

Superstitious Behavior

Every February 2th is Groundhog's Day. Tradition holds that this day a groundhog comes out of his hole in the ground and looks around to see if it's time for spring to start; if the groundhog comes out of his hole and sees his shadow, he'll get frightened and go back to sleep in his hole.

There are many elaborate rituals associated with this simple story. The largest celebration occurs in Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania where approximately 40,000 people gather every year to celebrate the emergence of their official groundhog, Punxsutawney Phil.

I've never been there, but I've heard that people party all night to celebrate the appearance of a rodent. In the morning, they gather around to hear what the master of ceremonies says when he 'translates' that messages from the groundhog.

This is all in good fun, of course. Most people in Punxsutawney have never heard the story about Celtic calendars and sacred bears. They don't actually believe that a ground squirrel can predict the weather.

Even though they may not believe in the groundhog having power to predict the weather, they act as though they do. Behavioral scientists call this, "Superstitious Behavior."

The phrase "Superstitious Behavior" comes from a behavioral scientist by the name of B.F. Skinner. Skinner was influenced by scientists such as Ivan Pavlov, who did an experiment consisting of giving a dog a small portion of food and measuring the amount of saliva the dog would produce.

He also rang a bell at the same time he gave the dog food. After a while, Pavlov discovered that whenever he rang the bell, even if the dog wasn't given any food, the dog would begin to salivate. The dog had learned to associate the sound of the bell with food.

With this thought in mind, other scientists began experimenting to see how much influence manipulating environments and providing rewards had on animals.

While Pavlov showed that rewards could be used to shape behavior, Skinner wanted to find out how far behavior could be modified. He found that animals could be trained to perform extremely complex tasks with few rewards. Rats were trained not only to tap on a paddle to receive food, but to tap on the paddle hundreds of times for even just a single pellet of food.

Not only could they be trained to do this, but it only took a few hours to do so! Behavioral science is a powerful way to manipulate any creature that can associate cause and effect.

My family and I went to Sea World last year and they had a show where dogs and cats would run around and perform complex tricks. They stressed in the show that all the tricks the animals performed were the result of the type of behavioral science pioneered by Doctors Pavlov and Skinner.

The animals were not punished or coerced in any way; they were simply rewarded for correct behavior. Thus, they learned to perform very complex and entertaining things.

Not only is this training technique used for small animals, but it's used for the larger aquatic mammals as well.

During an interview I overheard, one of the trainers was posed the question, "Do you punish the whales if they aren't cooperative for the show?" The trainer replied, "No, if an animal doesn't feel like performing then we don't force them; we simply cancel the show." The interviewer continued, "But you feed them when they do a trick correctly?" The trainer replied, "Yes." The interviewer countered, "So do you deny them food before a show to make sure they are eager to earn that food?" The trainer looked at the man for a second and then replied, "Se let me get this straight. You think we should take a Killer Whale... a Killer Whale, make him hungry, make him mad, and then get in the tank with him?"

Shows like the ones at Sea World are possible because of the work of Ivan Pavlov and B.F. Skinner. However, Skinner wondered how far this behavior modification could go. He wondered if it worked so well because the animals were naturally wired to look for it.

Would they act as though their behavior had an effect even if it didn't?

Skinner created an experiment where he took pigeons and placed them into a cage. He created a machine that would give them a food pellet at random increments of time. He found that the pigeons would perform complex behaviors even though their behavior had no effect on when the food was delivered. Some pigeons walked in circles, bobbed their heads around imaginary poles, and fluffed their feathers. It appears that the pigeons thought that their actions were causing the food to come out of the machine, when it had no effect at all.

Skinner called this, "Superstitious Behavior." To him, superstitious behavior is anything that someone does because they think it affects the outcome of something, when it has no effect at all.

He cited examples of superstitious behavior in not only animals, but in humans as well. For example, sports fans that wear strange makeup or refuse to wash their favorite jersey while their team is on a winning streak. He cited a bowler who made gestures in the air attempting to influence the bowling ball long after it's left their hand. He cited gamblers who have elaborate rituals they go through before going into a casino. In all these cases, Skinner stated that their behavior had nothing to do with the outcome of the game.

The World Thinks You Have Superstitious Behavior.

At this point, one might wonder where I'm going with this sermon. Please allow me to state one thing: I'm not saying that God isn't real. There are plenty of people who will tell you that you are wasting your time coming to church, because God isn't real. Or if God was real, that he doesn't care about you, doesn't perform miracles, and doesn't fill people with the Holy Spirit.

The people who say those things have never had an experience with God. They may have had an experience with religion or religious people, but they've never experienced God.

For a long time in the Pentecostal church, they tried to avoid discussions of doctrine and the nature of Jesus as God. They tried to avoid the issue by saying, "Pentecost isn't a doctrine; it's an experience."

Many of the old Pentecostal believers would tell their friends and neighbors, "You've got to come and experience this new thing I found." People didn't sit around their kitchen table and debate the Godhead, they simply said, "Come with me and experience for yourself what God can do."

No one can ever argue with your experience. They might try to argue with you, but in the end, it happened to you, not them. They might try to convince you that it didn't happen, but they're arguing from a weak position, because you're the one who experienced it.

Lots of people argue, "Speaking in tongues was only for the first century church." You know why they say that? Because they've never spoke in tongues. You know what the best argument against them is? To simply say, "I spoke in tongues when I got the Holy Ghost; your argument is invalid."

There are people who say that miracles and healings don't occur. They say that miracles are just wishful thinking, coincidences, or that they were for another time; no longer existing. But those people have never been blind from birth and regained their sight when anointed with oil. They've never had a limb grow back. People who have experienced miracles can never be argued into believing that it didn't happen and people who argue that it didn't can't prove so.

John 9:6-7 (KJV)

6 When he had thus spoken, he spat on the ground, and made clay of the spittle, and he anointed the eyes of the blind man with the clay, **7** And said unto him, Go, wash in the pool of Siloam, (which is by interpretation, Sent.) He went his way therefore, and washed, and came seeing.

The people who saw this had to be amazed. The man who was born blind was amazed. Unfortunately, the first reaction of the people around was in denial. First, they argued that it didn't happen; that he wasn't blind, but his parents went before the court and testified that he was born blind.

Then, they tried to argue that it couldn't have happened, because Jesus performed the miracle on the Sabbath Day, which made it a "sin."

John 9:24-25 (KJV)

24 Then again called they the man that was blind, and said unto him, Give God the praise: we know that this man is a sinner. **25** He answered and said, Whether he be a sinner or no, I know not: one thing I know, that, whereas I was blind, now I see.

The man could have argued with the Sanhedrin over whether Jesus was a sinner. He could have argued whether God should have performed a miracle on the Sabbath. But if he tried, he would have been slaughtered in the argument. Why? Because these men were professional arguers; they knew the law backwards and forwards. There isn't a way he could have argued with them into believing. Instead, he took the wise approach: he simply stated his experience. He told them that he was blind and now he's not. Those men couldn't argue with his experience.

John 9:34 (KJV) They answered and said unto him, Thou wast altogether born in sins, and dost thou teach us? And they cast him out.

They cast him out. They couldn't argue with his personal experience with Jesus, so they were forced to give up. They may not believe it, but they couldn't argue against it.

We've been having a class over the Oneness of Jesus Christ for the past few weeks. I think this is important, because we need to know what we believe and why we believe it. But as I told someone in that class a few weeks ago, "You'll never be able to debate someone into believe in Jesus Christ."

You may see people who receive the Holy Ghost speak in tongues, but until you experience it for yourself, you won't understand it.

I can stand here and tell you that the Holy Ghost will give you power, but until you experience it, you won't understand it. My wife and I used to play April

I can stand here and tell you that the Holy Ghost will give you power, but until you experience it you won't understand it.

Superstitious Behavior Means Not Having an Experience for Yourself

Remember that the pigeons in B.F. Skinner's lab got their food. The machines fed them on an irregular basis, but they got fed. Skinner concentrated on the fact that the pigeons were performing these elaborate rituals, but the truth is the pigeons were getting their food from the machines.

As a human being in church, you may also be getting your food. Your reward may come in the form of a miracle rather than a pellet of food, but the principle is the same. The question is: did you get the miracle because of what you did, or because of what someone else did?

Sometimes we may participate in superstitious behavior without even realizing it. We may think that we're influencing the effect that God has in our life when we are not. We think that our prayer caused us to get a new job, but it was somebody else's prayer that did it. We think that our answer came to us because we came to church, but it was actually somebody else's fasting. I would submit to you that it is possible that some people who come to this church are engaging in superstitious behavior. Not superstitious in the sense that it is false, but superstitious in the sense that they are relying on other people's experience. They rely on others' infilling of the Holy Ghost. They rely on others' prayer life to meet their own needs.

When you come into this body, you come under the protection of this body. We know that people who come into this church for the first time may not be in a position where they can support themselves spiritually, let alone support others.

We've set this body aside as a hospital of sorts where the spiritually weak and broken can come. Just like a hospital works to make the patient strong again, so this church body works to help the spiritually weak come to Jesus.

If you're here as a visitor, I say, "Welcome." But I also say that I hope your experience here is not just about listening to me talk. I hope that your experience is more than just having your children make crafts in Sunday School. I pray that you get an experience with Jesus Christ. I pray that we can baptize you in Jesus name and you're filled with the Holy Spirit.

Church is an experience, it's not all about me teaching you the Bible. People can argue about what I say across this pulpit; they can argue about what the words mean and how I have interpreted them, but they cannot argue with your experience. At the same time, I cannot experience Jesus Christ for you.

Superstitious Behavior and the Children

God said to Solomon:

1 Kings 11:33-35 (KJV)

33 Because that they have forsaken me, and have worshipped Ashtoreth the goddess of the Zidonians, Chemosh the god of the Moabites, and Milcom the god of the children of Ammon, and have not walked in my ways, to do that which is right in mine eyes, and to keep my statutes and my judgments, as did David his father. **34** Howbeit I will not take the whole kingdom out of his hand: but I will make him prince all the days of his life for David my servant's sake, whom I chose, because he kept my commandments and my statutes: **35** But I will take the kingdom out of his son's hand, and will give it unto thee, even ten tribes.

God continued to pour out His blessings on Solomon because of the experience that David had with God. But it was Jeroboam who suffered the double whammy of both God's wrath and the absence of God's blessings. It was Jeroboam who suffered because Solomon did not maintain his experience with God.

As someone who is a third-generation Christian myself, I can tell you that this passage sends chills down my spine. I have to ask myself, "Am I under God's protection because of my experience with Jesus, or am I just experiencing the lingering blessings of the experience of my forefathers? Do my prayers cause God's will in my life, or am I just engaging in superstitious behavior like one of B.F. Skinner's pigeons?"

Each of us are responsible to maintain our experience with Jesus Christ. Pentecost is an experience not a doctrine, but it is an experience that we each must maintain to extend God's protection over the sick among us as well as protecting the next generation to come.