

MISUNDERSTANDINGS

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on May 13, 1962 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P.M.

George Bernard Shaw, the brilliant English playwright and wit, used to say that one of the world's most pressing problems was the problem of misunderstandings among men. He was particularly impressed with the problem of the language barrier between nations and felt that much of the international tension that has plagued our world for centuries is a result of man's inability to understand his neighbors. If I am correctly informed, Shaw left a part of his estate to help in developing a common language, which he believed would help people understand each other better and thereby would contribute to world peace.

Misunderstandings are also common among people with the same language. For example, have you ever arranged to meet someone downtown and had a misunderstanding about time and place? Only this past week I hurried over to a luncheon engagement, searched hurriedly for the group with whom I was to eat, and then discovered that I had arrived at the wrong restaurant.

A great many of the tensions that arise in families are a result of misunderstandings. Sometimes these are misunderstandings between husbands and wives, sometimes they are misunderstandings between parents and children. Many of our human relations are less satisfactory than they might be because of misunderstandings. Sometimes people go for years not liking each other and having little to do with each other because of a complete misunderstanding of something that was said or done in the long ago. Misunderstandings are costly in so many areas of life.

What Causes Misunderstandings?

The problem of misunderstandings may come as a result of either faulty communication, or faulty hearing of that which is communicated. There is a great deal of careless speaking, which lends itself quite easily to misunderstandings. Our chief concern in this message, however, is with man's misunderstanding of God's instructions. Here, the fault lies exclusively with man, the hearer, rather than with God the communicator. Our question then becomes, "What are the factors on man's side of the equation which cause him to misunderstand the revealed will of God?" There are many such factors, of which the following are at least some of the chief ones.

First of all, there is careless hearing. An example of this may be found in the story of Adam and Eve, as recounted in the opening chapters of the Bible. "And Jehovah God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden, to dress it and to keep it. And Jehovah God commanded the man, saying, Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat: but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die." (Gen. 2:15-17). Immediately after receiving this restriction Adam and Eve disregarded it, and following the suggestion of Satan, did eat from the forbidden tree. This was not a case of failure to understand the words which God had spoken, but rather a failure to realize their significance. Adam and Eve had heard the commandment lightly, or casually. This careless hearing of God's commandment has caused the human race heartache, sickness, suffering and death throughout all of the centuries. Before we become overly critical of this first pair, however, let us remember that we also hear God's commandments with a rather careless realization of their significance. We of the 20th century A.A. are hardly in a position to accuse or condemn Adam and Eve for careless hearing.

A second very vital factor in misunderstanding God's word is the matter of pre-conceived ideas, the matter of a previous mind set. An example of this is clearly presented in II Kings 5, where we read the story of Naaman the leper. The military commander from Syria had come all the way to Israel to ask help from Elisha, God's prophet. When he arrived, he waited before the house of Elisha and was surprised when Elisha sent a messenger to him to say, "Go and wash in the Jordan seven times ..." The following verse reads, "But Naaman was wroth, and went away, and saying, Behold, I thought he will surely come out to me and stand, and call on the name of Jehovah his God, and wave his hand over the place, and recover the leper." (II Kings 5:10-11). Notice that Naaman had a very clear conception of exactly how Elisha would do the healing. When Elisha approached it in a different way, Naaman was wroth, and said, "Behold I thought ..."

The problem of pre-conceived ideas is the basic reason that the Jews rejected Christ. The Jews had for centuries expected the Messiah to lead them in establishing an earthly kingdom, in driving the Roman invaders out of the land, and in ushering in a period of great prosperity. When Jesus came to establish a spiritual kingdom, without military fanfare and with no earthly pomp and glory, this plan was so far from the plan which they had pictured in their hearts, they rejected Jesus. In spite of his miracles, in spite of his masterly teachings, and in spite of his great life, they could not somehow overcome their preconceptions.

In our day, too, there are many who are never able to come to a clear understanding of God's will for them, because of previous mind sets. I have been deeply disturbed from time to time by those who have fastened so firmly to some erroneous idea that they cannot hear the truth. As an example, I would mention those who in our day insist that Saturday, the Sabbath, is the day when Christians ought to worship. So deeply imbedded in the minds of some is this idea that they cannot see that the apostles and early Christians met

on the first day of the week for worship. Others find it impossible to see that baptism is a necessary part of salvation, in spite of the fact that Jesus said “Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except one be born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.”

Very closely related to the idea of preconceptions and prejudices is the matter of divergent backgrounds. Sometimes men come from so different a background, their experiences have been so different, that they find it difficult to comprehend the teachings of Christ. I think an example might be seen in Acts 18 where we read the story of Paul being brought before the judgment-seat of Gallio, a Roman proconsul in Corinth. The story is told in these words, “But when Paul was about to open his mouth, Gallio said unto the Jews, If indeed it were a matter of wrong or of villainy, O ye Jews, reason would that I should bear with you: but if they are questions about words and names and your own law, look to it yourselves; I am not minded to be a judge of these matters, and he drove them from the judgment-seat.” Acts 18:14-15). He simply had no grasp, no understanding, and no interest in these matters.

A similar story is found in Acts 25 where we read of Paul before the Roman governor, Festus. In this connection Festus spoke of Paul to King Agrippa, “concerning whom when the accusers stood up, they brought no charge of such evil things as I supposed; but had certain questions against him of their own religion, and of one Jesus, who was dead, whom Paul affirmed to be alive. And I, being perplexed ...” (Acts 25:18-20). Here a Roman governor got no more of the essence of Christianity than that it was a dispute over whether a man was dead or alive.

Divergent backgrounds are still a great problem, particularly in such areas of the world as the Orient. To a citizen of Japan, or China, or some other oriental nation, whose background of training has never included Jehovah, nor the law of Moses, nor anything of the Christian era, it is most difficult to convey the idea of Christ as the Son of God. This is not exclusively a problem of foreign nations, however, for even in our own land there are many whose family background and early religious training make it difficult for them to see pure, New Testament Christianity. Some, for example, hold to the idea of purgatory, though such is never taught in the scriptures. Infant baptism is held tenaciously by some, because it is a part of their family background. While it is very difficult to examine objectively the things that we have “inherited” in our religious training, it is imperative if we are to free ourselves from misunderstandings. The most loving of parents have sometimes introduced to their children, largely because they themselves had been misguided, teachings that are foreign to God’s word.

Still another major factor in man’s misunderstanding of the will of God is the very real problem of wishful thinking. In I Samuel we read the story of Saul, a part of which tells of a journey to destroy the Amalekites. God’s explicit commandment was that everything should be destroyed. You will recall that Saul brought back some of the fine sheep and oxen. When confronted by Samuel with his disobedience, he made excuse that these were for sacrifices to Jehovah. At that point Samuel said, “Hath Jehovah as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of Jehovah? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams. For rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft, and stubbornness is as idolatry and teraphim.” (I Sam. 15:22-23). Saul simply winked at God’s commandment because he wanted to bring back the spoil. This is another common means of misunderstanding God’s commandments.

Modern man is blinded to the teachings of God because he wants to believe, in many cases, something else. Modern man wants to believe in the realm of religion that, “Anything is all right, just so long as the people are sincere.” This is not taught in the scriptures. This could not possibly be true, yet it is believed by myriads of people. Modern man also clings to worldly living, not because he really understands this to be pleasing to God, but simply because he enjoys such living. Blinded to the importance of the commandments by his own wishful thinking, man often follows the road downward to destruction.

There is yet another major factor in man’s misunderstanding of God’s will. It is the problem of forgetfulness. Man has a short memory. Something known today may not necessarily be remembered tomorrow. The children of Israel are a fine ex-ample of this undesirable quality. Even though God brought them out of Egyptian bondage, fed them in the wilderness, and directed their every move, yet they forgot God at the slightest provocation. The making of the golden calf, the repeated murmurings, and the general disregard for the will of God are evidences of the shortness of man’s memory. All of these are factors that have led man to miss the mark.

What Can We Do About It?

The answer to this problem is a relatively simple one. Jesus said, “Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.” (John 8:32). Then, the Lord gave man an inspired book, the Bible, to guide him into all religious truth. So, our task is simply to take God’s work, read it, re-read it, study it, and make it the foundation of our lives. Although it is a large volume, consisting of sixty-six separate books, 1189 chapters and more than 31,000 verses, it can be read in only eighty-nine and one-half hours. The mastery of it is the work of a lifetime, but who dares to say that it is not possible? God made man, and God gave man this book. Surely God knew what he was about.

Just this past week I received a letter from an elderly Christian urging me to call the people to a more earnest and a more extensive reading of the Bible. I could not help but remember a busy businessman of this congregation who only a few weeks ago, as we shared a flight from Nashville to Memphis, confided to me that for the sixth year he had read the Bible through in its entirety, re-reading the

New Testament each year for full measure. He said that with each reading he found it even richer in meaning than before. This man is not one who has time hanging heavily upon his hands, for he has more than 550 men directly under his supervision. He must know their names, direct their activities, and solve their problems, yet he finds time to read the Bible through each year. It was only last Wednesday that I chanced to talk with one of the older women of the congregation. In the conversation she mentioned the two hours each day that she spends in reading the Bible. This takes her through the Bible between two and three times each year. She fences off the early hours of the day for her Bible reading and calls them, "my best time of the day."

In our reading, it goes without saying, that we must come with an open mind. Ours must be the attitude, "Speak, Lord, thy servant heareth." Regular attendance of Bible classes and worship services is also a means by which we can constantly deepen our understanding of God's teachings.

Conclusion

Man sometimes has the idea that God will never pass judgments of severity upon those who have misunderstood his will. There is a general feeling that if a man has been mistaken he will simply be excused. One needs desperately to read the accounts of Christ's life and teaching to find that this is not the case. One also needs to observe God's realm of nature. Misunderstandings are dealt with ruthlessly. When a man makes a mistake in understanding, he often pays with his life.

One of my most indelible childhood experiences is of something that happened while we were vacationing in Colorado many years ago. A few miles south of Colorado Springs is the Royal Gorge. Because of its beauty a railroad had built a line through the Royal Gorge and through it there passed many trains. One the occasion of which I speak a dispatcher had failed to get the proper warning to a certain engineer, to move on to a siding and let another train pass at a certain place. As a result, an eastbound train and a westbound train moved into the gorge, neither knowing the presence of the other. In those days trains had no radio communication and there was no block system of warning. A crash would occur somewhere in the gorge. Half an hour before the wreck occurred, another train was on its way bearing doctors, nurses and medical supplies. The inevitable crash happened with great loss of life. A mistaken belief that the track ahead was clear did not save the lives of those engineers nor of many of their passengers.

Similarly, just a year and a half ago three Nashville men lost their lives as a great airliner landed in the water short of the runway at LaGuardia Field in New York. Later, an airlines pilot explained to me that it was generally believed that this accident happened because of a faulty reading of a new type altimeter. Misconceptions in God's realm of nature bring upon man sudden disaster. Who dares to say that misconceptions in God's spiritual realm will go unnoticed?

Rather, we have God's own admonition, "And that servant, who knew his Lord's will, and made not ready, nor did according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes; but he that knew not, and did things worthy of stripes, shall be beaten with few stripes." (Luke 12:48). Although he is less blamable than the willful sinner, even the man who has misunderstood God's instructions, or the man who is completely ignorant of God's law, will be beaten with stripes.

Let us resolve that God's word shall be the most important book in our libraries. Let us dedicate hours of every day and days of every week to the study of that word, that we may clearly understand God's will for us, that we may live as God directs, that we may spend eternity with God in heaven.