

Jesus Rejects the 31 Flavors View of Worship

Matthew 15:1-9
November 8, 2015
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In churches professing to be Christian today one may see such a variety of practices in worship that it may seem that the worship of our holy, exalted God is simply a matter of choosing the flavor of worship which one prefers and enjoys the most (just like going to 31 Flavors Ice Cream and picking out your favorite ice cream from all of those that are available). If you like rap music, or dramatic skits, or bands, or ornate buildings with crosses, images, and pictures of Christ, or the celebration of Jewish festival days, or organs, or traditional hymns, or contemporary praise songs, or choirs, or country western soloists, or a pastor that tells jokes and keeps the message to 15 minutes, whatever flavor of worship one likes from week to week, it can be found in professing Christian Churches today.

Now what a contrast that is to the one and only manner of worship of God found in Scripture that was authorized by God Himself. There were not many choices or brands from which to choose. There was God's appointed way of worship or man's innovative way of worship, and those who departed from God's appointed way of worship met with startling consequences: **Nadab and Abihu** (priests and sons of Aaron) were slain by the Lord when they offered strange fire that did not come from the altar of the Lord which God appointed; **Uzza** was struck dead for touching the Ark of the Covenant to keep it from toppling off the wagon that was carrying it—contrary to God's appointed way of worship; and **King Uzziah** was afflicted with leprosy for the rest of his life because he sought to offer incense to the Lord in the holy place of the temple—contrary to God's appointed way of worship). Now that is a God who takes His worship very seriously indeed.

Dear ones, the same God who appointed one way in which He was to be worshipped in Scripture despises that worship which He has not appointed in His Word. When we address the matter of worship, God not only commands us **WHO** we are to worship (which is found in the First Commandment: Exodus 20:3), but He also commands us **HOW** we are to worship Him (which is found in the Second Commandment: Exodus 20:4-6). What is condemned here in the Second Commandment by the Lord is not the mere making of a false god to worship, but rather any invention or innovation of man which man would offer to God as acceptable worship. Paul calls the innovative worship of man (which God has not appointed in Scripture) “will-worship” in Colossians 2:23 (i.e. worshipping God according to the will of man rather than according to the revealed will of God in Scripture). The Second Commandment is a moral commandment of perpetual obligation upon all people (like the other nine commandments) just as Jesus Himself also expounds (Matthew 5:17-20).

Dear ones, the Lord does not consider how He is to be worshipped a matter of preference, but rather a matter of divine appointment, so should we. Listen to the place that Calvin gives to the way (or mode) in which we worship the Lord:

If it be inquired, then, by what things chiefly the Christian religion has a standing existence amongst us, and maintains its truth, it will be found that the following two not only occupy the principal place, but comprehend under them all the other parts, and consequently the whole substance of Christianity: this is, a knowledge, first, of the mode in which God is duly worshipped; and, secondly, of the source from which salvation is to be obtained. When these are kept out of view, though we may glory in the name Christians, our profession is empty and vain...." (*The Necessity of Reforming the Church* [Presbyterian Heritage Publications, 1544, reprinted 1995], p. 15).

Dear ones, as we address today the issue of purity in worship, let us understand that we are not dealing with mere trifles of the faith. To the contrary, we are ultimately dealing with this question: Does God have the right and has He exercised the right to require of us worship that is

limited by His own revealed will in Scripture? The Lord Jesus as we shall see from our text this Lord's Day clearly affirms that God both has the right and has exercised the right to require the worship we offer unto Him. The main points from our text are these: (1) The Tradition of the Elders Upheld by the Pharisees (Matthew 15:1-2); (2) The Commandments of God Upheld by the Lord (Matthew 15:3-6); (3) The Place Where Man-Made Tradition Leads (Matthew 15:7-9).

I. **The Tradition of the Elders Upheld by the Pharisees (Matthew 15:1-2).**

A. After the Lord had miraculously come to the rescue of His disciples (in the last portion of Matthew chapter 14) as He walked upon the water and silenced the storm upon the Sea of Galilee, He crossed over again to the region of Galilee where He continued His ministry. As He did so, there came a delegation of Pharisees and scribes from Jerusalem. They came not to inquire sincerely of Him, nor to listen earnestly to Him, but rather they came to find fault so as to destroy Him (Matthew 12:14).

B. The Pharisees noted that the Disciples of Christ did not wash their hands before eating. This was not so much a matter of good hygiene, but rather this was an act of worship wherein they would ceremonially cleanse themselves from contact with anything that might defile them while outside their homes (whether from a woman on her monthly cycle, or a man with a running issue, or one with a secret leprosy, or one who had touched the corpse of a loved one, the carcass of a dead animal, or even a defiled Gentile).

1. Though God did prescribe a ritual of cleansing in the Old Testament in which **the priest** would sprinkle a person cleansed from leprosy, God did not prescribe a ritual of cleansing one's hands from

possible ceremonial defilement before eating as an act of worship (which is what the Pharisees required according to the tradition of the elders, Matthew 15:1-2). The tradition of the elders required that the hands be ritually cleansed of all possible defilement through possible contact with that which was unclean before eating (lest the unclean hands make the food also unclean).

2. This was the oral tradition of the elders that the Pharisees and scribes claimed was passed by word of mouth from Moses to Joshua, from Joshua to the faithful for generations until it was finally recorded by the Great Synagogue of Elders. Thus, the tradition of the elders was viewed as equally authoritative as God's commandments in Scripture. This is precisely what the Roman Catholic Church presently teaches as to the immaculate conception of Mary, the bodily assumption of Mary, the infallibility of the pope and other false doctrines and practices.

3. This is not to deny that God gave to his prophets and apostles words that were never recorded in Scripture (John 21:25; 2 Thessalonians 2:15). It is simply to affirm that once the apostles died, there was no authoritative means of judging claims to oral tradition except by the supreme authority of Scripture. In fact, even while the prophets and apostles lived, it was according to the Scripture that their words were to be judged (Acts 17:11).

4. Dear ones, this is the nature of man's innovation in worship—man invents some act of worship which the Lord is supposed to accept because it proceeds from a motive of sincerity. As important as sincerity is in our worship of the Lord, we cannot worship the Lord in faith unless our heart and acts of worship be found in His Word. For you see, dear ones, biblical faith is not exercised in our sincerity, but is exercised in the revealed will of God. Thus, worship that does not rest upon the authority of God's Word is not worship offered in **faith** to God; for without faith it is impossible to please God (Hebrews 11:6). The words of that notable reformer of the true Christian religion, John Knox, ring

ever so clear in this regard:

Now, if you will prove that your ceremonies proceed from faith, and do please God, you must prove that God in expressed words has commanded them; or else you shall never prove that they proceed from faith, nor yet that they please God; but they are sin, and do displease him, according to the words of the apostle, "Whatsoever is not of faith is sin" (Knox, *Works*, I:195,196).

5. The Lord Jesus here condemns all additions or subtractions of man as sacred acts of worship which He has not authorized in Scripture (whether in public worship or private worship). It is imposing man's ideas and thoughts into worship. It is will worship (man-centered worship).

6. I dare say that such sacred acts of worship imposed by the work of man's hands into the New Covenant Worship of God include: the use of uninspired hymns, musical instruments, non-congregational singing, skits, dancing, and sacred symbols as crosses not appointed in God's Word; as well as the countenancing of holy days or pictures of Christ (whether publicly or privately).

7. Dear ones, it is the subtle scheme of the Romish harlot to lead Protestants back into her fold by means of imposing in worship that which has man's authority rather than God's. It is happening before our very eyes (in the sanctioned use of man-written hymns, musical instruments, crosses, choirs, images of Christ, holy days etc.). May the Lord give us the courage and love for Christ and His people not only to flee all idolatry, but also to warn others to flee.

II. The Commandments of God Upheld by the Lord (Matthew 15:3-6).

A. The Lord took great exception to the tradition of the elders (or will-worship) used by the Pharisees and rather declared the only rule to regulate acts of worship were God's commandments as found in His written Word (Matthew 15:3). As applied to the worship of God this is known as the Regulative Principle of Worship.

1. The Regulative Principle of Worship for the New Covenant

believer may be summarized in this way: What God has not authorized for worship in the New Testament is forbidden. That is to say that the Old Testament ceremonies associated with the priesthood and the temple and the feast days of the Old Testament have been abolished with the death of Christ because they were shadows of Christ who was to come (Colossians 2:17; Hebrews 10:1). The moral principle that governs our worship has not changed (What God has not authorized for worship in Scripture is forbidden), even though the outward administration of worship has changed from the Old Testament to the New Testament (e.g. circumcision to baptism, or a seventh day Sabbath to a first day Sabbath). However, some of the Old Covenant ordinances have remained the same in the New Covenant (e.g. prayer, reading and expounding Scripture, benediction, and the use of psalms in public worship, cp. Ephesians 5:19). But such Old Covenant ordinances that continue into the New Covenant are expressly authorized in the New Testament. If there is silence in the New Covenant concerning a specific sacred act of worship (e.g. the celebration of religious days like Christmas, the use of musical instruments), the silence of God does not mean approval (that is the approach of the Church of Rome). The silence of God in the New Testament Scriptures means the disapproval of God. For, dear ones, we can only be certain of God's approval in worship by His Word, not by our feelings, our sincerity, or tradition.

2. Any other principle by which the public worship of God would seek to be regulated is a sin and error contrary to the moral law of God (in the Second Commandment). Any other principle by which man would regulate the worship of God (whether public or private) is utter presumption on man's part (which is contrary to faith). Presumption assumes God will be pleased with our innovation, whereas faith knows God will be pleased with our worship because He has appointed it in Scripture.

B. According to Christ from our text, if we dare to rob God, we shall also dare to rob our fellow man (even our parents of their honor).

1. Jesus cites the moral duty written in the Law of God that children have to their parents (Matthew 15:4).

2. However, the Pharisees had devised their own tradition in order to escape their duty to their parents by claiming that the money they have is already dedicated to God as a gift (Matthew 15:5).

Therefore, the Pharisees claimed they were free from supporting their aging parents in their needs and necessities. They claimed their obligation to God relieved them of their obligation to their parents.

3. In so doing, Jesus condemned the Pharisees (and all like them) by saying, “Thus have ye made the commandment of God of none effect by your tradition” (Matthew 15:6). The point that Jesus would drive home so forcibly is that the authoritative commandments of God are supreme—not our traditions, preferences, or pleasures. God’s right always rules over our supposed rights.

C. Dear ones, what will prevent us from breaking the last six commandments if we do not fear the Lord our God to be faithful in seeking to keep the first four commandments? Jesus is saying that if we do not honor God in worship supremely, we will not honor our fellow man, including parents as we ought (in covenants, faithfulness, telling the truth, stealing etc.).

1. You see, there is an unmistakable connection between our practices in worship and our practices in our family, business, and civil affairs. A looseness in worship will manifest itself in a looseness in our ethical application of God’s law in other areas of our life. If, however, we fear the Lord and love Him with all our heart as we approach Him in worship and offer Him in heart, speech, and conduct only what He has authorized, the same pattern will also manifest itself in every other area of life.

2. Because the Pharisees disregarded the Second Commandment, they also disregarded the Fifth Commandment. How you worship the one true living God will determine so much about you. What does your life say about how you worship the one true living God? Does your life in the home, in the church, at work make it clear to others that you seek to worship God as He has appointed, or that you worship God as you please? For as a man worships, so shall he live.

III. The Place Where Man-Made Tradition Leads (Matthew 15:7-9).

A. The worship of the Pharisees was hypocrisy (Matthew 15:7-8).

1. They were merely going through the outward motions of worship. They professed with their mouths to know and follow the Lord, but there was no genuine faith in the Lord or love for God. They were good actors in playing the part of worshipers of God, but they were really someone else in the heart.

2. How we must always be on guard that we do not fall into such pharisaical worship. It is foolish to pretend that we come to worship the living God if we are not doing so with the heart as well as with the body and voice (the Lord sees our thoughts and intents and He despises hypocrisy). Christ said in John 4 that true worshipers are those who worship God in Spirit and in truth (i.e. inward and outward conformity to God's Word). Dear ones, this is not a show, this is divine worship of the eternal God. Let us each week prepare our hearts then to glorify and to enjoy Him.

B. Moreover, the worship of the Pharisees was vain (Matthew 15:9).

1. It was a useless speaking into the wind. Why? Because their worship was based upon the mere commandments of men rather than upon the authoritative commandments of God. Our worship is

likewise vain and useless like that of the Pharisees if our faith is in the Westminster Confession of Faith or in the Solemn League and Covenant rather than in Jesus Christ and His revealed Word alone (**Isaiah 8:20**).

2. If you are trusting that you will be accepted before the Lord because you are a Covenanter or because you have been baptized, or have been approved to come to the Lord's Supper, your faith is in vain. For only Christ can make you acceptable before a holy God. The subordinate standards of the Church are helps to your faith in Christ and not the object of your faith. They are for your well-being in Christ, but not for your being in Christ.

C. Dear ones, to institute as a sacred act in worship what is not authorized by God is (as it were) an attempt to push God off of His throne and seat ourselves thereupon. When we think of it in that way, what audacity and what blasphemy is it to take such a bold and brazen step within the Church of Jesus Christ! This is nothing less than the spirit of antichrist (2 Thessalonians 2:4). In so doing, we ministers of Christ become the ministers of antichrist; for we cannot use the authority of Christ against the truth, but only for the truth (2 Corinthians 13:8).

1. Worship is to approach the Lord who sits upon a throne of grace and yet upon a throne of holiness. It is to be humbled before Him who has reached down in love and grace and has rescued through the redemption of Christ for sinners who deserve His wrath and curse forever but who trust not in themselves or their own righteousness, but trust only in the righteousness of Christ as their ground for justification before the tribunal of God's holiness. True worship is our first and foremost duty to God. It begins in the heart (as God commands), but it always extends to the outward forms He has appointed in His word (in spirit and in truth).

2. I close by exhorting you to take true worship seriously (in the joy of the Lord, yes, but also in the reverence of the Lord (which is so

lacking in churches today and in the hearts of professing Christians today). For, dear ones, you cannot take God seriously, if you do not take His worship seriously. And you cannot take His worship seriously if you do not prepare yourselves to come into His presence to worship Him, but rather rush in unprepared, not quieting your heart before the Lord. May the Lord not utter these sobering words about you and me, “In vain do they worship me.”

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