

Home Training

Where there are a number of congregations from which to choose, Christians often decide where to worship based on the Bible class programs. There is nothing wrong with this priority. However, it should be stressed that this in no way relieves the father of his responsibility to bring his children up “in the training and admonition of the Lord” (Eph. 6:4). The Bible classes conducted by a congregation must be viewed as a supplement to—not a substitute for—teaching at home.
—Al Diestelkamp



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The Poison of BITTERNESS



By AL DIESTELKAMP

Bitterness is an evil that can develop and grow within a person almost unbeknownst to him. I am convinced that it is a tool which Satan uses to entrap even the very ones who have worked hard at ridding their lives of many other sins.

The apostle Peter spoke of bitterness as a poison when rebuking the former sorcerer. He said, “I see that you are poisoned by bitterness” (Ac. 8:23).

Simon’s condition was not exclusive to him. None of us are immune to its venom. Husbands are warned against being bitter toward their wives (Col. 3:19). Though the inspired writer did not specifically mention the possibility, I have no doubt that wives can develop bitterness toward their husbands. Certainly, if a father fails to heed the apostle’s instructions to avoid discouraging his children by provoking them to wrath (Col. 3:21), they will likely develop bitterness toward him.

Preachers are prime candidates for this poisonous condition. Though most preachers are treated well by the brethren, occasionally they are not. Unreasonable expectations of the preacher and/or his family can cause resentment which, if he is not careful, will lead to bitterness. Or a preacher may expect brethren to live up to *his* expectations, and when they don’t, he gets discouraged. Many able men have lost their influence, some even losing their faith, after being overcome with bitterness toward the brethren.

The elderly (and those approaching old age) seem to be especially susceptible to bitterness. Perhaps the loss of energy, diminished capacities, health problems and the perception (real or imagined) that the younger generation doesn’t appreciate us, opens the door to bitterness.

Bitterness is the state of being “sharp and disagreeable; harsh; severe; piercing” (*Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*). It can be brought on by a number of circumstances, including: discouragement, hopelessness, envy and jealousy.

The New Testament has several things to say about this attitude:

1. *It needs to be “put away”* (Eph. 4:25-32). The apostle Paul lists it among many other sins, and among those which “grieve the Holy Spirit.”

2. *It is connected with “cursing”* (Rom. 3:9-18). Christians who would never curse verbally may be guilty of “virtual cursing” by their display of bitterness. This may be only in thought, but if unchecked will eventually manifest itself in harshness.

3. *It is a spiritual “poison”* (Ac. 8:18-23). As already noted, Simon, who in becoming a Christian had to repent of his sorcery, was told that his bitterness was his poison that had him “bound by iniquity.” Suddenly without the attention of the masses, perhaps he became jealous of the apostles power to convey the Holy Spirit by the laying on of their hands.

4. *It can “spring up” unannounced* (Heb. 12:12-17). Read these verses and note how the Hebrew writer tells us that we ought to be “looking carefully...lest any root of bitterness springing up cause trouble...” (v.15). If unchecked it can take hold of us so powerfully that, like Esau, we might not find place for repentance, even if we want to.

It’s one thing to identify a problem, and another to provide a remedy. By applying the scriptures I believe we can beat this villain on two fronts:

First, we should help prevent it in others by avoiding what promotes it. For instance, a husband’s bitterness can be lessened by the wife’s attitudes and behavior (Eph. 5:25,28, 33a). At the same time a wife’s bitterness

may be avoided if the husband will treat her as God instructs (Eph. 5:22,33b). Parents’ bitterness can be minimized if children will obey (Eph. 6:1-3), and children will be less likely to become bitter if fathers will listen to God (Eph. 6:4; Col. 3:21).

All Christians should make a concerted effort *not* to be a discouragement to others. The younger Christians, in their enthusiasm and zeal must not leave the older generation behind. They need to understand that “change” (even though it is within authority) is unsettling to the elderly. Bring them along gently.

Older Christians need to accept what they know in their hearts—that change is inevitable, and as long as it is scriptural, it may even be desirable. Don’t “quench the spirit” of the youth lest they become bitter.

You can help a preacher avoid the pitfall of bitterness by being an encouragement to him in his efforts to teach the lost and edify the saints. Treat him as the brother he is, rather than an employe of the church which can be hired and fired at will.

Knowing that envy and jealousy promote bitterness, we should avoid flaunting power, possessions, or any other advantage we have over others.

Secondly, we must fight bitterness in ourselves by actively resisting it. To borrow a phrase from Barney Fife, “Nip it in the bud!”

Treat it like any other temptation. Start by recognizing Satan as the source of bitter attitudes.

When the symptoms appear, study and meditate on the scriptures instead of having a “pity-party.”

Be willing to rejoice with those who are blessed more than you—replace envy with joy. And most of all, pray for help.

Bitterness has the potential of consuming a person and draining him of his spirituality, and oh, how Satan enjoys that!

Fiddling With Tradition

By ANDY DIESTELKAMP

A popular play and movie produced in the 1970s is the classic *Fiddler on the Roof*. If you have seen this musical (and I have many times), then there is likely one word that comes to your mind which amply sums up the theme of this production. Indeed, one of its most popular songs was entitled *Tradition*. Tradition helped to explain why they believed what they believed and did what they did. There need not be any logical or scriptural explanation for a practice. It was simply tradition. Tradition was the easy answer.

Something elevated to the status of tradition no longer needs a defense in the minds of some. What happens when an unorthodox person comes along and questions or even breaks a tradition? He is considered rude if not blasphemous. Certainly some have been quite careless in their challenging of traditions, but that does not mean that questioning a long-standing practice is inherently rude or wrong.

In the spiritual realm it is obvious that tradition plays a very important role. Roman Catholicism is largely based on the traditions of "the church." By the time of Christ, Judaism had, in many respects, elevated its traditions to the level of God's Word. When dealing with the beliefs of friends and family, it is frustrating to make some point from the Scriptures only to have them respond with, "Well, that's your tradition. Ours is different."

Tradition is defined as information, beliefs and or customs handed down by word of mouth or in writing. The Greek word for tradition (*paradosis*) is used 13 times in the New Testament, and ten of those times it is used negatively in pitting the traditions of men against the commandments of God. Many of the confrontations between Jesus and the religious leaders of His day were over traditions.

The Pharisees questioned why Jesus' followers violated the traditions of the elders by not washing their hands in a certain way. Jesus had a better question, "Why do you Pharisees violate the commandment of God because of your tradition?" Jesus was not referring to the tradition of hand washing but to the practice of somehow sheltering money "dedicated to the temple," making it unavailable for honoring father and mother (Matt. 15:1-9; Mk. 7:1-13). In keeping their traditions they ended up nullifying God's commandments. This is hypocrisy according to Jesus. However, this was just one example. Jesus said, "Many such things you do." Many of their traditions became elevated to the level of or above doctrine. We



need to beware of being taken captive by the philosophies and traditions of men (Col. 2:7,8).

However, there are three occasions when tradition is used positively in the New Testament. In the midst of his discussion about balancing our liberties with the necessity of becoming all things to all men and not seeking our own, Paul reminds the Corinthians to "keep the traditions as I delivered them to you," (1 Cor. 11:2). These were not personal traditions that Paul had started, but the things that he had taught which were consistent with being Christ-like (vs. 1). The apostles of Jesus had been charged with taking the Gospel to the world. The traditions as delivered by Paul were the Holy Spirit-inspired revelations as promised by Jesus to His apostles (Jn. 16:13). Thus when Paul talks about traditions we are to keep, he means the doctrines of Christ which he had previously handed down.

Paul calls upon the Thessalonians to "stand fast and hold the traditions which you were taught, whether by word or our epistle," (2 Thess. 2:15). This is no reference to human traditions, but to the spoken and written Gospel message which was inspired by God and brought them salvation. This not only had application to the specifics of Christ's life, death, burial and resurrection, but even to apostolic instruction for our spiritual walk. Just a few verses later, Paul writes that they were to "withdraw from every brother who walks disorderly and not according to the tradition which he received from us" (2 Thess. 3:6).

So, it is accurate for us to say that we are obligated to keep traditions. We are obligated to keep apostolic traditions delivered by the Holy Spirit. It is clearly a violation of God's will to break traditions laid down by Christ's hand-picked messengers (2 Thess. 3:14), and we must stand in opposition to any attempt to break, either specifically or in principle, the traditions established by the apostles.

When we speak of the traditions of men, there are basically two types: 1) those which violate and/or contradict the apostolic tradition (infant baptism, clergy/laity concept, denominationalism, etc.), and 2) those de-

veloped over time because of the repetitive exercise of certain liberties. Liberties are things for which we have general authority, but which we may choose to do or not do based on expediency, convenience, taste, etc. Specific methods used in carrying out general commands or patterns often become traditions which, while generally authorized, are not mandatory.

For example, the obligation of local churches to gather together is clear (Ac. 20:7; 1 Cor. 11:18,20,33; Heb. 10:27). Where to assemble is not specified and is a matter of liberty and expediency. It is not a liberty to alter divine commands or patterns (thus local churches must come together). However, a liberty can be altered without necessarily displeasing God (thus churches can meet in a variety of locations).

There are many liberties that are practiced today among faithful churches that are merely traditional. This is not inherently good or bad. However, it is important that we know the difference between a traditional liberty and an apostolic tradition. Why? Because we do not want to be guilty of equating our traditions with divine traditions. It was not wrong for the Jews to wash their hands in a certain way or to dedicate money to the temple, but they became wrong when they interfered with the commands of God.

Could the Suburban Church of Christ which owns its own building, meets at 9, 10 and 6 on Sundays, and has Bible classes on Wednesday nights at 7:30 change some of its traditions and still be faithful? Could it sell the building and simply rent with a sign out front that says, "Christians meet here"? Could it decide to meet once on Sundays at 2 p.m.? Could it change its Bible study nights to Tuesdays or cancel them altogether? Could it do all of these things and still be considered faithful? Of course, for it would have done nothing except alter that which it had liberty to alter.

This does not mean that making such changes is inherently better or more spiritual. However, we must be ever vigilant to know the difference between what is a traditional liberty and what we are not at liberty to change. Should we break traditions just for the sake of breaking tradition? Perhaps we should! Occasionally altering traditional liberties is educational. It teaches the next generation that there are other authorized ways of being true to the doctrinal pattern. Shame on us for raising our eyebrows simply because a church has altered traditional liberties. Let us save that facial exercise for violations of divine tradition.

323 E. Indiana Ave., Pontiac, Illinois 61764
e-mail: adiestel@bwsys.net

Goodbye 'Virtues' Hello 'Values'

By DAVID DIESTELKAMP

When is the last time you heard someone on the street use the word "virtue?" The dictionary doesn't note it as an archaic word, but I fear that it is headed in that direction. Society, rather than decrying the death of virtue, is instead hailing its replacement—"values."

Virtues are things of "...intrinsic eminence, moral goodness" (*Vines Expository Dictionary*). They are things which are in and of themselves important and morally right. Their attainment is therefore considered excellence and worthy of praise (Phil. 4:8). Unfortunately, standards this high and unyielding have fallen on hard times today.

The term "values" seems innocent enough on the surface when viewed only as things of estimated worth. *Webster's New World College Dictionary* takes it another step farther in showing its modern usage: "the social principles, goals, or standards held or accepted by an individual, class, society, etc." Even this may not seem so serious until one realizes that this concept of values recognizes no standard outside of self.

Remember, virtues carry with them the authority of a standard. Individual actions can therefore be compared to an objective standard, not simply weighed by mere feelings, concepts, or philosophies. But values are based on searching your own mind and

life in order to find self-fulfillment, inner peace, a sense of acceptance, etc. A value is essentially what you like or love to do. It is not an ought to, but a want to. Actions can then only be judged based on how well they express what is desired or whether they are consistent with a chosen lifestyle.

In school our children are often given exercises designed to "clarify" their values. In other words, they are challenged to search within themselves to find what they feel is of worth. They are learning to emphasize feelings and personal growth from tapping inner power, rather than being taught to look to objective standards and listening to the aged voice of wisdom and reason. This is symptomatic of a society that is developing the inability to distinguish between personal preference and matters of moral obligation.

Of course, values can be virtues, but they don't have to be. Often values are simply opinions, feelings, preferences, even personal quirks and obsessions. It can be anything anyone happens to think is of value at any time, for any reason. This is at the heart of the appeal of the modern virtues concept—all distinctions and differences are therefore either ignored or seen as inconsequential. Everyone has their own values and they are seen to be as good as anyone else's. Therefore a sort of moral equality is seen to exist even when preferences and lifestyles differ—no one is right and no one is wrong, they are simply being true to their personal values system.

While it is true that we make our life's decisions based on what we value, we must base our sense of worth on something greater than fallible inner passion. Paul Earnhart once said, "The inner light is the worst form of illumination—it is based only on self."

We must reach out to what the world rejects and ignores. Lost in modern values is an infallible standard upon which to make moral choices. In turn, moral choice itself seems to disappear along with its consequences, principles, character, and responsibility. But we know that Scripture is "...profitable for doctrine, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Tim. 3:16). Now *that* is a standard upon which both values and virtues can stand as moral absolutes.

The worst of mankind still has some sort of values, but the righteous will be satisfied with no less than virtue. We must see the importance of adding virtue to our faith (2 Pet. 1:5), for it is to "glory and virtue" that God calls us (2 Pet. 1:3).

A Troubling Question

By ED BRAND

Since I was a boy, I have heard many maxims or proverbial sayings which reflected a certain societal "truth." One such saying goes something like this: "An honest day's labor for an honest day's wage." Such a proverb teaches workers to do their work well and honorably—no sleeping on the job, etc. Jesus said it this way, "The laborer is worthy of his hire."

I think such advice is still good advice for all of us. Perhaps some labor problems would be corrected without bitter strikes if labor and management would follow such a proverb.

What would you think about an employer who gave his employees two day's wages for one day's work? I suspect most would like to find one like this, wouldn't we? However, I am pretty sure none exists. Generosity is nice, but a company won't stay in business long with a wage policy which pays two-for-one.

What is disastrous policy on the corporate level is expected policy on another level. Generosity of spirit is encouraged by Jesus for His disciples. In the great sermon, He told His audience, "...love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matt. 5:44). Like many of the Jews, we find it easy and even pleasant to "love our neighbors" and "hate our enemies." This maxim appears to be fair and appeals to men who know without a doubt which man fits into

which category. Such men have no obligation to enemies, except to dislike them and castigate them. One of the great pleasures such thinking provides is the satisfaction one derives from associating with friends and scorning those who are the enemies of all right-thinking people. What can be wrong with such thinking?

Everything! Jesus said God neither thinks or acts this way. "He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous" (Matt. 5:45). God does indeed have enemies, but He is also kind and benevolent toward them.

Jesus ends this part of His exhortation with a troubling question: "What do you more than others?" (Matt. 5:47). This question was not designed to produce calculator ethics: the need to be in the plus column rather than owe someone a visit, a meal, or a kind word. The Lord wants His people to be like God: be kind and good to all instead of being kind and good only to those who fit our definition of our "brothers." Shouldn't we strive to develop a spirit within us which will be generous to all, before we consider "Do I have to?" This will go a long way to make us into the kind of people Jesus envisioned.

It would also go a long way in improving attendance records on Sunday and Wednesday evenings. Why don't you give it a try, even if you consider such meetings the enemy of your own leisure time?

1988 Tanglewood Drive, Snellville, GA 30078
e-mail: edbrand@mindspring.com

940 N. Elmwood Drive, Aurora, Illinois 60506
e-mail: daviddiestel@juno.com

T O L E R A N C E

By **BERLIN CHUMBLEY**

In our post-modern world, "tolerance" is the one virtue that is esteemed above all others. In fact, tolerance may soon become the only virtue our society will accept. Traditional virtues, such as humility, chastity and temperance, have long fallen out of public favor, and in some circles, are openly ridiculed.

Acts once universally labeled immoral and ungodly are now celebrated under the notion of tolerance. Abortion, homosexuality and pornography are championed by dozens of advocate groups and lauded by the mainstream media. Marital infidelity and divorce are so common and accepted, that few families if any, have escaped its bitter sting.

As the socially "enlightened ones" preach to the masses about being tolerant of those "different" than us, they are in fact the most intolerant of all people. These individuals are intolerant of those who hold to and embrace New Testament Christianity. In their demands of tolerance from people, they themselves cannot tolerate anyone who holds to the doctrine of Christ. They can't (or won't) accept those who believe in "one body, and one Spirit"; those who preach "one hope"; those who declare the truth that there is but "One Lord, one faith, one baptism..." (Eph. 4:4-6).

These "tolerant ones," cannot tolerate anyone who dares to believe in the inspired word of God as the sole source of truth and authority (Jn. 17:17). They can't tolerate those who live by a morality based upon God's divine will. Nor can they accept the notion that we will all be judged by how we handle His word. To these "tolerant" ones, being a child of God automatically makes

you "intolerant" and dangerous, and in need of sensitivity training, so we might become as "tolerant" as they.

Unfortunately, as the world goes, soon the church follows. Many in the church have now taken up the banner of "tolerance," and have begun to embrace denominations. They have sought to be "tolerant" and sensitive to all religions, no matter how different they are from the Lord's church. In their pursuit of religious tolerance, these "enlightened ones" of the church have begun to tolerate and accept all types of false doctrine. Such doctrines include, false teaching about the Holy Spirit, the use of musical instruments in worship, unscriptural teachings about salvation, even to the point of accepting into their fellowship those who believe you're saved before baptism, denying the necessity of the blood of Christ in cleansing us from all sins (Rev 1.5).

Like those in the post-modern world, these "tolerant ones" in the church are very "intolerant" toward those who challenge them. Labeling those they judge to be intolerant as "traditional" and "legalistic," they look upon all who demand book, chapter and verse as dangerous to the spirit of the Bible and the cause of Christ.

Yet, just as we must reject the post-modern value of tolerance, we must also reject these "enlightened ones" of the church. Instead of succumbing to the temptation of being tolerant of those in error, we must hold fast to, "the form of sound words..." (2 Tim 1:13-14).

We must faithfully guard the treasure of truth entrusted to us against all—outside and inside the church. If we do not, who then will?

1785 Elles Drive, Athens, Alabama 35611
buchumbley@aol.com

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Al Diestelkamp <aldiestel@aol.com>
P.O. Box 891, Cortland, IL 60112 • (815) 756-9840

THINK ON THESE THINGS

Philippians 4:8

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Editor AL DIESTELKAMP
P.O. Box 891
Cortland, IL 60112-0891
(815) 756-9840

E-mail Aldiestel@aol.com

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Cortland, IL 60112-0891

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