

## **On Being Led by the Spirit**

### **VI. The Place of Circumstances**

There is far more to the matter of guidance than the manipulation of circumstances, or the “handwriting on the wall.” The tendency to view guidance as an extraordinary exercise, defeats the basic meaning of our new birth. In reality, we have become spirit-oriented beings who are possessed by the Spirit of Christ, and therefore readily in touch with Him.

*But isn't that kind of closeness dependent upon our spiritual condition? Do we not have to be functioning at a very high level of devotion and commitment?*

Only if you are a Pharisee in good standing. The tendency to put the willingness of Christ to help us, on the basis of the human capacity to perform, puts the “cart before the horse.” How can we perform if we do not have His help? The issue of guidance is so intertwined with the whole process of life in the family of Christ, that we must see it as a part of the larger implication of the destiny of the human spirit, which is to abide forever in camaraderie with God, the Eternal Spirit. Therefore, it is essential that Christ must help us in every phase of our family life with Him on the earth.

Now, on the earth, we are passing through a phase—apparently essential—in the fulfillment of God's work within us. What its true function is in our preparation, only God knows. Most efforts to explain it are unsatisfying. But, sojourn on earth we must, for God's own reasons. Meanwhile, while we are on the earth, we are involved in many different exercises of faith—guidance, fellowship, service, suffering—which only God really understands, but which obviously are a part of our preparation.

Guidance, gifts, service, submission, are all elements in our life with Christ. But so also are learning and maturing; success and failure and weakness. Many problems which people see as spiritual are really immaturity, and need time as the ally of change.

Now, if we could only get guidance from God when we have passed all the earthly tests of spirituality, we would indeed be in a fix. We would be like the person applying for a job without experience. We can't get experience without a job, but you can't get a job without experience. How can we grow in the spirit, if we are not in God's place for us. But, according to many, we can't find God's place without “spirituality.” So then the search for guidance becomes an intensive effort to impress God with our spirituality so He will reward us with His help.

The answer to the dilemma, of course, is that since doing what the Lord wants is intrinsic to the growth process, it is therefore something wherein we can expect the help of the Spirit of God within, in spite of our struggles with the flesh. Our responsibility is willingness; His is effectiveness. That is, He will effectively work with us to see to it that we do what He wants, if we want what He wants. It is not a matter of worthiness, or cleverness, or fervor, or feelings of faith. It is a matter of simply accepting our need of His help, and leaving it to Him to see that we do what He wants.

*But what about willingness? Can't we hinder His guidance by being willful?*

If you mean by willfulness, strong feelings about what we wish He would let us do, that is a common condition in the natural self. He works in spite of our feelings, as a parent does what is best for the child, in spite of the child's desires. But, if you mean by willfulness, the determination to do what we want in spite of what Christ wants, He will probably let us have our way, and let us suffer the consequences, so we will learn to be submissive. People who get their own way, either with God, or others, usually pay a heavy price for it.

Guidance is a part of our growth process, like children learning from parents and wrestling with the problem of growing up.

*But what about the place of circumstances? Doesn't God use circumstances to guide us?*

Yes, indeed. But we must only use them as confirming, and not as the ultimate test. Circumstances by themselves are too subject to misinterpretation. Further, when we hold God to particular circumstances, we limit Him to our own narrow perspectives. We can so box God in with our own system of "sign post," that He can't work out His own guidance system. The same problem attends the use of "tokens." "If you do this, I'll do that," or, "If you do that, I'll know you want me to do this." It becomes an exercise in enigmas—trying to find one's way through the maze of clues.

*Well, what part do circumstances ever play?*

A very important part, but only in concert with other factors. As we said in the beginning, guidance is part of a larger process, and not a "thing in itself." It is like learning to get along with a friend, or mate. One gets to know what the other one wants by time together and by sharing experiences; by trying to please, and failing, and trying again. If that seems too much of a "trial and error" approach, one must confess that after nearly forty years of living with Christ oneself, and observing countless other Christians from the least to the greatest, one finds that to be a rather common experience. No one that I have ever met, would insist that they always know exactly what the Lord wants. But the mistakes themselves are part of the growth process. Nor does Christ ever fail to take into consideration the frailty of the flesh. **"He knoweth our frame, He remembereth that we are dust!"** (Psalm 103:14). Legion are the passages in both Old and New Testaments that assure us of the longsuffering of Christ towards us. But, one cannot simply come to Christ for guidance, when one has had only infrequent contacts, and limited experiences with Him.

Guidance is a combination of many things—sensitivities to Christ, which we acquire by time with Him and the Word; circumstances; fellowship with believers; as well as the general flow of one's life with Christ. One gets a sense of the overall pattern of things as one continues in the process of growth. Circumstantial evidence by itself is misleading, but it can be an important confirming factor. Sometimes it can be a strong factor, if it is a matter of closing doors, or opening them. But, here again, caution is needed. It is difficult to tell whether the circumstance is a hindrance of Satan—a road block to go through, or a check by the Spirit. It is also difficult, sometimes, to tell whether it is a door opened by Christ for His purposes, or a side track by the enemy. If

we are in the habit of fellowship with Christ, and we are in touch with the general pattern that He has been working out in our lives, we will be more apt to have a sense of which is which. One indicator is that Satan's choices always, in one way or another, tend to lead us away from Christ rather than toward Him.

In the ultimate, however, our only true guarantee that we are doing what Christ wants, is the capacity and willingness of Christ to work out His purposes in us, in spite of our human inadequacy to make sound decisions, or to assess what God has in mind for us. In summary, the following observations.

1. Keep in touch with Christ, daily. Don't just come to Him when you need special guidance.
2. See your mistakes as part of the growing process and not a hindrance to your fellowship with Christ, or to His willingness to work with you.
3. Use circumstances only as a confirmation, and not a final indication.
4. Express to Christ your willingness to do what He wants, whatever your feelings may be. (Don't pay any attention to feelings. It is your will that counts).
5. Beware of the kind of willfulness that stubbornly insists on one's own way, or elects not to inquire of Christ.
6. Beware of advice from anyone not in tune with Christ.
7. Trust the Lord to work out His purposes with your life, in spite of your fluctuating feelings and human inadequacy, to make the right decisions. Put your whole life in His hands, and ask Him to work out His will in spite of you. That is your ultimate safeguard.

David Morsey

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