

POWER

"... the gospel ... is the power of God unto salvation ..." (Romans 1:16)

SUPERFICIAL SPIRITUALITY (2 TIM. 3:4-5)

by Wade L. Webster

In the long ago, David prayed, "Help, LORD; for the godly man ceaseth; for the faithful fail from among the children of men" (Psa. 12:1).

Godly men were a dying breed in David's day. Evidently, the same was true in Jeremiah's day. God challenged the weeping prophet with the following words: "Run ye to and fro through the streets of Jerusalem, and see now, and know, and seek in the broad places thereof, if ye can find a man, if there be any that executeth judgment, that seeketh the truth; and I will pardon it" (Jer. 5:1). The implication was that Jeremiah would have some difficulty finding a man that executed judgment and sought the truth.

It seems that the situation was even worse in Ezekiel's day. Through Ezekiel, God declared, "And I sought for a man among them, that should make up the hedge, and stand in the gap before me for the land, that I should not destroy it: but I found none" (Ezek. 22:30).

In David's day, godly men were ceasing; in Jeremiah's day, they were few and far between; and in Ezekiel's day, they could not be found. For sure, our situation today compares to one of these. Although there are many who appear godly on the outside, there are only a few who are actually godly on the inside. Whited sepulchres abound (Mt. 23:27-28). The Apostle Paul addressed this problem in his second letter to

Timothy. Of some, he wrote, "Traitors, heady, highminded, lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God; Having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof: from such turn away" (2 Tim. 3:4-5).

The Display

In the second letter to Timothy, Paul spoke of those who had "a form of godliness" (2 Tim. 3:5). The term "form" refers to the "mere form" or "semblance."ⁱ Those that Paul was describing had the semblance of godliness, but not the substance. Ezekiel wrote,

And they come unto thee as the people cometh, and they sit before thee as my people, and they hear thy words, but they will not do them: for with their mouth they shew much love, but their heart goeth after their covetousness. And, lo, thou art unto them as a very lovely song of one that hath a pleasant voice, and can play well on an instrument: for they hear thy words, but they do them not (Ezek. 33:31-32).

Those of Ezekiel's day had a form of godliness. They looked like God's people and sounded like God's people on the outside. However, their heart was far from Him. In like manner, Isaiah's people made "mention of the God of Israel" but

"not in truth, nor in righteousness" (Isa. 48:1). They dropped God's name, but didn't develop God's nature. Like those of Paul's day, they professed that they knew God, but in works they denied Him (Tit. 1:16). Like those of Jesus' day, they outwardly appeared "righteous unto men," but within were "full of hypocrisy and iniquity" (Mat. 23:27-28).

Sadly, like those of Ezekiel's day, Isaiah's day, and Paul's day, many today just "seem to be religious" (Jam. 1:26). Their spirituality is skin deep at best.

The Denial

There is great profit and power in true godliness. Concerning its profit, Paul wrote, "For bodily exercise profiteth little: but godliness is profitable unto all things, having promise of the life that now is, and of that which is to come" (1 Tim. 4:8). In like manner, concerning its power, Paul wrote, "I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me" (Phil. 4:13; cf. Rom. 8:31; Prov. 16:7).

Please take note of the "all things" in both of these passages. Godliness is profitable and powerful unto all things. The passage under consideration in this study, 2 Timothy 3:4-5, uses the word "power." Thayer noted that this word refers to the "power residing in a

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thing by its very nature." ⁱⁱ In other words, there is inherent power in godliness. Those who exercise themselves unto godliness tap into the power of an all-powerful God.

Although godliness is profitable and powerful, it loses its profit and power when it is superficial (Rom. 2:20; Isa. 48:1; Tit. 1:16; Jam. 1:26). Those who merely have "a form of godliness," lose the blessings and the benefits of a sincere godliness. In the words of Paul, they deny the power of true godliness (2 Tim. 3:5).

Thayer says that the word translated as "denying" in our text means "to show estrangement from a thing." ⁱⁱⁱ Those who merely have a form of godliness, and not the real thing, are estranged or separated from the profit and power of godliness. Instead of being empowered to do "all things" (Phil. 4:13), they can do "nothing" (John 15:5). Perhaps, there is no area in our lives that better shows the power of sincere godliness and the weakness of superficial godliness than the area of prayer.

Those who are truly godly possess great power in prayer. James wrote, "Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed. The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much" (Jam. 5:16; cf. 1 John 3:22; Eph. 3:20). However, the man who only appears righteous or godly cannot claim this promise. His prayers will not avail much. In fact, until he repents and is restored, he is estranged or separated from the privilege and power of prayer. God is far from him (Prov. 15:29; cf. 28:9; Isa. 1:15; Jam. 1:5-8).

Isaiah declared, "Behold, the LORD'S hand is not shortened, that it cannot save; neither his ear heavy, that it cannot hear: But your iniquities have separated between you and your

God, and your sins have hid his face from you, that he will not hear" (Isa. 59:1-2).

There are numerous examples in the Bible of those who denied or became estranged from the power of godliness (Josh. 7:12, 13; Judg. 2:14). One example that stands out in my mind is that of Samson, the strong man of the Old Testament (Judg. 16:15-20).

As you recall, Samson performed feat after feat of strength until he was sweet-talked by a heathen hairdresser named Delilah and broke his vow. Then, he became like other men. When the Philistines descended upon him, he arose to fight them off as he had done countless times before; however, he was powerless to resist. His strength was gone. It lay in a heap of hair upon the floor.

Another example that stands out to me is that of Israel. They overcame the large city of Jericho and then fled before the little city of Ai (Josh. 6-7). What was the difference? The

difference was sin.

When Achan took of the spoils of Jericho, sin entered the camp of Israel. When sin entered, Israel became estranged from the power of God. Walls would no longer fall down before them. Without the power of God, even the smallest enemy could put them to flight.

It should be noted that the pious pretender not only loses the power and profit of godliness, but also brings the power and price of sin to bear against himself (Rom. 6:23). David declared, "The face of the LORD is against them that do evil, to cut off the remembrance of them from the earth" (Psa. 34:16). No doubt, David knew firsthand the consequences of superficial spirituality (Psa. 32:1-6).

The Directive

Paul instructed Timothy and the brethren with whom he worked to

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Deuteronomy 5:32

Wade Webster, Editor

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"turn away" from those who had only a "form" of godliness (2 Tim. 3:5). They were supposed to "withdraw" from those who walked disorderly, even if they pretended and professed to be godly (2 Thess. 3:6). Why did Paul give this directive? Let me suggest several reasons:

- First, we need to turn away from those who have only a form of godliness that they may be ashamed. "And if any man obey not our word by this epistle, note that man, and have no company with him, that he may be ashamed" (2 Thess. 3:14; cf. 1 Cor. 5:5).
- Second, we need to turn away from those who have only a form of godliness that others might fear. Hypocrisy is contagious. Paul wrote, "Them that sin rebuke before all, that others also may fear" (1 Tim. 5:20; cf. Acts 5:5, 11; 1 Cor. 15:33).
- Third, we need to turn away from those who have only a form of godliness that the influence of the church might be spared (1 Cor. 5; Gen. 34:30; Mt. 5:14-16; 1 Pet. 4:14-16).
- Fourth, we need to turn away from those who have only a form of godliness that God might not remove His power from us (Josh. 7). No doubt, you recall what happened to Israel when there was sin in the camp. A little leaven will leaven the whole lump (1 Cor. 5:6).

Perhaps, one of the reasons why we have so many pretenders today is because we do not follow Paul's inspired directive.

Paul's inspired instructions are desperately need today. Many are just going through the motions of being godly. They have a form of godliness, but are denying the power thereof. Let's encourage them to be genuine. If they refuse to repent and return to genuine godliness, then we must turn away from them.

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- i Thayer, Joseph Henry. **A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament**. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1977, p. 419, #3446.
 - ii Ibid., p. 159-160, #1411.
 - iii Ibid., p. 74, #720.