

Faith and Works LXX

The Contemporary and Biblical Contexts

Col. 2:8

Testing the Spirits

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Introduction

The Bible tells us to "test the spirits". There are all sorts of ways in which a spirit can lie and deny that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, the Anointed one who fulfilled all that was written in the Law and the Prophets.

The easiest way is not to deny Jesus outright, but to simply come in His name, or using the name of Jesus, but present a religious, spiritual system or philosophy which is man centered and carnal, and which thus places Jesus not as the foundation and head, but as simply a peripheral theological subject that one passes on the way to the real focus of a given theology or teaching.

The name of Jesus is mentioned in the teachings of other major religious systems, but they deny that Jesus is Himself the way, the truth and the life, the alpha and the omega, and the church members of His body. Using the name of Jesus is not the same as confessing Him as the Son of God, the only way to the Father.

1 John 4:1-3

Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, and every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not of God. And this is the spirit of the Antichrist, which you have heard was coming, and is now already in the world.

Where Truth Leads

In evaluating a religious or spiritual teaching or doctrine, one must consider where the focus is being drawn by what is being taught or preached. The false prophets come to draw attention to themselves, and to lead people after themselves for their own benefit, whereas true ministers of the Gospel proclaim Christ and not themselves.

When Jesus is lifted up, He draws all people to Himself. However, when men lift themselves up, even when they profusely include the name of Jesus in what they are presenting, they draw people into captivity and dependence on their own institution or teachings, and even themselves.

To such men the scripture is never complete in itself. It will always need to be qualified by their own interpretation and teachings.

In approaching this subject we need to make a distinction between those who deny outright the centrality of Jesus by placing the focus and emphasis on other things, and those who may have simply lost their focus and need to return to the balance of a Christ-centered teaching and ministry. We want to approach this subject on the fundamental level of the Gospel, and not get involved in the individual details of a particular ministry, if it is the case that the ministry in question is not denying the centrality and importance of Christ.

An example to follow is given in Paul's letters to the Corinthian church. They sound like a pretty lively bunch, with services filled with all sorts of people manifesting this and that spiritual gift, and yet Paul says they are carnal, and still processing the Gospel through their natural thinking.

And while Paul might have started going through the list of what they should or should not do in terms of the structure of their ministry (he does address issues of Christian conduct and morality, we are not here discussing that), instead he seeks to balance them by drawing attention to Jesus Himself, seeking to keep their

focus on Him, and having them keep Jesus in focus and work with the purpose of the Holy Spirit to build all up into the full stature of mature faith in Christ. Then Paul spoke about the love that should result from true faith in the Gospel.

As long as Jesus is kept in the center, and lifted up above all other things, those other things will eventually find their correct placement within a given Christian community. It is when Jesus is not kept in the center that those other things will begin to take preeminence, and begin to draw people into futile spiritual and religious systems, once again placing the emphasis not on Christ, but on the things built on the foundation inherited from the first fallen Adam.

While people are yet in their sins, they will have no confidence before God, and will be always seeking to apply themselves to the latest teachings that promise to teach them how to gain control over their circumstances. It will not be a relationship with God and confidence in His love and care for His children. Rather it is the old slave mentality where one always remains a debtor to the flesh seeking to try and improve it to meet God's standards or to become as God Himself.

Each season therefore, there is a new offering of the latest "truths" that supposedly are indispensable to the body of Christ in order for it to finally rise up in power and glory. But there is a difference between "truths" and the Truth, and in the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ, the true power of the gospel is found when we are conscious of our own weakness, and we keep our focus, faith and our confidence in who Jesus is, and in our fellowship with one another in the body of Christ we seek to help each other to not measure ourselves by ourselves, but instead, to look at the things that are unseen that are eternal, the treasure in the earthen vessel, that we might reach the full assurance of faith, the full stature of what it means to abide and rest in the finished work of Jesus Christ.

Ephesians 4:11-16

And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting, but, speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head — Christ — from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love.

If the foundation and focus of any religious system or gathering, even if it uses the name of Jesus, is a person or institution, Jesus Himself will not be fully represented as He is, and there will be an incomplete gospel, which is really not the good news of the New Testament.

Pragmatic Truth

Just as the seed of the Gospel can be choked by the cares and concerns of this world, so success and materialism can themselves be a road leading away from the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ. When the institution that facilitates the gathering of people coming together ostensibly to worship Christ becomes the focus itself, it becomes an idol that replaces Christ.

When the body of Christ is no longer recognized as the body of believers, and instead identifies itself by the institution that facilitates their gathering and provides the center of their focus, Christ is no longer the center. In the true church, Christ is the foundation, the church is His body, and He is the head.

If Jesus is no longer the head, He is no longer the foundation, and the gathering of those coming together will not be in Him. Once an institution seeks to perpetuate its need to be sustained by sufficient numbers of supporters, it will increasingly seek to draw interest to itself, to its own programs, and its own leadership, and as it must retain this focus, what is presented will never be the complete gospel because Jesus will no longer be the center of focus.

And in order to continue interest and support in the given institution, there will always be something more the institution presents, something more that those who attend "need" to receive in order to progress their journey of perfecting themselves. This usually takes the form of the next big event or teaching that will keep the congregants ever learning, but never coming to a knowledge of the truth.

Jesus did not instruct His disciples to go and make religious institutions in His name. He told them to go and make disciples, many of which would meet in small fellowships in their homes. The body of Christ was recognized in the fellowship and mutual affirmation of the believers in their mutual identity in Christ. Where ever two or more are gathered in the name of Jesus, He is there in their midst, but when people are drawn to fill large auditoriums as spectators to

religious events, the body of Christ is no longer in focus as the church; instead, the institution and its programs have become the primary point of interest.

Words That are Spirit and Truth

We make no apologies here for the amount of scripture being cited as it is not the purpose of this study to present new ideas, but rather to focus the reader on those common truths of scripture that seemingly must be rediscovered each age, and distinguished from the current opinions of the day. The eternal truth of the gospel must always be distinguished from the traditions of the current cultural consensus.

Jesus said that the words He was teaching were spirit and truth, true food for those who hunger and thirst for God's righteousness, who know that without God's grace they are poor in spirit. Jesus then spoke of how true shepherds would lead their sheep to the door, which is Christ Himself. He is the way, the truth and the life.

John 10:1-10

“Most assuredly, I say to you, he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door, but climbs up some other way, the same is a thief and a robber. But he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. To him the doorkeeper opens, and the sheep hear his voice; and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. And when he brings out his own sheep, he goes before them; and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice. Yet they will by no means follow a stranger, but will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers.” Jesus used this illustration, but they did not understand the things which He spoke to them.

Then Jesus said to them again, “Most assuredly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. All who ever came before Me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not hear them. I am the door. If anyone enters by Me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture. The thief does not come except to steal, and to kill, and to destroy. I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly.

Unfortunately, if one takes today's popular religious teachings and regards them as road maps leading to a destination, few, if any, end with Jesus. Instead the directions turn people back to look for answers and help from themselves as they seek to implement the latest self help teachings. These teachings are all about spiritual exercises, positive confession and affirmation, and buying God's favor by making commercial religious personalities rich.

In a very real sense, many of these are simply the modern equivalent of what used to be called "snake oil," and when one considers the gravity of both the temporal and eternal state of those who will turn to these modern representatives who claim to come in the name of Jesus, and how none shall hear from them the true Gospel in its entirety, truly this is the devil's work at keeping the gates of Hades locked and bolted against those seeking a way out of bondage to the fallen world system. It is not the door of freedom whose yoke is easy and burden is light.

The key missing ingredient in an incomplete Gospel or false teaching is that Jesus is not the center and foundation of the believer's position before God. True Christian faith is focused on Christ Himself, and is worked out in the believer's life by the letting go of not only bad deeds, but of the very foundation of who they are based on the old nature inherited from the first fallen Adam, and seeing themselves seated with Christ.

Colossians 2:16-23

So let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths, which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ. Let no one cheat you of your reward, taking delight in false humility and worship of angels, intruding into those things which he has not seen, vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind, and not holding fast to the Head, from whom all the body, nourished and knit together by joints and ligaments, grows with the increase that is from God.

Therefore, if you died with Christ from the basic principles of the world, why, as though living in the world, do you subject yourselves to regulations — “Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle,” which all concern things which perish with the using — according to the commandments and doctrines of men? These things indeed have an appearance of wisdom in self-imposed religion, false humility, and neglect of the body, but are of no value against the indulgence of the flesh.

One overcomes their debt to satisfy the lower nature when that nature is no longer dependant on that foundation of sand for their identity. For we are not to be looking back at that which we have once destroyed and left crucified with Christ when He took the sins of mankind on the cross with Himself.

Romans 6:1-14

What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? Certainly not! How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it? Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life.

For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection, knowing this, that our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin. For he who has died has been freed from sin. Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with Him, knowing that Christ, having been raised from the dead, dies no more. Death no longer has dominion over Him. For the death that He died, He died to sin once for all; but the life that He lives, He lives to God. Likewise you also, reckon yourselves to be dead indeed to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body, that you should obey it in its lusts. And do not present your members as instruments of unrighteousness to sin, but present yourselves to God as being alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God. For sin shall not have dominion over you, for you are not under law but under grace.

Colossians 3:1-10

If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth. For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory.

Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. Because of these things the wrath of God is coming upon the sons of disobedience, in which you yourselves once walked when you lived in them.

But now you yourselves are to put off all these: anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy language out of your mouth. Do not lie to one another, since you have put off the old man with his deeds, and have put on the new man who is renewed in knowledge according to the image of Him who created him, where there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcised nor uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave nor free, but Christ is all and in all.

Romans 8:5

For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit.

When religious or spiritual teachings focus the individual on their own efforts and success in operating or meeting conditions to advance themselves above their fallen state, this inadvertently produces the very carnal state of mind, the mind focused on the flesh, that the New Testament writers warned would not lead to spiritual perfection or holiness, but would actually result in increasing the works of the flesh including pride, self-centeredness, gossip and slander.

Galatians 5:19-21

Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness, idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like; of which I tell you beforehand, just as I also told you in time past, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

Galatians 6:8

For he who sows to his flesh will of the flesh reap corruption, but he who sows to the Spirit will of the Spirit reap everlasting life.

This is because individuals in such a mindset will inadvertently measure themselves by themselves, which will always result in attempts to justify one's own condition by contrasting and comparing it to those less capable or unfortunate regarding attempts to meet the same criteria of standards. Unless everyone finishes at the same finish line, none of the contestants can feel they have achieved a legitimate goal. Paul wrote that religious legalism is actually a way to empower the works of the sinful flesh:

1 Corinthians 15:56

The sting of death is sin, and the strength of sin is the law.

Romans 7:7-12

What shall we say then? Is the law sin? Certainly not! On the contrary, I would not have known sin except through the law. For I would not have known covetousness unless the law had said, "You shall not covet." But sin, taking opportunity by the commandment, produced in me all manner of evil desire. For apart from the law sin was dead. I was alive once without the law, but when the commandment came, sin revived and I died. And the commandment, which was to bring life, I found to bring death. For sin, taking occasion by the commandment, deceived me, and by it killed me. Therefore the law is holy, and the commandment holy and just and good.

The Spirit of Adoption

Approaching God through a legalistic mindset will actually alienate us from seeing ourselves as God's children through faith in Christ.

Romans 4:15

because the law brings about wrath; for where there is no law there is no transgression.

In such systems, love is always with hypocrisy, for love itself becomes a work done for approval on behalf of the one doing the work. This does not fit the definition of love that Paul gives us:

1 Corinthians 13:4-7

Love suffers long and is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up; does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Christian character was to be a fruit of those who allowed the seed of the Gospel to be planted in good soil. It was never to be a work by which one earned salvation or God's favor.

Romans 8:2

For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has made me free from the law of sin and death.

1 John 4:17-19

Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness in the day of judgment; because as He is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves torment. But he who fears has not been made perfect in love. We love Him because He first loved us.

Religious laws are not always unpleasant. Some cults present laws that the individual feels confident in achieving, as the rules are within the individual's power to do them. These can be laws and statutes such as knocking on a certain number of doors each week to distribute religious literature or make more converts, the eating or not eating of certain foods, choosing certain prescribed clothing or abstaining from certain kinds of public activities or amusements, even doing acts of charity that in themselves are good, but have no value or power to change the nature of the children of the first fallen Adam. All these efforts will only result in self-righteousness and negative attitudes of envy or condemnation towards those not succeeding or competing by the same rules.

Paul sums up what we have been saying here in the fifth chapter of his letter to the Galatians church:

Galatians 5:4-25

You have become estranged from Christ, you who attempt to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace. For we through the Spirit eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness by faith. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but faith working through love.

You ran well. Who hindered you from obeying the truth? This persuasion does not come from Him who calls you. A little leaven leavens the whole lump. I have confidence in you, in the Lord, that you will have no other mind; but he who troubles you shall bear his judgment, whoever he is.

And I, brethren, if I still preach circumcision, why do I still suffer persecution? Then the offense of the cross has ceased. I could wish that those who trouble you would even cut themselves off!

For you, brethren, have been called to liberty; only do not use liberty as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. For all the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." But if you bite and devour one another, beware lest you be consumed by one another!

I say then: Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh. For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.

Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness, idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like; of which I tell you beforehand, just as I also told you in time past, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law. And those who are Christ's have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit.

The Fruit of Truth

The Christian has a right and duty to choose an attitude of rest and peace in Christ. There are some false shepherds that Paul writes about who are teaching things that upset the faith of many. Is the ultimate reality that bounds our understanding of ourselves a belief that states we cease if our physical tent, this clay vessel we inhabit, ceases? Is our ultimate fate to be appeasing a wrathful God whose normal disposition is to cast all of the fallen race of the first Adam into eternal separation from Himself should they fail to provide the required religious works?

Do we imagine that it is our job to perfect the fallen clay vessel that we have inherited from the first fallen Adam; that with just the right religious knowledge, and the right number of religious works, we can present ourselves clean and spotless before a completely Holy and Righteous God?

Could we ever, under these conditions, be able to fulfill that law which Jesus said was the first and foremost, that of loving God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength? In a system of fear and hiding our nakedness behind the whitewashed walls of our religious good deeds, could we ever truly love our neighbors without hypocrisy without knowledge of the love that the gospel says we have received from God in the gift of His Son on behalf of our own sinful nature? According to the Biblical understanding of sin, we are not sinners because we sin, but we sin because we are born with a sinful nature inherited from the first Adam.

All such teachings that do not lead men to first rest in the finished work of Christ instead keep men in a system which attempts to justify the flesh by the works of the law (Romans 3:20). It is the spirit that gives life, the flesh profits nothing. The humility to recognize that we are terminally sick with the inherited sin nature from the first fallen Adam, and to seek by God's mercy to be clothed in the gift He offers of the righteousness of His Son - this is true New Testament Christian faith. Beginning on a basis of anything but the finished work of Christ will leave man yet building his house on a foundation of sand.

John 15:4-8

Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me.

"I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in Me, he is cast out as a branch and is withered; and they gather them and throw them into the fire, and they are burned. If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you. By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit; so you will be My disciples."

Jesus said that Mary had chosen the better thing, to first sit at the feet of Christ, to learn of Him, and to get a revelation of the great gift of His inheritance, the treasures that the believer receives in Him as a joint heir of God's family by faith and rest in the finished work of Christ.

Those working not on behalf of what they will gain as payment for their deeds, but who instead give their lives in the service of a treasure already granted to them on the basis of the finished work of Christ and which is kept where rust and moth and thief cannot destroy will always outperform those who seek by their good deeds to simply earn the wages of slaves.

Peter writes that those perfected in such a faith have purified themselves for a sincere love of God and the members of Christ's body, the church (1 Peter 1:22). An insincere love would be simply seeking to show acts of compassion not on behalf of those in need, but simply as a means of gain for oneself.

Paul writes to Timothy that the goal of Christian instruction is love from a pure heart and a clean conscience through faith in the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ (1 Timothy 1:5). Those that put their faith in Christ are sealed with the Holy spirit of God (Ephesians 1:15) who in the believer's heart testifies with their

spirits that they are indeed, by their faith, members of God's household, joint heirs in Christ (Romans 8:15).

But there are some who are teaching false gospels, even those who may freely use the name of Jesus in what they say, who would make orphans of the children of God, or else so ruin the hearing of those yet in darkness that they will never perceive the light of the Gospel, the glory of God in the face of Christ. They would replace the spirit of adoption with a spirit of slavery and fear, for as the devil leads captive by fear, so do the false prophets who come in Christ's name use the fear of those not yet perfected in God's love to lead them after themselves.

The true disciple in Christ needs carefully to make the distinction between a false gospel and that proclaimed by the disciples of Jesus, to know the true spirit of the words they are hearing, even more so as each day draws us nearer to that time when Jesus warned there would be a great falling away, an apostasy from the truth. Truth is in Jesus.

Ephesians 4:21

if indeed you have heard Him and have been taught by Him, as the truth is in Jesus

Acts 20:28-32

Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves. Therefore watch, and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears.

“So now, brethren, I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified.

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