

INTRODUCTION TO APPEARANCE AND REALITY

Introduction

Many of us would probably be familiar with experiences like this: we see some beautiful, lovely apples and we choose one that looks very good. We take a big bite and find it rotten inside and, to our horror, we see worms crawling out. Experiences like this quickly teach us the need to recognise, and also to heed the difference between appearance and reality. Something that appears good and desirable may in reality be far from it.

Similarly in our daily life, we see many products that are promoted as attractive, useful and durable. After using them for a while, we find, much to our disappointment, that they are not useful, give poor performance or break down within a short time.

Other areas may be more serious, for example, some women may appear beautiful and attractive but have ruined many a life by their guile and manipulative ways. Likewise, there are men who appear reliable, but in reality are crooks, causing much grief and heartache to naive and unsuspecting ladies.

Appearance and Reality – Its Relevance

There can at times be a great difference between appearance and reality. Acting on the basis of appearance alone can cause us great pain and serious adverse consequences especially when the matter is significant. This is an issue relevant to every man and woman, whether Christian or non-Christian.

However, in our study on the subject of Appearance and Reality, we will concentrate on areas that are more important and relevant to us as Christians, in particular, issues that relate to effective Christian living and how understanding these issues may help us to be alert to dangers and pitfalls. A good grasp of this subject will help us to understand, assess and perceive accurately people (including ourselves) and situations, their meaning, and the quality of actions or service.

Let me illustrate with three examples of how appearance may differ from reality:

- A Christian may appear to be struggling, having difficulty coping with his life. Yet such a person may be in a better state than another who appears to be coping well and victorious. Unless we are careful and prayerful, we can often be mistaken and take the appearance for the reality.

- A person may appear to be rather harsh and unapproachable while another may appear rather gentle, pleasant, friendly and caring. But when we get to know them well, we may be surprised to find that the one who appears harsh and unapproachable is warm, friendly, and cares deeply for people and issues that are important. On the other hand, the other person who appears pleasant, caring and friendly may in reality be rather superficial, self-centred and reactive when he finds a situation not agreeable to him. If we do not have true insight, we may draw the wrong conclusions about the character and being of people based on their appearance.
- A situation may appear adverse and we can easily become discouraged by it. However it may be a rather meaningful and helpful context for us to go through and in reality positive things may be taking place. If we are unable to perceive the reality, we may conclude that things are not going on well.

On the other hand, circumstances may at times appear to be favourable and we may then be lulled into a false sense of well-being. In reality our lives are going downhill, and things are taking place that are slowly but surely eroding the qualities that really matter in our lives.

The main point here is that, as Christians, we should be deeply concerned about what is really taking place, so that we can grow well and serve the Lord effectively. Reality cannot be perceived based merely on outward appearance or superficial observations or subjective feelings.

There is such a thing as an objective reality - that which is in agreement with how God sees things. God is the God of truth; He knows all things accurately. So whatever God sees would be the objective reality. It is therefore important for us to learn to perceive this reality as God sees it instead of falling into the error of perceiving things based on subjective feelings, outward appearance or the obvious, which may not tally with reality.

Two Key Scripture Passages

Let us refer to two important passages on this subject of Appearance and Reality. They are John 7:24 and 1 Samuel 16: 6, 7.

Healing on the Sabbath

John 7:24

"Do not judge according to appearance, but judge with righteous judgement."

These are the words of the Lord Jesus. When He says, "Do not judge according to appearance", He is telling us that it is wrong for us to base our assessment of people

or situation on outward appearance only. This is something that we should be careful to avoid. Instead, we should "judge with righteous judgement", meaning that we should have sound and accurate judgement that will lead us to a proper response on our part.

The words of the Lord in John 7:24 were spoken in the context in which people were angry with Him for healing on the Sabbath.

John 7:23

"If a man receives circumcision on the Sabbath that the Law of Moses will not be broken, are you angry with Me because I made an entire man well on the Sabbath?"

Why were they angry? They were angry with the Lord for healing on the Sabbath. The Jews and religious leaders of the day were of the view that such conduct was a serious violation of the Law and an offence against God. No one was expected to work on that day. What the Lord Jesus did, making a man well on the Sabbath, was to them tantamount to work. He had done something that was unexpected and not acceptable in their eyes and thus was seen to have broken the Sabbath law. But, in this case, their judgement was wrong. They were merely looking at the outward appearance of things.

Similarly, if someone does something that is generally not accepted or expected, we should not conclude straightaway that his conduct is wrong. Let us seek to understand the motive and meaning of the action.

Another reason that could explain the antagonism of the Jews towards the Lord is that He was untrained and uneducated in their eyes, unlike the religious leaders of the day.

John 7:15

The Jews then were astonished, saying, "How has this man become learned, having never been educated?"

Because the Lord Jesus was not educated in the usual way, they did not have proper respect for Him and did not expect Him to be learned. Do we, like the Jews in this gospel account, have a tendency to have a low opinion of what comes forth from the mouth of such a person?

As we reflect on what is recorded here, we can see that one major problem with the Jews is that their approach was superficial. That was why the Lord said to them, "Do not judge according to appearance." They did not seek to understand and perceive who He really is, what is the true quality of His life, and the nature and quality of His actions.

On the other hand, those who did respond well to Him had better insight into the person and work of the Lord. Being able to accurately understand and perceive the true quality of life and the nature and quality of the Lord's actions, resulting in a true appreciation of Him and commitment to Him, is a crucial issue, because meaningful submission to the Lord Jesus and appreciation of Him cannot be based merely on the fact that He did mighty works such as the performing of miracles. Responding on the basis of observation of miracles taking place also exposes us to the dangers of deception, as there can be counterfeits originating from the powers of darkness.

If the people were genuinely open and prayerful, they would not have responded merely to the outward appearance; instead they would have penetrated the superficial appearance and responded according to the truth. The Lord would have helped them perceive who He really is and the true meaning, intent and purpose of His actions and that what He did on that Sabbath day, healing the man, was something pleasing in the eyes of God.

The Lord Jesus also helps us to appreciate that in order to recognise the truth and reality, we must have a healthy attitude of heart. He said in John 7:17.

John 7:17

"If anyone is willing to do His will, he will know of the teaching, whether it is of God or whether I speak from Myself".

The Lord Jesus points out a significant issue, that is, "If anyone is *willing* to do His will, he will know ..." In other words, if one's heart attitude is healthy, open to the truth, desiring to know God and willing to do His will, he would be able to recognise that the teachings of the Lord Jesus are positive and originate from God. A healthy attitude of heart is therefore an important factor that helps us recognise truth and reality.

The Choosing of David

Another key passage on this subject of Appearance and Reality is found in 1 Samuel 16:6, 7. The context of verses 6 and 7 is the Lord sending the prophet Samuel to Jesse (v. 1). The Lord had informed Samuel that He had selected a king for Himself amongst the sons of Jesse (v. 3) and instructed him to anoint the one whom He had designated.

1 Samuel 16:6, 7

6 When they entered, he looked at Eliab and thought, "Surely the Lord's anointed is before Him".

7 But the Lord said to Samuel, "Do not look at his appearance or at the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for God sees not as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart."

This passage is rather striking for a number of reasons. Firstly, Samuel is a respected figure in the Old Testament, a man of God and one who served the Lord well. He is a spiritual man, and yet in this instance, Samuel erred.

When Samuel looked at Eliab, he thought, "Surely the Lord's anointed is before Him." Samuel centred his attention on the outward appearance of Eliab, who might have appeared rather impressive, with an appearance befitting that of a king. But how wrong he was in his judgement! Like Samuel, we often tend to be impressed by the outward appearance of people.

The Lord corrected Samuel, saying, "Do not look at his appearance or at the height of his stature...", making it clear that this approach was wrong. What happened to Samuel serves as a warning to us that if we do not pay careful attention to this area, we too can falter.

Secondly, "God sees not as man sees" tells us that God's perception of people is different from how man would normally perceive others. It is implied in the following phrase "for man looks at the outward appearance" that it is the tendency of man to be taken up with and conclude on the basis of outward appearance. This, however, is not God's approach, and this is also not the way that God wants His children to approach things.

Thirdly, while there is a tendency for man to look at outward appearance, God told Samuel that "the Lord looks at the heart." By that, He meant that He focuses on the inward quality of man. That is what counts to God and it is what we should concentrate on. A man's real worth is not measured by mere outward appearance or superficial observations including his social standing, capabilities and achievements in this world; rather, what counts is his inward quality. We must therefore learn to understand the inward quality of a man, that is, the moral and spiritual quality of his being.

Before we go on to consider this whole subject in greater detail in subsequent messages, it is helpful for me at this point to make some brief remarks on this subject of Appearance and Reality. I will start with a few observations that may help us to appreciate the need to exercise care in this area.

Why we need to exercise care in this area

1. There is a tendency to conclude, or be unduly influenced by external appearances or superficial issues. In referring to external appearances or superficial issues here, we are also including men's superficial observations of both people and situations. This is a weakness that plagues all men generally and it is in urgent need of attention. The points that follow helps us understand why this is so.

2. Man tends to act on the basis of his five senses, according to the visible realm and the obvious. The result is that he tends to draw conclusions inaccurately or respond in a way that is incorrect. This is made worse by the activities of the powers of darkness.

3. The powers of darkness want to confuse us, blur the issues and hinder us from grasping the reality, thus bringing us into his web of deception. The major areas of spiritual attack and failures recorded in Genesis 3 have a significant bearing on what has been going on in the history of mankind and is still true today.

Deception is one of the ways by which the evil one attacked Eve and caused the downfall of man.

Gen. 3:4-6

4 The serpent said to the woman, 'You surely will not die!'

5 "For God knows that in the day you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."

6 When the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was desirable to make one wise, she took from its fruit and ate; and she gave also to her husband with her, and he ate.

Satan succeeded in shaking the confidence of Eve regarding the truth of what was good for her, and what was not good for her. It resulted in Eve yielding to his temptation.

The evil one was at work in the situation, using the ideas already put into her mind. The way Eve was being tempted and the nature of the Fall of Man were very much related to the outward appearance of things. She "saw", it appeared "good for food" and "it was a delight to the eyes"; all these are related to outward appearance and resulted in a wrong response to the situation. Eve was not prayerful and failed to look to the Lord to help her perceive accurately what was the reality behind the appearance and then responding appropriately.

The evil one emphasises on the outward and seeks to draw man to act on the basis of appearance. He can make many things appear attractive that in reality will destroy us. This is deception through appearance.

4. The influence of the world, that is, the world's views and values, is pervasive. The world's approach, values and views do not include spiritual considerations (of the healthy kind), spiritual values and perception such as true insight and eternal perspective. The spiritual dimension is an important aspect of accurate perception of reality and the world's approach is fleshly rather than spiritual. It is true that the powers of darkness can at times draw man to exercise himself spiritually, but it is of an unhealthy kind that is related to the powers of darkness at work, which results in spiritual bondage and deception. The evil one is also at work in and through the

world, encouraging an approach to life that is fleshly and preoccupied with the visible and the temporal.

If we are not careful, we can be easily influenced by the ways and approach of the people around us. We will end up failing to perceive things accurately.

5. Living in this world of sights and sound, we are not used to and not so conscious of the spiritual realm and spiritual realities. Furthermore, many of us are lacking in spiritual perception and discernment, that is, the ability to perceive reality accurately, including the spiritual dimension. Spiritual perception is a quality that can and should be cultivated through the enabling of the Holy Spirit. It helps that we have a prayerful spirit and know what to look out for.

Generally, we simply let things move and just carry on with life. We may not be so conscious of the tendencies in man, the pervasive influence of the world and the activities of the evil one. We need to learn from the Lord how to distinguish appearance from reality so that we can assess and perceive people and situations accurately.

The Importance of Accurate Perception

We shall now consider why it is so important for one to have accurate perception.

1. Accurate perception is an integral part of growing and serving the Lord well. If we cannot perceive things accurately, how can we grow well and serve the Lord with effectiveness? As children of God, we want to walk in the light and in the truth. How can we do so unless we are able to perceive accurately the realities in this world and in the spiritual realm and unless we understand correctly what the Lord desires of us?

2. We need to learn to perceive accurately so that we will not be easily deceived and taken advantage of by the evil one. When we simply proceed on the basis of the appearance of things, the evil one can easily deceive us. When we are deceived, he will make us act on our wrong conclusions, which are based on appearance, and thereafter, influence us to do things that are displeasing in the eyes of the Lord. If we are ignorant of his schemes, we can make very serious mistakes and costly blunders that can have significant adverse effects on others, the Lord's work and ruin our own lives.

3. If we want to have deep fellowship with God, to be one with Him, to identify with what is in His heart and move together with Him, having this quality of spiritual perception is essential. Unless we perceive things accurately based on the way God perceives them, how can we have good fellowship with Him? When we perceive in the same way as He does, we will be able to see things the way He sees them, have fellowship with Him and feel together with Him. We will be burdened with the things

that He is burdened about, perceiving what is more important and what is less important in an accurate manner.

When we perceive things accurately, it will also enable the Lord to share, reveal and entrust more to us. It is His desire to reveal more to us. If there are many things that we perceive inaccurately, it will hinder Him from having the freedom to reveal more to us and also to entrust things to us. As wrong perception of things would lead to wrong actions, the Lord will not have that kind of freedom to share with us and entrust things to us. When we are able to perceive accurately, the Lord can share more of His heart, and we are able to understand what He is revealing to us. We will then be able to respond well to Him in obedience.

4. Accurate perception is important for proper and effective response to people and situations; in fact, to whatever confronts us in life. Wrong perception has many implications, for instance, we can be unfair to a person if we perceive him wrongly. Likewise, we can respond ineffectively to a situation or make very serious blunders if we perceive the situation wrongly.

Concluding Remarks

The subject of Appearance and Reality is relevant in many situations of life. I have made some preliminary observations and remarks on this subject. We see that appearance can be very different from reality. As Christians, we need to see clearly that having accurate perception is vital to healthy and effective Christian living and then strive to make progress in this area.

There is a tendency in man to be unduly influenced by the outward appearance of things. We tend to act on the basis of what impinges on our five senses. This is complicated by the powers of darkness at work and the influence of the ways of the world. It is important for us to learn to be more conscious of the spiritual realm and, with God's enabling, learn to perceive things accurately.

However, while it is true that appearance can at times be very different from the reality, it is also true that in many instances in life, there is a correspondence between what appears to be and the reality. Lovely looking apples can indeed be of good quality and taste good. Let us therefore not go to the opposite extreme and be unduly suspicious of those who relate with us in a warm and friendly manner, thinking they must be up to no good.

The important thing is to learn to be accurate in our understanding and perception of people, the meaning of their conduct and situations we encounter. We must learn not to conclude on the basis of the outward appearance of things, as they can be very different from the reality. If we are not careful, we can make very serious errors. We can also do many things that are unwise, wrong others and seriously hinder our own growth in the Lord and in our service for Him.

Finally, the various issues that are being raised and considered in this and subsequent messages will hopefully help us to have accurate perception. If we work hard in this area, we can improve in the accuracy of our understanding of things, which can help us grow toward spiritual maturity. As we become more mature spiritually, our perception will become keener, sharper and more accurate.

The Lord willing, in the subsequent messages, we shall dwell on this subject of Appearance and Reality under the following major categories:

1. People
2. Situations
3. Conduct, service, actions – their meaning and quality
4. The Lord Jesus Christ – His life and teachings
5. Reflections on the death of Christ

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