

## GOD'S INTENTIONS -- THEIR IRREDUCIBLE MINIMUM

by Bob Moffitt

Jesus' words in Matthew 7:13-23 are arresting. If you haven't read this passage recently, I ask you to read the entire section now. Jesus concludes it by saying:

Many will say to Me on that day, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophecy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?" And then I will declare to them, "I never knew you. Depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness." (ASV)

This passage should give us cause for serious self-examination. Why? Those whom Jesus talks about in this passage prophesied, cast out demons, and performed *many* miracles. Not only did they do these supernatural works, but they did them in Jesus' name. If a person came into our community or church ministering with such visible power, we would be impressed! We would view that person as very much attuned to heaven, a model of spirituality to which we would aspire. Yet, the people Jesus referred to would apparently be shocked to learn that He didn't know them.

What about *us*? Is there a possibility that we, too, have missed the crux of what Jesus teaches? Is it possible that we, too, have been doing what we do in Jesus' name, but He doesn't "know" us? From Jesus' account, the risk is real. Jesus says that the "right" gate is narrow, and only a "few" find it. "Many," He implies, assume they are ministering in His name—as His representatives—yet they are not even known by Him.

As we read this passage, our hearts should cry out, "Lord, show me what it is to know you—don't let me make this mistake! Lord, this is so crucial, not just to the meaning of my life and ministry, but to my ultimate destiny. Little can be of more importance!"

The key questions we need to know seem to be the following: What is the "Father's will" (Matthew 7:21 )? What is "lawlessness" (Matthew 7:23 )? What is the "good fruit" and the "bad fruit" (Matthew 7: 17 ) by which we can know the difference between true and false prophets, by which we can see the kind of prophet *we* are? The Father's will and good fruit seem related, as do those who practice lawlessness and bad fruit. If so, then it is crucial to understand the Father's will and lawlessness.

Immediately above the passage we examined, Matthew 7:12 says, "*Therefore whatever you want others to do for you, do so for them; for this is the Law and the Prophets.*" Interesting . . . the "Golden Rule" . . . described as the summary of God's Law! Isn't it the Father's will for us to obey His Law? Then it seems that the opposite would be disobeying the Father's will—not treating others as we want to be treated—lawlessness!

Can it be that simple? Can it be that the Father's will, good fruit, and the Law are as straightforward as the "Golden Rule?" As simple as treating others as I want to be treated? Do we really find our way through the narrow gate, do we bear good fruit, do we become known by Jesus simply by obeying the "Golden Rule?"

As we think about this, our knowledge of Scripture cautions us. The apostle Paul taught that "we are saved by grace, not by works." True! Yet, there are implications of Jesus' words. If all of these—our salvation, being known by Jesus,

and doing a ministry He recognizes—do not depend on loving my neighbor, they are nevertheless directly related to doing the will of the Father and obeying His Law. This Law was summarized in Matthew 7 as treating others as we want to be treated.

Let's look further at the relationship between the Law and loving our neighbor.

There are six New Testament passages where the Law and Prophets are summarized. Three of them refer to the summary in two commandments: to love God and to love our neighbor. In three other passages, the two summary commands of the Law are further summarized as one—surprisingly, as a command to love our *neighbor*.

<u>Love God and Neighbor</u>	<u>Love Neighbor</u>
· Matthew 22:36-40	· Matthew 7:12
· Mark 12:28-31, 33	· Romans 13:9
· Luke 10:27	· Galatians 5:14

Five other New Testament passages refer indirectly to these summary commands. Only one refers to both God *and* neighbor (I John 3:23 ). The other four refer only to loving our neighbor: (1) The "Golden Rule," (Luke 6:31 ) concerns doing to others as we want done to us. (2) The "Royal Law" (James 2:8) is about loving our neighbor as ourselves. (3) The "Law of Christ" (John 15:12 ,17 and Galatians 6:2) refers to loving one another.

Jesus says in Mark 12:29 that the "greatest commandment" is to "Love the Lord your God with all your heart . . ." It is clear from this and other passages that loving God is the first order of importance. Then, why does the Bible summarize the Law as loving our *neighbor*?

In the Law's summary command to love our neighbor, I believe that God has given us the Law's *irreducible minimum*. Is it because God understands that we, like the lawyer who questioned Jesus in Luke 10, tend to think we fulfill the Law as long as we just love God? Is it because God understands that we tend to think that, if we focus on loving Him, everything else will work out—including loving our neighbor? I believe the conclusion is clear: God wants to let us know that we can't really love Him without loving our neighbor.

In the absolute, eternal scale, loving God is the "greatest" commandment. Jesus told us this truth. But, here is a critical clarifier:

**God wants to remind us that loving our neighbor is the essential, principal, and practical way that we demonstrate our love for Him. This is the irreducible minimum of God's Law, of His intentions.**

That is precisely the point of Isaiah 58, James 2, and I John 3:11-24.

Yes, Lord, we believe that "doing the will of Your Father," "producing good fruit," and "being known" by You is much more closely related to "loving our neighbor as ourselves" than we exhibit in our lives. Savior, help us! Help us, please, to

understand how we should live Your intentions. Help us, please, to love and treat others as we want to be loved and treated. Amen.

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