

Empty Rituals

by Chuck Smith

God desires a broken and contrite heart, and true righteousness shown in actions of love for others, not just ritualistic worship.

Duration: 34:00

Scripture: Psalm 51:1

Topics: "Traditions"

Description

In this sermon, Pastor Skip leads the congregation through the book of Zechariah, specifically focusing on chapters 5 through 8. The sermon begins by addressing the question of whether the people should continue fasting in the fifth month now that they have returned to the land. The prophet Zechariah responds by emphasizing that true righteousness is not found in rituals, but in actions of love and kindness towards others. The sermon concludes with a reminder to worship God in spirit and truth, rather than relying on empty rituals.

Transcript

Let's turn in our Bibles now to Psalm 51 for our scripture reading. I'll read the first, the unnumbered verses. Pastor Brian will lead the congregation as you read the even verses, and shall we stand as we read the 51st Psalm.

This Psalm was written by David after Nathan, the prophet, came to him and faced him with the sin of adultery with Bathsheba. And so, David, in response to understanding that God knew his guilt, offered this prayer. Have mercy upon me, O God, according to the lovingkindness, according to the multitude of thy tender mercies, blot out my transgression.

Wash me thoroughly from mine iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. For I acknowledge my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done this evil in thy sight, that thou mightest be justified when thou speakest, and be clear when thou judgest.

Behold, I was shapen in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me. Behold, thou desirest truth in the inward parts, and in the hidden part thou shalt make me to know wisdom. Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean.

Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. Make me to hear joy and gladness, that the bones which thou hast broken may rejoice. Hide thy face from my sins, and blot out all mine iniquities.

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from thy presence, and take not thy Holy Spirit from me. Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation, and uphold me with thy free spirit.

Then will I teach transgressors thy ways, and sinners shall be converted unto thee. Deliver me from blood guiltiness, O God, thou God of my salvation, and my tongue shall sing aloud of thy righteousness. O Lord, open thou my lips, and my mouth shall show forth thy praise.

For thou desirest not sacrifice, else would I give it. Thou delightest not in burnt offerings. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou will not despise.

Do good in thy good pleasure unto Zion. Build thou up the walls of Jerusalem, and then shalt thou be pleased with the sacrifices of righteousness, with the burnt offering and the whole burnt offering, and then shall they offer bullocks upon thine altar. Let's pray.

Father, as David recognized that he needed to get a right relationship with you once again, that you weren't interested in just the rituals that he was going through, but you were interested in his heart, that his heart was right with you. So, Lord, as you look at us today, we realize that your interest is in our hearts, the condition of our heart before you. The fact that we are here in a service, the fact that we sing the songs and we go through particular rituals, is meaningless, Lord, to you unless our heart is really in it.

And so, Lord, help us this day that our hearts might be right before you, that we might have a right relationship with you, that you will then receive our praises and the offering of our love unto you, through our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. You may be seated.

Moving through the Bible, we are almost through with the Old Testament. Just about three more weeks and we'll be entering into the New Testament. So, tonight, Zechariah 5 through 8. And we encourage you to read them over and join with us as Pastor Skip leads us through the Scriptures this week, Zechariah 5 through 8. This morning, we'd like to draw your attention to the seventh chapter of Zechariah.

We read that it came to pass in the fourth year of the reign of King Darius, that the word of the Lord came to Zechariah on the fourth day of the ninth month, when they had sent unto the house of God, Cherezer and these others, to pray before the Lord and to speak unto the priests, which were in the house of the Lord, and to the prophets. And they said, Should we weep in the fifth month, separating ourselves as we have done for these many years? Then the word of the Lord came unto Zechariah, saying, Speak to the people of the land and to the priests, saying, When you fasted and you mourned in the fifth and seventh month, even those seventy years, did you at all fast unto me, even to me? And when you did eat, when you did drink, did you not eat for yourselves and drink for yourselves? Should you not hear the words which the Lord hath cried by the former prophets when Jerusalem was inhabited, and in the prosperity and the cities whereof round about her when men inhabited the south and the plain? And so the Lord spoke to Zechariah and said, Execute true judgment, show mercy, compassions, every man to his brother. During the seventy years that the Jews were captives in Babylon, because Jerusalem was destroyed in the fifth month of the year, they set aside the fifth month of the year as a month of fasting.

It was showing their sorrow, their mourning over the loss of the city and of their being taken captives. And this fasting on the fifth month, now that they were back in the land, now that Jerusalem was being rebuilt, they were wondering, do we need to go on with the fasting in the fifth month? Must we continue this practice fasting in the fifth month? And so the Lord spoke to Zechariah and said to tell the people, when you fasted and mourned in the fifth and seventh month, even during those seventy years, did you fast unto me? It is interesting how that oftentimes when a ritual begins, it is very meaningful that we know why we are doing what we are doing. We're conscious of our mourning over the fact that Jerusalem has been destroyed.

But over a period of time, rituals can turn into just that. Rituals. They become meaningless.

They no longer really touch our hearts. They no longer move our spirits. But it's just a ritual that I go through.

It is interesting how that rituals are so often associated with our relationship with God. In the Jewish religion, it is full of rituals. They have certain days for fasting.

They have a certain ritual in the washing of your hands. And if you don't follow the ritual of washing your hands, they consider that your hands are still dirty. Though they may be clean, you didn't clean them according to the ritual.

In the ritual of washing of hands, you would have to hold your hands up, but your arms outstretched. And as your hands are held up, they pour the water over your fingers. And as it comes down, you rub your hands in washing.

Careful not to let the water get too far down your arms, lest they become unclean. Then when they have washed your hands that way, then you put your hands down. Again, they pour a certain amount of water on it as you rub your hands together, and the water drips down.

And that is the way you washed your hands. And if you didn't do it, if you didn't follow the ritual, they would accuse you of eating with unwashed hands. The prayers became a ritual.

They weren't from the heart. They were read out of a book. And thus, the prayers were just totally ritualistic.

Their observances of the feast, they also became a ritual to the people. Much of the worship in church today is just plain ritualistic. When we are to stand, when we are to kneel, the use of the prayer book, the repetition of the Our Fathers, it becomes totally meaningless because you're just saying by rote, and oftentimes just as fast as you can, so you can get through the 10 Our Fathers and the 5 Hail Marys.

And it's just something that you're not thinking it. It isn't something that you're really processing in your mind and in your heart, but it's just words that are spoken as a ritual to the Lord. The communion service can become a ritual.

It used to be when I was in the ministry and in the denomination that I was in, it was traditional to have the communion service at the end of the service on the first Sunday morning of the month. And it was just a ritual. And we just knew the first Sunday morning that following the service, we would have the communion service.

But oftentimes, people were thinking about the dinner in the oven at home. And it was to get through with the communion service as quickly as possible so that we can dismiss the people before it's too late. And it just became a ritual.

And that is why we changed from a Sunday morning following the service to a Wednesday night where we could really spend time and truly think of what we were doing and think of our Lord's death and sacrifice for us and our partaking of Him. To change it from just a ritual into something that was truly meaningful for us. Often rituals become a substitute for true worship.

Paul said concerning some, they had a form of godliness, but there was no power. And that is so true. We can go through forms, but there isn't any real power in them.

Isaiah spoke of people and God said, they draw near to me with their lips. They say the words, but their heart is far from me. And oftentimes as we are singing the choruses or singing our songs, we are singing the words, but we're not thinking the words.

Our heart isn't really in our singing because our thoughts are on other things. Though we know the words, singing the words, it's not something that's really coming from my heart. And so rituals can oftentimes take the place of actual worship of God.

Isaiah 58, he said, cry aloud, spare not, lift up your voice, show my people their transgression. Though they seek me daily and delight to know my ways, and they delight in approaching me, they say, why is it that we have fasted and God did not see it? We have afflicted our souls and God did not acknowledge it. And God responded, in the day that you fasted, you found pleasure and you required your servants to work.

Behold, you fast for strife and debate and to smite with a fist of wickedness. You shall not fast to make your voice to be heard on high. Is this the fast that I have chosen? A day for a man to afflict his soul and to bow down his head and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him.

They would go through this routine in their fasting, put sackcloth under them, bow down their heads and all. And God said, that isn't what I want. For these were just rituals.

God asked, do you call this a fast that is acceptable to the Lord? This is the fast that I have chosen. Loose the bands of wickedness, undo heavy burdens and let the oppressed go free. Deal your bread to the hungry and that you bring the poor that are cast out to your home.

And when you see the naked, that you clothe him. God said, those are the things that I'm really interested in. Those deeds of kindness that come from your heart, not just an outward observance of some ritual.

When David had sinned against the Lord, as we read in Psalm 51, he said that sacrifice and offering you do not desire, else I would give it. You do not delight in the burnt offerings, but the sacrifice that you want is a broken spirit, a broken and a contrite heart. David recognized that just a ritualistic sacrifice, sin offering, isn't what God really wanted.

He wanted David to be broken over his sin. He wanted his heart to be contrite before God for his sin. Rituals have really caused a lot of division in the church through the years.

There were really theological battles that were fought by the theologians over what was the proper position for prayer. There were those that said, you've got to be kneeling. Others said, no, you have to stand with your arms upraised.

While others even advocated sitting. As they were arguing over the proper position for prayer, some fellows said, well, if you would fall down a shaft, a narrow shaft head first, you better hope that God will hear you when you're standing on your head. And it really isn't the position of our body that really is of interest to God.

It's the position of my heart when I'm praying. That's what God is looking at, not the position of my body. When is a ritual right and when is a ritual wrong? A ritual is right when your heart is right.

God looks on the heart. He said, man looks on the outward appearances. God is looking at your heart.

If your heart is right, the ritual is right. A ritual is wrong when your heart is wrong. Because again, God looks at your heart.

Our emotions can be touched through rituals. We may even shed a tear and yet it may not be touching our spirit at all. It may not be creating a real change in our lives.

And that's what God is interested in, the transformed life. Even churches that disdain rituals may have their own form of ritual. You can go to church week after week and pretty much know what's coming next.

We start off with a song, we have a prayer, we have announcements, we have songs, we have a sermon, we have a prayer and we are dismissed. And it's pretty much a ritual. And it can be totally meaningless if your heart isn't in it and if it isn't touching your heart and creating change in your life.

What influence does the Sunday morning service have on your life during the week? That's what's important. It's not how spiritual you look while you're here, how fervently you pray or sing, but it's in the heart and how it affects your life. There's a real danger to ritual in that it can give a person a false sense of security.

I may feel that because I go to church, I sing the songs, I drop something in the offering, that everything is all right between God and me. But you can do these things and not really have a relationship with God. They can become meaningless.

Jesus spoke of two men who went into the temple to pray. One was a Pharisee and the other was a dishonest tax collector. The Pharisee stood and prayed, God, I thank you that I'm not as other men, an extortioner, unjust, and an adulterer, or even as this crooked tax collector, but I fast twice a week.

I give tithes of all that I possess. The tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift his eyes toward heaven. Jesus said, he just smote on his chest and he said, oh God, be merciful to me, a sinner.

Jesus said, I tell you, this man, the tax collector, went home to his house justified rather than the other. For everyone that exalts himself shall be abased. He that humbles himself shall be exalted.

The tax collector was boasting of the rituals that he kept, but Jesus acknowledged that his rituals did not justify him, but the heart that was contrite before God was justified. God is far more interested in his relationship with you than in the rituals that you perform. A girl was asked why she was never interested in getting married.

She said, well, I have a stove that smokes. I have a dog that growls around the house. I have a parrot that cusses and a cat that loafes all day and then goes out and prowls half the night.

Why do I need a husband? It's a thing of relationship. You see, you can be doing these things, but it doesn't constitute a real relationship. Rituals do not guarantee a good loving relationship with God.

It's not that rituals are wrong. Just don't trust in them thinking that they automatically bring you into a right relationship with God. You can go through the motions, but you can lack the emotion.

God is looking at your heart and what's in your heart. You remember when Jesus wrote to the church in Ephesus, he commended them for their works. They had all kinds of excellent works, but he said, I have this against you.

You've left your first love. You see, in the beginning, these works that they were doing were prompted by their love for the Lord. And they were excited and it was a thrill to be serving the Lord with these different works.

But in time, they became a ritual. They were doing the same thing. They were going through the same motions, but the emotion was gone.

You've left your first love. And so it is important, I think, for us to take a look at my worship of God. And we do worship in rituals.

But is the emotions there? Are the emotions there? Do I have that stirring of love for God as I sing? Do I think of the words and do I let the words become an expression of my own heart and my own thoughts towards God? Or am I just singing words that are not really thinking about what I'm singing? Rituals can never be a substitute for a right relationship with God. Paul the Apostle spoke of the importance of love and that what I do should be prompted and provoked by my love. He said, though I speak with the tongues of men or angels, and I have not love, it's just a meaningless noise, such as is made by striking a cymbal.

And though I have the gift of prophecy and I can understand all mysteries, and I have all knowledge, and though I have all faith so that I could remove mountains, and I have not love, I am nothing. And though I bestow all of my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, if I have not love, it profits me nothing. You see, if I possessed all of these things, I would be prone to present to God all of my works, my giftedness.

But God is not interested in my giftedness, He's interested in my heart and my love for Him, which is manifested in my love for you. And that's what God desires. He wants more than just ritualistic worship.

He wants the true fruit of righteousness, which is love, to be manifested in our lives. The prophet, in answer to these people who had come, they said, during the 70 years, every fifth month we fasted, do we have to continue to fast now that we're back in the land? And there in verse 9, the prophet said, thus says the Lord of hosts, execute true judgment, show mercy and love every man to his brother, oppress not the widow nor the fatherless, the stranger nor the poor, and let none of you imagine evil against his brother in your heart. Rather than the fasting and going through the ritual, this is what God said He wanted to see, the actions that showed the love and the consideration and the kindness for those that are in need.

True righteousness is never manifested in our observance of some ritual, but in our actions of love for each other. May we worship God in spirit and in truth. Father, we pray that you will help us to realize that

the rituals that we go through are meaningless if they don't express our heart of love for you, manifested in our love for each other.

Forgive us, Lord, for just going through the motions lacking the true emotion of love. And Father, help us that we might not depend upon some ritual, but may we, Lord, develop a true relationship with you in Jesus' name. Amen.

Let's stand. And you see, I just broke a ritual. I usually say, let's stand to our feet.

I said, let's stand, just so, you know, we won't get in a ritual here. But let's look at our hearts. As God looks at our hearts, my relationship with Him, what's it based upon? The fact that I'm here, the fact that I'm sitting in church, the fact that I sang some of the songs.

The Lord said, is your heart in it? Does that really express? You sang of your love for me. Is it really there? Or was it just words? Was it just a ritual? It's possible that over a period of time, things that began with real sincerity turn into just a form, formalism. And it happens so slowly, you don't notice it.

Now, this past week, I had surgery in my left eye. They removed a cataract. I didn't know what I was missing until surgery.

I can actually see your faces very clearly now. So you better be careful about nodding off and I'll know it now. But you see, this cataract developed so slowly, I didn't know what I was missing.

White is really white. Now, it's interesting. I can look at this songbook now and those pages are just white.

If I close my left eye, which I had the surgery on, the pages turn yellow because I still have a little bit of a cataract in my right eye. But amazing because it happens so gradually, you don't realize that it's happening. And that's the way it can be in our relationship with the Lord.

We sort of gradually drift away until you don't realize where you are, until your eyes are open. And once again, the clearness by which you can see things. And it's possible that you've drifted.

As in Hebrews, it said, let's take the more earnest heed to the things which we have heard, lest at any time we should drift away from them. And maybe you've drifted. Maybe you've become more of a ritualistic worshiper of God than really worshipping from your heart.

And it'd be a meaningful experience for you. The pastors are down here at the front and they're here to pray with you and to pray for you, whatever need you might have. And if it is sort of a cooling off of the ardor and the love that you once had for God, Jesus said to the Church of Ephesus, repent.

Go back and do your first works over. And that importance of returning again to that love that provoked the works in the first place. And so they're here to minister to you.

We would encourage you as we're dismissed, make your way forward. Come on down. Honest confession is good for the soul.

Just say, you know, I have drifted. And you know, my relationship with the close and as fervent as it once was. Pray for me.

I want to return to that close relationship with Him. And they'll be glad to pray for you. And you'll go away a much better person, worshipping God in spirit and in truth.

The Lord bless thee. The Lord bless thee. And keep thee.

And keep thee. The Lord make His face To shine upon thee And be gracious Unto thee And be gracious Unto thee The Lord lift up The Lord lift up His countenance His countenance Upon thee And give Thee peace

Audio: <https://sermonindex1.b-cdn.net/11/SID11022.mp3>
Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/chuck-smith/empty-rituals/>

Grow in Your Walk with Christ

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

www.sermonindex.net