

Challenging Scriptures for Superficial Christians

It is a sad fact that the modern church is filled with superficial converts and this is easily demonstrated in the plethora of counselling ministries that are now vital to keep these people going. No such ministries existed in previous history, but now converts require emotional healing, healing of memories, exorcism, psychotherapy, 12-step counselling, and very many more. This is the result of the unbiblical Gospel being peddled in supposedly evangelical churches today, which is unashamedly based upon Arminian easy believism or, even worse, just falling over during an Alpha Course meeting. The Biblical Gospel brings change, power, release from the domination of sin and a new life in the Spirit.

In these churches the Biblical message on sin is toned down so as not to be a threat to the comfort of converts. Teaching on sensitivity to sin, confession of sin, mourning for sin and true repentance is rarely heard. Teaching on the need to obey God's law is anathema. Teaching on the responsibility of God's sons is neglected. Genuine teaching on Biblical sanctification is very rare indeed, with a proliferation of historical errors abounding. Consequently there is a prevailing antinomianism where the law of Christ is ignored and people sin freely and without compunction. Indeed, it is now common to find very gross sins, and very obvious sins, being exhibited in some churches, particularly Charismatic churches, even from the platform.

These people mistakenly believe that they can sin all they want and still be under grace, that God is loving and will not condemn them and that they will enter heaven with a complete reward. All this is rubbish. There are two problems for these people.

The first is that genuine believers always bear spiritual fruit. Those who abide in Christ obey his commands (Jn 14:15, 21, 15:10); keeping God's commandments is what matters (1 Cor 7:19). If there is no fruit then there is no life (1 Jn 2:5, 3:24; Rev 22:14). Very many modern supposed believers will go to hell unless they truly repent and see the truth of God's word.

The second problem is that even genuine believers must appear before the tribunal seat of Christ to give an account of their lives (Rm 14:10; 2 Cor 5:10), even every thought, and will suffer loss for acts of disobedience and failure that were not dealt with. They will still go to heaven but will lose their rewards and will have a lowly place in the glory. They will still participate in the joys of heaven but will have suffered loss (1 Cor 3:15). Such believers will be ashamed at the coming of the Lord (1 Jn 2:28).¹

This paper is a challenge to these people (and to all of us). They are stark passages that no one ever comments upon and no one preaches sermons on. They are passages which many do not even know are in Scripture and few ever read properly. But they are God's word and we must do justice to every Biblical word since all Scripture is for our training unto righteousness (2 Tim 3:16).

¹ See my paper, *'Ashamed at His Coming?'*

The unprofitable servant

But his lord answered and said to him, 'You wicked and lazy servant, you knew that I reap where I have not sown, and gather where I have not scattered seed. So you ought to have deposited my money with the bankers, and at my coming I would have received back my own with interest. Therefore take the talent from him, and give *it* to him who has ten talents. For to everyone who has, more will be given, and he will have abundance; but from him who does not have, even what he has will be taken away. And cast the unprofitable servant into the outer darkness. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' Matt 25:26-30

This passage is from the parable of the talents, which are all about the expectation of the master regarding the work of his servants. The general message is that Christ's servants are expected to put their gifts to good use; laziness or failure to function properly is inexcusable. This passage is very difficult. Many expositors simply avoid the problem by saying it only applies to superficial believers, but that is not the gist of the parable; it is also remarkable that many famous commentators simply ignore the problems in the text.

It is clear that Christians are referred to: 'the kingdom of heaven is like a man travelling to a far country, who called his own servants and delivered his goods to them. And to one he gave five talents' (v14-15). These servants are responsible stewards in the house of a great man who were trusted with specific gifts and expected to prosper those gifts. These are servants of Christ who call him 'Lord' (v20). Without doubt, the passage applies to believers, as most commentators agree. Matthew Henry is one example, '*The servants are Christians, his own servants, so they are called; born in his house, bought with his money, devoted to his praise, and employed in his work. It is probable that ministers are specially intended here, who are more immediately attending on him, and sent by him.*' [Bible Comm. in. loc.]

But some of these servants are worthless or unprofitable; they may do no harm, but they do no good either. Indeed, in many senses we are all unprofitable servants (Lk 17:10), but some converts live useless lives. John Gill says they are, '*being of no use for the conversion of sinners, or the comfort of saints, or the edifying of the body of Christ; and brought no honour to his master, and was of no service for the spreading of his Gospel, and the enlargement of his kingdom and interest; and therefore, as one good for nothing,*' [Comm. on Matthew, in. loc.]

So how do we explain this passage if it applies to believers? Many consider that the outer darkness refers to hell, which is pictured in this way elsewhere (Matt 13:42, 22:13-14, 24:51); but it does not say 'hell' here and there is no fire (which is associated with condemnatory judgment); so it may not mean 'hell'. It implies a separation from others, which is unhappy. Several commentators agree that Christians are in view and then say (or imply) that the unprofitable one will go to hell, ignoring the contradiction to Biblical theology (e.g. Gill, Henry). We cannot say that believers go to hell; but we must face up to the seriousness of this passage.

Notice the similar expression in Matt 8:12 'while the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' However, here the best explanation is that Christ is referring to Jews. As in other places, the Lord teaches that Jews, who should have been in the kingdom and submitted to the Messiah, will be cast out for rejection of their own Messiah (Matt 21:43, 22:12-13). The kingdom of Christ is definitely not Jewish and there is no saving benefit in simply being Jewish [though Jews are saved in the same way as any other nationality].

It seems best to simply leave the words as they stand and not try to fathom exactly what is in view. It means this:

- Some believers will suffer loss at Christ's tribunal for their lack of responsible work.

- This will be unpleasant and involve tears of repentance.
- The person will be called an unprofitable servant, i.e. someone who did not function as he should.
- He will be put into the outer edge of things for the time of the judgment but not when the new world is restored.

The Lord has left this vague to emphasise the danger of not obeying him. Failure to serve God properly is very serious.

The flavourless salt

You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt loses its flavour, how shall it be seasoned? It is then good for nothing but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot by men. Matt 5:13

There is no doubt that this refers to Christians; no one would dispute this. Salt is a brilliant symbol for the elect in the world. Believers are spaced out throughout the whole world but are expected to so influence it by the gifts and graces that God gives them, particularly prayer, that they have a significant effect. Though not seen, like salt is not observed in a meal, they have a great power to flavour society.

This is in direct opposition to what is commonly seen today where the church, particularly the Charismatic church, is expected to grow bigger and bigger in outward and obvious ways. Charismatics seek to affect the world by sheer force of numbers and outward influence; indeed they hope for a global revival to significantly increase their numbers for this purpose. This emphasis upon outward influence, upon numbers, upon big churches in strategic towns, is a far cry from what God intends through the symbol of salt.

But the point here is that Jesus expects his people to have an impact like salt. Bland food is immediately noticed and withdrawn; it is considered worthless, no matter how good it looks on the outside; it is the taste that is important. The most popular food in Britain today is Indian curries, and these are high in salt.

If salt has no savour, it is absolutely useless and fit for nothing. It is no good being called 'salt' if you have no savour of saltiness, no ability to affect food. Likewise, believers who do not act like disciples of the Lord, who do not obey his commandments and do not walk in His Spirit, are useless and fit for nothing. They do not please the Lord and will suffer loss.

The unforgiving brother

And his master was angry, and delivered him to the torturers until he should pay all that was due to him. So my heavenly Father also will do to you if each of you, from his heart, does not forgive his brother his trespasses. Matt 18:34-35

Christians are in view in this parable (Matt 18:23-35). It regards a king and his bond-servants who have received mercy from his hand and were forgiven their debts. Its message regards how the slaves treat each other in the master's service; they are expected to forgive each other, as the master forgave them, and release each other from debts. They were all servants, but one was a wicked servant. In fact Jesus called them 'brothers'. Furthermore, the parable was spoken directly to Peter (in the context of teaching to disciples), who asked about how many times he should forgive his brother. There is no doubt that believers are in view here.

Jesus' command is that brethren in the kingdom must forgive each other their debts. There is no end to the amount of times that this should occur; we must continually forgive each other, even if offended many times. To emphasise the importance of this, Jesus stated that there is punishment (chastisement of sons) for those who fail. 'Torturers' literally means the prison guards that subject a prisoner to torture to elicit information and confession. It is hard to say what 'torturers' should be interpreted to mean to us, but it is not pleasant. We can conjecture that the torture is the giving over to unpleasant circumstances in life to bring about godly discipline, as the apostle explains in Heb 12:5-11. Though sickness is not always the result of judgment, it is sometimes, and is probably in view here.

Erring churches

Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place - unless you repent. ... Repent, or else I will come to you quickly and will fight against them [leaders teaching false doctrine] with the sword of My mouth. ... Indeed I will cast her [a female false teacher] into a sickbed, and those who commit adultery with her [who follow her idolatrous teachings] into great tribulation, unless they repent of their deeds. I will kill her children with death, and all the churches shall know that I am He who searches the minds and hearts. And I will give to each one of you according to your works. ... repent. Therefore if you will not watch, I will come upon you as a thief, and you will not know what hour I will come upon you. ... I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot. I could wish you were cold or hot. So then, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of my mouth. ... As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten. Therefore be zealous and repent. Rev 2:5, 16, 22-23, 3:3, 15-16, 19

All these things are spoken to Christian people in Christian churches, even though it seems amazing that such sins could be committed. Over and over these people are commanded to repent of false ideas, behaviour and practices. The penalty of not repenting is severe and includes death; but these penalties are just the chastisement on earth, there are also the future loss of rewards and privileges on the Day of Judgment to follow.

These chapters alone should serve as a serious reminder that Christians must obey the commands of the Lord and do his will from the heart. There is no place for a slovenly or superficial attitude to the Christian life.

Ashamed at the Second Coming

Abide in Him, that when He appears, we may have confidence and not be ashamed before Him at His coming. 1 Jn 2:28

Here it is made clear that there will be those who feel shame when the Lord approaches and ushers in the end. Not every Christian will face the oncoming judgment with confidence; some will fear the assessment of the Lord. This is indisputable.

It is indisputable because we know from our own experience that there are many believers who are not acting correctly. They believe false doctrines, they engage in erroneous practices, they sin, they follow false prophets, they behave wrongly to their brothers, they slander, lie, cheat, and so on. These things have always been true (2 Cor 12:20; Gal 5:15, 26; Jm 3:14, 4:1). Thus there are great variations in the conduct of believers, and this will be brought into the open on the Day of Judgment.

It is also indisputable since Scripture tells us clearly that this is the case (1 Cor 3:13-15; 1 Pt 4:16-18; 2 Jn 1:8; Rev 3:18-19). Indeed it must be since God is not partial and will judge all our works.

Justification is equal to all; every believer stands legally accepted before God as Judge. However, God is also our Father and he expects his sons to do his will. The judgment we face is the discipline of sons who are expected to perform the good works our Father planned for us, '**For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them**' (Eph 2:10). We will be ashamed at his coming if our works have not been according to God's commands. Thus it behoves us to seriously consider our works and earnestly seek to fully consecrate ourselves to the Lord.

Conclusion

There are many more severe passages that we could consider, but the point has been made forcibly enough. God not only expects us to do good works to glorify him, but we were created and redeemed in order to do those good works.

The modern sloppy view of Christianity is erroneous; people who live superficially will get a great shock at the end. They will have a bad time of the Day of Judgment and be greatly shamed. They may also feel the effects of God's chastisement during the course of their life on earth, While they will enjoy the benefits of heavenly bliss, they will have forfeited opportunities to have a better inheritance than they ended up with. Be warned.

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