

God's Work or Ours?

^{NRS} **Deuteronomy 4:5-9** See, just as the LORD my God has charged me, I now teach you statutes and ordinances for you to observe in the land that you are about to enter and occupy.⁶ You must observe them diligently, for this will show your wisdom and discernment to the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, "Surely this great nation is a wise and discerning people!"⁷ For what other great nation has a god so near to it as the LORD our God is whenever we call to him?⁸ And what other great nation has statutes and ordinances as just as this entire law that I am setting before you today?⁹ But take care and watch yourselves closely, so as neither to forget the things that your eyes have seen nor to let them slip from your mind all the days of your life; make them known to your children and your children's children--

^{NRS} **Matthew 7:18-24** A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit.¹⁹ Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.²⁰ Thus you will know them by their fruits.²¹ "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven.²² On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name?'²³ Then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers.'²⁴ "Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock.

^{NRS} **Galatians 6:2-10** Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.³ For if those who are nothing think they are something, they deceive themselves.⁴ All must test their own work; then that work, rather than their neighbor's work, will become a cause for pride.⁵ For all must carry their own loads.⁶ Those who are taught the word must share in all good things with their teacher.⁷ Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow.⁸ If you sow to your own flesh, you will reap corruption from the flesh; but if you sow to the Spirit, you will reap eternal life from the Spirit.⁹ So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up.¹⁰ So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith.

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The topic on the three by five card read, "Distinguishing the difference between God's work and our work. How do we know that what we are doing (*our work*) is in line with *God's work*?" That's a great question! And it's a lot deeper and more complicated than it might appear at first.

To begin with, it assumes that there is some work involved. In a lot of pop religion and spirituality that we see today in our society, very little is said about work. Every now and then, a news magazine or a TV news program will sponsor an opinion poll and report that some high percentage of Americans believe in God. Well, that's nice. But for some people, belief in God is nothing more than a vague agreement that there is a God. For a great many people, their involvement with God never goes farther than an exclamation of "Oh, my God!" when they're surprised or shocked. This is, of course, a beginning. But before we give our culture a lot of credit for believing in God, we might want to remember ^{NRS} **James 2:19** "You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe-- and shudder." The evil spirits not only believe in God, they know some basic theology. They know that there is one God. And, they know enough about God's character and power that they shudder in awe and respect. Believing in God is a beginning, not an end.

Some folks are known for their faithfulness to friends and their love of family. We speak highly of people who spend a lot of time with their children and grandchildren. We praise them for their devotion, their dedication to raising their children, their care for other family members,

their warm friendship and devoted service to the community. And so we praise them highly for the work that they do and the service that they render, as well we should. But like basic belief in God, this is only a good start. Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, ^{NRS} **Matthew 5:46** "For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?"⁴⁷ And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?" Jesus makes the point that family love and deep friendships are not the distinguishing characteristics of those who follow him. Some of the roughest characters I worked with in construction work were devoted parents. Some of the shadiest people I worked with in business were loving, family-centered people.

Some people move beyond simple intellectual agreement that God exists, and they want to have a spiritual and personal relationship with God. They seek comfort in their troubles, guidance in their decisions, and perhaps some sort of pleasant spiritual euphoria that comes from experiencing an especially close presence of God. Well and good. I hope that we are all deepening our spiritual lives and listening for the still, small voice of the Spirit. But even here, as laudable and as important as this is, there is more. We heard the text from the seventh chapter in Matthew, still part of the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus teaches that "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven." Jesus says that to enter the kingdom of God, one does the will of God. There is doing involved. Not only belief, but actual doing. Words alone do not move you into the kingdom of heaven. Bearing good fruit is essential, Jesus said.

Now we know how Jesus kept telling people that the kingdom of heaven was close by, and even that it was within people. Doing God's work isn't about being good enough to get into heaven. It isn't about scoring enough points to make the eternal team. Rather, doing God's will moves you along the journey in this life, the journey that takes you further into the kingdom of God here and now. Let me give a small example. Some years ago Cathy and I went through Stephen Ministry training. There were a lot of words involved - words about listening rather than fixing, words about the value of being beside someone as they went through a painful time in life, and words about how Stephen Ministers received more than they gave. The words painted a picture of a meaningful ministry and we believed the words. But, it was in the doing of Stephen Ministry that we moved into a life with deeper meaning, a life within some portion of the kingdom of heaven. The believing isn't what puts us into a transforming relationship with God. It's the doing.

Those of you who have gone on mission trips have experienced this. The believing, the planning, the preparation, are all important, but it's in the doing that your relationship with God and neighbor is changed. It's in the doing, that transformation takes place. It's in the doing that you find yourself living in the kingdom. It's no wonder that James says that, ". . . faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead."(James 2:17, NRS)

So how do we discern if the work we are doing is God's work? In today's passage from Galatians, Paul says that we are each to test our own work. And, writing to the Thessalonians, Paul told them, "Do not quench the Spirit."²⁰ Do not despise the words of prophets,²¹ but test everything; hold fast to what is good." It's apparent that this isn't a simple process. This will require some thought.

The first step in discernment is to do like King Solomon did as he was about to be anointed as king of Israel ---- pray for wisdom. (I Kings 3:9-12) Ask for help. Ask for guidance. Ask for the Spirit. Don't pray that your wishes will be confirmed. Instead, be open the Spirit.

Not my will, Lord, but yours. Pray for wisdom. This is what Paul is saying when he says, "Do not quench the Spirit."

Secondly, Paul says, "Do not despise the words of the prophets." The prophets spent very little time talking about what the future held. We tend to only read those parts and say, "See, they said Jesus was coming!" That's reassuring and wonderful and warm and fuzzy and comforting. But then, we ignore the vast bulk of the message of the prophets, the challenging preaching. The repeated demand that God's children put their trust in God instead of in wealth and prestige and power. Time after time after time the prophets told the people to care for the widow, the orphan, the poor, the stranger, the weak and powerless. If all we do is listen to the parts that speak of a coming messiah, then we despise the message of the prophets.

Thirdly, Paul says, "test everything, hold fast to what is good." Test everything. Do some sorting. This even applies to scripture. The Bible is filled with vivid bad examples. Sometimes the story is about something terrible, but the text doesn't come right out and condemn the action. The scripture expects you to do some discerning. Read the last nine verses of Genesis chapter 19. There is no condemnation of Lot's two daughters, but we are expected to test everything and hold onto what is good.

To know God's will we must begin with the scriptures. All else is secondary. But care must be taken. Scripture can be abused. We can search for only those passages that seem to confirm what we want to hear. We can read scripture through the eyes of our time and place - and overlook the message it held for the reader when it was written. In so far as possible, we need to try to read scripture with an openness to the still small voice of the Spirit.

To a lesser degree, we can turn to tradition. The creeds and confessions are part of our tradition. Deeply faithful Christians, facing the issues of their time and place, wrote the best wisdom they could summon. With prayer and discernment, those creeds and confessions can provide much guidance for us today. It is not always necessary to reinvent the wheel. But, we must test everything. In this case, we test to see if the wheel still fits, so to speak.

We need to guard against pride, selfishness, and shortsightedness. So it is with humility that we pray that God's will, not ours, will be done. Nonetheless, we are not without some resources of our own. We are created in God's image.(Genesis 1:27) Or, as the psalmist put it, the Lord is mindful of us and has made us a little lower than the heavenly beings.(Psalm 8:4-6) We have been given minds. Reason, logic, and thinking are part of the tools of testing everything and discerning what is God's work. To do this, our minds need exercise, and development, and feeding, just as our bodies do. When we fail to develop and train our minds, we ignore one of God's greatest gifts to us.

Finally, experience can be part of the process. Not just our own personal experience, but our experience as people. Memory is important. We can't learn from experience if we don't remember. Over and over in the Old Testament we read that the people forgot God - and then they got into trouble. It isn't enough to just remember. Evaluating our experience is necessary, also. It's been said that those who refuse to learn from history are doomed to repeat it. On the other hand, we can build on our experience. We can stand on the shoulders of giants. Test everything. Evaluate your experience and the experience of history. Hold on to what is good.

So, pick up your Bible. Do more than just read it. Study it. Consider what others have learned from scripture. Strengthen your mental muscles and train your mind to test what you read and remember. Study and discern as you sit by the path of life. Then, rise up and do God's work, work that will take you down the path into the kingdom of God. Do not despise the words of the prophets, but heed these words of the prophet Jeremiah.

Take your stand and watch at the crossroads;
Inquire about the ancient paths;
Which was the path leading to good,
The Godly way?
Take that path, and walk in it,
And you will find rest for your soul. (Jeremiah 6:16)

Amen.

^{NRS} **1 Thessalonians 5:14** And we urge you, beloved, to admonish the idlers, encourage the faint hearted, help the weak, be patient with all of them. ¹⁵ See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all. ¹⁶ Rejoice always, ¹⁷ pray without ceasing, ¹⁸ give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. ¹⁹ Do not quench the Spirit. ²⁰ Do not despise the words of prophets, ²¹ but test everything; hold fast to what is good; ²² abstain from every form of evil. ²³ May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁴ The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this.

^{NRS} **Luke 11:42** "But woe to you Pharisees! For you tithe mint and rue and herbs of all kinds, and neglect justice and the love of God; it is these you ought to have practiced, without neglecting the others.

^{NRS} **1 Kings 3:9** Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil; for who can govern this your great people?" ¹⁰ It pleased the Lord that Solomon had asked this. ¹¹ God said to him, "Because you have asked this, and have not asked for yourself long life or riches, or for the life of your enemies, but have asked for yourself understanding to discern what is right, ¹² I now do according to your word. Indeed I give you a wise and discerning mind; no one like you has been before you and no one like you shall arise after you.

^{NLT} **Psalms 8:4** what are mortals that you should think of us, mere humans that you should care for us? ⁵ For you made us only a little lower than God, and you crowned us with glory and honor. ⁶ You put us in charge of everything you made, giving us authority over all things--

Jeremiah 6:16 Take your stand and watch at the crossroads; Inquire about the ancient paths; Which was the path leading to good, The Godly way? Take that path, and walk in it, And you will find rest for your soul.