

Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

Ritual vs. Reality

Scripture: Zechariah 7:1-14

Code: 2162

We are studying a series on the book of Zechariah but we're not going to begin in Zechariah tonight. I'd like you turn with me to the eighteenth chapter of Luke and I want to begin by reminding you of a parable that our Lord taught that has great significance for the theme of the seventh chapter of Zechariah which we'll look at in a moment. Beginning in verse 9 of Luke 18, Luke records for us:

"And He spoke this parable unto certain who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and despised others. Two men went up into the temple to pray, the one a Pharisee, the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, 'God I thank Thee that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. I fast twice in the week. I give tithes of all that I possess.' And the tax collector standing afar off would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven but smote upon his breast saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner.' I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone that exalteth himself shall be abased, and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted."

Now many lessons this parable can teach and I don't want to get into all of them, but I would like to just pull out one thought, and that is that there are two approaches to worship. One is the approach of the ritualist and the other is the approach of the realist. And we see them here. First of all, we see the self-righteous ritualist, for him religion is ritual. He doesn't pray to God, he prays with himself, it says. It isn't that he's trying to reach God, it's simply that he's reciting certain things that are prescriptions for his religion. He is not interested in repentance, he is not interested in sorrow or love or humility, or even true worship. He's only interested in reciting his credentials. And so he proceeds to say, "I fast twice a week and I give a tenth of everything that I possess," and pat himself on the back.

And I suppose that if true worship consisted in abstaining from food, rather than abstaining from sin, in giving money to God rather than giving your heart to God, then this is a deeply religious man. But unfortunately, religion is not made of giving your money or from abstaining from food. So he is anything but religious, he is a ritualist. And in his ritual and his routine and the performance of the prescriptions of religion, he has alienated himself from the reality of knowing God. And he does not go to his house justified.

But on the other hand, in opposition to the self-righteous ritualist, you have the self-repentant realist in verse 13. The tax collector who stands afar off doesn't even so much as approach the center place, or the place of prominence, or perhaps the location of this other man and he beats upon his breast in the sign of humility and guilt and conviction and penitence and says, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner." He is sorry, he is broken, he is humble. He offers God no ritual but he does offer God a broken and a contrite heart. And Jesus says that's the man who goes home to his house justified.

And so, Jesus gives us a good contrast between ritual and reality. I suppose there have been through history people who thought that because they were baptized in water like this, they were therefore saved. But because they were baptized or sprinkled or confirmed or whatever that they're all right because they've performed the ritual, but that is exactly what the Bible wants to counter. The problem of ritualism versus reality was a great part of the life and ministry of Jesus who came into the world in the Jewish day historically when ritual had reached its pinnacle and countered it by preaching the message of real faith, the message of reality. The Apostle Paul indicts the kind of Judaism that existed at that time, I think, in Romans 2:17 and following where he says you might approve the things that are in your heritage, you might defend the fact that you have received the law, you might think yourself to think yourself a fine guide for those that are blind and a light to those that are in darkness and an instructor of the foolish and a teacher of babes, but the fact of the matter is you break the Law of God and the Law of God is blasphemed because of you. You may want to exalt yourself because of what you possess and because the ritual of the ritual that you have defined and made out of your own tradition but the fact is, you miss the point. And throughout particularly the book of Matthew, Jesus runs head on into Jewish ritualism and counters it. He warns His disciples in the sixth chapter of Matthew not to pray ritualistically, not to pray as a performance, but honestly in the closet of your own heart.

Further in the New Testament, the Apostle Paul warns that this same kind of ritualism substituting for reality will find its way into the church. And Paul even talks about the future in 2 Timothy 3:5 and says, "Having a form of godliness they deny...what?...the power." There is a ritual and a form but there is not a reality. And as Paul said to the Corinthians in 2 Corinthians 5:12 there are some who glory in appearance. Throughout the history of the church we have fought the battle of ritual versus reality. And invariably Satan has endeavored to substitute a form or a routine or a rite or a ceremony or a ritual for true worship, always in pagan religions, always in false systems, and you can go all the way back to the worship of Baal as opposed to the worship of Yahweh and find the same thing, as we'll see next Sunday morning. But always in this history of pagan religion there is some kind of ritual, there is some kind of outward demonstration that replaces the reality of true worship of the true God that must come from the heart. This is ever and always Satan's big lie. It has been so ever since the Old Testament and even today that the Jews, it was their birthright, it was their

circumcision, it was their ceremony, their fasts, their feasts, their works, their sacrifices and I suppose with us in the church it is baptism and communion and attendance and good works and whatever else Satan can get us to force in as if it were the truth to substitute for what really is the truth. And that is what the folks were sharing tonight, a real relationship with Jesus Christ. And the Bible tells us that the judgment of God is against the ritualist and that God moves against that and will always move against it, even in the book of Revelation to the ultimate crushing of the final system of false religion.

Now with that in mind, I want you to turn to the seventh chapter of Zechariah because that is precisely the problem with Zechariah brings in this prophecy of chapter 7. The theme of Zechariah 7 is true worship as opposed to ritual. As 1 Samuel 16:7 says, "Man looks on the outward appearance, but God looks on the heart," reiterating the same principle. God has always defined true worship as something that is from the heart, not a routine, not a performance. And that is precisely the message that this chapter wants to give.

Now I want to pull out five features and we'll run them by rapidly tonight so you can get the whole picture. Number one, the first...the first element in this prophecy is the inquiry...the inquiry, verses 1 to 3. "And it came to pass in the fourth year of King Darius that the Word of the Lord came unto Zechariah in the fourth day of the ninth month which is the month of Chislev." And the next verse reads this way, "Now the town of Bethel had sent Sharezer and Regemmelech and their men to pray before the Lord and to speak unto the priests who were in the house of the Lord of hosts and to the prophets saying, 'Should I weep in the fifth month, separating myself as I have done these so many years?'"

Now let me see if I can give you the picture. We have just finished a series in the book of Zechariah of night visions, you remember them? Great pictures of the prophetic future of God's plan for Israel and the nations as well. And the night visions are over in chapter 6, and now two years have passed since these night visions. And this is the next Word of God through His prophet Zechariah. The tremendous declaration of those visions is over and they're beginning to unfold because they had both an historical and a futuristic fulfillment. And so now two years later while Israel is greatly comforted in what has happened in the meantime, God comes back to them with a tremendous message of warning. They came back from captivity at the beginning of the book of Zechariah, they looked at their temple which was in ruins. They looked at their city which was in ruins. And then God moved in and comforted their hearts by giving them these visions through Zechariah to tell them that God would rebuild their city and God would rebuild their temple and not only that, God would give them the Kingdom in the day to come. And there were some marvelous things that were going to happen and God had these all planned for them. And so they're greatly comforted as a result of those visions. It's now 518 B.C. The temple is rising. In fact, most scholars believe it's probably half way up by the time we come to chapter 7, that people are encouraged, every obstacle has been removed to the rebuilding of Jerusalem because of the decree of Darius recorded in Ezra chapter 6. The situation looks great. Their city is going to be restored. Their temple is going to be restored.

And the people are thrilled about all of this.

And there's a great danger. There's a great danger that they'll fall back into a pattern that they fell back into in the past. And as it turned out, they fell back into it again. And that is that once they restored their temple and once they restored their patterns of worship, they would substitute the form for the reality. And so comes the Word of God to them. And it comes in response to an inquiry. And we can see then after the date of verse 1, verse 2 then says, and this is the translation that is proper, "The town of Bethel had sent Sharezer and Regemmelech and their men to pray before the Lord and to speak to the priests and to ask them a question." And here's the inquiry in verse 3, "Should I weep in the fifth month separating myself as I have done these so many years?" Now this question about whether they ought to weep and separate themselves is the question that keys chapters 7 and 8. Now let me give you the picture here. The town of Bethel is translated probably in your Authorized Version as the House of God, but it should be really the town of Bethel here, and we won't go into all the reasons why but that is the best translation. I'll just give you one. Bethel, although its literal meaning is House of God, is never used to describe the temple, it is never used to describe a temple. The House of the Lord is used 250 times to speak of the temple. The House of Elohim is used 50 times, but not Bethel the House of God. So it's a term that designates a town or a location. And so in this town which is twelve miles north of Jerusalem there were some men, and these men come down to ask a question. Now perhaps these men had returned from Babylon. It is most likely because they have Babylonish names that they were Jews born in the captivity. And they have come back to the town of Babylon and they now come to Jerusalem because they have a question and they represent their little town of Bethel which was a famous town if you read Scripture, you remember Josiah in connection with that town. And so they came down because they had this question on their minds. They came down to pray before the Lord. Now that is a vivid Hebrew word, *lahalleth*(??), it literally means so stroke the face of, or to caress and it was used to speak of a person who came down and wanted to get the right answer from somebody. And in order to gain the proper answer and in order to give them the proper respect and in order to make sure they accepted everything peacefully, he would sort of stroke their face and rub out the wrinkles of consternation. It was like saying, "Now just...we just want to come and smooth away the wrinkles of displeasure and we want to get the right and proper peaceful answer." They were beseeching, and that's what the word came to mean, beseeching the Lord. They were pleading with the Lord.

And what was on their hearts was this, do we have to keep on with this fifth month fast? This is really becoming a drag. You say, "Well what is the deal?" Well let me give you a little background. God had only instituted one fast in the history of Israel that was permanent and that was the Day of Atonement. According to Leviticus 23:37 it seems, and it's only implied, it's not directly stated, it seems as though that was to be a fast, that is a time you didn't eat. But that was the only permanent fast that we know of in the Old Testament. But through the years a number of other fasts had been

added by the people. Well whenever some big event happened, they would say, "Boy, that was a great event and we'll remember that every year by having a fast. And so every year when that comes around, we'll have a fast." And so they began to pile up the fasts. And this particular fast, it says in verse 3, was in the fifth month, the month of Ab. And it was to remember the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple by the Babylonians. When the Babylonians had come in and wiped out Jerusalem and the temple, that was a devastating thing in the history of Israel and they wanted to remember it with a fast and so they had this fast. And now the captivity is over and years have passed since they've returned and some of them are still keeping the fast. You want to hear something interesting? There are some orthodox Jews today who still keep that fast. But these people have been keeping it in Bethel and they're a little tired of the whole idea and so they say, "Do we have to keep weeping? Do we have to keep separating ourselves?" And they use a Hebrew word there that is also the root word for Nazarite, or the Nazarite vow of separation. Do we have to keep consecrating ourselves and so forth and weeping and wailing and mourning every time the fifth month rolls around and we commemorate this special fast?

Now this is a sad thing, in a sense, because the very fact that they asked the question, here comes the major point, indicates that the whole purpose for which the fast was instituted had already passed by and all it was was a ritual. It was simply a routine. There wasn't anything there at all and they were just cranking out the motions and it was a rather boring thing to do. They had turned something that I'm sure they had good intention for into an institution, into a mechanical ritual, a time of, if you will, annual humiliation. And so the fact that they were asking out of it is indicative that it had lost its meaning.

Notice the phrase there at the end of verse , "As I have done these so many years." It really was a drag. They were tired of this deal. It was a real pain. In fact, it wasn't the only one. If you'll check over in 8:19 of Zechariah, they had piled up a bunch of fasts. "Thus says the Lord of hosts, the fast of the fourth month, the fast of the fifth, the fast of the seventh, the fast of the tenth," I mean, they had the fourth, the fifth, the seventh and the tenth fast going. They were getting a little tired, every time you turned around there was another fast. And each of these had a significance that we'll get to when we get to that point. And so, should we keep all this stuff up? But it was really just the legalistic void, there wasn't any genuine commitment there, there wasn't any genuine consecration there.

And so the Word of the Lord comes in answer to this, very straightforward in what I would call the intention, beginning in verse 4. The intention comes in response to the inquiry. And I think that God really meets this need head on because God realizes the trend toward ritualism on the part of a people who were...who used to be idolatrous and were used to falling in these same old patterns of ritual and routine so that their own religion had no meaning at all and they could move very comfortably in another kind of ritual that belonged to another god. And so God answers

pointedly...and here comes the intention in verse 4, and He hits hard. "Then came the Word of the Lord of hosts to me saying, 'Speak unto all the people of the land and to the priests,' Don't just answer this question, don't just direct yourself to these guys who want to know from the prophets and the priests, you tell the whole land this. "When you fasted and mourned in the fifth and seventh month even those 70 years, did you at all fast unto Me, even to Me?" In other words, he says, was this ever real? Was there ever any reality in this deal, or were you just cranking it out? I mean, for us it would be saying, "Look, was communion ever anything to you? Was the Lord's day when you came and you gathered in that place because it was resurrection day and every Lord's day from the time of the early church on has been a resurrection celebration, was it ever that for you? Or were you just there and did you just take the communion, and did you just go into the water or did you do it for Me? I mean, was it real worship? Or were you just praying with yourself and patting yourself on the back and announcing to God that you were cranking out your routine? And the rebuke comes then in verse 4 at that point.

Now notice verse 5...pardon me, verse 6, "And when you did eat and when you did drink, did not you eat for yourselves and drink for yourselves?" I mean, when your feast...your fast became a feast, was it for you? You see, He's...He's really proving a deeper problem. Their fasts and their feasts equally were their own and God was seldom considered as the implication. You see, the actual question that they were asking...should we keep the feast of the fifth month?...you know something, is never answered. That question is never answered because that isn't the point. The point is, you can worship and you can celebrate with a fast or you can celebrate with a feast any time you want if it's truly done to the honor and glory of the Lord, you see? There is no answer to the question, but the deeper issue is, what is the serious evil that really is infesting Israel? It is this feeling that all these things are merely the performance, mechanical. And the implication again of verse 5 where he says, "Even though seventy years," and again it's the Word of the Lord saying He's kind of reemphasizing their feeling of weariness. Did you just crank it out for 70 whole years? One commentator paraphrases the answer of God by these words, "When you fast, it is because of your sins. And when you eat and drink, it is for your own profit. The whole matter is for yourselves. But what have I in all this? For neither in the fasting nor the feasting is there anything for My glory. When you fasted it was like penance, and when you feasted it was for your own satisfaction. And where did I ever come in? Did you really ever fast for Me?"

You know, some people today fast, it's a good thing. And I wonder if we fast in the way that the Bible says we ought to fast, without letting people know we fast in order that it might be something done to the glory of God and not something done for us for the praise of men, or not simply having the occasion to miss a couple of meals because we've been busy and then to tell ourselves, "Oh, I fasted." The true fast is that of a broken contrite worshiping heart, that's what He's saying.

Don't ever thing because you went through the religious formality that you worshiped God. That's something that has to come out of the heart. Verse seven, "Should you not hear the words which the Lord hath cried by the former prophets, those before the captivity when Jerusalem was inhabited and in prosperity and the cities round about it, when men inhabited Negev and the Shephelah." In other words, you should listen to the prophets. Obedience to the Word of God is the issue. Now notice, should you not hear the words which the Lord spoke, divine revelation. You should have listened.

You know, the sad thing is that's the whole reason they went into captivity because they didn't listen. There was a time when Jerusalem was inhabited, a time when it prospered, a time when the cities or the suburbs around it prospered, a time when people went all the way from the Negev to the Shephelah, in other words, from one end of the land to the other. The Negev is in the south, the Shephelah, the west, and all the land in between, everything flourished and there's a picture of the whole land. And should you not hear the words which the prophets said, then you would never have experienced this thing if you had. You see, when you listen to God's Word there will be joy and there will be peace and there will be prosperity, and that's the key. So he says it isn't ritual, it's hearing the Word of God. It isn't routine, it's obedience. And so you see, their inquiry is followed with the unmasking of their intention. Their whole intention in the feast was wrong. There was no spirit of obedience or they never would have gone into....in to their problems the way they did, even from the beginning in their history. And little had changed, even through the captivity with some of them.

Now we come thirdly, and we're really hurrying, to the instruction in verse 8. And having kind of dealt with their intention, He moves to their instruction in verse 8 and it says, "And the Word of the Lord came to Zechariah saying, 'Thus speaketh the Lord of hosts saying, Execute true judgment and show mercy and compassions every man to his brother and oppress not the widow nor the fatherless, the stranger nor the poor, and let everyone of you imagine...let none of you, rather, imagine evil against his brother in your heart.'"

Now this is the main issue. Now notice this, very simple...very simple message. He says, "Look, you kept the feasts and you kept the fasts. What you should have done was listen to the former prophets. In fact, if your fathers had listened to the former prophets, you never would have gone into captivity to start with. And now even through all of that, you still don't listen to the former prophets and you crank out a ritualistic approach to religion. What you should do, he says in verse 7, is to hear the words of the Lord. And he says, "And here are the words of the Lord, here is the instruction, notice it. Number one, execute true judgment. It isn't the fasts and the feasts that I'm interested in, it's your non-partiality." And that's what he's saying, no respect of persons. You're not to prefer certain people over others. You're not to give certain people justice because they have money, or because they have prestige, or because you seek to win their favor. You are to show no partiality. There is no

respect of persons with God.

Go back to Exodus chapter 18 and read verses 19 to 23, we won't take the time now. You'll see it all begins there, that all are to be treated equally. And Paul says it in Philippians where he says, "All having the same love." And that's a basic truth in Christian faith. In Jeremiah chapter 7 verse 4, Jeremiah says, "Trust not in lying words, and saying the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord." In other words, you're hailing your form of religion. "For if you thoroughly amend your ways and your doings, if you execute justice between a man and his neighbor, if you oppress not the stranger or the fatherless or the widow and did not shed innocent blood in this place, nor walk after other gods to your harm, then will I cause you to dwell in this place." In other words, My blessing does not attend your activity at the temple, but it attends the kind of life you live. The first thing is to execute true judgment, let it be that you are impartial, let it be that you are peacemakers, let it be that you restore unity and harmony.

Secondly, he says that, "Ye show mercy and compassion." Two other words for that would be kindness and sympathy, in all human relationships. Hosea says in Hosea I think it's chapter 12 verse 6, "To hold fast to two things, justice and love." That's essentially what he's saying here.

Thirdly he says, "Do not oppress the widow, or the fatherless, or the stranger, or the poor." And here you have a list of the helpless members of society, those most easily exposed to the evils of unscrupulous men, exploitation of the weak and the poor and the helpless is not to characterize God's people. And see, all he's saying here is your religion is absolutely useless unless there is in your life justice and kindness and mercy and compassion. Those are the things that speak of a regenerated heart. Those are the things that speak of true religion. James said true religion is this, to visit the widows and the orphans. True religion isn't lighting candles and walking up and down steps. True religion isn't going through certain rituals. True religion is taking care of orphans and widows, says James, very basic. In fact, in Matthew 5:23 it says, "If you bring your gift to the altar...you're going to make your act of worship...and you remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there and go your way and first be reconciled to your brother and then come and offer your gift." Don't go through any routine unless you have covered the bases in terms of the real heart attitudes.

And so we see these are very simple. Then he says further, "Let none of you imagine evil against his brother in your heart." The idea of imagine here is to plot, or devise...plotting against others, bringing false accusations in law, suing people could be implied here. You can't come and worship God while you've got some bitterness or some grudge, or some backbiting, or some gossip or some lawsuit either in action or in your mind. You can't worship God unless the heart is right. And so God is simply saying, I'm not interested in how many fasts you have. I'm not interested in how many feasts

you keep. I'm not interested in how you bow or how you bend or how you pray or how you read or how you sing or how you attend services or anything else, how you recite a creed. What I want to know is what's cooking in your heart. And I want to see the spirit of total obedience.

There's a great text in Isaiah that parallels this in the fifty-eighth chapter, and I want to read it to you, 58:3, listen. "Why have we fasted, say they, and thou seest not." In other word, say, "O God, don't You see us down here? We're fasting, see. Could you unload a truckload of goodies in response? Why have we afflicted our soul and Thou takest no knowledge. Here we are...pounding and doing our religious callisthenics and You don't seem to pay any attention. Behold, in the day of your fast you find pleasure and exact all your labors." In other words, he says while you're fasting it's business as usual. You've got your employees all working. You demand that they work hard. You've got everybody fasting and you're having a wonderful spiritual time while the poor guy who works for you is working his head off and hasn't got anything to eat...cause he's fasting. "Behold, you fast for strife and debate and to smite with the fist of wickedness." One commentator said that the thing that happens here is you get so irritable because you're fasting that you could become cruel to your employees and you start fighting and arguing and you just...you literally want to hit them in the mouth. It's a wonderful fast you have. You've got everybody fasting but you, the proprietors, are working the rest of the people to the place where you're all losing your tempers.

Verse 5, "Is it such a fast that I have chosen, the day for a man to afflict his soul? Is it to bow down his head like a bullrush and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him? Wilt thou call this a fast, an acceptable day to the Lord? Is it some kind of game? Is it some kind of routine? Is it some kind of show you put on where you put funny things all over yourself and you walk around with ashes on top of you so you can gain some glory? Is not this the fast that I have chosen? What is the fast he chooses? To loose the bands of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, to let the oppressed go free and to break every yoke. Is it not to deal your bread to the hungry and that you should bring the poor that are cast out to your house? Instead of having a fast like that, why don't you have a feast and invite all the poor people? And when you see the naked, that you cover him, that you hide not yourself from your own flesh. Then shall thy light break forth like the morning and thy health shall spring forth speedily and thy righteousness shall go before thee. The glory of the Lord shall be thy rear guard. And then shalt thou call and the Lord shall answer, Thou shalt cry and He shall say, Here I am.

You want God to answer? Then quit the ridiculous kind of fast and live the pure kind of life. That's what I'm after. That's very basic. The self-righteous faster is to be replaced by the one whose heart is filled with love and kindness and sympathy and compassion. I think John reiterates the same principle in 1 John where he talks about true love being the reaching of my compassion to a brother in need.

So we see the inquiry, now go back to chapter 7, we've seen the intention, the instruction and then Zechariah receives a word from the Lord about the insolence. In spite of God's instruction, Zechariah faces the fact that the people may rebel as the people before the captivity had rebelled. Verse 11, "But they refused to hearken and pulled away the shoulder and stopped their ears that they should not hear. Yea they made their hearts as an adamant stone lest they should hear the Law and the words which the Lord of hosts has sent in His Spirit by the former prophets." He says the generation before you didn't listen, they substituted ritual for reality. And he shows a four-step progression here. They refused to hearken, verse 11, and that simply means they didn't take God's Word seriously, they treated it flippantly, indifferently. Secondly, they turned a rebellious shoulder. That phrase is used in Hosea 4:6 and I believe it's in Nehemiah 9:29 and it describes the conducts of...the conduct of an ox when the ox will not take the yoke. And he is saying they didn't listen, they treated it flippantly and then when I tried to place My Law upon them, they shrugged and turned and they wouldn't take a restraint and they didn't want any authority over them and they demanded a self-styled freedom.

And then there's another step in their progression. They stopped their ears. They went all the way to a deliberate refusal to listen to God. The word no longer touched them, it no longer reached them. They hated God's Word and yet they cranked out the ritual. And finally he says, "They made their hearts like an adamant stone." That's another term for diamond. They were hard-hearted as a diamond which is the hardest thing there is.

And so, here are these people. They've got all their ritual and God says to them, "I just want your hearts," and they stopped their ears and they make their hearts as hard as stone. Their minds and their wills were set against God and He says you ought to remember history because when that happened, they had a terrible judgment.

So the inquiry and the intention and the instruction and the insolence and finally reminds them of the indignation in verse 12. "Therefore came a great wrath from the Lord of hosts. Therefore it has come to pass that as He cried and they would not hear, so they cried and I would not hear, saith the Lord of hosts. And I scattered them with a whirlwind among all the nations whom they knew not, thus the land was desolate after them that no man passed through, no return for they laid the pleasant land desolate."

God says, "Here it is, here's the message. Because they refused to hear Me and they had a ritual instead of a reality, I judged them." Simple...the wrath of God. And for 70 years God didn't hear them. Verse 13 came to pass...they didn't hear Me, so I stopped listening to them.

What was the answer then to the original inquiry? Do we have to keep the feasts? God's Word came to Zechariah and said that's not the point. The point is was the feast ever for Me anyway? The point is that all you've done is make a form of religion. And so I say to you that God is not interested in the form, He is interested in the reality that's in your heart. And that reality springs from hearing the words of the Lord. And the last generation didn't hear the words of the Lord and they were judged and so I warn you. God does not want us to be indifferent and He does not want us to be disobedient to His Word.

Simple message for us, isn't it? You can't substitute any form for a reality. My great prayer tonight is that you know the Lord Jesus Christ. Not that you go to church, or that you've had some rite or some ritual...I always think about the story of the actor who went to the sort of a drawing room function. And there was a lady there, a fancy place, you know, ladies had their glasses on a stick, you know, one of those old fancy deals. So this one lady who was the hostess came to him and said, "Sir, we would like for you to recite for us." So the actor was in his glory, wanted to recite. And wanting to get the benefit of all that he could from his audience and having a rather unlimited repertoire, he said to his audience, "What would you like me to recite?" And there was an old preacher there, probably crashed the party, and he said, "I'd like to hear the twenty-third Psalm." And the actor said, "All right, I'll...I don't prefer to do that, but I'll do it on one condition," hoping that the gentleman would back down on his request, he said, "I'll do it if you'll do it after me."

The old pastor figuring twice is better than once said, "Fine." So the actor began and his intonation was flawless and his diction was beautiful. Masterfully he went through with great intensity the twenty-third Psalm. When he was done, there was applause. And the old preacher, he got up there and he had kind of a ministerial twang and his diction wasn't that hot, his interpretation wasn't so great. He got all done and there wasn't a sound. And there wasn't a dry eye in the place. And the actor was overcome with the silence, stood up and he said, "I think I know the difference. I know the Psalm, but he knows the Shepherd." That's the difference. There are lots of people who know the Psalm, sadly there aren't so many who know the Shepherd. Let's pray.

It's a sad thing, Father, we look back at the history of Israel, so many times they had all the form and none of the reality. We look at the church today and we see so many churches with form, ritual, routine, no reality. They have a name like Sardis that they're alive, but they're dead. They have a form of godliness but deny the power. They're just empty. And there are so many lives like that. There are some people here tonight, Lord, and they're just depending upon their baptism, or they're taking communion, or they're having religious feelings, or being in a Christian family or country, or who knows what, some good works they did to help poor people or sick people, some religious activity they engage in, some prayers they pray and they're counting upon that for their salvation. And the sad thing is, they know the Psalm but they don't know the Shepherd. They have the form

and the ritual and they're just like the Pharisee, they are talking to themselves, not to You. We pray, Father, that tonight maybe they'll go into the corner and beat on their breast and say, "Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner." And that they'll go home justified like that tax collector did because that's the issue. Christianity is simply the personal knowledge of You through Christ. May that be reality for all of us tonight.

If you don't know the Lord Jesus Christ and you've never really given your heart to Him, this would be a great time to do that. You can do that in your heart. You don't have to do anything religious, quote/unquote, you just have to open your heart and say, "Christ, I need You and I want You and I want to confess You as Lord like the folks did tonight." And if you do that in your heart, that will be it forever...great truth.

Father, we do pray that You'll cause all of our hearts to be sensitive to what Your Spirit is saying and for those who need so much to come, we pray that You'll draw them by Your Spirit, in Jesus' name and for His glory. Amen.

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