

Dear Friends,

I have often wondered at the utter blindness of the religious Jewish establishment of Jesus' time. Many of these men had dedicated their lives to their faith. They invested long hours of study, often daily, into their faith. Had they known their Old Testament Scriptures as well as they should have, how could they miss the signs, the evidence, of His Person and coming? He fulfilled every prophetic description given in the Old Testament. However, as we study their history in greater detail, we learn that they invested these long hours of study, often not in their Old Testament writings, but in subsequent writings that taught them more about the writers' opinions than about their actual Scriptures. One example makes the point clearly. In Matthew 15:1-9 we read about the Jews questioning Jesus. Why did Jesus' disciples violate the "traditions of the elders" by eating bread without washing their hands? Yes, washing before eating is a wise and hygienic practice, but should it be regarded as a sacred religious tradition? Jesus responded to them with a question and a supporting example. Why did they, by their traditions violate the law of God by not honoring their parents? And, to make their offense the more grievous, they used their religious traditions to rationalize their violation of God's law. For professing Christians, this lesson should wisely inform and enlighten us; God's Word alone, Scripture alone, intensely and regularly studied, and believed, should be our exclusive source of knowledge regarding all things moral and spiritual.

This lesson exemplifies a significant error in thinking that folks who should hold to their Bibles alone have practiced in every age of Christianity. What is our "Epistemology," the source, or sources, that we honor by claiming them as our source of reliable information? By adding the traditions of the elders to their Old Testament Scriptures, the Jews of Jesus' day blinded themselves to both God's true Word and to Jesus, God's "Christ," the Messiah, God come in human flesh prophesied throughout their Old Testament.

Our choice of sources for what we hold as reliable knowledge will mold our minds into its shape. (2 Corinthians 3:18 KJV) If we choose the wrong source, we are liable to believe error as if it were Bible truth. The Jews' rejection of Jesus in this week's study passage reveals the gravity of choosing the wrong sources for what we rely on and claim as "Truth" in our belief system. In this week's Gleanings, I try to make the case for God and for Scripture alone as our exclusive "Epistemology," our one trusted source of information that we trust to shape our minds, our thinking about moral values and all things spiritual. Lord help us to memorize 2 Timothy 3:16-17 and to apply its divine, from God, filter to all things moral and spiritual that challenge our thinking, our world view.

Lord bless,
Joe Holder

Is Jesus the One Good Shepherd?

There was a division therefore again among the Jews for these sayings. And many of them said, He hath a devil, and is mad; why hear ye him? Others said, These are not the words of him that hath a devil. Can a devil open the eyes of the blind? (John 10:19-21 KJV 1900)

When people decide not to believe or practice Jesus' teachings, they tend to look for and to believe just about anything they hear over Him and His word in Scripture. Joshua warned the people in his day. Once they decided it was "evil" to serve the Lord, they could choose anything else. One false god, one false religion, was as odious to the Lord as the other. (Joshua 24:15 KJV) For people devoted to serving the Lord, such as Joshua and his house, no choice was to be made. They were committed to serving the Lord—period. That decision eliminated the need to make such choices. We see echoes of this problem in the Jewish leaders' reaction to Jesus. They gladly believed anything, especially anything bad, about Jesus rather than believe the obvious. Can—or would—a devil open the eyes of a man born blind? (John 9 KJV) Human nature pridefully convinces people that modern man is too intelligent and too sophisticated to believe in devils or any kind of supernatural things. But reality is that modern man has merely revised his fantasy world. He hasn't outgrown that same old "Anything but God and His way" inherent wickedness in his heart. Pastors witness the modern version of this unbelief regularly.

Theologians use a fifty-cent word to identify a major source of this problem, "Epistemology." Technically, the word refers to the philosophy or theory of knowledge. In practical terms, it refers to what we choose as our source of information. What do you consider to be "Facts"? On what basis do we accept something as "Fact" in our mind? When a person reveals their true "Epistemology," you can predict what they will rigidly hold as "Facts," even though the idea may be far more fantasy than verifiable and documented "Facts." Their supposed documentation relies on this false epistemology. It makes a good appearance, but it is often far more imagination than verifiable facts. In terms of moral values and lifestyle, Biblical faith rejects these false ideas and sources in favor of God and His word alone. (2 Corinthians 10:3-6 KJV) Wise and faithful believers should hold to Scripture alone as their "Epistemology," not Scripture plus their favorite source of claimed knowledge outside Scripture. Not at all different from the people in Joshua's day, once a professing believer adds anything other than Scripture alone to his/her list of trusted "Epistemology," they will prefer that source above Scripture, and they will increasingly invest more time and emotional energy in those sources and less time in Scripture. The serpent still uses his favorite line, "Yea, hath God said?" And it still works quite effectively with those who have decided **not** to make God exclusive in their world of faith. When Jesus said, "*Ye cannot serve God and mammon,*" (Matthew 6:24 KJV) he put His followers on notice. "***Ye cannot serve God and....***" Fill in the blank. The Lord requires exclusive worship and lifestyle. Whenever we choose anything other than ***or in addition to God***, especially so with something so foundational as our epistemology, the source we select for our knowledge of life and values, we have chosen the serpent and his skeptical hiss, "Yea, hath God said..." over God and His word. Biblical faith is reduced to a superficial pretense.

I have a study filled with shelves of commentaries and books on the history and languages of the Bible, in addition to a larger electronic collection of resources on my computer. However, the longer I live and observe life the more time I spend with my Bible and the less time I spend with these books. 2 Timothy 3:16-17 does not say, "All scripture plus Commentary X is given by inspiration of God and is profitable...." ***It highlights Scripture alone.*** Let a person dare to put a stopwatch on their time with their Bible and their time with whatever else they read (Or listen to), their accepted "Epistemology," and you will quickly learn their true religion. Do we seek to join one or the other group of the Jewish leaders in our study passage, or do we strive to follow Jesus, our one and only true and "Good" Shepherd? Our time investment will tell us the reality we may otherwise choose to ignore.

Then came the Jews round about him, and said unto him, How long dost thou make us to doubt? If thou be the Christ, tell us plainly. (John 10:24 KJV 1900)

This response is so symptomatic of the unbelieving heart that has chosen another source of knowledge over or jointly with God and His Book. The more they allow that false epistemology to influence their thinking the more they blind themselves to the clear revelation of Scripture. "...tell us plainly." Really? Considering the first nine chapters of John's gospel, could Jesus possibly have told these people more clearly and repeatedly that He was the Messiah, God come in human flesh? He told them so plainly in John 5:1-18 that they fully understood His claim. Rejecting it, they were ready to stone Him for making Himself **equal with God**. They could not honestly now claim that He was being vague in His claim, for they had already acknowledged that He "Plainly" told them, and they rejected His testimony. But He shall tell them yet again.

The heart of unbelief looks for any method available to "Dumb down" the Bible and its teachings. When anyone who should know the Bible tells me, "You know the Bible doesn't say that much about 'X,' so we are legitimately free to think or do whatever we wish about it," they send red flags flying in my mind. In this dumbing down of the Bible, they reveal their own unbelieving heart far more than they reveal authentic knowledge of the Bible. 2 Timothy 3:16-17 will not allow any version of "Dumb down" toward the Bible to stand. Consider just one "Dumb down" example. Folks whose false belief system rejects that Jesus was fully God will tell you that Jesus never once claimed to be God or to be equal with God. Did they ever read the passage cited above from John 5? Did they ever read John 10:30? Did they ever read Paul abbreviated "Confession of faith"? (1 Timothy 3:16 KJV)

Consider Jesus' simple and clear answer to their unbelieving question.

Jesus answered them, I told you, and ye believed not: the works that I do in my Father's name, they bear witness of me. But ye believe not, because ye are not of my sheep, as I said unto you. My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. (John 10:25-27 KJV)

What was their question? "If thou be the Christ, tell us plainly." And Jesus categorically told them that He had specifically answered their question with the irrefutable testimony of His works in the Father's name, works that no doubt included restoring sight to a man born blind.

Jesus also told them why they refused to believe His words. It had nothing to do with His vagueness or not telling them. It had to do with their spiritual darkness.

But ye believe not, because ye are not of my sheep. They were void of spiritual life. Only Jesus could know their hearts so as to levy this charge against them. We should interpret this verse and similar lessons with wise caution. Jesus, the speaker who so accused these people, knew their hearts. You and I may talk about particular points of our faith to someone who doesn't believe our testimony, but we cannot know their hearts to make such a judgment against them. For example, John identifies a group of "Disciples" who did not accept Jesus' teachings, but he specifically identifies them as disciples and never hints at their not being children of God. (John 6:60 KJV and context) Jesus was fully qualified to make such a judgment. You and I are not. We may bear witness to our faith to someone, and we will obviously observe in

conversation if they accept or reject what we say. However, we cannot know their heart to discern if they are saved or not. Perhaps we failed to bear credible testimony to our faith, and their rejection has far more to do with our deficient testimony than with the state of their heart.

My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. (John 10:27 KJV)

A person's voice is as individual and unique to him as his fingerprint. You and I can readily repeat the words of Jesus from Scripture. However, no human can duplicate Jesus' voice. Only Jesus can speak with His voice to His sheep. I vividly recall; many years ago I was having lunch with a friend who was pastor in another denomination. He fancied himself to be a believer in grace, but his beliefs were somewhat "Hybrid," part grace and part not-grace. We were discussing the new birth. He believed that God accomplished the new birth through the intermediate agency of preaching and the gospel. I believe He accomplishes the new birth immediately by the work of the Holy Spirit. (John 3:8 KJV) In the conversation, I cited John 5:25 to him.

*Verily, verily, I say unto you, The hour is coming, and now is, when the **dead** shall hear the **voice** of the Son of God: and they that hear shall **live**. (John 5:25 KJV 1900; emphasis added)*

My friend utterly failed to catch the point. He immediately interpreted this verse as referring to the preaching of the gospel by man. We should preach Jesus' words and message, but, folks, no man living can duplicate Jesus' voice. No one. Only Jesus can speak His words with His voice to His sheep.

Jesus' teaching in John 10 deals specifically—exclusively—with His personal position as the one and only "Good Shepherd" of His sheep. When Jesus spoke the words of John 10:27, He described His personal "Voice" and how all His sheep respond to Him, to His own voice. He was not at all teaching about hirelings or human under-shepherds. To ignore His precise words and suggest that "If you are really born again, you will believe what I teach you," is to presume that your voice has the same power that Jesus' voice had. Have you stood at the closed tomb of a friend recently and called that dead friend to come out of the tomb alive? Have you lately restored sight to an adult man who was born blind? No. We may speak good words, even quote Jesus' words from Scripture, but we cannot duplicate Jesus' voice. Only Jesus has that exclusive power. That, praise God, is why He alone is the "Good Shepherd" of His sheep, of His people.

Elder