

Broomfield



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Religious Pretense Exposed, Part 2

Revelation 2:2-4, “know thy works, and thy labour, and thy patience, and how thou canst not bear them which are evil: and thou hast tried them which say they are apostles, and are not, and hast found them liars: And hast borne, and hast patience, and for my name’s sake hast laboured, and hast not fainted. Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love.”

Quite frankly this is a shocking verse. When I think of a loveless, heartless Christianity I think of men and women living in sin, who don’t care about truth, compromising, indifferent, and lazy in their behavior. And yet this text indicates that religious pretense can co-exist with diligence, faithfulness, and purity in one’s walk with the Lord. Here we read that the Ephesians’ were fighting the good fight of faith. They were standing firm in the truth of God’s word. They didn’t compromise. And they labored night and day for fidelity all for the sake of the Lord!

Yet, evidently, the seeds of sham Christianity were sprouting. They were trying to impress God by their actions. The roots of religious pretense had taken root because Christ exhorts them to return to their first love.

From this I hope you see that the temptation is ever and always present for the child of God to stray in their walks with God- forfeiting the righteousness of Christ for broken cisterns that can hold no water.

Do you know when you are lapsing into Phariseeism? Do you know when your labors for Christ are just a show? Do you know when religious pretense has taken root in your life?

1 Samuel 4 answers these questions! We have already considered the catalyst when it comes to religious shows — trials and difficulties of life. Religious pretense eventually leads to accusations leveled against God.

It’s Manifestation

Now, we will consider how religious pretense will manifest itself — it brings a dependence upon religious symbols or activities.

1 Samuel 4:3, “And when the people were come into the camp, the elders of Israel said, Wherefore hath the LORD smitten us to day before the Philistines? **Let us fetch the ark of the**

covenant of the LORD out of Shiloh unto us, that, when it cometh among us, it may save us out of the hand of our enemies.”

On account of our creation and the relationship into which God entered with us in Genesis 2, we have an inbred passion to impress God by our works and to earn His favor.

Now, I have identified this as our “default program” as image bearers.

Secondly, the trials and difficulties of life do not create, rather they reveal and feed this default program. Accordingly when God ordains a bitter providence, by nature we typically appeal to prior conduct as the basis for God to relent AND/OR we endeavor to do something to try to force God to take the trial away.

The passage at which we are looking this morning is an example of the latter. Upon the defeat of God's people at the hands of the Philistines, notice the thought process of the elders of Israel — men who clearly related to God on the basis of their conduct.

1 Samuel 4:3, “And when the people were come into the camp, the elders of Israel said, Wherefore hath the LORD smitten us to day before the Philistines? [Because this was an accusation, they did not seek an answer. Instead they immediately went to the dreadful solution...] Let us fetch the ark of the covenant of the LORD out of Shiloh unto us, that, when it cometh among us, it may save us out of the hand of our enemies.”

On account of their default programming and upon their defeat, the elder's first thought was NOT repentance, faith, mourning, sadness, grieving, or relying upon God. Rather they sought to pull out the “big gun” of the Ark of the Covenant. They did this with the idea that the Ark would protect, deliver and force God's hand and make Him bless them. I love how Keil and Delitzsch put it:

“Instead of feeling remorse and seeking the help of the Lord their God by a sincere repentance and confession of their apostasy from Him, they resolved to fetch the ark of the covenant... with the delusive idea that God had so inseparably bound up His gracious presence in the midst of His people with this holy ark... that He would of necessity come with it into the camp and smite the foe.”¹

Oh such folly in the midst of a trial to appeal to a Religious Symbol rather than God. Think of it: The Ark of the Covenant essentially was just an acacia wood box approximately 4 ft. x 2 ft. x 2 ft.² which was overlaid with gold.³ Inside the Ark was two rocks, a clay jar, and a branch of a tree.⁴ On top of it two chunks of gold was shaped into the form of two angels.

Now if 4000 fighting men could not defeat the Philistines, what chance could there be for a box of wood?

However, lest we forget, the elders of Israel knew that God had sanctified this religious object making it holy. He had deigned to use this object as a means whereby He communed with His people. They thought that this certainly this must mean something. They believed that this box had some power and

¹ Keil and Delitzsch, Commentary on the Old Testament, Volume 2, pages 53-54

² The actual size given is 2 ½ cubits long by 1 ½ cubits wide and 1 ½ cubits high or approximately 3 ¾ feet long by 2 ¼ feet wide by 2 ¼ feet high.

³ Compare also Exodus 25:10

⁴ By Solomon's time only the two tablets of the law were left. Compare 1 Kings 8:9

that God would be compelled to respect this!

Brothers and sisters I hope you see that on account of the elders' thinking here, God's people were acting like pagans — trusting in a symbol fashioned by man rather than God! It is reminiscent of Isaiah 44:

Isaiah 44:16-17, “He burneth part thereof in the fire; with part thereof he eateth flesh; he roasteth roast, and is satisfied: yea, he warmeth himself, and saith, Aha, I am warm, I have seen the fire: And the residue thereof he maketh a god, even his graven image: he falleth down unto it, and worshippeth it, and prayeth unto it, and saith, Deliver me; for thou art my god.”

Is this not what Israel is doing here? Are they not relying upon a box to save them? Matthew Henry wrote this of the Israelites in our passage:

“And yet indeed they did but make an idol of the ark, and looked upon it to be as much an image of the God of Israel as those idols which the heathen worshipped were of their gods.”⁵

From this we see the first way in which religious pretense manifests itself the false worshipper trusts not in the Lord but in a religious activity or symbol. This is what they turn to when the heat is on.

Now, I realize that I am walking on somewhat hallowed ground, but imagine a Christian trapped in one of the towers on 9/11. He knows his life is in peril and so he begins praying, reciting Bible verses out loud and joining with others to form a make-shift worship service where they begin singing God's praises. Now he helps others down the stairs and he labors to comfort and encourage the fainthearted.

Now, few of us would criticize anyone for doing these things. But to think that any of these actions could enable the Christian to avoid the millions of tons of metal and concrete that soon would fall upon his head is ludicrous. Yet brothers and sisters that's how so many of us respond to the trials and difficulties of life — that's how so many respond to God!

Think of the false believer in the body of Christ. They think that a drop of water on the head when they were a baby will defend them from God's wrath. They believe that a chant while holding beads in the hand will assuage God's displeasure on account of sin. They even believe that quoting a Bible verse will make everything better. And you cannot find a greater fool than this!

Or think of the genuine child of God facing difficulty. Where does he flee? For many, the first impulse is to flee to religious activity. We become much more devout in our walks. Quiet times once again are held with a sense of urgency. We are quick to witness — not caring what other people think. We do these activities with the hope that these activities somehow will make God love us again and so relent! We do these things so that the tower in which we struggle won't collapse.

The Last Act of an Apostate

During seminary it was discovered that when alumni passed away, on rare occasions their widows would donate their libraries to the seminary. When books were given which the Seminary library didn't need, a sale would be advertised for the seminary community. At one of these sales, I acquired a copy of “Redemption Accomplished and Applied” that was donated NOT by a grieving widow but a man — a former student — who had apostatized! This book is one of the most valued possessions in my library.

⁵ Matthew Henry, Matthew Henry's Commentary in One Volume, page 287

It has become valuable to me because it portrays this man's struggle with God and what the sinner does with doubts. Based on my observation, the book has been read many times. Many pages have notes and counter notes stressing this or that truth about the cross work of Christ. As I have read his annotations, I have come to the realization that he wasn't reading this book for information, but rather to convince himself of the truth — as if reading would make everything O.K.

Now, when I read this man's notes, I see my own struggle with God and religion. When the bitter providence comes my way I typically do not fall into Christ's arms. Nor do I denounce the offering and sacrifices — as did David — knowing that God only wants a broken and contrite heart.⁶ Rather I study harder. I pray more fervently. I become more holy. I do these things hoping that perhaps God will look upon my devotion and relent or bless!

Family of God let me ask you what have you come to for salvation? A tree? A stone? Something that can be manipulated by man? Or have you come to the living, eternal Lord who has loved you with an everlasting love⁷? Have you come to the One that is working all things — even when we don't understand it — for His and our good⁸? Have you come to Christ who does not only do good, but IS good⁹? Are you trusting the One who upholds all things by the word of His power¹⁰? Have you come to Christ who beautifies the afflicted with salvation¹¹?

Consumer Christianity

Accordingly, let us beware of the manifestation of religious pretense in our lives. It will push one to rely upon religious activity in order to please a God who already is pleased with you! And yet, this isn't the only push. It also will transform God's people into consumers.

1 Samuel 4:3, “And when the people were come into the camp, the elders of Israel said, Wherefore hath the LORD smitten us to day before the Philistines? **Let us fetch the ark¹² of the covenant of the LORD out of Shiloh unto us, that, when it cometh among us, it may save us out of the hand of our enemies.**”

When we read this we ought to weep. Do you see how God's people here are trampling underfoot our Lord and Savior?

The purpose of the Ark of the Covenant was established before time began. In eternity past God deigned to enter into a love-relationship with man. God created us, placed us in a state of grace, and charged us with perfect obedience upon the pain of death if we should fall. Herein, He walked with us. He had fellowship with us. He was our God and we were His people.

And yet in time we rebelled. We cast off God's authority. And we chose to relate to Him on the basis of our own likes and inklings.

⁶ Compare Psalm 51:16-17

⁷ Compare Jeremiah 31:3

⁸ Compare Romans 8:28

⁹ Compare Psalm 34:8

¹⁰ Compare Hebrews 1:3

¹¹ Compare Psalm 149:4

¹² The word *ark* is masculine in Hebrew. This gives emphasis to it as the agent of deliverance. Compare Gordon in I & II Samuel, page 94

Now, God would have been just in destroying mankind; but He didn't. Instead as far back as Genesis 3:15, God promised to give His own Son to die as a substitute in our place on account of our rebellion. But at the time, God's people were infants. And so the Lord issued forth revelation to disciple and so rear His people unto adulthood in Christ.

The Ark of the Covenant

As part of this revelation, God gave us a box. In this ark He placed three very important articles: A copy of the Ten Commandments not broken — to picture that a relationship with God is based upon perfect obedience. Secondly, a jar of manna — to picture that a relationship with God involves feasting upon the bread of life, Jesus Christ. And thirdly, the rod of Aaron that budded- to picture that as Christ is the vine and we are the branches, life comes from death!

Lest there be any confusion, upon this box — The Ark of the Covenant — God placed what He called a mercy seat. It was upon this seat the blood of the sacrifice was sprinkled. And it also was on this seat that God manifested His Shekinah glory as He fellowshiped with His people. As such by virtue of this seat the Gospel was proclaimed as the Lord established the fact that righteousness, feasting upon Christ, and life all come by His mercy.

The Ark was a tangible symbol and vessel by which God unconditionally delivered His people from His own consuming wrath. It was a symbol that proclaimed peace and so fellowshiped with His people. And it was a symbol that God related to His people on the basis of grace!

Oh what a wonderful gift God's people enjoyed at this time in redemptive history. If they doubted God's grace, wondered about God's love, sinned a great sin, their well-being was in doubt, or the enemy was at the gate they needed only to look to the Ark of the Covenant and its mercy seat to be assured of God's never-ending love, commitment, and devotion. This was not because the Ark itself could save them. Rather it was a tangible reminder of the fact that God had delivered them from the power of His wrath by grace!

And yet somewhere along the way the people of God lost sight of this.¹³ As a religious symbol, the Ark of the Covenant held significance in their lives. No longer did they gaze upon it as a declaration of God's grace but they used it as a tool of power. They used it to get what they wanted. They were using it to vanquish the enemy in order to make them feel good about themselves and the people of God.

And so rather than utilizing the Ark of the Covenant as a means to commune with God, the Israelites transformed this tool of fellowship into a lucky charm by which to win a losing battle. It is clear that **THAT IS ALL THAT CHRIST MEANT TO THEM HERE!**

Oh, such unabashed consumerism. The elders didn't care about fellowship with God, the Ark, or God's worship. These elders despised God's offering.¹⁴ If it meant getting what they wanted, now they had use for the Ark of Covenant! They now longed for its presence in their lives! They welcomed it into their camp! They became religious!

¹³ In fact, notice that throughout 1 Samuel 4-6 the Ark is referenced by various names. Here the elders lay emphasis on the Ark of the COVENANT (1 Samuel 4:3) — which is significant. By stressing the “covenant,” the Elders are placing emphasis on the relationship that God entered into with them whereby He promised to protect them (Genesis 12:3). Accordingly, the Elders use of the ark was for the purpose of forcing God's hand to make Him protect them from the enemy.

¹⁴ Compare 1 Samuel 2:17

From this I hope you see the second way religious pretense manifests itself. It results in God's people becoming consumers of God. They seek to use the things of the Lord for their own selfish ends. Religious pretense always results in a consumerism on the part of the body of Christ!

What is your purpose in life? (And don't just mindlessly quote the catechism answer please.) Why has God ordained your existence? Why has He saved you?

Brothers and sisters you must believe that we and this world were fashioned and created. The Lord sent His Son to die on the cross in our place for God's good pleasure. Yet somehow and somewhere along the way we have missed this. Through the fall we have become self-pleasers such that we think that God exists for our purpose and good.

Thus, rather than utilize the things of the Lord as He intended, we use them for our own purpose and aim. And so we can be found seeking Christ for no other purpose than to please ourselves, further our aim, and help us further our goals!

Do you love Christ because He is beautiful? ****or**** Do you love Him because of what you get from Him?

I can think of few more shameful descriptions of a people than that of John. 6 where Christ said this:

John 6:26, "Jesus answered them and said, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Ye seek me, not because ye saw the miracles, but because ye did eat of the loaves, and were filled."

And this is true of many in the church today! We come for what we can get!

Listen! Christ is altogether beautiful! To live a thousand lifetimes and yet have nothing to show for it but a relationship with Christ is to be rich indeed! But to gain the world and forfeit your soul is to lose everything!

Let us beware of religious pretense. It will not only drive you to depend upon religious activity it will also make you a consumer of Christ. It will bring Christ down to a Santa Claus figure. It will mar His beauty. It will exalt you above God and His glory. It will drive a wedge between you and Christ.

Let us bow now before the cross. Let us confess this heinous sin. Let us long for the Savior, not to get, but simply to give Him love and adoration because He is altogether lovely and beautiful.

Reliance upon Symbols and Activities

And yet having said all of this, there is one more element here that is important to understand about religious pretense; it reliance upon religious symbols or activities is not without cause.

1 Samuel 4:4, "So the people sent to Shiloh, that they might bring from thence the ark of the covenant of the LORD of hosts, which dwelleth between the cherubims: and the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were there with the ark of the covenant of God."

At the outset, notice that the inclusion of Hophni and Phinehas is because in this battle both would die in fulfillment of the promise of God in 1 Samuel 2:34.

Having said that, notice the description of the ark as found in this verse: “that they might bring from thence the ark of the covenant of the LORD of hosts, which dwelleth between the cherubims” (1 Samuel 4:4b).

The emphasis here is on the majesty and the awe that ought to accompany any approach to this religious article. In fact, let me remind you of a couple of facts that are easy to miss upon a first reading of this passage.

God Presence Manifested

The presence of the Lord was manifested in the Ark. In Exodus 25:22 four hundred years prior to our text, we read that it was on the Ark of the Covenant, between the two cherubim that God manifested his Shekinah glory.¹⁵ In 1 Kings 8:10-11 — about 150 years after our passage¹⁶ — we read that when the ark entered into Solomon's temple, that the entire temple radiated on account of God's presence such that the priests couldn't enter into it, God's Shekinah glory still accompanied the ark. In fact, it would not be until the sixth century BC¹⁷ that we read of God's Shekinah glory leaving the Ark of the Covenant as it left the temple.

This means that at the time of our passage the glory of the Lord was manifested above the mercy seat between the Cherubim. That is why this text lays stress on majesty and awe when mentioning the ark.¹⁸ Thus we are not shocked to discover that in 1 Samuel 5 the Ark brought great suffering, death, and humiliation to the Philistines. — so great was the presence of the Lord which rested on the Ark.

In 1 Samuel 6:19 over 50,000 men lost their lives because some fools chose to look into the ark! C. H. Spurgeon said:

“There were many other things which [God] held holy: but this ark always stood in the most holy place, and it was rendered doubly sacred, because, between the outstretched wings of those cherubic figures that rested upon the mercy-seat, there was usually to be seen a bright light, called the Shekinah, which manifested that Jehovah, the God of Israel, who dwelt between the cherubims [sic], was there.”¹⁹

Thus we see that God's theophonic presence at this time would have been seen resting on the Ark! No wonder they were tempted to depend upon the Ark!

God's Deliverance Accompanied the Ark

Prior to this time, the deliverance of the Lord accompanied the Ark. This wasn't the first time that God's people sought and — in other places — secured victory in the presence of the ark of God. We read of numerous occasions where the Lord brought victory and success for His people as they carried the symbol of God's presence — the ark — into battle.²⁰

¹⁵ Compare also 2 Kings 19:15; Isaiah 37:16

¹⁶ The Temple referenced here was completed in 959 BC

¹⁷ Compare Ezekiel 10

¹⁸ Compare 1 Samuel 4:4

¹⁹ C. H. Spurgeon, *The New Park Street Pulpit*, Volume IV, Sabbath Morning, April 4, 1858, page 170

²⁰ Compare Numbers 10:33-35; 14:42; 44-45

From all of this we see that the elders in this passage had grounds to think that the ark housed the power of God. After all to gaze upon it was to gaze upon the glory of God! Yet this was a misunderstanding.

It never was the Ark that delivered God's people; it was the Lord. Though God's presence was with the Ark, it was there in order to signify that He had delivered them from His wrath! He was their strength!

Yet on account of a cold heart and darkened understanding, the people of God mistook the symbols of their religion for God Himself and so trusted in the symbol rather than the Lord.

From all of this we must see that battling against religious pretense in our lives does NOT mean doing away with religious symbols (such as baptism/the Lord's Supper) or activities. Neither does it mean down-playing these signs and seals. Rather it means keeping them in their proper place. We need a proper understanding that the substance belongs to God.

This is an important truth for us to maintain. To come to Christ does not mean that we must stand against baptism, the Lord's Supper, Bible reading and study, church attendance, prayer or organization. Rather, it means that we must never mistake any of these for the Lord or salvation.

- Let us “watch over our heart with all diligence” (Proverbs 4:23)!
- Let us never forget that, “Sin is crouching at the door; but [we] must master it” (Genesis 4:7).
- Let us flee the youthful lust of Religious Pretense (2 Timothy 2:22).
- Let us “hold fast our confession” (Hebrews 4:14).
- In and through it all, let us use the means that God has appointed — whether it be His word, the sacraments, trial, tragedy, etc — to grow more richly and deeply in love with the Savior!

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About the Preacher

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