

ATTITUDE IS NOT THE MOST IMPORTANT THING

Introduction

- A. Text: **Eph. 1:15-20**.
- B. Where in the Bible is this found: *Attitude is the principal thing; therefore in all your getting get a better attitude?* It simply is not there.
- C. To question the number one priority of "attitude" is to fly in the face of conventional wisdom.
 - 1. Most people simply assume that attitude is the key to solving every problem.
 - 2. It is taken for granted that attitude is the most basic consideration in every endeavor.
- D. Yet from a biblical perspective, attitude is not the ultimate factor.
- E. Note carefully: in this lesson we will not be saying that attitude is *unimportant*. What we will be saying is that something else is *even more important*.
- F. *Attitude is not the idol our culture has made of it.*
- G. ***Attitude is not the most important thing!***

I. WHAT DO WE MEAN BY "ATTITUDE"?

- A. Many people, some of whom make a living talking about attitude, seem to have only a vague notion of what they mean by the term.
- B. The word "attitude" is interesting to study.
 - 1. It was used originally in the fine arts to mean the "disposition" of a figure in statuary or painting, the posture to given to it by the artist.
 - 2. It then came to mean a position of the body or manner of carrying oneself, especially as indicating a mood or condition — e.g. an attitude of prayer.
 - 3. Much later it was used in aviation to mean the orientation of an aircraft's axes relative to some reference line or plane, such as the horizon.
 - 4. Later it was used in aerospace for the orientation of a spacecraft relative to its direction of motion.
 - 5. In all of these usages, "attitude" has to do with the literal position of something physical.
 - 6. Along the way, however, attitude came to be used in a *figurative* sense to describe the "position" (or "disposition") of the mind: the expression "attitude of the mind" came into the language.
 - a. A "deliberately adopted, or habitual, mode of regarding the object of thought" (OED).
 - b. A "state of mind or feeling with regard to some matter; disposition" (AHD).
- C. An attitude is *a person's "mental posture" with respect to something*: positive or negative, optimistic or pessimistic, interested or disinterested, determined or indifferent, patient or impatient, etc.
- D. But how *important* is that in relation to other priorities?
- E. To understand where attitude falls on the scale of importance, the analogy of *maps* is helpful.

II. MAPS: OUR PERCEPTIONS, UNDERSTANDINGS, BELIEFS

- A. A map is *a representation of certain territory*.

1. A map is not the territory — it is only an approximate representation of it, one that is more or less accurate.
 2. Maps are very useful — often we cannot do without them.
 3. But much depends on the accuracy of the maps we use.
- B. Our minds carry many mental maps of the “territory” of human action.
1. These are the way we “see” reality: our perceptions, understandings, beliefs, assumptions, interpretations, and principles. Cf. our “frame of reference,” our “way of looking” at things, etc.
 2. Our minds contain two sets of maps.
 - a. Maps of the way we think things are: *realities*.
 - b. Maps of the way we think things ought to be: *values*.
- C. Our perceptions determine:
1. Our *attitude*: how we think about things in life.
 2. Our *behavior*: how we act in response to things in life.
- D. *But the accuracy of our maps varies greatly — and if our maps are not accurate, trying to improve either our attitude or our behavior will be very difficult and without much point.*
- E. Suppose we are trying to find our way to City Hall in Atlanta — but the map we have is one of Dallas.
1. If the map we have falsely describes the reality of the territory we are trying to work with, we will experience great frustration trying to accomplish our goal.
 - a. We might work on our behavior: we might try harder, double our speed, etc. — but this would only get us to the wrong place faster.
 - b. We might work on our attitude: we might be more positive, more optimistic, etc. — we still wouldn’t get to the right place, but maybe our attitude would be so positive we wouldn’t care.
 2. Without an accurate map, the best attitude and the best behavior in the world will do us little good: we’re still lost!
 3. But if we obtain an accurate map, then diligent effort becomes important and then positive attitude can make a real difference.
 4. *The first and most important requirement is the accuracy of our map!*
- F. The same principles hold true in the realm of human conduct: **beliefs > attitudes > behavior**.
- G. “We can only achieve quantum improvements in our lives as we quit hacking at the leaves of attitude and behavior and get to work on the root, the paradigms from which our attitudes and behaviors flow. . . . Correct maps will infinitely impact our personal and interpersonal effectiveness far more than any amount of effort expended on changing our attitudes and behaviors” (Stephen R. Covey, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, pp.31,35).

III. WHAT THE BIBLE IS ABOUT

- A. It ought to come as no surprise to us that the Bible is about *improving the accuracy of our mental maps!* “Through your precepts I get understanding, therefore I hate every false way” (**Psa. 119:104**).
1. The Bible is about correcting our maps of reality: **the way things are**.
 2. The Bible is about correcting our maps of value: **the way things ought to be**.
- B. When biblical truth has penetrated our minds to the extent that we understand accurately the “territory” of what is real, then both our attitudes and our behaviors naturally move into alignment with that understanding.
1. Think about it: on the judgment day, everybody’s *attitude* about God will automatically adjust itself.

- a. The reason is that everyone's maps will instantly be corrected — each will see reality fully and accurately for what it is!
 - b. "For it is written: 'As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to Me, and every tongue shall confess to God'" (**Rom. 14:11**).
 2. Prior to the judgment day, our primary effort needs to be directed not toward improving our attitude, but toward improving our understanding of reality.
 3. Paul prayed for his brethren in Colossae: "For this reason we also, since the day we heard it, do not cease to pray for you, and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding; that you may walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing Him, being fruitful in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; strengthened with all might, according to His glorious power, for all patience and longsuffering with joy" (**Col. 1:9-11**). Cf. **Eph. 1:17-20**.
 4. **Hb. 11:1-40** is an impressive list of people whose attitude and behavior were pleasing to God because of faith — their commitment to the truth of what is real, both in the realm of the seen and the unseen!
- C. The word "attitude" does not appear in many English translations of the Bible, but other words like these do: truth, knowledge, understanding, discernment, wisdom.
- D. Exhortations to improve our attitude do little good if the *perceptions* on which those attitudes are based are not changed.
1. Most modern attempts at attitude improvement are superficial.
 - a. They treat the *symptom* rather than the underlying problem.
 - b. They *do not last* — they need constantly to be pumped up by "positive mental attitude" psych-up speeches.
 - c. Without changing our beliefs, trying to keep our attitude where it needs to be is like trying to *blow up a balloon that has a hole in it*.
 2. Interestingly, the modern personal change techniques that are proving effective are those (like cognitive therapy) that focus first on beliefs and understandings.
 3. The "how" of improving human behavior is easy when there is a big enough "why"!
 4. It is no coincidence that the Scriptures urge us first to think first about those things that are *true*.
 - a. "Whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy — meditate on these things" (**Phil. 4:8**).
 - b. "The wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, etc." (**Jas. 3:17**).
- E. We need constantly to be seeking — through study of the Scriptures — more accurate mental maps.
1. Most problems with our perception (and therefore our attitude) are problems of limited perspective — we are seeing only a part of the picture.
 2. We need the *humility* to be willing for our perspective on reality to be made more perfect by God, rather than assume the accuracy of our own perceptions.
 - a. "Who can understand his errors? Cleanse me from secret faults" (**Psa. 19:12**). Cf. **vv.7-14**.
 - b. "Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct your paths" (**Prov. 3:5,6**).
- F. Ultimately, the thing that is distinctive about the Lord's people is that they are committed to *truth*.
1. "Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth" (**Jn. 17:17-19**).
 2. "The church of the living God, [is] the pillar and ground of the truth" (**1 Tim. 3:15**).
- G. Of all truth, the most important is *the truth about God Himself* — His nature, His character, who He really is, what His relationship to us really is.
1. Sin began with deceitful misrepresentation about God - **Gen. 3:1-7**.
 2. The story of the Bible is the story of God bringing back all those who will come . . . to the truth about Himself!

- a. "And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent" (**Jn. 17:3**).
 - b. "And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us an understanding, that we may know Him who is true; and we are in Him who is true, in His Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life" (**1 Jn. 5:20**).
- H. *This is what the Bible is about — not about improving our attitudes.*
- I. Primarily, Bible study ought to be a serious grappling with *the text of the actual books of the Bible* — not repetitive topical studies that hack at the leaves of attitude and behavior without getting to the root of our understanding of biblical truth.
- 1. There is an urgent need among the Lord's people today for *significant textual study of the Bible*.
 - 2. In very many ways, we are suffering from a deficiency of this type of study, both in the classroom.
 - 3. It's no wonder we have trouble changing people's attitudes when so many of the Lord's people have run away from an actual study of the Bible itself and have become biblically illiterate!
 - 4. An intensive, thoughtful study of nearly any book in the Bible will do more good for our attitude than any number of cotton candy studies about attitude itself.
 - 5. Consider the powerful change in attitude that comes from books like Isaiah and Revelation.
- J. ***Biblical truth adjusts our view of objective reality — and in the process it alters both our attitude and our behavior.***

Conclusion

- A. The place we give to attitude is symptomatic of the "touchy-feely," *subjective* emphasis of our age.
- 1. Often, our age goes so far as to deny there is anything objective "out there."
 - 2. Truth is nothing but your own feelings — it can be whatever you want it to be.
 - 3. In any case, we much prefer to contemplate what is "in here" (our subjective feelings, attitudes, opinions, etc.) than do the work necessary to grasp accurately what is "out there" (the objective facts of external reality).
- B. But against this emphasis, the consistent emphasis of the Bible is on *the importance of objective truth*.
- 1. "Buy the truth, and do not sell it, also wisdom and instruction and understanding" (**Prov. 23:23**).
 - 2. Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life" (**Jn. 14:6**).
 - 3. God "desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (**1 Tim. 2:4**).
- C. This is what our main *emphasis* must be.
- 1. "Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore get wisdom. And in all your getting, get understanding" (**Prov. 4:7**).
 - 2. "And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free" (**Jn. 8:32**).
- D. To the extent our minds understand reality as it truly is, our attitudes will be congruent with that reality.
- E. If we don't deal with reality now, we will have to do so later — but then it will be too late to be saved.
- F. "For it is written: 'As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to Me, and every tongue shall confess to God'" (**Rom. 14:11**).

[Outline suggested by Steven R. Covey, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*]