

The test of one's spirituality is not his gifts, but his godliness.

## SPIRITUALLY GIFTED, BUT HOW SPIRITUAL?

In a paper prepared for a ministers institute, I addressed one section to the proposition that spiritual gifts are not a proof of spirituality.

Afterwards a minister asked, "How can a person have spiritual gifts and not be spiritual?" I was not surprised by the question, for this has been a puzzle to many, and a direct contradiction to some. But there are various passages of Scripture to support this proposition.

For example, in Matthew 7:15 Jesus said, "Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves." These men had a gift to

prophecy, yet Jesus said they were wolves, not sheep.

He added, "Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name, and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity" (Matthew 7:22, 23).

On the surface, one would think that the operation of spiritual gifts would be the most natural evidence that a person himself was godly, and could be regarded as a safe guide in spiritual matters. But it is not so.

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In answer to the minister's question I reminded him of the story of Balaam. The Israelites had entered Moab en route from Egypt to Canaan. Balak king of the Moabites was terrified by their numbers. He was afraid they would devour the Moabites, so he sent messengers eastward to get the help of Balaam who was known to be a seer, or prophet.

The full account can be found in the Book of Numbers, chapters 22 through 25. The fact that four chapters are spent on it shows there is an important lesson in the story.

King Balak had confidence in Balaam. "I wot that he whom thou blessest is blessed, and he whom thou cursest is cursed," he said. "I pray thee, curse me this people . . . that I may drive them out of the land." With the messengers he sent "the rewards of divination"—that is, a payment for Balaam's services.

Balaam replied, "Lodge here this night, and I will bring you word again, as the LORD shall speak unto me." He used the greatest name of God, *Yahweh*, so it was in the name of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob that Balaam prophesied.

The next day Balaam told the messengers, "Get you into your land: for the LORD refuseth to give me leave to go with you."

After this King Balak increased the amount of the bribe, and sent it by messengers of higher rank. "I will promote thee unto very great honour, and I will do whatsoever thou sayest unto me: come therefore, I pray thee, curse me this people."

But Balaam still refused. He told the messengers, "If Balak would give me his house full of silver and gold, I cannot go beyond the word of the LORD my God, to do less or more."

But then Balaam made his first mistake. He began thinking of the king's liberal offer and his covetous spirit got the best of him. That is why Peter later alluded to the incident when he wrote, "An heart they



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have exercised with covetous practices . . . gone astray, following the way of Balaam the son of Bosor, who loved the wages of unrighteousness" (2 Peter 2:12-22).

So Balaam said he would make it a matter of prayer again. But it is sin to pray about a matter when the will of God is already known. What is called for is obedience.

Since Balaam's true desire was not to do God's will, but to go with the men, God gave him permission to go; but He cautioned him, "The word which I shall say unto thee, that shalt thou do."

So Balaam went with the king's messengers, and he made three attempts to curse Israel. Each time he spoke, he prophesied good concerning them. He could not pronounce a curse, but only blessing.

In the fourth prophecy he spoke of the coming Messiah: "I shall see him, but not now; I shall behold him, but not nigh; there shall come a Star out of Jacob, and a Sceptre shall rise out of Israel" (Numbers 24:17).

Actually Balaam was prophesying against his will, for he greatly wished to please King Balak and receive the promised rewards. But he prophesied truthfully, even when his heart was not right before God.

But to view the whole story requires adding Numbers 31:16. Chapter 31 is an account of the vengeance ordered against the Midianites, the principal reason being the immorality that had occurred between them and the Israelites.

Many people grow to maturity in our churches without learning the real nature of the pagan worship of the nations around Israel, because we feel the subject is too delicate to teach our children. The fact is that nearly all the nations of the Near East worshiped some form of agricultural deities, and these took the form of fertility cults. In the idea that their example would encourage their gods to grant them increase in their flocks, herds, and fields they

engaged in temple prostitution as a part of their religion.

And in 31:16 we learn that Balaam had advised Balak to invite the Israelites to share in the worship of their gods, including participation in the immorality of their cult. For this sin God sent a plague that caused 24,000 to die (Numbers 25:9).

Surely this provides clear proof of our proposition. Balaam uttered genuine prophecies four times, and then he advised King Balak how to trap the Israelites, whom he had just blessed, into immorality. He knew this would lead to their destruction. *The operation of a spiritual gift is no proof of personal godliness.*

One other instance should be cited. Caiaphas, the high priest, uttered a prophecy at the very time he was plotting the death of Jesus.

The account is in John 11:47-53. The chief priests and Pharisees held a council after the raising of Lazarus to consider the question, "What shall we do? for this man doeth many miracles." And Caiaphas, "being high priest that year, said unto them, 'Ye know nothing at all, nor consider that it is expedient for us, that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation perish not.' And this spake he not of himself; but, being high priest that year, he prophesied that Jesus should die for that nation; and not for that nation only, but that also he should gather together in one the children of God that were scattered abroad."

Caiaphas uttered a genuine prophecy, though he was not conscious that he prophesied.

There will be those who have prophesied in Christ's name, and in His name have cast out devils and done many wonderful works, who shall be shut out of God's kingdom.

Consider a simple illustration.

Assume that you wish to spread the gospel throughout the city, and you have decided the best way is to put up billboards bearing the message of John 3:16.

So you let the contract to a local billboard company that has a crew of unsaved men. They place the message on the billboards, "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life."

It's a chilly day in the fall, so after a few billboards the men warm themselves in the nearest saloon. Then they post a few more billboards, and go to another saloon. After a few more billboards and a few more saloons, the men end the day hardly able to stand on the cat-walks from which they paste up the message.

But a driver, coming into the city, sees the billboard and gets the message of John 3:16. If he reads the last sign they place, he will receive as much truth as from the first sign they placed when they were sober.

The truth is in the message, not in the messenger.

Yet one more illustration. Consider the decorated Christmas tree. I ask, "Is it a pine, a spruce, a fir, or a hemlock?" Do you look at the tinsel, the colored ornaments, the pretty lights, or the angel with the halo on the topmost branch? Or do you examine the gifts hung on the tree, or displayed beneath it? No, these have been supplied. They do not indicate the nature of the tree.

To answer my question you look at the needles, the bark, and the cones. They grew there by nature, and they indicate what kind of tree it is.

Jesus never taught, "By their gifts shall ye know them." He said, "By their fruits ye shall know them" (Matthew 7:20). The test of one's spirituality is not his gifts, but his godliness.