

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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God's Message to Seven Churches: Sardis: What you Hear and How you Hear

Remember therefore how thou hast received and heard, and hold fast, and repent. If therefore thou shalt not watch, I will come on thee as a thief, and thou shalt not know what hour I will come upon thee.
(Revelation 3:3, KJV 1900)

In the first century, the choices for Christians were quite clear. Even early in the church's history, error invaded the faith and worked aggressively to draw away followers. First century culture offered many religions, but few that claimed the Biblical truth of the gospel. The Jewish community viewed Christianity as a corrupted form of Judaism, a new religion that perverted their ancient traditions. Within the Christian community, a movement existed that tried to blend the Jewish traditions of the day with Christian faith. Acts 15 reveals many aspects of this error. The controversy that unfolds in this chapter was not between Judaism and Christianity, but between two contradictory beliefs within Christianity. The people who introduced the legalistic ideas in Antioch Church were members of Jerusalem Church. This explains why Paul took the problem to Jerusalem Church, and it also explains why Jerusalem Church sent its letter to Antioch, repudiating the errant conduct of its members at Antioch.

Gnosticism also invaded the faith. We see clear indications of gnostic mysticism in Paul's letter to the Colossians and in much of John's writings, especially First John. It may be that this error explains why John's gospel, believed to have been written sometime later than the first three gospels, focuses on Jesus' full deity, His full equality with the God the Father. (John 5:18; 10:30-33; plus the many "I am" statements of Jesus in John's gospel) Docetic Gnosticism with its denial that Jesus possessed a literal human body is the "antichrist" of First John. (1 John 4:3)

The religious culture of our times presents the studious Bible believer with a vastly different problem. Within the broad public umbrella of professing Christianity, you can find a group of people who believe just about anything you could imagine, so the aberrant mind can literally "Shop around" for the brand of Christianity that best fits his/her preconceived ideas. The idea that the Christian faith is a fixed body of truth set forth specifically in Scripture is ridiculed in our day. Many professing Christians hold the civil principle of religious liberty to be far more sacred than the teachings of Scripture.

The Holy Spirit's letters to these seven churches would not go over well in today's relativistic, "Find

the best fit for your personal religion" pretense of Christianity that dominates the landscape of our time.

Remember therefore how thou hast received and heard.... The people in the Sardis Church had heard the truth of the gospel, perhaps even from John himself. Their problem was not the confusion of an endless continuum of beliefs that pretended to be acceptable Christianity. They had heard the truth of the gospel. Their problem related to what they did with that truth after they heard it. Do not overlook the distinction between "How" and "What." Jesus warned against both dangers.

*And he said unto them, Take heed **what ye hear**: with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you: and unto you that hear shall more be given.* (Mark 4:24 KJV)

*Take heed therefore **how ye hear**: for whosoever hath, to him shall be given; and whosoever hath not, from him shall be taken even that which he seemeth to have.* (Luke 8:18 KJV)

Notice the emphasized words in each verse. A believer who listens non-stop to Christian radio or to a myriad of recorded sermons from many preachers with many ideas puts his/her pure faith at constant risk. For many years, my secular career required that I spend a lot of time in my car. I listened to Christian radio most of the time. Some of the programs were so clearly contradictory to Biblical teaching that I couldn't even tolerate listening. Others, far more dangerous to the naïve believer, at times sounded quite similar to Biblical truth. Unsuspecting hearers might well hear one of these men and conclude that he was preaching the truth, or something so near it, that they would begin to accept and to believe his teachings. Paul voiced his grave concern at this kind of attitude.

But I fear, lest by any means, as the serpent beguiled Eve through his subtilty, so your minds should be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ. For if he that cometh preacheth another Jesus, whom we have not preached, or if ye receive another spirit, which ye have not

received, or another gospel, which ye have not accepted, **ye might well bear with him.** (2 Corinthians 11:3-4 KJV)

“...ye might well bear with him” expresses Paul’s fear, not his admonition. When people listen to error for too long, it slowly erodes their pure minds and impacts their beliefs. What they might readily identify as error if their minds were immersed in Scripture slowly begins to sound rather neutral. Then “Neutral” starts sounding right, and Paul’s fear is realized in the compromised faith of the unsuspecting believer. We should take Jesus’ warning to be cautious in what we hear quite seriously.

Now we shift to the second passage from Jesus’ warnings, taking heed **how we hear**, the point of the Holy Spirit’s warning to the Sardis Church. On a few sad occasions in my ministry, I have encountered people who illustrate the final outcome of failure to obey this command. In reasoning with them on Biblical teaching, I would literally read a passage to them, only to hear them respond, “Well, that is just your idea. My idea is just as good as yours.” No, I did not write the New Testament. I was directing the person to inspired and supernaturally preserved Scripture. They weren’t disagreeing with me per se; they were disagreeing with Scripture. They had so compromised their faith that they started reading the Bible, if at all, as if it were the latest novel on the best seller list of contemporary reading material. Nothing in Scripture for them is absolute and fixed.

As we read Scripture, we readily learn that Scripture presents its truths with the expectation—and the commandment, not a polite suggestion—that coming to believe its teachings demands a specific and clearly prescribed action. We see this pattern in our study verse. If the Sardis Church obeys and starts taking heed to “...**how**...” they hear the gospel, they will “...hold fast, and repent.” The consistent message of Scripture commands us to hold fast to its teachings, not find endless rationalizations for altering its meaning and ignoring its teachings.

If therefore thou shalt not watch, I will come on thee as a thief, and thou shalt not know what hour I will come upon thee. The consequences of not obeying the gospel, the New Testament gospel that Jesus taught, along with His apostles and others under their teachings, are not negotiable, nor are the divinely warned consequences of not believing Scripture’s teachings. Refusal to obey Scripture’s commands brings the Lord’s personal judgments against His erring children. The subjects of this letter are not pagan unbelievers, but children of God in a New Testament church. They are fully capable of understanding and obeying the gospel. They are quite able to repent. Their problem lies in their minds and hearts. They have knowingly ignored the teachings of God in Scripture and in the gospel, favoring their own imagination to God’s

revelation in Scripture. The Lord’s longsuffering with His erring children is amazing. However, Scripture repeatedly warns us that His tolerance of error or sin in His children does have its limits. Once a rebellious child of God has ignored his/her own convictions from the indwelling Holy Spirit, and has repeatedly chosen to sin against the knowledge that he/she has gained through Scripture and the gospel that is according to Scripture, the Lord’s judgments are swift. Interestingly, at that point, they also come without warning, “...as a thief, and thou shalt not know....” I plead with you. Be warned. The Lord’s longsuffering is not endless. And His judgments against His children who knowingly choose sin over righteousness, error over truth, are severe.

How does the Lord react to our rebellious sins when we refuse to repent? Scripture does not leave us ignorant.

Therefore will I be unto Ephraim as a moth, and to the house of Judah as rottenness. (Hosea 5:12 KJV)

For I will be unto Ephraim as a lion, and as a young lion to the house of Judah: I, even I, will tear and go away; I will take away, and none shall rescue him. I will go and return to my place, till they acknowledge their offence, and seek my face: in their affliction they will seek me early. (Hosea 5:14-15 KJV)

Notice the progression of God’s reaction to sin in His child. At first, He convicts and warns the erring child clearly, but mildly, the annoying moth fluttering around the flame. However, our refusal to heed that warning brings a far sterner divine response. He shouts His word to our conviction and warns us, the roar of the young, hungry lion. If we refuse to heed His warning, He may well send severe chastening, “...tear and go away.” In the end, the answer to our question, we face the most dangerous of all possible divine actions. The Lord quietly withdraws and leaves His stubborn, erring child in silence. If the warning of the Lord’s shouting convictions do not get our attention, perhaps the lonely silence of His disapproval will. Paul identifies some whose stubborn sin eventually brings upon them a similar consequence; their conscience becomes seared with a hot iron. (1 Timothy 4:2)

Behold therefore the goodness and severity of God: on them which fell, severity; but toward thee, goodness, if thou continue in his goodness: otherwise thou also shalt be cut off. (Romans 11:22 KJV)

The Lord’s goodness to His repenting child is amazing. However, His response to the stubborn, sinning child is severe. It is altogether righteous, but it does become severe.

God faithfully observes one of His own natural laws, sowing and reaping. He shows gracious longsuffering far beyond our ability or expectation. However, when the erring child persists in sin, He withdraws and leaves the sinning child to suffer the unmitigated consequences of his/her own sins. For a time, He may buffer us from the full consequences of our sins, but not for ever.

As in no past age, we need to exercise extreme care in both what we hear/read and in how we hear/read Biblical truth. Hearing error deadens our sensitivity to error. We soon lose the ability to discern truth from error. Hearing the truth, but with resistant disobedience to it, sets the stage for the Lord's severe chastening, His coming against us as a thief, invasive, disruptive, and unexpectedly. We choose our path, but we cannot separate our choice from its consequences. We cannot mock God. (Galatians 6:7)

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