

MESSAGE 1 – THE SIGNIFICANCE OF MORAL AND SPIRITUAL STATURE

Introduction

- Theme of last year's messages: *The equipping and readiness of God's workman*
- Theme of this year's messages: Primary importance and value of *moral and spiritual stature*
Both themes directly related to the theme of this conference: *Taking your ministerial growth to the next level* – and also the objective of Pastoral Care Conferences – to encourage the brethren, help them grow well and be equipped for effective ministry
- Messages relevant to all believers – especially to those with leadership responsibilities in preaching, teaching and shepherding the flock
- Moral and spiritual stature of a person refers to the positive moral and spiritual qualities he has attained to in his being – the transformation of his character and being – the degree he has been conformed to the image of Christ
- The richness in meaning and the potential of moral and spiritual development of man in Christ is beyond our imagination – so too, the life God intends for us
- Reason: *God has created man in His image, as a moral and spiritual being with great potential for growth in moral and spiritual stature, for deep fellowship with God and with one another, and for contributing a vital and meaningful part in the fulfilment of God's purposes*
- Two inter-related key aspects in God's intentions for man are:
 - o Development of moral and spiritual stature
 - o Deep fellowship with God and among the brethren
- In this conference, I will focus on the first key aspect: *Development of moral and spiritual stature*

1. Our moral and spiritual stature is of primary importance and supreme, eternal value

- God's primary intention for man is that he attains to moral and spiritual stature
- The supreme and eternal value of moral and spiritual stature comes through clearly in Paul's writings, e.g.

2 Corinthians 4:16-18

16 Therefore we do not lose heart, but though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day.

17 For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison,

18 while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal.

- o (v 17) – 'eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison' – refers primarily to the positive qualities of the inner man and character formation that took place in the lives of Paul and his co-workers in the midst of trials and afflictions (vs 8-10)
- o (v 16) – the renewal of the inner man
- o (v 17) – that the 'momentary, light affliction' was producing in them

- o Important to appreciate deeply this area of truth and learn to have the right perspective reflected in these verses
- God's intention for fallen man is not merely that we be forgiven of our sins and be reconciled to Himself, but that in Christ, we may grow in moral and spiritual beauty and character, conformed to the image of Christ, in the direction of perfection in moral and spiritual stature
- This is God's intention for every believer and should be the goal of true ministry
- God wants us to be a mature man – attaining to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ

Ephesians 4:11–13

11 And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers,

12 for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ;

13 until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ.

- God wants all believers to become conformed to the image of Christ

Romans 8:29

For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren;

- God desires that we grow towards perfection in moral and spiritual stature

Matthew 5:48

“Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

- The word translated ‘mature’ in Eph 4:13 is translated as ‘perfect’ in Matt 5:48 and ‘complete’ in Col 1:28

Colossians 1:28

We proclaim Him, admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, so that we may present every man complete in Christ.

- What the Lord Jesus tells us we should be in Matt 5:48 is the goal of Paul's labours (Col 1:28) and what we should seek to attain to together in church life (Eph 4:13) – to fulfil what has been God's intention for us all along (Rom 8:29)

2. Why is moral and spiritual stature so important?

- It is a major aspect of the goal for man in the fulfilment of God's purposes: Moral and spiritual stature, like God's being, is good and valuable in itself. It is vital for the meaning and quality of the being
- It has a direct bearing on the meaning and quality of:
 - o our relationship with God – our fellowship and oneness with Him
 - o our relationship with one another
 - o our ministry and participation in the outworking of God's purposes on earth
 - o our existence and participation in the outworking of God's purposes in eternity
- What is covered in this series of messages on the significance of moral and spiritual stature is a key to understanding the story of Job and why a good and loving God would allow Satan to attack Job so severely. Many have difficulty reconciling the existence of the sovereign and perfect God with the terrible suffering faithful believers have to go through

- o As I explained in my book *Understanding Job* (pages 20-21), Satan had challenged God's pronouncement on Job's character – that he was a blameless and upright man, fearing God and turning from evil. By questioning “Does Job fear God for nothing?” Satan was in effect saying Job's apparent good conduct had no real quality in it. Job had responded well because God had blessed him materially, making a hedge around him – but if God were to allow his circumstances to become adverse, he would surely curse God to His face
- o If a believer rejects the perfect God because of trials and difficulties, he is destroying the foundational basis for his life and his growth in moral and spiritual stature
- o God allowed Satan to put Job to the test because He knew there were genuine good qualities within him and the trials Job went through could help him develop further
- o There is a critical issue involved here, which is vital to the fulfilment of God's purposes. The issue is: *Can man develop genuine, deep moral qualities within, and to what degree can he develop such qualities?*
- o In this series of messages on moral and spiritual stature, I will be making several references to the story of Job and my book *Understanding Job* – because various important points in these messages on moral and spiritual stature are illustrated and come through powerfully in the story of Job

3. Of supreme importance, yet God cannot just give it to us

- If moral and spiritual stature is so important, should we not earnestly ask God to bring it about or give it to us?
- No, in the sense that God cannot simply give it to us or bring it about by Himself
- Most other things in life – those which do not require our moral input – God can give to us or bring about by Himself. For example:
 - o Material things and wealth
 - o Our physical and mental attributes and talents
 - o Spiritual gifts
 - o Many aspects of the environment and framework within which we work out our lives
- Moral and spiritual stature is different
 - o God cannot simply give it to us, bestow it upon us or bring it about by Himself
 - o It requires positive moral and spiritual input on our part
 - o It takes time for us to grow in moral and spiritual stature
- Does it mean then we should not pray to God about it?
 - o No, we should pray to God earnestly that He helps us make good progress in it
 - o It should be a primary longing of our heart, reflected in our earnest prayer to God
- We cannot make progress in moral and spiritual stature on our own
 - o We must rely on God's provision and enabling – especially God's provisions for us in Christ, what has been accomplished at the Cross, God's revelation of the truth and the ministry of the Holy Spirit

4. Why God cannot simply give it to us

- Because it requires positive moral, spiritual input from us
- Moral input cannot be supplied by anyone else – it must flow forth from the person himself

- That is how God has created us - that is the meaning of moral meaning and input
- This is why we will always be fully responsible for the moral meaning in our heart and the moral input from our being – in all situations and through all the days of our life
- This will be the primary area of our accountability before God on Judgement Day

2 Corinthians 5:10

For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad.

Proverbs 16:2

All the ways of a man are clean in his own sight,
But the LORD weighs the motives.

Jeremiah 17:10

“I, the LORD, search the heart, I test the mind,
Even to give to each man according to his ways,
According to the results of his deeds.

- Others can encourage us, help us, exert positive influence on us, but without our own positive moral response, we will not make progress in our moral development
- When we walk according to the flesh, our being will degenerate – when we walk according to the Spirit, our spirit and spiritual life will be enriched

Galatians 6:7–8

7 Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap.
8 For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life.

5. Positive moral and spiritual development cannot be prevented

- Just as no one can supply moral input to another or ensure his moral development, no one can prevent another from responding positively or block his moral development
- There may be adverse influences and discouraging circumstances, and the evil one and the forces of darkness may make things very difficult for us – but it is always feasible for us, by God's grace, to respond positively
- God has created us as moral beings with the capacity for positive moral response and positive moral input
- Positive moral response is from our heart and spirit – this is always feasible whatever the circumstances we are in

6. Responding well in adverse circumstances can accelerate our moral and spiritual growth

- It helps in the formation of strong, positive character traits – e.g. love, kindness, patience, righteousness, perseverance, courage, self-control
- God's grace is always sufficient for us to respond well in any situation
- The more difficult the situation, the greater the opportunity to experience God's grace and His working in and through us
- Isn't this a wonderful way of viewing difficult times? This is the perspective God wants us to adopt
- The Lord assured the apostle Paul:

2 Corinthians 12:9-10

9 And He has said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness." Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me.

10 Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong.

- The right attitude and perspective towards trials are reflected in Paul's testimony in 2 Cor 4:16-18 (referred to earlier):
 - o Momentary light affliction can produce within us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison
 - o In the process, the inner man is being renewed
- Having this perspective towards trials helps us to appreciate the meaning and purpose of Job's suffering and the suffering of other faithful believers

7. The significance of moral meaning in our hearts comes through strongly in 1 Corinthians 13

- This chapter is about the primacy of love – love is central to positive moral meaning and moral response

1 Corinthians 13:1-8

1 If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but do not have love, I have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.

2 If I have the gift of prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge; and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.

3 And if I give all my possessions to feed the poor, and if I surrender my body to be burned, but do not have love, it profits me nothing.

4 Love is patient, love is kind and is not jealous; love does not brag and is not arrogant,

5 does not act unbecomingly; it does not seek its own, is not provoked, does not take into account a wrong suffered,

6 does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth;

7 bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

8 Love never fails; but if there are gifts of prophecy, they will be done away; if there are tongues, they will cease; if there is knowledge, it will be done away.

- Absence of love would mean: 'I am nothing' (v 2)
 - o Nothing of value in our being – worthless in God's sight – opposite of prophet Daniel, man of high esteem in God's sight – God's precious treasure
 - o No positive moral meaning in our being – even if we have spiritual gifts and much knowledge – even if we have gift of prophecy and know all mysteries and all knowledge
- Absence of love would mean: 'I have become like a noisy gong and clanging cymbal' (v 1)
 - o Nothing of value can come forth from our mouth – even if we can speak with the tongues of men and of angels
 - o Nothing of true value can flow forth from such a person because there is no positive moral meaning and value in the being
- Absence of love would mean: 'It profits me nothing' (v 3)
 - o It does me no good – it is not appreciated by God – there will be no reward
 - o Whatever we may give and do – even if we give all our possessions to feed the poor and surrender our bodies to be burned – if all these are done without positive moral meaning within our hearts, they will not do us any good

- o We will not grow morally and spiritually
- Love and positive moral meaning and quality of being have direct bearing on our conduct and how we relate with others:
 - o (v 4) Love is patient, love is kind and is not jealous; love does not brag and is not arrogant
 - o (v 5) Love does not act unbecomingly; it does not seek its own, is not provoked, does not take into account a wrong suffered
 - o The greater the love, the higher the quality of moral meaning, the more positive the conduct and manner of relating with others
 - o Positive relationship is also at the heart of the fulfilment of God's purposes
- Love and positive moral meaning and quality of being have abiding, eternal meaning and significance and will always be of supreme importance
 - o (v 8) Love never fails
 - o (v 13) But now faith, hope, love, abide these three; but the greatest of these is love

NOTE: All scriptural quotations in this series of messages are taken from NASB