

Knowing God in the Word

That I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death. Philippians 3:10.

Steps to a Godly Maturity

The struggle to reach spiritual maturity is not easy for us as believers. We strive to reach the place in our walks with God where He would have us to be, and yet many factors seem to get in the way of what we know our potential for Him could be. I believe that many of the roadblocks that we face on our way to coming to a place of maturity have not so much to do with our circumstances, or even with our outward behavior, but rather with our attitudes.

Think, for a moment, of a child commanded by his parents to take out the trash. Now, all that is really necessary physically for him to be able to do this is the proper strength and coordination to accomplish the task. Yet just because he is able to do this, does not mean that he is mature about it. If he must be told a hundred times to do it, and if he grumbles and complains the whole time, then he can hardly be said to be mature when it comes to taking out the trash. Thus, maturity has not so much to do with his age or ability, but much more to do with his attitude.

Thus, I believe that it is attitude more than anything that signals a true maturity when it comes to our relationships with the Lord. I want to consider in this message three different attitudes that I believe lead us to a place of maturity in Christ. These attitudes are not the final answer to everything, of course, but I think that a believer who consistently takes these attitudes towards God will not remain long in an immature state.

So, let us examine these three attitudes, and how they can affect our lives and walks with the Lord, both if we follow them, and if we do not. The first attitude is:

1. It's not a religion. It's a relationship.

For many, religion defines their relationships to God. What they do religiously is what they do in relationship to God. This kind of thinking can be clearly seen in the example of Saul and Samuel in I Samuel 15.

In I Samuel 15:1-3, God gave Saul a command through the prophet Samuel.

1. Samuel also said to Saul, "The LORD sent me to anoint you king over His people, over Israel. Now therefore, heed the voice of the words of the LORD. 2. Thus says the LORD of hosts: "I will punish Amalek for what he did to Israel, how he ambushed him on the way when he came up from Egypt. 3. Now go and attack Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have, and do not spare them. But kill both man and woman, infant and nursing child, ox and sheep, camel and donkey."

This was a grim command, yet it was one that was necessary. Amalek had become Israel's enemy as they were traveling to the land God had promised them. Deuteronomy 25:17-18 tells us why the Lord was particularly angry with the Amalekites for this attack.

17. Remember what Amalek did to you on the way as you were coming out of Egypt, 18. how he met you on the way and attacked your rear ranks, all the stragglers at your rear, when you were tired and weary; and he did not fear God.

So, the Lord was angry with the Amalekites for this cowardly attack upon the weak. Thus, he had commanded in the next verse:

19. Therefore it shall be, when the LORD your God has given you rest from your enemies all around, in the land which the LORD your God is giving you to possess as an inheritance, that you will blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven. You shall not forget.

So, God had planned to carry out His promised vengeance upon Amalek through King Saul. Some have blamed God for doing such a thing as demanding the extermination of an entire people. Yet there are a few things we need to realize here. First of all, He is God, and we need to always give Him the benefit of the doubt. If He believes a certain people does not deserve to exist anymore, then we need to take Him at His word and believe He knows best. If we were to just decide this and try to wipe a certain people out, that would be very wrong. But God is not like us, and He does know best. Secondly, we have never met an Amalekite. In fact, we have never met a member of any one of the peoples the Lord wanted wiped out. That is because they have been wiped out, for when the Lord wills such a thing, it occurs. Perhaps if we did meet some of these people, we might see more why the Lord commanded this! If the Lord thought they needed to be exterminated, then they must have been pretty bad. And finally, the Lord waited many years between Deuteronomy and I Samuel 15. His patience, even with this wicked people, was long. He showed them a great deal of grace by allowing them to live for hundreds of years after He said they should be destroyed. Perhaps He was waiting for them to become wicked enough to deserve total destruction.

At any rate, this is what the Lord commanded Saul to do. And he did do it, as we read in verse 7.

7. And Saul attacked the Amalekites, from Havilah all the way to Shur, which is east of Egypt.

So Saul obeyed God's command, and it seemed all would be well. But consider the next verses.

8. He also took Agag king of the Amalekites alive, and utterly destroyed all the people with the edge of the sword. 9. But Saul and the people spared Agag and the best of the sheep, the oxen, the fatlings, the lambs, and all that was good, and were unwilling to utterly destroy them. But everything despised and worthless, that they utterly destroyed.

So Saul did not completely follow the Lord's command. First of all, he kept the king of the Amalekites, Agag, alive. Back then, having defeated a group of people and taken their king captive was a sign of great status. Warlike kings would often have a collection of the kings they had defeated. These kings would become servants of the king who conquered them. They would live in his house, and eat his food. They were kept as a kind of trophy for the king to show off. "Here are the kings that I have defeated. See what a great king I am, to have so many," a king back then might boast. We see an example of this in the Israelites' defeat of the king Adoni-Bezek in Judges 1:5-7.

5. And they found Adoni-Bezek in Bezek, and fought against him; and they defeated the Canaanites and the Perizzites. 6. Then Adoni-Bezek fled, and they pursued him and caught him and cut off his thumbs and big toes. 7. And Adoni-Bezek said, "Seventy kings with their thumbs and big toes cut off used to gather scraps under my table; as I have done, so God has repaid me." Then they brought him to Jerusalem, and there he died.

This must have been a warlike king indeed, to have collected seventy kings that he had defeated. Of course, with God on their side, the Israelites had no problem defeating this warrior king and repaying him in kind for what he had done to other kings. But we see that this was a practice among kings at the time, and so it seems that Saul wanted this kind of a status symbol for himself. Therefore, though he destroyed the rest of the people, he kept the king alive.

But Saul didn't stop there in disobedience. He also kept the best of the spoil, and did not destroy it. He destroyed all the bad parts of the spoil, but kept the best. It seems he just could not bring himself to destroy it all and devote it to God, as he had been commanded to do.

10. Now the word of the LORD came to Samuel, saying, 11. "I greatly regret that I have set up Saul as king, for he has turned back from following Me, and has not performed My commandments." And it grieved Samuel, and he cried out to the LORD all night.

Now, God regrets making Saul king because of his disobedience. Therefore, He sends Samuel to him to chastise him for his negligence. Samuel is grieved by this news, and mourns for Saul. Yet even while Samuel mourns, notice what Saul's attitude is in the next verse.

12. So when Samuel rose early in the morning to meet Saul, it was told Samuel, saying, "Saul went to Carmel, and indeed, he set up a monument for himself; and he has gone on around, passed by, and gone down to Gilgal."

Even while Samuel was mourning Saul's disobedience and rejection by God, Saul is busy building a monument to himself! While God is disappointed in him and planning his removal, Saul is wrapped up in himself and his own greatness. Notice Saul's first words to Samuel when he comes to see him in verse 13.

13. Then Samuel went to Saul, and Saul said to him, "Blessed are you of the LORD! I have performed the commandment of the LORD."

Now, it was true that Saul had gone out and attacked the Amalekites, as God had commanded. It was true that he had done this probably at great expense and risk of danger to himself. It seems that Saul thought this was enough. Just the fact that he had gone on the mission God commanded him to go on should satisfy the LORD, he seems to have reasoned. So what if he didn't carefully follow all the commands God gave him? He went on the mission, and that was the important thing. Besides, such a campaign costs money. God couldn't blame him for wanting to pay himself back for his expenses by taking some of the spoil, could He? And keeping just one king alive from the Amalekites couldn't hurt either, could it? After all, he was only one man. How could he do any more harm, when all his people were destroyed? Could it really be so wrong to keep just one man alive out of all the Amalekites that had been slaughtered? These must be the kinds of things Saul reasoned. So, when he comes to speak to Samuel as the messenger of the LORD, he acts like he has nothing to worry about. He views himself as the faithful servant who has carried out God's commands. He has no concept that he is about to be reprimanded.

Samuel quickly cuts to the problem with the presentation of the situation that Saul had just made. *"But Samuel said, 'What then is this bleating of the sheep in my ears, and the lowing of the oxen which I hear?'"* Samuel points out to Saul that he had not performed the commandment of God, for he had not utterly destroyed everything as God had commanded him to do.

Now Saul knows what the problem is, yet he quickly has a ready excuse. His excuse is ultimately religious. *"And Saul said, 'They have brought them from the Amalekites; for the people spared the best of the sheep and the oxen, to sacrifice to the LORD your God; and the rest we have utterly destroyed.'"* Saul claims that a desire to be religious and offer these animals to God was the reason he had kept these animals alive. He almost seems to think that he could fool God. For, of course, the reason they had kept these animals alive was greed, not to worship God with them. If worshipping God had been their objective, they could have done it best by obeying His command! Yet Saul offers this excuse for what he had done, no doubt hoping that God would buy it and let him off the hook. After all, he had attacked the Amalekites like God had said, right?

But God doesn't buy Saul's excuse, as Samuel declares in verses 17-19.

17. So Samuel said, “When you were little in your own eyes, were you not head of the tribes of Israel? And did not the LORD anoint you king over Israel? 18. Now the LORD sent you on a mission, and said, ‘Go, and utterly destroy the sinners, the Amalekites, and fight against them until they are consumed.’ 19. Why then did you not obey the voice of the LORD? Why did you swoop down on the spoil, and do evil in the sight of the LORD?”

Samuel identifies what Saul had done as what it was: evil in God’s sight. Yet Saul just doesn’t seem to get it. In verses 20-21, we read,

20. And Saul said to Samuel, “But I have obeyed the voice of the LORD, and gone on the mission on which the LORD sent me, and brought back Agag king of Amalek; I have utterly destroyed the Amalekites. 21. But the people took of the plunder, sheep and oxen, the best of the things which should have been utterly destroyed, to sacrifice to the LORD your God in Gilgal.”

Saul, as I said earlier, thinks that just the fact that he went on the mission should be enough. Then, he tries to shift blame to the people. They made him do it! But God buys none of it.

22. So Samuel said: “Has the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, As in obeying the voice of the LORD? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, And to heed than the fat of rams. 23. For rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft, And stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the LORD, He also has rejected you from being king.”

God refuses to accept Saul’s attempt to make a religious appeal. God knew that Saul didn’t really care about obeying Him, and so sacrifice would not impress Him. So, He pronounces the judgment against him that he is rejected as king. Surely, it would seem that this would bring Saul around. To realize that he would lose the kingship for acting like this...how could he not repent at this point, and realize his need to get right with God? And yet, this is not the response we see from Saul.

24. Then Saul said to Samuel, “I have sinned, for I have transgressed the commandment of the LORD and your words, because I feared the people and obeyed their voice. 25. Now therefore, please pardon my sin, and return with me, that I may worship the LORD.”

At this point, Saul admits he has sinned. Yet, he still wants to blame it on the people. And, with the next breath after apologizing, he asks Samuel to just forgive him and come worship the Lord with him. Saul wants to dictate his own forgiveness, and then sweep this whole thing under the rug like it never happened! Yet God again would not go along with what Saul wanted.

26. But Samuel said to Saul, “I will not return with you, for you have rejected the word of the LORD, and the LORD has rejected you from being king over Israel.”

Samuel makes it clear to Saul that God is not kidding, and he is not going to be able to just talk God out of this and sweep it under the rug. Saul has sinned, and he is being rejected. But Saul is not about to accept this gracefully. So we read in verse 27,

27. And as Samuel turned around to go away, Saul seized the edge of his robe, and it tore.

Now, Saul physically grabs Samuel and tries to stop him from leaving. Yet why does he do this? Is it because he is so sorry for what he has done, and longs for forgiveness from God? No, that is not what he wanted. We read in verse 30 what Saul really wanted.

30. Then he said, “I have sinned; yet honor me now, please, before the elders of my people and before Israel, and return with me, that I may worship the LORD your God.”

Here, I believe, is revealed Saul's real motivation for not wanting Samuel to leave. He was afraid of losing face before his men! He just cared about looking good, not being good. He wanted to manipulate God into giving him what he wanted, not learn what God required to serve him. And this is ever the attitude of religion. Those who are religious are never all that concerned with doing what God wants. Obeying him means just going as far as is convenient. Looking good to others and saving face are more important than pleasing God. God is there to be manipulated into serving us, not the other way around. Yes, Saul is a great example for us of one who thought he could substitute religion for what God really wanted. Yet it didn't work for Saul, and it still doesn't work today.

Another negative example of wanting to please God religiously, but not from the heart, is in II Samuel 11:4. We have all heard the story of David and his sin of adultery with Bathsheba. Yet did you realize that David and Bathsheba were careful to keep God's rule of cleanness, even as they committed adultery? That is what we read in that verse.

Then David sent messengers, and took her; and she came to him, and he lay with her, for she was cleansed from her impurity; and she returned to her house.

David, as we know, had seen Bathsheba while she was bathing. Apparently, she had been doing this because she had become unclean somehow. Yet now she was over her uncleanness, and so David took note of this before committing adultery with her. Yet how foolish that is! God's commands for cleanness and uncleanness were relatively minor. Breaking them made one unclean. Yet adultery was a major sin, and was even a breaking of the old covenant, for it was one of the Ten Commandments. The punishment for committing adultery was not uncleanness, but death! Yet in committing this sin, David and Bathsheba are careful to follow God's rules of cleanness. This is a common attitude that people have when being religious. Major sins are overlooked, while minor commands are studiously followed to the letter. Yet we could never do such a thing if we put our relationship with God first, not following some religious rules.

Another example of following religion and losing sight of the relationship with God that He truly desires is found in the attitude of the Israelites in Malachi 1:7-8, where God complains,

7. "You offer defiled food on My altar, But say, 'In what way have we defiled You?' By saying, 'The table of the LORD is contemptible.' 8. And when you offer the blind as a sacrifice, Is it not evil? And when you offer the lame and sick, Is it not evil? Offer it then to your governor! Would he be pleased with you? Would he accept you favorably?" Says the LORD of hosts.

The Israelites had forgotten the spirit of giving to the Lord they were supposed to have when coming to Him with their sacrifices. Instead of seeking to please Him, they only sought to see to it that they fulfilled this duty. Therefore, they had decided to kill two birds with one stone, and get rid of their lame and sick animals as sacrifices. This made perfect sense to them. They were keeping the sacrifices, and helping improve their flocks at the same time. Yet they completely forgot God at the other end of their sacrifices. They acted like what they had done wouldn't matter to Him. Yet it did matter, for their actions were like a slap in the face to Him. They had forgotten the relationship, and offered Him only religion.

The truth is that we, too, are not just part of the "Christian religion." If we truly have faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, we have entered into a relationship with Him. The Lord is real, and our relationship with Him is also real. We must not fall into the trap of thinking that religion is all that matters, or that if we look good on the outside and follow certain religious rules, that God will be pleased with us. Rather, we need to ever keep in mind the relationship that we are really in, and work to make that relationship the most important thing. Jesus Christ reveals the framework for today in John 4:23-24.

23. "But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him. 24. God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth."

The spirit has to do with your inner thoughts and attitudes. It is there that God is truly looking for that which pleases Him. It is not in the outward things we do with our bodies. It is in the inward motivations for those things that we do. When the motivations are right, the outward worship is truly meaningful. When the attitude is wrong, the outward worship is merely religion, and does not impress God at all.

Paul gives us an example for today of the attitude we are supposed to have towards our relationship with Jesus Christ. In Philippians 3:7-8, he explains,

7. "But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ. 8. Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ."

Everything that had been gain to Paul before, all religious privileges and advantages he had had, he now counts as negatives, as losses, compared to the great prize of the knowledge of Christ Jesus. To Paul, knowing Him was what was really important. And that needs to be what is important to us as well. We need to seek a relationship, not a religion. That is the attitude that God desires.

Nathan C. Johnson