

(How to Get Out of a Religious Rut): Rote, Rut, and Rot!

by A.W. Tozer

The greatest enemy of the Church is the dictatorship of the routine, which leads to spiritual stagnation and non-expectation.

Duration: 34:40

Scripture: Genesis 12:1-3, Deuteronomy 1:5-8, Deuteronomy 30:19-20, Joshua 1:9, Matthew 22:37-39, Matthew 28:19-20, John 17:20-21

Topics: "Religious Rut"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher emphasizes the need to break free from spiritual stagnation and move forward in our relationship with God. He acknowledges that people often prefer specifics over generalities, and promises to provide practical steps to become a better church and individuals. The preacher highlights the various blessings and promises that God has for His people, including victorious living, joyous living, holy living, and a deep knowledge of the triune God. He warns against falling into the rut of repetitive and meaningless worship, and urges the congregation to seek a genuine and transformative encounter with God.

Transcript

Now, in the 5th, or in the Book of Deuteronomy, the 5th Book of Moses it's called here, Deuteronomy, the 1st chapter, verse 5, verses 5 to 8. On this side, Jordan, in the land of Moab began Moses to declare this law, saying, The Lord our God spake unto us in Horeb, saying, Ye have dwelt long enough in this mount. Turn you, and take your journey, and go to the mount of the Amorites, and unto all the places nigh thereunto, in the plain, in the hill, in the vale, in the south, by the seaside, to the land of the Canaanites, and unto Lebanon, and unto the great river Euphrates. Behold, I have set the land before you.

Go in and possess the land which the Lord sware unto your fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to give unto them, and to their seed after them. Now, Israel had just come out of Egypt some years before, a relatively short time before, thought of in the long sweep of history, and they had been wandering about. Now the Holy Spirit says to them through Moses, Ye have dwelt long enough in this mount, get you up.

That leads me to ask a question, and that is, what is Israel's greatest enemy? You know that in that great desert, that waste howling wilderness with the wild beasts howling at night and the sun beating down

pitilessly by day, there were enemies. Then there were the Edomites, and there were the giants tall that towered up to heaven. There was the desert sand, hot and barren and hostile to the feet of those who walked upon it.

There was lack of water and many other enemies. But who or what was Israel's greatest enemy? I believe that Moses touched it here that the greatest enemy of Israel was the dictatorship of the customary. That is, Israel had gotten used to walking around in circles, and she was quite content to walk around in circles or to stay by a mountain for a while, as she did here.

That is, it's the psychology of the usual. And God said to Israel, Now here, ye have been here long enough, ye have been at this mountain long enough. Now, by this mountain to you and me, we see this as a spiritual experience or a spiritual state of affairs.

You have been here long enough, turn you and take your journey. Where, God? Where shall we go, God? Why, God says, Go to the Mount and unto all the places nigh thereunto. And go into the plain, and into the hills, and into the vale, and into the south, and by the seaside, and to the land of the Canaanites, and unto Lebanon and the great river Euphrates.

Behold, I have set the land before you. Go in and possess the land which the Lord swore unto your fathers Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to give unto them unto their seed. The problem with Israel was that they had given up getting the land.

They were satisfied to go about in circles or to stay camped in a nice, comfortable place under the brow of a mountain where there was a little shade by day. And they had gotten the psychology of the Rupun. And this was positively their greatest enemy, because it kept them where they were, it prevented them from getting the riches that God had for them, it froze them and fixed them in their present state, and this was their worst enemy.

If the Edomites had come after them, they could have fought the Edomites down to the death, and somebody would have won, and they would have gotten somewhere, and they wouldn't have been there sitting, twiddling their thumbs, waiting around for the customary to keep on being customary. But there wasn't anything like that happening. They were just sitting about sort of waiting, and God said, You've dwelt here long enough, get ye up and get ye going.

Now, I want to ask a question of you about this Church and about the Church generally. Who is our worst enemy? Right here is where a lot of unreality and unconscious hypocrisy enters. The Churches are ready to say, Well, the liberals are our enemies.

Now, I needn't tell you that I am not speaking in favor of liberal theology or liberal Churches, but I do not like to make a hypocrite out of myself by saying that liberals are our problem. Brother, you have no problem with liberals here in this Church. What problem have you got with liberals? Nobody gets up in this pulpit or anywhere in the Sunday school or in the prayer meetings or in the women's groups, nobody gets up and says, The first five books of Moses are a myth, the story of the creation is simply religious mythology.

Nobody gets up and says that Joshua didn't make the sun stand still, and nobody gets up and says Christ didn't walk on the water, that he didn't rise from the dead, that he wasn't the Son of God, and that he isn't coming back again, and that the scriptures cannot be trusted because they are a myth. Nobody gets up

and says that here. You have no trouble with liberalism at all, so let's not hide behind liberalism and say the trouble with the Church of Christianity is liberals.

No, let the liberals go their way. As I have said many times, I don't waste any powder and shot on a dead lion. Let them go their way.

And we'll go ours because we believe that we are evangelical Christians trying, trying the least to hold on to the truth which was given to us and is the faith of our fathers. So the liberals are not our problem. We have no problem with the government.

Anybody can do anything he wants to do. We could hold prayer meetings all night here if we want to, and the Canadian government would never bother us. They're not against this.

They might raise an eyebrow and wonder what had happened to us, but they'd go their way looking for votes. They wouldn't care. They don't mind what we do and don't care what we do.

There's no secret police going to come in here and breathe down our necks. Nobody. Nobody is going to say, well, now you've got to close this up, we have to have this to teach you Nazism or Communism.

Nobody is doing that. You're living in a free land here in Canada, and you ought to thank God every minute of your life that you're living in a free land. So let's be honest and admit what our trouble is.

I believe that our greatest enemy and the greatest enemy of this Church is the dictatorship of the routine. It is when the routine becomes a lord in the life. Things get organized and conditions are accepted as normal, and anyone can predict next Sunday's service, next Sunday's doings.

Anybody can predict it. This, to me, is one of the deadliest things in the Church that we can predict, what's going to happen. What's going to happen three weeks from today? Everybody can say, well, Brother McNally will lead the singing and so-and-so will take up the offering and such-and-such will probably be back at the organ and piano, and Brother Tozer will preach probably on Hebrews.

I've been at that now about a year. And they'll say, well, that's what will happen here. Whenever we're to a place where we can be predicted and we don't expect anything from God that's unusual at all, but we can foretell what will be, then we know that we have reached the place where we're in a rut, where the routine dictates.

And we can tell not only what will be next Sunday, but what will be next month, and if things don't get better, what will be next year. We can reach a place where what has been determines what is, and what is determines what will be. Now, that would be perfectly all right for a cemetery, perfectly all right and proper for a cemetery.

Nobody expects anybody in a cemetery to do anything except to be entirely, to conform. The greatest bunch of conformists in the world sleep this evening out in Mount Pleasant. They've never bothered anybody from the day they laid them away with tears and covered them up.

They lie there asleep. It's perfectly all right. You can predict what is there, except for not being able to predict that margin of who will be laid in there next.

You can predict what everybody will do in the cemetery, even the live people you can predict. They'll cut the grass and trim the flowers and sweep up the walks and look after it and keep it trimmed up. But

everybody has accepted the routine.

I don't expect anything other of our friends who sleep waiting the resurrection of the just, or of the unjust for that matter. But I do expect something else of the Church, because what has been should not be the Lord to tell us what is, and what is should not be the ruler to tell us what will be. God's people are supposed to grow.

You take a baby, take a baby. Can you predict your baby? Do you know what he'll do next? I could have you on the floor rolling with laughter if I would tell you a few things. I was over at the Ranky's here some time ago, and their little boy went out in the yard while we were having dinner.

Some of the things we saw him do out there, nobody would have believed. There isn't a comic strip world would have thought of that. He thought of that himself.

He wasn't dead, you see. He hadn't accepted that the dictatorship was a routine. He was experimenting.

He was having himself a time out there. Now, I believe as long as there is growth, there is an inability to predict. Certainly we cannot predict exactly, but you can in most churches.

We know exactly, and that's our woe and that's our greatest enemy. Not Prusciat, not the liberals, not the government, not the enemy, the devil even, because what could the devil do if God's people all decided they were going to lay hold of the provisions made for them in a resurrected Lord? What could the devil do except to snarl in helpless frustration while the people of God grew in grace? He could do nothing. We blame the devil.

We blame the last days. We blame anybody that we can find to blame. But I tell you that our greatest enemy is not outside of us at all.

Our greatest enemy is the dictatorship of the routine. It is accepting things as they are, as things as they should be. It's in believing that what was must necessarily determine what will be, and so we do not grow in expectation.

You say, Do you mean that we ought to go out and run around the block and call people in? No. That's an odd thing. As soon as you begin to talk the way that I'm talking now, then immediately the Lord's people try to respond by getting busy.

They dash about. And Protestants can dash about the most hopelessly and fruitlessly and uselessly of any people under the sun. The most active dashers or abouters are lots of the evangelical Protestants.

But they have read something that somebody did back there, and so they try to do what that person did, and round and round they go. But you can predict them. You know exactly what they will do.

Now, this that I'm talking about is an internal thing. This is a thing of the soul, a thing of the mind. And because it's of the soul and of the mind, it finally, ultimately determines the conduct.

Now, I'm not an alliterative preacher, you know that. I don't say, I'll preach this morning on three C's or three D's or four G's or something. I haven't done that ever in my life that I can remember.

I'm not an alliterative preacher. But I do happen to have three words here that are alliterative, in that they all start with the letter R, and I will show you the progressive stages. And by progressive stages, don't

misunderstand me.

I mean the word progressive the same as a doctor means the word progressive when he says you have progressive anemia or progressive myopia or progressive cancer. He doesn't mean that it's progressing in the right direction, he means it's progressing in the wrong direction. Here is the way we go in our progression, or at least our slow movement.

First is rote, R-O-T-E. That is repetition without feeling. If someday in this church at Avenue Row, somebody would read the scripture and everybody would believe it, and then we'd sing some songs and everybody would believe what they sang, it would have a blessed spiritual revolution underway in a short time.

But the rote means that we repeat without feeling, without meaning, without wonder, and without any happy surprise or expectation. That is the rote. Repetition without meaning, repetition without wonder, and repetition without happy surprises.

Now once more, we tell our people, Oh, you ought to be glad you are a Protestant because you can pray without a prayer book. But if you would take down on tape the average preacher's prayers, including mine, and then play them back, you would find over a period of six weeks that he repeated himself just as surely as the prayer book. And if you would take the average Protestant's service, you would find that we are just as ritualistic as the Roman Catholics, except our ritual isn't good and pretty and well-ordered, and theirs is.

That's the difference. God can't get in because we've got it all fixed up for him. And we say, Lord, we are going to have it this way now, and will you kindly bless our plans? He does the best he can, for he is a kind, loving God.

But we repeat without feeling, and we repeat without meaning, and we sing without wonder, and we listen without surprise. That's the rote. And then we go one step further and we come to the rut, and that is bondage to the rote.

When the inability comes, or the inability to see and sense that we are in a rut, then we are in a rut. A man who is sick may be sick and not know he is sick. For instance, a man who has a very, very bad heart.

And the doctors have told his wife, Now listen, I don't like to frighten your husband, but he could drop any minute, any minute, just expect it. When the phone rings, just expect it. I can't imagine the doctor telling a woman that, but I'm illustrating.

You can do anything with an illustration. So I would say, the doctor says to the woman, Now, Mrs. Jones, your husband will, any minute he'll go, because he can't last the way he is. But he doesn't know it.

And so he goes out and plays tennis, or golf, or goes on a long hunting trip, or goes out and paddles a canoe. He is inviting that. He is sick and doesn't know how sick he is.

If a man is sick and knows he is sick, you can do something for him. But if he is sick and doesn't know it, nobody can do anything for him. He may hasten his end by the fact that he doesn't know it.

So the rut is bondage to the rote. Inability to know that we are in a rut, inability to sense it or to feel it at all, our bondage to it. There is a third word, and I don't like to use it, but the history of the Church is strewn with it as the coasts of New England are strewn after a great storm with pieces of spire and pieces of the

ships that have gone down.

And that is the word rot. It's dry rot. And so psychology of non-expectation takes over and spiritual rigidity sets in.

And a general debility, an inability to visualize anything better, and a lack of desire for improvement. And this is the rut. How many churches are there that are in the rut? You say, Mr. Tozer, I know lots of evangelical churches that would like to grow and they have contests to get their Sunday school larger and they try to get crowds to come to them.

Yes. What they are trying to do is to get people to come and share in the rut. They want people to come and help them to celebrate the rote and finally join in the rut.

Because the Holy Ghost isn't given the chance, nobody is repenting, nobody is seeking God, nobody is spending a day in quiet waiting on God with his open Bible, seeking to mend his ways and straighten himself out. Nobody is going to do it. We just want more people.

We want more people. So we say, let's go out and get more people. More people for what? More people to come and repeat our dead services without feeling, without meaning, without wonder, without surprise.

More people to join us in the bondage to the rote. And finally, the spiritual rigidity that can't bend and the general debility that is too weak to know how weak we are. Well now, let me go on a little and say to you that a church is an assembly of individuals.

This church, we'll talk about this church. It wouldn't be nice for us to talk about the one across the street or one two blocks up. We'll talk about this one, us.

We're not talking about the building now. But what is a church? When I say a church gets into the rote, gets into the rut, and then goes on to rot, what do I mean by a church? I don't mean the building. A church is an assembly of individuals.

There's a lot of meaningless dialogue going on these days about the church, and it's meaningless because those who are engaging in the dialogue forget that a church has no separate existence. It's not an entity in itself. The church is composed of individual persons.

It's the same error that we make when we talk about the state. You hear politicians sometimes talk about the state, or social workers talk about society. Society is people, brother.

And the church is people. We're people. The church hasn't separate entity in itself, but it is composed of persons who have existence.

And then when they're together, then we have a church. So a church isn't some superior group of people that we can't identify and don't know about. The church is composed of that old gentleman that's been coming to church for twenty-five years, and that dear old lady who is sick, but when she can get to church and prayer meeting, she does, and that young fellow who was just converted three weeks ago, and that girl who just decided it was better to serve the Lord than to serve the flesh, and that businessman who works all day in his office and then tries to get to prayer meeting on Wednesday night in church on Sunday.

It's composed of people, you see. You can identify them. The people that compose the church are people.

They're not faceless zombies. They're people. They're human beings.

And in this church, they're quite cosmopolitan. We're composed of everything. We have Chinese, we have Japanese, we have some Jamaicans, we have Swedes, and we have Scots, and we have English, and we have Irish, and we have whatever I am.

And we have, we're just from every where, happily serving God together. So you say, what kind of church is the Avenue Road Church? I identify them by name. And I say, that's the Avenue Road Church.

And you say, well, tell me more. And I say, that's the Avenue Road Church. The Avenue Road Church is people.

And whatever the persons are who compose the church, the church is. No worse, no better, no wiser, no holier, no more ardent, no more worshipful. When a lot of Christian people come into a building to carry on a service, if the people are worshipful, the church is worshipful.

If the people are not, the church is not. And always remember that you are the church. And the church can be improved only by improving individual persons.

And that is by improving you. Almost everybody has a list of people he knows in the church that he wishes could be improved. Almost everybody.

When I preach a sermon like this, I don't touch very many people, really, at the quick of their souls, because they've gotten a habit. When they hear a sermon that cuts close, they say, yes, that meant for so-and-so. Almost everybody has a list of people that you feel should be improved.

But that's the sure road to failure. And that is evidence enough that we are in the rut, and evidence enough that the next stage will be dry rot. And it's a proof enough of three sins, the sin of self-righteousness, the sin of judgment, and the sin of complacency.

When the Lord said, one of you will betray me, thank God those disciples had spirituality enough that nobody said, Lord, it is he! Every one of them said, Lord, it is I. If they had not said, Lord, it is I, there could have been no Pentecost. For the Holy Ghost, a few days later, fell on those people at Pentecost. It was because they were humble enough to say, Lord, is it I? But if we insist that I know Mrs. Jones, bless her, I know she's a good woman, all right, we say smugly, but how she needs to be enlightened, how she needs spiritual help, how she needs help.

Sister, maybe she does. But Peter said, Lord, is it I? Not Lord, it is she. So self-righteousness is one.

If we feel that we are what we ought to be, then we shall remain what we are. The next is judgment of others, and I've mentioned that, and the third is complacency. Complacency is the great sin, and I guess maybe complacency is the word that will cover all I've said about the rote and the rut.

Complacency. Lord, I am satisfied with my spiritual condition, and I hope one of these days the Lord will come and I will be taken up to meet him in the air and I will rule over five cities. He can't rule over his household, but he expects to rule over five cities.

He prays only spottily and sparsely and rarely attends prayer meetings, but he is reading his Bible and marking it. He expects to go zooming off to the blue yonder and join his Lord in the triumph of the victorious saints. Brethren, I wonder if we are not fooling ourselves.

I wonder if a lot of that is not simply self-deception. I hear the voice of Jesus saying to us, saying, You have dwelt long enough where you are. You have dwelt long enough in that present place.

Turn you, turn you. Take your journey and go to the Mount of the Amorites, that is, whatever that may mean to God and to the present moment, some new spiritual mount, some new hill that you can take. And all the places nigh there unto in the plain and in the hills and in the vale and in the south and to the seaside, it's all yours.

Everything Jesus Christ did for us that we can have in this age, now I grant there were some things he did for us we can't have now. We can't have resurrection bodies now. We can't be delivered now from this world, I mean, out of it.

We have to live in it, as the Sister said in her testimony. But there are so many things that he has for us. Victorious living, joyous living, holy living, fruitful living, wondrous ravishing knowledge of the triune God.

We can have all this. Power we never knew was for us before. Answers to prayer we never dreamed we could have.

All these are for us. Behold, I have set the land before you, says the voice of Jesus. Go in and possess it.

The Lord swear it to you in his covenant he gave it to you. Go take it, it's yours. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and they seeked after him.

And Jesus, when he prayed, said, Neither pray I for these alone, but for all them that shall believe on me through their word. That's Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and all of his seed and all of the people who belong to the Church of Jesus Christ. We have called him Lord.

How can we afford to sit any longer in the rut? Midsummer is hot. A quarter, I guess, of our people are away. The scripture says, Work in season and out of season.

And I've always been an out-of-season man. In fact, I like to work out of season better than in season. Because when you work out of season, you work when the devil is the busiest, and you can get closer to him for a closer shot.

And the Lord has called us to move on, called this Church to move on. I think with last Sunday we begin a new era in this Church. I do.

I believe we begin a new era. The day when everybody came in and looked to see what a wonder was in the pulpit there and what kind of a strange creature that American preacher was, that's over now. Everybody is back where he belongs, in his own Church and looking after his own stock where he belongs.

And now from here on, it's our job and business to take what we have and go ahead with it. Our young brother here, along with myself, we dedicate ourselves by the grace of God and in the power of the Holy Ghost to do everything that can be done. But when people are in a rut, if they will not come out of it, not even the angel Gabriel can help them.

This is not an accusation, but it's a suggestion, that's all. If you're not in a rut, don't get mad, somebody else is. But if you are in a rut, don't get mad, because you ought to get out of it.

So shall we not together respond? The difference between a wooden leg and a good leg is that if you would prick a wooden leg, the fellow would never notice it. The difference between a Church that's got dry rot and a Church that's alive is that if you prick the live Church, it will respond. If you prick the other kind, it's already dead.

The tree that stands out there alive with its green lush leaves, take a knife and scar the bark deep in it and it will bleed, it's alive. The old dead tree that stands there, a watchtower for old sentinel crows, take your knife and dig as far in as you want to and nothing will happen there because it's dead. And if you will get neither mad nor glad nor sad under my preaching, and I know nothing that can be done, but there are some who live and I believe it's the majority.

And I believe you will hear me and hear my call and hear the call of God the Holy Ghost. Come on, we've been long enough in this mountain. There's no reason why we can't have Sunday night services here that will mean the salvation of sinners, the filling with the Holy Ghost of believers and the restoration of people from a life of carelessness, members joining the Church and more people joining the prayer meetings.

There's no reason why we can't have it. We're situated well, we're right downtown here, we're surrounded by people. There's no scandal in the Church, there's no division in the Church, there's no trouble in the Church and there's very little debt hanging on that we can pay off in no time.

So there isn't any reason why we can't get out of the rut. Now tonight I've more or less given you a beginning of my talks, but later on from Sunday to Sunday I'm going to talk about how we can do, what we can positively do. I've had people go out of the service after I've preached and say, Well, what does the pastor want us to do? Well, I don't blame them, because I know people don't like generalities, they want particulars, and I'm going to give some particulars.

So I'd like to have you come even though, regardless of how hot it gets, I'd like to have you come and I'd like to have you bring your friends along. Next Sunday night I'm going to begin to say how. Tonight I've told about what the rut is and tried to say that the call of God is to get out of it and to get moving spiritually.

And now next Sunday I'm going to give you two points and the next Sunday two more points. What we can do so that we will become a better church and better individuals. I believe God is going to help us.

I'm looking forward to great enthusiasm myself, more enthusiasm and expectation on my heart now than ever since I've been in this city. Now, Brother McNally, please lead us in that

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