

God's Glory or Our Glory

The Problem with Popularity

John 5:39-47

The translation supported by the context of our lesson text reads, " You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; it is these that testify about Me; ..." (Jn. 5:39). How could this happen? The people who scrutinized the Old Covenant failed to see the focus of the Old Covenant! They totally missed the point! Why?

A Few Useful Points of Background Information

- John commonly uses the word "Jew" to mean the religious establishment, usually the Pharisees (cf. Jn. 1:19, 24; 5:10).
- The context of John 5:39-47 points to the Pharisees in general and their scribes and Rabbis in particular.
 - The scribes were the keepers, copiers, and diligent students of the Jewish Scriptures—doctors of the law.
 - The Rabbis were the preachers and teachers to the people.
- The Pharisees accepted the inspiration of the Jewish Scriptures, but their understanding was weakened by several factors.
 - "Hedges" around the Torah distorted Scripture through misguided attempts to prevent sin with manmade rules (Mk. 7:1-4).
 - Rabbinic Judaism had, for all practical purposes, given greater weight to a tradition-created "Oral Torah" than to the actual religion revealed in Scripture (Matt. 5:21-48).
 - Nationalistic and materialistic passions looked for a physical rather than a spiritual Messianic Kingdom (Lk. 17:20-21; 19:11).

What Went Wrong?

- With the scribes, their care stopped with their meticulous copying practices and memorization of Scripture; the Rabbis concern came to be more with tradition than Scripture.
 - Such things became an end in themselves.
 - They were not, therefore, drawn closer to God or to His Son (Matt. 15:8-9).
 - They sought glory from their knowledge of details rather than from humble service to God (Matt. 23:3).
 - They, as with most of the people, looked for a Messiah of their own imaginations (cf. Matt. 16:21-23).
 - They had a superstitious reverence for Scripture (Matt. 23:5a).
- Their preoccupation with details gave such things a disproportionate ranking (cf. Matt. 23:23-24).

- They made remarkably accurate copies of Scripture, but they did not understand what they were copying (Matt. 12:3).
- Facts for their own sake overshadowed purposes, principles, and real life applications (Lk. 10:30-37).
- Scripture, rather than God, became their primary focus (Jn. 5:39).
- A spiritual void was created (Matt. 12:43-45)
- These things won them glory from the people as the religious leaders showed off their religion for the praise of men (Matt. 6:1; 23:1-7).
 - The people were ultimately more eager to follow the ways of men than the truth of God.
 - Popularity trumped truth.
 - Jesus' "*mistake*," as human wisdom saw it, was that He did not give the people what they wanted (Jn. 6:4-66; 5:41-44).
 - Peter, however, got it right (Jn. 6:67-69).

What Was Needed?

- They needed a relationship with God through His Son (Jn. 17:3; Matt. 7:21-23).
- They needed to know more than where the Messiah was to be born; they needed to know the Messiah (Matt. 2:3-5; Jn. 8:19).
- Foreigners, Shepherds, old men, and old widows with humble, open hearted faith knew more than the revered scribes and Rabbis (Matt. 2:1-2; Lk. 2:8-20, 25-38; cf. Jn. 3:10).
- Tax collectors and whores, in recognizing their need for forgiveness, were more apt to enter the kingdom than scribes and Pharisees (Matt. 21:31; Jn. 3:1-10).

John 5:39-47 is one of the most revealing passages in all the New Testament. It demonstrates why in religion the broad way is not the way to salvation and why the narrow way is always less traveled. Popularity can be a very dangerous thing. Present religious conditions demonstrate how to win the crowd and enjoy popularity with a wider audience. The Scriptures show how to find peace with God.

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February 24, 2008 (AM)