

The Fable Of The Hedge Apple And The Recluse Spider

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Have you ever seen a hedge apple? They are about the size of a regular apple, but they are extremely fibrous inside, and totally inedible. And, do not mow over them because they will gum up your mowers real quick. Worse yet, they will not burn either. They just sit there in the burn pile, defiantly staring at you from the fire. After the burning, there they are, a little bit charred, but intact.

They seem totally worthless. But, as the story goes, if you put them in your closet, they will keep brown recluse spiders from taking up residence in your clothes. So maybe, there is some good purpose for them.

One exterminator told John Reid that he actually saw a recluse spider build her nest comfortably atop the hedge apple placed in a closet designated to keep her away. So, is the hedge apple a good defense against recluse spiders? Is it fact or is it fable? What can you believe?

Life is filled with conflicting stories about hedge apples and arachnids, com-trails, weather patterns, and the right calendar to determine God's holy days. Every day individuals are faced with the daunting task of sifting through gigantic gobs of often conflicting information in an effort to make quality judgments about a multitude of issues, big and small.

For example, we need to decide what to do about the guy next door (I will talk about him a little bit later), whether it is consistent with God's law to eat a certain item, or to wear a certain article of clothing. Or, given our particular circumstances, if it is wise to move out of the cities, or to change jobs and retrain, or to engender another child, or just sit tight? Young people, those most lacking in experience, are faced with some key decisions that will affect their entire lives, such as what kind of work to go into, or whom to marry?

These judgments—these decisions—that we make determine how we live, where we live, and indeed, the quality of our lives. Judgments are part and parcel with governance. If we govern a family, a home, or a business, and indeed, if we govern ourselves, we must make judgments; right or wrong, good or bad, we make judgments. Therefore, it behooves us to make as high-quality judgments and decisions as possible.

Later on, as leaders in the family of God, we will be charged with teaching others how to

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make good choices and good decisions. It is important that we know how to do that ourselves.

Today, I want to talk about making sound, sensible decisions. What does God's Word say about decision-making? What steps ensure that our judgments are sagacious decisions? Stated this way, the subject is vast. I bet there are at least two people in this room, maybe three, who could deliver a series of twenty sermons on this particular topic. I will not do that. I will narrow it down and try to give you a few thoughts to ponder.

Before we go any further, I need to distinguish between judging and making judgments. There is an importance difference. The best approach may be through the use of a simple—though maybe overblown—illustration.

As parents with children, we may know of someone who is a predator. Maybe we know that the individual has difficulties in this area because of a past experience, or perhaps they have a previous conviction. Maybe we just suspect it, but we do not know it for sure. And we may be right. Maybe the individual is a brother, sister, or uncle. Maybe the individual is a neighbor, a boss, or even a teacher. I am not being specific on purpose. However, we will call this person, "The Guy Next Door."

What do we do with the Guy-Next-Door? Whether right or wrong, no matter how strong or weak the evidence may be, we do not have the prerogative to judge the individual. We all know what Christ taught in Matthew 7:1, "Judge not, that you be not judged." We are not called to judge these people and their standing with God. He will do that. God will work powerfully with the individual, maybe bringing him or her unto salvation and into His Kingdom in His time. It is not within our domain to condemn the individual.

But, we need to add some sauce to the soup. You see, this particular individual has an opportunity to be around your children in this present evil world. Maybe the opportunity is occasioned by your work or business, maybe by the fact that the individual is a somewhat close family member, or maybe a teacher.

While not being empowered by God to judge, we certainly have the right, and indeed the responsibility, to make a judgment call based on the facts as we see them. WE have the duty to make decisions and to implement them, as long as they are consonant with God's law. It is certainly wise that we take protective, if not overtly preemptive action.

We may choose to move away from the individual if he is a neighbor, or to change jobs if he is a boss, or to change schools if he is a teacher. Minimally, we deem it proper to take sound, but sure, steps to ensure that our youngsters are never alone with him or

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her, and that there are always responsible and trustworthy adults around when this person is in the presence of our children. This kind of judgment is absolutely proper, given the situation and given the times. It is better to be safe than sorry. This is not judging the individual. It is making a judgment. There is a difference.

Hopefully, of course, we are making our decisions based on a sound reading of the situation and not on surmise, imagination, or rumor. We should not go on witch-hunts.

How can we ensure that our decisions and judgments are sound? God has given us a number of guidelines to making sound decisions. For lack of time, I cannot elaborate on His law that we should be impartial, or that we do not judge by appearances, as important as these principles are to my point. But rather, I will focus on two other principles from God's Word on the subject of making sound decisions.

The first principle I want to talk about is "Get the Facts." We can see a number of examples of people who failed to get the facts. In John 7, Christ is in the Temple. We will start in verse 27 where some of Christ's critics assert:

John 7:27 However, we know where this Man is from, but when the Christ come, no one knows where He is from.

They had urban legends in those days too. One of them was that people would not know from where the Messiah would come. He would just appear. This is not supported in any way in the Scriptures. Yet, some made their decision rejecting Christ based on nothing more substantial than a myth. In verse 40, others had a different problem with the facts:

John 7:40-42 Therefore many from the crowd, when they heard this saying, said, "Truly this is the Prophet." Others said, "This is the Christ," but some said, "Will the Christ come out of Galilee? Has not the Scripture said that the Christ comes from the seed of David and from the town of Bethlehem, where David was?"

These people understood Isaiah correctly. Christ would come out of Bethlehem, and indeed He did. But, Isaiah also asserted that the gospel would start from "Galilee of the Gentiles" (found in Isaiah 9:1). These people did not have all the facts. They had not put everything together correctly. In verse 52, some Pharisees are rebuking Nicodemus:

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John 7:52 Are you also from Galilee? Search and look, for no prophet has arisen out of Galilee.

Either by design or ignorance, the Pharisees here express pure geographic snobbery, or chauvinism. We would call it "better-than-thou-ism." They looked down on Galilean Jews as "country bumpkins," outside the Jerusalem power-structure, and by that token, outside mainstream Judaism. They rejected Christ due to geographic prejudice. And, their comments about no prophet coming from Galilee are simply inaccurate. Jonah and Hosea came from Galilee, and perhaps a few others.

These people, their attitudes, and their approach toward Christ, were dead wrong. But, Nicodemus had it right in verse 51, where he rhetorically asks,

John 7:51 Does our law judge any man before it hears him and knows what he is doing?

God's law does indeed require due process. Notice in Deuteronomy 13 that Moses, in context, is speaking about people who stand accused of enticing Israel into idolatrous practices, a serious accusation indeed. God says, through Moses:

Deuteronomy 13:14-15a Then you shall inquire, search out, and ask diligently. And if it is indeed true and certain that such an abomination was committed among you, you shall surely strike the inhabitants of the city with the edge of the sword

Notice how explicit Moses is: "Inquire, search out, and ask diligently." God does not to expect us to make judgments capriciously or whimsically. This teaching, like all of God's instructions, is established by a second witness—using almost the exact same words, in Deuteronomy 17:4, 6.

As a New Testament reference you may want to notice Acts 17:11 where Luke praises the Bereans calling them, "more fair-minded than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so." These people did not just sit in services and leave and then forget what they heard. They diligently "proved all things," to use Paul's expression in I Thessalonians 5:21. They searched. They sought the facts. They got the facts. Such is essential if we are to make sound decisions. We need to get the facts.

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The second principle in making sound decisions is "The Standard of Evidence" that God has instituted. I suggest to you that this principle is too often overlooked by many in God's church.

Deuteronomy 19:15 One witness shall not rise against a man concerning any iniquity or any sin that he commits; by the mouth of two or three witnesses the matter shall be established.

God appears to give mankind a certain degree of latitude in the matter of decision-making. In matters we deem to be of special importance or weight, we may elect to require three witnesses. Otherwise, there must be two. One is insufficient to establish any matter. This is important. Mankind, already limited in his ability to perceive the truth of any matter and all too often given to blinding prejudice, is incapable of reliably making a proper decision based upon the words of a single witness.

If only one witness attests to a matter, the matter is not established. By the word "established," I mean that the matter is not proven, confirmed, or verified. The matter remains in the realm of a possibility, perhaps even a probability, but it is not established.

The thorny question remains, "Are we justified in taking action—for example, an action about the guy next door—when a matter is not established?" We will get there in a few moments.

We see an important New Testament application of this standard of evidence in John 8. We will pick up Christ's comments in verse 16.

John 8:16 And yet if I do judge, My judgment is true; for I am not alone, but I am with the Father who sent Me. It is also written in your law that the testimony of two men is true. I am one who bears witness of Myself, and the Father who sent Me bears witness of Me.

Those are remarkable words. They would make an interesting Bible study. How does God the Father bear witness of Christ? He does in a number of ways. Even though He was perfect and sinless, Christ did not bear witness of the gospel by Himself. The good news was attested to by two—that is, by Christ and the Father. In His day, and if you understand what I am saying, even to this day, the two witnesses of the truth that eluded Pilate are Christ and the Father. Of course, I am not saying that the Father and Christ are the two witnesses mentioned in Revelation 11. That clearly is not the case. I

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am saying that the witnesses of the truth we have learned are God Himself and Jesus Christ.

Should we ever get the idea that God has lowered His standard of evidence, there is the witness of Paul. Concerning the elders, Paul writes:

I Timothy 5:19 Do not receive an accusation against an elder except from two or three witnesses.

Notice that he uses the same terminology we saw in Deuteronomy, "two or three witnesses." God has not changed. He has not lowered His standard of evidence. It is the same standard that He instructed Moses to give to the people. The "two or three witnesses" rule is very much alive and well to this day.

It is for this reason that you should absolutely never accept as established, or proven, any purported doctrine that appears to be supported by just one scripture. God does not do that to us. That is not His pattern. He always supports His truth with a number of scriptures.

Did you ever hear a true minister of God cite only one verse in support of a doctrine? Usually you hear two or three—or 23! A person once wrote John Reid that he could prove that we that do not have to keep the Sabbath from one scripture. Well, of course he cannot do that. This individual's standard of evidence was far lower than God's standard of evidence. We will see in a few minutes what the implications of those low standards are and where they can lead.

I will not elaborate, but there is another New Testament witness to the "two or three witness" rule in Hebrews 10:28. And, of course, the final warning message which will go out will not be preached by one, but by two witnesses.

Now, what do old folk in Missouri do during the dog days of summer—those long, hot, sultry afternoons of summertime? Well, we amble over to our neighbor's front porch, or he roams over to ours, and we chew the fat for awhile. So, one afternoon, I found myself on my front porch talking to Joe, a retired trainman who lives across the street. A few minutes later we were joined by another Missouri "old boy," as they are pleased to call themselves, who happens to be a deputy sheriff from the town of Bolivar. So, we chewed the fat. (Actually, Joe chews tobacco.)

The rambling conversation eventually turned to children who suffered from asthma. Do

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not ask me how it got there, but it did. The sheriff asserted, "Get a short-haired Chihuahua. That will cure it." The sheriff related how his son, many years ago, was a severe asthmatic. The sheriff, at that time, took his neighbor's advice and imported into his house a shorthaired Chihuahua. The boy's asthma disappeared quickly and never returned. (He is an adult now. I have never met him.)

Now, it just so happens that the other fellow, Joe, has a grandchild, about nine years old, who also suffered from asthma. Joe confirmed the sheriff's apparently wild idea, because Joe's grandson, who also has been raised with a shorthaired Chihuahua, is now asthma-free. Yet, only a month before they acquired the dog, Joe's family was paying more than \$100 a month for medication for the boy. I know the boy. I see him every few days, and he appears normal and healthy.

Okay, what do we do with this one? Joe and the sheriff are not detractors of the medical system. They go to doctors all the time. Neither of them (notice, there are two of them) have an ax to grind; they are not out to "get" the medical profession. But, neither are they doctors; they could not explain how a shorthaired Chihuahua could remove asthma. Yet they both vouched for the treatment's effectiveness, based on personal experiences in their respective families.

So, is this matter established because of two witnesses? Well, probably not. We need some more facts, some credible knowledge as to why this happens, if it does happen at all.

The question remains, what would you do if you found yourself in a circumstance where you were raising an asthmatic child? Well, in this audience, it goes without saying that any of us would contact a minister of God before we took any action. We would call for the elders to anoint the child, as the apostle James instructs in James 5:14 and 15. We know that, as the apostle writes, "the prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise him up," of course, in His time.

Having done that, we would also set about making a number of decisions to adjust the child's diet and lifestyle to deal with the illness. Would one step, perhaps, be the acquisition of a shorthaired Chihuahua, based upon the comments of these two witnesses? After all, it could not hurt, right? Every boy needs a dog! That is something I will let you ponder. Remember, there are two witnesses here, but do we have all the facts?

Consider this next example. A few years ago, someone in the congregation of the Church of the Great God ran across a flyer in a health food store that made a startling

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allegation: sugar was refined using animal fat. Some of you may remember the hubbub this caused. While most of us shun large amounts of refined sugar, we do so for general health reasons, not because it has been rendered unclean in the refining process.

At the time of this so-called revelation, some people jumped to all sorts of conclusions, some even before they actually read the flyer. Some people refused to attend the Feast, for example, for fear that they would come into contact with some refined sugar somewhere along the eight days.

Well, one of the elders did some research on this matter, actually talking to a senior chemist in the employ of a major sugar company. It turns out that animal fat was, in fact, used in the refining of sugar—in Europe more than a century ago. That process was quite expensive and had been abandoned for more than a hundred years. If I recall, this particular chemist doubted that the process had ever been used in the United States. Further research confirmed this individual's claim.

What we have here is a case where a person, maybe a very well-intentioned person, was thoroughly misinformed. He wrote a flyer and passed around faulty information based on old data. He apparently did not make the effort to confirm how current his claims were. In this case, what he said was true one hundred years ago, but it is not true today. Therefore, it is irrelevant to us today.

The point that I want to make is this: until his claims were debunked, there were any number of people in God's church who were going to change their entire eating habits, even forego attending the Feast of Tabernacles, because of this one witness, and one, it turned out, that was highly impeachable. These peoples' standard of evidence was different from God's standard of evidence.

Rather than changing their eating habits based on the evidence presented by two or three credible and independent witness, they were willing to make major changes based upon only one witness. The second or third witnesses were never found, if they even looked for them. The original paper was never confirmed, and the matter stands today as not established. Refined sugar may be bad for us, especially when consumed in quantity. But it is not unclean.

In Romans 10, Paul is speaking about Israel, but it can be an application to the church, the Israel of God.

Romans 10:2 For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge.

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That is bad enough. In this day and age, knowledge is all around us. Some people who bought into this sugar idea were zealous for God, but they did not ensure that they had all the facts, or that they were basing their ideas on current processing. Paul goes on, though, to say that people who do such things display something far more deadly—far more dangerous—than simple ignorance.

Romans 10:3 For they being ignorant of God's righteousness, and seeking to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted to the righteousness of God.

That is heavy! In saying this, Paul hits the ball all the way into another ballpark. You see, the issue is not that these people were merely lazy, or careless, or even negligent, in the handling of knowledge. They were that. But also more seriously, these people wanted to prove themselves more righteous than God. They established their own standard of evidence. They did not submit to the righteousness of God, as it is stated in Deuteronomy 15, which states that His standard of evidence demands more than one witness. Some of these people, who did not repent, are not with us today.

"But, it might be true!" We need to address this comeback, this rejoinder. Given the importance to God that we avoid unclean meats, some would justify this level of extreme action, this refusal to eat any sugar at all, and even to not to go to the Feast, based on the thought that the ideas espoused in this flyer may be true.

But, that is just the point. Almost anything may be true, but not everything is true. For instance, consider this.

The Bolivians of South America store their pepper which they harvest in crab shells taken from their coastal waters. These shells add flavor to the pepper before it is shipped to the United States.

Is this statement true? Should we all stop eating Bolivian pepper just because this statement may be true? Now any eighth grader who has studied South America knows that Bolivia has no costal waters, being landlocked. Therefore, it does not harvest crab off its coasts. Further, the eighth grader probably knows that Bolivia exports tin and other metals to the United States, not pepper.

The story is totally bogus. It "might" be true, but it is not. I need to repeat, as a second

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witness, that the Bolivia story is an example only and is not true. It has no basis in fact. It is a total fabrication I designed only for the purposes of illustration. To refuse to purchase or consume pepper because my little story might be true is about as silly as to refuse to go into the parking lot this afternoon because there might be a lion there.

God has determined the standard of evidence: two or three credible witnesses. But, I do not think you will ever find any honest and credible witnesses who will back up my Bolivia story. We cannot live our lives on might's or maybes. To do so is to become paranoid.

This point is highly pertinent where doctrine, prophecy, and Christian living principles are concerned, such as in matters involving the calendar, the practice of the Sabbath, unclean meats, and the like.

When browsing a bookstore or the Internet, and someone runs across some new doctrine or new "information" about Christian living, I strongly urge that person to contact an elder before running to the photocopying machine or before hitting that "FORWARD" button. To sow division and discord over unconfirmed information that may, in fact, be misinformation is not at all pleasing to God. He may hold us responsible, or at least complicit, in promulgating lies. That is very serious.

I ran across an interesting news story this past winter—yes, you will guess that it came over the Internet, the source of so many lies, rumors, and myths. This particular story claimed that some high-ranking American military generals had tried to kidnap Dick Cheney, the Vice President, when his airplane touched down in Australia earlier this year. The story reported that two or three people had been killed in the shuffle, but that the Vice President's secret service staff had done their job effectively and efficiently, and fended off the kidnapping. Apparently, these American generals had planned to use Mr. Cheney as a ransom so as to force Mr. Bush not to attack Iran. The reporter believed that an American attack of Iran was imminent at that time.

The author quoted a snippet of an Associated Press news release which said that the Vice President's jet had indeed landed briefly in Sidney for refueling—but that is all. From there, the author, using inference and innuendo, skillfully and carefully crafted the story about the attempted kidnapping. The names of the generals were not given. In fact, I believe no names were given at all, except that of the Vice President.

In other words, the story was extremely general, with no confirmatory information whatsoever. There were no quotations from police officials, the State Department, or the Department of Defense—or anywhere at all.

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Should we, in the absence of a sufficient number of witnesses, believe this story? Yes, it might be true. But should we, given the credibility test God sets in Deuteronomy 15, believe it? In the ensuing months, as far as I know, it has never been corroborated. I never heard another word about it.

Are we so knowledgeable, so wise, that we can determine the truth of a matter based on a lower standard of evidence than what God has established in Deuteronomy 15? Is this matter "established" based on this one report? Is this the sort of thing we should pass around over the Internet? That "FORWARD" button is so convenient and easy to click. Does God look at a decision to forward such an unsubstantiated story as part and parcel to passing around a lie, perpetrating the lie? Are we, in deciding to forward it, complicit in the author's irresponsibility and prevarication? Is forwarding such a report all that different from rumor-mongering? Is it edifying, or does it foster disunity and confusion?

I leave these questions for you to ponder. They are crucial questions of evidence. Indeed, they are questions touching on God's righteousness, since He has determined the standard of evidence by which we are to live. Do we dare to change that standard?

Let me conclude with a few of questions. Do too many of God's people fall for every story that comes around, kind of in a gullible way? Do too many pass around documents and ideas that should be discussed with a minister first? Do too many make decisions based on unconfirmed evidence? I believe the answer is yes, yes, and yes.

Now, we are not all scholars. We cannot all delve into every email that comes our way, or every rumor we hear, to confirm its veracity. But, each of us can appoint ourselves as a committee of one to gather the facts before making a decision. We can seek to talk to an elder before we hit that "FORWARD" button or the speed dial button of our telephone. We can consider nothing to be established until it has been adequately attested by at least two witnesses. We can ensure that we do not make any judgments until we have all the facts and until the matter stands confirmed under God's standard of evidence.

Such a committee of one is well on its way to making wise decisions.