

THE MARKS OF TRUE RELIGION

Introduction

There was once a man known as “Grandpa Hicks.” He was a man who lived a crooked life. He trapped fish illegally in a lake near his home. He rented out boats that he did not own. He stole gasoline for his motorboat from other boats at a neighboring dock. He took catfish off the lines of other fishermen.

One Sunday morning two of his grandsons asked if he would take them fishing. With great conviction “Grandpa Hicks” replied, “I never fish on Sundays. I wasn’t brought up like that!” (*Our Daily Bread*, 7/22/90)

“Grandpa Hicks” placed great value on the observance of the Lord’s Day, but his religion did not extend beyond that day. Indeed, his religion did not control his life because it was not rooted in his heart. As a matter of fact, “Grandpa Hicks” did not know the first thing about true religion.

Our next topical study from the Book of Proverbs confronts us with two characteristics of true religion: 1) a holy fear of the LORD; and 2) a whole-hearted trust in the LORD.

I. Fear the LORD Your God, Because that is a Mark of True Religion (Prov. 14:27; Prov. 16:6; Prov. 14:2; Prov. 14:26; Prov. 22:4)

The fear of Jehovah is a fountain of life, causing a man to turn from the snares of death. (Prov. 14:27)

Proverbs here defines the fear of the LORD as a source of life. It is compared to a spring of water issuing from the ground, such is a welcome and vital source of life in an arid land like Israel, note Proverbs 19:23, ***“The fear of Jehovah leads to life; and he that has it shall rest content; he shall not be visited by calamity.”*** ***“The fear of Jehovah leads to life;”*** it will lead you to a place of lasting satisfaction, namely, the blessed presence of the LORD Himself; and you will ***“not be visited with calamity”***—i.e.; you will be spared from the judgment of God that is coming upon sinful and disobedient mankind.

The fear of the LORD is a source of life precisely because it turns us away from ***“the snares of death.”*** Temptation, the invitation and allurement of sin, is viewed as a snare (or trap) that kills its victims, note James 1:14-16, ***“each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. ¹⁵Then, after the desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death. ¹⁶Do not be deceived, my dear brothers.”*** But the fear of the LORD confronts us with the fatal outcome that finally results from yielding to temptation and motivates us to resist temptation.

Compare this present proverb (14:27) with Proverbs 13:14; *“The teaching of the wise is a fountain of life, intended to turn a man away from the snares of death.”* The point is that biblical teaching distinguishes between right and wrong, between truth and falsehood, and defines the respective consequences—the former leading to life and blessing, the latter resulting in death and the divine judgment. But it is the fear of the LORD that motivates us to heed the biblical teaching, note Hebrews 11:7, *“By faith Noah, when warned about things not yet seen, moved with godly fear, prepared an ark by which his family was saved. By faith he condemned the world and became heir of the righteousness that comes by faith.”*

By mercy and truth atonement is made for iniquity; and by the fear of Jehovah men turn away from evil. (Prov. 16:6)

Proverbs 16:6a teaches that by *“mercy and truth”* sin is forgiven—it is covered and blotted out of the sight of God. In His mercy the LORD provided His own divine sacrifice at Calvary that satisfied the demands of His righteousness and justice and thereby provides us with forgiveness and reconciliation.

Proverbs 16:6b teaches that by the fear of the LORD sin is avoided. The fear of the LORD confronts us with the consequences of sin and motivates us to turn away from it.

It is significant that these two truths are brought together and presented in this order. The mercy of the LORD and the fear of the LORD are not incompatible, they are complementary. At this present stage of our Christian life the fear of the LORD prevents us from abusing the mercy of the LORD; it prevents us from being like those people described in Jeremiah 7:9-11,

“Will you steal and murder, commit adultery and perjury, burn incense to Baal and follow other gods you have not known, ¹⁰and come and stand before me in this house, which bears my name, and say, ‘We are safe;’—safe to do all these detestable things? ¹¹Has this house, which bears my Name, become a den for robbers to you? But I have been watching!” declares Jehovah. (Jeremiah 7:9-11;) the people of Israel abused God’s mercy, wrongly assuming that God’s mercy allowed them to continue in their sins with impunity and without fear of judgment.

On the positive side, the fear of the LORD promotes the ultimate purpose of God’s mercy, namely, a life of Christ-like holiness, note Titus 2:14, *“our Savior Jesus Christ; ¹⁴... gave himself for us, so that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people for his own possession, a people zealous for good works.”*

He who walks in uprightness fears Jehovah, but he whose ways are perverse despises him. (Prov. 14:2)

A true fear of the LORD is expressed in the form of obedience. A holy fear of the LORD does not merely, or even mainly, consist in an emotion of terror and dread of just retribution, that is the characteristic of the ungodly, note James 2:19b, "*the demons ... shudder.*" A holy fear of the LORD is a work of grace that moves a man to turn away from evil and walk in obedience; motivated not only by fear of retribution, but far more by the unbearable prospect of being separated from Christ, the One who is the supreme object of our love. Note the example of Peter as presented in John 13:6-9,

[Jesus] came to Simon Peter, [but Peter] said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" ⁷*Jesus replied, "You do not now understand what I am doing; but later you will understand."* ⁸*Peter said to him, "You shall never wash my feet." Jesus answered him, "If I do not wash you, you have no part with me."* ⁹*Simon Peter responded, "Lord, not only my feet, but wash my hands and my head also."* (Jn. 13:6-9) although he did not understand what the LORD was doing, Peter submitted to Christ because he could not bear the thought of being separated from Christ.

A true fear of the LORD consists of a reverence and devotion to the LORD as much as, if not more than, a fear of retribution. Note Samuel's concern that he should not sin against the LORD: "*far be it from me that I should sin against Jehovah by ceasing to pray for you. I will instruct you in the way that is good and right*" (1 Sam. 12:23.)

According to Proverbs 14:2b, a true fear of the LORD is contrasted with despising the LORD. Consider Proverbs 28:14, "*Blessed is the man who always fears [Jehovah], but he who hardens his heart shall fall into mischief.*" A true fear of the LORD creates a heart that is sensitive and responsive to God, one that experiences His blessing. Note how a continual fear of the LORD—i.e.; a heart controlled by godly fear—is contrasted to a hardening of the heart. The former has the blessing of God pronounced upon it; the latter "*falls into mischief*" (the Hebrew word, *רָע*, translated, "*mischief*," has both the meaning of evil as well as calamity or judgment.) Thus, the point of the proverb is that the one who hardens his heart will be one who commits evil deeds and will make himself vulnerable to calamity in the form of the righteous judgment of God.

In the fear of Jehovah there is strong confidence, and his children shall have a place of refuge. (Prov. 14:26)

The fear of the LORD is described as a source of sure confidence, a sure refuge, a strong protective fortress, note Psalm 34:7, "*The angel of Jehovah encamps around those who fear him, and he delivers them.*" Note, too, Isaiah 8:13-14, "*Jehovah of hosts, him you must sanctify; he is the one you are to fear, he is the one you are to dread—¹⁴and he will be a sanctuary [for you]*" (Isa. 8:13-14.) If you "*sanctify*" the LORD—recognizing Him to be sacred and thus worthy of holy worship and

reverential fear, and honoring Him as sacred—He will be “*a sanctuary*” (a place of refuge) for you. Proverbs 14:26b goes on to say, “*and his children shall have a place of refuge.*” Either the pronoun “*his*” is referring to the LORD and reaffirming the fact that He, indeed, is a sure refuge for those who fear Him; or the pronoun is referring to the man who fears the LORD and indicating that as his God-fearing life is witnessed (and imitated) by his children, they, too, will discover the same truth: the LORD is a sure refuge for those who fear Him, compare Psalm 103:17-18,

... from everlasting to everlasting Jehovah's love is with those who fear him, and his righteousness with their children's children—¹⁸with those who keep his covenant and remember to obey his precepts. (Psl. 103:17-18)

The reward for humility and the fear of Jehovah is riches and honor and life.
(Prov. 22:4)

It is the consistent teaching of Scripture that the man whose life is governed by a holy fear of the LORD shall experience the blessing of the LORD: “*How great is your goodness that you have stored up for those who fear you, which you bestow in the sight of men on those who take refuge in you*” (Psl. 31:19.) The greatness of God's goodness stored up for those who fear Him is here in Proverbs 22:4 described as consisting in the riches of God, honor from God, and life with God.

Let us fear the LORD our God—cultivating a deep awareness of His sacredness and His awesome majesty, an awareness that governs our lives, directing us out of sin and into holiness—because this is a mark of true religion.

II. Trust in the LORD Your God, Because that is a Mark of True Religion (Proverbs 16:20; Proverbs 29:25; Proverbs 28:25)

He who heeds instruction shall find good, and whoever trusts in Jehovah—blessed is he. (Prov. 16:20)

Trust in the LORD is here defined in terms of confidence in the LORD and commitment to the LORD. The Hebrew word for trust, אֲחֻזָּה, literally means, “to cling to;” the term conveys both confidence and commitment. By way of illustration: You get lost in the depths of a pitch-black cave; a park ranger comes to your rescue. He instructs you to grab hold of the back of his belt and hold on as he leads you to safety. You cling to his belt because you have confidence in him, and that confidence inevitably translates into commitment—because of your confidence in him you are going to follow him wherever he leads you.

Trust in the LORD is closely identified with obedience to His Word: “*He who heeds instruction shall find good.*” If you listen to God's Word, believe it, and act upon it, it will lead you to what is truly good. Compare this proverb with the words of

our Lord Jesus Christ as recorded in the New Testament: *“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. ²⁹Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am meek and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls, ³⁰for my yoke is easy, and my burden is light”* (Matt. 11:28-30.) The invitation to come to Christ for rest is coupled to the demand that we take His yoke upon us—i.e.; that we come under His discipline. This call to Christian discipleship is also the essence of the Great Commission: *“Therefore go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit “* (Matt. 28:19.)

The fear of man brings a snare, but whoever puts his trust in Jehovah shall be safe. (Prov. 29:25)

According to Proverbs 29:25a, *“the fear of man”* (the fear of losing his favor, the fear of incurring his wrath) becomes a snare that restrains our activity (in word and in deed) on behalf of righteousness. Too often the sinful question, “What will they do?” takes precedence over the righteous question, “What should I do?” Note Galatians 2:12 as an example from the life of Peter: *“Before certain men came from James, Peter had been eating with the Gentile [believers]. But when they came, he withdrew and separated himself from the Gentiles, because he was afraid of those who belonged to [the faction who advocated] circumcision.”*

Contrast Peter’s inconsistent behavior, caused by his fear of man, with the example of the Lord Jesus as witnessed by His enemies. The Pharisees *“sent their disciples to him along with the Herodians. Teacher, they said, ‘We know you are a man of integrity and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. You are not swayed by men, because you pay no attention to who they are’”* (Matt. 22:16.) Note that the Jews recognized that our Lord’s integrity stemmed from His trust in God His heavenly Father: ***“He trusts in God. Let God rescue him now if he wants him, for he said, ‘I am the Son of God’”*** (Matt. 27:43.)

Proverbs 29:25b goes on to say, *“whoever puts his trust in Jehovah shall be safe;”* (literally, *“[he] shall be set on high.”*) Here is not only the promise of God’s protective care (to be set on high was to be set out of danger;) here is also the promise that God will bestow honor upon us as we reject the fear of man by placing our confidence in the LORD and doing what is right in His sight. Note 1 Samuel 2:30b, *“Jehovah declares, ... ‘Those who honor me I will honor, but those who despise me shall be distained.’”*

He who has a greedy spirit stirs up strife, but he who puts his trust in Jehovah shall be made fat. (Prov. 28:25)

The context indicates that trust in the LORD not only involves confidence and commitment, but also contentment: the man who trusts in the LORD is contrasted with the man who has a greedy spirit. Conversely, that contentment stems from confidence in the LORD; the promise of Scripture is that the man who trusts in the

LORD *“shall be made fat”*—in His time the LORD shall abundantly bless that man who trusts in Him. Consider the promise contained in Psalm 84:11-12, *“Jehovah God is a sun and a shield. Jehovah will give grace and glory; no good thing will he withhold from those who walk uprightly. ¹²O Jehovah of hosts, blessed is the man that trusts in you.”*

Trust in the LORD your God—clinging to Christ alone with a confidence that generates commitment and contentment—because this is a mark of true religion.

Conclusion

In contrast to old “Grandpa Hicks,” a man who did not know the first thing about true religion, may our lives be characterized by a holy fear of the LORD and whole-hearted trust in the LORD. Those two attributes are the marks of true religion.