

Knowledge vs Conversion

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Brethren, as firstfruits of God's family, one of the responsibilities that we have in our Christian walk is to study God's word, to be very familiar with the content of this book and to be knowledgeable of it because the job that we're in training to do—if we are, hopefully, successful in our Christian walk and make it into His kingdom as one of His firstfruits—the job that we will be performing is teaching the content of this book, God's word, to the rest of mankind. And to successfully do that job, we obviously have to be familiar with this book and to be knowledgeable of it. So, one of the responsibilities we have as Christians is studying this word, getting into it regularly, and becoming very familiar with it.

As human beings—I oftentimes like to describe the human condition with a phrase that a friend of mine that I used to go to Ambassador College used to love to jokingly say. She would put it like this, "I only see the middle of the road as I jump from one ditch to the other." Oftentimes as human beings, that describes how we are. We oftentimes wind up in either one ditch or the other.

One of the ditches that we can wind up falling into in this subject is the misperception that our knowledge of God's word in and of and by itself can sustain us. In other words thinking, "Because I understand God's truth and I understand the plan of salvation," that that's enough. What we're going to do today is look at this particular subject. If you would like a title for this sermon, it's

Knowledge vs Conversion

The reason I say that is it's certainly possible for us to understand God's truth and have the knowledge of what the Bible says, but to not take that knowledge into a deeper level to where it really changes who we are and converts our hearts, our minds, our way of life. If we fall into that trap, we think that just our knowledge, our technical understanding of the Bible, will sustain us. If we do that long enough, what will eventually happen is, over time, we will lose that knowledge. It will fade away or it will become twisted or perverted. In other words, we'll get into crazy ideas or off into the weeds and twigs of different doctrinal ideas because that's what happens if we're not taking that knowledge to a deeper level and converting our hearts. So, again, we're going to look at this subject today of knowledge verses conversion.

To start off with, what we're going to do is take some time to look at a particular parable in the Bible that makes this lesson clear to us. If you will, turn with me over to Matthew 25 and we'll start off looking at the Parable of the Ten Virgins. It's Matthew 25 and if you have a ribbon in your Bible, I'd suggest you probably put it there because we'll turn back a forth quite a bit here but we're going to come, at least in the first half of the sermon, a lot to Matthew 25.

What we're going to do first of all is just read through this parable and get a good overview of what it's saying. Then, we're going to look at it like a jigsaw puzzle. We're going to let the Bible interpret each of the different symbols in this parable so that we can then put together the lesson of what this is really teaching us. I have to say in my experience in the Church of God—and I've been attending church since I was born. My parents were baptized a year or two before I was born. So, I've attended the Church of God my entire life. I have to say oftentimes when I hear this particular parable taught, the lessons that are emphasized here are preparing for the long haul, enduring to the end and things of that nature—which are valuable lessons—but they don't really get at what this parable is trying to tell us because if we understand the symbols of what this parable is talking about, there is a much deeper lesson that ties in with what we talked about in the introduction here.

In Matthew 25:1, we'll just read through this and get an overview.

Matthew 25:1. *"Then the kingdom of heaven shall be likened to ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom.*

2) Now five of them were wise, and five were foolish.

3) Those who were foolish took their lamps and took no oil with them,

4) but the wise took oil in their vessels with their lamps.

5) But while the bridegroom was delayed, they all slumbered and slept.

6) "And at midnight a cry was heard: 'Behold, the bridegroom is coming; go out to meet him!'

7) Then all those virgins arose and trimmed their lamps.

8) And the foolish said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.'

9) But the wise answered, saying, 'No, lest there should not be enough for us and you; but go rather to those who sell, and buy for yourselves.'

10) And while they went to buy, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the wedding; and the door was shut.

11) "Afterward the other virgins came also, saying, 'Lord, Lord, open to us!'

12) But he answered and said, 'Assuredly, I say to you, I do not know you.'

13) "Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour in which the Son of Man is coming. (NKJV)

Notice in the picture we have here, that these ten virgins who are on the journey to meet the bridegroom. We're told that half of them are wise and half of them are foolish. And the distinguishing factor between them is this oil in the vessel. It says that the wise had oil in their vessel but the foolish didn't take that with them. Oftentimes when this parable is taught, it's approached from the standpoint of having an extra gas can. It's like we might do in our lives today where you stock some extra supplies because you might run out so you want to have some extra as a backup. It's thought of in terms of that type of idea. In other words, preparing for the long haul, enduring to the end, which again are valuable lessons, but as we're going to see when we take this particular

parable apart, there is a deeper lesson of what this parable is really telling us than just preparing for the long haul.

First of all, let's look at this like a jigsaw puzzle and let the Bible itself interpret every one of the symbols that are talked about here. When we let the Bible give us its own meaning, then we can put it altogether and get the picture of what it's talking about. We start off here, again, with a picture of ten virgins on this journey. So what does the Bible mean when it refers to virgins? Let's let it interpret that itself and what this symbol means. Turn over first of all to 2 Corinthians 11 and we'll let the Bible itself interpret how it uses that term. Now this is the apostle Paul writing a letter to the church at Corinth, but notice what he says to them here in verse 2.

2 Corinthians 11:2. *For I am jealous for you with godly jealousy. For I have betrothed you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ. (NKJV)*

Notice, he's writing to the Church of God here and he's referring to them as "virgins" being presented to Christ. In other words, that is, to the bridegroom they're going to marry. Again, if we follow this concept we get an idea of what this parable is talking about. The virgins we're referring to here are church members. This is the Church of God that's being referred to here. And the bridegroom that they're on a journey to be able to marry is Jesus Christ. That's what happens at the marriage supper when the Bride of Christ, the church marries Him. That's basically the analogy that's being played out here in this particular parable.

Now that we understand who this is and who is being addressed and pictured here, now let's understand the different symbols that are talked about here so we can put together the lesson of what this parable is saying. It tells us that all of the virgins had a lamp with them and they were using this lamp to guide their way on their journey. What is this "lamp?" Again, let's let the Bible interpret that. Turn over to Psalm 119 and verse 105.

Psalm 119:105. *Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path. (NKJV)*

It's referring here to the word of God, essentially to this book—the Bible. It's saying that this is basically what the lamp is; that this guides our path because if you think about it, the virgins being referred to here are the Church of God; they're on a journey to ultimately be married to the bridegroom who is Jesus Christ. But what is it that guides us in our Christian walk and how to live our lives? It's the word of God. That contains the instructions we want to follow that lights our path. That's basically what this is saying.

Notice here also that all the virgins didn't just have a lamp. They all had oil in them. We talked about the difference. We're going to get into here what the vessels refer to and what that's about, but we know all of them had oil in their lamps because they're burning. You notice later in the parable that even the foolish said, "Our lamps are going out." For them to be going out means they were burning in the first place. They had to

be to be going out. That means they had to have fuel in them and that's the oil we're referring to which is basically fueling these lamps.

If we follow the analogy here, if the word of God is the lamp and that's the light that they're using, what is the fuel that enables this lamp to give us light to be able to see our path? You see that's God's spirit. Turn with me over to John 16 and again we'll interpret this directly out of the Bible, John 16:13.

John 16:13. *However, when He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth; for He will not speak on His own authority, but whatever He hears He will speak; and He will tell you things to come. (NKJV)*

This is Christ at the end of His life explaining to the apostles that the holy spirit would be given to them later on Pentecost. He's helping them understand what the holy spirit is going to do for them. It's referred to as the spirit of truth. It guides you into all truth. In other words, it guides you into understanding the content of this book because, otherwise, it's just words on a page and it doesn't make sense. You have to have God's spirit to be able to make sense of it.

To follow this again, turn over to 1 Corinthians 2. We'll see this same concept here that Paul is explaining to Corinth, 1 Corinthians 2:6.

1 Corinthians 2:6. *However, we speak wisdom among those who are mature, yet not the wisdom of this age, nor of the rulers of this age, who are coming to nothing.*

7) But we speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, the hidden wisdom which God ordained before the ages for our glory,

8) which none of the rulers of this age knew; for had they known, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.

9) But as it is written: "Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man the things which God has prepared for those who love Him."

10) But God has revealed them to us through His Spirit. (NKJV)

In other words, this is what enables us to understand.

10b) ... For the Spirit searches all things, yes, the deep things of God.

11) For what man knows the things of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him? Even so no one knows the things of God except the Spirit of God. (NKJV)

So, Paul is saying that without the spirit of God we can't understand what this book is saying. It's basically just words on a page. It's not something that's going to light our path.

So, if we understand this—just to recap what we've covered so far—we have ten virgins. That's a picture of the Church of God. They are on a journey to ultimately be married to the bridegroom, which is Jesus Christ. They all have lamps, all ten of them.

They all have God's word. They have this to guide their journey. They're all converted. They've all received God's holy spirit, which is the oil that enables them to understand this. That's what enables it to light up their path and to show them how to live. And all of them have this in common.

Now, let's get to this distinction between them and understand what this is saying. Notice it says that the wise took oil in their vessels in addition to their lamps and the foolish didn't. The foolish didn't take this. As we're going to see here, the distinction is more important than just preparing for the long haul and taking extra supplies because we need to understand what is meant by "the vessel."

Again, let's follow the same philosophy that we've done with all of these symbols and let the Bible itself interpret that. How does the Bible use that term? How does it use the term "vessel" and what kind of meaning does it give it? Turn with me over to 1 Thessalonians chapter 4 and we'll see the Bible interpreting this. We'll start in verse 3.

1 Thessalonians 4:3. *For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you should abstain from sexual immorality;
4) that each of you should know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor,
5) not in passion of lust, like the Gentiles who do not know God; (NKJV)*

Notice he's talking about maintaining your "vessel" in sanctification and honor. He's saying you do that through abstaining from sexual immorality. So, what really are you keeping pure here? Well, a person's body or their life, you might say, because not only are they protecting their body of the consequences of sexual immorality, it's keeping their life pure from the sin associated with that. That's keeping their "vessel in sanctification and honor." You can see the point I'm getting at here is how Paul is using the term "vessel." It's referring to an individual's life.

Now, if you'll turn over to Acts chapter 9, you'll see this word used very similarly at the very beginning of Paul's conversion. We'll start reading in verse 15. Just to summarize the context that leads up to this: As you know, the apostle Paul was previously known as Saul. He was an individual, not only was he not a church member, he was actively involved in persecuting and attacking the church. He's on the road to Damascus. Basically God strikes him down, strikes him blind. God is getting Paul's attention and humbling him.

As Paul's going through dealing with his blindness, God's now got his attention and he's crying out, "Please heal me from this." God instructs Ananias. He says, "I want you to go visit Paul, heal him of this and baptize him because I've got plans for his life. I'm going to use him as a tool." Let's pick up in verse 15 as God's explaining to Ananias.

Acts 9:15. *But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is a chosen vessel of Mine to bear My name before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel.*

16) *For I will show him how many things he must suffer for My name's sake.*"
(NKJV)

So God is basically revealing a plan here that "I'm planning on using Paul as an apostle eventually. And I'm going to send him to the Gentiles. He's going to write a lot of the New Testament. I've got big plans for this guy." Notice the terminology God used in explaining this. He said, "He's a chosen vessel for my purposes." In other words, his life is a "vessel" that I'm going to utilize. So you can see this is a theme throughout the Bible and how the Bible utilizes this term "vessel."

Now, let's turn around and apply this to the parable we just talked about. Again, to kind of put together a jigsaw puzzle as we've done thus far. We have ten virgins. We know that's the Church of God. They're on a journey towards a wedding with the bridegroom. On their way there, they all have lamps to guide their path. They all have the Bible; they have the word of God. And they have oil in those lamps, obviously, because they're burning. That's what enables the lamps to give them light and show them how they should go.

The distinction we have here is that the wise have oil in their vessels whereas the foolish just have in their lamps. Again we're referring to a lot more here than just the idea of having extra supplies. Notice here if we look at the vessel as a person's life, in other words they're exercising the holy spirit in their lives. Not just in their knowledge.

If you think about it, what is one of the first things that we do as we come into the truth? We start understanding what this book actually means. We start understanding you have to keep Saturday, not Sunday. You can't eat unclean meat. You have to keep God's holy days and not the pagan holidays. You start understanding a number of these things but then you have to take action upon that knowledge.

As you grow into conversion, it becomes not just those basic things; it begins changing your entire life if you are, then, taking it and applying it on a day to day basis in how you act, how you treat other people, how you go about living your life. It's the deeper level of conversion. Understanding is just the basic beginning of this process. It's really converting our heart and changing who we are, which is the deeper level of conversion.

So, what it's getting at here is the wise were those who didn't just have the knowledge of this book, they took that oil and applied it to their lives. They were changing their hearts and the way that they lived and becoming converted in their day to day life.

Whereas the foolish, yes, they understood the right doctrines. They knew you keep the holy days. You don't keep Christmas. They understand that the Sabbath is right and not Sunday. They understood what meats to eat and what not to eat and such. That doesn't mean it was changing their hearts or they were actively pursuing this as a way of life in a deeper form in their lives.

That's the big distinction here between who the wise and who the foolish are. As we're going to see over time, what happens is if you don't actively practice this in your life, what happens is you lose that knowledge. That's what takes place.

Now, let's turn back to Matthew 25 and follow the rest of the parable here. Let's pick up now in verse 5 because we've summarized and gone through the first five verses of what this parable is referring to.

Matthew 25:5. *But while the bridegroom was delayed, they all slumbered and slept. (NKJV)*

Notice this is something that happened to all of them. This wasn't just something that just happened to the foolish. They all wound up slumbering and sleeping. We're not talking about physically sleeping here. This is a spiritual analogy Christ is getting at in this parable. He's basically saying that they all got to a point where they were all being lax in their Christian life. They were all being lax in their Christian responsibilities. That's what being spiritually "asleep" means.

6) *"And at midnight a cry was heard: 'Behold, the bridegroom is coming; go out to meet him!'" (NKJV)*

In verse 7, we see their reaction to that.

7) *Then all those virgins arose and trimmed their lamps. (NKJV)*

I think there are a number of lessons we can pull from these particular verses that I'm going to give you. One particular example that struck me when I first began to understand what this parable is really saying.... And I'm not suggesting by any means that's the only interpretation of this because just looking at this from a general perspective, I think all of us in our Christian lives go through times where you could say we kind of fall asleep. We have times where we're very diligent. We're diligent in our study; we're diligent in trying to overcome. And we have times in our lives when we get distracted; we get focused on other things. God kind of gets shoved to the back part of lives and we're not living as diligently as we should. That's being spiritually asleep. And I think we all go through times where that can happen to us.

But just to look back. Again, when I first really started studying this parable (probably about twenty years ago) and digging this out, it was just after the bust up of the Worldwide Church of God. In that context looking back at that, it really struck me. If you look at the time period after the death of Herbert Armstrong and what the church went through over the next decade or so as the apostasy went on, I think you can accurately say that was at least one time period when probably the majority of the church fell asleep to some degree or another. I think for a lot of us things slowly started changing around this and we weren't totally aware of it. We weren't really staying on top of it.

Then enough happened that you kind of get jolted awake and realize “Wow! Look what has happened.” I know for myself, personally, I can look back at how I let myself slip and how I let priorities in my own life and my own understanding start slipping in the wrong direction. It’s really like someone comes up and slaps you in the face or pours some cold water on you. You go, “Whoa! What just happened here?”

What was the reaction that so many of us had when those events took place and all of a sudden we kind of got jolted awake? Didn’t we start suddenly getting our faces into this book a lot more? Start studying and checking up on things—really checking out the things that we’ve been taught? Going back and re-evaluating everything that we thought and had been taught? We got much more diligent in it. Didn’t we? That’s exactly what this is referring to when it’s talking about trimming the lamp.

When I first starting really studying this parable a number of years and when I got to verse 7, I was really scratching my head as to how to apply all of this because it says, “The virgins arose and trimmed their lamps.” I was thinking of this very literally in terms of an actual lamp. If you have an oil burning lamp, there is a wick on it and after it burns for a while it becomes black and used up. So, at times you may trim it and cut off the useless part of the wick to make it burn easier. I was trying to apply that analogy to God’s word and going “What part of this would you cut off and pitch aside?” That analogy just doesn’t really fit when you try to apply this to God’s word.

Then, I looked at what is the Greek word actually saying here that is translated as “trimmed.” The meaning of that gave me more insight of what this is actually saying. The Greek word here translated as “trimmed” is transliterated into English as “kosmeo” (kos-meh'-o). It’s Strong’s # 2885, and according to Strong’s Concordance, it means *to put in proper order*.

Now if you think of it in that context, while you certainly wouldn’t cut off part of God’s word and say this is the useless part and throw it away, you would put it into proper order. If you think of it in that context, it can give us some insight into what this is actually saying. Just to illustrate how we can do that, turn over to Isaiah 28:9.

Isaiah 28:9. *"Whom will he teach knowledge? And whom will he make to understand the message? Those just weaned from milk? Those just drawn from the breasts?*

10) For precept must be upon precept, precept upon precept, Line upon line, line upon line, Here a little, there a little." (NKJV)

What this is getting at is the concept that we’ve oftentimes referred to in the Church of God is the Bible being like a jigsaw puzzle. In other words, if you have ever built one of the 1,000 piece jigsaw puzzles. When you pour them all out, you have all these pieces here but you have to figure out what order to put them in to get the right picture. You’re looking at the picture on the box and trying to match that up. It takes a lot to put those together to get the right picture because if you put them together in the wrong order, you just have confusion.

The Bible can be very similar. Basically it breaks up into a number of teachings all throughout the book and if you don't put the pieces together properly, you can come up with some really off-the-wall doctrinal ideas. If you just look for example in today's professing Christian world (like Protestants or Catholics), what do you typically hear? God's law has been done away with. You hear you don't have to keep any of these things that the Bible says. Well, what do they do? They go straight into the writings of the apostle Paul and then they interpret everything else in light of the understanding they have of Paul. What do they come up with? They have the pieces all in the wrong order and they come up with completely different doctrinal ideas.

If you put the pieces in the right order, if you focus more on your foundational, easy to understand, straightforward scriptures and you interpret your difficult ones by the straightforward ones, you come up with a much better understanding. If you put the pieces together in proper order, that's when you come up with correct doctrine. And that's what it's getting at—this idea of placing it all in proper order.

To reinforce this idea, turn over to 2 Timothy 2:15.

2 Timothy 2:15. *Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth. (NKJV)*

Again, we're getting at this same idea of rightly dividing the word, in other words, correctly putting the pieces together to come up with the right understanding. Basically what this is saying is this is what it means to trim the lamp. Oftentimes when we find ourselves getting lax in studying God's word and just in our own lives, and something comes along and kind of wakes us up—a life event or something that kind of slaps you up the side of the head—what do we tend to do? “Well, I'm going to get more diligent. I'm going to start studying more and try to get involved in this.” I think we've all been through times of that individually. I think even through the events we've been through in the last few decades we probably all collectively at times have been through similar experiences like this.

Notice it said all of the virgins arose and all of them did this. All of them trimmed their lamps. All of them got more diligent in trying to put this together. But let's notice what happened over time. Turn back over to Matthew 25 and we'll pick up the rest of the story here in verse 8.

Matthew 25:8. *And the foolish said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.'* (NKJV)

Notice what's happening: They're losing their oil and they're losing the light that coming from the lamps. They're saying, “our lamps are going out” and they're realizing there is a problem. Let's notice what takes place here—how they respond to that.

9) *But the wise answered, saying, 'No, lest there should not be enough for us and you; but go rather to those who sell, and buy for yourselves.'*

10) *And while they went to buy, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the wedding; and the door was shut.*

11) *"Afterward the other virgins came also, saying, 'Lord, Lord, open to us!'"*

12) *But he answered and said, 'Assuredly, I say to you, I do not know you.'*

13) *"Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour in which the Son of Man is coming. (NKJV)"*

There are several lessons that we can learn from the latter part of this parable of how this played out. First of all notice and remember our fundamental difference between the wise and the foolish. They are all converted. They all are church members. They all have God's word. They all have His spirit. But the wise are the ones who are daily trying to live this in their own lives and practice it to where it becomes a deeper level of conversion and not just "head knowledge." It's not just basic doctrines they understand.

What happened over time though is because the foolish weren't doing this at a deeper level, what happened to that knowledge? It began to fade. They got to the point where it's starting to fade and it got perverted and corrupted and they're losing it. How did they respond to that? The way of responding to that is they thought they could fix that problem through other people. Notice that they turn around and go to the wise and say, "Give us some of your oil." The wise tell them, "It doesn't work that way. You can't get it from other human beings. You have to go back to the source. You got the oil from God. You have to go back and build a relationship with Him."

Let's apply that to our world today. How often in our church culture today do you hear people saying you have to be with this group because as long as you're in this organization or you're following this particular leader, that makes you right." Follow their logic. They think they are going to get their oil from other human beings, who they are around, from whom they associate with. They think, "As long as I'm hanging around with the wise, that's going to rub off on me and that's going to make me right." No, it doesn't. That's not how it works. You have to have a relationship with the source because that's basically what is going to sustain you. It's not being around other individuals

As one individual, who is a friend of mine I've known in the church for many, many years, several years ago literally and sincerely said this to me, looked me right in the eye and said, "You know if you are following this particular leader (and he named a particular minister) and what he has to say, you have a leg up on the place of safety and a leg up on the Kingdom of God." That's a direct quote. He literally thought "Hey, as long as I'm following the wise, another human being, that's going to sustain me. That's going to make me right with God."

No, it will not because you have to have that relationship with the source. That's what the wise were telling the foolish here. "We can't give you some of our oil. It doesn't work that way. You have to go back to the source and have that relationship with Him.

That's who you're going to get your oil from. That's what's going to sustain you." Again, that's one of the pitfalls we can fall into with this idea because we can never depend upon "as long as I understand this" or "as long as I'm sitting in this group" or "I'm following that leader," it's all going to be okay. No, it's not. You have to be applying this in your own life and in your own day-to-day priorities in your relationship with God. That's what sustains you in the long term.

You have to realize it's a tremendous pitfall to get into the idea of thinking "I understand the truth and that makes me right with God." Understanding the truth is great, but in and of itself, that won't sustain you because, as we saw here, what happens is you wind up losing that knowledge. And it won't be necessarily forgetting a knowledge of everything. You may oftentimes get into crazy doctrinal ideas or get off in the weeds, conspiracy theories, or other crazy ideas, because that knowledge becomes perverted. It hasn't been totally lost. That's why you always want to get back to who is living it.

To reinforce our initial point here, it's always important for us to realize that the foundation of having a good understanding of God's word always comes down to the concept of living it. It's practicing it day to day in your own life. Turn over to Psalms 111:10. We're going to see a couple other scriptures in the Bible that reinforce this particular point.

Psalms 111:10. *The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; a good understanding have all those who do His commandments. His praise endures forever. (NKJV)*

Notice the foundation of a good understanding is how you live. It's how you practice that. Absolutely, we need to be studying this word. We need to be spending time with this, getting familiar with it. But again, there's a great pitfall if our studying becomes just the pursuit of technical knowledge and understanding every technical subject rather than being about changing our heart and how we live and how we treat other people, our relationship with God and our relationship with our fellowman. If we're not changing that part, we're not really utilizing what this is about and getting down to basic conversion. And, again, we always have to remember if we're skipping that part, not only will that knowledge not sustain you, you will ultimately lose that knowledge. It will slip and vanish away from you. That's what will eventually happen.

Turn to Proverbs 11:2 and we'll again see this same point emphasized here.

Proverbs 11:2. *When pride comes, then comes shame; but with the humble is wisdom. (NKJV)*

Where is wisdom and good understanding? That always comes back to who is humble and is actively trying to pursue this at a deeper level. Not just an understanding of all the technicalities of various subjects, but changing their lives and their hearts, how they live their lives, how they treat their fellowman and deepening their relationship with God. That always gets down to the heart of what conversion really is.

Now let's talk about a basic diagnostic tool that we can utilize in assessing ourselves and in assessing, you might say, environments around us of who we choose to hang out with, who we choose to meld our lives with. It's a very basic biblical principle, but to illustrate I'd like to share with you a story of a friend of mine.

We're going to call my friend today "Susan." That's not her real name but just to protect her identity. Susan was quite a bit older than me. She's actually deceased now but I had known her for a few years in the church. Susan was somebody, I would say, probably in her life about the most formal education she had in her life was about a sixth grade education. She was sharing with me one time after the whole breakup of Worldwide her experience of how she came to assess if something was really wrong and how she came to see all of this. She put it to me like this and I'll try to recreate her words as best I can.

She looked at me one day and she said, "James, you know when they started coming out with all these new teachings and new doctrines, I didn't understand them. It didn't really make a lot of sense to me. A lot of the old teachings—those made sense to me but this new stuff? I just really couldn't wrap my head around it and it didn't make a lot of sense to me. I just assumed I don't have a lot of education and I'm not the smartest person in the world so maybe it's just me. Maybe if I just be patient and follow along, this will eventually make sense to me." She said, "As the years went by, more and more of these types of ideas came out and they didn't make sense to me either." Then she said, "I would read through this and go 'It doesn't really make sense to me. The old way made better sense to me.'"

But one day she said she started making an observation. And I think there was great wisdom in what she observed here.

She said, "I started paying attention to what was going on in my local congregation. I noticed one day before and after services when people are fellowshiping, nobody ever wants to talk about the Bible anymore." She said, "I started noticing it wasn't just a one-time thing. It was kind of an on-going trend that it just really wasn't a part of people's discussion anymore. Nobody really wanted to talk about what they were studying or just their own Christian walk and what they were trying to overcome and the struggles they had. It just all became social and just talking about people's lives."

Not that there is anything inherently wrong with sharing each other's lives, but she was getting at that she noticed that there was an absence of the spiritual side of things.

She said she started paying attention to this and going, "Wait a minute. This is church. If no one ever wants to talk about the Bible here, where do they talk about it? Do they ever discuss this? And if no one ever wants to talk about it, that suggests to me no one is really trying to follow this or making a habit of studying this book because that would want to come out. They would want to share that. They would want to discuss that with other people."

She said, "Something is terribly wrong here!" She said once she started realizing this, she said, "No, it's not just me. I'm not crazy. Something is kind of wrong here." Then she started asking questions and delving into things more and realized it wasn't just her. And there was a reason why these things didn't make sense to her—they were wrong!

But realizing this particular point is what raised the red flag in her mind. What she was getting at here is a very basic principle that Jesus Christ taught us about how to assess things. Turn with me over to Luke 6:43.

Luke 6:43. *"For a good tree does not bear bad fruit, nor does a bad tree bear good fruit.*

44) For every tree is known by its own fruit. For men do not gather figs from thorns, nor do they gather grapes from a bramble bush.

45) A good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth good; and an evil man out of the evil treasure of his heart brings forth evil. For out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks. (NKJV)

The principle He's getting at here is that you can listen to a person long enough and eventually what is in their heart is going to come out in their discussion and in their conversations and how they interact with others. That was the very principle my friend Susan was realizing. She started realizing, "Wait a minute. If people never want to discuss this, it's not in their minds. It's not in their hearts." It's not a part of their day to day life because if it was they eventually are going to want to share this. They're going to talk about it. It's going to be a part of their focus. Not that they don't discuss other things in their lives and social things as well. As people we certainly do, but if this is completely absent, that means something is wrong.

That's the whole point she was getting at. It's not just a tool that we can utilize in looking at or assessing others or environments that we're in; it's something that we can use with ourselves. How often does God's word come up in our thoughts, in our conversations and what we want to share with other people? Not that we can't have social conversations and share our lives and other things as well. That's just natural. But if we never want to talk about this, what does that say about us? That can oftentimes say that it's not a big priority. It's not something we're spending time studying or thinking about or meditating upon or making a part of our day to day lives.

Because, if it is, it's something we're naturally going to want to talk about. We're going to want to share with other people because it's important to us and it's in our hearts. It's something that we're really focused on. We tend to find time to do the things that are important to us. You can really tell in terms of how a person spends their time and their money what is really important to them because we all have a limited amount of both (time and money) and we prioritize them on what means the most to us and what is the most appealing to us.

So again, we can kind of measure our own spiritual lives in terms of how well are we doing. Yes, we all understand the basic doctrines and the average church member today has been in the church for what? Decades. We've probably understood these things for quite some time or most of our lives. But how much of it is in focus in how we live our day to day lives? We can assess that but, again, not just assessing the conversations of others but paying attention to ourselves. How often do we want to meditate on these things? Do we want to talk about them? Do we want to share things with other people or discuss some of the things we've studied. How oftentimes is that a part of us? If that's missing in our day to day lives, that means there is something missing in our Christian focus and how much we're internalizing this because, if we're internalizing it and it's a part of our hearts, again it's naturally going to want to come out.

To emphasize this point again, turn over to Deuteronomy 6. We'll see that this is a natural extension of loving God and focusing our lives on Him which is going to come out in our daily discussion. Turn to Deuteronomy 6 and we'll look in verse 5.

Deuteronomy 6:5. *You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your [might]. (NKJV)*

Notice, if we are loving God with all of our might, and all of our soul, what naturally extends from this?

- 6) *"And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart.*
- 7) *You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up.*
- 8) *You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes.*
- 9) *You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.*
(NKJV)

So, it's emphasizing the importance to teach this to our children but it's also saying if we're loving God and that's a major focus in our lives, what is naturally going to happen? We're going to want to talk about this. Especially with others who share the same viewpoint, who share the same goals and the same viewpoints, we're going to want to discuss these things and have it be a part of our conversation because it's a part of our heart. We're going to want to share that and focus on it. That's the whole concept of iron sharpening iron in fellowship. We want to share these things with each other and share what we've learned. Everyone can bring their own perspective but it also focuses our minds on what is important and in living this way of life.

If we understand this, we realize it's not just an assessment tool that we can use with ourselves or with others; it's also an assessment tool that God uses in looking at us. Turn with me over to Malachi 3:16.

Malachi 3:16. *Then those who feared the Lord spoke to one another, and the Lord listened and heard them; so a book of remembrance was written before Him for those who fear the Lord and who meditate on His name. (NKJV)*

Notice the picture that is being created here. It says, “Those who fear the Lord,” in other words, God’s called out ones. They’re speaking to one another. But who is paying attention to the conversation? God Himself. He’s paying attention to this and a book of remembrance was written down. In other words, He’s using this as an assessment tool as well because He can tell what’s coming out of our hearts in our conversation. He’s utilizing this Himself basically in evaluating us. So, again, it’s a very important principle, just a basic common sense principle. You can listen to a person long enough and tell what is in their heart. Then not only with other people, but we can tell this in ourselves if we’re paying attention to ourselves.

Again, if we look at this basic principle of getting back to the idea that it’s not just about knowledge; it’s about what we practice in our day to day lives. This is very much a principle that Christ taught us how to assess even our teachers or those who give us knowledge. It’s something I like to refer to as “The Biblical Criteria for Assessment.” It’s basically the concept of “by their fruits, you shall know them.”

Turn with me over to Matthew 7:15.

Matthew 7:15. *"Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves.*

16) You will know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes from thorn bushes or figs from thistles?

17) Even so, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit.

18) A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit.

19) Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

20) Therefore by their fruits you will know them. (NKJV)

Notice what Christ is specifically referring to here is evaluating our teachers. In other words, how do you assess who do you listen to and who do you not? Who do you run from as a wolf? And who do you look to as a teacher to get your understanding from? The concept He is saying is you sort it out by their fruits. Now this is a good general principle outside of the context of what specifically Christ is addressing here. Evaluating fruits is a very good general principle for assessment.

But what does He mean by fruits? I think it’s important to realize that. In our church culture—at least what I’ve experienced a lot of my life—sometimes the subject of “fruits” get a little skewed. People will sometimes hold up and say, “This organization is the right organization.” But how do you know that? “Well, look at the fruits.” And then look at the list they give you. “We have the largest attendance numbers.” Or, “We have this particular TV program or magazine subscription” or various things that they will point to in that regard. Again, those things can be evidence of God’s blessings. I’m not discounting that.

But, again, if you're holding those types of things up solely as fruits, can you show me in the Bible where it ever defines that as fruits? It doesn't. The Bible itself defines for us specifically what it is referring to here as fruits. And, as we're going to see, it always gets down to character traits; it gets down to how people live.

If you'll turn over to Galatians 5, the Bible tells us specifically its own definition of the term "fruits." Galatians 5 and we'll start reading in verse 19.

Galatians 5:19. *Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, [licentiousness], 20) idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, 21) envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like; of which I tell you beforehand, just as I also told you in time past, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. (NKJV)*

Now here we have the bad list. What follows right after this is the positive list of fruits. In other words we have the things that we want to avoid and the things you want to look for. Look at the good list.

22) But the fruit of the Spirit ... (NKJV)

This is how we know this is the list of what the Bible defines as fruit. "You will know them by their fruit"; what fruit are we talking about? This list right here.

22) But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23) gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law. 24) And those who are Christ's have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. 25) If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit. 26) Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another. (NKJV)

What Christ was saying is if you want to know how to sort out the wolves from the good shepherds that you want to follow, what's the biggest thing you want to look for? The fruits of their behavior. Because what He's getting at here is, if you notice the trend in this list, this isn't about corporate size or corporate success or things of that nature. This always gets down to who is living and practicing God's way and who isn't. The core of this list is all about character traits and behaviors. That's what's being described here. He's saying that's the core thing to look at.

Sometimes we can be wowed by an individual's knowledge. In fact, in the conversation I referred to a little bit earlier where a friend of mine said "If you're following this guy, you've got a leg up on everybody," really what he was getting at was "I'm really wowed

and impressed with the technical knowledge of this individual.” And I have to agree with him. The individual we were talking about was a good technical teacher. But, again, you always want to look deeper than that because if we just look at the knowledge issue and we’re not looking deeper at how they’re living, we have to realize that if an individual goes long enough without living it, what’s going to happen with that knowledge? That knowledge is going to become perverted.

Let me give you another example of another individual that shared with me a situation in their own personal life at the feast several years ago, which I think really illustrates this particular point. I was talking to a friend at the Feast of Tabernacles (I want to say five or ten years ago.) and he was sharing with me how he in his own life for a while got confused over the various calendar ideas that circulate through Church of God circles and have for decades where usually there is an alternate calendar and you have to worship God at these other times because of this particular calendar. If you have ever looked into that subject, it is an endless spider web of technical arguments that can go on forever and ever.

This individual had gotten kind of confused by some of this, but he said that he sat back one day and made an observation. I thought this was very profound as he told it to me. He says, “You know I got to thinking and looking, not only just in general at the kind of organizations that would teach these ideas, but at the particular leaders that taught these ideas.” And the observation he made, and I’ll just tell it in his own words and this was his own opinion because he had been firsthand involved in this. He said, “I just felt looking at the individuals who did this, I just felt they were unbalanced. Oftentimes, I didn’t feel like they set a good example and they were often unbalanced in their approach on a lot of things.”

He said, “And, then, I just started looking around for a group that taught these ideas that was kind of on the right track because the logic I was using was ‘If God’s holy spirit is leading people to this particular understanding, then that means I should be able to find at least one organization out there that teaches this particular idea that I feel is generally on the right track.’” He said, “Nobody’s perfect. No one’s right in every area, but if God’s holy spirit is leading people to this understanding, then that means I should be able to find at least one group that I think sets a good example and is just generally balanced and going in the right direction in most areas because they certainly won’t be perfect.”

He said, “But I got to looking around and I couldn’t find that!” He said, “Everywhere I looked I could just find major issues everywhere I looked. And the people I thought were balanced and on the right direction, who set a good example in the way they lived their lives, those were always the ones who didn’t teach this.” He said, “And I thought ‘Something is wrong here!’ Because if I can’t find this particular understanding and God’s spirit correlating in the same place, then that means God’s spirit is not leading people to this understanding and something is wrong.”

As he told all this to me, I just smiled and said, “Yea, you’re absolutely on the right track because that’s exactly the criteria that Jesus Christ gave for us as to how you should sort these things out.” You always come down to the behavior, of the fruits of someone’s behavior and their example as to who you want to listen to and who you don’t. Again, regardless of how smart an individual is or how big of a scholar they might be, if they’re not living that in their day to day life, what will eventually happen, as we see very clearly from the Parable of the Ten Virgins, is that understanding will wane and it will get off in a ditch. That’s why Christ said, “You’re going to look at this criteria and if you don’t see the right fruits, don’t follow them,” because it gets to that same basic concept.

So, how do we wrap this up? What is our bottom line looking at this?

Again, I don’t mean by any means to say that we shouldn’t put a priority upon studying God’s word and delving into even the technical understanding of what God’s word is saying. Certainly, that is a good thing to do. We have a future responsibility if we make it into God’s Kingdom to be teachers of this book and we certainly want to be familiar with it. We certainly want to know as much about it as we possibly can. That’s our responsibility as Christians.

But we have to realize and the whole point of why I’m giving this sermon is we can’t just rely upon technical understanding and realize “Hey, I understand the truth so that makes me right with God” because look at the life of Solomon. If you look at the life of Solomon and we won’t take time to go through all of his example. I think a lot of us are at least familiar with the basics of the story. But the Bible directly tells us that Solomon was the wisest man who ever lived. It says he was great in understanding; he was great in wisdom. He authored several books of the Bible, but what happened to his life?

If you follow through the book of Ecclesiastes, he got full of himself and that knowledge and he even literally sat out for a while. Basically, he decided he wanted to go play with fire. He wanted to get as close to the world as possible and he thought his knowledge was going to protect him. He literally deluded himself into thinking, “Since I’m so wise, I can go play with fire and I’ll be too wise for the fire and it won’t burn me,” which was insane thinking. But Solomon winds up eventually worshipping other gods. He literally starts chasing around Jeroboam trying to kill him when he realizes that God’s going to replace him after he dies and split the kingdom and his son will only have part of it and the majority of it is going to go to the Northern Kingdom. He was thinking he was going to outsmart God. In spite of all of that knowledge, not living it did all of this to his life.

Personally, I believe at the end of Solomon’s life he repented and he turned back to God because if you look at how the book of Ecclesiastes ends, I can’t imagine anyone writing that who didn’t come to understanding that “I really erred in my way of doing all of this.” If you read through that book, he’s telling you, “Here are all the mistakes that I made. Here are all of the things I did. I focused my life on all my personal pleasures and it didn’t turn out well.” That’s obviously written like a guy who has come to the end

of his life, looked back, and said, “This was a horrible mistake. Don’t do what I did. It’s painful. Let me teach you the easier way to do it.”

After learning all of this, he summed up for us the most important point that we’ll learn today. Turn over to Ecclesiastes 12 and we’ll see how he summed things up at the end of his life. Remember this was a man who had more knowledge and wisdom than any of us will ever have in this lifetime. This was a guy who wowed everyone around him. Other world leaders in his time would travel to visit him just to be impressed with the understanding that this guy had. They would bring every difficult question they had to him because he was so smart in the things he could tell them. Still, his life completely went off target because he wasn’t living and focusing in his day to day living God’s way of life. And he had to learn some very painful lessons as a result of it. As God explains, God allowed him to live out the rest of his life being king of Israel and having his position solely because of his father David. God even tells him that, “Because of your father David, I’m going to let you live out your life in this position, but after you die, I’m going to have the kingdom separated. Because of David, I’m going to have one of your lineage keep a few tribes and the majority of them are going away. That’s going to be your punishment for what you’ve done. So all of this happened, again, in spite of how smart he was.

The conclusion of the whole matter, as he put it, brings us back to this very lesson of what I’ve been emphasizing in the sermon. As you’ll see here in Ecclesiastes 12:13:

Ecclesiastes 12:13. *Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: fear God and keep His commandments, for this is [the whole duty of man].*

14) For God will bring every work into judgment, including every secret thing, whether good or evil. (NKJV)

Solomon sums up the whole thing here saying, “Yes, I had all this knowledge. I had all this wisdom, but let me just tell you what the bottom line is. You have to practice this. You’ve got to live this in your day to day life or things are going to go terribly wrong and you’ll have to learn some very painful lessons that you don’t want to go through.” He’s basically saying, “Learn from my example. Just do what God says. It makes life a whole lot easier for you.” That’s the point in all of this.

As Christians, we have the responsibility to be studying God’s word. In training for our future job if we successfully make it into God’s Kingdom, what is the job description for us? It’s to be teachers in God’s Kingdom. It’s teaching the rest of mankind this book. We certainly want to be as familiar with it as possible and know as much about it as possible. Investing time in studying it is a very valuable thing and something we should do.

We need to be careful not to ever think that knowledge all by itself or because we’ve understood this knowledge for decades in our lives that that is good enough to make us right with God because we have to be striving to convert our hearts. We have to realize

that knowledge, in and of and by itself, is not enough. We have to be converting our hearts and learning to think and act like Jesus Christ