

“More than Lip Service”

When I was a teenager I had my first theological run in with the church. We were in our senior high Sunday School class taught by a couple who were some of my earliest mentors—Skip and Pat Freeman (may they rest in peace). This day they had invited the pastor or our Baptist Church to field questions from us. I know there were many questions but the one I remember clearly is, “What happens to people who do not go to church on Sunday? Do they go to heaven?” The pastor told us, “Well, there are some people like Seventh Day Adventists who go to church on Saturday because it is their belief that Saturday is the Sabbath. But all Jews go to hell.”

The strangeness of that response still troubles me. First of all, the pastor did not answer the question with regards to Christians who do not go to church. He did not answer the question with regards to atheists. He picked Seventh Day Adventists as an example of Christians who worship on a different day. Then as if out of thin air he condemns Jews. There was no mention of other non-Christian groups such as Muslims, Hindus, or Buddhists. He focused on Jews.

I found this particularly disturbing because our next-door neighbors were Jewish as was my high school choir director. Knowing them as well as I did, I found it hard to believe that our loving God was going to consign them to an eternity of misery. The same people who were telling me that Jews were destined for eternal flames had also been the ones who taught me that God loves everyone. It did not make sense. Also, Jesus was a Jew. All of his disciples were Jews. Most of the first people to accept him and proclaim him the Son of God were Jews. There was a huge disconnect for me.

Another of my initial objections to this condemnation of Jews was my observation of how my fellow churchgoers lived. They often came to church on Sunday with hangovers, but as Baptists we were to abstain from alcohol. After church the men would gather in the parking lot for a cigarette. This was just after hearing the preacher condemn smoking as a sin and then shaking his hand on the way out. It was so blatantly hypocritical.

The Jews that I knew were kind and gentle people. They seemed to me to be living more Christian lives than many of my fellow Christians. They gave to the needy, were kind to strangers, and cared for my family more than our fellow Christians did. You may call me naïve, but I could not reconcile the idea that belief was the one thing that would separate them from us in the afterlife. Living a good life should matter.

One of the essential theological tenets of the Protestant Reformation is salvation by faith alone. The idea is that performing righteous works was not enough. Those proponents of salvation by faith alone were opposed to what they called works righteousness. That is the idea that good deeds were not

enough for eternal life. One could not earn their way into heaven. Eternal life in God was a gift that could not be earned. That is a strong theological belief among all Christians. But the perversion of salvation by faith alone is that works do not matter at all. That is why today's scriptures are so important.

Moses, James and Jesus all tell us that lip service does not fulfill our responsibilities to God. In the case of Moses, he reminds the people who are about to enter into the Promised Land that it is not enough to believe in God they also need to obey God's "statutes and ordinances." He goes on to say, "You must observe them diligently, for this will show your wisdom and discernment to the peoples."¹ As the chosen people they are to observe God's commandments not just for their own well-being but so that the people of other nations may see them and come to obey God. The earliest Christians also lived this way, and other people saw them and were amazed. The challenge in our lives is that so many so-called Christians live lives that Jesus would tell us has nothing to do with his teachings of how to follow God.

St. James, the brother of Jesus, is famous for the words "be doers of the word, and not merely hearers."² He tells us that those who hear God's commandments but do not live by them are deceiving themselves. They are like someone who looks in the mirror and after looking away cannot recall what they saw. The implication is that what we remember is something different from what the mirror revealed. So we hear God's word, think we have received salvation and go about our lives doing anything we like. These people are usually called hypocrites.

Then there is Jesus, our Lord and Savior, he quotes Isaiah 29:13 when he says "This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me." By quoting Isaiah he reminds us that what he is calling out is not a new sin. People of faith have struggled with this for ages. That does not mean we give up. Rather we redouble our efforts to do something more than pay lip service to God's commandments. It is even harder for us folk when we see leaders who live hypocritical lives. In Jesus' day he was calling out the Pharisees and Sadducees. In our day we might call out the moguls, televangelists, and politicians who quote scripture to support their agendas while the poor suffer, children starve, the elderly go without medications, girls go uneducated, and vaccines are denied to most of Africa and South America. All the while they collect enormous salaries, fly rockets into space, and live in gigantic mansions without losing one moment's sleep for the plight of anyone else on earth.

God always calls us to care for the poor, widowed and orphaned. The prophets reprimand us time and again for not following that commandment.

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Jesus affirms the necessity to live into God's word, not just have it flow over us like some sort of justifying waterfall that requires nothing of us.

Paying lip service is fairly easy. There is little personal cost to it. Living a godly and sober life means there will be some sacrifice—driving an older car, not remodeling the kitchen, a delayed vacation, hamburger instead of filet mignon, and so forth. You can name your own sacrifices. By definition when we make these choices we make the things involved sacred. That is what the word sacrifice means, to make something holy. When we give up something for the betterment of another we make sacred the choice. We make the old car sacred, the old kitchen sacred, and the hamburger sacred all in order to help someone else. Additionally, these sacrifices make our lives sacred.

That was the difference between many of my fellow churchgoers and the Jewish people I knew. They chose to make life sacred in thanks to God. Rather than defying God for their own pleasures. God knows when our beliefs are merely lip service. God knows when we make the hard choices to sacrifice for others. God knows because God also made a sacrifice in sending us his son to show us how to live as sacred people. That son made the ultimate sacrifice on the cross to show us the way of truth and life.

God is not asking us to die on a cross. God is asking us to die to the selfishness and sinfulness of a world which values nothing except greed and lust. When we die to those sins we make our lives sacred. We also show people who are yearning for truth and disillusioned by the world how to live a life of meaning, a life that is sacred to themselves, sacred to others, and sacred to God.