

CHRIST'S KNOWLEDGE OF MAN

John 2:23-25

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But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people and needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in man (Jn. 2:24-25).

John chapter 2 presents three situations in which Jesus performed signs that revealed his deity. First, Jesus turned water into wine at a wedding feast. Not many people saw this, but we are told that “his disciples believed in him” (Jn. 2:11). Soon afterward, Jesus drove the merchants out of the temple courts. This was done publicly, and the reaction was negative: “The Jews said to him, ‘What sign do you show us for doing these things?’” (Jn. 2:18). In the few verses that end this chapter of signs, we learn that while Jesus was at the feast in Jerusalem he performed a number of unspecified miracles, and that as a result “many believed in his name” (Jn. 2:23).

John’s assessment of this situation is striking, because he tells us that while there were different responses to Jesus, Jesus had one response to all people: “Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people and needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in man” (Jn. 2:24-25). In the Greek there is a deliberate parallel: they believed in Jesus’ name when they saw his signs, but he did not believe in them.

WHAT JESUS KNEW ABOUT MAN

Most relationships are built on mutual admiration. But this is not true when it comes to mankind and Jesus. Though people were praising Jesus because of his miracles, he was not willing to commit himself to them. The reason, John says, is because of what Jesus knew about man.

God's knowledge about us is different than our knowledge of each other and even of ourselves. The Bible says, "Man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart" (1 Sam. 16:7). This makes it hard for us really to know other people. It is difficult to make a wise decision when hiring, because someone may look good, have a great resume, and answer questions well, and still be completely different from what they appeared. Or think about an executive who suddenly flees from the country with a large amount of company funds. People always comment on how much they trusted him and how well thought of he was by everyone. All along he had been a thief, and none of the people who knew him best suspected it.

But God "knows the heart" (Acts 15:8); he "searches hearts" (Rom. 8:27) and knows what lies within. "No creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account" (Heb. 4:12). That Jesus can do the same is yet another proof of his deity. John says, he "needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in man" (Jn. 2:25).

If the Bible is the Word of God, then the way to learn what Christ knows about man is to examine what the Bible says about man. What, for instance, does the Bible say about the heart of man? People will defend a criminal by saying, "But he has a good heart." Yet the Bible says, "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick" (Jer. 17:9). We are frequently advised, "Trust your heart." But the Bible says that is a dangerous thing to do, because your heart is not a sound moral guide. The great tragedy of our race is that because of the infection of sin, our hearts are wicked and deceitful.

This is seen in man's attitude towards his Creator. We live in a glorious world made by God and filled with good things. So how does man respond to God? The classic answer is given by Paul: "Although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him" (Rom. 1:21). Walk around your neighborhood or at work and listen to the conversations. Do people praise God for the good things they enjoy? Are they thankful to the Lord for their many blessings? The answer is No. People do not honor or thank God, but mainly try to avoid him. Donald Barnhouse comments, "Men will read trash rather than the Word of God, and adhere to a system of priorities that leaves God out of their lives. Multitudes of men spend

more time shaving than on their souls; and multitudes of women give more minutes to their makeup than to the life of the eternal spirit.”¹

Malcolm Muggeridge’s conversion to Christianity was hastened by a glimpse he received of his wicked heart. He was working as a journalist in India and went to a river for a swim. As he entered the water, he saw an Indian woman bathing. He felt an impulse to go and seduce her, just as King David felt when he saw Bathsheba. Temptation storming his mind, he began swimming toward her. As he recalled his wedding vows he just went faster. The voice of allurements called out, “Stolen water is sweet” (Prov. 9:17), and he swam more furiously still. But when he pulled up towards the woman and she turned, Muggeridge saw, “She was a leper... This creature grinned at me, showing a toothless mask.” His first response was to accuse her: “What a dirty lecherous woman!” he thought. But then it crashed in upon him that it was not the woman who was lecherous; it was his own heart. Ravi Zacharias comments: “This is precisely the teaching of Christ’s message. When we look into the human heart we see the lust, the greed, the hate, the pride, the anger, and the jealousies that are so destructive.”² Jesus knew this about man. He knew that man would in the end reject him and mock him and crucify him. Therefore, here at the beginning, he did not commit himself even to those who acclaimed him, for he knew the heart of man.

Man does not merely have heart disease, however. We are also inflicted with the hand, foot, and mouth disease of sin. Consider Paul’s spiritual diagnosis in Romans 3:10-18:

None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one." "Their throat is an open grave; they use their tongues to deceive." "The venom of asps is under their lips." "Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness." "Their feet are swift to shed blood; in their paths are ruin and misery, and the way of peace they have not known." "There is no fear of God before their eyes."

These are all quotes from the Old Testament, and with them Paul is summing up the Bible’s doctrine of total depravity. This means that as a result of the fall of our race into sin, described in Genesis 3, every part of man’s nature – our physical drives, our emotions, our wills,

¹ Donald Grey Barnhouse, *Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, ?), 2:46

² Ravi Zacharias, *Can Man Live Without God?* (Dallas: Word, 1994), 137.

our consciences, our thoughts – is contaminated by sinful motives and desires. Total depravity does not mean that we could not be worse – for we could always be worse – or that there is nothing good to say about men and women. Nor does total depravity deny mankind’s dignity and worth as created by God. Instead, total depravity chronicles the tragedy of our corruption in sin, a corruption that is totally comprehensive with respect to all our faculties: heart, mind, and body. Isaiah summarizes, “From the sole of the foot even to the head, there is no soundness” (Isa. 1:6). Jonathan Edwards says:

Not only is everyone corrupt, but they are all over corrupt – in every power, faculty, and principle; every part is depraved... And not only is every part corrupt, but exceedingly corrupt – being possessed with dreadful principles of corruption, horribly evil dispositions and principles of sin that may be represented by the poison of asps, which makes men like vipers and devils.³

This is what the Bible says about humanity, and it is because he knew this that Jesus did not entrust himself to men.

WHAT WE NEED TO KNOW ABOUT OURSELVES

It is sometimes said that all theology is anthropology; that is, our view of ourselves shapes our view of God and salvation. If that is true, and if our hearts are deceitful, then there is a great danger that we are self-deceived. It is always the person who snores who is never woken up. The person who tells bad jokes is the one who laughs loudest. Likewise, men and women tend to be deceived about themselves, and therefore about God, life, judgment, and salvation.

This being the case, we need to recognize and accept the truth about *our wickedness and guilt before God*. I went to high school in a rural area where there were not a great number of accomplished musicians. There, I was a celebrated pianist and I harbored the delusion that I might make it big as a musician. But once I was in the wider world, it became clear that far from being greatly talented I really was rather mediocre. I remember being a little embarrassed, but mainly relieved to have found out. Imagine if I had gone on thinking I was a musical genius, when in fact I was not. The same is true when it comes to our moral standing before God. The fact that we can delude ourselves and others does not mean that we can deceive God. The sooner we

³ Jonathan Edwards: *Christ Exalted*, from *Altogether Lovely* (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, ?), 63-64.

recognize the truth that we are not “basically good people,” but offensively wicked sinners, worthy of eternal damnation, the better off we will be.

But how do we do this? How do we see our moral and spiritual condition accurately? The two best ways are to study the Bible’s teaching about God and to ponder the requirements of God’s law. Isaiah was an eminent Israelite who went into the temple to pray at a time of national crisis. What he saw changed his life: a vision of Christ enthroned in glory, with angels singing, “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts” (Isa. 6:3). Isaiah cried in response: “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!” (Isa. 6:5). He had seen God, and for the first time, in that holy light, he saw the truth about himself. Likewise, if our minds conceive of the greatness and especially the holiness of God, we will humble ourselves in the knowledge of our sin and guilt. Imagine the horrified shock that will fall upon self-righteous sinners when at the end they stand in the presence of holy angels before God’s holy throne. The contrast will reveal all, but then it will be too late.

So we learn of our wickedness through the knowledge of God gained from the Bible. A second way to see the truth about ourselves is to consider the teaching of God’s law. Petrus Dathenus explained how the law helps us in a famous letter to Lady Elizabeth de Grave: “Because we are so blinded by spiritual pride that we do not feel our miserable state, the law of God serves as... a mirror (Ja. 2:5), in which we can see and acknowledge how far we fall short. He does this in order that we will be displeased with ourselves (Ps. 19:13) and become ashamed like the poor publican who did not even dare to lift up his eyes to heaven, and say with him, ‘God be merciful to me a sinner’ (Lk. 18:13).”⁴ People do not seek forgiveness today largely because they do not think they are guilty. But if we would read and reflect upon the Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount, for instance, we would have a clearer idea of our true condition.

We need to know our wickedness and sin, and this will help us see a second truth we need to know: *our only salvation is by God’s grace alone*. The truth is that we not only *must* not pretend that we are

⁴ Petrus Dathenus, in a letter to Lady Elizabeth de Grave, *The Pearl of Christian Comfort*, 15-16.

good, but we *need* not. God has provided salvation by grace for wicked sinners. God “justifies the ungodly” (Rom. 4:5) who trust in Christ. Salvation, says the Bible, comes “by [God’s] grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 3:24). God sent his Son, Jesus, to die on the cross for our sins. He did this because of his own mercy and for the glory of his own grace. We do not deserve it and we cannot earn it. It is “to be received by faith” (Rom. 3:25).

It is not only new converts who need to know this but the most seasoned Christian. Richard Lovelace comments: “A church with a weak understanding of sin will thus inevitably be a church in which the flesh is alive and spiritual vitality is dampened.”⁵ This is true, because to the extent that we have confidence in our supposed virtue and ability, we will rely on what we can do. But if we see ourselves as sinful and weak, as we really are, then we will humbly place all our reliance on God, his Word, and the power of his grace.

This has been described as the see-saw of theology: on opposite sides are our view of man and our view of God; when one is up, the other is down. The better we think of ourselves, the less we will care about God and his Word; the more we exalt God and his Word, the more humble and lowly we will be. For this reason, worldly churches are always churches that will not teach the truth about sin, and churches that will not teach about sin are always worldly churches. To be a godly church, and one in which God’s power is at work, we must humbly admit and proclaim our sin and then wholly rely on the good news of God’s grace for sinners in Jesus Christ.

To the extent that we rely on Christ, we will also be a church of spiritual joy, and our worship will be marked with fervent and sincere gratitude to God. Too many Christians talk of being angry at God because of their trials or disappointed with God because they lack worldly blessings. But when you see the enormity of your sinfulness, and then realize that the sinless Son of God voluntarily died for you, you will worship him with joy. This is the point of a recent worship song:

I’m forgiven, because you were forsaken. I’m accepted, you were condemned.
I’m alive and well, Your Spirit is within me, Because you died and rose again.
Amazing love how can it be, that you my King would die for me?

⁵ Richard F. Lovelace: *Dynamics of Spiritual Life*, pp. 110, 111.

Amazing love I know it's true. It is my joy to honor You.⁶

Moreover, knowing the truth about our wickedness will reveal a third truth we need to know: *we must zealously resist temptation and fight sin*. I recently thought of this while watching the movie *Black Beauty*. In one scene, a man ignored warnings not to smoke his pipe in the barn. Sure enough, some smoldering tobacco fell into the straw, igniting a fire that burned down the barn and threatened many lives. If we saw the straw of sin in our hearts, the way that Jesus sees what is in man, we would guard against any spark of temptation – be it lust, greed, pride, envy, or malice.

In her spiritual autobiography, *Girl Meets God*, Lauren Winner tells of a Christian friend who confided that she thought she was about to have an extra-marital affair. She had met a man who was more interesting than her husband and was fawningly attentive. They had been secretly meeting for coffee and an occasional lunch, though nothing more had yet happened. Lauren exhorted her, “Just don’t see him again. The next time you’re tempted to call him, call me instead and we’ll go to the movies.” She added, wisely, “You know how we ask God in the Lord’s Prayer not to lead us into temptation? Well, I think He honors that best when we don’t go marching into temptation ourselves.” Her friend ignored the advice, ended up having a sexual affair, and made a ruin of several lives.⁷ This is the kind of sin and folly that Jesus saw in us, and as we recognize the truth about ourselves we will guard against every kind of temptation.

WHAT JESUS DID ABOUT HIS KNOWLEDGE OF MAN

It is clear that Jesus was not encouraged by what he saw in man. “He did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people” (Jn. 2:24). But that does not mean that Jesus abandoned us, as we would likely abandon people we cannot trust. The good news of the gospel is that Jesus came to save the people he knew so well – people like us in all our wickedness and sin. So what did Jesus do?

The first thing Jesus did was speak the truth to man. Jesus spoke directly and frankly to people about their wickedness and sin – especially to those who were smug and self-righteous. On one

⁶ Billy James Foote, 2002.

⁷ Lauren F. Winner, *Girl Meets God: A Memoir* (New York: Random House, 2002), 65-68.

occasion, a group of Jews were boasting in their lineage as descendants of Abraham. Jesus rebuked them, “You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father’s desires” (Jn. 8:44).

We, likewise, must speak about the wickedness of men and our guilt before God. But this is something Christians are increasingly unwilling to do, and it is one reason why our witness is so weak. Instead of speaking the truth, as Jesus did, many preachers seek to attract crowds of people by telling them positive things about what God will do for them, without any mention of sin or Christ’s blood.

The pastor of America’s largest church was asked on television if he ever told people they are sinners. He replied, “I don’t.” “Is that a word you don’t use?” “I don’t use it.” He explained: “I don’t have it in my heart to condemn people. I’m there to encourage them. I see myself more as a coach, as a motivator to help them experience the life God has for us.” He pointed out that people want a more positive message, and no doubt that is true.⁸

But the problem is that people are under the wrath of God unless they come in faith to the cross of Christ. No matter how helpful the advice and how motivating the message, unless they are born again they cannot see the kingdom of God (Jn. 3:3). This is why such a positive message is not, in fact, loving or compassionate – nor faithful to Christ. As Paul reasoned, how can they believe unless they hear, and how can they hear the truth unless it is preached? (Rom. 10:14). Jesus spoke the truth, so that people would be saved: “Unless you believe,” he said, “you will die in your sins” (Jn. 8:24). We, too – preachers in the pulpit and Christians in the world – must lovingly speak the truth in Christ’s name.

Most importantly, Jesus responded to his knowledge of our wickedness and sin by dying on the cross. Jesus did not die for us because he thought we were good but because he knew we were bad. He did not take up the cross because we are innocent before God, but because he knew we are guilty and he wanted to bear that guilt in our place. Consider this: Jesus died for you knowing the full truth about your wickedness: about your envy and greed and lust and self-serving

⁸ “Interview with Joel Osteen,” *Larry King Live*, June 20, 2005, accessed on-line at <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0506/20/1kl.01.html>.

ambitions. Jesus knows more about your sin and mine than even we will ever know. But he died for us anyway.

In a television special about a Christian celebrity, she was shown putting on the vast amount of facial make-up for which she was famous. As she was applying the layers, she remarked that her husband, a televangelist, had never seen her without the make-up on. What a terrible way to be married, and an even more terrible way to relate to God – always covering up, always pretending to be something you are not. But no matter what fig leaves you put on, no matter what mask you wear or what spiritual make-up you apply to your face, Jesus knows the truth about you. And he loved you and died to make you his own – not some fake you but the real you – and then rose from the grave to give you power to lead a new kind of life: a life in which you give your ugly heart to Jesus to be cleansed and renewed, and a life in which you spread his love among the ugly and unlovely people in this world.

Christ could not commit himself to man, but we can commit ourselves to him. We can come to him honestly, not pretending to be righteous, to seek mercy. We can come to him in weakness, to seek strength. We can come to him tempted, seeking deliverance. We come to him judgmental and self-serving, seeking compassion and a self-giving heart. We can come to him mourning: he will wipe our tears. We can come to him hungering and thirsting: he will fill us. We can come to him lost: he will, as Psalm 23 says, restore our souls and lead us in righteous paths for his name's sake.