



# **The Vanity of Religious Works**

and importance of

## **The Fruits of the Spirit.**

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# The Vanity of Religious Works

## And

## Importance of the Fruits of the Spirit.

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### Topics.

- Israel's fasting was vanity before the LORD.
  - Israel's heart was stubborn and diamond hard before the LORD.
  - Israel at Mount Sinai entered into a covenant with God.
  - God's used king Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon as his servant.
  - Worthless shepherd's desert the flock.
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### ISRAEL'S FASTING WAS VANITY BEFORE THE LORD

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- **Zechariah 7:4-5:** Then the word of the LORD of hosts came to me (Zechariah) <sup>5</sup>"Say to all the people of the land and the priests when you fasted and mourned in the fifth month and in the seventh, for these seventy years, was it for me that you fasted?"

Israel was fasting, but their hearts were not toward God they were simply doing it as a matter of duty, a matter of tradition and a matter of law, their hearts were not in it. It is pointless to practice religious customs and traditions if we are only doing them to fulfil rules, traditions and other people's expectations since they count for nothing before God. People dominated by self-love outward religious works to earn righteousness because as long as they faithfully keep them, they are free to do as they please. This is because they believe they are counted righteous and worthy of salvation and eternal life by its own self-effort.

- **Zechariah 7:6:** when you eat and when you drink, do you not eat for yourselves and drink for yourselves?

Israel was called of God to come together on certain feast days to celebrate the LORD, but instead of holding them to celebrate and give God glory they were simply having a great party time together. Self loves to attend religious meetings when the flesh is fed in some manner. In certain churches today many followers maybe attending simply for the entertainment value and positive self-motivating talks. People can be in church not because they are seeking God, but because they are promised by the religious leaders, they follow that God will bless their life with perfect health and prosperity here and now in this world.

The underlying theme today in some modern churches is not what we can do for God, but what God can do for us. This result in people following Christ for what they can get from God, but when the promise of prosperity and perfect health does not come to pass many are confused and fall away. Though Israel was doing their religious duties they weren't doing them from a heart that desired to honour God, but simply from a sense of duty and therefore the focus was upon what satisfied self and the flesh rather than what honoured God.

- **Zechariah 7:9-10:** Thus says the LORD of hosts, Render true judgments, show kindness and mercy to one another, <sup>10</sup>do not oppress the widow, the fatherless, the sojourner, or the poor, and let none of you devise evil against another in your heart."

God through the prophet is telling Israel two things:

1. It matters little to God if they faithfully adhere to ceremonial rites, holy days and strictly keep religious customs and traditions if they lack kindness, mercy and compassion toward the less fortunate, the poor, the widows and orphans amongst them.
  2. Having a kind and compassionate heart and thinking good thoughts toward each other is the things God values far above religious works (especially when they are only acts of legalism and tradition).
- Jesus said: “You will recognize them by their fruits” (Matt. 7:20).

Fruits are not religious works, but love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control etc., (Gal. 5:22-23) these are the things the LORD loves.

- **Micah wrote:** “What the LORD requires of mankind is to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with their God” (Micah 6:5-10).
- **Isaiah says:** “The LORD loves justice, hates robbery and wrong doing” (Isaiah 61:8).
- **Jeremiah said:** “Those who know God practise steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth, because it is in these things that God delights” (Jer. 9:24).

The great prophets Micah, Isaiah and Jeremiah clearly show us that the people the LORD loves are not only those who acknowledge God, but who also uphold justice, do not lie, deceive or make promises they do not intend to keep, but speak the truth, do what is right, show respect and give help to others when able and make choices that lead to peace. These are the things the LORD delights in and that bring His favour.

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## JESUS FAMOUS SERMON ON THE MOUNT

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The constant theme throughout Jesus famous Sermon on the Mount is doing what is right before God by seeking the way of peace in all situations. Jesus calls Christians to treat people fairly and with respect, dignity, decency grace compassion, kindness, mercy and to be quick to forgive. This means living a life that honours God and the Lord Jesus Christ is about doing all we can do to protect people from harm and being dominated by the thought, “What action can I take or do that will help and encourage this person.” It is all about doing right to others.

This is the reason the message Jesus spoke on the mountain is referred to as, “The Famous Sermon” because the principals if followed not only by Christians but all humanity are the only way to peace (Matt 5). A wicked person is primarily one who deliberately and consciously denies the existence of God and does harm to other humans. For further information on Jesus Famous Sermon see:

- Matthew 5 in Commentary New Testament (ON WEBSITE MENU).

**NOTICE:** Israel believed true judgment was about keeping God’s laws concerning religious statutes (i.e., ceremonial rites, Holy days, Feasts etc.), but God is saying true judgments are about treating others with kindness and mercy and giving help to the less fortunate the poor and the helpless.

Whoever exalts religious works above the fruits of the Spirit is deceiving themselves and whoever thinks they are righteous because they regularly attend a religious service every week and such like things when they give not thought to the fruits of the Spirit (love, compassion, kindness etc.,) in the heart is deceiving themselves and whoever thinks they are righteous because they strictly adhere to ceremonial rites and holy days and keep religious customs and traditions when they give no thought to the fruits of the Spirit in the heart has also go their priorities grossly wrong.

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## ISRAEL'S HEART WAS STUBBORN AND DIAMOND HARD BEFORE THE LORD

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- **Zechariah 7:11-12:** But they refused to pay attention and turned a stubborn shoulder and stopped their ears that they might not hear. <sup>12</sup>They made their hearts diamond-hard lest they should hear the law and the words that the LORD of hosts had sent by his Spirit through the former prophets. Therefore great anger came from the LORD of hosts.

This verse shows how grossly stubborn Israel had become. For God's people to have a heart that is described as diamond hard toward hearing the LORD'S word is wickedness to the extreme. Israel on the outside were attending to the temple duties, but it was simply legalistic formality, national duty and tradition their heart was so far removed from God it was all vanity. Self and the flesh had become so dominant in the minds and heart of those who once had a faith toward God that (except for a faithful remnant) they had become a totally rebellious and corrupt people before God.

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## THE LORD CALLED TO ISRAEL, BUT THEY WOULD NOT LISTEN

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- **Zechariah 7:13-14:** As I called, and they would not hear so they called, and I would not hear, says the LORD of hosts, <sup>14</sup>"and I scattered them with a whirlwind among all the nations that they had not known. Thus the land they left was desolate, so that no one went to and fro, and the pleasant land was made desolate."

Israel prayed to God, but He would not listen, there is a Great lesson to be learned in this, those who practice religious works and give no thought to the fruits of the Spirit and who give no thought to the heart of God and whose religion is simply formal legalistic duty should not expect God to listen to their prayers. The LORD sent prophet after prophet to warn Israel again and again to get their lives right before the LORD their God, but they would not listen so the LORD brought upon them all the curses of the covenant they made with the LORD at Mount Sinai. The following verse shows that all the people of Israel at Mount Sinai entered into a covenant with God:

- Moses came and told the people all the words of the LORD and all the rules. And all the people answered with one voice and said, "All the words that the LORD has spoken we will do (Exodus 24:3).

The following verses show that Israel agreed to the curses of the covenant:

- If you (Israel) will not obey the voice of the LORD your God or be careful to do all his commandments and his statutes that I (Moses) command you today, then all these curses shall come upon you and overtake you (Deut. 28:15).
- All these curses shall come upon you and pursue you and overtake you till you are destroyed, because you did not obey the voice of the LORD your God, to keep his commandments and his statutes that he commanded you (Deut. 28:45).

God used King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon as his servant to bring judgment upon Israel. The armies of Babylon destroyed the city of Jerusalem, plundered the temple of God, laid the towns, cities and farms of Israel waste and took the people of Israel captive into Babylon for seventy-years. The following verses show that God used King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon as His servant:

- I the LORD will send for Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon *my servant* and I will bring his armies against this land (of Israel) and its inhabitants and I will devote them to destruction and make them a horror, a hissing and an everlasting desolation (Jer. 25:9).
- I the LORD have given all Israel's lands into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon *my servant* and I have given him also the beasts of the field to serve him (Jeremiah 27:6).

- Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Behold, I will send and take Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon, *my servant* and I will set his throne above these stones that I have hidden, and he will spread his royal canopy over them (Israel) (Jeremiah 43:10).

King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon was a pagan king who worshipped the gods of Babylon. This shows us the following three things:

1. If God chooses, He may use secular rulers and nations to bring judgment upon countries who confess to belong to His Kingdom, but whose government and population are far from Him in their hearts, minds and lifestyle.
2. Nations and people can confess to believe in God and appear religious on the outside and still be totally devoid of God and living to gratify the flesh because self is still the king on the throne of their heart and mind and not the Lord Jesus Christ who they confess to be following.
3. God is not limited to using only His people to achieve His plans and purposes.

**NOTE:** since the end of the Babylonian captivity Israel has never returned to idol worship and pagan gods, sadly they also never recognised their Messiah the Christ when he came.

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### WORTHLESS SHEPHERD'S DESERT THE FLOCK

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- **Zechariah 11:17:** Woe to my worthless shepherd, who deserts the flock! May the sword strike his arm and his right eye! Let his arm be wholly withered, his right eye utterly blinded!"

This is enormously harsh and strong language, but the shepherds were responsible for the nation's spiritual well-being and under the leadership of these shepherds the people of Israel:

- Had become self-centred, self-absorbed and lived to gratify self and the flesh.
- Exalted religious works above the fruits of the Spirit.
- Were cold hearted (they lacked compassion and kindness)
- Were totally selfish they had abundance, but oppressed the feeble for their own gain and gave no help to the poor.
- Thought evil of each other rather than thoughts of compassion, encouragement and kindness (this is manifested in idle gossip and conversations that criticizes, demeans and degrades others).
- Hearts were diamond-hard toward God's faithful prophets and the word of the LORD.

Under the leadership of these shepherds Israel as a nation had become totally corrupt in every way possible before God. It is interesting to notice when Israel had good shepherds and good king the nation was spiritually healthy, but when the kings and the shepherds were driven by self, ego, pride and the flesh the nation as a whole fell away from the LORD except for a faithful remnant. This is of course why God places greater honour and greater judgment upon those called and privileged to shepherd His flock.