

“On Phony Religion”

Isaiah 29;13-14

July 1st, 2001 – Maryvale Drive Presbyterian Church, Philip Siddons

This passage in Isaiah comes in a section of writings where he’s speaking about the morality of the people of his country. He felt that most people had turned away from their God and gone about their lives as if there was no God. He felt that the ones who were involved with their religion were going through their ceremonies and memorizing their rules and liturgies but they didn’t have their heart in what they were doing. So we have some interest in finding out what Isaiah might have seen in their culture.

As the Israelite territories were slowly being taken over by foreign governments, people tended to adapt their lifestyles to those who were ruling them. In order to keep Judaism from fading into the culture and religion of the occupying nation, the priests tried to make sure that everyone keep up their temple attendance and performance of the animal sacrifices, their prayers, the dietary restrictions and the memorizing of the rules about right living. But as they were doing this, Isaiah was saying it was getting a little empty, perhaps phony. They were becoming proud of themselves for keeping the Sabbath but when it came to the rest of the week, their religion had disappeared. They had two worlds: their weekend life at the temple and then the rest of their lives.



This sort of prophetic reminder isn’t the first time God’s people heard this. Long before, the prophet Samuel said, “Which does the Lord prefer: obedience or offerings and sacrifices? It is better to obey God than to sacrifice the best sheep to God!”¹ That was said back in the early days of the kings.

Hosea, another prophet before Jesus, also reminded his contemporaries of the priorities. “I want your constant love, not your animal sacrifices. I

would rather have my people know Me than have them burn offerings to Me.”²

To further emphasize how people were getting more concerned with the outward religious ceremonies instead of living in relationship to God, he said this: “The more altars the people of Israel build for removing sin, the more places they have for sinning! I write down countless teachings for the people but they reject them as strange and foreign. They offer sacrifices to Me and eat the meat of the sacrifices, but I, the Lord, am not pleased with them and now I will remember their sin and punish them for it; . . .”³

Hosea was pointing out that the ceremonies had lost their meaning for the people because what was being symbolized was not being connected with how they were living their lives and treating one another. Their sacrifice rituals had turned into bar-B-Qs.

Probably the strongest prophetic criticism of organized religion came from Amos. “The Lord says, ‘I *hate* your religious festivals; I cannot stand them! When you bring Me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I *will not accept* them; I *will not accept* the animals you have fattened to bring Me as offerings. Stop your noisy songs; I do not want to listen to your harps. *Instead*, let justice flow like a stream and righteousness like a river that never goes dry.’”⁴

As Amos so vehemently criticized the leaders of organized religion, he was saying these priests could just as well be selling shoes than running their followers through all these rituals and formalities. That God wanted their personal lives to show justice and goodness, not ceremony.

Finally, the prophet Micah gives his assessment of the situation. “What shall I bring to the Lord, the God of heaven, when I come to worship? Shall I bring

² Hosea 6:6

³ Hosea 8:11-13a

⁴ Amos 5:21ff

¹ 1st Samuel 15:22

the best calves to burn as an offering? Will God be pleased if I bring thousands of sheep or endless streams of olive oil? Shall I offer my first-born child to pay for my sins?

No! The Lord has told us what is good. What God requires of us is this: to *do* what is just; *show* constant love and to *live* in humble fellowship our God.”⁵

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Throughout the history of God’s followers, there has always been a tension between the priests (who’s job it was to maintain and preserve the status quo) and the prophets. There has always been this built in tension between the priests and the prophets because it has always been the prophets who stood in the minority and who argued that there is a tremendous difference between organized religion and true spirituality. Organized religion has to do with buildings and grounds, rule books and maintaining the status quo. Spirituality has to do with your heart-felt connection with God and others and yourself. Spirituality is about changing the status quo so that what gets done is done in fairness and compassion. The Prophets talk change while the Priests say ‘this is the way we’ve always done things around here.

Since the prophets were always in the minority, the keepers of the status quo usually had the prophets killed. The people with more power and privilege resist change. They resist growth because spiritual growth requires the work of evaluation, change, risk and often living out of sync with the majority. It’s about living in justice, love and humility before God. But if there was this centuries-long history of struggle between the priests and the prophetic types before Christ, what happened in the 1st century?

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Things changed. The rabbis (who taught and lead in worship services in the neighborhood synagogues) made a break with the temple priests. They formed their own circle of colleagues and called themselves “the Pharisees.” A few others broke off and formed their own private community called The Essenes.⁶

⁵ Micah 6:6-8

⁶ Dead Sea Scrolls were kept by this Qumran monastic

There were about 10,000 rabbis or Pharisees in Palestine at the time of Christ. But how were they different from the priests?

They recognized how corrupt the priesthood was so they decided to study the law and the prophets and teach it to everyone on the street. They thought everyone could become holy and still keep their 9-5 jobs without going through all the temple rituals. This was a huge change from the religion of the priests.

This attempt to thoroughly study the laws and the prophetic writings and do the religious rituals in your own home – enabled Judaism to survive the destruction of the temple cult in 70 C.E. Because the Pharisees placed the highest priority on studying the Scriptures as well as their own commentaries on the scriptures, to this day, the average twelve year old Jewish child knows more about Scripture than most of us.

The Pharisees were not as evil as had some of them been portrayed by that the gospel writers. They, at least, had recognized what the Old Testament prophets were saying – that our worship should line up with the way we live our lives during the week. If you’re nice and accommodating to people around you in worship, be exactly the same to everyone else, period!

The problem was that while most of the Pharisees had emphasized obedience to the law in every day actions, they failed to do good things *from the heart*. They were making sure they said their personal prayers and stayed away from things that had been defined as “unclean” but they often ended up defining their religion by what one doesn’t do. This is similar to how conservative parts of the Christian church have traditionally defined their Christianity as a “list of don’ts” rather than a “list of do’s.” Whenever alumnae of so-called ‘Christian colleges’ get together, they usually have a few laughs in remembering the ‘pledge’ or code of prohibitive actions their school had imposed upon them in their student years. In

commune. The scrolls were found in 1947 and showed they believed in a priest & king messiah and that prophecies were fulfilled in their time (such as was claimed by Christians. John the Baptist was conjectured to be a member of this community before meeting Jesus.

hindsight, these alumnae always think those old rules to be rather stupid and fearful and consider them to be remnants of some ancient and fearful subculture of an archaic religious group, irrelevant to today.

Look what happened when Jesus prophetically confronted the excesses of the Pharisees. They criticized Him for befriending “unholy” people – “sinners” no less.

Jesus’ response was that the reason He came on the scene, in the first place, was to help sinners because changing behavior and coming home to the self that God created in each of us was more important than the whole classification scheme of Palestinian Jewish religion.

They criticized Jesus’ followers for breaking an oral tradition that one shouldn’t eat corn on the Sabbath because it was *like* the work of harvesting when they were picking it.

Jesus’ response, of course, was that the Sabbath observance was made to serve people – not to bind them up in tormenting meticulous human obligations.

The Pharisees became emotionally judging about how He and His disciples didn’t mimic their own meticulous hand-washing ceremonies.

Jesus responded by quoting the Isaiah passage, we’ve already read, about true religion not being in the rituals but in our relationships.

In summary, then, in the Old Testament times, people tended to be involved in a shallow religiosity – doing their religious rituals that didn’t connect with meaning in how they lived the rest of their lives. They were worshipping one way but living another way the rest of the week.

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In Christ’s time, people were again going through the proper religious actions but it was getting legalistic; actions but no compassion for others. Their faith was being expressed as a list of “don’ts” rather than seeing life as full of opportunities to *be* and to *do* positive things in relationship with others. They were loving the law instead of their neighbors.

Today we might do well to ask ourselves if we are aware of the difference between organized

religion and true spirituality. Are we acting differently here than how we are the rest of the week?

How about who we are at work? Are we different from who we are at home?

How about who we are in our own homes? Recall how we can become somewhat humble and mindful of our need for improvement, before God, as we read through the liturgies of confession in the bulletin. Where is that attitude when we’re in a discussion with others in our household with whom we may disagree? Do we usually see ourselves as defending our “right” opinion when we are in unresolved family discussions? Are we humbly seeking what is best because we are on a continuing journey of gathering truth and knowledge, which usually comes from learning from others and their experience? Are we signed up for class to learn from our spouse?

This is the challenge of our spiritual growth: consistency. This is where you and I will find balance in every part of our lives: our body, our mind and emotions and our soul. Our mindfulness of our trying to be consistent in all parts of our lives is, in reality, a quest for wisdom. And that’s why Solomon put it this way three thousand years ago:

“Trust in the Lord with all your heart and soul and don’t rely on what you think you know. Remember God in *everything* you do and God will direct your paths. . . . If you do, it will be like good medicine, healing your wounds and easing your pains.” 🌹

