

The Great Snare

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"Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. Many will say to Me in that day, 'Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness.'" (Matthew 7:21,22)

These words from the lips of Jesus are perhaps the most severe and frightening warning that He ever spoke. They are severe, because the judgment is final and eternal separation from Him. They are frightening because they are spoken to religious people who thought they were serving Jesus. Jesus did not say, "You *tried* to do many wonders in My name." Something *was* happening. There were results that men could see. But in the end, it counted for nothing.

How could this be? Is it possible to do works in the name of Jesus with results that seem real, and yet not do the will of God? Is it possible to be well-intentioned, but miss the mark completely? Will we explain away this warning and say that Jesus could not possibly mean what the plain words seem to say? Many have done so, with reasons and self-justification, but will our arguments stand the test in the final day before Jesus Himself?

In these two verses is a warning about one of the greatest snares--perhaps *the* greatest snare--known on earth. Let us take the words of Jesus at face value to mean exactly what they seem to mean. How shall we escape if we reason around them to justify ourselves? On what basis do we reinterpret them to suit our own situations? May the Lord open our eyes, lest we be found cast away on that final day.

Working for Jesus

There is a common desire in the hearts of men, to be useful. Each of us is born wanting to "be somebody," do something noteworthy, and be noticed for our accomplishments. Unfortunately we often bring this desire into the working of God. It seems so natural. In many ways and forms, we are challenged to find out what our gift is and use it for the Lord. We are challenged to give of our best to the Master. We are encouraged to go to the ends of the earth to work for the Lord. New Christians are often encouraged to get involved immediately in Christian work of some kind, such as teaching, a witnessing program, or serving in some kind of organized work. On the surface it seems good. It gets people involved and busy in the work of God. After all, is that not what we are left here on earth for? What could possibly be wrong with that?

Others press on quickly to other work that is seemingly even more spiritual. We just read of men who cast out demons and did great miracles in the name of Jesus. No simple natural Christian program for them! They are out to do battle for Jesus and cast out the demons, taking the territory for Him. They seem to be experiencing great spiritual power and God's blessing. They are confident of their reward when they stand before Christ on the final day. After all, they have done great exploits for Jesus.

Here then, is the searching question. *Can we work for Jesus?* What do we do with this statement from our Lord: *"I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing"* (John 15:5). Is this "working for Jesus"? Or what about the words of Paul? *"Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who*

works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure." (Phil. 2:12,13)

Strictly speaking, brethren, we do not work "for Jesus." If we do, it is self-effort which is "wood, hay, and stubble," and will be burned up in the final day of judgment. Nothing we can do has any value to God. Apart from Jesus, we can do absolutely nothing. We might argue that we are not separate from Jesus, and that should be true. But if we are moving on our own initiative, with our own ideas, our own ability, and on our own time, trying to do the work of God, we are moving separate from Jesus and it is "nothing" in God's eyes. It is only as God works in us and we move in union with God that our lives have any value in God's economy. This is not our work for Jesus, but God working in and through us. It is the work of God, not our works. Some may argue that we are splitting hairs, but may I plead to my readers to seriously consider what is being said? This is not splitting hairs, but the very heart of the great divide. It is the difference between Isaac and Ishmael. It is the difference between rest and struggle. It is the difference between life and death.

If we consider the entire history of God's working with men, from Adam until today, we can see one theme. Will we allow God to initiate all things and obey His leading, or will we come up with our own solutions to life's problems and challenges and work them out in our own strength? Trace this theme through the lives of Abraham, Moses, Israel, the prophets, the disciples, and the book of Acts, and we find it is all the same. In other words, will we let God be God in our lives? God does not accept our works. We may have heard that all of our lives, but so often we turn right around and begin to plan the work that we are going to do for God. It is so appealing to our minds to try to do some great work for God, but that is absolute death to the spiritual life with God.

Knowing God

In the scripture we began with, the contrast given by Jesus is between those who did works for Him, and those that He "knew." These are in absolute contradiction. The word "knowing" is a very intimate one. Adam "knew" his wife and she bore a son. When we enter into an intimate spiritual union with Jesus, we will bear fruit out of that relationship that will bring glory to God. Apart from this intimate union, however, we cannot bear fruit. If we do not abide in the Vine and bear fruit, we are good for nothing but to be gathered and thrown in the fire. (John 15:6).

In our minds, many of us have put the business of "knowing God" and "God knowing us" into an optional category for a few special people who have more time than we do. We are busy people, and there is a great work to do. Souls must be won, the church must be built, and missions must go forward. Our focus is not on abiding in Christ, but on doing some work that men (and God) can see. In placing the focus on work, we miss the very purpose for which Christ redeemed us. He redeemed us for Himself. Only as that purpose is realized in our lives will we be the fragrance of a heavenly life. It must be God at work within us, and our responsibility is to work out that which God is working within. It is in this continual abiding in the presence of Jesus that our lives are of value to God in His purpose. Our work is to abide. If we abide, then God will do His work through us. The focus for us is Jesus and abiding in Him.

Doing His Will

If we consider the words of Christ carefully, we must conclude that there is one ultimate test that must be applied to every part of our lives: have we done the will of God? Those who have not done the will of God will be cast from His presence as "workers of lawlessness." Christ did not die so that we could be excused from doing the will of God, but rather so that we would be able to do the will of God. Grace does not excuse us, but empowers us to do what we could not do before. Mercy is not shown just because Christ died, but rather as we are in Christ. To be in Christ, we must be abiding in the Vine in active faith. It is not a positional, theoretical identification which has no meaning.

Jesus gave the example of two sons, one who did the will of the father and one who did not. He commended the one who did the will of the father, and told us to go and do likewise. The will of God is the only thing that matters. "Thy will be done on earth, as it is in Heaven." Is this central in our thinking?

To be able to do the will of God, we must first be in Christ and have His Spirit dwelling in us. Then, as we move in response to the indwelling Holy Spirit, we will do His will in all things. Not only will we do His will, this is the *only* way we can do His will. Every other way we try to approach God's will results in self-effort and does not glorify God or speak well of who He is.

God's way is perfect. Nothing less than perfection satisfies the heart of God. Christ died that we might be perfect in Him. If Christ had not died, and God had only given a set of commandments, then we could do no more than try our best to please God. But our best falls so far short of who God is that God refers to it as "filthy rags." Christ did die, however, and God is completely just in requiring absolute perfection since He has made the way for us to be delivered from our own abilities and to live the very life of God. If we decide to choose another way, we become "lawless," not submitting to the ways of God.

In the beginning, Adam chose to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. This put man in the judge's seat, evaluating every situation based on his own resources, and deciding what to do. To live from the basis of this tree is death, because it does not spring from God Himself. The tree of life is God's choice. That means an utter dependence on God for all things. To do the will of God is to live His life. We cannot live our lives, trying to evaluate and understand what the will of God is. The will of God for each one of us is to realize that as far as God is concerned, I have been crucified with Christ, and I no longer live. The life I now live is the life of God, which is lived by the faith of the Son of God (Gal. 2:20). This is the only life that pleases God.

Finding a Place of Rest

Trying to serve God and do His will in our own strength is a great struggle. We cannot know the approval of God or His grace while we are doing what we think is best. When we move in our strength to do our will or to try to do what we think is the will of God, the only resource we have is ourselves. In this place, we are tossed by our desires, our emotions, our weaknesses, and by every influence that comes our way from this wicked world.

Paul said of himself before he came to Christ that what he wanted to do, he could not do, and what he did not want to do, he did. This is truly a place of bondage. We are bound by sin and unable to deliver ourselves. Paul's final cry was "Who shall deliver me from this body of death?" What was the answer? "I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord." That is why Christ died, to deliver us from this place of death. The only thing that will deliver us from death is life. We are saved by His life. (Rom. 5:10)

We find the same message proclaimed in the book of Hebrews, chapters 3 and 4. The example given is Israel. God wanted them to trust Him for all things. He said that He would provide. Instead, they continually turned to their own strength, their own wisdom, and their own resources. Every time they did, they failed, and the final end was a trail of corpses scattered through the wilderness. We are told that they did not enter into God's rest because of unbelief and disobedience. We are commanded to be diligent to enter the rest, and to fear, lest any of us fall short of it. Do we believe this warning, or do we think it's for somebody else?

What are we to believe and obey? First, we must accept the fact that "apart from Him we can do nothing." That is a real place of faith. If we believe what Jesus said, and are willing to obey, we will come to an absolute end of trying to do something for God. This will touch every area of our lives, and if we are serious before God, the Holy Spirit will show us exactly what that means. Secondly, we will wait before God until we come to a place of perfect rest and peace, daring not to move unless God speaks. This will take time, as most of us are running at top speed, trying to keep up with this world and accomplish something that will make our lives seem worthwhile. Our lives are filled with so much activity that is self-initiated, that we have pushed God out. This must be reversed. In this place of quietness, we will become sensitive to the Holy Spirit. He will put His finger on things that have been hindering our relationship with Him. As He does, we must act, responding to His discipline. All of this will clear our relationship with God so that we can begin to live from the tree of life, as God intended. Our steps in the beginning may be small, but it is like learning to walk all over again. We are entering into a place of actually living the life of God instead of just talking about it.

A Final Word

Perhaps some will find what has been said to be too vague and hard to understand. Can we be reminded again of God's provision? "However, when He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth; for He will not speak on His own authority, but whatever He hears He will speak; and He will tell you things to come. He will glorify Me, for He will take of what is Mine and declare it to you" (John 16:13,14).

This is a spiritual working. Those who worship God must worship in spirit and truth. The natural cannot please God. We must not run from this place. God has made full provision, and there is no second plan for those who are afraid of the Holy Spirit. Let us not draw back to destruction, but press in boldly to the throne of grace, that we may find mercy and help in time of need. Jesus will be there to meet us, and He will give the Holy Spirit to those who ask. Glory to His name!