

THE FAILURE OF ORGANIZED RELIGION: Hebrews 10: 11-24

We're reading from the 10th chapter of Hebrews, verse 10: "By this will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. And every priest stands daily ministering and offering time after time the same sacrifices which can never take away sin. But He, having offered one sacrifice for sins for all time, sat down on the right hand of God, waiting for that time onward until HIS ENEMIES BE MADE A FOOTSTOOL FOR HIS FEET. For by one offering, He has perfected for all time those who are sanctified. And the Holy Spirit also bears witness to us; for after saying, 'This is the covenant I will make with them after those days,' says the Lord. 'I will put my laws upon their heart and upon their mind I will right them,' He then says, 'And their sins and their lawless deeds I will remember no more.'

Verse 18: "Now where there is forgiveness of these things, there is no longer any offering for sin. Since therefore, brethren, we have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He inaugurated for us through the veil that is His flesh, and since we have a high priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a sincere heart and full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good works, not forsaking the assembling together as the habit of some, but encouraging one another and all the more as you see the day drawing nigh."

This is a classic example of the failure of organized religion and that's what we want to talk about, the failure of organized religion. Now when it comes to organized religion, none could hold a candle to the Jews:

Ephesus had its Diana, Samaria had its Simon the Sorcerer, and Paphos had the Elymas, the Magician. Athens had the whole city filled with idols and even one to an unknown god. Corinth had its temple prostitutes and Rome had its emperor Caesar.

But Jerusalem, Jerusalem had its temple, its priesthood, its law, its ritual, its sacrifice and it could boast on 4,000 years of being the people of Jehovah God. They had the best and the most elaborate, the best located, and the most magnificent physical plant in town. They had it all. Their priesthood surpassed that of Roman Catholicism. They could trace their priesthood back to Aaron. Their ritual and their pageantry would've made the Episcopalians take a back seat. They were more organized than the Baptists, more reformed than the Presbyterians, more traditional than the Methodists. and more refined than the Lutherans. They were about legal concerning the law as the Church of Christ is concerning the New Testament. And they were about as independent as the Christian Church. They kept the Sabbath more holy than the Seventh Day Adventists did. And their worship would have made charismatics jealous. They sang Psalms, they chanted, they praised and prayed. They raised their hands and they clapped and they danced and they offered sacrifices and they burnt incense. About any practice you find in organized religion today, has its roots somewhere in the Old Testament Judaism. Yet the sad

thing about it all, it was absolutely worthless . . . Absolutely worthless.

Not that God established something that was of no value. The intent of God had been lost centuries before. And what was practiced as the Jewish religion in the day of Christ had no resemblance to the original form and purpose that God intended it have.

So, let me talk about the failure of organized religion. Three things: It could not free and cannot free the worshiper from sin. In the second place, worship becomes meaningless. And in the third place, it is not the will of God. He tells us very plainly that this organized religion of the Jews could not free the worshiper from sin. The law only had a shadow of good things to come and not the very substance of the form of things. He said it can never by the same sacrifices year by year, which they offer continually. This is something they do day after day, week after week, month after month, year after year. They do it continually, and it cannot make perfect those who draw near. Otherwise, would they not have ceased to have been offered? If it were of any value and could have made perfect the ones who were doing it and could have forgiven their sins, then, he says, they would've stopped it, because the worshipers, having been once cleansed, would no longer have a consciousness of sin.

He goes on to say, "Every priest stands daily ministering and offering time after time the same sacrifices which can never take away sin." It doesn't make any difference how much they worship through these sacrifices and offerings and this ritual. It cannot make any difference in their life as far as sin is concerned. They are worshipers! They are faithful in what they are doing. But it cannot take away sin. **And you must be free from sin in order to function in the kingdom as God would have you function.** That's basic. **If you are not free from the consciousness of sin, you cannot function in the kingdom of God.**

Romans 6 and chapter 6 and verse 18, Paul puts it very plainly. He said, "And having been freed from sin, you became slaves of righteousness. You are free from sin in order that you might become a slave from righteousness and there is no practicing of righteousness until you are free from sin." **If we're not free of a sin consciousness, as he calls it, a consciousness of sins, nothing you do is of any value.** Otherwise they would've ceased to have been offered because the worshipers having been once cleansed would no long have a consciousness of sin.

They would not be spending their time and their energy trying to be forgiven of their sins. They would know that they were forgiven, their sins would be forgiven and taken away, that burden would be lifted and they would get on with the work of God. The only thing that can do that of course, according to the Hebrew writer, is chapter 9, verse 14: "How much more shall the blood of Christ who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God."

The reason so many Christians today are not serving the living God as they ought to is they have not had their conscience cleansed from sin. Organized religion and ritual and worship and sacrifice and coming and going and doing is not going to cut it. It is through

the blood of Christ that we have this experience of having our sins forgiven and our conscience cleansed. It is only then that we can get on with the work of the kingdom. That's the whole point of the Book of Hebrews, from the beginning to the end . . . the writer is saying let's get on with it. As God told Moses in the wilderness: "You have been in this mountain too long." Realize who you are and what you have and what God wants you to do and begin doing it. And he makes it very plain in this 10th chapter what he's talking about. After saying what he says about the offering and the sacrifice that Christ made for the sins of his people, having perfected for all time those who were sanctified, he then quotes again from Jeremiah concerning the new covenant, and the outstanding thing of the new covenant, he says, is "their sins and their lawless deeds, I will remember no more." Then he says, "Where there is forgiveness of these things there is no longer any offering for sin." You have been forgiven. Now, he says, start acting like it. It means something to be forgiven.

In the second place, worship becomes meaningless. If there is no forgiveness of sins in what you do, then worship becomes meaningless. Every priest stands daily ministering and offering time after time the same sacrifices which can never take away sin. Sort of like going to church every Sunday and nothing happening. Attending church every Sunday and your life remaining defeated.

Isaiah, the first chapter, is a passage that has touched me deeply, because it speaks so loudly of this very subject. We'll not read it all, but he calls the heavens and the earth to listen in verse two, to pay attention to what he has to say because he says, "The Lord is speaking." So what he says is important and he invites the nation of Israel. In it, he says, "They are sick because they have forgotten God." He begins to describe their conditions. "The land is desolate, the cities are burned with fire, strangers come in and devour their fields. Desolation is everywhere. The daughter of Zion is like a shelter in a vineyard and a watchman in a cucumber field." And he said, "If the Lord of Host had not left a survivor, we would've been a Sodom and Gomorrah." That's quite a picture, quite a description of God's people.

God had to send them a prophet to tell them what was going on before their very eyes. They didn't even know it, couldn't even see it. So, he sent Isaiah to tell them. Then, beginning in verse 10 of this first chapter, he tells them why they are in such condition, verse 11: "What of the multitude of your sacrifices to me? I've had enough of your burnt offerings of ram, the cattle and blood of bulls and lambs and goats when you appear before me. You're trampling out my courts. Bring your worthless offerings no longer, your incense is an abomination to me. The new moon and the Sabbath and the calling of your assemblies I cannot endure. Iniquity and the solemn assembly, I hate." God says, "I hate your new moons and your Sabbaths and your calling of assemblies. They have become a burden to me. I'm weary of bearing. When you spread forth your hands in prayer, I will hide my eyes from you, and even though you multiply prayers, I will not listen because your hands are full of bloodshed."

Why was their land desolate? Why were enemies overrunning them? Why were they falling apart? Why have they forgotten God? Why were they in the condition they were in, impotent

and useless to God? They were too busy going to Sunday school and church. They were too busy offering sacrifices and burnt offerings and the blood of bulls and goats. They were too busy trampling His courts and raising their hands in prayer and keeping the Sabbath day holy and calling their solemn assemblies. They were too busy practicing their religion to be what God wanted them to be or to do the job that God wanted them to do. So their worship was meaningless.

Jesus warns us in the Sermon on the Mount about that. Chapter seven of Matthew: "Therefore," verse 24, "everyone who hears these words of mine and acts upon them, he's like a wise man who builds his house on the rock and when the storms of life begin to beat upon them, his house stands because it's built upon a rock. He has heard my word and he has acted upon it. "Everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act upon them, he's a fool. He's building his house upon the sand."

The one who attends church and hears and listens to sermons but do nothing about it, the ones who are faithful in Sunday school and church, and God bless them for being faithful, but if they're faithful in Sunday school and church but they don't put it to practice in their lives, Jesus said they are fools. And when the rains and the floods and the torments of life come, they will not stand, because what they're doing is useless.

The third thing, and perhaps most importantly, it is not the will of God. Now, God ordained all of these things, but He never ordained them to be practiced as they were being practiced. He says, "Therefore when he comes into the world," he says, "sacrifice and offerings thou has not desired." God instituted the sacrifices and the offerings. He told them how to do them and commanded them to do them. Everything we read in the first chapter of Isaiah God had given it to them in the beginning. But they had so traditionalized it and so changed it, it had lost its meaning entirely and so he says, "Sacrifice and offerings, I do not desire. A body thou hast prepared for me in whole burnt offerings and sacrifices for sins, I take no pleasure."

Can you imagine worshiping God and offering unto Him worship of which He takes no pleasure at all? "Then I said, behold I'd come in the roll of the book it is written of me, I have come to do they will, O God. And after saying sacrifices and offerings and whole burnt offerings and sacrifices for sins, thou has not desired, nor hast thou taken pleasure in them, which are offered according to the law." No doubt about it, we're scriptural. We're orthodox. Then he said, "Behold I have come to do thy will." **What God wants of His people is that they do His will. He doesn't care how much you attend church and how faithful you are to your organization. He doesn't care how much you worship and how you worship if you're not doing His will.** He says, all of that should lead you to do His will. **And we ask what is His will?** I think it could be summarized in three points and is laid out for us very clearly in this chapter. **His will is things that we are not able to do in legalism. Things which we are not able to do by ourselves. And things which we can do only if we avail ourselves of His provision.**

Now they're summarized for us, I think, in verses 22 through 24, three "heads of let us": **Let us draw near with a sincere heart and full assurance of faith. Let's draw near to God. Let's be in right relationship with God.** Verse 23: "Let us hold fast the confession of our hope." Strangely enough, he's talking about being in right relationship with the world. And verse 224: "Let us consider how to stimulate one another," be in right relationship with one another. And interestingly enough, he says, "Let us stimulate one another to love and good works" (good deeds).

Let's be in the right relationship with God. We're not going to say much about that this morning, because that's what the Hebrew epistle is all about. And that's what we've been preaching on for weeks, is that **our high priest has opened the way for us and we can come boldly into to God's presence. We are truly, as Paul says, "Sitting with Christ in heavenly places." We can draw near. We can live in his very presence. He lives in us and we in him. We have access to the throne. We have access to heaven. And God has given to our disposal all heaven itself. We couldn't ask for any more than what He has already provided. As Peter says, "He has given us all things that pertain to life and Godliness." Or as Paul puts it, "He has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly realm." It is ours! God can do no more for us than what he's already done for us. The problem is, we don't take advantage of it. We don't accept it. We don't draw near. We're not in the right relationship with God. That's what it boils down to.** So, we'll not say anything more about that.

Let's go on to the second one: Let us hold fast our hope. I said that speaks of being in right relationship with the world. How do we get that out of it? Because the world, according to the scriptures, for example in Ephesians chapter two and verse 12, the apostle describes the Ephesians while they were in the world, "Therefore remember that formerly you, the Gentiles in the flesh who were called uncircumcision by the so-called circumcision, which is formed in the flesh, made by human hands, remember that you were at that time separated or separate from Christ. You were excluded from the commonwealth of Israel. You were strangers of the covenant of Thomas, having no hope and without God in the world." You had no hope and you were without God in the world.

The world has no hope but the Hebrew writer says, We do! Now let us hold fast that hope in order that we may offer to the world an alternative. See, they have no hope. We have the hope. We know the worst thing in the world is to live without hope. Brings despair, emptiness. **But the Christian has hope. He knows that when he dies or when a loved one dies, that's not the end. There is a resurrection. There is going to be a new body. He knows there is more. He has hope. God says we are to offer that hope to the world. We have an alternative lifestyle. Instead of being like the world, they should be clamoring to be like us. I don't know how Christians get things so turned around. Seems like everything in God's Word, we just take it and we turn it and make it different than what God intended it to be.**

God never intended for Christians to be influenced by the world and become like them and let the world be the influencing factor in our life. He meant for us to be the salt and the light and for us to offer to the world an alternative lifestyle and they would be searching out from us because we have the answer.

Instead, we live just like they do. They set the pattern. They establish the criteria. We try to be like them. They're the Joneses and we're trying to keep up with them. And everything the world does, the church has to follow. We can never stand before the world and say, "Hey, listen. We have the answer. We have an alternative. This is the way it ought to be," because we're so busy trying to be like them and using them. They don't pay any attention to us. No wonder they don't. So not only are we out of relationship with God, we're out of relationship with the world. We're not in the right relationship that God wanted us to be.

Verse 24: "And let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good works." That's the will of God. Be in right relationship with one another, stimulate one another to love and, he says, good works. We've talked a little about this business of love, loving and accepting and forgiving a couple of Sundays ago. That's the point of it all. Let's just mention these good works. I was sort of struck by the Book of Titus when I started looking at good works. In the first chapter of Titus: "They professed to know God, but by their deeds, they deny Him, being detestable and disobedient and worthless for any good deed."

That's the way he's describing those who have come in and are false prophets and false teachers. He doesn't look so much at what they believe, but at what they do. They are "detestable and disobedient and they are worthless for any good deed." In verse seven: "In all things, show yourself to be an example of good deeds with purity and doctrine dignified." Verse 14, chapter two, Titus: "He gave Himself for us that he might redeem us from every lawless deed." That's what the Hebrew writer's been talking about: His sacrifice and his offering . . . Once and for all wants to forgive us of every lawless deed. But there's another side to it. "He gave himself also to purify for himself a people for his own possession." That sounds good. For God to possess us. But then he adds, "For his own possession, they are to be zealous of good works." Zealous of good works.

Verse one, chapter three: "Remind them to be subject to rulers, to authorities, to be obedient and to be ready for every good deed." He said, "I want to speak confidently, so that those who have believed in God may be careful to engage in good deeds. These things are good and profitable to man." Then he ends his book: "And let our people (let our church) learn to engage in good deeds." Isn't it interesting that you have to learn to do this? You're not going to do it automatically or naturally. You have to learn to engage in good deeds to meet the pressing needs that they may not be unfaithful. Second Timothy, chapter two and verse 21: "Therefore if a man cleanse himself from these things," and cleansing is important . . . Being forgiven is important. "He will be a vessel of honor. He will be sanctified, useful to the master, prepared for every good

work." Second Corinthians, chapter nine and verse eight, talking about our giving, "And God is able to make all grace abound to you that always having all sufficiency and everything you may have an abundance for every good work."

And the classic on works, I guess, is Ephesians chapter two and verse 10: "For we are His workmanship created in Christ Jesus for good works." God created you. He recreated you. He brought you forth. You were born again, born anew. You were created for good works which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them. He prepared beforehand. We talk about predestination and argue whether or not God has predestined anybody to heaven or to hell. argument is not heaven or hell. The argument is, the point is, God has prepared beforehand. He has predestined that we walk in good works. That's His plan and His purpose.

So let us hold fast the confession of our hope. Let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good works. **What he is saying is that He has called us together as His people, not only in order that we might be something in the world. We seem to find that hard enough to be what He wants us to be. He has also called us into the world to do something. And what He has called us to do is not to go to church every Sunday, as important as that is. A lot of people don't even do that. It's hard enough, I guess, to get us to Sunday school and church, but He hasn't called us to do that. He has called us, He said, to be salt and light in the world, to be something, to do something, to have an influence out there in the world. It doesn't do any good to come here every Sunday and listen to me preach and then go home and live like you want to live, and come back next Sunday and hear me preach again. It makes me feel good, but that's not the important thing God didn't say, "Make him feel good." He said, "Make me feel good." And the way you do that is to do His will out there in the world.**

Paul put it this way in writing to the Philippians. He said, "Prove yourselves to be blameless and innocent children of God, above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you appear as lights in the world, holding fast the word of life." God wants His people to live in a crooked and perverse world and to be an influence in that world. To be doing something to get the attention of the world. Our worship, be it ritual or sacrifice or whatever it is, our organized religion, our practicing faithfulness in church is to prepare us to do something. If it doesn't, it's worthless. We might as well stay home, go fishing, whatever we want to do. Most people do it anyway. We might as well join them. Because organized religion, ritual and offering and sacrifice is worthless unless it brings us to the place where God can use us for what He created us to be out there in the world.

Well, we're going to stand and sing our closing hymn. I think I announced one. 447, we'll stand as we sing that, please, both stanzas.

Audience:
(singing)