

Ritual or Righteousness?

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Introduction.

- A. For those who come out of the world to join the Lord's church, there are many hurdles to overcome, and one of the most difficult of these hurdles is the bafflement or outright hostility of the new convert's family. This family strife is most apparent during the holidays that many denominations consider "religious," such as Christmas and Easter. During my meeting at Merrillville, I spoke with a sister named Bernice Lopez, who came to the Lord from a denominational background ten years ago, yet still must deal with family controversy.
- B. The pattern that she describes, I suspect, is common to many. Her family goes all-out for Christmas every year, right down to a birthday cake for Baby Jesus, and they ask her why she doesn't celebrate Christmas anymore. She tries to explain that she does celebrate Christmas, just in a non-religious way, but that explanation doesn't register. Five minutes later, they're asking her why she doesn't celebrate Christmas again.
- C. As I was talking to Sister Lopez, I saw that it's no surprise that these holidays are such a lightning rod for controversy. The yearly discussion isn't about Christmas or Easter; it's about what it means to be a Christian. For many, being a Christian is primarily about having elaborate ceremonies on special days. For us, being a Christian is about studying God's word and then devoting our lives to putting the Bible into daily practice.
- D. Even though people in both of these two categories claim to be Christians, the things that they practice are quite different. For the ceremony-driven Christian, religion is something to be emphasized part of the time and soft-pedaled the rest of the time. For us, our emphasis on religion remains fairly constant. For them, Christianity is primarily about outward, lavish display; for us, it's about the inward transformation of the heart.
- E. In fact, these two approaches to God are so different that they almost constitute two separate religions, both bearing the name of Christ. But which one does Christ actually want? Does He want us to devote ourselves to honoring Him ceremonially, or to imitating Him instead? The way we answer this question may well determine our eternal destinies. Let's ask, then, does God want ritual or righteousness?

I. In the Eyes of God & in Saul.

- A. To answer this question, we first have to look at the world through **THE EYES OF GOD**. Basically, we have to ask not how we perceive things or what we care about, but how God perceives things and what He cares about. We find an important piece of this puzzle in Micah 6:6-8. Essentially, what we see in this verse is a divinely inspired meditation on the same issue we're talking about today, in the terms of 2500 years ago.
- B. Micah wants to know the same thing we want to know: what do we have to give to God to make Him happy? He begins by mentioning animal sacrifices. The Israelites offered animal sacrifices, and the idol worshipers around Israel offered animal sacrifices. This is a familiar part of the religious ritual of the day, so it seems like a good place to start. Micah then reasons that if sacrifices are the thing that makes God happy, then more sacrifices should make God even happier. Don't just bring one ram; bring thousands! Don't bring a little vial of oil; bring a river! Bring ten thousand rivers! That will really show God how much we care!
- C. The problem is, though, that no matter how big our material offerings are, they never still that voice inside our heads that tells us we've sinned, and so Micah moves on to a more grotesque sacrifice. He asks if he should sacrifice his firstborn child to God as a sin offering. This too is right in line with the rituals of the day. In their evil, the children of Israel often offered their children as sacrifices to the false god Molech. I know that's appalling for any parent to consider, but it's true, and to our human minds, it seems effective. After all, if we can buy God off with an external show, then sacrifice of something so precious ought to do it, right?
- D. From there, though, Micah drops the mode of inquiry he's been using. He tells us to get outside of ourselves. Making sacrifice to God is not about what we want and what we think is important and precious. It's about what God wants and what He thinks is important and precious. There's no guesswork here. He's already told us what is good. He doesn't require some spectacular show. He doesn't require us to kill our own children to make Him happy. He simply wants us to be just, merciful people who walk humbly and faithfully with Him. It's not the ritual that matters to God. It's the righteousness.
- E. All right, so God wants our hearts, not our celebrations. But what if we come up with these elaborate rituals in His honor anyway? How does He feel about that? We can answer this question by looking at ritual and righteousness in the life of **SAUL** in 1 Samuel 15. We see God assign Saul a task in 1 Samuel 15:2-3. Simply put, Saul is to exterminate the Amalekites and everything they possess. Saul goes trotting off to do this, but there's a catch, and we see it in 1 Samuel 15:9. Saul spares the life of the Amalekite king Agag, and he doesn't kill the very best of their flocks and herds either. God is not happy about this, and He sends Samuel to rebuke Saul. Saul throws up excuse after excuse, and at the end of this, we see the exchange of 1 Samuel 15:20-22. Saul says that the people meant all along to use these livestock in a big sacrifice to God, a big outward religious display of their devotion. Samuel replies, though, that obedience is better than sacrifice, and

for Saul and the people to listen to God would have been better than all the offerings in the world. It didn't matter why they were disobeying. All that mattered is that they were disobeying, and God was not pleased.

- F. Folks, if there's one thing in the Bible I wish the denominational world understood, 1 Samuel 15:22 might well be it. To obey is BETTER than sacrifice! It's so tragic to look around at all of the big, spectacular ceremonies people come up with for God, and to realize that God doesn't want any of it and is indeed revolted by it.
- G. God is very precise about what He wants us to do in worship to Him, and if we don't do that and only that, it is a sin against Him. I remember watching one of those TV worship services right around Easter, and in this particular service, the church had gone to all the effort of making living tableaus of Bible scenes appear behind the speaker. You had the woman washing Jesus' feet, the Last Supper, and so forth, all presented in real time by actors, with beautiful, moving music in the background. This was not some pimply-faced kid with a dishrag on his head, either. This was professional-quality sets, costumes, the works! Hundreds and hundreds of hours of work, thousands and thousands of dollars, all for a backdrop! What a show! But the problem is, there's not a word about any of it in Scripture. Not only is such a ceremony nothing in the eyes of God; it is worse than nothing because it is disobedience to Him, and so is everything like it. God wants righteousness, not ritual.

II. In the Pharisees and in Us.

- A. So, now that we've finished wagging our fingers at the wicked, wicked denominations, we can return to our normal ways of doing things and rest content in the knowledge that God is pleased, right? Actually, not so much. It's just as problematic to do the right thing for the wrong reason as it is to do the wrong thing for the right reason. Let's look at the way this plays out in the story of ritual, righteousness, and **THE PHARISEES**.
- B. We see Jesus take the Pharisees to task for what they did in Matthew 6:5-6. He's getting on the Pharisees, for, of all things, praying. Imagine that! I wish Christians today would pray more, not less! So what's going on? The problem is that the Pharisees took praying, which they were undeniably supposed to do to be righteous, and they turned it into another outward ritual. They got so caught up in the ceremony of what they were doing, so caught up in doing what looked right to others, that they lost touch with God.
- C. This is not just an isolated incident in the lives of the Pharisees, either. Look at how Jesus describes them in Matthew 23:23. I'm sure this is a path the Pharisees started down with a clear conscience. I'm sure they said to each other, "Let's be extra careful to make sure we do all of the law of God." The problem was that in the course of being extra careful to do everything right, they forgot why they were being extra careful. While interpreting the Law, they stopped seeing the Law as a path to being holy and pleasing God. It lost its meaning to them and just became this weird bureaucratic game where they weaseled ways to do what they wanted. What started out as the righteousness of God became an elaborate ritual that filled their lives.
- D. Where do we stand in this? How does the struggle between ritual and righteousness play out in **US**? Let's not think we're not at risk here, friends, just because we obey God's word. Satan will be more than happy to lead us down the same path the Pharisees took, and he'll be absolutely delighted to have us with him in hell forever, if only we'll give him the chance. It's not enough to give God our actions. He wants our hearts.
- E. Here's our battleground: We're good Bible students. We know what Christian worship is supposed to look like. We know that there are five things that we must do on every first day of the week. We must sing, we must pray, we must partake of the Lord's Supper, we must study the word, and we must give of our means to the Lord's work. Unless the Lord comes back first, I am certain that by the time the last "Amen" is said today, we will have done all five of them. That's great. That's important. But that's not all that's important.
- F. What's important is not just that we do the right thing, but that we do it for the right reason, and we must constantly examine ourselves in this. We must ask, "Why do I sing?" Do I sing because, well, I'm here, and I'm supposed to, and I'll feel funny if I don't, or is it because I want to teach my brother and praise my God? Why do I pray? When the brother says those magic words, "Let us pray," do I just bow my head like a trained dog and think about dinner until he says "Amen," or do I use it as an opportunity to come before the throne of my Father? When I partake of the Lord's Supper, do I eat my cracker, drink my grape juice, and think about dinner some more, or do I remember the death of my Lord, and share in that moment with my brethren? When the preacher gets up here and begins to preach, does my mind wander to every topic under the sun, or am I listening to the voice of my Father, considering my life, and thinking about the ways I need to change it in order to please Him? When the time comes for the collection, do I hurriedly dig in my wallet for a couple of bills, or just write a check for the same amount as my checks for the past 15 years, or do I give the amount that I have purposed in my heart after prayerfully considering the Lord's work and deciding I need to help?
- G. Questions like these are important in the assembly, but their significance doesn't stop there. We need to consider our entire lives in terms of ritual or righteousness. Am I just going through an elaborate charade as a Christian, or am I really making the journey to heaven? Basically, do I obey God from a heart that desires to serve Him, or do I just obey because I'm "supposed to?" This is not a question we can afford to answer wrongly. Removing the heart from Christianity is no less fatal than removing the heart from a human being. It's just that the consequences aren't as obvious. Let's be people who hunger and thirst for righteousness.

Conclusion. If you recognize that your life has not been righteous, today is the day to change.