

REND YOUR HEARTS

God is not opposed to ceremony. God commanded Israel to observe a number of holy days. He created the world in six days, and He rested on the seventh. He commanded His covenant people, Israel, to arrange their days after this pattern. The Fourth Commandment is:

Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days shalt thou labour, and do all thy work: But the seventh day is the sabbath of the LORD thy God: in it thou shalt not do any work, thou, nor thy son, nor thy daughter, thy manservant, nor thy maidservant, nor thy cattle, nor thy stranger that is within thy gates: For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, and rested the seventh day: wherefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day, and hallowed it. (Exodus 20:8-11)

So, God's people worked for six days, and rested on the seventh. God commanded His people to observe other days: Passover, Unleavened Bread, Firstfruits, Feast of Weeks, Feast of Trumpets, the Day of Atonement, and the Feast of Booths. These holy days had religious significance, and they ordered the religious life of God's people. God required the people to observe them, and to fail to observe them was a sin. The Israelites added other holidays: the Feast of Purim, a commemoration of the defeat of Haman, chief minister of the king of Persia, who plotted to massacre the Jews; (Esther 9:18, 19) and the Feast of Dedication, a commemoration of the rededication of the temple in Jerusalem after it was desecrated by the Syrians.

Ceremony is not sinful. Ceremony performed without a right heart is. Because of man's sinful nature, he may in several ways sin in his observance of religious holidays. In respect of days commanded by God, he may sin by failing to observe them. He may simply ignore them. This is an act of rebellion. In the fifteenth chapter of the Book of Numbers, a distinction is drawn between intention sins, and unintentional sins. Immediately after, the Scriptures relate the time a man in Israel was caught working on the Sabbath Day. The Lord told Moses that the people must stone the man to death. The man's sin was intentional. It was high-handed, and so he deserved to die. A man may sin in his observance in another way. He may observe a holy day in a perfunctory manner. He may observe it indifferently. He may observe the day in letter, but not in spirit. Or, a man may perform an act or religious devotion for the purpose, not of honoring God, but of being honored by men. Worse, a man may observe the day, but do so with a bad heart. He may perform the ritual, but do with a hard and impenitent heart. He may observe the rite, but do so while hating God and man. God deplores such observance. Jesus, in His Sermon on the Mount, taught His disciples that, if they would be pleasing to God, then they must obey His commands, and do so with the right motive. If a man gives alms so that other men will praise him, then he will receive no praise from God. If he gives alms so that God will be pleased with him, then God will be pleased with him. If a man prays so that other men will praise him, then he will receive no praise from God. If he prays so that God will be pleased with him, then God will be pleased with him. If a man fasts so that other men will praise him, then he will receive no praise from God. If he fasts so that God will be pleased with him, then God will be pleased with him. God does not consider religious form to be trivial. He does, however, consider religious form without heart to be damnable.

In the days of the divided kingdom, when Israel were in high rebellion against the Lord, Isaiah the prophet called them Sodom and Gomorrah, and told them God's word to them:

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 1:11-15)

The religious devotion of the Israelites was merely formal; it had no matter. The Lord through His prophets called upon the people to worship Him, not with form only, but also with heart. Through the prophet Joel, He told them:

Therefore also now, saith the LORD, turn ye even to me with all your heart, and with fasting, and with weeping, and with mourning: And rend your heart, and not your garments, and turn unto the LORD your God: for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repenteth him of the evil. Who knoweth if he will return and repent, and leave a blessing behind him; even a meat offering and a drink offering unto the LORD your God? (Joel 2:12-14)

A man may tear his clothes as a sign of his grief and repentance. If his heart is not also broken, then he has no forgiveness; he has nothing but a torn garment.

All men are sinners. Because of the sin of the first man, Adam, every man comes into the world both sinful and guilty. It is the nature man after Adam to sin, and he cannot change his nature. Sadly, in this life, sin is for every person inevitable. What is more, the sinner cannot in this life atone for his sins; so, he must atone for them forever in the next. God is righteous, and detests men's sins; yet, He is also merciful, and ready to forgive them that repent. When the Lord revealed His glory to Moses, He said:

The LORD, The LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, Keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, and that will by no means clear the guilty; visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, and upon the children's children, unto the third and to the fourth generation. (Exodus 34:6, 7)

If a man would have forgiveness of sins, then he must repent of them. If he repents of his sins, then he will bear fruit in keeping with repentance. So, if he has done wrong, then he will regret them; he will grieve over them. If he grieves over them, then he will desire to make amends with God and with man. Isaiah the prophet said:

Wherefore have we fasted, say they, and thou seest not? wherefore have we afflicted our soul, and thou takest no knowledge? Behold, in the day of your fast ye find pleasure, and exact all your labours. Behold, ye fast for strife and debate, and to smite with the fist of wickedness: ye shall not fast as ye do this day, to make your voice to be heard on high. 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? 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.” (Isaiah 58:3-10)

A man may fast, but if he ignores a man who is hungry, not by choice, but because he is poor, then that man’s fasting does not please God. If a man covers himself with sackcloth and ashes, but does not cover the man who wears no clothes, not by choice, but because he is poor, then that man’s sackcloth and ashes do not please God. Saint James wrote, “Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world.” (James 1:27)

The people of God are no longer bound to observe the holidays of the law of Moses. Those holidays were types that have been fulfilled in Christ. Saint Paul wrote to the Colossians, “Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holyday, or of the new moon, or of the sabbath days: Which are a shadow of things to come; but the body is of Christ.” (Colossians 2:16, 17) Nevertheless, the church has seen fit to create certain holidays, and to order time by them. This, in a manner of speaking, sanctifies time. Moreover, it is an aid to man’s devotion. So, the church has organized the Christian Year, also known as the liturgical year, around the two great events of christian history: the Incarnation, and the Resurrection. The Christian Year begins with the season of Advent. This is the season that leads to Christmas, the joyful celebration of the Incarnation. It is a penitential season because, during that time, Christians, anticipating the celebration of the first Advent of Christ to atone for the sins of His people, contemplate His Second Advent in which He will judge the living and the dead. They give special consideration to their sins, remembering that they must one day give an account of themselves. Saint Peter wrote that men “shall give account to him that is ready to judge the quick and the dead.” (1 Peter 4:5) Saint Paul wrote, “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ; that every one may receive the things done in his body, according to that he hath done, whether it be good or bad.” (2 Corinthians 5:10) After the season of Advent is the season of Lent. This is the season that leads to the joyful celebration of the Resurrection. It is a penitential season because, during that time, Christians, anticipating the celebration of Christ’s Resurrection, contemplate the reason for His suffering death. They give special consideration to their sins, remembering that it was because of their sins that Jesus died. The season of Lent is forty days, following the example of Jesus fasting for forty days in the wilderness. The forty days of Lent do not include Sundays, because, as Jesus rose from the dead on a Sunday, Sunday is always a feast day. As Jesus fasted for forty days, Christians in the season of Lent practice fasting and abstinence.

Ash Wednesday begins the season of Lent. Many churches hold a special service on Ash Wednesday, a service which includes the Imposition of Ashes, a ritual in which the minister imposes ashes on the foreheads of the people. Ashes, of course, symbolize man’s beginning and end in this life. Just as the first man was made from the dust of the earth, so every man returns to dust after he dies. Ashes, by extension, are a symbol of repentance. Daniel the prophet prayed, “And I set my face unto the Lord God, to seek by prayer and supplications, with fasting, and sackcloth, and ashes.” (Daniel 9:3) The ashes are imposed on a man’s forehead as a symbol of remembrance of God’s law, and his sin. In the days of the divided kingdom of Israel, when many worshiped idols, God sent six men to kill the idolaters. He would spare faithful men, and those men

would be identified by a mark on their foreheads. According to Ezkiel the prophet, God said to one of his avengers, “Go through the midst of the city, through the midst of Jerusalem, and set a mark upon the foreheads of the men that sigh and that cry for all the abominations that be done in the midst thereof.” (Ezekiel 9:4) To the others God said, Go ye after him through the city, and smite: let not your eye spare, neither have ye pity.” (Ezekiel 9:5) The Imposition of Ashes in the Ash Wednesday service is intended to remind the Christian of his sin and his mortality, and that, if he would have eternal life, then he must repent of his sins.

Concerning a religious holiday, not commanded by God, but created by man, it is no sin in itself. Jesus faithfully observed the days commanded by God, but He also, it seems, observed the others. Saint John records that Jesus went up to the temple during the Feast of Dedication. (John 10:22, 23) A religious observance is wrong, not if it is created by man, but if it is contrary to the Word of God. So, Jesus told the Jews concerning one of their religious traditions, “Thus have ye made the commandment of God of none effect by your tradition.” (Matthew 15:6)

Just as the Israelites often failed properly to observe their holy days, so Christians may also fail properly to observe theirs. They may perform them in an indifferent way, without due consideration of their sins, or of the meaning of the ceremony. Or, they may perform them with hard and impenitent hearts. Or, they may perform them to be seen by men as pious, and so receive their praise. If a Christian observes a ceremony in this way, then his observance is of no avail. Worse, it is an offense to God. So, the Christian, if he observes such ceremonies, must do so with a right understanding, and with a right heart. He must confess his sins, and repent of them, and, repenting of them, make things right. In this way, a man stands righteous before God.

Let us repent of our sins. Let us perform our devotion to God with hearts that are true. Let us bear fruit in keeping with repentance.

Now unto Him that is able to keep you from falling, and to present you faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy; to the only wise God our Savior, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and ever. Amen