



MINUTES WITH MESSIAH

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FIND WHAT YOU'RE LOOKING FOR

It's a preacher story you may have heard before. Nevertheless I will repeat it. A farmer was working in his field, near the main highway in the area. As he worked, up the road came a wagon with a family onboard. The wagon stopped and the driver, a man, hailed him. He explained that his family was moving and he wanted to ask what the people in the nearest town were like, so he could decide whether to stop or go on. The farmer replied, "Well, that's an interesting question. Tell me, though, what were the people like where you came from?" The man on the wagon went on about how they were all a bunch of crooks and idiots, and that the reason they were moving was to get out of that town. "Well," said the farmer (who seemed to like to start every time he spoke with "well"), "it's interesting that you say that, because that is just the kind of people in this town. I'm a gonna have to say you'd better move on farther." A short while later another wagon, with a family onboard, stopped. The driver asked the same question. The farmer replied, "Well, that's an interesting question. Tell me, though, what were the people like where you came from?" The man on the wagon sadly replied that they were the best people in the world, who would give you the shirts off their backs if that was what you needed. He said they were sorry to leave that town, but needed to find work elsewhere. "Well," said the farmer, "it's interesting that you say that, because that is just the kind of people in this town. In fact, if you can wait a few minutes 'til I finish this job, I will ride with you into town and introduce you to the owner of the best hotel. I'll see that he gives you a good rate until you can get settled."

In life, in worship, in anything you do, you get out of it what you put in. Some people in this world seem to look for the negative in everything. If they look you in the eye, all they can see is the piece of sawdust, and not the wood you are sawing to build a house for somebody in need. When you deal with such people, though, you need to watch for them to shake their head, so you can duck that plank that is in their own eyes.

The challenge is always to look for the positive. If that is what you are looking for, that is what you will find. "If you're looking for failure you don't have to look very far." But do you want people to look for your failures? No, you want them to see the good in you. So you need to

look for the good in them. "Seek and ye shall find." (Matt 7:7) If you are looking for the good you will find it. Maybe that is what is meant by "love covers a multitude of sins." (1 Pet 4:8)

Most importantly, you should be seeking that most positive of all things. "When thou saidst, Seek ye my face; my heart said unto thee, Thy face, LORD, will I seek." (Ps 7:28) The most important thing to seek is God and his kingdom.

Some people are only looking to make a living. All they seek is their daily bread, and maybe a little more. They think they are too busy surviving in this world to seek God. The thing is, when that is all they seek, that is all they find. They get by. If they would seek more, however, they could have so much more.

And seek not ye what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink, neither be ye of doubtful mind. For all these things do the nations of the world seek after: and your Father knoweth that ye have need of these things. But rather seek ye the kingdom of God; and all these things shall be added unto you. (Lk 12:29-31)

Sometimes you find only what you are looking for. Sometimes it seems that God would give us more if we would just ask for more. Sometimes it seems that God is waiting for us to seek him, so he can give us more. God is just waiting for people to find him. Just look for him. He is there. You will find what you are looking for.

All of the articles in this issue of "Minutes With Messiah" are inspired by songs from Amy Grant's album, "Somewhere Down the Road." The titles of the articles are the titles of the songs that inspired them.

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BETTER THAN A HALLELUJAH

The secretary had spent hours working on a document. His manager called and asked for a different document that she had needed first. The secretary and the manager had not made priorities clear. This happens all the time. People get their priorities wrong. This does not mean what they are doing is wrong. That secretary was working on an important document; just not the one with the highest priority. Sometimes we think we know God's priorities, but he tells us that something else is better. We sing our hallelujahs, and that is good. But other things may be better than a hallelujah, sometimes.

Doctrinal Purity

Doctrinal purity. That is the rallying cry of the denominational Church of Christ. Of course, they preach that they are not a denomination, but rather the restoration of the first century church. In practice, though, they are as much a denomination as many other groups that they speak against because of their lack of biblical names or doctrines. Not every congregation that wears the name Church of Christ is of this denomination. Neither can it be said that every individual in one of those congregations is a member of a denomination.

(Perhaps we should define a denomination. In this context, a denomination is a division of the Christian

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religion worldwide, distinguished from other denominations by a particular set of beliefs or practices. Within each denomination is the belief that they are the only ones that follow the Bible in at least one particular respect. They can show scripture for this doctrine, but have an inability to accept any other view of that belief. They may even teach that anyone who does not believe as they do on this issue cannot be a "true" Christian. Thus they divide themselves from all other believers in Christ. A denomination, under this definition, may even follow the Bible very closely. The distinguishing mark of denominationalism is division. They separate themselves from others.)

The belief in doctrinal purity says that one must follow the teachings of Jesus and the apostles as closely as possible in order to be saved. It does not matter what else one does; if one refuses to believe or

obey the Bible in any particular one is not following God. Doctrinal purists are always in danger of, and often accused of, believing that one is saved on the basis of his works. Or if not that, at least that one can be eternally lost on the basis of unrepented sin. Based on the attitude of Jesus toward some of the *Prushim* (Pharisees), one wonders sometimes what Jesus would think of the doctrinal purists.

It must be pointed out that doctrinal purity was important to Jesus. His problems with the Pharisees were never over their obedience to actual scripture. He had a problem when they put tradition over scripture. He had a problem when they used scripture unjustly. He never had a problem with them obeying God. If anything, his frustration with the Pharisees was that their doctrine was right but their practice was lacking.

Then spake Jesus to the multitude, and to his disciples, Saying, The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat: All therefore whatsoever they bid you observe, that observe and do; but do not ye after their works: for they say, and do not. (Matt 23:1-3)

It is important to believe that the scriptures are accurate and true. It is important to follow them. There is even danger in a lack of doctrinal purity. When one fails to accept the entire teachings found in the Bible, then one may even be misled about his own salvation, and miss the boat entirely. Too many who have "given their lives to Jesus" (to use the popular but not scriptural phrase) think they are saved from sin when they may not be. When giving your life to Jesus does not include immersion in water in order to be saved from your sins, then a lack of accurate doctrine can indeed be deadly. If you give your life to Jesus on your terms rather than on his terms, you may find yourself still unforgiven. Compliance with scripture is vital. It is a life-and-death issue.

One can, however, accurately teach that one is not forgiven of sins until one is immersed, and still be in danger of being wrong. One can accurately teach that congregations are independent from one another or any hierarchical structure, the priesthood of all believers, salvation by grace (which is not inconsistent with water baptism), and that one must give up practicing a sinful life style (drunkenness, lying, homosexual acts, theft, etc.), and still be lacking in spiritual maturity.

Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith: these ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone. (Matt 23:23)

Note that Jesus did not condemn the Pharisees for doing the right thing. He even approved of their industry

in following the law. What he condemned was their attitude, while commending the purity of their doctrine.

Church attendance and worship

There seems to be a belief in common across all denominations of Christianity. That belief is that God is satisfied with church attendance and community worship. Many, perhaps most, people act as if they believe that once they become a member of a church all they need to do is attend worship once a week (or thrice a week, or twice a year) and possibly participate in prayer or singing, and that is all God requires.

The writer of Hebrews says attendance is important. He/she writes, “And let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works: Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is.” (Heb 10:24-25) Some people even make verse 25 a command that stands alone without the purpose given in verse 24. Assembling together is very important. It shows how much we love our fellow Christians, and how much we are willing to join them in praise to God.

Others choose not to assemble with God’s saints. They see no value in joining with others in praise to God. They feel that they can praise God just as well by themselves. This may even be true. But the purpose of the collective worship is not just to praise God. Christians assemble together primarily to encourage each other. The encouragement of knowing there are others who believe like you do is greater than the songs and prayers to God. What you do for others with your presence is often better than the worship you could have done alone. It is hard to provoke another to love and good works (or even provoke them in the usual negative sense) if you are not in their presence, if you do not know them.

God likes to hear voices lifted in song. (Eph 5:19-20) God listens to our prayers. He may even appreciate the occasional “amen” or “hallelujah” during the sermon. But God wants more than just our corporate worship. If we come together once a week and ignore him the rest of the time, our hallelujahs are empty. God wants our worship, but sometimes he wants something better than a hallelujah.

Better than a hallelujah

What could be better than our worship to God? There is one thing that brings rejoicing in heaven, a better hallelujah, than our worship, individually or collectively. “I say unto you, that likewise joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth, more than over ninety and nine just persons, which need no repentance.” (Lk 15:7) God likes us to encourage one another and to praise him, but he likes better that we teach others about him. Face facts. Very few people have ever come to God because they sat in worship services. Time and time again, surveys of those

who have come to believe in God and his Son show that personal, individual contact made the difference. Bringing people “to church” so they can see the love others share helps. Personal example helps even more. Personal example accompanied by personal teaching accomplishes the most. Better than a hallelujah is a hallelujah heard by one who is seeking God.

In Matthew 25 Jesus pictures a judgement scene. Without arguing whether this is the final judgement or the separation between the church and the world in this life, picture a separation of two groups of people. On one side are the sheep; on the other the goats. To those who are considered sheep God says, in the version expressed by some people’s lives, “Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: For you preserved my doctrine intact, you drove away people by your attitude toward those who erred in certain points of scripture, and you sang loudly every Sunday in the public worship.”

Are those really the criteria which God uses to judge our effectiveness? What does it really say? “For I

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was an hungred, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in: Naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me.” (Matt 25:35-36)

Corporate worship is important. Doctrinal purity is very important. But these must never be required at the expense of compassion. It is important that the person who has no food because they lost their job be told that they are a sinner and that God wants them to be immersed for the forgiveness of sins. That person, though, will never hear that message as long as his belly is empty. Everyone needs to know that Jesus was God’s grace to man, that he died as a sacrifice for sin. The homeless person who is freezing under the freeway overpass will not hear that message until he has a warm place for the night. The neighbor who is hurting because she has been abused by her boyfriend, again, does not need to be invited to church. She needs to be shown a God who is not abusive or indifferent. That is not likely to happen even in a church building once a week. Christianity takes place outside the church building.

“He heareth the cry of the afflicted.” (Job 34:28) God hears the poor and needy louder than he hears a hallelujah, sometimes. God, and the one we bless with our good deeds, hears our actions better than a hallelujah, sometimes.

OVERNIGHT

Life, they say, is a journey. Time does not stand still. We learn slowly. I remember at the beginning of one year in elementary school looking at the back of the math book and thinking that I would never learn how to do those problems. By the end of the year I had learned enough to do those problems. By the end of the following year I thought those problems were easy. My teacher knew that would happen. We learned to do the math a little at a time. God deals with man the same way. Perhaps the history of the holiday of *Shavuos* (Pentecost) shows this very clearly.

There was a time when God seems to have communicated to man primarily on an individual basis. Sometimes he expected individuals to teach his word as they had opportunity. Noah was a preacher of righteousness in his day. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob knew God and showed him to the people they met. They showed the world a generous, loving God who spoke to man in a way he could understand. They showed the value of the sacrifices and obedience. But they could not show God's love to the world overnight. People were not yet ready.

Then came *Shavuos*. Traditionally, fifty days into the exodus from Egypt, God spoke to a whole nation. With the nation surrounding Sinai, God spoke and the people heard all together. God gave a law for a specific people. They became his chosen nation. Through Moses, God gave Israel the Law. He did not give it to the rest of the world. On *Shavuos* God gave Israel "Most Favored Nation" status. He showed the world that he could love more than just a few obedient giants of faith. For centuries God dealt with man through the nation of Israel and the Law of Moses. But there was a problem. Actually a couple of them. One problem was that the nation was still not

fully ready for God. A cursory reading of the historical books of Torah shows the difficulties Israel experienced in following the Law. The other problem was that the Law was only a step toward the final revelation of God. One writer later explained that the Law of Moses was good, but was like the early days of the math class.

For the law having a shadow of good things to come, and not the very image of the things, can never with those sacrifices which they offered year by year continually make the comers thereunto perfect. For then would they not have ceased to be offered? because that the worshippers once purged should have had no more conscience of sins. But in those sacrifices there is a remembrance again made of sins every year. For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and of goats should take away sins. But this man, after he had offered one sacrifice for sins for ever, sat down on the right hand of God; From henceforth expecting till his enemies be made his footstool. For by one offering he hath perfected for ever them that are sanctified. (Heb 10:1-4, 12-14)

Then came another *Shavuos*. "This man," mentioned by that author, was a man named Jesus, who had been executed. About fifty days later, on *Shavuos* some of his followers, empowered by God, told the world that salvation was come to all. "In due time Christ died for the ungodly." (Rom 5:6) The world was ready, in God's view, to see the whole picture. We had learned what we needed to know. It did not happen overnight. But as Amy Grant sings, "If it all just happened overnight,/ you would never learn to believe/ in what you cannot see." Because God gave us the lessons over time we can believe.

(*Shavuos/Pentecost is May 19 in 2010.*)

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