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## **BIBLICAL EXAMPLES: (1) SCRIBES AND PHARISEES (2) MOSES**

### **Introduction**

The subject of Appearance and Reality has applications in many different areas. Let us begin on the first major category: People. As we reflect on the lives of various Bible characters, we shall seek to draw lessons about life and learning at the same time how we can more accurately perceive and assess people, including ourselves.

If we want to understand and perceive people accurately, we must appreciate and bear in mind the key issue God mentioned in 1 Samuel 16:7 when the Lord said, "Do not look at his appearance ... for man looks at the outward appearance, but *the Lord looks at the heart.*" We must concentrate upon and learn to perceive accurately what is in the heart. The Scriptures records that God found in David a "man after God's own heart" (1 Sam. 13:14, Acts 13:22). This was the reason why God chose David instead of Eliab. David had his weaknesses and he did falter at times, but the Lord appreciated the positive attitudes and longings in his heart. David did not merely have longings; these longings were expressed in a life that was basically moving in the direction of God and truth.

In this first message on People, we shall reflect on two biblical examples: the first is the scribes and Pharisees and the second, Moses.

### **Example 1: Scribes and Pharisees**

#### *Pronouncement of Woes on Scribes and Pharisees*

The Lord Jesus pronounced "woes" on the scribes and Pharisees in Matthew 23:27, 28.

#### **Matthew 23:27,28**

27 "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which on the outside appear beautiful, but inside they are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness.

28 So you, too, outwardly appear righteous to men, but inwardly you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness".

The Lord Jesus described the scribes and Pharisees as "whitewashed tombs", that is, outwardly they appeared righteous, but inwardly they were full of hypocrisy and

lawlessness, just like whitewashed tombs that look good on the outside, but are full of uncleanness and contain dead men's bones inside. It is not the outward appearance that counts. It is the inward qualities and realities that matter.

The scribes and Pharisees had a certain measure of status during their time. They were the learned religious leaders of the day. They loved the recognition of men and sought the places of honour in social gatherings. They also did seemingly righteous acts to be noticed by men and to earn their respect and praises. And generally recognition and respect were accorded to them.

However, the respect that they attained was not the kind that God was pleased with. Although they were learned people and were recognised as those who had gone through training and education, they were not "learned" in the eyes of the Lord because in spite all their learning, they had not come to recognise the truth. Instead they were more concerned with outward religious observances and they did many things that appeared righteous. In reality, within their hearts, there were lawlessness and uncleanness. And this is the reason for the Lord Jesus pronouncing woes on them.

The character flaw of the scribes and Pharisees is an aspect that is helpful for us to reflect upon. Do we have the tendency to be impressed by the status of men, especially people who are generally regarded as respectable and learned, and who outwardly may do many things that appear good and righteous? Do we pause and try to understand the reality within the heart of a person?

Worse still, do we at times also behave in this way? Do we conduct ourselves in such a way as to impress others and to gain their recognition and respect by our external conduct? Do we try to do things that appear righteous and agreeable to people so that they will be pleased with us? Or are we more concerned that our actions flow forth from the reality within our hearts that are healthy and pleasing to God?

God is not impressed by the external for He looks at the heart. He is concerned about what motivates a man. Let us examine our actions to see if they are done out of love for God and men and out of love for the truth, or they are motivated by our desire for praise and honour from men. The reality within the heart is what counts in the end.

#### *Contrast With the Tax Collector*

Let us consider a parable told by the Lord Jesus in Luke 18 in which He draws a contrast between a Pharisee and a tax collector. While the scribes and Pharisees enjoyed men's praise and regard, the tax collectors were generally despised by society.

**Luke 18:11**

"The Pharisee stood and was praying this to himself: 'God, I thank You that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.'"

**Luke 18:13**

"But the tax collector, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, the sinner!'"

In his eloquent prayer to God, the Pharisee showed a contemptuous attitude towards the tax collector. He gave himself a pat on his back and boasted of his merits before God! In contrast, the tax collector was rather ashamed of himself and his sins. He appeared unimpressive and lacking in eloquence. We see him barely able to express himself, beating his breast, and merely saying, "God, be merciful to me, the sinner!"

In situations like this, it is quite easy for people to have a higher regard for someone who conducts himself like the Pharisee – a confident demeanour, speaks eloquently and does many things that appear righteous. In contrast, this tax collector seemed unimpressive, lacked eloquence and held his head down in shame. However, the Lord Jesus cuts through the facade and shows us the reality of the matter.

**Luke 18:14**

"I tell you, this man (the tax collector) went down to his house justified rather than the other (the Pharisee); for everyone who exalts himself shall be humbled, but he who humbles himself shall be exalted."

It is unmistakable, from this parable and in Matthew 23, that the Lord Jesus showed disapproval of the scribes and Pharisees. He helps us to recognize that in reality their lives were bad and were not appreciated by God. Although the tax collector appeared to be in a rather poor state, God approved of him because of his repentant heart. God also appreciated the way he approached the throne of grace.

**For reflection:**

Are you ashamed of yourself and your sins? There is hope - if you come to God with a repentant heart.

Are you confident that you are going on well because you are careful to do all the things expected of a Christian and people think well of you? God may not be pleased with our lives if we are concentrating on outward conduct and what others think and say of us instead of concentrating on having a healthy spirit, good attitudes and walking humbly with our God.

**Example 2: Moses***Moses at the age of forty*

Let us now consider the next example, Moses, when he was at an age of about forty.

Acts 7:20, 21 tell us that after Moses was born, he was nurtured for three months in his father's home. After that, Pharaoh's daughter took him away and nurtured him as her own son. He grew up and became learned and powerful.

**Acts 7:22**

"Moses was educated in all the learning of the Egyptians, and he was a man of power in words and deeds".

As the adopted son of Pharaoh's daughter, the learning that he acquired and the opportunities available to him would have been the best in Egypt, described here as "all the learning of the Egyptians". He was also described as "a man of power in words and deeds." The word "power" has been translated in the King James Version and the Revised Standard Version as "mighty". Some people would consider him as a mighty man.

The picture we have of him during this period is a rather impressive one. He was confident and he dared to act decisively. He also had recognition of God and that God wanted to work through him in the deliverance of the Israelites. All this is indicated by his act of striking down an Egyptian for mistreating his own people, an Israelite, and his frame of mind as he did so. Acts 7:25 tells us that Moses "supposed that his brethren understood that God was granting them deliverance through him, but they did not understand." Besides being capable, Moses was ready and eager to act and to serve. Indeed, he was in a vantage position to do so. Given all these, we can be easily impressed with such a man and his readiness to serve.

But what is the true state of affairs at this point of time? In reality, Moses was not ready. He was impulsive; he acted in the flesh and had to flee in fear when he sensed that his life was in danger because of his impulsive killing of the Egyptian. As a fugitive, he settled in the land of Midian and became a shepherd in the wilderness. We can read all this in Exodus 2:11-22.

We need to pay attention to a point that is more important than the fact that Moses had acted wrongly, and that is, Moses was not yet sufficiently dealt with and trained by God. In other words, the really important inward qualities were not properly formed in him yet. At this phase of his life, Moses was not ready for the work that God intended for him although he appeared to be well-equipped and ready for service. His rash act in the killing of the Egyptian is a manifestation of this lack of readiness.

Therefore, we can see that appearance and the reality were rather different in the life of Moses during this period in his life.

*Moses, forty years later*

Now we look at this man Moses again forty years later when God spoke to him from the midst of the burning bush as recorded in Exodus 3 and 4.

**Exodus 3:1**

Now Moses was pasturing the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian; and he led the flock to the west side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God.

What is the impression, the picture that comes through? At this point of time, he was a shepherd living in the wilderness, without position and status in the eyes of the world. Gone were the privileges of living in the palace and the enjoyment of the status as the adopted son of Pharaoh's daughter. He was no longer "a man of power in words and deeds" as he was in Egypt. Instead he was a fugitive in the wilderness, and tended sheep for forty years. He had lost all sense of confidence, eloquence and capability of the previous kind.

The conversation between God and Moses recorded in Exodus 3 and 4 gives a glimpse of this picture.

**Exodus 3:2-10**

2 The angel of the Lord appeared to him in a blazing fire from the midst of a bush; and he looked, and behold, the bush was burning with fire, yet the bush was not consumed.

3 So Moses said, "I must turn aside now and see this marvelous sight, why the bush is not burned up."

4 When the Lord saw that he turned aside to look, God called to him from the midst of the bush and said, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am."

5 Then He said, "Do not come near here; remove your sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground."

6 He said also, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." Then Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

7 The Lord said, "I have surely seen the affliction of My people who are in Egypt, and have given heed to their cry because of their taskmasters, for I am aware of their sufferings.

8 "So I have come down to deliver them from the power of the Egyptians, and to bring them up from that land to a good and spacious land, to a land flowing with milk and honey, to the place of the Canaanite and the Hittite and the Amorite and the Perizzite and the Hivite and the Jebusite.

9 "Now, behold, the cry of the sons of Israel has come to Me; furthermore, I have seen the oppression with which the Egyptians are oppressing them.

10 "Therefore, come now, and I will send you to Pharaoh, so that you may bring My people, the sons of Israel, out of Egypt."

We see God appearing to him "in a blazing fire from the midst of a bush". God Almighty was calling Moses, telling him of the intentions of His heart and giving Moses a mission. The fact that God was calling Moses in this way showed that God had confidence in him. God wanted him to fulfil an important task, but what was Moses' response?

**Exodus 3:11**

But Moses said to God, "Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh, and that I should bring the sons of Israel out of Egypt?"

Moses had become someone very much lacking in confidence. He was not thinking so much about the God Who was calling him, but looking at himself - "Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh..." God had to reassure him of His presence.

**Exodus 3:12-22**

12 And He said, "Certainly I will be with you, and this shall be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God at this mountain."

13 Then Moses said to God, "Behold, I am going to the sons of Israel, and I will say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you.' Now they may say to me, 'What is His name?' What shall I say to them?"

14 God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM"; and He said, "Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, 'I AM has sent me to you.'"

15 God, furthermore, said to Moses, "Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, 'The Lord, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.' This is My name forever, and this is My memorial-name to all generations.

16 "Go and gather the elders of Israel together and say to them, 'The Lord, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, has appeared to me, saying, "I am indeed concerned about you and what has been done to you in Egypt.

17 "So I said, I will bring you up out of the affliction of Egypt to the land of the Canaanite and the Hittite and the Amorite and the Perizzite and the Hivite and the Jebusite, to a land flowing with milk and honey."

18 They will pay heed to what you say; and you with the elders of Israel will come to the king of Egypt and you will say to him, 'The Lord, the God of the Hebrews, has met with us. So now, please, let us go a three days' journey into the wilderness, that we may sacrifice to the Lord our God.'

19 But I know that the king of Egypt will not permit you to go, except under compulsion.

20 "So I will stretch out My hand and strike Egypt with all My miracles which I shall do in the midst of it; and after that he will let you go.

21 "I will grant this people favor in the sight of the Egyptians; and it shall be that when you go, you will not go empty-handed.

22 "But every woman shall ask of her neighbor and the woman who lives in her house, articles of silver and articles of gold, and clothing; and you will put them on your sons and daughters. Thus you will plunder the Egyptians."

In various ways, God was preparing Moses for the task he was called to carry out. But Moses said, "What if they will not believe me or listen to what I say? For they may say, 'The Lord has not appeared to you'" (4:1). At that, God told him he could demonstrate God's power by turning the staff he was carrying into a serpent (4:2, 3). If that was not sufficient, he could further demonstrate God's power by making his healthy hand become leprous and later restoring the leprous hand to good health (4:6, 7). All these were miraculous signs that God would perform through him so that the people would respect him and pay heed to his authority. And if they still would not believe, God told him to show further evidence of God's power by taking some water from the Nile and pouring it on the dry ground, and as he did so, to see the water turn into blood (4:9).

Yet, despite all the assurances from God, we see in verse 10 that Moses still felt a great sense of inadequacy.

#### **Exodus 4:10**

Then Moses said to the Lord, "Please, Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither recently nor in time past, nor since You have spoken to Your servant; for I am slow of speech and slow of tongue."

Here we see the vast difference between Moses now and Moses at the age of forty. He who was previously described as "a man of power in words and deeds" was now saying "I have never been eloquent, neither recently nor in time past" and "I am slow of speech and slow of tongue." He who used to be so confident and could act so decisively was now drawing back despite many assurances from God.

Still, God spoke to him patiently. In Exodus 4:11, 12, the Lord said to him, "Who has made man's mouth? Or who makes him mute or deaf, or seeing or blind? Is it not I, the Lord? Now then go, and I, even I, will be with your mouth, and teach you what you are to say." What more can a man ask before he can sense his readiness to fulfil the task assigned by God? Yet in Exodus 4:13, Moses said, "Please, Lord, now send the message by whomever You will."

He appeared so weak, incapable, unwilling, lacking in confidence and ill-equipped for any worthwhile task. He was even unable to trust God's express assurance or to obey God's express command to go. This is how many would view Moses, or someone else in a similar situation. We tend to come to this kind of conclusion but is this view in agreement with the reality? Sometimes, there are many deeper issues that are not easy for us to perceive or comprehend. If we quickly conclude on the basis of the obvious and the outward appearance, we may make a very major mistake in our

assessment and understanding of a person. The reality can be very different. We need to look to the Lord to help us perceive accurately.

### **Important Lessons to Learn**

There are important issues to think about when we try to understand a person accurately in a situation like this, whether it is about Moses or others.

#### *The True State of Moses*

The main issue is: *What are the true qualities and true state within a person?* Instead of making a hasty conclusion based on the outward, we should ask ourselves various questions that could help us come to a more accurate understanding of the true state of a person. Continuing with Moses as our example, we could perhaps ask:

- Why did he act in that way?
- What is the meaning and reality within that gave birth to the outward manifestations?
- Was it because he feared for his personal safety?
- Was it preoccupation with his personal interests or a case of self-preservation?
- Was it due to a lack of love for God, lack of love for man, lack of concern for the truth?
- Was it a lack of concern for God's work and its accomplishment?
- Was it because he was immature and having significant deficiencies in his character?

Moses may have appeared to be in a poor state, but is it the reality? It is possible that after asking these questions, we may still quickly and rashly arrive at the wrong conclusions. However, if we pause and reflect carefully, we will see that in reality Moses was not deficient in any of these areas to any significant degree. The scriptural records bear this out, which we shall examine as we proceed.

When Moses was forty, God did not ask him to deliver the Israelites out of Egypt. But now, forty years later, God was commissioning him because in God's sight, Moses was ready. God called him even though the task was very great and very difficult. But God had the confidence that Moses could fulfil it.

#### *Moses Had Moral and Spiritual Stature and Quality of Character*

When we think of the enormity of the task that was before Moses, we realise that it required much perseverance, spiritual stature and strength. It also required a deep love for God and for man, and a deep concern for the accomplishment of God's purposes. It called for a man of great strength of character, one who will not deviate from the task or give up when the going gets tough.

When Moses finally obeyed the Lord and took on the task, we find that Moses demonstrated and proved that he had these essential qualities. He went on to confront Pharaoh, to lead the people of Israel out of Egypt, and continued to lead them in the wilderness for forty years. He not merely succeeded in doing all these, but he demonstrated remarkable qualities of character in the whole way he conducted himself during this long period. Along the way, Moses would have continued to grow as he obeyed the Lord. However, the way he appeared before Pharaoh and confronted him and the way he led the people of Israel out of Egypt showed that there was already quite a lot of substance and readiness in his life. That was why God called him at this point of time.

It is clear that Moses was not a man who was just concerned about his personal interests and personal safety or merely concerned with self-preservation. He confronted Pharaoh again and again knowing that he could easily have been killed. When the Israelites murmured, grumbled and rebelled against God, God told Moses that He would destroy the nation of Israel and make a nation out of Moses. Moses pleaded with God not to do that, and if God still intended to destroy the nation of Israel, he said, "Please blot me out from Your book" (Ex. 32:32). This showed that he deeply cared for the people. There was no hint of unhealthy preoccupation with personal interests and self-preservation.

The whole way Moses persevered during this period as he led the nation of Israel out of Egypt and during the time in the wilderness showed great strength of character and deep love for God and for man. He did not shrink back in the midst of difficulties and pressures. These are evidence that he was at that time mature in the Lord and well-equipped for the task. There were very outstanding qualities in this man of God, one whom the Scriptures pronounced as "very humble, more than any man who was on the face of the earth" (Num. 12:3).

#### *Sense of Personal Inadequacy*

But what about the incident recorded in Exodus 3 and 4 where Moses showed great reluctance to accept the task God had assigned him of delivering the Israelites out of Egypt? Wasn't there weakness on his part? Wasn't there failure? Wasn't God angry with him? Quite clearly, there was weakness and failure and that is why God was angry with him. However, the failure on the part of Moses at this point of time was not due to any serious deficiencies in his inward qualities. This explains why even after his failure to respond properly to the call, God still entrusted the task to him because the important inward qualities were present in his life. And Moses vindicated God's confidence in him and fulfilled the task entrusted.

Why then was there this failure? What was the nature of the weakness? It is likely that Moses' hesitation in going in spite of the many assurances from God arose from a sense of personal inadequacy in fulfilling the immense task before him. This sense

of inadequacy was seen in the manner of conversation he had with the Lord when he voiced doubts such as "Will they believe me?" and "I am not eloquent".

A deep sense of personal inadequacy without any trace of self-confidence is actually an important prerequisite of readiness for effective service. In various ways God seeks to bring this about in the lives of His children as part of His preparing us for effective service. However, to be wholesome, together with the sense of personal inadequacy and no trace of self-confidence, there must be the presence of confidence and faith in God and His enabling for whatever He desires of us. The hesitance on the part of Moses shows that he had learned well the first part but there was a need to deepen and strengthen his faith and confidence in God and His sovereign undertaking and enabling for the fulfillment of the task entrusted. Probably, he was affected by memories of his past experiences, in particular, the failure forty years ago when he had to flee Egypt. In a sense, that experience did serve a useful purpose and could be viewed as part of God's preparation of Moses - that he would no longer have any confidence in himself, but to learn properly to trust God and depend on Him.

#### *The Need to Trust God Fully*

Moses needed to learn to fully trust God instead of stopping at the point of the sense of personal inadequacy. He should have trusted God to empower him to do whatever He required of him. It was a failure on his part that he drew back when God called him and commissioned him. However, because the basic, important inward qualities were present, God could and did help Moses overcome his initial hesitancy and he finally accepted the task entrusted. During the forty years that he lived in the wilderness, God was preparing him for this great task. The wilderness years were not spent in vain. After the period was over, Moses was ready.

#### **Concluding Remarks**

If we consider Moses in these two contexts, separated by a span of forty years, we see that it is a rather helpful and interesting illustration of the subject of Appearance and Reality. The outward appearance in one context is in contrast to the other. If the outward appearance in the first instance can be classified as "ready", then the second would appear to be "not ready". However, the reality in each instance is opposite of what appeared to be. In the first instance, although he appeared ready, he was not ready. On the other hand, in the second instance, though he appeared not ready, he was ready. To put in a nutshell: when Moses was not ready, he appeared ready; but when he was actually ready, he appeared not ready.

This is not just a play of words. If you reflect upon them, the meaning will become clearer. These two instances highlight to us the need to be more careful and alert when we are faced with situations and with people and their conduct. We should not quickly conclude based on what appears to be, because the reality can be very different from or even opposite of what appears to be!

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