

SUBSTITUTING AN HOUR OF WORSHIP FOR A WEEK OF RIGHTEOUS LIVING

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on May 31, 1964 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P.M.

It is believed that the most remarkable building in the ancient world was the Jewish temple, built by Solomon approximately 900 years before Christ lived. David, his father, was not permitted by God to erect the temple because he was a “man of blood,” but he was allowed to gather more than 100,000 talents of gold and more than 1,000,000 talents of silver for its erection. The building of the temple took seven years and six months, and involved more than 180,000 workers. The temple was built according to the plan of the tabernacle, except that all of the dimensions were doubled. The ceiling and the walls of the temple were cedar from Lebanon, which was made available by Hiram, King of Tyre, a friend of Solomon. These timbers were overlaid with gold, and ornate carvings were provided by the most skilled artisans of the day. The floor was of cypress, so far as we are able to identify the wood that was used. The stones of the temple were so carefully cut at the quarry that they could be placed together without the sound of hammer or chisel. Eventually, the temple was dedicated with a week-long feast, and the offering of 22,000 oxen and 120,000 sheep. (II Chronicles 1-7)

For centuries the temple was the center of Hebrew worship. To it the annual pilgrimages were made by all loyal Jewish men. At the temple the various feasts were held, especially the feast of Passover in the spring, the feast of Pentecost in early summer, and the feast of Tabernacles at the end of the harvest season. There was an elaborate priesthood, with the selections of the priests, their official clothing, and the ceremonies that they were to perform spelled out in detail in the books of Exodus and Leviticus. Finally, there was an endless series of sacrifices. These were of many kinds, ranging all the way from meal-offerings, to the burning of oxen and sheep. They were offered for many purposes and at many times during the year.

But, as time went by, something went wrong. In spite of the magnificent building, the elaborate instructions from God, and the guidance of the priests and the prophets, something went wrong. What was it? Let us turn to the prophets of the Old Testament to see.

The Prophets Speak Out

In the opening chapter of Isaiah we find these words, “What unto me is the multitude of your sacrifices? saith Jehovah: I have had enough of the burnt-offerings of rams, and the fat of fed beasts; and I delight not in the blood of bullocks, or of lambs, or of he-goats. When ye come to appear before me, who hath required this at your hand, to trample my courts? Bring no more vain oblations; incense is an abomination unto me; new moon and sabbath, the calling of assemblies,— I cannot away with iniquity and the solemn meeting. Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hateth; they are a trouble unto me; I am weary of bearing them. And when ye spread forth your hands, I will hide mine eyes from you; yea, when ye make many prayers, I will not hear: your hands are full of blood. Wash you, make you clean; put away the evil of your doings from before mine eyes; cease to do evil; learn to do well; seek justice, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow. Come now, and let us reason together, saith Jehovah: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool. If ye be willing and obedient, ye shall eat the good of the land: but if ye refuse and rebel, ye shall be devoured with the sword; for the mouth of Jehovah hath spoken it.” (Isaiah 1:11-20)

Later, in Isaiah 29:13-14, the prophet added, “And the Lord said, Forasmuch as this people draw nigh unto me, and with their mouth and with their lips do honor me, but have removed their heart far from me, and their fear of me is a commandment of men which hath been taught them; therefore, behold, I will proceed to do a marvelous work among this people, even a marvellous work and a wonder; and the wisdom of their wise men shall perish, and the understanding of their prudent men shall be hid.” Nearly eight centuries later Jesus quoted this prophecy from. Isaiah in these words, “This people honoreth me with their lips; but their heart is far from me. But in vain do they worship me, teaching as their doctrines the precepts of men.” (Matthew 15: 8-9)

This reminds us of the statement in the eleventh century B.C. from the prophet Samuel, “Hath Jehovah as great delight in burnt-offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of Jehovah? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams.” (I Sam. 15:22)

Next, we turn to the writings of Hosea, and in Hosea 6: 4, 6, we find this warning, “O Ephraim, what shall I do unto thee? O Judah, what shall I do unto thee? for your goodness is as a morning cloud, and as the dew that goeth early away ... For I desire goodness, and not sacrifice; and the knowledge of God more than burnt-offerings.”

To these words, we add the words of the prophet Amos, “I hate, I despise your feasts, and I will take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Yea, though ye offer me your burnt-offerings and meal-offerings, I will not accept them; neither will I regard the peace-offerings of your fat beasts. Take thou away from me the noise of thy songs; for I will not hear the melody of thy viols. But let justice roll down as waters, and righteousness as a mighty stream ... Woe to them that are at ease in Zion, and to them that are secure in the mountain of Samaria ... that lie upon beds of ivory, and stretch themselves upon their couches, and eat the lambs out of the flock, and the calves out of the midst of the stall; that sing idle songs to the sound of the viol; that invent for themselves instruments of music,

like David; that drink wine in bowls, and anoint themselves with the chief oils; but they are not grieved for the affliction of Joseph.” (Amos 5: 21-24; 6:1, 3-6)

The words of the prophet Micah also deserve to be heard, “Wherewith shall I come before Jehovah, and bow myself before the high God? shall I come before him with burnt-offerings, with calves a year old? will Jehovah be pleased with thousands of rams, or with ten thousands of rivers of oil? shall I give my first-born for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? He hath showed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth Jehovah require of thee, but to do justly, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with thy God” (Micah 6:6-8) This chorus of voices, calling on the people to repent and render heart-service to God, comes from the prophets of the eighth century B.C. A century earlier the prophet Joel had called upon the people to repent, and had used the especially effective phrase, “... rend your heart, and not your garments, and turn unto Jehovah your God.” (Joel 2:13)

### What Were Their Sins?

As one reads the writings of the prophets of the Old Testament, eventually he comes to feel that their sins fall into several different categories. In daily living, their sins were those of license and lust. There was drunkenness, worldliness, and adultery. There was also the sin of luxurious living, or as we would classify it in our day a materialism that crowded out their right relationship with God. In business practices, their sin was that of greed. The rich are accused of robbing the poor. There was the taking of bribes and the perverting of justice. In religion, their sins were those of insincerity and hypocrisy. Their religion had become mere habit. The ritual and the ceremonies were correct, but their hearts were not in the worship. Finally, and perhaps most disturbing to God, their religion did not carry over into their daily lives.

What does all of this mean to us today? Possibly nothing, nothing at all. On the other hand, it may be the lesson most needed by some of us. Or for some others, it may be a valuable warning.

### The Basic Problem

Ancient Israel was guilty of substituting an hour of worship for a week of righteous living. One of the most ancient and long-continuing problems is the problem of the great gap between the profession of religion and the practice of religion. Some years ago, I bought a copy of a book by C. S. Lewis, entitled *The Great Divorce*. Upon reading it, I found that it was not a book about marriage and divorce, but rather about the great separation that will come eventually between the righteous and the unrighteous. Ultimately, the greatest of all divorces is the separation between righteousness and unrighteousness. The problem of all God's people throughout the ages has been the problem of remaining loyal to Jehovah in the face of the temptations and pressures of the world. Ancient Israel was guilty of being religious on Sabbath, and being worldly the rest of the week.

We are all aware that a man often wears different kinds of clothes. On Sundays he wears his Sunday suit. Later, at more relaxed times, he wears sports clothing. At other times, he may wear a special type of clothing for his work. At still other times, we may find him wearing his painting clothes, or his cleaning-the-basement clothes. All of this is right and good, for it is sensible to dress according to the requirements of the day.

However, this same kind of practice has also seeped into religion, and here it is not right and good at all. Sometimes a person wears his Christianity as he wears his clothes--well dressed on Sunday, but discarding this dress for inferior dress during the week. Sometimes a person compartmentalizes his life, with religion in one tight self-contained compartment, having little influence on the areas of recreation, vocation, and the other activities of his life.

However, Christianity cannot be compartmentalized and still be Christianity. Christ's way is a total way of life. It must be practiced every day. There must be no separation between professed and practiced religion. In our day, too, we are sorely tempted to substitute an hour of worship for a week of righteous living. In our day, too, this practice would have the same disastrous effect that it had in the eighth century B.C.

### Warnings For Us

These great prophetic warnings are especially appropriate for us of the twentieth century, in a day when we are tempted to be so preoccupied with the material things of life as to crowd out spiritual values. In addition, ours is a world in which sensualism has been given a prominence and an emphasis unheralded in past generations. All of this means that we, too, are in constant danger of separating our worship of God from the living of our daily lives.

I am reminded of a warning from the pen of the apostle Paul, “But know this, that in the last days grievous times shall come. For men shall be lovers of self, lovers of money, boastful, haughty, railers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, without natural affection, implacable, slanderers, without self-control, fierce, no lovers of good, traitors, headstrong, puffed up, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God; holding a form of godliness, but having denied the power thereof: from these also turn away.” (II Tim. 3:1-5). Notice in the last part of the sentence that the ones to whom this was written were religious people, “holding a form of godliness, but having denied the power thereof.”

Still another very familiar passage of the New Testament emphasizes that goodness must accompany our concern for God's kingdom or church. In Matthew 6:33, Jesus is quoted as saying, "But seek ye first his kingdom, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you." Finally, I would add a fragment of scripture from the book of James, "The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much in its working." (James 5:16).

There are many Christians, perhaps, who do not need the warnings that come from these prophetic passages which we have studied. They have mastered the problem and have narrowed the gap between the profession of religion and the practice of religion. There are others who should seriously heed these God-given warnings and should consider them a call to repentance, lest they continue in their divided way and be eternally lost. For most of us, however, these passages serve as a great warning, lest we slip into the sin of ancient Israel, substituting an hour of worship for a week of righteous living. May we strive to keep our worship fresh and meaningful and genuine. May we strive to keep our religion an every-day affair, letting it undergird our entire lives. Only then will our worship to God be acceptable.