

Can We Determine Right Or Wrong?

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Jesus once declared to some: "If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed; and ye *shall know the truth*, and the truth shall make you free" (John 8:31-32). This statement clearly implies that one can know the truth of God's Word.

However, determining right and wrong depends upon a proper attitude of a person's mind. Christ also stated: "If any man *will do his will*, he shall *know* of the doctrine whether it be of God, or whether I speak of myself" (John 7:17). So one must be willing to do the will of God. He must be of a disposition to obey the Lord's commandments or have an honest desire to obey the Lord in all things.

It is the purpose of this study to show from the Holy Scriptures that a person with average intelligence can learn what is right and what is wrong in religion and that he can obey the Lord for his soul's salvation. Nevertheless, to do so does require an honest heart and a willingness to obey the Lord. Note again the reading of John 7:17 found in other translations besides the King James Version:

- If any man *willeth* to do his will, he shall know of the teaching (ASV).
- If any one *wants* to do His will, he shall know concerning the doctrine (NKJV).
- If any man is *willing* to do His will, he shall know of the teaching (NASB).

A SIMPLE ILLUSTRATION

Let us suppose that in this good city of several public elementary schools there is confusion on the part of some of the teachers and the students as to the correct answer to the equation of two times two equals four ($2 \times 2 = 4$). One teacher says the answer is four, another says it is five, and so on. Still others say that it does not make any difference which answer the students puts on his paper if he, or she, is satisfied with the answer, after all it is a matter of one's own interpretation. So no answer will be marked wrong on the final examinations. This would certainly be confusion in the school system and in the minds of the students.

How can the matter be correctly settled? The answer is very simple: get a textbook that has the multiplication table in it, examine it and see what is the correct answer. Then all the teachers agree to teach the same thing from the textbook and grade all students by this correct answer that is in the book. Then all the schools would be teaching the same thing in their classes.

Now make the application of this illustration to the subject of religion. How can we determine what is right and what is wrong? We must all agree to go by the inspired Word of God. For example, what is the purpose of baptism, and what is the proper mode? What name should the followers of Christ wear? When should the Lord's Supper be observed? What kind of music should we offer in our worship to God? These questions, and many other similar questions, can be correctly answered by the Bible when we carefully examine it for the answers. Then all should teach and practice exactly what the Bible says. Peter admonished: "If any man speak, let him speak as the oracles of God" (1 Peter 4:11).

But one objects, "One preacher says one thing and another says something else." That is true, but what does the Bible say? The Bible does not contradict itself. God is not the author of confusion (cf. 1 Corinthians 14:33). Another says, "We cannot all understand the Bible alike." If we understand it, we understand it alike. All cannot be different and all cannot be right. If we understand that two times two equals four, and all understand it alike, we can understand the Bible alike in regard to our soul's salvation.

MUST HAVE RIGHT ATTITUDE

During Christ's personal ministry, we have an account of Him speaking a series of parables by the Sea of Galilee (Matthew 13:11-52). He later explained to His disciples why He spoke in parables and why some did not understand the things spoken. It was not His fault if some of the Jews did not understand Him. Also Jesus said:

And in them is fulfilled the prophecy of Esaias, which saith, By hearing ye shall hear, and shall not understand; and seeing ye shall see, and shall not perceive. For this people's heart is waxed gross, and their ears are dull of hearing, and their eyes they have closed; lest at any time they should see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and should understand with their heart, and should be converted, and I should heal them (Matthew 13:14-15).

This was a quotation from Isaiah 6:9-10, which was literally fulfilled during the time of the prophet; but in the time of Christ the people then had the same attitude toward God's Word. Like Israel of old, they too, had closed their eyes upon the truth and rejected divine teaching. The words of Isaiah were, therefore, as well fitted to express the character of these people during the personal ministry of Christ as in the time of the prophet. In this sense then the words were fulfilled (cf. Acts 28:25-27). The people were prejudiced; they would not see the truth or understand what was contrary to their opinions or desires.

This attitude is by no means uncommon in the religious world today concerning what is right and what is wrong. The reception of any truth from God's Word depends wholly upon the attitude of the

individual who is hearing it proclaimed or reading it. His prejudices, formed maybe in years gone by, prevent him from accepting the teaching of the truths concerning his soul's salvation. This, however, is not the fault of the Word of God.

Some declare that they cannot really know the truth, what is right and what is wrong, as there are so many different "interpretations" of the Bible. Some reject the teaching of the Bible because it is against their former teaching. One should ask himself: "Do I have a desire to learn and to do God's will regardless of what may have been my teaching in the past?" "Am I really hungering and thirsting after righteousness" (Matthew 5:6)? "Am I free of prejudices so that I can say, "Speak, Lord, and I will hear; command, and I will obey" (cf. 1 Samuel 3:9)?

A person must reach that point of honesty with himself in order to know what is right and to do it, according to the words of Christ in John 7:17. God's Word is plain, simple and easy to be understood as to what the Lord wants us to believe and do in religion. Man's attitude then should be: "Show me the way, Lord; I want the truth; what is my duty? I really want to go to heaven when I die."

GOD'S WAY VERSUS "MY WAY"

There are many who would not mind becoming Christians and serving the Lord if God would let them dictate the terms on which that could be brought about. Many are willing to worship God if the Lord will let them do as they please and do what they like. David declared: "Thou shalt guide me with thy counsel, and afterward receive me to glory" (Psalm 73:24); "Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path" (Psalm 119:105; cf. Psalm 1).

After His resurrection and prior to His ascension, Christ declared: "All authority hath been given unto me in heaven and on earth" (Matthew 28:18 ASV). We are to hear Christ (Matthew 17-5; Acts 3:22-23; Hebrews 12:25; 5:9).

EXAMPLE OF SINCERITY

The account of the conversion of the Ethiopian officer, the secretary of the treasury of Queen Candace's government, shows a person who was of a willing and sincere heart (Acts 8:26-39). Wanting to know what the will of the Lord was, he was reading the Scriptures when Philip, the evangelist, met him. Philip "preached unto him Jesus," and after he had learned the Lord's plan of salvation, he immediately confessed his faith in Christ and was baptized. Then "he went on his way rejoicing." He learned the Lord's will, and he obeyed it.

Did the eunuch learn what was right? Indeed so. Can a person, who is accountable, learn that same message today? We think so. One of the greatest deceptions the devil has ever put upon mankind is to suggest that one cannot, with an honest heart, read and understand his duty to God for his soul's salvation. To remove this deception of Satan will result in many souls who would have otherwise been lost, being with God eternally.

MAN RESPONSIBLE

If an intelligent person cannot understand, or know, God's will for him by reading it or hearing it preached, then the Lord is responsible for that person's condition if he is eternally lost. Could God have made the message plainer or more simple in His Word but did not because He could not? If so, this reflects on the ability of God. If God could have made it plainer but He did not because He did not care if a person understood it or not, this then reflects upon the morality of God as a loving and just Being. If man needs more teaching than is in the Bible to know and to do God's will to be saved, then why did not God give us all these things that we need?

The truth is, God "hath given unto us all things that pertain unto life and godliness" (2 Peter 1:3) in terms easy to be understood and obeyed. The lack of obedience then is because people "shut their eyes, stop their ears, and bar the door of their hearts" to truth. It is impossible for that man who does this to ever learn the truth and obey it. Why? He does not want the truth. A person of that disposition is certain to be lost eternally. Hence, the Bible teaches that each person is accountable and responsible for his own soul's salvation (Romans 14:12; 2 Corinthians 5:10).

There are some who think that the Holy Spirit in some direct, personal way gives additional help or insight into the Holy Scriptures, in addition to the Bible, to help them know the Lord's will. But this is not taught in God's Word. Too, there are some statements of Scripture that are misapplied and used to teach people that they cannot read and understand the Bible. We mention two such statements:

First, in 2 Peter 1:20 is the statement that "no prophecy of the scripture is of any *private* interpretation." This is used to teach that an ordinary person needs someone who has extra divine help or guidance of the Holy Spirit to explain the Scriptures to him. And there are those who claim to have this power. But such an idea that there are certain ones today who are being divinely guided to help explain the Word of God is not taught in this passage. The apostles and prophets were divinely inspired to give us God's Word; "holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost" (2 Peter 1:21). For example, Paul received his message by divine inspiration and wrote it down; then he said, "whereby, *when ye read, ye may understand...* as it is now revealed unto his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit" (Ephesians 3:3-5). Also, Paul wrote: "All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable... That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto *all* good works" (2 Timothy 3:16-17). The apostles were guided into "all truth" by the Holy Spirit (John 16:13). Again, Paul affirmed in 1 Corinthians 2:12-13, that the words of God are verbally inspired. So the Bible is the verbally inspired, inerrant, and complete will of God.

So, verse 23, of 1 Peter 2, explains why the prophecies given by inspired prophets were not of any "private interpretation." They were not giving their own, private interpretation of the "signs of the time" concerning future events. They were guided by the Holy Spirit to write what would happen, not their own ideas. The passage has absolutely nothing to do with a person needing today any extra direct help from the Holy Spirit to understand God's will or some person divinely

guided to help explain it to him. A person can read and learn his duty to God by reading and studying for himself if he is honest and sincere.

Second, some refer to passages of Scripture which state that the gospel of Christ is a “mystery” revealed, as in Ephesians 3:3, and infer that the gospel of Christ which was once hidden in the mind of God and has now been revealed, is “mysterious” and cannot be understood by the common man. This is a gross misunderstanding of the passages. The Bible is a *revelation* of God’s will.

The word *mystery*, as used in the Scriptures, signifies a secret, something that was kept secret in God’s mind from man’s understanding until God revealed it to us by the Spirit. Once God’s will was revealed, it was no longer a mystery (cf Romans 16:25-27). In 1 Corinthians 2:7-13, Paul tells of the gospel of the Christian Age as having been in God’s mind from all eternity (Ephesians 3:10-11) but now revealed unto us by the Holy Spirit through the apostles and prophets. In this connection he refers to a prophecy by Isaiah “that eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him,” (referring to the many blessings in the Christian Age). Then Paul says that “God hath revealed them unto us by his Spirit” (vs 10). Paul also said, “Which things also we speak, not in the words which man’s wisdom teacheth, but which the Holy Ghost teacheth; comparing spiritual things with spiritual (words, ASV)” (vs 13).

(Incidentally, 1 Corinthians 2-9 is not a funeral text to be applied to heaven, although it is often used in that way. The language refers to the blessings in the age of the Lord’s church when it was once established. It has now been established, since the day of Pentecost, (Acts 2). So the gospel is no longer a mystery, and it is certainly not mysterious. Isaiah prophesied centuries before the Lord’s church was established and spoke of things yet to come which no one knew exactly.)

“KNOW EVERYTHING”

Some then sneeringly ask, “Well, then do you know everything that is in the Bible? The answer is no, emphatically **NO**. But I do understand God’s will to me as to what I must do to be saved, the name to wear, and how to worship and serve the Lord in living the Christian life, for everything that is necessary for our salvation is plain and can be easily understood by all rational beings. We can know that if people will hear and obey the word of God, it will save them; but if they will not, it will condemn them in the last day. Truth can be known, that is, truth for our spiritual freedom. Jesus said so. A lack of reverence and indifference toward the Word of God is a lack of reverence for God. This is the spirit of liberalism. It is a very dangerous attitude. But some will ask, “If you can know the truth, then who was Cain’s wife, what was Paul’s ‘thorn in the flesh,’ etc.?” Those questions do not pertain to knowing and understanding God’s will to be saved from sin by the grace of God and in living the Christian life faithfully in order to go to heaven when this earthly life is over.

MYSTERIES IN THE BIBLE

Again, some ask: "Since we can know the truth and know right from wrong, are there not mysteries in the Bible that cannot be answered?" The answer again is yes. Indeed, there are mysteries in the Word of God, that is, many things that we are not able to understand. Among them, we could say that we do not know how God could cure Naaman of his leprosy by his dipping seven times in the river Jordan (2 Kings 5:1-14). We do not know how the blind man was cured, by his washing in the Pool of Siloam (John 9:1-7). But the Lord cured Naaman, and the blind man received his sight when they both obeyed the Lord.

Why did God tell Naaman to dip seven times in the Jordan River? Why did it have to be in the Jordan? We do not know the answer to those questions. Why did he have to dip seven times? We do not know. Would not some other river have been as good as the Jordan? After all, there were rivers in his own country, Abanah and Pharpar. No, because the Lord said: "In the River Jordan." Well, would not one dipping in the river be sufficient? No, because the prophet of God said: "Seven times." If Naaman had dipped one time and then stopped, would he have been cured of his leprosy? No, because God said: "Seven times." But why seven times if God could cure him by dipping one time? We do not know, that is God's side of the matter.

Did the water in the river have any power to cure Naaman of his leprosy? Indeed not. Then why dip in the river? Because that is what God told him to do. Could Naaman see any reason for doing this? No. But when Naaman finally did what the Lord told him to do, he was cured of his leprosy. It was the Lord that bestowed the blessing of healing, but not until Naaman had obeyed the Lord. If Naaman had refused to do what the Lord told him to do, would he have been cured of his leprosy? Certainly not! He had to obey the Lord to receive the blessing.

Well, was the instruction given to Naaman simple? Could he at the time he was told what to do understand it? Indeed so. That was his side of the matter. Naaman's refusal to obey at first was not due to the fact that he could not understand what the prophet of God had told him to do. It was because he, from a human standpoint, could not see any reason for doing it. The command was simple, easy to be understood and easy to be obeyed. Hence, when Naaman obeyed the Lord, he was cured of his leprosy!

The same principle applies to all people today. We can easily understand and obey God's will for us, and when we obey the Lord, we will be blessed.

TWO SIDES TO SALVATION

We should always remember that there are two sides to man's salvation: God's side and man's side. God's side is to provide for man his forgiveness by His grace and to tell man what conditions are to be met to obtain His blessings. Man's side is to learn and obey the conditions by his obedient faith in God; these conditions are always simple and easy to understand and to obey. Man needs only to trust the Lord and do His will. Christ is "the author of eternal salvation unto all them that obey him" (Hebrews 5:9).

MYSTERIES IN NATURE

However, there are mysteries in the realm of nature as well as in the Bible, which we cannot fully understand. For instance, how are our physical bodies nourished and sustained in all their parts by our eating certain foods? We know some things about it, but much of it is a mystery to us. The same food will help put white skin on the body of one person, black skin on another person and yellow skin on another. Can we explain that?

We do not understand how a sheep and a goose can eat the same food in the field and it produce wool on a sheep's back and feathers on the goose's back. We do not understand how a black cow can eat green grass and give white milk from which we get yellow butter. But we can feed and milk the cow, drink the milk and eat the butter and enjoy the benefits therefrom.

The God of Nature is the God of Revelation, and in both realms there are things we cannot know. The natural realm is full of such mysteries. Here is a man in this state. He has a very limited education, in fact, he cannot even spell the words "agriculture" or "horticulture." Yet, in the springtime he can prepare the soil, plant corn seed, knowing that the seed will reproduce after its kind, then later cultivate the ground, and finally gather the corn, have the corn ground and he and his family can eat good cornbread. Does he fully understand all about the growth of the corn seed? Indeed not! Yet he does his part, and God in His providence in the natural realm does the rest. Does the farmer necessarily need to know how the seed grows in the ground and produce a harvest of corn for him to plant the seeds? Of course, he does not. But he does not refuse to plant the seeds because he cannot fully understand how the seed reproduces after its kind and multiplies. It would be just as foolish for a man, therefore, to reject the book of Nature because he cannot understand its mysteries as it would be for him to reject the Bible (the Book of Revelation) because he cannot fully understand all of its mysteries. This one thing we must keep in mind: *the mysteries in nature and in the Bible are always on God's side and never on man's side.*

It was a mystery how God healed Naaman when he dipped in the Jordan and how He gave sight to the blind man when he washed in the pool of Siloam. But the mystery in both cases was God's side. So it is with man's salvation. Man has only to believe and obey. His part is plain and simple and easy to obey. There is absolutely no mystery on man's side.

We may not know why baptism is made a condition of salvation to a penitent believer (Mark 16:15-16; Acts 2:38; 22:16), but like Naaman and the blind man, we can believe and obey. Hence, we proclaim to every one this message: *take God at His word, believe what He says, do what He commands, and trust Him for the fulfillment of His promises.* We can know right and wrong in the realm of religion if we are honest and sincere in the study of God's Word. His Word is truth (John 17:17). It will judge us in the last day (John 12:48). "And ye shall know the truth, *and the truth shall make you free*" (John 8:32).

Sir Walter Scott, one of Scotland's distinguished novelists and poets (1771-1832), truthfully said concerning the Bible:

Within this ample volume lies
The mystery of mysteries,
Happiest they of human race
To whom God has given grace
To read, to fear, to hope, to pray,
To lift the latch, to force the way,
And better had they ne'er been born
Who read to doubt or read to scorn.

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