

External Religion

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| <i>Text</i> | Jeremiah 7:21-23 (Read Jeremiah 7:1-29) |
| <i>Readings</i> | Romans 2:17-29; Matthew 23:23-39 |
| <i>Theme</i> | The Lord rejected Judah's sacrifices and called for genuine covenantal obedience. |
| <i>Purpose</i> | To warn against the practice of mere external religion and urge obedience arising from a genuine relationship with the Lord. |

Congregation,

The beginning of this book of Jeremiah informs us that he began his ministry in the thirteenth year of Josiah, king of Judah. Josiah was only eight years old when he became King and he reigned for 31 years. He was a good king. He loved the Lord and followed his commands.

Five years after Jeremiah began his ministry Hilkiah the High Priest was having a clean up in the temple and he found a scroll, which turned out to be the Book of the Law. When Josiah had read it he realised how far Judah had slipped away from God's commands and he began a far-reaching reform of the kingdom. He removed all foreign items from the temple of the Lord; he did away with the pagan priests; he burned the Asherah pole; he pulled down the heathen gods; he cleaned out all the high places and got rid of all mediums and spiritists and idols. It was the most far reaching reform that any king had undertaken in Judah (2 Kings 23:25f).

The Lord was pleased with what Josiah had done but it was not enough to prevent judgement coming on the people of Judah and Jerusalem. Why not?

One reason was that Josiah's father, Manasseh, had been an evil king and had done much harm in the kingdom during his long reign of 55 years. He left a lasting legacy of sin in the nation.

The other reason was that Josiah's reforms did not touch the *hearts* of the people.

The external features of the pagan religions had been removed and the idols had gone; but the hearts of the people had not changed.

Yes, they practiced the religion of the Lord their God and it all looked good on the outside but their hearts were not right. They obeyed the Lord in the external requirements of God but they disobeyed him where it really counted.

So the Lord told Jeremiah to go to the temple and to stand at the gate and to deliver this sermon. It is a sermon we need to hear today because we are troubled by the same things. The prophet told them that the Lord condemned external religion and commanded true obedience. These are the two things we want to see in this passage.

First of all then, **the Lord condemns external religion.**

In verse 21 the prophet condemned the people of Judah because they **misused** the ceremonial law.

They kept up the practice of the ceremonial law about offerings and sacrifices, but they did not follow these properly.

When they sacrificed a *burnt* offering the whole animal was to be burnt up and offered to the Lord. None of it was to be eaten.

On the other hand, when they gave a *fellowship* offering the person offering was allowed to eat a part of it.

But the people of Judah were eating parts of the *burnt* offering as well.

In response to this the Lord said; Go ahead – eat the whole lot! You might as well *eat* the meat of the burnt offering because the sacrifice isn't going to do you any good anyway. Your sacrifices are not acceptable to me.

He had said the same thing to them in chapter 6:20 - "What do I care about incense from Sheba or sweet calamus from a distant land? Your burnt offerings are not acceptable; your sacrifices do not please me."

The Lord did not want their incense nor their sacrifices because they were merely external rituals – they did not come from the heart.

They were following the regular routines of their religion but they were merely forms and habits and rituals. It was all outward. It was the visible practice of religion, which was the easy part, but the Lord was not satisfied with this.

Yet the people thought that they were doing well. They believed the external practice of their religion would keep them safe. They had a superstitious trust in the temple itself. They kept saying; "This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord!" (verse 4). They were the people of God; they had the temple; so they would be okay; God would look after them. But God told them that they were trusting in "deceptive words that are worthless" (verse 8).

As an example he reminded them, in verses 12-15, of what had happened to Shiloh, the place where the tabernacle had been set up in the days of Joshua (Joshua 18:1). That had been destroyed by the Philistines because of the sin of Israel. God reminded them of this as a warning that the same thing could happen to them as well. Unless they repented and obeyed the Lord then this temple too would be destroyed. They could not trust in this building as though it were a magic charm.

Think also of what happened to the Ark of the Covenant in the days of Eli the High Priest. The people of Israel took that sacred box into battle thinking it would keep them safe and give them victory. But they were soundly defeated and Eli's two sons were killed.

We need to think about this ourselves.

Are you trusting in the external practice of your faith as though that in itself will save you?

Do you think that coming to church and singing psalms and songs are the essence of true religion?

Do you think that reading your Bible, attending catechism and having family devotions will take you to heaven?

Do you think that attending the Lord's Supper and regular prayers will make you acceptable to God?

Not at all! In themselves all of these are good habits – they are practices we should keep up – but they are not the essence of faith. They are useful for maintaining faith and growing in a relationship with God, but they are not the centre of our faith.

For these habits and routines to have meaning they must come from the heart and be lived out in true obedience. The Apostle Paul wrote about that in his letter to the Christians in Rome. "...a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit." (Romans 2:29).

This is where the people of Judah failed.

Be sure you don't fail by falling into the same sin and practicing the routines of your faith in a merely external manner. So the people of Judah *misused* the ceremonial law.

They also **misunderstood** the ceremonial law.

In verse 22 the Lord took them back in their minds to when he had brought them out of Egypt and had given them his law at Mt Sinai. He reminded them of the order in which he had given the commands.

First of all he had made a covenant with them in which he promised to be their God and they would be his people. When he made that agreement with them he gave them his covenant law - the Ten Commandments – written on two tablets of stone. These ten laws expressed the essence of the requirements of the covenant.

Later on God explained all the other laws he wanted them to keep - all the ceremonial requirements of the law. These too were important, but they were secondary to the Ten Commandments.

The problem was that the Jews tended to focus on the ceremonial law rather than the moral law. Hundreds of years later Jesus condemned the Pharisees for this and exposed this as hypocrisy; "You give a tenth of your spices – mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law – justice, mercy and faithfulness" (Matthew 23:23). All through their history the Jews were inclined to misunderstand the ceremonial law and put more emphasis on that than on the more important matters of the law.

They misunderstood these laws because they did not see that they would eventually be fulfilled in the Messiah, the Christ.

All these ceremonies and sacrifices were pictures of the great sacrifice that Jesus would make in his death on the cross.

The Passover, Pentecost, the Feast of Tabernacles, the burnt offering – they all pointed forward to him. All of these were a picture for Israel of God’s forgiveness that was given on the basis of the sacrifice Jesus made on the cross.

Eventually, after Jesus came, none of these ceremonial laws were necessary any more - they had been fulfilled.

All these were only shadows that passed away once the reality had come. The letter to the Hebrews makes all this very clear, but the Jews did not see this. Sadly, many Jews today still do not believe in the Lord Jesus as the Messiah and in what he has done. Many still keep up the external ceremonies of the law. And even back then, in the days of Jeremiah, many trusted in these ceremonies themselves.

But the Lord condemned a mere external obedience and an outward form of religion.

2. Instead, secondly, **the Lord commands true obedience.**

As we consider this we should note, first of all, that true obedience arises from **God’s Covenant**.

As we have seen Jeremiah reminded Israel of the covenant he made with them at Mt Sinai.

A covenant is an agreement between two parties; this one was made between God and his people. He promised a relationship with his people: “I will be your God and you will be my people.”

This is the essence of biblical faith – it is about a relationship with God. The psalms are full of this, giving us many beautiful descriptions of this close, intimate, living companionship with the Lord our God.

In these New Testament times we know that this is only possible through the Lord Jesus Christ. God sends his Holy Spirit into our hearts so that Jesus may live in us and with us. Our relationship with the Lord today is even richer than any of those Old Testament believers could experience it.

Do you know what that is like? Do you have a relationship with God, or are you merely going through the motions of faith?

Do you have a living, daily communion with the Lord Jesus, or are you simply following routines? The Lord wants you to know him - truly, deeply, and intimately.

We can see this in the words, “obey me” in verse 23. Literally it reads; “Hear my voice”. The Hebrew grammar of these words emphasises a personal relationship. God doesn’t want you to hear his words only in a physical sense; rather he wants you to hear them inside, internally, within you. He wants you to hear his voice and to commit yourself to a personal relationship with the Lord that expresses itself in obedience. So obedience arises from God’s covenant.

Secondly, obedience means **following God’s commands**.

“Obey me”, says the Lord. “Walk in all the ways I command you.”

This meant more than just keeping the ceremonial law. Earlier in the chapter God directed them to what he really wanted them to do (verse 5-6); “deal with each other justly...do not oppress the alien, the fatherless and the widow and do not shed innocent blood in this place...and do not follow other gods to your own harm.” Here is the essence of God’s law.

This was a common refrain in the Old Testament prophets.

Through Amos the Lord told the people of Israel; “I hate, I despise your religious feasts; I cannot stand your assemblies” (Amos 5:21).

Through Hosea he said; “For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings.” (Hosea 6:6).

David realised this after his own sin; “you do not delight in sacrifice or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, a broken and contrite heart O God, you will not despise.” (Psalm 51:16-17).

What about you? Are you satisfied with the externals of religion or are you living close to the Lord and doing what is just and right and holy?

Bishop Ryle, living in the late 1800’s, noted that there are thousands of people who attend church regularly; they go the Lord’s Supper; but they don’t get any further. They don’t have any experience of God. They are not familiar with the Scriptures and they take no joy in reading them. They do not separate themselves from the ways of the world. When they mix freely with unbelievers you can’t tell them apart in their speech or actions. They don’t take in what is preached and are indifferent to the truth about Jesus.

But an external religion like this will not save you. It will not give you joy in life nor will it comfort you in death, nor will it give you a place in heaven. The Lord wants a living faith in Christ that comes from your heart and that is expressed in obedience to his law. (“Formality” in *Practical Religion*).

Obedience arises from a covenant relationship with God and it follows God’s commands.

In the third place we note that if you obey God’s law you will **receive God’s blessing**. It will “go well with you” (verse 23).

It won’t *always* go well with you; and it won’t go well with you *in everything*.

There will be difficult times. There will be times of loneliness and trial and persecution and sorrow. Jesus warned us that following him would carry a cost. It will not be easy.

But overall, in the eternal scheme of things, “it will go well with you.” You will be blessed. You will know a peace that passes all understanding. You will be able to rejoice in the Lord and in your relationship with him.

None of these things are automatic though. They are dependent on obedience. This is a conditional promise - it is conditional on you walking in all God's ways.

We have seen that obedience is not a merely external matter.

The people of Jeremiah's day made this mistake. The reforms of King Josiah had cleaned up the land. The idols were gone and the priests of Baal had been removed. But it had not changed the hearts of the people. They continued on with their sacrifices and offerings but these were not acceptable to God.

Today too Christianity is not just a matter of coming to church and attending catechism or a Bible study and reading your Bible. Those practices are good and useful but they are not enough. Don't be satisfied with a religion that is merely external.

That is true for us as individuals and for us as a church. We can have an ideal church facility, well-ordered Sunday services, lovely singing, beautiful music and hear biblical sermons; but one thing can be lacking - the involvement of our hearts.

By contrast, there may be congregations who meet in a messy school hall or community centre, who singing is unmusical, who hear feeble prayers and sermons that are even feebler – and yet their heart is in it! The Holy Spirit is among them. They have a living faith and others are brought to faith. What we need is a heart-religion.

Let's not be satisfied with the shell of Christianity, with the husk of faith. God does not want a busy religion - one that is mere activity.

Seek a living relationship with the Lord that is based on his covenant with us.

Obey God's law and live it out.

Walk in all God's ways and it will go well with you.

Amen.