

GREAT IN THE KINGDOM

There is in the western world a problem of atheism. Atheists hold that there is no God, and they seek, not only to live consistently with that belief, but to persuade others to believe, and to live, the same. There are in the western world, however, including in the United States of America, many Christians. Yet, there is a problem with many Christians in the United States, and that is the problem of hypocrisy. Every two years, Ligonier Ministries and Lifeway Research conduct a survey of the state of theology in the United States, and they identify Evangelical Christians, which they define as those who strongly agree that the Bible is the highest authority for what he believes; that it is very important for them personally to encourage non-Christians to trust Jesus Christ as their Savior; that Jesus Christ's death on the cross is the only sacrifice that could remove the penalty of their sins; and that only those who trust in Jesus Christ alone as their Savior receive God's free gift of eternal salvation. Last year, their survey found the following amongst Evangelicals: more than half believe that God accepts the worship of all religions, including Christianity, Judaism, and Islam; forty-three percent believe that Jesus was a great teacher, but he was not God; twenty-six percent believe that the Bible, like all sacred writings, contains helpful accounts of ancient myths but is not literally true; thirty-eight percent believe that religious belief is a matter of personal opinion, and is not about objective truth. Concerning ethics, thirty-seven percent believe that gender identity is a matter of choice; and twenty-eight percent believe that the Bible's condemnation of homosexual behavior doesn't apply today. Of course, their view of ethics follows their view of authority. Many Evangelicals have a great problem, if not with irrationality, then with hypocrisy. They profess faith in the God of the Bible, but they do not obey Him.

In the days of the divided monarchy, the people of God were in rebellion against the Lord more often than they were in submission to Him. The Lord sent to them many prophets to rebuke them for their sins, and to warn them of the consequences of continuing in them. The people would not repent, however. They believed they were acceptable to God because they performed the religious ceremonies that God required of them. Moreover, there were always false prophets who assured them that God would not judge them. To the southern kingdom of Judah, God sent Isaiah the prophet. In the opening of the Book of Isaiah, the prophet told the people of the Lord's anger toward them because of their sins. The people did not love God, and did not love each other. They oppressed each other, even abusing widows and orphans. Those who suffered injustice could not appeal to the civil authorities, because those authorities were corrupt, and cared nothing about justice. The people killed to get what they wanted. Although the people were wicked, they continued with the religious ceremonies God had commanded, and so they consoled themselves. Of their rituals, the prophet said:

Hear the word of the LORD, ye rulers of Sodom; give ear unto the law of our God, ye people of Gomorrah. To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices unto me? saith the LORD: I am full of the burnt offerings of rams, and the fat of fed beasts; and I delight not in the blood of bullocks, or of lambs, or of he goats. When ye come to appear before me, who hath required this at your hand, to tread my courts? Bring no more vain oblations; incense is an abomination unto me; the new moons and sabbaths, the calling of assemblies, I cannot away with; it is iniquity, even the solemn meeting. Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hateth: they are a trouble unto me; I am weary to bear them. And when ye spread forth your hands, I will hide mine eyes from you: yea, when ye make many prayers, I will not hear: your hands are full of blood. (Isaiah 1:10–15)

The prophet compares Judah to Sodom and Gomorrah, those wicked cities that God destroyed for their wickedness. God did order sacrifices to atone for sin, but, because the people brought their sacrifices with impenitent hearts, those sacrifices were worse than useless; they were an affront to God. The people offered blood sacrifices, but God rejected their sacrifices because the people had blood on their hands, the blood of their fellow man. God not only refused to receive their sacrifices, but He also refused to hear their prayers. The relationship between God and His people was broken because of the sins of the people. The prophet said further:

Wash you, make you clean; put away the evil of your doings from before mine eyes; cease to do evil; Learn to do well; seek judgment, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow. Come now, and let us reason together, saith the LORD: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool. If ye be willing and obedient, ye shall eat the good of the land: But if ye refuse and rebel, ye shall be devoured with the sword: for the mouth of the LORD hath spoken it. (Isaiah 1:16–20)

There was for the Israelites, a choice: repentance and forgiveness, or rebellion and destruction. If the people repented of their sins, and changed their ways; if they stopped oppressing each other, and worked for justice, then God would forgive their sins, and prosper them. If they continued in their sins, then God would not forgive them, but destroy them. The choice was theirs.

Later in the Book of Isaiah, God calls His prophet again to prophesy to the people. God tells Isaiah to cry out to the people, and not to hold back. Isaiah's prophesying is to be like the blast of a trumpet, arresting the attention of all the people. He is to expose to the eyes of the people all their sins, all their transgressions. God characterized the people this way: "Yet they seek me daily, and delight to know my ways, as a nation that did righteousness, and forsook not the ordinance of their God: they ask of me the ordinances of justice; they take delight in approaching to God." (Isaiah 58:2) The people carried on their religious lives like they were devout, daily seeking God and finding delight in His ways. They acted as a people that were righteous, and not as people that had forsaken God's law. They asked what God demanded of them, and they were delighted to meet His demands. They could not understand, then, why God did not look on them favorably, why He was displeased with them. They said, "Wherefore have we fasted, say they, and thou seest not? wherefore have we afflicted our soul, and thou takest no knowledge?" (Isaiah 58:3) They observed the ceremonial law, including the Day of Atonement. Concerning that day, the law of God states:

And this shall be a statute for ever unto you: that in the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month, ye shall afflict your souls, and do no work at all, whether it be one of your own country, or a stranger that sojourneth among you: For on that day shall the priest make an atonement for you, to cleanse you, that ye may be clean from all your sins before the LORD. It shall be a sabbath of rest unto you, and ye shall afflict your souls, by a statute for ever. (Leviticus 16:29–31)

The Lord commanded that in the seventh month of the Hebrew calendar, on the tenth day of that month, the people of the land, including any foreigners, should fast, and do no work. On that day the priest would make atonement for the people of God, and the people would rest from all their work, and fast. The people of Isaiah's time dutifully observed this rite, but their observance did not move the Lord; He was still angry with them. He was angry with them because theft did as they pleased; they indulged their sinful desires. Moreover, they

oppressed their laborers. On the Day of Atonement, they expected God to forgive the debt they owed to Him because of their sins, but they would not forgive their debtors. The day was to be one of rest, but they made it a day of strife and quarreling, and even violence. They observed the rituals God required, but they did not repent of their sins. They commended themselves to God by their observance of ceremonies, but they did not beg His forgiveness for their sins. They were like the later Pharisee who said, “God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican. I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess,” and not like the tax collector who beat his breast and said, “God be merciful to me a sinner.” (Luke 18:11–13) God forgives sinners, not because they perform rituals, but because they repent.

If the people of Isaiah’s time would be forgiven, if the Lord would hear their appeal, then had rightly to fast. The Lord said to His people:

Is it such a fast that I have chosen? a day for a man to afflict his soul? is it to bow down his head as a bulrush, and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him? wilt thou call this a fast, and an acceptable day to the LORD? Is not this the fast that I have chosen? to loose the bands of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, and to let the oppressed go free, and that ye break every yoke? Is it not to deal thy bread to the hungry, and that thou bring the poor that are cast out to thy house? when thou seest the naked, that thou cover him; and that thou hide not thyself from thine own flesh? (Isaiah 58:5–7)

God called the people to fast, it is true; but he called them to fast because of their sins. The Lord did not accept, in themselves, the abstaining from food, bowing, and sitting in sackcloth and ashes. He only accepted these rituals if the people performed them with penitent hearts, hearts sick of sin, hearts broken by sin. Moreover, people with penitent hearts, broken by sin, stop sinning and start doing right. They bear fruit in keeping with repentance. They stop oppressing people. They feed the hungry, shelter the homeless, and clothe the naked. They do not hide themselves from their countrymen, but rather seek to come to their aid.

The Lord told His people what would be the result of their repentance:

Then shall thy light break forth as the morning, and thine health shall spring forth speedily: and thy righteousness shall go before thee; the glory of the LORD shall be thy rereward. Then shalt thou call, and the LORD shall answer; thou shalt cry, and he shall say, Here I am. If thou take away from the midst of thee the yoke, the putting forth of the finger, and speaking vanity; And if thou draw out thy soul to the hungry, and satisfy the afflicted soul; then shall thy light rise in obscurity, and thy darkness be as the noonday: And the LORD shall guide thee continually, and satisfy thy soul in drought, and make fat thy bones: and thou shalt be like a watered garden, and like a spring of water, whose waters fail not. And they that shall be of thee shall build the old waste places: thou shalt raise up the foundations of many generations; and thou shalt be called, The repairer of the breach, The restorer of paths to dwell in. (Isaiah 58:8–12)

The people of God were moral darkness and moral sickness. They sinned, and hid themselves from those that had need of help. They were diseased with sin. If a man would repent of his sins, and do good, then he would be as the light of the sun at the break of day; he would not hide from his fellow man, but reveal himself to him. His moral sickness would be health. In the army of the Lord, a man’s righteousness would lead, and the Lord would be his rear guard, giving protection from the enemy. If a man would repent, then, and only then, would the Lord

hear his cries for help. If a man would remove from his fellow man the yoke of oppression, and if he would cease in contempt pointing his finger at him, and speaking evil of him, if he would have compassion on the hungry, and satiate those who had not eaten, then would his moral light rise out of darkness, and his moral darkness be replaced by good works that shine like the noonday sun. As it says in the book of Psalms, “Unto the upright there ariseth light in the darkness: he is gracious, and full of compassion, and righteous.” (Psalm 112:4) His moral sickness would give way to health. Then would the Lord be his constant guide and protector, his vanguard. He would provide spiritual sustenance. As the Lord led Israel in the wilderness, giving them food and water, so he sustains the soul of the righteous man that walks through the wilderness of this life. The Lord makes the desert of a righteous man’s life a flourishing garden, so that the man may water the lives of others. His family will rebuild the ruins, the effects of sin, and many generations after will receive the benefit. People shall know that man as the one who repaired the broken walls, and restored the streets for people to dwell in.

Jesus, in His Sermon on the Mount, said:

Ye are the salt of the earth: but if the salt have lost his savour, wherewith shall it be salted? it is thenceforth good for nothing, but to be cast out, and to be trodden under foot of men. Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on an hill cannot be hid. Neither do men light a candle, and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick; and it giveth light unto all that are in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven. (Matthew 5:13–16)

The people of God are the salt of the earth. Just as salt makes food palatable, so the people of God by their good works make the world liveable. If they fail to do good in the world, then what good are they? They are good for nothing. The people of God are the light of the world. Just as light illuminates darkness, so the people of God enlighten the sinful world. If a city is set on a hill, then it can be seen for miles. It is a beacon for the weary traveler. If a man lights a candle, he does not hide it under a basket; he puts it on a stand so that it will illuminate the house. So, Jesus said, His disciples ought to shine their light for all to see. They ought to do good works, not so that men might praise them, but that they might praise God who has enabled them to shine. Jesus later said, “I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life.” (John 8:12)

Jesus, in His sermon, further said:

Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil. For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled. Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I say unto you, That except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 5:17–20)

Jesus did not come to overthrow the law of God, or the writings of the prophets. This is to say, He did not come to overthrow the Scriptures. Moreover, Jesus said that anyone who does overthrow them, anyone who breaks the least commandment, and teaches others to do the same, will be least in the kingdom of heaven; but anyone who keeps the law, and teaches others to do the same, will be great in the kingdom. No, Jesus came not to overthrow the Scriptures, but to fulfill them. He is the one about whom the Scriptures teach. He is one that

fulfills the types of Scripture. He is the one that the sacrificial system typified. He is the one about whom the prophets prophesied. Jesus later said to Jews who did not believe in Him, “Search the scriptures; for in them ye think ye have eternal life: and they are they which testify of me.” (John 5:39) After Philip met Jesus, he told Nathaniel, “We have found him, of whom Moses in the law, and the prophets, did write, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.” (John 1:45) When Jesus walked with two disciples on the road to Emmaus, “beginning at Moses and all the prophets, he expounded unto them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself.” (Luke 24:27)

If anyone would enter Christ’s kingdom, then his righteousness must exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees. Of course, the scribes and Pharisees strictly observed the law of God. Yet, their observance was, like their forefathers in the time of Isaiah, formal and external, and not substantial and internal. It is the false piety of the scribes and Pharisees that Jesus warned about in the antitheses of His Sermon on the Mount. To do right by God, a man must have the right standard, the word of God; he must have the right motive, faith; and he must have the right goal, the glory of God. The scribes and Pharisees did not have the right standard, because they nullified the word of God for the sake of their traditions. (Matthew 15:6) They did not have the right motive, because they did not have faith in God, and in His Son, Jesus Christ. They did not have the right goal, because they did not do their works for the glory of God, and to receive praise from Him; they did them to receive praise from men, and so to glorify themselves.

Jesus fulfilled the Scriptures, and His death and resurrection made the ceremonial law obsolete. The moral law, however, based as it is on God’s unchanging character, can never be obsolete; it endures forever. If anyone says he believes in Jesus, then he must strive to keep all of God’s moral law, and he must do so for the glory of God. When he fails perfectly to keep God’s law, then he must repent of his sins, and beg God for mercy, which mercy God is sworn to give.

Let us understand that we must obey God’s law. Let us obey Him because we trust in Him, and in His Son. Let us obey Him for His glory.

Now unto the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only wise God, be honor and glory, for ever and ever.

Amen.