

Who do you Serve?

We come each week to memorialize the Sacrifice of our Lord Jesus Christ, in the emblems of bread and wine. In these things, we see a declaration of love - not that we loved God, but that He loved us first: "God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life" (Jno. 3:16). And in response to that great extension of love, we have the responsibility to reciprocate it, in living lives lovingly obedient to what our Master and Saviour commands. "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man may lay down his life for his friends" (Jno.15:13), and being "his friends", we must lay down our lives in service to him.

But implicit in love, is the making of a decision. Man, when originally formed from the dust of the ground, was not an automaton. He was created with the free will as to whether or not he would serve God, and obey his command. An automaton could only worship in a predetermined way. There is no choice set before such a one, it would have no capacity to respond to, or return love. This is why there had to be the Serpent in Eden: without a potential source of disobedience, Adam and his wife would obey, but because there would have been no other option available to them, and no choice to be made. But with the introduction of the serpent, we see that there was a decision to be made: obey God, or listen to the serpent? Love God, or partake in the delights of sin? Being made free to love, the first human pair were also free not to love. Being free to enjoy the blessings in Eden, he was also free to choose a different path. Those who forsake the true Way are said to have "left thy first love" (Rev. 2:4). By it's very nature, love cannot exist without choice, and it is because Yahweh requires loving obedience, that the way is open for men to make the choice to serve him, or follow the way of the world. If God had created man without the ability to choose, it would have eliminated the ability to either love, or sin.

These things are epitomized in Messiah's teaching, recorded in Matthew chapter 6:

"No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and Mammon." (Mat. 6:24).

As we come before Christ, we have a decision to make. Moses spoke to the people:

"I have set before thee this day life and good, and death and evil ... ***I have set before you life and death,*** blessing and cursing: therefore choose life, that both thou and thy seed may live" (Deut. 30:15, 19).

We have the same choice to make. It is the choice of life or death. We cannot serve two masters: we cannot serve God and Mammon (riches). We must choose to either worship Yahweh in Spirit and in Truth, or to seek after the way of the world – which is, of course, the majority decision.

This is a theme that runs throughout Scripture. Joshua exhorted Israel:

"... choose you this day whom ye will serve; whether the gods which your fathers served on the other side of the flood, or the gods of the

Amorites, in whose land ye dwell: but as for me and my house, we will serve Yahweh” (Jos. 24:15).

We are the house of the antitypical Joshua, the Lord Jesus Christ. We have made the decision to serve Him only, and publically declared that decision in obeying the Gospel, by being baptized. “though there be that are called gods, whether in heaven or in earth, (as there be gods many and lords many,) **but to us there is but one God**, the Father, of whom are all things, and we in him; and one Lord Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we by him ...” (1 Cor. 8:5-6).

We eschew the idols of the heathen, and cleave to the Lord in love and faithfulness, that we might have His love extended towards us, in the personage of Jesus Christ - who laid down his life for his friends. Unlike Israel of Old, we do not “halt between two opinions” (1 Kin. 18:21), but with singleness of heart, we embrace Yahweh, the only true God: to him we look for love and forgiveness.

Matthew chapter seven demonstrates these two options in life in four different ways, and we shall consider each in turn.

TWO PATHS

The Master presents our walk in life as traversing in one of two paths:

“Enter ye at the strait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat: Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it” (Mat. 7:13-14).

We must guard against assuming that the majority opinion is the right one: according to Christ, the majority wanders down a broad way, amply able to accommodate their sins and the excess of transgressions. The way of Christ is “narrow”. Sometimes folk describe our religion as being too restrictive, and that we should relax our “narrow minded” views in relation to the freedom that today’s world offers. But the narrowness of the way is not of our making: it is not designed to accommodate the masses and their baggage of sinfulness and apostasy. It is designed to only accommodate the few who are prepared to make the effort to find it, and who take up their cross of self-denial and follow their Master.

The book of proverbs also speaks of these two ways:

“Hear, O my son, and receive my sayings; and the years of thy life shall be many. I have taught thee in **the way of wisdom**: I have led thee in right paths ... take fast hold of instruction: let her not go: keep her; for she is thy life ...” (Prov. 4:11,13).

Here is the way of life, also known as “the way of wisdom”. This “way” requires the humility of the one desiring to walk down it, to “take fast hold of instruction”. Those who traverse the right paths are those who do not tire at being corrected and admonished by the Word, lovingly applied. To take hold of such instruction, refusing

to let her go, is to take hold of life, and to hold on to the principles of doctrine which form the Gospel message – the power of God unto salvation.

By contrast, we have the way of the wicked. So the Proverbs continue:

“Enter not into *the path of the wicked*, and go not in the way of evil men. Avoid it, pass not by it, turn from it, and pass away ... the *way of the wicked* is as darkness: they know not at what they stumble” (Prov. 4:14, 19).

Stumbling in darkness, those who traverse the way of the wicked cannot be led to salvation and life. Notice the emphasis here: “go not in the way”, “avoid it”, “Pass not by it” “turn from it” and “pass away”. Have nothing to do with it, and avoid it at all costs. Don’t even go near it, lest we be tempted to follow it into oblivion. Christ’s brethren are not to be found on this path, only those whose excesses will bring them down into the pit.

TWO TREES

Our Master declares that false prophets will be known by the “fruits” that they bear:

“Ye shall know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles? Even so every good tree bringeth forth good fruit; but a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit. A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit. Every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down and cast into the fire. *Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them*” (Mat. 7:16-20).

The “fruit” it is evident, represent the characteristics by which a tree is identified. Christ’s brethren bring forth the “good fruit” of the spirit, which are defined by the apostle, to be the Godly qualities that they manifest:

“The fruit of the spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance” (Gal. 5:22).

By contrast thorns and thistles are all that the wicked can produce. Concerning these it is written:

“... that which beareth thorns and briers is rejected, and is nigh unto cursing; whose end is to be burned” (Heb. 6:8).

The plain exhortation for us then, is to try and modify our lives to bear the fruit-characteristics of the spirit, those qualities that Christ’s brethren rejoice in, and seek to develop further in each other.

It is interesting to note the absolute terms that our Master uses: “a good tree *cannot* bring forth evil fruit”. John, under spirit guidance, speaks similarly:

“whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin; for his seed remaineth in him: and *he cannot sin*, because he is born of God” (1 Jno. 3:9).

Again, the point is made that Christ's brethren "cannot sin". Of course, the literal reality is that we do continue to sin, lamenting with the apostle Paul "O wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me from the body of this death" (Rom. 7:24 see context). But the point being made here, is that when we sin, we are succumbing to the "old man" of the flesh. It is not the new plant growing in our hearts, or the "inward man" that bears evil fruit, or works of sin. That which is born of God is the New Man, with the old man being crucified with Christ. The New man can never sin, but the old man continually entices us to go astray. We must therefore be ever on our guard, seeking to bring "into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ" (2 Cor. 10:5) – however hard that may be.

TWO JUDGMENTS

Because of the markedly different attributes of these two groups of humankind, there are two judgments: one to condemnation, and one to immortality:

"Many will say unto me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? And in thy name have cast out devils? And in thy name done many wonderful works? And then I will profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity" (Mat. 7:21-23).

Those who "work iniquity" will not be recognized by Messiah when he comes again. Even though they might have wrought wonderful miracles with the Holy Spirit gifts, unless their hearts are filled with the fruit of the Spirit, they will be driven away from the presence of the Lord. By contrast, those who are Christ's are known of him. John chapter 10 expresses the Master's parable of the shepherd:

"I am the good shepherd, ***and know my sheep, and am known of mine***" (Jno. 10:14).

And again:

"my sheep hear my voice, and ***I know them***, and they follow me: And I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand" (Jno. 10:28).

The true sheep know the voice of their shepherd, and he knows them. They will not perish in the Aion to come, for they are in the hand of Messiah, and he will never leave nor forsake them. As we read elsewhere: "the Lord knoweth them that are his" (2 Tim. 2:19). But those who are abandoned to disobedience will not be recognized by him when he comes again.

Notice here, that those who are rejected include those who profess that Jesus is Lord:

"not everyone ***that sayeth unto me, Lord, Lord***, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven, but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven" (Mat. 7:21).

Some of the religious groups and churches around us teach that all that is necessary is for us to accept Jesus as our Lord, and we shall be saved. However, Messiah's own

testimony is this it not enough: those who would be saved must also do the will of his Father in heaven, as it is expressed in the holy writ.

TWO FOUNDATIONS

The final couplet in Matthew chapter 7 is about the importance of *doing* the will of God, as well as hearing it:

“... whosoever doeth these sayings of mine ***and doeth them***, I will liken him to a wise man, which built his house upon a rock ...”

The stormy winds of judgment came, and the house “fell not”, because it was founded upon a rock. By the same token, those who hear, but don’t do the sayings of Christ:

“shall be likened unto a foolish man, which built his house upon the sand: and the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; ***and it fell: and great was the fall of it***” (Mat. 7:24-27).

The difference between the wise and the foolish is not to do with how much work each man did. Both did the same work: they both built the same type of house. But one was building upon the basis of the rockbed of Truth as taught by Messiah, the other upon the ever-shifting sands of men’s wisdom. For the one man, his doings were upon the foundation of Christ’s sayings, for the other, it was a building upon a different, unstable basis. What we are building is not so important as where we are building it – we must therefore, ensure that our activities are in obedience to the sayings of Christ.

WHO DO YOU TRUST AND SERVE?

Returning to the theme of not serving Mammon, or Riches, the Lord taught:

“No servant can serve two masters ... ye cannot serve God and Mammon” (Luke 16:13).

The Pharisees reacted badly to this, for they were a covetous group of men: “the Pharisees also, who were covetous, heard all these things: and they derided him” (Lu. 16:14). But it is a truth that as Christ taught: “take heed, and beware of covetousness: ***for a man’s life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth***” (Luke 12:15). Riches cannot save men from the clutches of the grave. So the Wise Man taught: “Wisdom is a defence, and money is a defence: but the excellency of knowledge is, that wisdom giveth life to them that have it” (Eccl. 7:12). Far better to seek the eternal things of wisdom than the material things of this life.

Jesus taught this lesson to a certain rich man who had observed all the principles of the law from his youth:

“then Jesus beholding him loved him, and said unto him, One thing thou lackest: go thy way, sell whatsoever thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come, take up the cross, and follow

me. And he was sad at that saying, and went away grieved: for he had great possessions” (Mrk. 10:20-22).

And the Master commenting on this response, continues:

“Children, how hard is it for them that trust in riches to enter into the kingdom of God” (Mrk. 10:24).

This is the real crux of the issue. The matter is one of Trust: who do we trust? Mammon (wealth), or Yahweh? “One thing thou lackest” was the words of Messiah to this certain man whom he loved. How many things are lacking in our lives? Mammon, whilst it might furnish an abundance of this world’s goods in this life, cannot save us from death. Whereas Christ is able to save those who trust in his Name – that Name which is the only Name under heaven whereby we must be saved.

When we consider these things, we behold the certainty of our hope, by contrast to the uncertainty of riches. Salvation is “of faith, that it might be by Grace; to the end that the promise might be sure to all the seed” (Rom. 4:16). Salvation is based on faith, not works. Those who proclaimed the Lordship of Christ, and who did many wonderful works before him were rejected, trusting in their works and position, and not in Yahweh’s power to save. Salvation is based on Grace, for man cannot earn salvation, and there is therefore no other way that salvation can come: Divine favour is the basis of our redemption, not personal wealth. The certainty of our hope is absolute. As we saw above, Messiah taught that there are only two ways along which a man can walk, with two different destinations. It is an irrevocable fact that those who walk along the broad way will be led to the grave, and it is a second irrevocable fact that those who walk along the narrow way will not arrive at any other destination, but eternal life in the kingdom to come. So long as we are on the right path, our salvation is guaranteed. There is, then, no reason to trust in the uncertainty of riches: to Yahweh we look for strength and salvation, for in Him do we trust to bring us to the glories of the Age to Come.

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