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DO WE REALLY LIKE BEING BLESSED BY GOD?

If I were to ask almost anyone in God's Church the question: "Would you like to be BLESSED by God?", pretty well everyone would reply: "Why, OF COURSE I would like to be blessed by God." It's a rhetorical question, isn't it? We all would like for God to bless us, right? And yet our conduct at times implies that we don't really like certain blessings that may come our way.

Let me explain.

On our recent trip to the United States to visit our children and other family, we had the opportunity to meet with a number of different groups of basically scattered people. And in several cases it became quite clear that some of these people had been deeply hurt by the treatment they had received from one or other of the larger church-of-God groups. They had tried to serve God's people within those groups, they gave freely of their time and their efforts, and in many cases had opened their homes for the benefit of the members of that group. They had supported these groups financially. Yet when they had in all sincerity experienced a conscience problem with one or other teaching of that organization, because they were convinced that the teaching in question was not in full agreement with the Bible, then they took those questions of conscience to the leading ministers in those organizations. And then basically the following happened:

They were either offered no answers, or they were given answers that were unsatisfactory because the answers simply did not address the scriptural concerns that they had raised. The answers appealed to "the traditions" we have received from Mr. Herbert W. Armstrong, they appealed to Mr. Armstrong's position and status in the Church, but they did not address the scriptural concerns these members had raised. As their scriptural concerns had not really been faced up to and addressed, therefore these members continued to request that their scriptural concerns with the teachings in question be answered. It quickly became evident to these members that their organizations really had no biblically satisfactory answers for the questions they had raised, but neither were these organizations about to concede that perhaps their understanding of the doctrines in question was incomplete and in need of some correction. Instead, the organizations would stonewall themselves behind "the traditional teachings" we have received from Mr. Armstrong, or they responded with: "the official position of our organization is ...".

Now it might be one thing if that was where it had stayed. But in many cases it went further. In many cases the individuals who had raised such questions found they suddenly received a totally different treatment from some of their ministers. They were now viewed as "troublemakers", as people who could not really be trusted, as people who just wanted to change all of the teachings of the Church. In some cases they were even accused of wanting to do exactly the same things that the Tkach administration had done in the Worldwide Church of God from the latter 1980's onwards. In some cases their character was obliquely attacked and criticized, and any number of wrong motives were imputed to them. In one way or another many people in this sort of situation came to feel that they were being pressured out of the group they had until then been a part of.

And then some of those, who had been pressured out because of raising questions that were a matter of conscience to them, felt hurt. The unfair treatment they had received at the hands of their organizations discouraged them. Some may even have felt offended by the treatment they had received from the ministry? And even if they did not hold any grudges against their former organizations, some STILL had a hard time coming to grips with the treatment they had received ... because it was just so unfair.

Does that perhaps describe some of you, to some degree or other? If so, did you, or do you still, feel hurt and somewhat discouraged by these things that have happened?

If you do, then I would say that you don't really like being blessed by God, do you?

Consider what Jesus Christ Himself tells us:

BLESSED ARE YE, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. (Matthew 5:11 AV)

Have you been reviled? Have any number of things been said UNFAIRLY about you? Do you feel that you have been persecuted ... and all because you try to live by all of the Bible? Do you as a result consider yourself to be one of "the walking wounded" (a term some people have started to use to describe those who have met with unfair treatment by one or other of the church-of-God organizations)?

Of course, it is easy under such circumstances to become discouraged by unfair treatment and feel sorry for oneself. But Jesus Christ Himself says: "YOU ARE BLESSED" if you receive this kind of treatment!

Don't we believe what Jesus Christ then said in the next verse?

REJOICE, AND BE EXCEEDING GLAD: FOR GREAT IS YOUR REWARD IN HEAVEN: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you. (Matthew 5:12 AV)

Understand that Jesus Christ here gives us A COMMAND! The verbs "rejoice" and "be exceeding glad" are both in the imperative mood in Greek, expressing a command. God COMMANDS you and me to REJOICE when we are reviled; God COMMANDS you and me to BE EXTREMELY GLAD when we are unfairly accused and vilified. If we therefore feel hurt and discouraged and gloomy because we are reviled, then we are not obeying a command God has given us!

The fact that it may well be very hard for us to "rejoice" under such circumstances does not in any way change this command God has given us. There are reasons for this command.

Do we really grasp what Jesus Christ is telling us in Matthew 5:12? If we are unfairly reviled and vilified, AND WE COPE WITH THAT WITHOUT BECOMING OFFENDED, then we will receive from God a reward that is VASTLY SUPERIOR to the reward people, who (hypothetically speaking) simply lived by all of the ten commandments but never had to face unfair treatment, will receive.

Look at the parallel account of these words by Jesus Christ, as recorded by Luke:

Blessed are ye, when men shall hate you, and when they shall separate you from their company, and shall reproach you, and cast out your name as evil, for the Son of man's sake. REJOICE YE IN THAT DAY, AND LEAP FOR JOY: for, behold, YOUR REWARD IS GREAT IN HEAVEN: for in the like manner did their fathers unto the prophets. (Luke 6:22-23 AV)

Luke likewise used the imperative mood for the verbs "rejoice" and "leap for joy". Jesus Christ COMMANDS us to "leap for joy" when people put us out of their organizations ("they separate you from their company") and when they reproach us unfairly. Yet if we are not careful, we are most likely inclined to feel hurt and offended when these things happen to us, things about which Jesus Christ commands us to jump for joy!

Do we grasp the significance of this command from Christ? Do we realize that this is THE ONLY TIME (one occasion recorded in two of the gospel accounts) Jesus Christ ever used the expression "great is your reward in heaven"? The only other time Christ is recorded as using the same expression, but without the words "in heaven" included, was a little later in the same context, in Luke 6:35:

But love ye your enemies, and do good, and lend, hoping for nothing again; and YOUR REWARD SHALL BE GREAT, and ye shall be the children of the Highest: for he is kind unto the unthankful and to the evil. (Luke 6:35 AV)

Now consider what the topic of this verse is. If we rejoice and leap for joy when people revile us (and such people would be considered to be our "enemies"), then we are also in a position to "love our enemies". If we find that we cannot bring ourselves to "love our enemies", then that is very likely because we have been unfairly reviled and persecuted and evil spoken of. Can we see that Luke 6:35 and Luke 6:22-23 speak about exactly the same attitude? That is why Jesus Christ speaks about a GREAT reward in both passages.

These are the only times Jesus Christ referred to a "GREAT REWARD". (See also Paul's use of a similar expression in Hebrews 10:35, and David's reference to God's laws in Psalm 19:11.) Consider this in conjunction with Christ's reference that IF we only do those things we are commanded to do, then we are still only "UNPROFITABLE SERVANTS" (see Luke 17:10).

So what does God say will receive "A GREAT REWARD": keeping all of His commandments or correctly responding with joy to unfair reviling and persecution? References to a GREAT reward are only made for coping with unfair reviling!

Now WHY does God tell us that there is a GREAT reward for coping well with such unfair treatment? I suspect that the reason God gives us a great reward if we cope well with such unfair reviling is because this is probably one of the most difficult things for us to do ... to rejoice when we are counted worthy by God to suffer reviling unfairly. Yet Christ tells us, we are by no means unique in being treated unfairly ... such unfair treatment has ALWAYS been the lot of God's true servants.

So understand this: you are obeying God's laws and heading for an "average" reward from God. And then along comes THE OPPORTUNITY to "convert" that "average" reward into a GREAT reward ... someone reviles you, treats you unfairly, persecutes you and puts you out of their fellowship. Can you not understand that this is exactly the same as if someone handed you the winning ticket in a lucky draw for a new motor car or a trip around the world? ALL YOU HAVE TO DO, to be eligible for the prize, is to respond correctly ... by being extremely glad for the opportunity and jumping for joy! That is what Jesus Christ said!

AND THAT IS WHAT GOD IS LOOKING FOR IN OUR HEARTS!

Who cares whether that is hard to do or not? Nobody said that true Christianity was going to be easy and "peaches and cream". Saying things like: "well, that is very hard to do" is nothing more than a cop-out that you and I will at times use. God COMMANDS us to develop this attitude of rejoicing when we are faced with reviling and being treated unfairly! That's the bottom line in living "true Christianity".

Jesus Christ didn't just set us an example for us to look at and admire! He set us an example so that we should DO as He had done. The Apostle Peter explained this in some detail in his first letter to the Church.

For this is thankworthy, if a man for conscience toward God ENDURE GRIEF, SUFFERING WRONGFULLY. For what glory is it, if, when ye be buffeted for your faults, ye shall take it patiently? BUT IF, WHEN YE DO WELL, AND SUFFER FOR IT, YE TAKE IT PATIENTLY, THIS IS ACCEPTABLE WITH GOD. For even hereunto were ye called: because Christ also suffered for us, LEAVING US AN EXAMPLE, THAT YE SHOULD FOLLOW HIS STEPS: (1 Peter 2:19-21 AV)

The expression "for even hereunto were you called" means that God EXPLICITLY intends for us to suffer wrongfully! God EXPECTS us to cope correctly with suffering wrongfully. Very clearly we are to follow in Christ's steps, to follow His example. And yes, of course that is hard to do. But do it we must. Two verses later Peter explained:

Who, when he was reviled, reviled not again; when he suffered, he threatened not; but committed himself to him that judgeth righteously: (1 Peter 2:23 AV)

Jesus Christ didn't revile, He didn't threaten, He didn't feel sorry for Himself and He didn't take offence at how people treated Him ... AND WE ARE TO DO LIKEWISE! We are to be prepared for being reviled and vilified for doing well ... those are the times when God is watching us very closely. They are the times of some of the greatest blessings from God for us (see again Matthew 5:11) ... and only once we are changed into spirit beings (or resurrected) will we realize just HOW GREAT THOSE OPPORTUNITIES WERE ... and most of the time we just blew those opportunities by responding in wrong ways, right?

It is always the same: we learn too late! Once we are in our 40's or 50's or even older we can look back at all the opportunities we missed (like not working a bit harder for just a few years in school so we could become better qualified, not trying a bit harder at any number of tasks, rejecting opportunities to study or travel or learn another language or some specialized skill, etc.), and we can say: "IF ONLY I COULD LIVE MY LIFE OVER AGAIN, KNOWING ALL THE THINGS I KNOW NOW ..."

Let me make this very clear:

All of the missed opportunities in our whole lives lumped together will pale into insignificance when compared to THE MISSED OPPORTUNITIES FOR "GREAT REWARDS IN HEAVEN" because we simply did not respond to being reviled with rejoicing and gladness!

When we learn to respond to reviling with rejoicing and gladness, THEN we have the mind of Christ ... because that is precisely how Christ wants us to respond to such situations. Look at the example of the Apostle Paul, and how he coped with being unfairly scourged and reviled and imprisoned: HE SANG PRAISES TO GOD! See Acts 16:22-25. Paul wasn't offended or feeling sorry for himself because he had been reviled.

Look also at what God tells us in Psalm 119:

GREAT PEACE have they which love thy law: and NOTHING SHALL OFFEND THEM. (Psalm 119:165 AV)

When we feel "hurt" because people have reviled us, then we are actually to some degree "offended" by what has been done to us. And when we feel hurt, we also don't really have "GREAT PEACE".

Jesus Christ did not take offence at ANYTHING that people said or did to Him. If we still take offence at ANYTHING, then we have not yet learned the lesson of Matthew 5:11. And if we still take offence at ANYTHING, then we also are not really heading for any "GREAT" reward.

So irrespective of how unfairly we may have been treated by any of the church-of-God organizations, we need to strive to always respond to reviling with the understanding that GOD IS TESTING US FOR A POSITION IN HIS FAMILY AND HIS KINGDOM! When we respond positively, without taking offence, to such situations, THEN we stand in line to become the children of our Father who is in heaven (see Matthew 5:45).

When Jesus Christ instructed us to "love our enemies" in Matthew 5:44, He did NOT mean that we are to have certain "feelings of love" or "emotions of love" for our enemies. Christ meant that we are to DO certain things, not to have certain feelings.

But I say unto you, LOVE your enemies, BLESS THEM that curse you, DO GOOD TO THEM that hate you, and PRAY FOR THEM which despitefully use you, and persecute you; (Matthew 5:44 AV)

By "love them" Jesus Christ meant exactly three things:

LOVE them = BLESS them + DO GOOD to them + PRAY FOR them

The Greek word for "bless" literally means "say good words", because that is what a blessing is: it is saying "good words". So if God "blesses us", then He is saying good words to us ... and because He is God, therefore He also brings those good words to pass. When we read in the Old Testament that one of God's servants "blessed God", it simply means that this servant of God was saying "good words" to God. When we human beings "bless other people", then we likewise are simply saying "good words" to them.

So when Jesus Christ instructs us to LOVE OUR ENEMIES, He means that we are to:

- SAY GOOD WORDS to them and about them,
- DO GOOD to them and for them,
- PRAY FOR them.

So again, regarding the people (or organizations?) that have reviled us and persecuted us, we are to say good words to or about, we are to do good to or for them, and we are to pray for them. And in the process of doing this we are to rejoice because we understand the frame of mind God wants us to develop and to have.

It is extremely important that we don't take offence when people revile us, that we don't harbour hurt feelings and emotions over being unfairly treated. Always keep in mind how God deals with EVERY PERSON He calls into His Church:

For whom THE LORD loveth he chasteneth, and SCOURGETH EVERY SON whom he receiveth. IF YE ENDURE CHASTENING, GOD DEALETH WITH YOU AS WITH SONS; for what son is he whom the father chasteneth not? But if ye be without chastisement, whereof all are partakers, then are ye bastards, and not sons. (Hebrews 12:6-8 AV)

So HOW does God "scourge" you and me? Can we not see that ONE of the ways God scourges EVERY PERSON He calls into His Church is by exposing us to unfair reviling and persecution, and then in effect saying to us: "I want to see how you handle this kind of situation"? Each of those occasions is an opportunity for TREMENDOUSLY GREAT BLESSINGS! That's what Jesus Christ tried to explain to us.

So when we are unfairly treated we have the following situation:

A) GOD SAYS: I want to see how you handle this one. If you handle it well, THEN I will bless you. The lessons you will learn by handling this kind of situation correctly are absolutely vital to the type of character I want to see in you.

B) SATAN SAYS: Hey, you are being treated unfairly. Go ahead and be magnanimous and forgive them because they aren't nearly as good as you are. They are hurting you, and it is okay for you to feel hurt; don't deny your real feelings. You have a right to feeling hurt, even if you do forgive them for being unkind to you.

God speaks to us through the Bible. But Satan speaks to us more directly ... somehow he manages to get us to think HIS THOUGHTS with our minds. And if we do feel hurt when people revile us, then God knows that we are really still thinking Satan's thoughts and not His (i.e. God's) thoughts.

To make this plain: when people are saying unfair or untrue things about us, then we obviously KNOW we are being reviled. That is a fact we recognize. The "natural" or automatic or spontaneous way of responding to such unfair treatment is to feel hurt, to get angry or resentful or even bitter. The "natural" response is a desire to set the record straight, to restore our reputation or credibility or status. But God says to us: "I don't want you to give in to your natural way of responding. Instead I want you to respond in a way that is totally UNNATURAL and foreign to you ... I want you to REJOICE for having this opportunity to suffer unfairly. I want you to LEARN to respond that way so often that eventually IT WILL BECOME "NATURAL" FOR YOU TO RESPOND THIS WAY! And when you achieve that, THEN your mind will have gone through a process of transformation."

Now here is a major potential problem we all have to deal with. This is important to understand.

Thousands of people have left the Worldwide Church of God over the past decade for any number of reasons. In many (perhaps in most?) cases we received unfair treatment (i.e. they tried to persuade us to accept unbiblical teachings, we were pressured to accept pagan ideas and doctrines, etc.). So we left in order to hold fast to the truth. If we had indeed been exposed to reviling and persecution, then we were nevertheless expected by God to have the right approach and perspective.

Even if they left the Worldwide Church of God for the right reasons (i.e. to hold fast to the true teachings of the Bible), THOSE PEOPLE who allow Satan to persuade them to feel hurt and offended by the wrong treatment they have received, AUTOMATICALLY OPEN THEMSELVES UP TO ACCEPTING WRONG TEACHINGS OR PRACTICES!

Not taking offence at wrong treatment is the greatest possible assurance to staying "on the right track". People who have ALREADY allowed Satan to deceive them into feeling "justifiably hurt" are also more likely to be deceived by subtle doctrinal errors. And they just can't see it themselves. And the more people like that focus on being "the walking wounded", on having been "abused" by a harsh and domineering ministry, etc., the more likely they are to introduce doctrinal errors of their own.

So I believe that there is a considerable danger attached to a wrong response to reviling and persecution. Sadly, with the vast range of doctrinal differences we now see amongst the various church-of-God groups, that a few years or decades ago were all a part of the Worldwide Church of God,

it is quite clear that some have fallen prey to doctrinal errors ... we can't all be right. And harbouring hurt feelings over unfair treatment is a major way Satan sets people up to also accept other subtle doctrinal errors. Some people (or even organizations?) are openly bitter about their past connections to Mr. Armstrong ... and such attitudes of bitterness are almost certain to guarantee that they themselves will also hold doctrinal errors ... because they have never learned the lesson of Matthew 5:11-12.

So when next we are unfairly treated or reviled, let's see it for "the winning ticket" and "the opportunity" that it really is ... and let's strive to learn to respond as God would want us to respond. And then, as Jesus Christ so clearly said:

GREAT SHALL BE OUR REWARD FROM GOD!

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