

Appearances vs Reality

Introduction

Good afternoon from Hong Kong.

I want to talk to you today about appearances versus reality and its implications, not just for Christians, but for those who are seeking and those who are totally non-Christians at this time.

Let me just ask you have you ever had this experience where you see some beautiful, lovely apples and they look great? The guy has sort of made them look very shiny - the guy who's been selling them, and then when you get them home - you open them up and they're dry; they're like bread or they've got some sort of bug in them?

And experiences like this quickly teach us that what we see is not what we get. Experience in this world is not actually the reality of the situation. Now things can be more sinister than this. A man or a woman may appear very attractive to us, but at the end of the day, particularly if you're a Christian, this person can make your life a misery, and has actually been sent in by the enemy, by Satan to make your life miserable, and I think you get a hint of where I'm going now with this particular teaching.

Appearances vs Reality - Its Relevance

OK, why is appearances versus reality relevant, relevant to us all, Christian or non-Christian? So, let's just look at some examples from a Christian perspective, from a Christian setting of how appearances can differ from reality so we can see the difference.

The first example is the case of a Christian who may appear to be struggling, things may not be going well for this particular person - difficulty coping with life, but actually this person has an inner peace. The person has an inner peace and an inner joy which the outward circumstances would not suggest that person could ever have.

The second example is a person who may appear to be rather harsh, unapproachable and yet, when we get to know that person, that person has a deep caring for people and for issues that are important. On the other hand, we might meet

someone who is extremely, as we say in the west, hail fellow well met, someone who is very nice and caring, or apparently so, but when we get to know that person, that's not really the character of the person. So, I think we need to bear in mind that often those people that don't necessarily make a good first impression, when you get to know them, they are good people. Some people who are superficially very pleasant, when you get to know them, the outward exterior is not matched by the internal reality.

I think Samuel 16 verse 7 (NIV) we have the way God sees things, reinforcing the fact that judging people on the basis of superficial impressions is wrong. Verse 7 says this: *...God sees not as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.*

Now, there's a need for balance here. I don't want you to think that when you go into a church situation or any other situation for that matter, the person who appears to be nice, there's something wrong with this person, that they're a sinister person. That would be totally unfair and that would be ridiculous because most of the time, to use our first example, if you buy apples which look good, they tend to be good, but nevertheless, we need to remember that as Matthew 7:16 puts it, *By their fruit you will recognise them.* So, people need to be judged not on superficial first impressions but by the reality of how they act and behave.

The third example, again from probably a Christian setting, is people may be going through adverse circumstances and they can be easily discouraged. However, it may be a meaningful situation if it's you that's going through these circumstances, it may be a meaningful situation for you because in reality, positive things are going to take place. We may just perceive that we're in a bad situation when things are going wrong, but let me tell you something, God does not build Christian character when life is a bed of roses. Sometimes, God will loosen his grip on the enemy's work, the enemy's activity in our lives, for the purpose of building Christian character. James 1 verses 2-4 says it, says this exactly. *Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.*

So, what I think we need to be looking at as Christians is not about the type of things that are going on in our lives, when things don't seem to be going right, but what is Christ doing, what is the Lord doing in our lives? He's building Christian character so

that we can be more Christ-like.

I want to move now to talk about appearances verses reality, specifically in the spiritual realm. There is such a thing as objective reality - an objective reality is consistent with how God sees things. God is the God of truth; He knows all things accurately. So whatever God sees will be objective reality. It's therefore important to perceive reality as God sees it instead of falling into the error of perceiving things with subjective feelings and outward appearances.

So, what is reality for God? I think for God, Paul sums up God's notion of reality when Paul says in Ephesians 6:12 that *... our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.*

This is an important and absolutely fundamental truth that we need to embrace, or we will be continually deceived by Satan and prevented from leading a full Christian life or realising our Christian potential or in the case of someone who is seeking the Lord, we will be hindered from giving our life to Him.

A. W. Tozer, a well-known Christian writer of the 1940's and 50's and sometimes thought to be, by many, a modern day prophet, puts it this way and in his book: 'This World: Playground or Battleground' he says this, and he's talking about the American context but it has a universal application.

"Our forefathers conceived the world as a battleground, not a playground. Contemporary thought, however, is more likely to claim: We are not here to fight. We are here to frolic."

Tozer is actually reinforcing Paul's point; namely, that this world is a spiritual battleground!

A preacher by the name of James Smith in the mid 19th century wrote some very telling words and I want to quote them to you which emphasise the difference between appearance and reality. This is what he says:

"We are all too much taken up with appearances. We do not look beneath the surface as we should. A title, a grand equipage, a good name, large property, a splendid house, fine dress, or popular applause attract our attention, win our admiration, and

even, at times, excite our envy! But it should not be so. Many are titled on earth who are despised in heaven. Many ride to hell in fine carriages, many who are poor trudge on foot to heaven. Many are commended by creatures who are condemned by the Creator. Many have worldly wealth who are strangers to true riches. Many live in splendid houses on earth for whom no mansion is prepared in heaven. Many who clothe their bodies in purple and fine linen will find their souls naked when they come to appear before God. And many who are applauded now will be accused and condemned for eternity. Let us not judge, then, according to appearance but let us judge righteous judgment."

Where am I going with this message?

Now where am I going with all this? Well, there is a tendency for man (Christian or non-Christian) to be unduly influenced by external appearances and superficial issues. This is a weakness that plagues all men and is in urgent need of attention by everybody, particularly by the Christian. Why is this?

Well, first, man tends to act on the basis of his five senses, according to the visible and the obvious. The result is he draws inaccurate conclusions and responds in a way which is totally incorrect and this is made worse by the activities of the prince of this world, Satan.

The powers of darkness want to confuse us, blur the issues and hinder us from grasping reality, thus bringing us into a web of deception. It's been going on ever since creation. A quick analysis of Satan's dealings with Adam and Eve illustrate this point very well and his tactics have not changed.

If we look at Genesis verse 4 through 6, we look at an extract from Satan's interaction with Adam and Eve. *The serpent said to the woman, "You surely will not die! For God knows in that day you eat from it (and this is the tree of life) your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." When the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was desirable to make one wise, she took from its fruit and ate; and she gave also to her husband with her, and he ate.*

So Satan succeeded in shaking the confidence of Eve in God's word regarding the truth of what was good for her and what was good for Adam. The way Eve was tempted is instructive for us. Remember when we look at this verse, she "saw", "it

appeared good for food", "it was a delight for the eyes". All these are related to outward appearances and resulted in the wrong response to the situation.

The evil one, Satan, emphasised the outward to her and to us too and seeks to draw man to act on the basis of appearance just like Adam and Eve did. He will make many things appear attractive that will in reality destroy us. This is deception through appearance. Most importantly, and here is a lesson for us in the area of spiritual discernment, Eve was not prayerful and failed to look to the Lord to help her perceive things accurately.

Let's look at the second issue. The influence of this world, that is, the world's views and values, is all pervasive unless we step back and discern things from a spiritual perspective. The evil one is at work in and through the world, encouraging an approach to life that is fleshly and preoccupied with the visible and the temporal. You've only got to look at what's on the cinema, what's on movies, TV, all the hoardings advertising, you know exactly what I mean. If we are not careful, we can be easily influenced by the ways and approach of the people around us, and we end up in disobedience and failing to perceive things accurately.

Third, living in this world of sight and sound, we tend not to be 'tuned into' or conscious of the spiritual realm and spiritual realities because they don't seem obvious. Furthermore, many of us are lacking in spiritual perception and discernment, that is, the ability to perceive reality accurately, including, and especially, the spiritual dimension. Spiritual discernment is a quality that can and should be cultivated through the enabling of the Holy Spirit and through gathering knowledge on matters of spiritual warfare. This is so important when you think that the New Testament makes over 80 references to Satan, the Devil and his work.

A further point, accurate perception is an integral part of growing and serving the Lord well. If we cannot perceive things accurately, how can we grow and serve the Lord with effectiveness when we are continually being kicked around like a football by the work of the enemy? Also, when we perceive things accurately, we will also enable the Lord to share, reveal and entrust more to us. If we can perceive things as the Lord perceives them, He's more confident that we can do His will effectively. We can respond to Him in obedience.

Finally, and a most important point, is that if we are pushed and pulled around by Satan, in effect, he becomes our lord rather than God and our God is a jealous God,

and there are fundamental implications here.

Conclusion

OK, let me just conclude by saying that the various issues raised here will help us to perceive, hopefully, reality accurately and understand that we are in a spiritual battle. If we focus on God's reality, which means that we need to be spiritually discerning, we can improve in the accuracy of our understanding of reality. This can help us on our journey to becoming more Christ-like, to discern and come against the work of the enemy in our lives as Christians, and in the case of the non-Christians, this can help us not to be deceived and to move towards salvation.

I'm going to leave you now to discuss the key points of this message in your Little Church World fellowship groups. God bless and see you next week.

Discussion Questions

1. Example 1 is all about judging a person, but doesn't the bible teach us that we are not to judge others?
2. Example 2 above is all about suffering. What is God's purpose for suffering in the world?
3. What is the meaning of "joy" in James 1:2-4? *Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.*
4. In this natural world in which we live, while the focus on the senses means that there is little comprehension of the reality of the spiritual battleground, there seems also to be a pre-occupation with the supernatural e.g., super-heroes, vampires, zombies etc. Why is this?
5. Ephesians 6:12 reads: *For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.* Paul's statement is a reflection of the reality of existence. What does this say about how we should

respond to this “struggle”?

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31st October, 2013