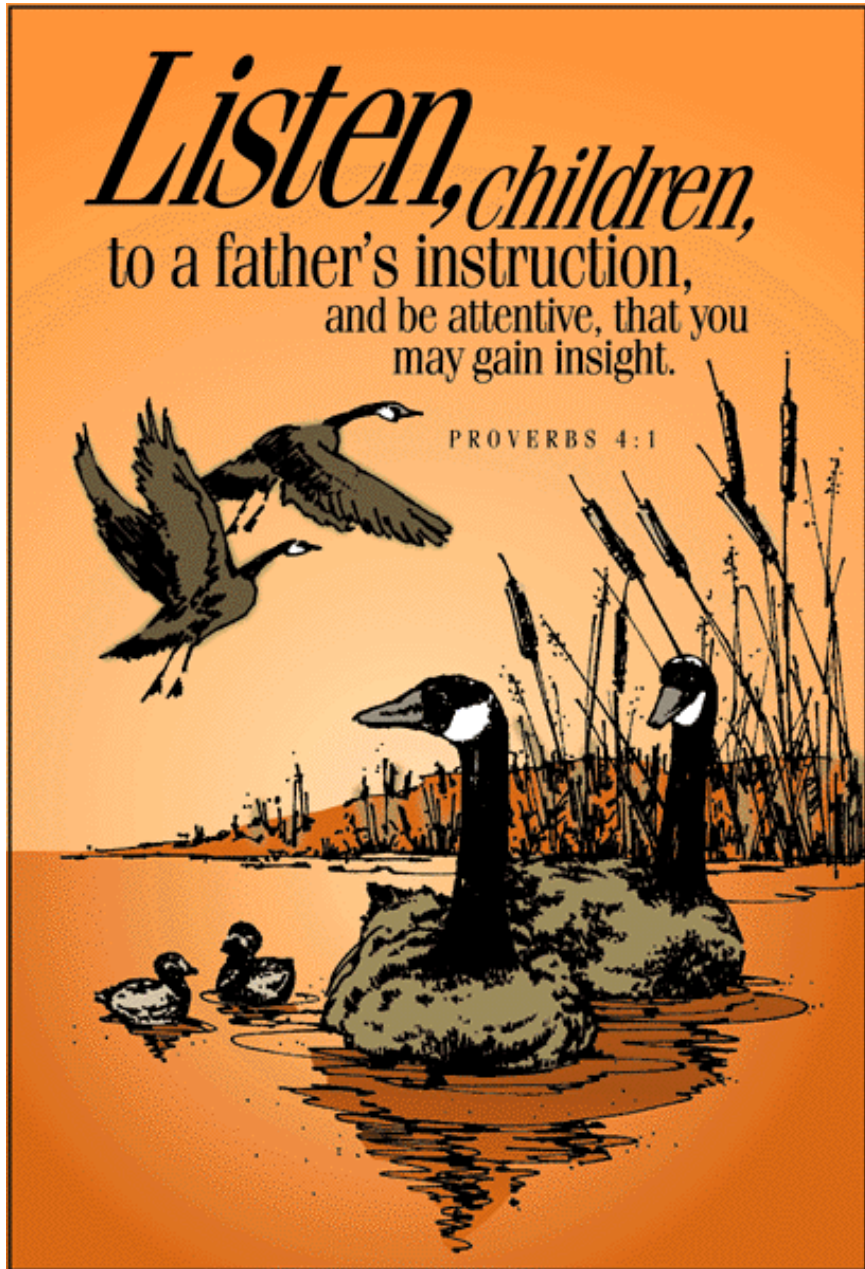


Listen, children,
to a father's instruction,
and be attentive, that you
may gain insight.

PROVERBS 4:1



Sabbath Service
Saturday, January 13, 2007



Sabbath Service — Saturday, January 13, 2007

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CALL TO WORSHIP

Worship God, whose glory fills the universe,
whose majesty is over all the earth.

**The voice of God shakes the wilderness
and flashes forth flames of fire.**

God builds up the ancient ruins
and raises up the former devastations.

**God gives strength to people who respond,
and blesses them with joy and peace.**

The Spirit of God calls and empowers us
to bring good tidings and proclaim liberty.

**God anoints us to bind up the brokenhearted
and open the prisons of those who are bound.**

INVITATION

Send your Spirit among us, O God, and into each one. Confirm our baptism with the fire of your love. Direct our ministry in the footsteps of Jesus, that we may experience liberation, and extend the blessings of freedom to those who are bound. Lift up and inspire our work and worship. Amen.

OPENING HYMN #187

"Dear Lord and Father of Mankind"

John Greenleaf Whittier, 1872

Frederick C. Maker, 1887

Dear Lord and Father of mankind, Forgive our foolish ways.
Re-clothe us in our rightful mind; In purer lives Thy service find
In deeper rev'rence praise.

In simple trust like theirs who heard, beside the Syrian Sea,
the gracious calling of the Lord, Let us, like them, without a word,
rise up and follow Thee.

Drop Thy still dews of quietness till all our strivings cease;
Take from our souls the strain and stress, And let our ordered lives confess
the beauty of Thy peace

Breathe through the heats of our desire Thy coolness and Thy balm;
Let sense be dumb, let flesh retire. Speak through the earthquake, wind and fire,
O still, small voice of calm!

OPENING PRAYER

Lord, our God, in whom we live and move and have our being, open our eyes that we may behold your fatherly presence ever about us. Draw our hearts to you with the power of your love. Teach us to be anxious for nothing, and when we have done what you have given us to do, help us, Father, to leave the issue to your wisdom. Take from us all doubt and mistrust. Lift our thoughts up to you in heaven, and make us to know that all things are possible to us through your Son Jesus Christ. Amen.

MOMENTS OF SILENCE

PERSONAL PRAYER

HYMN #3

“All Hail the Power”

Verses 1-3 Edwarsard Perronet, 1779, 1780

Verse 4 John Rippon, 1787

Oliver Holden, 1793

All hail the power of Jesus' name! Let angels prostrate fall;
Bring forth the royal diadem, And hail Him Lord of all;
Bring forth the royal diadem, And hail Him Lord of all.

Ye chosen seed of Israel's race, Ye who did hear the call,
Hail Him who saves you by His grace, And hail Him Lord of all;
Hail Him who saves you by His grace, And hail Him Lord of all.

Let every kindred, every tribe, On this terrestrial ball,
To Him all majesty ascribe, And hail Him Lord of all;
To Him all majesty ascribe, And hail Him Lord of all.

O that with yonder sacred throng We at His feet may fall;
We'll join the everlasting song, And hail Him Lord of all;
We'll join the everlasting song, And hail Him Lord of all.

PRESENTATIONS BEFORE GOD

ANNOUNCEMENTS

COLLECT

Fulfill the scriptures in our midst, amazing God. Send your Spirit to open our eyes, enlighten our eyes, and loosen our tongues in praise and thanksgiving. We ascribe to you glory and strength, revealed ever more clearly as the Holy Spirit baptizes us with fire. May the dove that descended on Jesus also bring to us your blessing and peace. Amen.

THE LESSON

Spiritual Blindness and the Hardening of the Heart

New International Version (NIV) of the Bible used unless otherwise noted.

Along with a suspension of our thinking processes, part of the legacy from our past experience in the so-called Churches of God, have been notions imparted to us of people somehow being less accountable because of some sort of spiritual blindness foisted upon them by God himself or ideas that have God randomly blinding people to his truth in accordance with his timetable for the salvation of all mankind. The example of Israel is often cited to confirm this belief:

Deuteronomy 29:2-4 — Moses summoned all the Israelites and said to them: Your eyes have seen all that the LORD did in Egypt to Pharaoh, to all his officials and to all his land. (3) With your own eyes you saw those great trials, those miraculous signs and great wonders. (4) But to this day the LORD has not given you a mind that understands or eyes that see or ears that hear.

The apostle Paul quoted from verse 4 of this chapter, and did indeed apply it to an Israel described as hardened, or blinded:

Romans 11:7-8 — What then? What Israel sought so earnestly it did not obtain, but the elect did. The others were hardened, (8) as it is written: “God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes so that they could not see and ears so that they could not hear, to this very day.”

Were Moses and Paul, therefore, saying that God was unwilling to grant Israel a heart that could see spiritually? Are people hardened or blinded by God so as not to be able to understand and accept his truth?

The Gospels do indeed tell us that the fullness of some of the “mysteries” of the Kingdom were not to be understood until the advent of the Holy Spirit:

Luke 9:45 — But they did not understand what this meant. It was hidden from them, so that they did not grasp it, and they were afraid to ask him about it.

John 13:6-7 — He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, “Lord, are you going to wash my feet?” (7) Jesus replied, “You do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will understand.”

And it is also true that Satan, the god of this world, blinds the minds of those who do not believe (**2 Corinthians 4:4**).

But what is the nature of the spiritual blindness that prevents people who are witness in word or in deed to the truth of God from accepting it — and can we also be affected?

UNWILLINGNESS TO UNDERSTAND

Christ many times admonished the multitudes to whom he spoke to both *hear and understand*:

Matthew 15:10 — Jesus called the crowd to him and said, “Listen and understand.

Mark 7:14 — Again Jesus called the crowd to him and said, “Listen to me, everyone, and understand this.

Since Christ was not one to use words superfluously, we must assume that he expected them to be able to do both. Yet he often had to rebuke his own disciples for a lack of understanding of what they had heard him say and seen him do:

Mark 8:14-21 — The disciples had forgotten to bring bread, except for one loaf they had with them in the boat. (15) “Be careful,” Jesus warned them. “Watch out for the yeast of the Pharisees and that of Herod.” (16) They discussed this with one another and said, “It is because we have no bread.” (17) Aware of their discussion, Jesus asked them: “Why are you talking about having no bread? Do you still not see or understand? Are your hearts hardened? (18) Do you have eyes but fail to see, and ears but fail to hear? And don’t you remember? (19) When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many basketfuls of pieces did you pick up?” “Twelve,” they replied. (20) “And when I broke the seven loaves for the four thousand, how many basketfuls of pieces did you pick up?” They answered, “Seven.” (21) He said to them, “Do you still not understand?”

Christ’s final question implies that there was no reason in his eyes why his disciples, by applying correct reasoning, should not have been able to consider the implications of the miracle they had just seen to reach the conclusions he expected them to reach.

Mark 6:51-52 — Then he climbed into the boat with them [his disciples], and the wind died down. They were completely amazed, (52) for they had not understood about the loaves; their hearts were hardened.

Mark is here telling us that the disciples' astonishment at Christ's ability to calm the storm, though natural, was nonetheless blameworthy, in that having just previously witnessed Jesus' multiplication of the loaves, they should have been much more conscious of the divine power with which he was endowed. Perhaps a degree of skepticism, of fatal familiarity, had set in. This can happen to us all. Spiritual blindness caused by the hardening of the human heart can effect everyone, as we shall see.

SPIRITUAL BLINDNESS

Christ spoke of people who would see but not perceive the mysteries of the Kingdom, who would hear the truths of God but fail to understand them:

Mark 4:9-12 — Then Jesus said [to the crowds who were listening to his teaching], **“He who has ears to hear, let him hear.” (10) When he was alone, the Twelve and the others around him asked him about the parables. (11) He told them, “The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables (12) so that, “ ‘they may be ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding; otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!’”**

Christ applied these words, taken from Isaiah 6:9-10, to those “outside” the Kingdom of God who are indeed described as blinded and without understanding.

The prophet Isaiah, in these two verses, did speak of people's hearts as being made dull and of their eyes as being shut:

Isaiah 6:9-10 — He said, “Go and tell this people: “ ‘Be ever hearing, but never understanding; be ever seeing, but never perceiving.’ (10) Make the heart of this people calloused; make their ears dull and close their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed.”

Christ stated that his parable of the sower and the seed was for those who had “ears to hear.” When he told his disciples that it was “given” to them to understand, but to the multitudes “outside” it was not so given, did he mean that this blindness, this failure of the many to understand, was in fact a blindness sent from God?

Notice what he explained in regard to the seed that fell by the wayside:

Mark 4:15 — Some people are like seed along the path, where the word is sown. As soon as they hear it, Satan comes and takes away the word that was sown in them.

The seed of God's truth is actually sown in the heart of the person who hears the words of God, but the Devil is allowed to snatch it away. In Matthew's account of this parable, Christ confirmed that this happens because of a lack of understanding:

Matthew 13:19 — When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart. This is the seed sown along the path.

Again referring back to the prophet Isaiah, Christ further revealed that this blindness is as a result of an *unwillingness* to understand.

John 12:37-40 — Even after Jesus had done all these miraculous signs in their presence, they still would not believe in him. (38) This was to fulfill the word of Isaiah the prophet: “Lord, who has believed our message and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?” (39) For this reason they could not believe, because, as Isaiah says elsewhere: (40) “He has blinded their eyes and deadened their hearts, so they can neither see with their eyes, nor understand with their hearts, nor turn — and I would heal them.”

Christ compared himself to a light that had come into a world of darkness to illuminate men (v 46), to enlighten them to the truth of God. He was “the arm of the Lord” whose message, through the many miraculous signs that were done by him, Israel should have believed. That the Jews “could not believe” was a statement of God's foreknowledge, not a statement of their lack of choice. All men have the choice, when confronted with the light of God's truth, to accept or to reject it. The Jews who chose to do the latter revealed by their actions that they hated the light, and so exposed the hardness of their hearts:

John 3:19-21 — This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. (20) Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. (21) But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God.”

Jeremiah used similar language to Isaiah, and ascribed the spiritual blindness of his people to sin and a rebellious heart:

Jeremiah 5:21-25 — Hear this, you foolish and senseless people, who have eyes but do not see, who have ears but do not hear: (22) Should you not fear me?” declares the LORD. “Should you not tremble in my presence? I made the sand a boundary for the sea, an everlasting barrier it cannot cross. The waves may roll, but they cannot prevail; they may roar, but they cannot cross it. (23) But these people have stubborn and rebellious

hearts; they have turned aside and gone away. (24) They do not say to themselves, 'Let us fear the LORD our God, who gives autumn and spring rains in season, who assures us of the regular weeks of harvest.' (25) Your wrongdoings have kept these away; your sins have deprived you of good.

The apostle Paul also quoted the words of Isaiah 6:9-10, in a context which leaves no doubt that this failure to understand the truth of God when exposed to it is a consequence of disbelief, of a heart unwilling to embrace the words of God:

Acts 28:24-28 — Some [of the Jews] were convinced by what he said, but others would not believe. (25) They disagreed among themselves and began to leave after Paul had made this final statement: "The Holy Spirit spoke the truth to your forefathers when he said through Isaiah the prophet: (26) " 'Go to this people and say, "You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving." (27) For this people's heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them.' (28) "Therefore I want you to know that God's salvation has been sent to the Gentiles, and they will listen!"

These Jews whom Paul addressed, just like the Israelites of old who had the Gospel preached to them, made the decision not to believe, not to exercise faith:

Hebrews 4:2 — For we also have had the gospel preached to us, just as they did; but the message they heard was of no value to them, because those who heard did not combine it with faith.

The Scriptures do therefore describe the decision of people to reject what they hear from God as a blindness coming from God, in the sense that nothing happens without his will. It is, however, a blindness brought about by a lack of faith and by sin:

Isaiah 29:9-14 — Be stunned and amazed, blind yourselves and be sightless; be drunk, but not from wine, stagger, but not from beer. (10) The LORD has brought over you a deep sleep: He has sealed your eyes (the prophets); he has covered your heads (the seers). (11) For you this whole vision is nothing but words sealed in a scroll. And if you give the scroll to someone who can read, and say to him, "Read this, please," he will answer, "I can't; it is sealed." (12) Or if you give the scroll to someone who cannot read, and say, "Read this, please," he will answer, "I don't know how to read." (13) The Lord says: "These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me [*a choice they made*]. Their worship of me is made up only of rules taught by men. (14) Therefore once more I will astound these people with wonder

upon wonder; the wisdom of the wise will perish, the intelligence of the intelligent will vanish.”

We need to realize that this is the true nature of the spiritual blindness of Israel to which the apostle Paul refers several times in his epistles:

Romans 11:7 — What then? What Israel sought so earnestly it did not obtain, but the elect did. The others were hardened,

2 Corinthians 3:14 — But their minds were made dull, for to this day the same veil remains when the old covenant is read. It has not been removed, because only in Christ is it taken away.

This spiritual blindness is the result of the unwillingness to use the God-given powers of reasoning and logic when confronted with the testimony of God. It is epitomized in the idolater, but the mental processes involved are a warning for all of us:

Isaiah 44:17-19 — From the rest [the tree] he makes a god, his idol; he bows down to it and worships. He prays to it and says, “Save me; you are my god.” (18) They know nothing, they understand nothing; their eyes are plastered over so they cannot see [but it is they who have shut them!], and their minds closed so they cannot understand. (19) No one stops to think, no one has the knowledge or understanding to say, “Half of it I used for fuel; I even baked bread over its coals, I roasted meat and I ate. Shall I make a detestable thing from what is left? Shall I bow down to a block of wood?”

In fact, in this same chapter of Isaiah, this state of spiritual blindness is prophesized to continue; it is also the grounds for God’s judgment:

Isaiah 6:10-12 — Make the heart of this people calloused; make their ears dull and close their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed.” (11) Then I said, “For how long, O Lord?” And he answered: “Until the cities lie ruined and without inhabitant, until the houses are left deserted and the fields ruined and ravaged, (12) until the LORD has sent everyone far away and the land is utterly forsaken.

The apostle Paul also re-echoes this:

Romans 11:8-10 — as it is written: “God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes so that they could not see and ears so that they could not hear, to this very day.” (9) And David says: “May their table become a snare and a trap, a stumbling block and a retribution for them. (10) May their eyes be darkened so they cannot see, and their backs be bent forever.”

THE HARDENING OF THE HEART

Picking up on the theme of the hardening of the heart, the author of the book of Hebrews specifically links such a hardened heart with unbelief:

Hebrews 3:7-11, 19 — So, as the Holy Spirit says: “Today, if you hear his voice, (8) do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion, during the time of testing in the desert, (9) where your fathers tested and tried me and for forty years saw what I did. (10) That is why I was angry with that generation, and I said, ‘Their hearts are always going astray, and they have not known my ways.’ (11) So I declared on oath in my anger, ‘They shall never enter my rest’.”
(19) So we see that they were not able to enter, because of their unbelief.

This is accompanied with an exhortation to spiritual Israel, the Church of God today, to ensure that they have hearts that are not hardened through unbelief:

Hebrews 3:12-15 — See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. (13) But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness. (14) We have come to share in Christ if we hold firmly till the end the confidence we had at first. (15) As has just been said: “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion.”

So the truth of the scriptures is that *man hardens his own heart*. We can, therefore, reconcile the accounts in the book of Exodus which have God hardening Pharaoh’s heart as well as Pharaoh hardening his own heart:

Exodus 8:15 — But when Pharaoh saw that there was relief, he hardened his heart and would not listen to Moses and Aaron, just as the LORD had said.

Exodus 9:12 — But the LORD hardened Pharaoh’s heart and he would not listen to Moses and Aaron, just as the LORD had said to Moses.

See also **Exodus 8:32; 9:12, 34; 10:1, 20, 27; 11:10; 14:8.**

The reality was that the heart of the Egyptian king was hardened against the God of Israel:

Exodus 7:14 — Then the LORD said to Moses, “Pharaoh’s heart is unyielding; he refuses to let the people go.

God merely confirms the condition of such a heart and what happens to it if it continues to refuse to acknowledge him or to heed the godly witness before it: darkness and further alienation from God ensue:

Romans 1:21 — **For although they** [*speaking of man in general, who has no excuse for not glorifying God (v 20)*] **knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened.**

Notice, also, Romans 9:18:

Romans 9:18 — **Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden.**

Just as God is not arbitrary in his mercy, but exercises it when it is sought, and desires all to come to repentance (**2 Peter 3:9**), so neither does he arbitrarily harden anyone's heart. When his overtures to an individual are ignored or rejected, he permits the individual to be hardened, just as he so permitted Pharaoh, or the Jews of Christ's time, or Israel of old. In verses 30-32 of this same chapter of Romans, the apostle Paul attributes God's rejection of Israel to their *unbelief*, not to any deliberate blindness expressly sent by God.

The heart that resists the witness of God goes astray, and can end up testing God:

Psalms 95:8-10 — **do not harden your hearts as you did at Meribah, as you did that day at Massah in the desert, (9) where your fathers tested and tried me, though they had seen what I did. (10) For forty years I was angry with that generation; I said, "They are a people whose hearts go astray, and they have not known my ways."**

This heart can be "lifted up" to forget God:

Deuteronomy 8:14 — **then your heart will become proud and you will forget the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.**

This happened to king Nebuchadnezzar, who rejected the testimony of the true God he had witnessed through the prophet Daniel and instead allowed pride to override reason and logic:

Daniel 5:20 — **But when his heart became arrogant and hardened with pride, he was deposed from his royal throne and stripped of his glory.**

THE PARABLES OF CHRIST

In regard to this subject of spiritual blindness, what false notions about Christ's use of parables do we retain in our thinking because of past teachings?

Christ did expect his disciples to understand his parables:

Mark 4:13 — Then Jesus said to them, “Don’t you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable?”

To the general populace, however, he adapted his parables and teaching according to the degree of receptivity of his hearers, so that through the parables some truth from his Father might be understood and people drawn to himself:

Mark 4:33-34 — With many similar parables Jesus spoke the word to them, as much as they could understand. (34) He did not say anything to them without using a parable. But when he was alone with his own disciples, he explained everything.

Like the ministry of Isaiah, Christ’s ministry would expose the resistance of the hearts of people to the truths of God. Their failure to understand the essential tenets of the Way of God was the result of decisions made by them, not of a willful blinding from God. Christ spoke in parables to the multitudes he taught not, as we have often been asked to believe, to keep them blinded to the truth, but to test the spiritual responsiveness of his hearers. Those who were provoked by them into intensive reflection could then proceed to obtain further enlightenment about the mysteries of the Kingdom by, for instance, asking Jesus their meaning, as the disciples did. Those who omitted to reflect on them would indeed, as Isaiah 6:9-10 states, be ever seeing but never perceiving: they would understand the literal meaning of the words, but not the parables’ deeper significance: the introduction to the Kingdom of God which they provided.

This is further amplified in Christ’s parable of the lamp on a stand:

Mark 4:21-25 — He said to them, “Do you bring in a lamp to put it under a bowl or a bed? Instead, don’t you put it on its stand? (22) For whatever is hidden is meant to be disclosed, and whatever is concealed is meant to be brought out into the open. (23) If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear.” (24) “Consider carefully what you hear,” he continued. “With the measure you use, it will be measured to you — and even more. (25) Whoever has will be given more; whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him.”

Just as a lamp is only useful when placed on a lampstand, the ultimate purpose of Christ’s parables was to reveal truth rather than to hide it, even though these parables might be somewhat mystifying initially. The populace in general would not have been able to handle the undiluted realities of the Kingdom of God; parables, on the other hand, still illustrated truths and, for the spiritually perceptive, would stimulate further thinking. If the hearer paid attention to the parable—had ears to hear (v 23-4)—the spiritual profit in terms of understanding would be granted him according to the measure of attention paid to it (v 24). Then “whoever has”—by way of the application of the heart to

understand—would be given more in terms of understanding and divine blessing (v 24-5). The casual hearer, however, would only end up in confusion, blinded to the wonderful truths of God (v 25).

WILLING HEARTS AND THINKING MINDS

Notice how Christ addressed the Jews who were unwilling to accept his words:

John 8:43, 47 — Why is my language not clear to you? Because you are unable to hear what I say. (47) He who belongs to God hears what God says. The reason you do not hear is that you do not belong to God.”

In contrast, God’s sheep hear his voice, recognize the truth, and follow it (John 10:3-4). The people of God hear, listen to and heed the spirit of truth when it witnesses to them:

1 John 4:6 — We are from God, and whoever knows God listens to us; but whoever is not from God does not listen to us. This is how we recognize the Spirit of truth and the spirit of falsehood.

So the heart must be willing to hear, listen and respond with godliness to understanding from God. And he expects all of us to use the thinking minds he has given us to reason and come to correct and godly conclusions. The Jews whom Christ confronted were unwilling to do this because false concepts of God lingered in their hearts which they refused to abandon. What false concepts do we yet retain?

Christ expected repentance from those to whom he witnessed:

Luke 11:31-32 — The Queen of the South will rise at the judgment with the men of this generation and condemn them; for she came from the ends of the earth to listen to Solomon’s wisdom, and now one greater than Solomon is here. (32) The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now one greater than Jonah is here.

Christ’s teaching was rejected, accompanied though it was with miracles. However, the Gospel was rejected also by the Jewish leaders who witnessed the preaching of John the Baptist, but whose hearts were unprepared to believe truths that differed from their notions of what was correct. John, who performed not a single miracle (**John 10:41**) warned them that they were in danger of condemnation:

Matthew 3:7-10 — But when he [John the Baptist] saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them: “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? (8) Produce fruit in keeping with

repentance. (9) And do not think you can say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father [‘Don’t refer back to a legacy you have distorted’; in our experience, we might say: ‘Let’s be careful not to keep referring back to a church culture we assume to be godly, but which may be found wanting’].’ I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. (10) The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.

Miracles are no guarantee of faith. Ancient Israel saw the miracles of God for forty years in the wilderness and countless times throughout the history of the nation; the Scriptures tell us, however, that they, like the Jews in Christ’s day, were rebellious and did not really *understand* — or want to understand — them, did not understand how they attested to God, to his nature and purpose:

Psalms 106:7 — When our fathers were in Egypt, they gave no thought to your miracles; they did not remember your many kindnesses, and they rebelled by the sea, the Red Sea.

Their eyes should have spiritually seen and their ears understood. Ezekiel also uses the language of Isaiah:

Ezekiel 12:2 — “Son of man, you are living among a rebellious people. They have eyes to see but do not see and ears to hear but do not hear, for they are a rebellious people.

Judgment is much harsher for those who see the hand of the Lord and with unbelieving hearts reject what they see and hear:

Matthew 11:20-24 — Then Jesus began to denounce the cities in which most of his miracles had been performed, because they did not repent. (21) “Woe to you, Korazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! If the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. (22) But I tell you, it will be more bearable for Tyre and Sidon on the day of judgment than for you. (23) And you, Capernaum, will you be lifted up to the skies? No, you will go down to the depths. If the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Sodom, it would have remained to this day. (24) But I tell you that it will be more bearable for Sodom on the day of judgment than for you.”

Notice that in Christ’s words there is no mention of any extenuating circumstances — such as minds ‘blinded’ by God.

Yet note verses 25 and 26:

Matthew 11:25-26 — At that time Jesus said, “I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to

little children. (26) Yes, Father, for this was your good pleasure.

These cities that Christ rebuked considered themselves, like the Jewish leaders of the day who felt they knew how God should do his work, to be “wise and learned.” This pride was the source of their failure to believe. It would have been far better for them to have humbled themselves like little children whose hearts accepted the evidence of these workings from God. These things were therefore “hidden” from them, not by any capricious decision on the part of God to blind them, but by choices made by them according to God’s foreknowledge, an act of his wisdom, for which the Father was deserving of praise.

Christ had willed to reveal the Father to them, but they had hearts unwilling to believe:

Matthew 11:27 — “All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.

Similar situations can arise today where Christ, through his servants, clearly and powerfully presents God and his truth as a witness which is, however, rejected because of minds reluctant or unwilling to correctly process what they hear or see happening before them. Let us make sure we are never guilty of committing such a sin.

ALL ACCOUNTABLE

Christ’s words make it clear that any and all who desire can come to him. *No one*, when brought to face with his truth, is arbitrarily blinded by God from believing in him:

Matthew 11:28-30 — “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. (29) Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. (30) For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

However, all who are confronted with the Gospel of truth are accountable if they choose to reject what they hear or see:

Matthew 10:14-15 — If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words [the words of the disciples commissioned by Christ to preach the Gospel], shake the dust off your feet when you leave that home or town. (15) I tell you the truth, it will be more bearable for Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for that town.

The preaching of the Gospel by Christ and the apostles was accompanied by miracles such as healing, but miracles, whether those done for Israel of old or those performed by Christ during his ministry, are no guarantee of believing hearts. Human beings still have choices to make, to process with their minds what their eyes see and their ears hear.

God has given us minds with which to reason. He expects those with whom he is dealing directly to make correct, godly decisions. The works of God should be recognized by the children of God:

John 10:37-38 — Do not believe me unless I do what my Father does. (38) But if I do it, even though you do not believe me, believe the miracles, that you may know and understand that the Father is in me, and I in the Father.”

SETTING THE HEART

It is with believing hearts that we seek the true God and his will:

Romans 10:10 — For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved.

We need to ask God for understanding of his ways:

Psalms 119:27 — Let me understand the teaching of your precepts; then I will meditate on your wonders.

And we must then always *set our hearts* to understand:

Daniel 10:12 — Then he continued, “Do not be afraid, Daniel. Since the first day that you set your mind to gain understanding and to humble yourself before your God, your words were heard, and I have come in response to them.

Like Daniel, let us resolve to always set out hearts to understand and to heed the true Words of God so we never fall into spiritual blindness.

CLOSING HYMN #57

“Open My Eyes That I May See”

Clara H. Scott

Open my eyes, that I may see
Glimpses of truth Thou hast for me,
Place in my hands the wonderful key
That shall unclasp, and set me free.
Silently now I wait for Thee,

Ready, my God, Thy will to see;
Open my eyes, illumine me, Spirit divine!

Open my ears, that I may hear
Voices of truth Thou sendest clear
And while the wave notes fall on my ear,
Ev'rything false will disappear.
Silently now I wait for Thee,
Ready, my God, Thy will to see;
Open my eyes, illumine me, Spirit divine!

Open my mouth and let me bear
Gladly the warm truth ev'rywhere;
Open my heart, and let me prepare
Love with Thy children thus to share.
Silently now I wait for Thee,
Ready, my God, Thy will to see;
Open my eyes, illumine me, Spirit divine!

CLOSING WORDS

Ascribe to God glory and strength;
worship God not only in prayer, but also in deeds.

**Our eyes are open to the majesty of God;
we will seek by our actions to make God known.**

God grants the mantle of praise to our faint spirits
and liberates us from bondage to ourselves.

**We will use the freedom God provides
to open the prisons in which others are bound.**

God baptizes and empowers us
by water and the Holy Spirit.

**Equipped by God's blessing
we dare to serve in Christ's name.**

Amen.