

(New Wine in New Wineskins) 8. True Spirituality - Seeking God's Interests

by Zac Poonen

The sermon emphasizes the importance of seeking God's interests and not our own, and warns against the dangers of deception and false righteousness.

Scripture: Matthew 3:2, Matthew 16:18, Matthew 16:21, Mark 1:14, John 12:25, Romans 11:31, 2 Corinthians 11:3, Philippians 2:19, 2 Thessalonians 2:10

Topics: "True Spirituality", "Deception Resistance"

Description

Zac Poonen preaches about the danger of being led astray from devotion to Christ by the deceitfulness of Satan, who disguises himself as an angel of light. He warns against pursuing righteousness like the Pharisees without truly seeking God's interests and walking in the light of His Word. The essence of salvation lies in being saved from 'seeking our own', as seen in the contrast between the Old Testament gospel of personal blessings and the New Testament gospel of God's purposes and heavenly things.

Transcript

"I am afraid lest as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, your minds should be led astray from the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christfor Satan disguises himself as an angel of light, and his servants disguise themselves as servants of righteousness" (2 Corinthians 11:3, 14, 15).

"Israel, pursuing a law of righteousness, did not arrive at that law" (Romans 11:31).

The Pharisees in Israel pursued righteousness, but they were led astray by Satan. This is a warning for all who are pursuing righteousness today. It would be conceit on our part to imagine that we are incapable of being deceived. Our protection from deception lies only in walking in the light and loving the truth as it is found in God's word and in the earthly life of Jesus (2 Thessalonians 2:10, 11).

Sincerity alone cannot protect us from deception, if we do not make God's word our guide. Peter was quite sincere, yet he became the mouthpiece of Satan in suggesting a wrong course of action to Jesus (Matthew 16:21-23). When Jesus first spoke about the cross to His disciples, they could not understand this as God's way. They had been used to an Old Testament gospel that had promised God's people prosperity, health, many children and other earthly blessings. To suffer and to die was quite contrary to this Old Testament gospel.

The Old Testament was centred around personal blessing and earthly things. The New Testament gospel is centred around God's purposes and heavenly things. When John the Baptist came preparing the way for this New Testament gospel, his message was "Repent (turn around) ...for the kingdom of heaven (as opposed to an earthly kingdom and earthly blessings) and the kingdom of God (as opposed to the kingdom of personal blessing) have now come very near" (Matthew 3:2; Mark 1:14, 15). Jesus said that after John the Baptist's time, the kingdom of heaven and of God were being preached (Matthew 11:12; Luke 16:16). But He also said that we had to be men of violence in order to get into this kingdom. The love of self and of earthly comfort, honour, convenience, wealth, etc., is so deeply rooted in our flesh, that only those who are prepared to do violence to such loves can ever possess God's kingdom.

When Peter suggested the way of ease and comfort to Jesus, He rebuked Peter saying, "Get behind Me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to Me; for you are not setting your mind on God's interests but man's" (Matthew 16:23). When we set our mind on our own interests, we become a stumbling block to Jesus and to the kingdom of God. It is then, that Satan succeeds in leading us astray.

The essence of salvation from sin is to be saved from "seeking our own". Lucifer sought his own, and sin came into the universe. Jesus never sought His own, and thus brought salvation. A righteousness that still leaves a man seeking his own, is a counterfeit righteousness. Yet this is the righteousness that one sees even in many groups proclaiming holiness. Man is basically 'business minded' - and so he would like to get heaven's best, with minimum inconvenience to himself. Thus he is forever prone to invent a convenient theology that does not disturb his comfort or his interests.

It is possible to have overcome anger, sexual sins and bitterness and also have made restitution in all matters (concerning one's past life) and yet to be seeking one's own - one's own comfort and convenience or one's wife's convenience and comfort, (In 1 Corinthians 7:33, such pleasing of one's wife is called being occupied with 'the things of this world!'), or one's own honour (not perhaps in the world, but in the church and particularly the honour and esteem of the elder brothers), or one's own gain (in the pursuit of professional ambitions etc.), etc.

It is possible to believe, to understand and even to be able to explain the mystery of godliness, and yet not to have understood the mystery of iniquity.

The secret source of all iniquity is the desire to seek our own. This is one of the most deceptive desires in our flesh. One can imagine himself to be spiritual, just because of having overcome a few superficial sins, when 'seeking one's own' may still be rampant in his decisions and actions. Such is the deception of Satan when he comes as a minister of 'righteousness'! Such is the mystery of iniquity!

We have no lack of biblical knowledge in our day. In fact, it is quite likely that the clever ones among us are able to explain the doctrines of the new covenant even better than Paul himself (who had the first revelation on it) could! Yet it is more than likely that our life is thousands of miles behind Paul's, in being freed from seeking our own!

The one thing that marks out a true man of God is not that he holds a particular doctrine - but rather that he does not seek his own. Paul says in Philippians 2:19-21 that most of his co-workers were still seeking their own, and that therefore he could not send them to Philippi. Timothy however was a glorious exception. Paul's co-workers had all their doctrines perfectly right, no doubt. Yet they sought their own. They may even have considered themselves righteous and spiritually superior to others around them. Yet Paul could see through the shallowness of their 'righteousness'. The same situation persists today.

The one thing that all truly great men of God have had in common, through the centuries of Christian history, is this: that they did not seek their own. It is not the finer points of doctrine that made them men of God, but rather this one common factor - that they did not seek their own. Some may not have had as accurate an understanding of the truth as we have. But their spirituality lay in the fact that they selflessly sought the kingdom of God, according to the light that they had, in their day and generation.

If we today have more light on some truths in Scripture than many godly men, then we must remember that to whom more is given, from them more will be required. We are in great danger then, if we think that righteousness consists merely in overcoming anger, sexual sins, etc. There are devout men of other religions who have conquered these sins (externally). One famous religious leader is reported to have stated that it was impossible for others to provoke him to anger. But that is not the righteousness of Christ. That is merely suppression! Many hermits also claim to have no attachment to material things. They certainly put many 'believers' to shame!

We can look at all these sins of the flesh as the Philistines that stood with their captain Goliath against Israel. Goliath himself, however, is the giant of 'seeking our own'. If David had merely killed the Philistine soldiers one by one, there would have been no victory - or at best, a long drawn out one that may have taken many years. But we read that when David killed Goliath, all the other Philistines ran away (1 Samuel 17:51). This is the secret. We are to concentrate all our attack on the giant, 'seeking our own', if we are to win a real victory. Then the other sins will automatically be overcome.

Jesus came to lay the axe to the root of the tree. The fruits of the tree are many - lying, stealing, coveting, anger, bitterness, etc. The root of them all, however, is to seek one's own. Here is where the axe must be laid. Otherwise we shall be deceived.

It is possible to imagine that we are walking in holiness, just because we are never seen losing our temper and because we speak a certain religious language. Yet our mind, energy and time may often be spent in the acquisition of more and more material things for our homes, pleasing our wives, making our children happy, and living a generally comfortable middle class life. To live like this and to imagine that we are holy is the height of self deception.

Paul was afraid that the Corinthians would be led astray from simple devotion to Christ. There is a real danger of our devotion to our wives becoming more than our devotion to Christ. The first commandment is not to love our neighbour as ourselves, but to love God with all our heart, soul, strength and mind. It is when we do that first, that we shall be able to love our neighbour (including one's wife) aright.

Christians pursuing righteousness can be like a pendulum that swings to one extreme, and then, on seeing their error, swinging to the other extreme. There are cliffs on both sides of the narrow way - and Satan does not really mind which of the two cliffs you fall over!

But we praise God for the ministry of the Holy Spirit. "If you leave God's paths and go astray (to the right or to the left), you will hear a Voice behind you say, 'No, this is the way; walk here'" (Isaiah 30:21 - TLB). This is the main purpose of prophetic ministry in the church - to let that Voice speak to us, keeping us right in the centre of the narrow way. The prophetic ministry in the church, and the written word of God are the means God uses to keep us in the centre of the narrow path that leads to life.

Having seen the unreality in much of Christendom that has emphasised external activity, neglecting their family life, we can now swing to the other extreme of thinking that Christianity consists of only loving our

wife, children and other Christians who speak our 'language' in our ghetto! We must certainly live in love with our family and assembly members and also overcome sin in our personal life. But our devotion to Christ must also be expressed in seeking to promote His kingdom, even at personal cost and sacrifice. Inward purity and external sacrifice are not mutually exclusive - for Jesus had both in His life.

The apostle Paul could have settled down to a comfortable Christian life in Tarsus as a Christian businessman and lived a holy life. But he did not do that. His devotion to Christ compelled him so that he offered to the Lord that which cost him everything in this life.

Two hundred years ago, two of the Moravian brothers heard of a slave colony on an island in the West Indies and decided to sell themselves as slaves there for the rest of their lives, in order to preach the gospel to those slaves. Two others heard of a leper colony in Africa, where no one was allowed to enter and return, for fear that the disease might spread. They volunteered to go into that leper colony for the rest of their lives in order to present Christ to the inmates of that colony.

I do not know the minute details of doctrine that these men believed. But they certainly did not seek their own and they certainly offered to the Lord that which cost them everything.

Our petty self-denials today pale into insignificance in the light of what men like these have given up for the Lord. In eternity, we shall meet such men and we shall discover that the bride of Christ comprises of men and women who have the same nature as Christ - that is, "not seeking their own". Some of us are in danger of thinking that it is a doctrinal understanding that qualifies us to be in the bride of Christ. It is not. It is a life of seeking God's interests and not our own.

How shallow our lives and labours are, compared with those of men like these. What monumental conceit it is for us to think that we are following Jesus better than these men did, just because we know more of the truth! How much has it cost us to serve God - in terms of loss of money, comfort, convenience and health? Perhaps very little, or nothing. That should humble us and make us think. Perhaps we have conveniently avoided a life of sacrifice.

Every Christian who can read English should read and be challenged by biographies of men like Hudson Taylor, C. T. Studd, David Brainerd, William Carey, William Booth, Jim Elliot etc. The Holy Spirit has used the examples of many men in Hebrews 11 and of Paul in 2 Corinthians 11, to encourage our faith; and the examples of these modern day heroes also can challenge us out of our self-centred, family-centred, comfort loving, materialistic Christianity, into a life of devotion to Christ.

In Jesus' days there were those who sold sheep and doves and exchanged money in the temple in the name of religion. Jesus drove them out. Godliness had become a means of gain for them. Whenever godliness becomes a means of gain for ourselves - gain of money, comfort, ease, etc., we can be sure that we are on the wrong track even if we imagine ourselves to be pursuing righteousness. For Jesus, godliness meant the giving up of everything that this world holds dear. It will cost the same for us, if we are really wholehearted. (Read Matthew 19:29 for example, and see if you have had to give up the things that Jesus mentioned there).

Jesus said that the pearl of great price could be obtained only if we gave up everything that we had (Matthew 13:46; Luke 14:33). Paul had to give up everything 'to gain Christ' (Philippians 3:8). If we today have succeeded in gaining Christ without giving up everything, then it must be another 'Christ' that we have 'gained'. This is the fear that Paul had for the Corinthian Christians - that they would end up following

'another Jesus' who did not demand the forsaking of everything (2 Corinthians 11:4). We can also deceive ourselves by theologically defining 'forsaking all' in such a convenient way that in actual fact we have to forsake nothing at all. If we do not face up to the truth in this matter, we shall end up being led astray by a spirit of delusion. God Himself will let us be deceived.

The mere admiration of saintly men of God will not make us spiritual. Many people admired Jesus when He was on earth; but they did not become spiritual. There were also many who believed in Him, but He did not commit Himself even to them (John 2:24, 25) - for He knew who were wholehearted and who were not. He knows even today.

Let us then stop gloating over the little Philistines that we have slain here and there, while Goliath still stands tall and erect. The stone in our sling must be aimed at this giant: seeking our own. This is the one whose head we must cut off, if true victory is to be ours. The life of ours that Jesus told us to hate is this life that seeks its own (John 12:25).

If we walk in the light and seek to discover the self-centredness that defiles most of our actions and decisions, and judge ourselves ruthlessly in those areas, then little by little we shall see this giant overcome and slain.

Jesus once told Peter that he was expressing Satan's thoughts, soon after telling him about the building of the church (Matthew 16:18-23). The church that the gates of Hades cannot overcome is a church that is built on those who seek God's interests and not their own. It is not built with those who have merely given intellectual acknowledgment to evangelical doctrine and who have slain a few petty Philistines.

Source:

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