

## Applied Theology

The Lord never intended mankind's knowledge of Him to be useless, or redundant. Instead of being theoretical data, all understanding of God is to be for the purpose of glorifying Him, which is why humans were created in the image of God (Gen 1:27).

As the name suggests, '*Applied Theology*' looks for real ways of applying God's truths into believer's lives. It is more than obeying rules and traditions, it seeks to replicate the character of God into the lives of those reborn into Christ (1Jn 2:29).

In this lesson we shall consider a little of what needs to happen to transition a Bible student from knowledge to Christlike character. Knowing something changes nothing until the person with the knowledge decides to act upon that knowledge. This involves recognising two spiritual realities which must work together. The first is the holy and immutable character of our Saviour God. The second is the fleshly and changeable character of redeemed sinners.

The apostle Paul struggled with these realities just as all believers do. Romans 7:15 explains the struggle well, "*for I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.*" Simply knowing truth and having good desires does not guarantee that we will do right behaviour. Sadly, many believers have fallen into

serious sin because of their lack of understanding of the relationship between knowledge and behaviour.

All study of theology should begin with careful study of God's Word. This should lead the Christian towards a loving desire for glorying God as *"we make it our aim to please him"* (2 Corinthians 5:9). Knowing God is the primary reason for Bible Study, so that we can bring God glory and pleasure through both our knowledge and our living, beginning with salvation. This is all part of our life-long walk of Holy Spirit sanctification which aims for holiness (1Co 10:31; 2Co 3:18; 1Pe 4:11). A Christlike mind should lead to Christlike behaviour, and it is this inner relationship which we shall think upon in this lesson.

Jesus gave an alarming warning found in Matthew 7:22-23 concerning the coming day of judgement. *"On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?'"*<sup>23</sup> *And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'" Somewhere in the thinking of these false believers, there existed disbelief. Somehow these people thought belief in Jesus meant doing super spiritual works for Jesus while their hearts remained self-righteous and separated from Jesus. Sadly, this is an easy trap for sinners to fall into. External works can never save a sinner. Works alone are terribly deceptive.*

In Mark chapter 9, we read about the father of a boy with an unclean spirit. The father made a clear confession of two active types of belief within himself. This desperate father comes to Jesus with his son and says, *“if you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us”* (Mark 9:22). Jesus immediately challenges the man’s statement of *“if you can,”* by informing this poor father that with Jesus *“all things are possible for one who believes”* (Mark 9:23). Now, this weak but courageous father makes an amazing statement followed immediately by an equally amazing request of Jesus, *“I believe; help my unbelief!”* (Mark 9:24).

His belief told him of all that Jesus *‘may be able to do.’* But this was not a convincing belief that should have said, *‘Jesus will do.’* The wonderful thing in this story, is that this father recognised the limitation of his little belief, and the danger of his unbelief. Plus, he realised that only Jesus could help him with his unbelief, so he chooses to ask Jesus to help him with his confessed unbelief.

Similarly, it is possible, for both belief and unbelief to exist side by side within the human heart of Christians. The challenge for us is to invite the Lord Jesus Christ to make the connection between our belief and any unbelief. This is a spiritual work that only God can do, but we are involved in the process as the Holy Spirit does His inner work.

It begins by recognising when unbelief exists within our hearts. For the Christian, unbelief can manifest in many ways, possibly through our unwillingness to forgive others, to forget their offenses, to pray for and do good to our enemies (Mt 5:44; Lk 6:27). Maybe it's our unwillingness to accept difficult circumstances that the Lord had brought into our lives. We may refuse to follow James' instruction, *"count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, <sup>3</sup> for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness"* (James 1:2-3).

Maybe we are unwilling to invite the Lord to examine our doctrine and make changes according to His will and His Word. It could be that unbelief shows itself by our unwillingness to remove a favourite sin which lives comfortably in our thought life and our behaviour. Secret and protected sin is a major area of unbelief that can exist within the heart. All these must be confessed as sinful unbelief, then surrendered to the lordship of Jesus for change.

It is at this point that the difficult work of sanctification really begins as the Holy Spirit opens our hearts for ongoing purification and maturing towards spiritual adulthood.

Paul details some of the more obvious areas of heart and behaviour unbelief which must be put to death. He explains in Colossians 3:5-10, *"put to death therefore what is earthly*

*in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry.* <sup>6</sup> *On account of these the wrath of God is coming.* <sup>7</sup> *In these you too once walked, when you were living in them.* <sup>8</sup> *But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth.* <sup>9</sup> *Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices* <sup>10</sup> *and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator.”* Genuine belief in Jesus looks at the unbelief parts of our lives and says, ‘*you must be dead and gone from my life.*’ Belief brings the areas of unbelief close so that belief can dominate by putting to death the areas of sin and be victorious over unbelief.

Unbelief will always resist this work of belief. Unbelief will always try to justify its existence because unbelief will always lead to a greater comfort with sin in both heart and behaviour.

Therefore, it is extremely important for the child of God to be committed to “*applied theology.*” Genuine belief must overrule and master unbelief. Belief in truth must transition into humble and growing righteous thoughts and behaviour.

There are many challenges for genuine Christian faith. The worldly attacks from others may be many, and sometimes vicious. The weaknesses within are also many, requiring the

Lord's constant grace to be at work. Therefore, we must *"be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might."*<sup>11</sup> *Put on the whole armour of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil"* (Ephesians 6:10-11). The believer strengthens their belief by putting on the spiritual armour that God provides. This involves understanding the nature of Christian life from salvation through to life in heaven.

Salvation is wholly of God *"who saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began"* (2 Timothy 1:9). God enabled our belief in the gospel (Eph 1:13) by gifting us with the necessary faith (Eph 2:8-9) for us to place in Christ. But from the time of salvation onwards, we are to be engaged with God in growing more and more to be *"his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them"* (Ephesians 2:10).

Just as there needs to be a genuine connection between our God given salvation and our living, so there also needs to be an equal connection between our theology and our Christian behaviour. **What we truly think of God will show in our behaviour.** If our thoughts and behaviour are ungodly, this tells us that we are disconnected from our knowledge of God, and we need help. Confession of this sin followed

by repentance should drive the Christian back to God's Word with humble prayer seeking correction.

Therefore, a solid foundation of the doctrines of God are essential. A believer who knows God should instinctively know the godly character which the Holy Spirit desires to manifest in them. The knowledge of God also educates the believer's conscience so that they are aware of inner and outer violations of God's character.

A disconnection between what is known of God and the behaviour of a person can be both subtle and extreme at the same time. You see, knowledge without humble repentance will always breed self-righteousness. Once a person learns how to grow intellectual knowledge of God while silencing their conscience, they can deceive themselves. Paul warned Timothy of such people, they are *"always learning and never able to arrive at a knowledge of the truth"* (2 Timothy 3:7). Their knowledge never reaches the destination of truth manifested in righteous behaviour, which is the intention of God's Word and the intention of the gospel and salvation.

The apostle John speaks to this matter in 1 John 3:6-10; *"No one who abides in him keeps on sinning; no one who keeps on sinning has either seen him or known him."*<sup>7</sup> *Little children, let no one deceive you. Whoever practices righteousness is righteous, as he is righteous.*<sup>8</sup> *Whoever*

*makes a practice of sinning is of the devil, for the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil. <sup>9</sup> No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God's seed abides in him; and he cannot keep on sinning, because he has been born of God. <sup>10</sup> By this it is evident who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is the one who does not love his brother."*

Solomon gives a stern warning in Proverbs 26:23-25, *"like the glaze covering an earthen vessel are fervent lips with an evil heart. <sup>24</sup> Whoever hates disguises himself with his lips and harbours deceit in his heart; <sup>25</sup> when he speaks graciously, believe him not, for there are seven abominations in his heart."* As we disciple others to follow Jesus, we must always aim for their hearts. Aim for that place of greatest spiritual weakness and deceit (Jer 17:9). Aim for that place of inner control over the entire person.

Sins of the heart are deadly because they deceive the sinner into thinking that if their outer behaviour is good by this world's standard, they are safe – **WRONG!** Sins of the heart will say that if you have good traditional doctrines, you are safe – **WRONG!** Sins of the heart looks good on Sunday, sounds good in prayer meetings, and smiles as the heart sins manifest in wicked behaviour.

It is the disciples responsibility to teach God's Word in such a way as to make the heart connection between correct belief and correct behaviour.

Knowledge of God's truth will change nothing until a believer moves that knowledge into action. This requires choices of faith to be made. These faith choices demand a sacrifice of old and sinful pleasures. Old and weak ways of thinking that fail to produce righteous living must be challenged. It is through this inner process that the genuine believer discovers that they are able to *destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ* (2 Corinthians 10:5). Thoughts made captive to Christ must get converted into right attitudes, right desires, right motives, right choices, and right actions. Biblically correct thoughts still require action by our volition, which is our God given choice maker. To be victorious over sin, over unbelief, and over spiritual weakness, our volition must prioritise God over all thoughts and all appetites and desires. This is the responsibility of every believer in Jesus.

The believer who experiences the transforming power of God is the believer who chooses to direct their knowledge of God in correct beliefs of God and then into Christlike behaviour.

We shall give the apostle Paul the final say. *“I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.”*<sup>2</sup> *Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect”* (Romans 12:1-2).

As believers, we examine ourselves to ensure that our behaviour matches our theology. In this way, the study of theology is the most practical study any believer can be involved in. It is our responsibility to humbly bring together our knowledge of God and our behaviour for God. Then, we go and assist others to do the same (Mat 28:19-20).