

PREACHING TO THE SPIRITS

“For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh, but quickened by the Spirit: By which also he went and preached unto the spirits in prison; Which sometime were disobedient, when once the longsuffering of God waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was a preparing, wherein few, that is, eight souls were saved by water.” (1 Peter 3:18-20 KJV)

Students of the Bible disagree on this verse as they do on many others. One major area of disagreement involves whether Christ preached to the spirits after He died, or whether His Spirit was preaching through Noah centuries before while Noah was preparing the ark? For the purpose of this study it doesn't matter. The focus of this study will involve “preaching to the spirits”. The terminology seems unusual. The “men” of Nineveh repented at the preaching of Jonah (Matt. 12:41) but this preaching was to “spirits”. It is the purpose of this brief article to ponder the meaning of these words.

As you probably know, man is a three fold being. He is “spirit”, “soul”, and “body” (1 Thess. 5:23). Mankind, both male and female, are created in the “image of God” (Gen. 1:26, 27). Animals are not created in the image of God. The difference is, animals do not have a spirit.

Everybody knows what a body is, but what is a soul? The Hebrew word for “soul” is “nephesh”. It occurs 754 times in the Hebrew Bible and is translated as “soul” 475 times in the King James Version. While this may come as a surprise to many, the first 4 times “nephesh” is used in the Bible it refers to animals and fish (See Gen. 1:20, 21, 24, 30). Plants and trees do not have “souls” but animals and fish do. This does not mean that animals and fish are eternal, it merely means they are “living creatures” with a quality of life superior to that in plants and trees.

In Gen. 2:7 “nephesh” is also applied to man. Yes! Man has a soul. He has physical life like animals and fish, but man is unique in creation in that he also has a spirit. Of all the millions of living things that God created, only man was created in His image. Only man has a spirit.

The word “soul”, however, is sometimes used to refer to man in his entirety. For example: **“All the souls that came with Jacob into Egypt, which came out of his loins, besides Jacob's sons' wives, all the souls *were* threescore and six; And the sons of Joseph, which were born him in Egypt, *were* two souls: all the souls of the house of Jacob, which came into Egypt, *were* threescore and ten”.** (Genesis 46:26-27 KJV)

Jesus Himself said: **“For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world and lose his own soul?” (Matt. 16:26).** Luke's version states: **“For what is a man advantaged, if he shall gain the whole world and lose himself” (Lk. 9:25).**

In these and other verses the word “soul” is used in a general sense to refer to man in his entirety (spirit, soul, and body). Obviously it is not profitable to gain the whole world and lose yourself. Your “self”, of course, includes your spirit, soul, and body.

But while these considerations are profitable to pursue, they are not the focus of this study. This study involves “preaching to the spirits”. While we human beings may have difficulty distinguishing between the “soul” and the “spirit” the Word of God does not. Please remember: **“... the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any twoedged sword, piercing**

even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.” (Hebrews 4:11-12 KJV)

CARNAL COMMANDMENTS

A dog is a “living being” with the capacity to understand and obey commandments. Since a dog does not have a spirit, however, he can only respond to carnal commandments. You can teach a dog to do physical things, but it has no capacity for spiritual understanding. How could it? Obviously, a dog cannot become a Christian.

When Paul warned the Philippians “beware of dogs” (Phil. 3:2) he was not referring to animals, he was referring to legalistic preachers. The reference to them as “dogs” is appropriate for their preaching only involved carnal commandments. They were B.C. preachers in an A.D. world. Jesus preached to the spirits and they did not!

Please consider:

- The carnal mind is enmity against God (Rom. 8:7).
- The Corinthians lost their focus on the spirit and walked as carnal men (1 Cor. 3:3,4).
- The weapons of our warfare are not carnal (2 Cor. 10:4).
- Melchisedec did not become a priest by means of a carnal commandment (Heb. 7:16).
- The commandments under the Law involving meats and drinks and divers washings which were merely carnal ordinances (Heb. 9:10). The spiritual dimensions of our faith come through Christ, not Moses.
- It is possible for believers today to obey commandments on a carnal level, that’s why Paul prayed for believers to have wisdom and spiritual understanding (Col. 1:9).

IN THE SPIRIT

There is no doubt that believers in Christ are commanded to operate on a spiritual level. Walking “in the Spirit” is the very essence of pleasing Christ. This reality makes preaching to the spirits all the more relevant. There are so many Scriptures that emphasize the importance of the Spirit that it is not practical in this study to try and list them all. Here are a few examples, however, to whet your appetite and spur you on to love and good works.

- **“But the hour cometh and now is when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship him.” (Jn. 4:23).**
- **“For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the Gospel of His Son (Rom. 1:9).**
- **“But he is a Jew which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit” (Rom. 2:29).**
- **“But now we are delivered from the law, that being dead wherein we were held; that we should serve in newness of spirit and not in the oldness of the letter” (Rom. 7:6).**
- **“Walk in the Spirit, and ye shall not fulfil the lust of the flesh” (Gal. 5:16).**

- “If ye are led of the Spirit you are not under the law”. (Gal. 5:18).
- “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance: against such there is no law” (Gal. 5:22, 23).
- “The law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus hath made me free from the law of sin and death” (Rom. 8:2).
- “The righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit” (Rom. 8:4).
- “The carnal mind is enmity against God” (Rom. 8:7).
- “For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God” (Rom. 8:14).
- “Speaking to yourselves in sons and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord” (Eph. 5:19).
- “I will sing with the Spirit, I will sing with the understanding also”
- Etc.

THE PROBLEM OF SIN IS IN THE HEART

- Man looks on the outward appearance, but God looks on the heart (1Sam. 16:7).
- It is possible to honor God with your lips when your heart is far from Him (Matt. 15:8).
- Ancient Israel often made sacrifices to God with evil hearts.
 - For this reason God despised their worship (Is. 1:10 - 15).
 - They killed an ox like they were slaying a man and sacrificed a lamb as if they were cutting off a dog’s neck. They offered an oblation as if were swine’s blood and burned incense as if they were blessing an idol (Is. 66:3).
 - Even though they outwardly obeyed God, inwardly they were corrupt to the core.
- Jesus and His disciples were once criticized for eating with unwashed hands. Jesus explained that sin does not start outside of a man and force it’s way in. Sin originates inside of a man and forces it’s way out. Jesus said: **“Out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies. These are the things that defile a man: but to eat with unwashen hands defileth not a man” (Matt. 15:19, 20)**
- Because Jesus knew all men (Jn. 2:24), He had perfect understanding of the Scribes and Pharisees. While they scrupulously obeyed outward commands and appeared to be righteous, inwardly they were full of hypocrisy and iniquity (Matt. 23:28).
- Preaching that does not change the heart is of no value. That’s why our preaching needs to target the spirit. It is possible to do many external things which make you appear to be godly, but God looks upon the heart. You cannot fool God! He knows exactly why you are doing what you do.
- When the Corinthians came together, for example, it was impossible for them to eat the Lord’s Supper (1 Cor. 11:20). No! They didn’t have a problem physically eating the bread and drinking the wine. They had a spiritual problem. Anybody can eat bread and drink wine, but not everybody has a spirit in communion with God. This is not a peripheral problem for to eat and drink the Lord’s Supper in an unworthy manner is to eat and drink damnation to yourself (1 Cor. 11:29).

- The good news is that when you search for God with all your heart you will find Him (Jer. 29:13).

PREACHING TO THE SPIRITS

- Many years ago I heard of an evangelist who was preaching to large crowds in India. Unbeknownst to him, his interpreter was offering money to anyone who would come forward, confess Christ, and be baptized.
- While I do not know if this story is true, it illustrates the possibility that preaching can be aimed at the flesh and not the spirit.
- Jesus preached to the spirits and so should we!
- The motives of the preacher, however, do not cancel the power of God's Word. In Rome, for example, some insincerely preached the Gospel supposing to add affliction to Paul. As long as the true Gospel was preached, however, it didn't matter. Good seed will grow regardless of the insincerity of the person who plants it (Phil. 1:15 - 18).
- In this regard it is important to remember that only God can make a seed that will grow. Artificial seeds may look, smell, and taste like the real thing, but when you plant them they will not grow. Only God can make a seed with life in it.
- It goes without saying, therefore, that a manmade message cannot produce life or minister to the spirit. That's why we must use the **"Sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God"**(Eph. 6:17). The "Sword of the Spirit" has a double meaning. The Word of God not only comes from the Spirit, it is also specifically designed to minister to the spirit.
- As we have already said: **"The Word of God is quick and powerful, and sharper than any two edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart"** (Heb. 4:12)
- Paul, however, warned of those who "corrupt" the Word of God (2 Cor. 2:17). The Greek word translated as "corrupt" is "kapeleuo" which refers to a petty retailer or huckster. A different word (doloo) is used in 2 Cor. 4:2 describing those who handle the Word of God deceitfully. It should be obvious that those who "corrupt" the Word of God and handle it "deceitfully" are not preaching to the spirits.
- The Bible tells us that some preachers subverted whole houses teaching things they ought not for filthy lucre's sake (Tit. 1:11). Other false teachers bring in damnable heresies even denying the Lord that bought them (2 Pet. 2:1). These carnal preachers have forsaken the right way and are gone astray, following the way of Balaam, the son of Bosor, who loved the wages of unrighteousness (2 Pet. 2:15).
- JESUS PREACHED TO THE SPIRITS! He never appealed to the flesh. Jesus said: **"If any man will come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily, and follow me"** (Lk. 9:23). As if this were not clear enough Jesus also said: **"So likewise, whosoever he be of you that forsaketh not all that he hath, he cannot be my disciple"** (Lk. 14:33).
- Man is more than a mere animal. Preachers who realize this obviously have a spiritual approach to preaching. Man does not add anybody to the church, only God can do that. Consequently our exhortations should never come from deceit, uncleanness, or guile (1

Thess. 2:3).

CONCLUSION

Fortunately, most preachers are not evil or malicious. Most do not handle the Word of God deceitfully, or preach like Balaam for dishonest gain. Yet there is still the ever present temptation to compromise principle and preach to the flesh. This temptation is particularly strong in churches with a clergy system. Sometimes a pastor's job is in jeopardy if the church is not growing. With bills to pay and a family to support, new members provide a certain measure of job security for a paid pastor. Therefore, in the process of recruiting new members, some have lowered the bar and secured "decisions" while discreetly omitting teaching about repentance, self denial, and taking up a cross. Building on the sand, as you know, is only a temporary fix. When the storms come those who have not compromised will be glad they faithfully obeyed Christ and built their house upon a rock (Matt. 7:24 - 27).

Remember! Jesus preached to the spirits and so should we!

The book of Revelation contains seven letters to the seven churches of Asia. Only two of these churches were without rebuke. They were the church in Smyrna, and the church in Philadelphia. Neither of these churches seemed so have crowds so large that other congregations wanted to know how they did it. It was the dead church at Sardis which had the reputation of being alive (3:1). It was the lukewarm church at Laodicea that had the reputation of being rich, increased with goods, and in need of nothing (3:17). The church at Smyrna, by comparison, was in affliction and poverty (2:9), and the church at Philadelphia only had a little strength(3:8). On Judgement Day, however, those who have faithfully built upon the Rock will hear the words "well done".

As we have already said, man is a three fold being with a body, a soul, and a spirit. Jesus preached to the spirits, and so should we!

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