

# Character and knowledge

**Reference: SHM-S09-049-Mw-R00-P2**

(Originally spoken on 3 August 2014, edited on 4 August 2014)

Web site: <http://www.ajourneyinlife.org> and <http://www.ajourneyinlife.com>

This message is protected by copyright © 2014 Lim Liong. Permission is given to reproduce part (where the meaning is retained and the part is not quoted out of context) or all, of it, for personal use or for distribution, on condition that **no changes are made** and the message is **distributed free** of charge. Please do so prayerfully and discreetly.

Unless otherwise stated, Scripture quotations are taken from the NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE®, Copyright © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.

The paragraphs above as well as this paragraph must be included when the message is reproduced so that others who reproduce it will be conscious of the conditions stated above.

Let us turn to **John 7: 43-49**.

## **John 7: 43-49**

- 43 So a division occurred in the crowd because of Him.
- 44 Some of them wanted to seize Him, but no one laid hands on Him.
- 45 The officers then came to the chief priests and Pharisees, and they said to them, "Why did you not bring Him?"
- 46 The officers answered, "Never has a man spoken the way this man speaks."
- 47 The Pharisees then answered them, "You have not also been led astray, have you?"
- 48 "No one of the rulers or Pharisees has believed in Him, has he?"
- 49 "But this crowd which does not know the Law is accursed."

As we seek to appreciate who the Lord Jesus is, as we seek to get to know Him more personally and deepen in our walk with Him, it is important for us to seek to understand what He values, what is important to Him, how He views situations in life.

And as we identify with Him, we can then come to a true knowledge of the Lord Jesus.

For today I want to concentrate on this remark that the Pharisees made. They said, "But this crowd which does not know the Law is accursed."

So as it stands, what they were saying was that knowledge of the Law was primary: This crowd does not know the Law and because of that, they are accursed. In contrast, the Pharisees knew the Law and they thought that they knew the Law very well and so, they must be quite blessed.

We all know that in reality in the eyes of God, it was not true. Many of the Pharisees, while they knew the Law, they were not true to the spirit of the Law; they were not living according to the intentions of the Law. And in fact, the Lord Jesus pronounced woes on them.

Their values were very different. To them, knowledge of the Law was very important, so they spent many hours and days and years studying the Law: The crowd did not have such knowledge, so they would not be blessed. They had to be taught by them; they had to follow their instructions.

So the Lord Jesus told this parable about a Pharisee and a tax collector. This is a very interesting and helpful parable. He told this parable to some people who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and viewed others with contempt. This was very fitting in the description of the Pharisees.

What was the primary difference between the Pharisee and the tax collector as they approached God? The Lord Jesus said,

"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. I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.'

So it seemed that the Pharisee was doing very well. He knew the Law and he seemed to be acting according to the Law: 'I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.' Fasting, tithing, were taught in the Law and the Pharisees seemed to be fulfilling the requirements of the Law.

On the other hand, 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!'

This is the contrast between the two and the verdict is clear: the Pharisee went away condemned; the tax collector went away justified.

What was the central difference? We can look at it from different angles but here the Lord Jesus said, "...everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted."

The Pharisee exalted himself. He regarded himself highly; he looked down on others, he despised others, he condemned others. The tax collector humbled himself before God. He recognized his unworthiness, his sinfulness; he recognized the holiness of God. And because of that, as he humbled himself before God, seeking God for mercy, God was prepared to forgive him.

The tax collector might not have known much of the Law but one thing he knew: he was a sinner; he needed forgiveness. So that is the primary issue that he needed to know: that he was a sinner who needed forgiveness; he needed to come to God for forgiveness.

The Pharisee did not appreciate that. He thought he was all right; he was righteous, he did all the right things. He did not need that kind of confession, that seeking of mercy from God: "I thank You that I am not like other people. I am different. I am holy, I am righteous, I am good" - in himself.

So one way we can look at this is: the difference is the focus. The Pharisee was focusing on himself. He thought he was good, he was righteous, he was knowledgeable, he was doing the things right. He did not see things from God's eyes, from God's perspective. He did not understand true reality.

He was focused on himself; he had an exaggerated opinion of himself, an inaccurate understanding of himself. And so in his unrighteousness, he proclaimed himself righteous.

In contrast, the tax collector, though sinful, he focused on God. He wanted to look up to God but he dared not because he recognized God was holy, he was sinful; he was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven. He did not dare to look up to God because he knew that God was righteous and holy. He was beating his breast and he said, 'God, be merciful to me, the sinner!'

Yes, he had sinned; he had done many things wrong. He cheated people (probably); he coveted the treasures of this world, but he came before God in repentance. He recognized that he was wrong and he wanted God to be merciful to him, that he may be given the opportunity to live his life the right way. He humbled himself before God.

So then, as we look at situations like that, we may consider: where should we place knowledge? "...this crowd which does not know the Law is accursed." They did not have knowledge of the Law. How important is this knowledge of the Law? The Pharisees had that knowledge but they were condemned. The tax collector did not seem to have much of that knowledge but he was justified.

The apostle Paul put it this way:

**1 Corinthians 8: 1**

Now concerning things sacrificed to idols, we know that we all have knowledge. Knowledge makes arrogant, but love edifies.

So the apostle Paul, a man of great knowledge, he said, "Knowledge makes arrogant, but love edifies." And this can happen very readily: We can become knowledgeable, we can assume that we are on the right path, and we can become arrogant.

As we look at these passages, we may then conclude: “Knowledge is not important. What is important is I must be humble. Just be humble before God; I will be all right. There is no need to pursue knowledge; no need to know so much.”

In some ways that may be true but that kind of statement very often arises from a heart where there is something amiss.

If you are truly humble, you know that the only way to correct yourself, to become right and good, is to find out more what is the right way, and to live according to that. Therefore knowledge is important.

The Jews, the apostle Paul said, “They have a zeal for God but not according to knowledge”. So although they had a zeal for God, it was not based on God’s revelation, it was not in line with what was in God’s heart. They then were persecuting Paul.

Paul likewise was persecuting the Christians because he had a zeal for God but also not according to knowledge.

So then what should we do? Should we pursue knowledge or should we not? If so, how do we do that? Let us turn to **2 Peter 1: 5-8**.

**2 Peter 1: 5-8**

- 5 Now for this very reason also, applying all diligence, in your faith supply moral excellence, and in *your* moral excellence, knowledge,
- 6 and in *your* knowledge, self-control, and in *your* self-control, perseverance, and in *your* perseverance, godliness,
- 7 and in *your* godliness, brotherly kindness, and in *your* brotherly kindness, love.
- 8 For if these *qualities* are yours and are increasing, they render you neither useless nor unfruitful in the true knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The apostle Peter was talking about true knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. And what is that true knowledge?

He explains in these verses; and in these verses, he mentions “knowledge”. We need knowledge.

But if we look at this very carefully, you will realize that this knowledge that he is talking about is at the heart of and in the midst of moral qualities of excellence. They are all associated with moral excellence.

He says, "...applying all diligence, in your faith supply moral excellence". Here he is talking about living faith, right kind of faith. If you truly believe in God, if you truly want to follow Him, you acknowledge Him as your God, your Lord, your Saviour; if that is your kind of faith, then in your faith supply moral excellence.

The word "supply" can also be translated as "add" or "develop". In your faith supply or add moral excellence. You must develop moral excellence in the context of your faith. If there is no moral excellence in your faith, then your faith is a question mark. Is it true faith or is it false faith?

True faith will lead to moral excellence. It must manifest in moral excellence because the meaning of true faith is: We recognize God, who is perfect morally, and we are prepared to be committed to Him, to worship Him, to follow Him, to obey His instructions.

If we do that, we certainly must and will develop moral excellence. The Lord Jesus said, "If you love Me, you will keep My commandments." If we keep His commandments, we will become like Him, we will develop that quality of being like Him.

So notice he says, "...in your faith supply moral excellence, and in *your* moral excellence, knowledge": knowledge – not any kind of knowledge; acquiring knowledge so that we can know many things, including studying the Bible to know many things; that is not the kind of knowledge that God is concerned about. God wants us to develop knowledge in the context of moral excellence.

Yes, we need to study the Scriptures, we need to know accurately what the Scriptures reveal, but it must be with the right heart, with the right spirit.

God did instruct Joshua to meditate day and night on the Law of Moses. He told him, "You must ponder over what God has revealed in the Scriptures – the Law of Moses – day and night. You must study, consider, ponder, think over." For what purpose? It was not to accumulate knowledge after knowledge. He said, "...so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written."

It is with a desire to obey God, to fulfil His will that we study, that we seek to acquire knowledge.

This is very, very important. Be very careful about acquiring knowledge so that you can become more knowledgeable. Knowledge makes arrogant, but love edifies. If we do not first develop love in our hearts, a right spirit, then that knowledge can make us arrogant.

But if there is love in our hearts, that knowledge will promote moral excellence because if we love God, our knowledge will be in the direction of understanding what is in the heart of God so that we can obey Him. If we love our fellow men, our knowledge will be in the direction of what would be the most helpful for our fellow men, how we can minister to them, contribute to their lives effectively.

So we acquire knowledge with a purpose, with a direction and it arises from moral excellence.

"...and in *your* knowledge, self-control..." Can we have knowledge without self-control? Certainly: We display our knowledge, we know a lot of things; we want people to know – no self-control. That knowledge is not useful.

The knowledge that we have must be in a context where we exercise meaningful self-control. We speak at a time when it is appropriate, it is helpful, it is meaningful to God. And this has to do with the spirit of moral excellence.

Knowledge acquired in the context of moral excellence is not just reading about it or listening or just absorbing what we see around us. Knowledge associated with moral excellence has very much to do with living. It has very much to do with applying what we understand of God's ways and His will to our lives so that it becomes real to us. It is genuine, it is tested, it is lived out, and we have knowledge of what it means.

Many people can tell you, "God is good. God is kind. God is gracious", but the same people who tell you that can also be living their lives often grumbling and complaining: "Why must this happen to me? God does not seem to care." So that is not true knowledge. It is just a recognition. Yes, God is good, God is gracious; we recognize, but is it true in our lives? Is it knowledge that arises from moral excellence in our being? So in that knowledge, there will be self-control. We understand what is helpful, what is edifying, what is good.

"...and in *your* self-control, perseverance..." We will be determined because we recognize this is a right path: this is good, it is worthwhile. We are prepared to give ourselves for it.

And so as a result, we move in the direction of godliness: in perseverance... godliness... godliness, brotherly kindness... brotherly kindness, love. All these qualities move in the direction of perfect divine love: the highest quality in our being where we give ourselves for what is truly good, we care for the well-being of people not because we want something in return but because we love them, we care for what is good.



We love God because we know that He is good and we want to honour Him because it is a meaningful thing, it is a right thing to do.

So the apostle Peter says, "For if these *qualities* are yours and are increasing, they render you neither useless nor unfruitful in the true knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ."

True knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ is this kind of knowledge; not that kind of knowledge that the Pharisees were talking about. It is a knowledge that is alive, a knowledge in the context of a deep personal relationship with God, where we know who God is, we are not ashamed of Him, we live our lives to honour Him, and God knows us and He appreciates.

So if we want to understand what is in the heart of the Lord Jesus, then we know that this is central: the true knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ centres on moral excellence, moral and spiritual development in the context of which knowledge is acquired both by understanding as well as by living, by experience, and increasing reality.

And because of such, we will be increasingly identified with God.

So there is a relationship between character and knowledge.

They are not mutually exclusive but we need to understand how to develop the right kind of character in the context of healthy knowledge.

God has created all mankind with sufficient knowledge to know what is right, what is not right, so that they can pursue what is good. Gentiles do not have the Law but they have the Law written in their hearts: they know what is the right path, what is the wrong path.

But if we want to know God deeply, we cannot just say, "I already know all that there is about right and wrong and good and bad."

There is so much that we do not know. Our conscience does not tell us everything.

So, we need to learn, we need to acquire knowledge, we need to seek God. We need to be diligent to search the Scriptures, to study, to ask God to teach us, that the Holy Spirit may show us the right way.

But our study is with the intention, with the purpose, of living by what God says: that we should live by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God. This must be our purpose, our objective, our approach. Then the knowledge we acquire will be helpful.

So then let us come before the Lord and ask Him to help us to evaluate our lives: How have we been approaching our relationship with God and our acquiring of knowledge?

If our approach is good, let us deepen it, be diligent in it.

If it is faulty, unwholesome in some ways, let us ask Him to help us to correct that so that our time will be meaningfully spent in a way that will help us to grow well and to develop into His likeness.