

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 Continued

As believers, we should all be seeking to reach a godly maturity. We know this is what our Lord desires of us. Yet how exactly to reach this place of maturity is something that few will agree upon. Others are just not willing to do the work necessary to reach a place of maturity in their walks with the Lord. Yet I think, if we strive towards maturity, the results will be greatly beneficial to us. At the very least, we will build our relationship with God and get to know our Lord better, and what could be better than that?

In our last study, I expressed my opinion that the steps to maturity are not so much things we do as attitudes we have. Thus, I began to set forth the attitudes I believe we need to have in our hearts in order to reach a place of maturity. The first attitude was that, in a believer's walk with God, it is not a religion. It is a relationship. Now, let us go on to the second attitude I believe is crucial for spiritual maturity.

II. It's not about you. It's about God.

Sometimes, I think we view our relationship with God as if He was like an employee at Wal-Mart. Some may find this to be a very strange analogy, so allow me to clarify what I mean. Suppose you were in a Wal-Mart, and you asked an employee where, for instance, you could find the automotive department. Suppose the employee replied, "Certainly, I'll show you where it is. But first, this aisle we're in is kind of messy. I would like you to pick up these scattered items and put them back on their hooks. Oh, and the floor is dirty. The mop and pail is there. Clean this up, and then I'll show you where automotive is." How would you respond to a Wal-Mart employee who treated you like this? Of course, you wouldn't put up with it. You would probably point out to the Wal-Mart employee that you are a customer, not an employee, and that it's not your job to clean up part of the store before being helped.

I believe this same sort of "customer" mentality often invades our views of our relationships with God. We feel as if we are customers coming to God to be helped, and that it is God's job to make sure we leave satisfied. We feel like "the customer is always right," like God should always be ready to serve our needs, and like we should feel "satisfied" or something is wrong. Yet God is not at all like an employee at Wal-Mart. We are not coming to Him for service, and He isn't just there to wait on us. Instead, He is the One in charge, and we really are the ones who are supposed to wait on Him!

The truth is that God is in charge. What really matters is whether or not He is happy with our service to Him, not whether or not we are happy. His satisfaction is what is truly important. Paul viewed himself in this way. He saw his own labor as being totally inconsequential compared to what God was doing. In I Corinthians 3:5-7, he declares:

5. Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos, but ministers through whom you believed, as the Lord gave to each one? 6. I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase. 7. So then neither he who plants is anything, nor he who waters, but God who gives the increase.

Paul viewed his own labors, and those of others like him like Apollos, as being nothing compared to what God Who gave the increase was doing. Do we view our own lives and ministries the same way? That what we do is truly nothing, and what God does is everything?

We need to realize more and more that what we do for God is not about us. It really is about God! Do we ever think about what God thinks of what we are doing? I think we often do, but when we do, it is more from the standpoint of fearing His wrath if we are not doing things right than anything else. Do we ever think about what God might be feeling when we sin? Ephesians 4:30 says: *“And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.”* We can grieve God’s Spirit! He can be made to sorrow by our behavior. Yet how often do we think about this?

Grieving God is not the only thing we can do. We can also please Him. II Timothy 2:3-4 states, *“You therefore must endure hardship as a good soldier of Jesus Christ. 4. No one engaged in warfare entangles himself with the affairs of this life, that he may please him who enlisted him as a soldier.”* Paul wanted Timothy’s motivation to be pleasing God, just like a soldier seeks to please the one who enlisted him. Thus, he wanted Timothy to endure the hardship he was going through for the purpose of pleasing Him. Do we, too, seek to please God through our patient endurance of hardships?

Do you ever think about God’s feelings? When you do what you know is right, do you think that He must be happy with you? When you fail and sin, do you think how grieved and saddened He must be? For God is a real Person, and He does have feelings. We know He loves us. How does one who loves us respond when we do things they like or dislike? God is not a bitter and vengeful being who responds only with anger to anything we do wrong. We truly grieve Him when we do not live as He desires us to live. For His sake, and for our own, we need to realize this more and more, and live so as to please Him. Sneaking under the wire...just doing enough to get by...these things are not sufficient as a response to One Who loves us so deeply.

A self-centered child only fears the wrath of a disappointed parent. But a mature child who has grown to empathize with his parents feels not just the wrath, but also the disappointment of the parent whom he loves. He chastises himself as well for letting down one who loves him as much as this parent does. In the same way, when we have a mature view of God, and when we realize that it is about Him, not just about us, we too will feel keenly the disappointment God feels when we let Him down. Our sin then grieves us more for the break it causes in our relationship to God than for any punishment we might receive for it. We will not just duck our heads and hope not to get smacked, like the immature and religious person would do. May we all come to a place where God is real enough to us and our love for Him is great enough that what He feels about things matters to us!

III. We don’t criticize the Bible. It criticizes us.

Whenever you read anything, you may not realize it, but you automatically act as a critic of what you are reading in your head. If what you are reading is an adventure book, then you are assessing, “Is this exciting? Am I interested in what is happening? Do I like the characters? Do I want to learn what happens next?” You aren’t consciously asking yourself those questions constantly, of course, but if the answer to them is no, then you probably will not be too interested in finishing the book. You might be reading a magazine on cars. You would be doing the same thing. You might ask yourself, “Do I agree with what this article says about this car? Do I think it is as good or bad as the article claims it is? Do I agree with its assessment of its value?” These questions might not actually run through your mind, but if the answer to them is no, you would soon be disagreeing with the article. The same would be true of a philosophical or political article. You would be asking yourself, “Do I agree with this philosophy? Does this fit with the way I think the world works? Do I like what this author is saying?” All through reading the article, you are acting as a critic of the article in your mind. You might decide you really like it and agree with it, or that you don’t like it or agree with it, or you might not be sure what to think. But all through reading it, you would be assessing it. Even if the author was smarter than you, you would still evaluate what he says based on what you know, and decide about the rightness or wrongness of his statements. That is just the way we read books, and the way they must be read in order for us to truly enjoy them.

Now since this is the way we read every other book, we tend to approach reading the Bible the same way. Automatically, the critic in our heads speaks up, and we want to decide, “Do I like this? Am I engaged? Do I agree? Am I bored?” Yet the Bible is the one Book that we cannot treat this way. The truth is that we have no right to criticize the Bible. Rather, the Bible is what should criticize us. The question is not, “Why is this part of the Bible so boring?” Rather, it is, “What is wrong with me that I’m bored with this part of the Bible, with what God wants to say to me?” It is not, “Why does God say something that I don’t believe is true?” It is, “Why don’t I believe the truth that God says?” It is not, “Do I agree with what God says?” It is, “Does God agree with what I’ve said and believed?” This is the attitude we need to take...that we must take. We must be ready to be criticized by the Bible!

The Word of God is not just any book. It is God’s written word to us, and it is powerful. Hebrews 4:12 says,

12. For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.

When we read the Bible, we are not reading just any book. We are not coming to some work of men with our practiced eye ready to see if it is true or false. Rather, we are encountering the very power of God, a power that is able to criticize us and see through our own, human bias. Proverbs 21:2 reads,

2. Every way of a man is right in his own eyes, But the LORD weighs the hearts.

Too often, we are blinded by our own prejudices and desires from the truth of things in our lives. Yet the Word of God is able to cut through all that, and show us our thoughts and attitudes for what they really are. The Bible is the criticizer and we are the criticized, not the other way around.

When it comes right down to it, are you willing to take God’s criticism? I am reminded of the story of the Canaanite woman in Matthew 15:21-28.

21. Then Jesus went out from there and departed to the region of Tyre and Sidon. 22. And behold, a woman of Canaan came from that region and cried out to Him, saying, “Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David! My daughter is severely demon-possessed.”

23. But He answered her not a word. And His disciples came and urged Him, saying, “Send her away, for she cries out after us.”

24. But He answered and said, “I was not sent except to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”

25. Then she came and worshiped Him, saying, “Lord, help me!”

26. But He answered and said, “It is not good to take the children’s bread and throw it to the little dogs.”

27. And she said, “Yes, Lord, yet even the little dogs eat the crumbs which fall from their masters’ table.”

28. Then Jesus answered and said to her, “O woman, great is your faith! Let it be to you as you desire.” And her daughter was healed from that very hour.

There are several things I find fascinating about this story, and perhaps the greatest one of them is this woman’s attitude. The Lord calls her a dog, and she responds by agreeing with Him. If He thinks she is a dog, then she will take the place of a dog. “How loud should I bark?” is the kind of attitude she takes. I wonder how many of us would respond this way if God appeared to us and said, “You know what? You’re a dog!” And dogs back then were not considered “man’s best friend” like they are now. They were mangy, unclean, disgusting animals that no one wanted much to do with. The children liked puppies, and sometimes they would bring them into the house to play with. Yet when these puppies grew into adults, they were always thrown out, and had no place in an Israelite family. Yet this woman is willing to take the place of a dog, and ask for crumbs from

the table, like one of those little puppies taken into the house might receive. What faith she had! And what willingness to be criticized by the Lord! How many proud churchgoers of today would respond as readily to such criticism from the Lord? We much prefer to pile up good things to say about ourselves. We like being called the Church the Body of Christ, or told that we are sons of God, or that we are seated with Christ, and all these good things. Yet how willing are we to receive an assessment by God if it is not such a good one? We probably all need work on being ready and willing to be criticized by God!

What would you do if your beliefs were criticized by God's Word? I remember one man in a Bible study I was attending. We were studying the book of Mark, and something came up that had us talking about what we liked about the churches we were attending...this Bible study had people from many different churches. At any rate, this man was speaking proudly of his church's work with divorced people. He said they were very loving and accepting towards them, that they had many programs to help them, and that more than half the people in his church were divorced. Now I thought that it was very interesting, and almost ironic, that he mentioned this, for we were studying the end of Mark 9, and were about to get into the beginning of Mark 10, and I remembered the section which reads,

2. The Pharisees came and asked Him, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" testing Him. 3. And He answered and said to them, "What did Moses command you?" 4. They said, "Moses permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce, and to dismiss her." 5. And Jesus answered and said to them, "Because of the hardness of your heart he wrote you this precept. 6. But from the beginning of the creation, God 'made them male and female.' 7. 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, 8. and the two shall become one flesh'; so then they are no longer two, but one flesh. 9. Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate." 10. In the house His disciples also asked Him again about the same matter. 11. So He said to them, "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her. 12. And if a woman divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery."

Knowing this passage was coming up in our study, I found myself curious as to what this man who was so proud of his church's work with divorced people would say when we came to it. Thus, when we did read that passage, I was watching him closely. He was quiet for a while while someone else commented, and then he simply blurted out, "I don't believe that!"

That was sort of what I expected him to think of that passage, but I didn't know, of course, that he would be quite so straightforward about it. Now, this is not the time or place to set forth an explanation of the meaning of the passage in Mark 10. Certainly this passage deserves careful study, and consideration of how it applies to our dispensation today. Yet to come right out and say you do not believe a passage...that is something I hope that most of my readers would never do. Yet do not we do this in all practicality many times when we find that we simply are not willing to accept the truth a passage is teaching? We might not actually blurt out, "No, I don't believe that," but isn't that often our attitude towards a passage that we just don't like to hear? What an attitude this man had towards this part of Scripture...to simply state his disagreement with it! He was not willing to allow Scripture to criticize him. Instead, he took upon himself to criticize it. That is an attitude that we need to dispense with.

I remember one time when I was in tenth grade, I was sitting in a study hall when our math teacher, who was teaching eleventh grade math next door at the time, came to talk to me. He said he was having a mental block about a problem he was trying to show on the board, and wondered if I could come next door and help him out with it. I expressed some doubt that I would be able to help with an eleventh grade math problem, but he told me that it was an easy problem that we had covered in tenth grade math a few weeks before, and he was just having a mental block remembering how to do it. Well, I told him I would see if I could help, and I came next door and looked at the problem. Well, he was right and it was an easy one, and so I was quickly able to show him the solution he was not remembering.

Now, I know I was not smarter than my math teacher. He taught us problems that I had trouble solving, and when we would play a strategy game that he introduced us all to, he would regularly beat me two out of three, at least. So I definitely wasn't smarter than he was. Yet in this case, he had a mental block, and I was able to see the solution that he couldn't. So, for that brief time, I suppose you could say I knew more than he did about that problem.

Most people, I think, would readily admit that they don't know more than God. Yet, in our human self-importance, I think we view God rather as we do very smart people in this world. That is, we know that they are smarter than we are, yet we retain the right to disagree with them or think we are ahead of them regarding certain things that we think they are wrong about. And, of course, when it comes to intelligent people we can think this and sometimes be right, for even the smartest person isn't right all the time. Yet when we come to God, this is never true. There is no time when God has a mental block or looks at things a little wrongly, and we could be smart enough in that instance to see his mistake and help Him out of it. The foolishness of God is wiser than men, as I Corinthians 1:25 says, and so when we think we see His errors, we are always mistaken. It is not good, it is nothing but arrogance on our part, to suppose that we could ever be right where he was wrong. If something He says seems wrong to us, then we are either misunderstanding what He said, or else we are misunderstanding reality to the extent that we think He is wrong. But we can never think that we have caught Him in an error. To think that is nothing short of arrogance, and we have far to go to reach maturity if we are willing to take such a stand.

Now I do not wish anyone to misunderstand me on this last point. I am not talking about criticizing texts, or criticizing translations. I am well aware that some things said in our English Bibles are wrong, either because of textual errors or because of translational errors. What I am talking about, however, is the majority of passages where what God said and what He meant cannot be questioned. To say He is wrong in these cases is, as I said, nothing but sinful pride. God can and does criticize us through His Word. We have no right to criticize Him back.

Ultimately, in conclusion, we serve a powerful God. Yet often we act like He is our serving boy. To bear the fruit that God desires, we need to take the place that He requires. We need to live in relationship with Him, not simply clinging to the tenants of an empty religion. He needs to be the important one in our relationships. We must not just focus on ourselves. And we must learn to take His criticism, and refuse to think that we might be able to find His errors or criticize Him back. Only when we have incorporated these three attitudes into our lives and thoughts will we have begun to be spiritually mature believers, and will we be able to bear the fruit for Him that He is looking for from our lives. I pray that this article will aid my readers in coming to the place where the sort of attitude that incorporates these three principles becomes a reality in their lives.

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