

Spiritual Religion

by Ian Murray

True spiritual religion is a matter of the heart, characterized by a sense of the glory of the Holy Spirit, thirst for the word of God, and humility and contrition before God.

Duration: 44:05

Scripture: Numbers 22:18, Isaiah 66:3, Isaiah 66:5, Matthew 6:33, Romans 2:28

Topics: "Sincere Worship", "Biblical Obedience"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker emphasizes the importance of handling the word of God with sincerity and genuine love for scripture. He warns that simply preaching orthodox teachings does not guarantee salvation. The speaker references Numbers 22:18, where Balaam is unable to go beyond the word of the Lord, even if offered all the gold in his house. The sermon also highlights the need for ministers to prioritize their focus on the word of God and prayer, rather than allowing their energies to be scattered in various directions. The speaker mentions the conversion of Thomas Howard to the Roman Catholic Church and discusses his own work on the life of Dr. Lloyd Jones. The sermon concludes with a reference to Isaiah 66:1-2, where God questions the need for a physical house and emphasizes the importance of genuine worship and obedience.

Transcript

I just thank you, many of you who have a prayerful and spiritual interest in the work of the Banner of Truth Trust. We are conscious that the work that we seek to do is upheld and supported by Christians all around the world, and it is chiefly spiritual, prayerful interest that we need. Our needs are wonderfully supplied.

We are not appealing for help in that regard, but there is, as Cecil says, great opportunity in different parts of the world. But it is dependent upon the work of God's Spirit that a hunger for the truth is given, and I do believe in this regard that there is nothing more important than the work of prayer. And it's a great encouragement to know that here in Grand Rapids, and in many parts of the states, there are Christians who are prayerfully involved.

Perhaps I might say that, quite contrary to our expectations, when in 1957 the Banner of Truth Trust was started in Britain, it was intended as a non-profit-making publishing house to publish the fundamental doctrines of historic Christianity. Quite contrary to our intention, those books began to sell in the United States, because we knew that you already had a number of publishing houses. But the interest in the states has grown, and I suppose at the moment something like 38% of our publications are sold in the

states.

And when you bear in mind that we are not able to sell a number of our books in the states, I say our books, I mean books by Dr. Hendrickson and Dr. Lloyd-Jones and others that are published by other publishers in the states, which we sell around the world, but not here. And when you bear that in mind, when I say that we sell 38% of our books in the states, that's quite a high figure. It's a great pleasure to be at this conference again.

I've been away for six years. I've read eagerly the reports and heard from friends of things that have gone on here. As some of you know, we have been in Australia for three years, from 1981 to 1984.

I was serving a Presbyterian congregation in Sydney, and that was one factor which prevented me coming to these conferences. We were much encouraged in our time in Australia. We saw there and in Southeast Asia the power of Christian literature.

There are many young people, especially, who are reading, who have not perhaps ever been in large congregations. In fact, very few of them would have been where these truths have been preached, Chinese, Australians, New Zealanders and South Pacific islands. And in that part of the world, in all truth, one believes that there is a recovery of historic Christianity.

And this is going on, as you know, I trust, in different parts of the world, and we must lift up our hearts to God in thanksgiving. I've been in Britain most of the last 12 months, and then next month we expect, or I rather should say in July, to go back to Australia for a further period, but I expect to be concerned with the work of the Trust there, and especially finishing the second volume of The Life of Dr. Lloyd-Jones. It's been very difficult to make progress with that, although I am making progress, and I need time to finish it, and I trust I may be given that in this next year.

Some of my friends say, where can we find you? And if you write to any address on the Banner of Truth magazine, that will quickly find me. Now, let us turn then, my friends, to the Word of God, the reason why we are here, and the words that we find in the Prophet Isaiah, the 66th chapter, and verses 1 and 2. Isaiah 66, and verses 1 and 2. Thus saith the Lord, The heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. Where is the house that ye build unto me, and where is the place of my rest? For all those things have mine hand made, and all those things have been, saith the Lord.

But to this man will I look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit, and trembleth at my word. Particularly the words, to this man will I look, to him that trembleth at my word. We have been in this conference speaking and thinking of the work and the ministry of the Holy Spirit, and as I sought to prepare for this evening session, it seemed to me the subject that would be relevant would be the nature of spiritual religion.

What is that religion of which the Holy Spirit of God approves? What is that saving religion which He imparts? Now here, in Isaiah 66, at the beginning, is the commencement of the last prophecy in this book. And to rightly understand the chapter as it begins, I am sure that we need to bear in mind that these opening verses are addressed to two quite different groups of people. Both of them are spoken of in these first two verses.

The first group are rebuked and rejected by God. To them the question is addressed, where is the house that ye build unto me? And to this same group, God speaks at the end of the third verse, and He says,

they have chosen their own ways, their soul delighteth in their abominations. There is a second group who are also addressed.

And they are spoken of firstly in this second verse. They are those who are poor and of a contrite spirit and who tremble at God's word. The same group is then spoken of again in the fifth verse and addressed in verse five.

Hear the word of the Lord, ye that tremble at His word. Your brethren that hated you cast you out for my name's sake. Now we have to understand that while here we have two different and separate groups of people, they were not physically separate.

They were both Israel. They were both spoken of, or are spoken of here, as brethren. They were both involved in the worship of the temple.

They both heard the words of the prophet Isaiah. They shared together in the public ordinances of God. They are not physically or geographically separate, but spiritually separate.

In other words, what we have in verses one and two is a description of the difference between false external nominal religion and true spiritual saving religion. That is the distinction which is apparent in our text and which is brought before us here. One group are the children of God in name only.

The other group are the children of God in reality and in truth. So that you might say that in a certain sense these verses are a warning against false religion and they are a description of true spiritual religion. The characteristics of a believer.

Now of course to say that this is the subject here is to say and to remind ourselves at once that it is a subject that is found throughout the word of God. I think it would be true to say that there is no subject of more importance according to scripture than the subject of the difference between true and false religion. It is not something that is just touched upon occasionally in scripture, but it is an ever present subject.

And it is ever present in the scripture because this kind of thing is a danger which is ever present in the world. It was present in the world of Isaiah's day. It was present in the world of our Lord's day.

How often do we hear our Lord saying such words as take heed and beware of the leaven of the scribes and the Pharisees. How often does our Lord say to one or another of supposedly religious leaders ye do err not knowing the scriptures nor the power of God. It was false religion that was the great enemy of apostolic Christianity.

It attacked the churches not only from without but also as an angel of light from within. From among your own selves, says the Apostle Paul, shall men arise speaking perverse things to draw away disciples after themselves. The New Testament repeatedly and continually warns us to beware of false prophets, to try the spirits, to understand the necessity of discernment at all points in Christian life and history.

Now I believe we live at a time when that warning is greatly needed. I am sure that you have in this country as we certainly have in Europe and in Britain an emphasis which says that the great danger of this present hour is the danger of materialism and secularism and humanism and that those dangers are so imminent and so present that it becomes all Christians, whatever their profession be, to make common cause against the influences of sheer pagan materialism. But this is not a day when we should be attending to any differences or little attending to any differences among Christians but rather we should

understand that we need to face a common foe and if everybody of religious persuasion will only do that then we may begin to impress the world and make an impression upon governments and so on.

That is being said very commonly and of course there is an element of truth in it. But when we come to the point of saying that the greatest danger lies in that direction I think we have already departed from the warnings of the word of God. Only this week I was reading a statement by an evangelical leader who was saying that today Catholics are among the most loyal and virile brothers that evangelicals can find.

Well that is being said not once but in many places and in many different venues and the total impression that is being given is, as I say, that it is the world without which is our main concern. Now I do not believe that with our Bibles open that is true. I believe the scriptures teach us that unrighteousness and paganism are the result of ungodliness and ungodliness is the result of false religion.

The problem with our modern world is not the absence of religion it is the presence of false religion. It is false religion that has contributed to the materialism and the paganism of the English speaking world. It is true religion which lies at the foundation of all real righteousness and godliness.

This subject then is one of great importance at this time and indeed as I say at all times. Now notice with me what we are told here concerning the contrast between the possessors of true and false religion. The difference between the nominal and the real.

And I believe the first thing that we may notice in our text is this that nominal religion or false religion always puts its emphasis in the first place upon what men do, upon their actions, upon their activity. The people who are described in the first verse are those who are engaged in building a house for God. That is to say they were religiously employed in beautifying the temple, in adorning the temple, in building the temple.

And as verse 2 goes on to say and verse 3, they were equally engaged in religious sacrifices. They were killing oxen, they were sacrificing lambs, they were offering oblations. In other words they were religiously active in doing these things.

And these things and their activity lay at the center of their religion. Their disposition is summed up by the prophet Jeremiah in another place when speaking of the judgments of God upon his own professed people he found the reaction of those who were equally engaged in religion who said the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord are these. Now here God in Isaiah 66 1 speaks scornfully to these same people and he says where is the house that ye build unto me and where is the place of my rest? And he goes on to reject the worship that they offer in the third verse.

He says that their killing of oxen was like the sin of murder. He killeth an ox as if he slew a man that is in the sight of God. That so-called act of worship was an abomination to God.

And the sacrificial lamb that was offered was as worthless as the cutting of a dog's neck. It is God's rejection of what they were doing. Now of course God had appointed worship.

God had appointed a temple for the time of Israel's infancy to teach them not because God needed a temple because as God says here the heaven is his throne and the earth is his footstool the whole universe is filled with his majesty and power. But false religion emphasizes what men do. But true religion, says our text, makes its emphasis upon man's inner spirit upon his disposition, upon his attitude to God himself.

To this man will I look, to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit and that trembleth at my word. Real religion is a religion of those who are consciously poor and needy and empty and ignorant. Ignorant of God, conscious in contrition of heart of their great unworthiness and crying to God daily for help and grace.

And to this man will I look, to him that trembleth at my word. That is where real religion begins. It is heart religion.

It is a man's disposition in the presence of God himself. Now I need hardly remind you today that there are many influences contrary to that emphasis. There have been in some parts of the church for many years those who consciously or unconsciously belittle Christian doctrine and they do it supposedly in the interest of Christian action of doing good, of loving our neighbor, of stopping injustice, of building the kingdom of God.

And there are others who do not take that view but who nevertheless speak very largely as though Christianity is in the first instance concerned with matters of church growth and evangelism programs and teaching people this or that which they must do and which they can do. Now all these things have their place according to the word of God but none of them have first place. The first place lies in a different point altogether.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, says our Lord. Blessed are they that mourn. Blessed are they that hunger and thirst after righteousness.

And that is what this text is teaching. He that trembleth at my word. It is exactly the same distinction of course as our Lord makes when he describes to us the Pharisee and the Publican who went both to the temple to pray and the one speaks of what he did.

I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess. He was building the temple, he was engaged as he believed in activity for God and the other dareth not so much lift up his eyes to heaven but smote upon his breast and said God be merciful to me, a sinner. That is, says our Lord, saving religion.

That is the religion which the Holy Spirit imparts. That is why the saints of God as they have departed this life have not gone with any spirit of complacency, far less of self-congratulation but like John Wesley dying they have said here goes an unprofitable servant. Or like Thomas Hooker the great New England Puritan who when he was dying one of his friends said to him Sir, you are going to receive your reward.

No, says Hooker, I am going to receive mercy. That is Christianity. Poor, contrite spirit that trembles at my word.

But you notice there is something further here. False religion or nominal religion never gives supreme attention to the word of God. It assumes that it knows how God is to be served.

Or if it acknowledges in word the need for revelation it does not stand in awe and in trembling before the word of God. Nominal religion never speaks as Paul speaks when he went to Corinth and he says I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling. That is the voice of true Christianity.

That is not how nominal religion speaks. Nominal religion assumes that it knows how God is to be pleased and served and if it does not actually substitute human wisdom in the place of the word of God it never gives the scriptures and the word of God the first, the supreme place. It does not stand in awe before the

holy scriptures.

There is no harmony between the spirit of the nominal Christian and the word of God. He does not tremble at God's word. And that is God's charge here in the book of Isaiah.

Not only in this chapter. You understand of course that these people were not flippant, giddy worshippers as sometimes they be seen today. God says to them in Isaiah 29, Your fear toward me is taught by the precept of men.

They appeared to fear God. But what was offensive to God was that that appearance of fear was not the result of inward filial devotion to God. It was taught by the precept of men.

And therefore their spirits were out of harmony with God's word. In Isaiah 22, God says, In that day did the Lord God of hosts call for weeping and mourning and girding with sackcloth. But behold, behold, instead joy and gladness, slaying oxen and killing sheep, eating flesh and drinking wine, a people who did not tremble at the word of God.

And so the result as we know was that in the days of King Josiah, when the temple was to be refurbished and when debris was to be cleared out, there was found after years of apparent neglect, the book of the law. The book of the law lost to all real usefulness in the very church. False religion, nominal religion displaces the primacy of scripture.

And it must always be our first test in the judge of real religion to take the standard of scripture. I'm sure a number of you have read the story of Thomas Chalmers who for some seven years was a minister in the Church of Scotland. At the beginning of the last century a man of great ability began his ministry in the small parish of Kilmarney in Fifeshire.

He had many interests besides scripture. He was somewhat of a scientist, mathematician, taught in the University of St. Andrews, managed at the weekends to get something together for his people. And all this went on I say for seven years until he was converted and became a man of poor and contrite spirit.

The first thing that was noticed by his parishioners was his transformed attitude to the word of God. And that was not simply seen in the pulpit, but it was seen in his home. One of his old elders who frequently called said to him a little after his conversion, he said, Mr. Chalmers, I often used to call and visit you and would never find you reading the scriptures.

But now, he says, when I come I find you doing nothing else. To which Chalmers replied, all too little, John, all too little. And if one reads of any great period of revival and awakening and we ask what were the men doing who God put into positions of responsibility and leadership, men like Whitfield and Jonathan Edwards and many others, what were they doing? The answer is, they were very much alone.

They spent much time with the word of God and with prayer. And it was from out of that communion with God they came to preach in the way that transformed whole communities. Let me read you some words of Jonathan Edwards.

He says, I have many times had a sense of the glory of the third person of the Trinity in his office as a sanctifier, in his holy operations communicating divine light and life to the soul. God in the communications of his Holy Spirit has appeared as an infinite fountain of divine glory and sweetness being full and sufficient to fill and satisfy the soul. Then he adds, and I have sometimes an affecting sense of the

excellency of the word of God as a word of life, as the light of life, a sweet excellent life giving word.

And one more thing, he says, I have had a vastly greater sense of my own wickedness and the badness of my heart than ever I had before my conversion. Those things go together. The conscious glory of the Holy Spirit, thirst for the word of God and humility and contrition before God himself.

I say these are the great distinctions between true and false religion. True saving religion gives supreme regard to scripture. Now let us pass on quickly to say a few words about why trembling is the only proper attitude that is required of us in these words.

And the first answer from our text is because the scriptures are the word of the true and the living God. Thus saith the Lord, the heaven is my throne, the earth, this great earth in which we dwell is but the footstool of God. It is less than nothing and vanity, as Isaiah 40 says.

All nations before him are as nothing. And it is God, this God, who has made his word ours in the holy scriptures. The God against whom we have sinned and rebelled.

The God who from the beginning of time has given to fallen man communications of his mind and will. The subject of prophecy was before us this morning. The amazing truth that God gave to men his very word to speak to others.

Isaiah and these prophets were not volunteers. They were given the word that they were to speak. All flesh is grass and all the goodness thereof is the flower of the field.

The word of our God endureth forever. And in our Lord Jesus Christ we have that final word given to us. And I won't enlarge upon that wonderful and amazing truth that God's very words are given to us, but touch upon simply the fact that the author of scripture is indeed the God who rules the nations, who holds our breath in his hand.

And it is not therefore simply the hearing of scripture that men need, but it is the attention to scripture in the consciousness that the living God is here the author of scripture. And that is where the ministry and power of the Holy Spirit come in. It is as God attends his word that men are pierced in their heart and tremble.

The God who spoke through Noah is the God who sent the flood upon the earth after 120 years. The God is the God who smote Egypt with the death of their firstborn. The Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of Glory, is the one who could command the fishes of the sea, who could tell the disciples to throw in their nets here, and as they pull them out full and bursting, we read Simon Peter saying, Depart from me for I am a sinful man, O Lord.

For our Lord, when the woman, the paralyzed man I should say, was let down through the roof and who heals him at his word, there was great fear, says the gospel writer, great fear. Fear at the word of the Lord and fear of the consciousness that that word is indeed the word of the living God. And in this age in which we live, of course, men suppose that they do not tremble at scripture because of our advanced understanding and our superior wisdom, whereas the truth is the exact opposite.

But by reason of our pride and idolatry, we have been smitten with blindness so that the very glory of scripture is hidden from men. But the scripture that men may not sometimes hear is the scripture of the God who controls all nations, controls our economies, controls our energy problems, controls war and

peace, controls our individual lives, and God in his grace and power is able to bring us to attend to his holy word. And sometimes it may very well be the things in the world that we most dread, they may be the very means to bring us to heed the word of God.

You know what wonderful things have happened in China, for example, since 1950 when the church seemed to disappear, when persecution was rampant, when missionaries were banished, and when the veil is drawn aside more than twenty years later, all these events of history are seen to have been in the hand of God to bring people to attend to his holy word. We are to attend to scripture because it is the voice of God. But, and my last reason why this trembling is required of us, it is because, as verse 2 says, it is only to such as tremble at God's word that God will look.

That is to say, his favor, his blessing, his salvation is to those and to none other. Now, of course, that is not something commonly believed today. There are multitudes of people, alas, in the very church who suppose that our attitude to scripture is just one matter of opinion, one amongst others, who have no concept of what is said in the first psalm, that the alternative to meditating in the law of the Lord is to be among the ungodly, whom the chaff, who are driven away as the chaff.

That is the only alternative. We bow before scripture and we fear God, or we are as the chaff which the wind drives away. You know, this year, 1985, is reminiscent of great events in church history.

One event is the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in France, 1685, when the French church, the Protestant church, was suddenly plunged into persecution and almost every pastor was exiled or imprisoned, and suffering began which went on for many years. Or that same year in Scotland were called the Killing Times, because of the number of Christians that were put to death. And to refer to another time of persecution, in the English Reformation, when after the reign of King Edward, when it seemed the whole country had become Protestant, then suddenly there was a political reversal, and Mary Tudor, Roman Catholic, came to the throne, and almost overnight those who were willing to stand for the word of God seemed to disappear.

273 or more people were burned to death, some 13 ministers, but among those 13 ministers there was amazement where their brethren had gone. Where were all those who believed that it was dangerous and blasphemy to attend the Roman Catholic Mass? They seemed to have disappeared overnight, and what had made them disappear, you understand, was not any fresh light upon spiritual questions, but it appeared as though they had never trembled at the word of God. Trembling at the word of God is the mark of the true people of God.

Now, before I close, let me attempt to say a few words of application, and primarily to our brethren who are ministers here at this conference. I believe that we need to understand ourselves that handling the word of God, even the orthodox preaching of the word of God, is not in itself any indication of our own salvation. Something more is needed.

Our own heartfelt submission and love for Scripture, our own fear of God, is necessary to mark us out as God's people. Some of you follow McChain's readings in the Bible, and if you are doing that, you have been recently going through the book of Numbers. I was very moved again reading those words in Numbers chapter 22.

If Balak, let me quote Numbers 22.18, if Balak would give me his house full of silver and gold, I cannot go beyond the word of the Lord to do less or more. What a wonderful testimony. If Balak would give me all the

gold in his house, I can't go beyond the word of the Lord to do less or more.

It's orthodox, you see, isn't it? But it's the words of one who perished, the words of Balaam. It is not enough to assert the truth. It is actually being found, as Jesus says in Matthew 7, doing his words, fearing his words.

And therefore I believe as ministers of the gospel, having first sought to make our own calling and election sure, and not simply assuming that we are Christians, but making our own calling and election sure, then we need at all costs to see that we are not diverted from our true calling, which is handling the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. The great thing that Satan is concerned to do with regard to the Christian ministry is to divert men from that duty. And he has many, many ways of doing it.

Many ways. He may do it sometimes by flattery. That's what he did with Balaam.

Balak said, I will promote thee unto very great honour. Plenty of people have talked like that today. I will promote thee to very great honour, but only if you are careful about what you do and say in the church.

Flattery. Or persecution, which I've mentioned. What is the purpose of persecution? It is to divert the preaching of the word of God, to silence the truth.

But sometimes by our own sheer unwatchfulness, by our busyness, we are far from such men as Jonathan Edwards. We allow our energies to be dissipated into a hundred different directions, and instead of being like what is written in Acts chapter 6, we will give ourselves to the word of God and to prayer. We give ourselves to all these different things.

And it is no wonder then, that preaching has fallen upon sad times. I'm sure you've all read the various correspondence in different magazines about the conversion of Thomas Howard to the Roman Catholic Church. Christianity today gave some prominence to it.

I suppose it is a subject that was worthy of some prominence. And if you've read that you will have noticed that Thomas Howard said that one of the things that had influenced him so much was the sheer informality and flippancy and casualness of evangelical worship. That he longed for solemnity and awe and something different.

The tragedy of that of course is that that is not where true awe and wonder will be found. It is only found not with gorgeous apparel and liturgy and vestments and choir and all the rest, but it is found where the word of God is held in supreme reverence. And that awe and wonder which is indeed the great need of the church today is that which the Spirit of God Himself must impart and give to us.

And let me mention one other point before I pass to my conclusion. I think ministers too in guarding their time need to make sure they give little time to books written by men who evidently do not tremble at the word of God. I am not, you understand, saying that we confine our reading to men who tremble at God's word.

But I do believe we should give very little of our time to those who don't. And I think it is a great tragedy when men are supposedly trained for the ministry in the church of Christ and they are compelled to give great amounts of time to people who evidently do not fear God's word. That is a great tragedy.

When I was at university I was much helped by a very sad truth. I read the biography of H.E. Ryle who was the son of John Charles Ryle. John Charles Ryle is read today all over the world although he died in 1900.

He wrote biblical Christianity. I find all over the world people are reading Ryle. But his son is unheard of.

But his son in his own day was a more famous man. He was dean of Winchester and then a bishop in the Church of England. He became a great man and he wrote many books.

And the last book that he wrote was on the minor prophets. And you know by the time that he actually died the book hadn't been published and it was out of date. And he was put into the waste paper basket immediately after his death.

That's what unbelief does. It withers everything. It's useless.

But those who tremble at the word of God although in their own day they may be cast aside in generations to come the Lord is still honoring and blessing their word. I close then with a final word to all of us. If we are members of congregations and the Lord's people our great need is to be in prayer.

In prayer for our pastors. In prayer for ministers in different nations. In prayer for those who are training for the ministry.

Let it be understood that the truth of God always revives. It never finally is crushed. Sometimes in some parts of the earth it almost seems to have died out.

And then it rises with majesty and power. And I do believe that in so far as the truth is reviving in our own day it is the result of prayer and tears. It may often be of people who have died and gone before us.

And if we are to see a continuing recovery of the truth let us pray my friends. Pray for our ministers. And let ministers pray.

Penitential prayer. For how often our own hearts have not truly stood in awe before the God who we seek to serve and love. We pray for the Holy Spirit.

And we believe the word of Christ. He will give his spirit to them that ask. Let us go on asking until God opens the windows of heaven and pours out his spirit upon us.

May God bless his word to us.

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