become skillful in the Word. They slide by on the knowledge of salvation, skip over growing in a greater knowledge of Jesus as they maintain an unrealistic view of the Christian walk, are content with the milk of doctrine, and fail to see a need to graduate to the meat of the Word.

There are various reasons for this spiritual state, the major one being that some believers do not see the Word as their milk, bread, and meat. They know enough to slide into heaven, but they fail to know Jesus, and if a person does not know the real Jesus, then he or she will be unable to discern the counterfeits masquerading as wolves in sheep's clothing, and just as Jesus warned in Matthew 24, there are plenty of counterfeits out there.

It is vital that Christians come to full age by feeding on the Word, walking in the ways of righteousness, exercising godliness, and being able to properly classify what is good and what is evil in a world that shuns absolutes, mocks morality, and rages against righteousness.

If you are not coming to full age in order to discern good and evil, I want to encourage you to push aside the comfortable milk of doctrine and begin to ask the Spirit of God to feed you meat. Granted, it might be hard for you to swallow at first and you may want to spit it out, but the more you assimilate it by walking it out in your life, the more you will be enlarged to partake of more meat, which will enable you to drop the baby bottle, graduate from the infant stage and grow into spiritual maturity in order to come into the fullness of your calling and ministry. †

WHO IS YOUR HEAD?

“Jesus Christ wants His church back, He wants her undivided love and unqualified submission to Him as her only Head and sole authority.” - Kenneth Butcher

“I delight to think of the thousands of God's beloved people who are scattered up and down amid the various religious organizations of the day—living stones amid the debris.” - C.H. Mackintosh

PETER'S WORDS OF WISDOM By Smith Wigglesworth

“Humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you in due time.” — 1 Peter 5:6

Let's take a look at the fifth chapter of 1 Peter. *“Humble yourselves”* (v. 6). Look at the Master at the Jordan River, submitting Himself to the baptism of John, then again submitting Himself to the cruel Cross. Truly, angels desire to look into these things (1 Pet. 1:12), and all heaven is waiting for the man who will burn all the bridges behind him and allow God to begin a plan in righteousness, so full, so sublime, beyond all human thought, but according to the revelation of the Spirit.

“Casting all your care upon Him, for He cares for you” (1 Pet. 5:7). He cares! We sometimes forget this. If we descend into the natural, all goes wrong, but when we trust Him and abide beneath His shadow, how blessed it is. Oh, many times I have experienced my helplessness and nothingness, and casting my care upon Him has proved that He cares.

Verse eight tells us to *“be sober, be vigilant.”* What does it mean to be sober? It means to have a clear knowledge that we are powerless to manage, but also to have a rest of faith. The Adversary's opportunity is when we think that we are something and try to open our own door. Our thoughts, words, and deeds must all be in the power of the Holy Spirit. Oh yes, we need to be sober—not only sober, but also vigilant. We need not only to be filled with the Spirit but also to have a “go forth” in us, a knowledge that God's holy presence is with us. To be sober and vigilant, to have an ability to judge, discern, and balance things that differ—this is what we need.

“Your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour. Resist him, steadfast in the faith” (vv. 8-9). We must resist in the hour when Satan's schemes may bewilder us, when we are almost swept off our feet, and when darkness is upon us to such a degree that it seems as if some evil thing had overtaken us. *“Resist him, steadfast in the faith.”* *“He who keeps*

Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep” (Ps. 121:4). God covers us, for no human can stand against the powers of hell.

“After you have suffered a while” (1 Pet. 5:10). Then there is some suffering? Yes! But it is *“not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us”* (Rom. 8:18). The difference is so great that our suffering is not even worthy of mention. Ours is an eternal glory, from glory to glory, until we are swallowed up, until we are swallowed up in Him, the Lord of glory. †

COMMENTS

“June newsletter. WOW! Right on Sisters!!! All articles wonderful, they always are of course but some seem to hit you more. So much wishy-washy everything going on in this world even in the House of God and that's where the judgement starts. As for the weeping, well, I weep easily, but don't like to in public. However, when I came to the Lord I was weeping from the moment Peter Youngren started preaching on the cross and when he made the alter call I was one of the first to go up front still weeping in front of all those people! On my own never would I make a spectacle of myself, but when the Holy Spirit leads.....!!” - BC

“Starting reading the newsletter and started with your [Jeannette's] article as you had me interested with ‘Moving The Stop Sign’. Wow, you really packed a punch in your powerful article. It is very sobering and convicting to take to heart what you have written.” - ID

“GREAT articles [April NL]... all of 'em! May ‘the force’ NOT be with you!!! LOL!!! Thanks. - FL

“The Islam infiltrators have bought out our news stations, our banks, our food chains and much more. America has been asleep. We would be even more shocked to see how our courts, Universities and our schools have been taken over, and many of our churches. That is why O'Reilly is gone and other conservatives. Such a deal!!! Blessings to you guys.” - WA

“Redeeming the time, because the days are evil.” - Ephesians 5:16

ARE YOU RIDING IN THE BOXCAR, DRINKING MILK? By Jeannette Haley

“For when for the time ye ought to be teachers, ye have need that one teach you again which be the first principles of the oracles of God; and are become such as have need of milk, and not of strong meat. For every one that useth milk is unskilful in the word of righteousness: for he is a babe. But strong meat belongeth to them that are of full age, even those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil.” - Hebrews 5:12-14

A number of upbeat and catchy songs have been written on the theme of Christians riding on the “train to heaven.” Folks like to sing along while entertaining the happy idea of hopping aboard that heaven-bound train where they can sit back and enjoy the ride. Of course, this is pure fantasy, but if there were such a train, I daresay the majority of passengers would be unwittingly riding in a personal boxcar. And, some of those boxcars aren’t very big.

When it comes to the Christian life, many people have a tendency to look for a workable formula, acceptable blueprint, understandable synopsis, or a compatible explanation that can be contained (thus controlled) in one’s “personal boxcar” where it can be safely confined and locked away from any outside interference (from God or others) that may challenge it to grow, mature, expand, explore and experience Christ, the Living Word, through the eternal Spirit, as the All in All.

Looking to any type of workable formula for a successful, workable, predictable, unruffled Christian life is self-defeating and unrealistic. Not only that, but it reveals self-serving slothfulness, as well as a lack of faith in the Holy Spirit to guide, instruct, teach and lead into an ever unfolding revelation of the Person and work of Jesus Christ and His will. Formulas may be helpful in some aspects of life in the physical, scientific, mathematical and worldly realm, but in the spiritual realm they are extremely limiting and, if depended upon, are about as spiritually flimsy as a punctured inner tube is to a drowning person. When life’s stormy waves

begin to break over your head, your well-rehearsed formulas (and platitudes) will only help you to sink faster. In other words, God is sovereign and doesn’t have to conform to religious formulas, nor will formulas save anybody.

People’s naïve dependency on formulas to provide a “fail safe plan” to help them perform the “right way” to keep God “off their back” and ensure that they will arrive safely in heaven is a recipe for spiritual disaster. Assuming that formulas are somehow the “life preserver” that is supposed to erase fear of failure and guarantee a relatively easy life without major upsets, disasters, conflicts, suffering and challenges that require decisions and actions that are outside of the formula’s boundaries is sheer folly. When real life intrudes and overrules the pat answers of man, this is the time when formulas fail, and a person’s faith plummets for the pure reason that God cannot be contained in mere formulas within the confines of man’s “boxcar” existence. This was the difference between righteous Job and his companions—they clung to their formulas and Job clung to the Sovereign God he knew, loved and served so well.

There are many formulas available in today’s religious market. Some examples of formulas are, “The Four Spiritual Laws” that were popular in recent times (which should not be used as an end in and of itself); the plethora of man-centered self-help books that offer man’s vain philosophies as substitutes for serious Bible study and meditation on the Word of God. Formulas abound such as those offered by so-called “Christian” psychology, Focus on the Family (instead of focus on Christ); contemplative meditation and spiritual formation (Hinduism and New Age); Word of Faith/Positive Confession (mind science, witchcraft); Emergent Church methods, and so forth. People like formulas, however, because a formula can give a person a warped sense of infallibility, power and control.

Marvin J. Rosenthal wrote, “Tradition can be good, but sometimes however well-intended, tradition can be a hindrance to truth. For some, tradition becomes truth in

place of ‘thus saith the Lord.’” Personally, I would also like to add that for some tradition becomes the “ultimate” religious experience in place of dependency upon, and life in, the Holy Ghost. Therefore, if the truth is hindered by tradition, and the Holy Spirit is quenched by tradition, how can we declare that Jesus is the Head of the church?

Dependency upon formulas not only leads people away from Christ and the Word of God, but they open the door for cultish beliefs and behavior, as well as occult and demonic influences. This is because adhering to a formula can actually make the formula itself a type of anti-Christ (substitute for Christ) and negates the presence of the Holy Spirit whom we are to be led by, walk in, and be filled with because the Holy Spirit will always point us to Christ, reveal Christ, confirm the work of Christ, exalt Christ and cause us to worship Christ. The Holy Spirit gives us the gifts of the Spirit, one of which is the much-neglected, but very much needed gift of discernment. “*Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world*” 1 John 4:1. “*This I say then, Walk in the Spirit, and ye shall not fulfil the lust of the flesh*” Galatians 5:16. “*If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit*” Galatians 5:25. “*For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God*” Romans 8:14.

People who are functioning within the narrow confines of a religious formula will become resistant and belligerent if anything outside of their formula, including the truth, challenges them to a greater understanding and perspective. A formula often serves as a type of insulation from a personal encounter and relationship with God, as well as feeds pride, and dulls a person down with a false sense of “accomplishment” as a Christian. We are not called to be “accomplishers” but to be victorious overcomers by the power of the Holy Spirit.

People riding in boxcars can’t be sure of where they are, and they certainly can’t enjoy the scenic beauty of the trip. Christians in a boxcar religion are just as limited. They have no un-

derstanding of the ways of God, neither do they have a burning desire to escape the stuffy confines of their boxcar spiritual life, exchanging it for first class seating where the light shines in and avenues for true ministry (service) abound. Once people settle into their dingy boxcar with their predictable formula, they adapt to the status quo, which leaves them with no desire to pursue an intimate relationship with God by continuing to learn of Him, seek His face, know Him in greater ways, and follow Him outside the confining, lifeless formula mentality. Keep in mind, all cults and false religions operate within the perimeters of formulas

An example from Scripture is the story of the rich, young ruler who approached Jesus, and said, "And a certain ruler asked him, saying, Good Master, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" (See Luke 18:18-22). As you study this passage, you realize that while the young man was seeking for a formula for eternal life by keeping some of the Ten Commandments, he had missed, not only the intent of the Law, but the Law Giver Himself, and his lack of faith and spiritual blindness became evident when he refused to pay the price of true discipleship, rejected Jesus' answer, and sorrowfully turned away from Him to walk back into his empty world of "formulas." Even if it were possible for a person to keep the whole law, but miss Jesus, the only thing that person would acquire besides a dead-letter formula, is a religious spirit; and, he or she would still be lost. Only Jesus saves!

Therefore, if you are directing your life according to some sort of religious formula, you're merely riding in the limitations of a boxcar without the presence of the Living God for "behold, heaven and the heaven of heavens cannot contain thee; how much less this house which I have built!" **2 Chronicles 6:18b**. Nothing and no one can reduce the Lord God Almighty to a mere formula!

The next group of Christians is those who long for an acceptable blueprint for their life, especially as it relates to their future. They can also settle for riding to heaven in a boxcar of spiritual limitations. Let's face it, people being what we/they are, wonder about the future and what it holds.

Many people step over the boundary of God's protective warnings and admonitions concerning the dangers of fortunetellers, diviners, mediums, and such, while many a zealous (but untaught) Christian has fallen prey to false prophets and their lying spirits within the church. (Note: The same lying and familiar spirits that speak through so-called "Christian" false prophets and heretics are the same as those who speak through mediums, diviners, fortunetellers, etc.)

When the risen Christ spoke with Peter on the beach prior to His ascension, He gave him a prophetic blueprint, saying, "Verily, verily, I say unto thee, When thou wast young, thou girdedst thyself, and walkedst whither thou wouldest: but when thou shalt be old, thou shalt stretch forth thy hands, and another shall gird thee, and carry thee whither thou wouldest not" **John 21:18**. Seeing the Apostle John nearby, Peter asked Jesus what was going to happen to John, and the content of Jesus' response implied, "That is none of your business"... "follow thou me" **John 21:22b**.

Thus we see that Peter was given a very rare perspective from the lips of the Lord as to how his journey in this world would end, but between the time that Jesus uttered those words and the day in which, according to historians, they were fulfilled when both Peter and his wife were martyred by the Romans on the same day, he had no definite, detailed, minute-by-minute blueprint but to follow Jesus.

Nevertheless, many Christians try to work out an acceptable blueprint for their lives, sometimes based on verses from the Bible taken out of context, or because some "prophet" gave them a grandiose "personal prophecy", or by bits and pieces of man's so-called "wisdom" they pick up from sermons, or from "feel good" "Christian" books that fit into their notions about how life is going to work out for them if they carefully plan everything out and then follow that blueprint to the letter. While a formula consists of carefully constructed rules, regulations, do's and don'ts, church traditions and pat answers, acceptable blueprints are more futuristic and personally "tailor made" to the individual which, in reality, offers a false sense of somehow being in control of one's future and life in this

world, which, in the end will enable them to painlessly step into heaven much like a passenger disembarks from a boat onto the dock.

Because of the imaginary, futuristic blueprint that has been worked out to the person's liking, riding in the boxcar to heaven is less risky than moving on up to the unlimited possibilities presented in the deluxe passenger car. After all, some experienced and wise old saint in the passenger car might present a challenge to one's blueprint, and that is a risk that this type of Christian can't take. Nope. It's better to withdraw into the boxcar and keep focusing on that carefully constructed blueprint so none of the lines become blurred. It's safer that way. Or, is it?

In Peter's case, the blueprint Jesus gave him was actually a type of comfort for him. After all, he had failed the Lord on more than one occasion, and then when Jesus needed him the most, he denied three times that he even knew Him. Yet, here was the Rock of Ages giving Peter a blueprint that assured him that he would fulfill his calling and commission, and in the end, instead of denying his Lord, he would actually give his life for Him. Peter needed to know that God, in His mercy, was showing Peter that he was forgiven, and that his life would make a difference in lives, that he would be a living sacrifice, and eventually an acceptable offering to God. He knew from that time on that he was, in God's eyes, an overcomer. How personal, wonderful and awesome our God is!

But, it's a whole different story when we take it upon ourselves to map out our own idea of what our life should look like. Pushed by fear, insecurity and pride the temptation to reject the truth of reality and accept whatever looks, feels or sounds good to itching ears can propel us into a tailor-made fantasyland that makes Walt Disney look like an amateur. The greatest danger in all of this is the subtle redefinition of God and His Word. When a blueprint becomes a person's guiding factor as the "way, the truth and the life" it has taken the place of Christ. Focusing on the blueprint will blind spiritual eyes, and deafen spiritual ears. The person's prevailing focus is on fulfilling the blue-

print instead of daily following Jesus.

Then there are the people who settle for what they consider to be an understandable synopsis of the Gospel. They have no problem riding in the boxcar because they figure they have enough information to get by in this life, and enough knowledge to slide into the next. They have all the “basics” of Christianity down pat; can quote the plan of salvation forwards and backwards, and as far as they are concerned, that’s good enough. Their take on Christianity is, if you simply “accept Jesus” and tack Him on to your life when it serves your purpose, why go to all the bother to read and study the Bible? Synopsis people are content to sit in a predictable church where nothing out of the ordinary ever happens, and where they are never challenged in a personal way to surrender all and get real with God.

These are the people who don’t care if the scenery outside their boxcar changes as long as it doesn’t affect them; they don’t care about what they are missing in the first class passenger car, and their whole attitude is, “I can take it or leave it, I’m saved—so what’s the big deal?” As far as they’re concerned, it’s up to others to go out into the harvest field, and labor for the Master.

In the parable of the talents (*Matthew 25:14-30*) we read of the servant who only had to be faithful with one talent, but instead he “*digged in the earth, and hid his lord’s money.*” This servant operated with an understandable synopsis, and this limitation, when confronted with the slightest command of his Lord, revealed his true character and heart condition. This servant was given the least of all the other servants, yet he did nothing with what he had, but went and buried it.

Perhaps Matthew Henry’s comment on this Scripture best describes such a slothful, arrogant and self-sufficient servant. Henry wrote: “Christ keeps no servants to be idle: they have received their all from him, and have nothing they can call their own but sin. Our receiving from Christ is in order to our working for him. The manifestation of the Spirit is given to every man to profit withal. The day of account comes at last. We must all be reckoned with as to what good we

have got to our own souls, and have done to others, by the advantages we have enjoyed. It is not meant that the improving of natural powers can entitle a man to Divine grace. It is the real Christian’s liberty and privilege to be employed as his Redeemer’s servant, in promoting his glory, and the good of his people: the love of Christ constrains him to live no longer to himself, but to Him that died for him, and rose again. Those who think it impossible to please God, and in vain to serve him, will do nothing to purpose in religion. They complain that He requires of them more than they are capable of, and punishes them for what they cannot help. Whatever they may pretend, the fact is, they dislike the character and work of the Lord. The slothful servant is sentenced to be deprived of his talent. This may be applied to the blessings of this life; but rather to the means of grace. Those who know not the day of their visitation, shall have the things that belong to their peace hid from their eyes. His doom is, to be cast into outer darkness. It is a usual way of expressing the miseries of the damned in hell. Here, as in what was said to the faithful servants, our Saviour goes out of the parable into the thing intended by it, and this serves as a key to the whole. Let us not envy sinners, or covet any of their perishing possessions.”

The last type of Christian riding in a boxcar is the one who bases his or her beliefs on a compatible explanation. Such people filter everything they read or hear concerning Christianity through their “mental framework” which is made up of preconceived conclusions that serve as guardians to their fragile ego. While such people may appear to be open to hear other opinions and conclusions, their mind is already made up, and if an explanation is presented that isn’t compatible with what they already believe, they simply dismiss it as bothersome irrelevant.

While outwardly they may appear to be receptive, inwardly anything that doesn’t neatly “fit” into their like-minded filter, or is incompatible with what they have already concluded, or that challenges them out of their comfort zone in any way is simply dismissed. Their “filter” has nothing to do

with separating truth from error; rather, they filter out anything from the Word of God, or exhortations from the Lord’s servants that challenge them in their comfort zone. Thus, they can merrily ride along in their own personal boxcar without a thought or concern for what others are thinking, doing or experiencing. And, that also includes what God is doing in the world, in the church, or in the lives of people.

These people actually enjoy riding in the boxcar because it separates them from “fundamentalists” whom they view as narrow minded, old fashioned, outdated, and clueless. Even though they may nod and smile at the exposition of a solid, “rooted and grounded,” seasoned soldier of the cross, inwardly they cringe at bold confidence that unashamedly declares the “way, the truth and the life” as it is written. This prideful “stiff-neckedness” causes them to be receptive to different “interpretations” and explanations of the Bible, as well as who God, Jesus and the Holy Ghost are, what constitutes true Christian living, and so forth. Therefore, when given the opportunity to reject blatant error, they may play around with it while trying to figure out how to fit it into their personally constructed mental framework. All of this compromise may give them a heady feeling, but their feet are precariously standing on shifting sands.

An example of such a person can be found in the parable of the wedding feast in *Matthew 22:11-14*, “*And when the king came in to see the guests, he saw there a man which had not on a wedding garment: And he saith unto him, Friend, how camest thou in hither not having a wedding garment? And he was speechless. Then said the king to the servants, Bind him hand and foot, and take him away, and cast him into outer darkness; there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth, For many are called, but few are chosen.*” Here is what Charles Haddon Spurgeon said pertaining to this Scripture: “The God of love is willing to save all the souls that he has made. This he has proclaimed to them in his word, together with the terms of salvation, revealed by the Son of his love, who gave his own life that they that believe in him

might have everlasting life. And for these he has prepared a kingdom, from the foundation of the world. But he will not force them to accept of it; he leaves them in the hands of their own counsel; he saith, "Behold, I set before you life and death, blessing and cursing: Choose life, that ye may live." Choose holiness, by my grace; which is the way, the only way, to everlasting life. He cries aloud, "Be holy, and be happy; happy in this world, and happy in the world to come." "Holiness becometh his house for ever!" This is the wedding garment of all that are called to "the marriage of the Lamb." Clothed in this, they will not be found naked: "They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb." But as to all those who appear in the last day without the wedding garment, the Judge will say, "Cast them into outer darkness; there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

Therefore, if you can identify with riding in a "spiritual" boxcar while depending on your workable formula, or acceptable blueprint, or understandable synopsis, or compatible explanation to get you to heaven, now is the time to call out to the Lord to stop the train and help you exit the confining box you have stuffed yourself, and God, into. It's time to repent, surrender all to Jesus, and let Him set you free, lead you into all truth, cause you to be quickened by His Spirit, save you by grace, and raise you up with the saints of God, and make you to sit in heavenly places in Christ Jesus.

It's time to exchange the "milk train" for the "meat train." *"Therefore, leaving the principles of the doctrine of Christ, let us go on unto perfection; not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works, and of faith toward God. Of the doctrine of baptisms and of laying on of hands, and of resurrection of the dead, and of eternal judgment" Hebrews 6:1-3.*

Are you ready for the challenge?



EXERCISE DISCERNMENT

(From the Berean Call) - "Too often the phrase "Touch not God's anointed!" is an excuse for not exercising the discernment God has given us. Many who say this are unaware that they have already judged an individual to be a prophet of God and, as a consequence, will not do anything that might seem to question their statements or activities, no matter what they say or do. May God keep us from such fatal complacency.

"Beloved, believe not every spirit, but [test] the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world."—1 John:4:1

(From *This World: Playground or Battleground?* By A. W. Tozer) - "Conditions over the world are so grave that no one who thinks at all is able any longer to maintain a spirit of optimism. The world's philosophers have long ago ceased to preach peace, except as a goal toward which the nations should frantically struggle even while they have but little hope of attaining it.

The best brains of the world have gone into the production of tools with which to destroy the world. And if they do such things in the green tree, what shall they do in the dry?

When Pharaoh was faced with trouble, he sent for Joseph; Nebuchadnezzar in distress called upon Daniel. These enlightened men of God knew the score—they could predict the future and point the way to safety. They were wise with a wisdom not of this world and so were able to face the future with cheerfulness even when they knew how dark and troubled that future would be.

Today also there are a few men and women who can face the coming year without discouragement or terror. They are Christians. They are not smiling optimists who draw their comfort from a denial of the facts or base their hopes upon false expectations of peaceful intentions among nations. Rather, they are of all men the truest realists. They will have nothing to do with fantasy—they demand to know the facts, whether those facts are good or bad. They insist upon squaring their beliefs with the truth, and do not hesitate to face up to any truth wherever it is found."

WATCH YOUR STEP

By Herbert Lockyer

"What an engaging term Paul used in his description of the walk and warfare of the believer! *Circumspect* means wary, taking everything into account, exercising caution. The Revised Version expresses the verse, "*Look therefore carefully how ye walk, not as unwise, but as wise*" (Ephesians 5:15). We are to walk accurately, looking around, watchful on every side. As those redeemed by the precious blood of Jesus, we must be strict about our character and check up on our daily living with the deliberate purpose of correcting wrong decisions taken and of being self-controlled in every habit. Strictest consistency in common things is obligatory, for we are taught to avoid every appearance of evil. Only therefore can we buy up every opportunity of doing good.

Surrounded as we are by the wiles of the devil, we have to be careful of every step. In *Julius Caesar*, Shakespeare wrote:

'It is the bright day that brings
forth the adder,
And that craves wary walking.'

We live in a hostile, godless world surrounded by manifold temptations. Our heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked, and unless we keep close to Jesus, we cannot be victorious as we walk in the midst of snares. Honoring Him in every phase of life should be our constant aim, and for such a purpose the precious promises covering life and service were given. Isaac Watts wrote:

'So let our lips and lives express
The holy gospel we profess;
So let our works and virtues shine,
To prove the doctrine all divine.'

VANCE HAVNER QUOTE

"*Works and first works* (Revelation 2:1-5). Ephesus had plenty of works—religious activity without spirit—and no 'First works'—the spontaneous expression of devotion to Christ. The trouble is found in verse 4: they had left their first love. We are long on works and short on first works in the churches today."

RAYOLA'S Q & A CORNER

Q: "Can you please clarify why a loving God would harden someone's heart, like the Pharaoh in Moses' day?"

A: This is a good question because it can cause confusion for people who are trying to come to terms with the ways of God. In order to understand the question, it is important that a person understands the makeup of the heart. The first thing we must understand about the heart is that an unregenerate heart is wicked and deceitful to the point that even the individual cannot know the depth of wickedness and deception that abounds in it (*Jeremiah 17:9-10*). When you realize that the carnal heart is inclined towards wickedness and operating according to a perverted reality, it would make sense that it can easily enough become hard in the right situation.

To understand how a person's heart can be hardened, we must realize that God first searches all hearts and tries their "reins." "Reins" point to the mind or inner character of a person. King David asked the Lord to search his heart and see if there was any wicked way in it (*Psalms 139:23-24*). Clearly, David understood that he did not know his own heart and asked the Lord to reveal if there were areas in his attitude, approach, and thinking that were wicked to Him, but unknown to David. David wanted such ways to be brought to the light so they could be addressed. We also know according to *Matthew 13:3-23* that there are four heart conditions: the hard, stony, worldly, and open hearts. The heart condition determines how the Word of God will be received.

In *Romans 9:14-23* and *2 Timothy 2:19-21* we are told that God uses vessels for both honorable and dishonorable dealings to bring about His plan. In *2 Chronicles 16:9* we see that the Lord searches to and fro to find those through whom He is able to show Himself mighty.

In the case of Pharaoh, God knew his inner character and used him as a dishonorable vessel through whom He could show Himself mighty on behalf of Israel and confirm that He is the LORD GOD and their DELIVERER. We know there were ten

judgments leveled at Egypt, and God knew how Pharaoh would react in each judgment. He knew that instead of Pharaoh being broken in his stiff-necked ways that he would resolve in his will and mind to resist God even more so. Each time he resisted God, the harder his heart became toward God's words and warnings, resulting in God's judgments which revealed the true character of Pharaoh's heart.

When you read that God hardens the heart of someone, it does not mean He literally hardens the person's heart; rather, it means that the individual already had a hard heart towards the things of God and when challenged, simply continued to resist truth and righteousness which resulted in the person's heart becoming harder towards the conviction and moving of the Holy Spirit in the matter. You must also keep in mind that God is the one who sets leaders in their positions, knowing their heart and character in order to bring about His righteous judgments and perfect plan.

Sadly, as a ministry, we have witnessed people's hearts becoming hardened through the years. We have contended with people who were in delusion, rebellion, denial, and anger. We have used God's Word to challenge, guide, edify, and warn. If a person's heart is tender towards God, the Word will break, instruct, and comfort that person, but if the person insists on his or her own reality (deception) and way (rebellion), while maintaining his or her right to do as he or she sees fit, then the individual's heart becomes more resolved, or harder, as a means to maintain his or her particular darkness as being light, and not the darkness of evil. The problem is the more you contend with people who are in a state of hardness, the harder their heart becomes as their ears become deafer.

As ministers, we struggle with how much to contend with a person. If we see the individual continuing to resist the truth, we pull back and seek the Lord as to whether we are to continue to contend for that person, because we do not want the person to be turned over to his or her delusion to pay harsh consequences by tasting the bitterness of his or her wicked ways. †

A WIDOW SPEAKS OUT

Is there room for Jesus in your church?

In many large churches in America today, things are so tightly scheduled and choreographed that people couldn't be spontaneous even if they wanted to be.

Once upon a time in America, going to church was not about watching a show. We actually used to have something called "worship services" where people truly worshiped the Living God. And when the conviction of the Holy Spirit fell, people would actually run up the altar to pray and confess their sins.

But nobody really does that today. After all, what would people think?

And in most churches you never hear topics like "abortion" and "sexual immorality" discussed because we don't want anyone to feel uncomfortable.

There is certainly nothing wrong with trying to do things with excellence, but sometimes we get so caught up in decor and graphics and coffee that we forget all about Jesus.

When church leaders sit around and discuss how they can reach people, I don't think they have the widow in mind. I don't think they have the cancer patient in mind. I don't think they have the children who are growing up without a parent in mind. I am not paying attention to the church décor when I walk through the doors. I don't want to smell fresh brewed coffee in the lobby. I don't want to see a trendy pastor on the platform. I don't care about the graphics or the props on the platform. I am hurting in a way that is almost indescribable. My days are spent working full time. My nights are spent homeschooling and taking care of two young children. I don't have shared duties with a spouse anymore - everything is on my plate. And when I go to church I desperately want to hear the Word of God.

Excerpted from:
<http://kimberlilira.blogspot.com>

"Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world." - James 1:27