

Some Spiritual Realities Within The Church

Making Sense of Evil on the Christian Scene

By Alan Morrison

Having a discernment ministry means that one discerns what the spiritual need is at any given moment and then meets that need -- whether it is providing information which plugs a hole in someone's theology, exposing something which is deceiving people, facilitating fellowship for hungry believers, etc. I would like to go into this in detail in order to expose some spiritual realities and even discover some eternal implications.

I know that many of you have suffered for your faith, and what a shock it has been to your system. I also know that it has taken you right to the farthest edge of your faith when this has happened. Fortunately (or, should I say, by the grace of God), one grows to be almost impervious to it ("almost" being the operative word here). As my friend Tal Brooke put it to me once in a phone conversation: "To be a minister today one needs the hide of a Rhinoceros and the alertness of a world class spy". Perhaps it is also true to say that even to be a discerning Christian today, one needs the hide of a Rhinoceros and the alertness of a world class spy! The first is for protection; the second is in order to ensure that one keeps one step ahead of the duplicity and chicanery which is all-pervasive in today's Christian scene.

One of the reasons that we need such protection and wisdom is because we (i.e. discerning Christians) are capable of seeing through evil of every type, whether it is merely some silly kind of hype or the worst sort of wickedness. As a discerning Christian, you don't even have to do or say anything to find yourself at the wrong end of a gun. Your very existence exudes discernment and insight into these things and thus renders you as Public Enemy Numero Uno.

But what is the theology behind all this? What spiritual realities do we need to be aware of in order to make sense of all the wickedness and hype in the Christian scene -- especially in the evangelical or even fundamentalist arenas?

The first spiritual reality we need to be aware of in order to make sense of all the evil and hype in the Christian scene is:

I. THE IMPERFECTION WHICH EXISTS EVEN IN THE COMMUNITY OF THE SAVED

The first thing that needs to be stressed is that all Christian believers will stumble from time to time. We should not expect Christians to behave perfectly — although they are certainly called to it by the Lord Jesus Christ (Matthew 5:48). In spite of the fact that true believers have been forgiven for their sins and brought into the kingdom of God, they still have much to contend with in this life which can cause them to sin. After all, not only do we have all the problems associated with having an earthly body but we are also subject to harassment by the powers of darkness (Eph.6:10ff). Thus, we will sin, but not willingly. Sin has no actual ongoing power over the genuine believer (Rom.6:14); but it can still make some harmful inroads into our lives.

However, the inevitable unwitting or unwilling stumblings of even the most faithful Christians still does not adequately explain that impenitent practice of evil which can so often — especially in present times — afflict the professing Christian Church. For the true believer is open to correction, even seeks it, and is horrified at any behavior -- especially his or her own - - which would offend the Lord or hurt His human creation. Yet so many professing Christians today -- when they are brought face to face with their maliciousness -- behave even more wickedly towards those who have seen through them or exposed them. How are we to explain such a state of affairs?

This brings us to the second spiritual reality that we need to be aware of in order to make sense of all the evil and hype in the Christian scene:

II. FALSE PROFESSIONS OF FAITH

The key to all this lies in that word "profession". There is a vast difference between merely professing to be a Christian and actually being a genuine believer. It is a sad fact that there always have been — and will be until the end of this present evil age — many people who are in the Church for reasons of their own, who do not have saving faith as they have never truly repented and been converted by the power of God in Jesus Christ. The Lord Jesus refers to this problem when he speaks of the "wheat" and the "tares" in a parable in Matthew 13, verses 24-32. The wheat represents true believers, while the tares (a kind of weed which looks very similar to wheat, until it is ready for harvest) represent professing Christians who are not true believers. In His interpretation of this parable in verses 36-43, Jesus shows how the fallen angel Satan has been responsible for the infiltration of such pseudo-Christians into the church. Sometimes these "tares" will remain incognito all their lives and will never really show their

true colors (although discerning people may often wonder about them). Others will be seen for what they are when they begin to show plainly their ungodliness.

We have to remember here a very solemn saying of the Lord Jesus Christ: "Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it" (Matt.7:13-14). The awesome truth here is that there are (and always have been) comparatively few people who are genuine disciples of Jesus Christ. This is why a little later on in that same chapter in Matthew, the Lord Jesus stresses that there will be many false "Christians" who will come to Him on the Day of Judgment expecting to be received into heaven, only to find the door firmly shut in their faces (verses 21-23). They may have passed themselves off as believers by coming into the Church, but they were never really in the true Body of Christ.

It was the same in Old Testament Israel. The vast majority -- although part of the theocratic community -- were never really God's people in their hearts. This is why there was always such disintegration and apostasy of that community. There was, nevertheless, always a "remnant", a small number of folks who had not bowed their knees to Baal. And that remnant was always under persecution, oppression and ridicule from the majority of unsaved people in Israel and Judah.

So it is also in the church today. The unsaved "Christians" by profession take over the spiritual community of God and then persecute and oppress the "few" who have found "the way to life". False professions of faith by religious impostors is one of the spiritual realities of the Christian scene, not only today but from the beginning of the New Testament church. "Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution. But evil men and impostors will grow worse and worse, deceiving and being deceived" (2 Tim.3:12-13).

This brings us to the next spiritual reality that we need to be aware of when we are trying to make sense of all the evil in the Christian scene today:

III. DIVINE JUDGEMENT WILL BE BASED ON OUR ACTIONS RATHER THAN OUR BARE BELIEFS

This is a real stumbling-block for many professing Christians, the full understanding of which would revolutionize their lives. Unfortunately, many think that a mere intellectual belief in God and Christ is enough for them to be heaven-bound. Not so; Not at all so. For even the creatures of the demonic realm believe intellectually in the reality of God (James 2:19).

So what is the litmus test of faith? How will the Lord Jesus Christ measure our faith when the Day of Judgment finally arrives? Will He ask us to recite perfectly the Westminster Confession of Faith? Will He quiz us with a raft of questions about our understanding of systematic theology? Will He test our knowledge of Scripture with a four-hour examination paper? How will He make it plain before the angels and men and women of the cosmos what is the true state of our hearts?

Well this is clearly spelled out in Matt.25:31-46. Let us look at this in some detail. Please turn to this passage of Scripture in your Bibles and read especially verses 33-35 and 41-43. Now what exactly does the Lord Jesus mean by these words. Is He saying that simply leading a charitable life, joining the Rotary Club or Buffaloes, being a general do-gooder, and so on, will bring you into heaven for eternity? Is that what is being said here? Not at all. The secret here lies in the words *"inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren"* (v.40) and *"inasmuch as you did not do it to one of the least of these..."* (v.45). The Lord Jesus is here plainly saying that people will go into either "everlasting punishment" or "eternal life" on the basis of whether or not they have shown practical love and concern towards those to whom He refers as His "brethren" (v.40).

This begs an interesting question: What is the identity of Christ's "brethren"? Who are they? Surely the answer is provided in Mt.12:46-50:

"While He was still talking to the multitudes, behold, His mother and brothers stood outside, seeking to speak with Him. Then one said to Him, 'Look, Your mother and Your brothers are standing outside, seeking to speak with You'. But He answered and said to the one who told Him, 'Who is My mother and who are My brothers?' And He stretched out His hand toward His disciples and said, 'Here are My mother and My brothers! For whoever does the will of My Father in heaven is My brother and sister and mother'".

We read the same sentiment in Lk.8:19-21:

"Then His mother and brothers came to Him, and could not approach Him because of the crowd. And it was told Him by some, who said, 'Your mother and Your brothers are standing

outside, desiring to see You'. But He answered and said to them, 'My mother and My brothers are these who hear the word of God and do it'". [cf.Heb.2:11]

In other words, in the final analysis, true saving faith -- as exemplified in the family of God -- is evidenced by loving behavior towards one's fellow believers. No one can truly love a believer except a true believer. And such love is shown by Christ to be a primary evidence of faith (cf. Gal.6:10, doing good "especially to those who are of the household of faith").

It is no coincidence that this passage about faith being evidenced by works comes immediately after the Parable of the Talents (Matt.25:14-30). The way that we have used our earthly gifts is a test of whether we are destined for the kingdom, and fit for heavenly service. *"If you have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon, who will commit to your trust the true riches?" (Lk.16:10).*

Other passages in Scripture teach the same thing. John specifically says, "We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love the brethren" (1 Jn.3:14). Loving one's fellow believers is a sure sign of salvation. Surely, therefore, not being loving towards them brings our salvation into question. The context of this brotherly love is galvanizing:

"In this the children of God and the children of the devil are manifest: Whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is he who does not love his brother. For this is the message that you heard from the beginning, that we should love one another, not as Cain who was of the wicked one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his works were evil and his brother's righteous. Do not marvel, my brethren, if the world hates you. We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love his brother abides in death. Whoever hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him. By this we know love, because He laid down His life for us. And we also ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. But whoever has this world's goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him? My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth. And by this we know that we are of the truth, and shall assure our hearts before Him" (1 Jn.3:10-19).

"If someone says, 'I love God', and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen? And this commandment we have from Him: that he who loves God must love his brother also" (1 Jn.4:20-21).

It is THIS that keeps the true Church vibrant. **This love is a sure sign of salvation.** *"For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor un-circumcision avails anything, but faith working through love" (Gal.5:6).* Working, working, working. Faith actually works through love. Faith without such works is DEAD! Without such works as evidence of salvation, there can be no genuine faith. ***It is for this reason that the Lord Jesus shows that the determining factor on the Day of Judgment will not be our tightness of doctrine but whether or not our faith has worked through love. It is that simple.***

Of course, works, in and of themselves, can never make one justified (righteous) before God; but the one who has been justified before God through salvation in Christ actually "works"! And, as the Lord Jesus shows in Matt.25:31-46, it will be on the basis of whether or not our professed faith works which will determine our eternal destiny. Thus, it will not be our "theological fundamentalism" or "strict confessionalism" which will bring us through the Day of Judgment into glory. It will instead be whether or not our actions have consistently proven the reality of our beliefs. You can be a "theological fundamentalist" or a "strict confessionalist", but if all that head knowledge has not metamorphosed itself into your relationships so that you become a loving, caring person, then you are a deeply ignorant person who will one day hear the Lord Jesus Christ roaring into your own ears with the words: ***"I NEVER KNEW YOU!"*** (Matt.7:23; cf. 2 Tim.2:19). It will be on the basis of whether or not our professed faith works in accordance with the will of God which will determine our eternal destiny

This is echoed perfectly in James's letter. In fact, James says a very astonishing thing in his letter. He writes: *"You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only" (Jas.2:24).* WOW! Now that is a statement to make the minds of many boggle; for it seems to be in direct contrast to Paul's words: *"Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ" (Gal.2:16), and "Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight" (Rom.3:20), and "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast" (Eph.2:8-9).*

However, there is no contradiction here whatsoever. One has to understand what James is saying by seeing 2:24 in the light of the rest of the chapter. For example, he states: *"Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. But someone will say, 'You have faith, and I have works'. Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith BY my works" (2:17-18).* Then he finishes by saying: *"For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also" (2:26).*

What one needs to understand is the difference of context between Paul and James. Paul speaks of the reality of faith — James is speaking of the quality of faith. Paul speaks of the underlying cause of justification and therefore has no place for works in his schema. James is speaking of the outworking effects of justification and therefore makes a big play on them, showing that faith will be evidenced by works, therefore works are what our faith can be judged by. In summary, Paul and James together are saying this:

- 1. Whoever wants to be accepted by God must be righteous.**
- 2. Such righteousness can be found in no human being by nature (Rom.3:10).**
- 3. Such a righteousness can only be found in Christ (Rom.3:22-26).**
- 4. This righteousness is made ours by faith in Him.**
- 5. The righteousness of faith is then seen in the subsequent quality of our works -- faith working through love (Gal.5:6; Eph.2:10).**
- 6. A person can thus be declared righteous by the Lord because of his or her evidenced works (James 2:21-23; Matt.25:31-46)**

For example, it is not that Abraham was actually made righteous because of his obedience with Isaac, but that he could be shown to be righteous — declared to be righteous — because of his obedience. His obedience evidenced his righteousness, not that it made him righteous (cf. Rom.4:3). Do you see the beauty of this?!?

We can see now that divine judgment will ultimately be based on our actions rather than our bare beliefs. To come under the guillotine of many professing Christians today, one would think that it is only what we believe in our heads (and especially if we agree with them!) which will determine our eternal destiny. They think that all one has to do is to be a "fundamentalist" and that this will be enough to save them. But this is a tragic mistake and explains why so many "fundamentalists" are so uptight and unpleasant in their personal dealings with others and have such frozen emotions. There is nothing wrong with calling yourself a fundamentalist or holding to what you may consider to be fundamentalist beliefs. But if your "fundamentalism" has become a kind of spiritual pride and a means to look down on others who may not be as doctrinally "watertight" as you are - or if your "fundamentalism"

has made you into an isolationist who shuns normal human society -- or if your fundamentalism has made you obsessively suspicious of others and even paranoid -- in other words, if your "fundamentalism" has become your religion, then you have ceased to live out the foundations of the faith and you are, in reality, no longer a true "fundamentalist". Unless people realize that being a fundamentalist involves far more than adherence to a set of beliefs, they will fail to be true fundamentalists. It is this reality which eluded the Scribes and Pharisees who so persecuted the Lord Jesus during His earthly ministry. And if they persecuted Him, they will certainly persecute you (Jn.15:18-19).

By all means, let us be discerning. But if our "discernment" is merely used in the form of hand-grenades designed to "bomb" the enemy and are not tempered with care and concern for the heartfelt needs of living people (and especially Christ's people), then we are betraying the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints. If discernment is not tempered with mercy and compassion (and, indeed, humor), then it will merely serve as an ego-building device, rooted in selfishness and isolation, bitterness and rancor, by which a person becomes increasingly paranoid and accusatory. Discernment is about the meeting of need. This is the true province of the pastor/teacher. If we neglect this, we will lose the heart of our faith.

These have been but a few of the spiritual realities of which we need to be aware in order to make sense of the fact that so many professing Christians seem so uncompassionate, harshly critical and unbendingly rigid in their mindset. Compassion and mercy have nothing to do with being "wet" or "ineffective"; but they have everything to do with being faithful to the Word of God.

The big question is: How can we develop that soft heartedness which should be at the centre of all Christian action? How can we follow Paul's wish when he says: *"Let your gentleness be known to all men?" (Phil.4:5). How can we prolifically produce that "kindness, goodness [and] gentleness" (Gal.5:22-23)* which is the natural fruit of the Spirit? How can we do all this and yet still remain vigilant, discerning, truth telling and intolerant of evil?