

ATTITUDE BEFORE GOD

By
Dr. Gordon H. Clark
Professor of Philosophy, Wheaton College
Wheaton, Illinois

Delivered over Station
WMCA, New York, N.Y.
and Affiliated Stations
of the
Inter-City Broadcasting System

Sunday August 21, 1938
at Nine A.M.

I.

When consideration turns to the attitude which a man should take in the presence of God, the Christian need not be told that carelessness and indifference are incorrect. Unfortunately, multitudes give little thought to God; they neither glorify Him as God nor give thanks; and since they are without excuse their condemnation is just.

On the other hand, though God and man's attitude toward Him are nothing to the unthinking crowds which pass by, there are serious people, too few in number, who, instead of needing to be persuaded that such a view is folly, would welcome, in their genuine concern to please God, even a mediocre treatment of the subject. Now while these people are in no danger of ignoring God, it may yet happen that some of them are in slight danger of tending toward the opposite extreme of bold presumption. This does not mean that they consciously intend to impose on God; on the contrary they may be sincerely seeking to please God and at the same time fail because they take Him too much for granted.

If one suspect that one is failing, or if one wish to engage in self-examination as a periodic precaution, no better method could be employed than the consideration of conspicuous Scriptural examples.

Undoubtedly the clearest early example is to be found in Abraham. In the fifteenth chapter of Genesis there is the description of a remarkable meeting of God and Abraham. Abraham had asked God for a sign by which he should know that God would fulfill His promise. That sign involved a vision in which Abraham saw God as nearly as any man can see God. What, then, was the instinctive reaction of Abraham? What effect did that vision have upon him? Was it the ordinary effect that good news has on most people? Did he shout? Was he vociferous? Or was the reaction more subdued? The text makes it perfectly clear: "... and, lo, an horror of great darkness fell upon him." The thoughtful worshipper may demur at taking the experience of Abraham as normative for his own. For, in the first place, it was a vision and visions are not in order today. Even if they were, it is not obvious that visions are safe guides for states of ordinary consciousness. Second, it was a sign which Abraham may have needed but which has no immediate application to common folk. And third, the revelation or presence of God was so definite and intimate that no one today could reasonably expect its duplication.

Now, although the first two of these three reasons are true enough in themselves, the third rather indicates, not so much *why* as *how* we may apply the experience of Abraham to ourselves. Even though we do not expect such a definite revelation in this life, the account in Genesis shows how a man actually behaves when face to face with God. If the manner of others is more carefree, perhaps the reason is that they do not know God as Abraham knew Him; if others really knew God, they might conclude that Abraham's horror was justified. Therefore, we may ask ourselves the question, if God when so personally revealed elicits such a response, what should our present attitude be toward such a God? For He is the same unchanging God.

However, not to run the risk of misunderstanding a single illustration, one may turn to Exodus 3:6. Here Moses was confronted by the living God; what was his attitude? The text reads: "... And Moses hid his face; for he was afraid to look upon God." The account of Gideon in Judges 6:22 is entirely similar.

Or, one may quickly turn the pages of the Bible and come to Isaiah 6:5. When Isaiah was brought into the presence of God, what did he consider the proper attitude to be? Did he rejoice and sing? Did he take it as a good fortune though somewhat as a matter of course? Did he feel at home? No, the text does not indicate that our common attitudes in our everyday life are appropriate, but rather the verse reads: "Woe is me, for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips: for mine eyes have seen the King, Jehovah of hosts."

II.

Now it is easily imagined that someone, particularly if he have leanings toward liberal theology, will argue that these illustrations have all been taken from the Old Testament, and that therefore they do not apply to the present generation. Jesus has come since that time and has taught that God is our Father, that we should have confidence before Him, and that we should no longer look on Him as an oriental despot after the manner of the Old Testament. This type of argument is such a confusion of truth, error, and invalid inference that it cannot be disposed of in one breath. The examples so far adduced do not indicate that the men of the Old Testament lacked confidence in God. In fact Abraham is the outstanding example of faith; and it is also recorded that God spoke to Moses face to face as a man speaketh unto his friend. (Exodus 33:11.) And those who go so far as to use without modification the figure of an oriental despot are usually guilty of at least a semi-conscious misinterpretation. Of course, Jesus taught that God is our Father, and undoubtedly His teaching goes beyond that of the Old Testament; but it "goes beyond" in the sense of explanation. For the New Testament, as many passages indicate (Romans 1:17, 3:21, 4:6, Gal. 3:8) does not abrogate but rather completes the Old. It brings to

light what was previously obscure, so that the Lord rightly says to us, “O slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken...”

The Christian who wishes to have an accurate understanding of the Bible must avoid two extremes. The first extreme deepens the colors of the Old Testament and fades out the colors of the New. It overestimates the severe aspects of the Old by forgetting what is said of loving-kindness and tender mercies, while at the same time it is voluble on the beauty of Jesus and silent on what He said about a generation of vipers, outer darkness, and gnashing of teeth. This lack of balance which is characteristic of the liberal theology finally results in a rejection of the Scriptures as the very Word of God and in a conception of God as love to such an extent as to deny Him sufficient righteousness to punish sin.

The other extreme to be avoided is less dangerous in that it is less attractive, for no one would wish to underestimate the clearer revelation of God as Father which we have in the New Testament. For we have not received the spirit of bondage again unto fear but the spirit of adoption whereby we cry, Abba, Father. To use an illustration from human affairs, there comes to mind two boys or young men, who in addressing their fathers always made frequent use of the word, Sir. With them it was always, Yes, Sir; No, Sir; I beg your pardon, Sir. Perhaps one who is accustomed to more tender language is not capable of passing judgment on such usage; but at first sight it might seem that respect had passed over into timid servility. The other extreme, however, in which a boy addresses his father as the old man, is obviously worse. So then, the Christian must choose his course between these two, maintaining a proper reverence without a spirit of bondage to fear.

III.

To discover by way of concrete illustration how the New Testament confirms rather than abrogates the Old, one may consider the disciples' relation to Jesus. At first it would seem that the fear of God had here disappeared into human familiarity. But we must remember that during the earthly life of our Lord His divine nature was veiled by His human nature. His glory and deity did not clearly shine forth. On one occasion, however, there was a difference. After Jesus had brought Peter, James and John up into a mountain He was transfigured before them. Even so, Peter managed to sputter some well-intentioned but utterly inappropriate sentences. But while he yet spake, God spoke from heaven, and the Scriptures record that the disciples were *sore* afraid. They had heard the voice of God.

Then, after the earthly ministry had been accomplished, one notes in the first chapters of the Acts the joy and freedom characteristic of the early Christians, and one is tempted to see in this a modification of the fearful attitude of the Old Testament. At the same time, the Holy Spirit, Who gives the joy, is not to be trifled with. His joy is not a careless thoughtlessness nor a superficial emotion. The fear of the Lord forms its background. This fear need not be exactly the same kind of fear which Paul had in mind when he spoke of the spirit of bondage to fear. Paul was thinking of the fear of the extreme penalty of sin; but the fear of the Lord is something quite different. It is possible that the early Christians in the first glow of their new zeal momentarily forgot the lessons of the ancient Scriptures; but God ended their forgetfulness by a serious example. Ananias and Saphira conspired to lie to the Holy Ghost and they were on that account stricken dead. Then the Apostle records that *great fear* came upon all that heard it. Fear rather than hilarity is the proper attitude when a man comes face to face with God.

But how may we tell whether we have the proper attitude; how may we know to avoid both a cheap familiarity and a state of abjection which argues lack of confidence in God? At first it may be a disappointment to find that the Scriptures spend very little time describing subjective feelings. Frequently, as in Exodus 33 and 34, the account is reserved and objective. But if the Scriptures give no

psychological analysis, how may we judge ourselves? Fortunately there is, as it would seem, a very sure method, available to all who ask the question seriously. It is to be observed that Abraham, Moses, Isaiah and the Christians in Acts did not study, fret, or figure how to attain to the proper attitude. The response to God was instinctive, instantaneous, unpremeditated: It was not the result of introspection; it was the result of seeing God.

From this it may be inferred that if we wish to have a proper attitude before God, we should cease to study attitudes and, instead, seek and study God. There is a certain gentleman, who, along with many estimable qualities, is constantly feeling his pulse and inquiring into the state of his stomach and other organs. He is a constant visitor of three or four doctors and regularly takes as many prescribed medicines. To be sure the state of his health requires a physician, but his constant attention to the least fluctuations of his heart is not doing him any good, and it is a marvel how his stomach can put up with so many drugs. Similarly, the state of spiritual hypochondria is not desirable. Sickness may require examination; and occasional spiritual check-ups are good; but as a regular thing the direction of attention should be healthy and objective. Subjectivity breeds morbidity. And the Scriptural examples cited substantiate this view.

IV.

The next question naturally suggests itself after the first. If our attention should be directed to God rather than to ourselves, how may we know that we are coming into contact with God and are not deceiving ourselves with vain imaginations? The answer is as easy as the question is natural, though first, the answer may be given negatively, using for concreteness and contrast an illustration from the Old Testament. The thirteenth chapter of First Chronicles shows that mere good intentions are insufficient to bring us into a blessed contact with God. The chapter gives the account of David's first attempt to bring back to its proper place in Israel the Ark of the Covenant which the Philistines had previously captured. All the people were sincere in wanting to have again this symbol of God's presence in their midst. The first part of the chapter gives a joyous picture of a multitude desiring to please God. Their intentions were very good. But their joy was turned to sorrow, fear and dismay, when God showed His displeasure at their attempt. While their intentions were good, they had failed to ascertain how God wished to be worshipped. They thought that good intentions were a substitute for knowledge. So long as they meant well, so long as their feelings were acceptable to themselves, it made little difference what God had objectively commanded.

The situation has frequent parallels today. In the first place the religious liberal thinks he can come to God in his own way, and can dispense with the blood of Jesus Christ, Who is the only way to the Father. His intentions may be of the best, but they merit only God's displeasure. In the second place, those who have trusted in Christ, those who are truly regenerated by the Holy Ghost, also on occasion disregard God's commands, and seek to please Him in their own ways. The result can only be that instead of drawing nearer to God, they deafen themselves to His voice.

This unfortunate result can easily be avoided. There is no good reason for remaining in ignorance of what God would have us do. So to change from the previous negative answer, a positive and definitely certain way of coming into the presence of God may be stated. And the more definitely we see God the less we need to worry about our attitude. That sure way of coming to know God is the study of the revelation of Himself which He has made to us. Holy Scripture is the only infallible rule of faith and practice. In the Scriptures, and in them alone, do we have a clear and accurate concept of God. Our duty, then, is to study them diligently, carefully noting the attributes of God, the distinctions of His persons, particularly the person of the Son, and also all God's works of providence. When we thus

come to know God, then we, like Abraham, will naturally have a proper attitude before Him. It will not result from a subjective study of our emotions, but from an accurate knowledge of God Himself. Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is the whole duty of man.