

Chapter One: What Is Your Attitude?

A fundamental component of a successful Christian life is a godly attitude. Fellowship with God—either now or in the hereafter—is impossible without it. Having said that, Christians tend to place great value on this (“Attitude is everything!”) yet proportionately very little on what formats or determines attitude. There is no question that attitude is important, especially with regard to one’s spiritual welfare. Yet, efforts to improve one’s attitude without revealing and addressing those factors that create an improved attitude are pointless. This study will ultimately explore those factors. We will begin this study, however, by looking at “attitude” in a very general sense without regard to specific religious beliefs.

Attitude can be defined as “a series of thoughts that are connected to a feeling, or vice versa. It is the repetitive cycle of thinking and feeling, feeling and thinking.”⁵ Thus, attitude is made up of two basic parts: what you think about (i.e., your thoughts) and how you feel (i.e., your emotions). This is also referred to as your state of mind, mindset, mental disposition, heart (in a figurative sense), or personal outlook. In the ancient world, one’s “attitude” referred to his physical posture as he presented himself before his god, whether standing, bowing, kneeling, or lying prostrate. This idea is still embedded in the modern usage of the word: one’s attitude describes, in essence, his mental posture toward a given person, subject, experience, or life in general. To “fall upon one’s knees,” for example, depicts not only one’s physical posture in prayer but also the humble inclination of his heart (as in Ephesians 3:14). Likewise, to stand erect with one’s neck stiffened and chin thrust upward is a physical posture that also depicts the defiance and insubordination of that person’s heart (as in Acts 7:51).

“Thoughts” refer to what you put into your head and how you process that information (whether positively or negatively, objectively or subjectively, and/or truthfully or imaginatively). You think a certain way or about certain things because you choose to do so; or, because of earlier choices, you have been essentially programmed to do so. In most cases, it is the individual himself who programs his own thinking. Whatever a person thinks about is a window into that person’s true nature or identity. A man of the world may have good thoughts from time to time, but he does not have “the mind of Christ” (1 Corinthians 2:16); a Christian may think bad thoughts from time to time, but his habit is to dwell upon the things of God (Philippians 4:8).

What a person thinks about ultimately determines the outcome (or “fruit”) of his behavior and his words (Matthew 12:33-37). The one who is pure has filled his heart with pure thoughts; the one who is defiled and unbelieving” has filled his heart with corruptive thoughts and wicked imaginations (Mark 7:20-23, Titus 1:15-16). “Internal character dictates what we ultimately choose to do. If we have problems in our heart, no amount of trying to make right choices will produce good fruit in us.”⁷ (We will later discuss this “fruit” in detail.)

One’s general attitude, however, has a much broader meaning and application. It is not limited to a particular time or incident, but describes one’s overall disposition toward the social and political environment in which he lives, authority figures (including God), and/

or the world as a whole. One's attitude is the product of (but is not entirely defined by):

- Personal knowledge: facts, information, education, life experiences.
- Temperament: what kind of personality one has generally.
- Beliefs: family, cultural, religious, philosophic, traditional, etc.
- Thought content: what a person thinks about (or, what he puts into his head).

We should not confuse attitude with one's personal mood. "Mood" refers to one's mental and emotional disposition at a given moment. This can fluctuate due to the given situation or set of circumstances in which that person finds himself. Weather, physical health, favorable (or unfavorable) circumstances, financial status, job status, etc., can all affect one's daily mood. Mood and attitude are certainly related—the one affects the other—but mood is far more incidental rather than general. A person may have a certain attitude for years; but his mood may change daily or weekly.

Some have likened attitude to a kind of map of the mind that observes and reflects the "territory" of human action. We allude to this when we use expressions like one's "frame of reference" or "way of thinking." This "frame" or "way" concerns itself not only with one's view of reality—in essence, that person's reality, as he thinks it exists—but also his beliefs about how things ought to be—in essence, his personal policy system for the world. The accuracy of this map, however, may vary greatly from person to person.⁸

Attitude can also be defined as a pre-determined way of thinking that dictates one's present behavior. The attitude that you program in your head today will dictate how you act (or react) tomorrow. This attitude will either work for or against you (in achieving what is in your best interest), depending on whether or not it is consistent with what is in your soul's best interest. Attitudes can also be understood as cyclic or habitual patterns of thinking that are formed over a long period of time. "Patterns of thinking are so deeply ingrained in our hearts that we hardly even notice them. We get so used to reacting a certain way that our choices become automatic, and in time we cease to see them as actual choices."⁹

The Christian's attitude—one expected of a follower of Christ (as opposed to that of an unbeliever)—is tempered or conditioned by his regard for his Lord rather than the details of his physical life. His devotion to Christ and high regard for the Word of God establish a mental disposition that transcends his earthly circumstances. Ideally, this attitude is in harmony with Christ: "Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus ..." (Philippians 2:5; see also Romans 15:5-6 and Philippians 3:15-16).¹⁰ It is, of course, impossible to have a godly attitude until one is fully committed to God's truth. It is not uncommon for religious people to focus on a "good attitude" but focus relatively little on divinely-revealed truth. We will have much to say about this in the coming chapters.

The Importance (and Limitation) of Knowledge

Knowledge always precedes learning, and learning precedes attitude and (then) trained behavior. One's attitude will be conditioned by what he knows, but it is not equal to what he knows. Knowledge is an acquaintance with facts, truths, or principles, as from study or investigation.¹¹ It is not a replacement for righteousness, nor does it align a person's heart with God independent of other factors. Certainly not all knowledge is profitable:

- The (pre-Christian) ancients studied all kinds of scientific, mathematic, and astronomical knowledge, but this knowledge did not bring them closer to God or deliver them from paganism and idolatry.
- The Ephesian sorcerers had all sorts of books filled with (allegedly) magical and secret information of the occult, but when they became Christians they consigned this collection of knowledge to the flames because it was now useless to them (Acts 19:18-20).
- Many men in Paul’s day sought human “philosophy” [lit., the love of wisdom], but this was grossly inferior to the revealed Word (*Logos*) of God in the Person of Jesus Christ (Colossians 2:8-10; see John 1:1-3).
- Some of the Judaizing teachers of Paul’s day dabbled in angelology—the study of angels and angelic mediation—but such elaborate pursuits did not give them any advantage with regard to salvation (Colossians 2:18-19).
- The elitist Gnostics [from *gnosis*, “knowledge” or “(an) understanding”] of the first century sought righteousness through intellectualism and the possession of (what they believed was) secret and mystical information, but this could not atone for their sins or transform their hearts.
- Jesus referred to “the deep things of Satan” in Thyatira (Revelation 2:24), but this information did not profit those who studied it—and it offered nothing in the way of spiritual salvation. In fact, it had the complete opposite effect.
- Likewise, today’s secular world boasts of excelling in all sorts of knowledge, and we are allegedly living in an “Information Age.” Yet, not even the accumulation of or immediate access to all of this knowledge can offer the human soul what the revealed Word of God alone is able to provide. Furthermore, despite our lightning-fast access to untold volumes of information, our society is becoming increasingly immoral and antagonistic toward God and Christians.

The Christian faith is established upon the information that God has revealed in His Word, the Bible. This information provides the basis for faith, but it does not actually produce faith. An atheist can read the same Scripture that a believer reads, yet he may remain an atheist; despite such excellent knowledge, his regard for God may not change at all. Likewise, ancient Israel heard “good news” from God (in the Law of Moses), yet many Israelites did not exercise faith in Him. As a result, they forfeited what was promised them (Hebrews 4:1-2).

In response to the question of how much knowledge is needed as a foundation for one’s faith in God, there is no static or universal answer. The Book of Acts shows men and women with various levels of education all being taught the same gospel, and all who became Christians by obeying that gospel in the same way (or method). Clearly, one must have sufficient knowledge to be able to answer the basic questions concerning his convictions: 1) What do I believe? 2) Why do I believe it? 3) Is what I believe able to withstand objective criticism? 4) Does my belief system serve my very best interest, as measured over time)? and 5) Does my belief system serve the very best interests of all other people with whom I come into contact, as measured over time? John Piper has this to say:

There is no necessary correlation between extensive learning and the right use of the mind. Many PhDs think poorly, and many people with little formal education

think with great clarity and depth. I am pleading for a hearty engagement of the mind in the pursuit of God. I am not pleading mainly for more formal education. That may or may not be good in different cases. But the right use of the mind is always good no matter how much or how little education one has.¹²

Christians regularly assemble together in order to gain or refine biblical knowledge. This accumulated knowledge, however, does nothing for the improvement of one's attitude or life conduct until it is united with personal faith and (thus) put into appropriate practice. In other words, knowledge that does not bring a person closer to a known and beneficial goal is of little value to anyone, including the person who possesses it. More specifically, no one can achieve a godly attitude by knowledge alone. Furthermore, no one will find favor with or salvation from God based upon knowledge alone. Yet it remains unquestionably true that no one can be saved by God until he comes to know Him—not just know about Him but also to have fellowship with Him.

What do *you* think?

1. How important do you believe one's mental disposition is with regard to his or her success as a Christian?

2. If God is very concerned with what you think—i.e., what is going on in your head—then should you also be very concerned about this? Please discuss.

3. If your attitude is not based solely upon an accumulation of knowledge, then what good is it to have knowledge—especially the knowledge of God's Word?

4. Please read Colossians 1:9-12. What is the goal of knowledge?
 - a) Do we act alone (in whatever we do for God), or is He involved in whatever we do for Him?

 - b) How does this passage help to establish an appropriate attitude for Christians?