

Steadying the Ark of God

by Vance Havner

The sermon emphasizes the importance of doing God's work God's way, with personal responsibility and reverence for sacred things.

Duration: 29:33

Scripture: Exodus 30:32-33, Exodus 33:14, Numbers 4:15, Isaiah 55:8-9

Topics: "Ark Of God"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher emphasizes the importance of true worship and the need for personal responsibility in carrying out God's work. He criticizes the idea of putting on a religious performance without truly experiencing God's presence. The preacher also warns against becoming complacent in one's faith and relying on tradition rather than a genuine relationship with God. He concludes by stating that revival occurs when God's people faithfully and obediently carry out His work.

Transcript

Well, when Uzzah tried to steady the Ark, his intentions were good, but the whole procedure was wrong to begin with. Today the Ark is reeling and rocking, and Uzzah is worried, and the brethren are all bothered about the unsteadiness of our doctrine, and our wavering churches, and the unstable swaying of modern Christianity. And all kinds of efforts are being made to stabilize the situation.

But the end only like this did, for we've started out wrong, and we must give up our new carts, and get God's work back on the shoulders of the Levites, that is, separated and surrendered people. Now, what was the sin of Uzzah, after all? Well, remember, please, that he was the son of Abinadab, and all his life the Ark had been at his house. It had become a familiar piece of furniture, and it had become just a box.

And he had lost his regard for the sacredness of it, as a symbol of God's presence among his people. Old Matthew Henry says perhaps he affected to show before this great assembly how bold he could make with it, having been so long acquainted with it. Familiarity, he said, even with that which is most awful, is apt to breed contempt.

Now, Uzzah was a Levite, but he wasn't a priest. And only the priests were supposed to touch the Ark, Numbers 4.15, and that only under certain circumstances. Now, we're Levites.

I wonder it takes some time under these days to study the Levites. I have noticed lately in reading through the Bible what peculiar people the Levites were. They didn't have any inheritance down here.

They didn't have any land given to them. Their inheritance was the Lord, and their portion was God. And they even, when the time came to go out and purify the situation after the great sin out there in the wilderness, they even took a stand against their own kinfolks.

They had to, to be true to God. It will pay you to make a study of the Levites. We're Levites.

We don't appear to know it very much, but every Christian is a separated person unto God, and our portion and our inheritance is God. And we're priests. I believe in the priesthood of the believers.

But it's a sad day, beloved, when the Ark becomes a box. We become so familiar with church and scripture and worship and ordinances that we lose our reverence for them. Alexander McLaren said, Here they had a lost sense of awe.

Nothing is more delicate than a sense of awe, he said. Try for with it ever so little, and it speedily disappears. There's far too little of it in our modern religion.

Well, if Alexander McLaren were to go to church now on Sunday morning and look over the average congregation just before the service begins, everybody gossiping and carrying on, and finally they get still long enough to begin the meeting, what he'd see would not be, it wouldn't be awe, it would be awful. There's a lot of difference. And we're so anxious to have relevance that we've lost reverence.

Taking God's name in vain, beloved, means more than cursing. Plenty of people take God's name in vain singing a song out of a hymn book. You sing, My Jesus, I love thee, for thee all the fathers of sin I resign.

You haven't done it, you've lied for one thing, and you are irreverent, and you are taking God's name in vain. I read of a traveler in Africa back in the days when diamonds were plentiful in South Africa, and he came up in a bunch of boys playing what looked like a game of marbles, and as he drew near, they were playing marbles with diamonds. They were so common, and so plentiful.

And the church today is doing exactly that. We're playing marbles with diamonds. We're handling the holy things of God with such a crude and rude familiarity.

We handle the colonnage of God's word without ever examining it to see whose image and superscription may be thereupon. I heard of a girl touring Europe, and in Vienna she went into the museum where they have Beethoven's piano. And this poor little thing sat down and played some rock and roll on it, and the old caretaker smiled indulgently, and when she finished, he said, Paderewski was through here years ago to see the piano.

Oh, she said, what did he play? And the caretaker said, nothing. He said he was not worthy to touch Beethoven's piano. Now, I'm sure that poor little thing must have gone out of that red face if she was capable of embarrassment.

Oh, today, how carelessly we handle the things of God. It's a terrible thing to treat the Ark like a box, and it's only by the long-suffering of God that more corpses don't lie all around over the place today. Beware of the Ark becoming a box.

There's no greater hindrance. Somebody has said, there is no greater hindrance to true spirituality than a superficial acquaintance with the language of Christianity from childhood. I grew up in a Christian home, and I thank God for it, but it's dangerous.

I was soaked and saturated in the Bible. I had read through the New Testament, I don't know how many times, before I was 10. I tried to write pieces for the paper before I was 10.

I was licensed to preach at 11 and ordained at 15, and then the day came when I had to back myself into a corner and say, Now, wait a minute, you have learned the language, but do you have the life? Is this real, or is it something you've picked up until you can recite it like a parrot? We can become so accustomed to being Christians and even being preachers that we place unholy hands on sacred things. Now, our intentions may be good, and so were others, but Matthew Henry says again, It will not suffice to say of that which is ill done that it was well meant. That won't excuse it.

Now, there's another angle to this episode. There's something personal about carrying the ark on one's shoulders. But shifting it to a cart, you see, lessens the sense of personal responsibility.

The Lord's work today has become one of the most impersonal things I know anything about. We let a machine do a lot of it. Putting our shoulders to the wheel is not the same thing as putting our shoulders under the ark.

Too much of our Christian giving today is like feeding nickels into the slots in a vending machine. So much for home missions, and so much for morning missions, and so much for local expense, and we get so accustomed to the thing that it's what Isaiah called a vain oblation. And a vain oblation is when you put your money on the plate and never give God yourself.

The Macedonians first gave themselves to the Lord's self, service, and substance. That's the way it ought to be. God doesn't want your money if he can't get you.

Now, I think these new Philistine carts may have been pretty, and it certainly took a load off their shoulders, but you cannot transfer personal responsibility. And we are living today in a stampede from responsibility in this country. We want all the privileges of being Americans without the responsibility of being Americans.

People want the privileges of marriage without the responsibilities of marriage. They want the privileges of being church members without the responsibilities. Everybody is running away from their responsibilities.

Everybody wants their rights. Rights. I want my rights.

I don't hear anybody talking much about my responsibilities. I want to do something about that. It may seem more sophisticated to put the ark on the cart.

That's more up-to-date. But it actually took longer to get where they were going with it that way than it would have taken if they had started out right and carried it on the shoulders of the Levites. Now, the problem was not that the oxen stumbled and that the cart shook and that the ark lurched.

There should never have been any oxen, any cart to start with. And no matter how many Uzzahs try to steady the ark today, we are working on their own problem. We're not going to help matters making better carts and hiring more trained Uzzahs.

We've got schools today turning out Uzzahs by the dozen. New ways of raising church money, new ways of interesting the young people, new ways to increase church attendance, new styles in church music. We've never had so many new carts running around all over the place.

And never has the ark wobbled like it's wobbling now. There's plenty of fanfare and music, but it doesn't hide the fact that it wasn't right in the sight of God. I read a moment ago, the thing was right in the eyes of all the people.

It doesn't say it was right in the eyes of God. It's possible to put on quite a religious parade today that's a performance and not an experience, a form of godliness without the power. A. W. Tozer, who was one of the best writers of this generation, he was in the Christian Missionary Alliance.

I knew him personally and I've read everything I can get my hands on that he wrote. He stuck his neck out on a lot of other things nobody else ever mentioned, but he didn't hesitate. He was a prophet.

He said, Evangelical Christianity is now tragically below the New Testament standard. Worldliness is accepted as part of our way of life. Our religious mood is social instead of spiritual.

We've lost the art of worship. We're not producing saints. Our models are successful businessmen, celebrated athletes, and theatrical personalities.

We carry on our religious activities after the method of the modern advertiser. Our homes have turned into theaters. Our liturgy is shallow.

Our hymnody borders on sacrilege. And scarcely anybody appears to care. That's David's new card all over again.

David finally came to his senses, better late than never. And he said the arts should be carried only by the Levites. Well, that's what Numbers and Deuteronomy both say.

He'd broken that rule and that was what caused all the trouble. I want you to remember one thing tonight. And that's what all this is about.

God's work must be done by God's people, God's way. And if it isn't, it won't be done. I read in Acts when they appointed the seven, you know, seven men of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom.

Those are the qualifications for an office in church. Just because a man's a lawyer and talks all week doesn't qualify him to teach the Bible class, unless he knows the Lord. Just because he's a banker and handles money all week doesn't qualify him to be the treasurer, unless he's full of the Holy Spirit.

Just because some woman's got a diploma from a music conservatory and can sing so high that Tetrassini couldn't have sung bass to it, doesn't qualify to sing to the glory of God, unless she knows the Lord. You can't run a church like a department store. Only the Levites were qualified.

They were sanctified. Don't be scared of that word sanctified. Baptists could use a little of it.

Set apart to the glory of God. What's wrong with that? So David had a convocation and gathered all Israel together, and they went at it the right way this time, 1 Chronicles 15. I'm going around over the country calling a convocation, saying, now let's do God's work, God's way, if we're God's people.

He assembled the priests and the Levites and gave them a charge, sanctify yourselves that you may bring up the ark of the Lord. Over in Exodus, we are told about the oil with which the high priest was to be anointed, and there were three restrictions on that oil that was to be used. Upon man's flesh it shall not be poured.

You cannot anoint old Adam to do the work of God, the old nature. You mustn't make any like it. You can't imitate it to the glory of God.

And if you put any of it on a stranger, you will be cut off from the people. One thing is certain in the word of God, there are two verses that ought to be hung up in every one of our churches. They that are in the flesh cannot please God.

Now, we don't seem to know that's in the Bible. They that are in the flesh, that means to say, when you came in this world, you were a son or a daughter of old Adam, and you were of the flesh and that old nature. You can't please God with that nature you were born with.

Save your life. You can educate it and get it in the church and make it religious and all the rest of it, but it cannot please God. Never.

I read that God hath chosen foolish things of the world and weak things and things which are despised. He did not call many wise men, not many mighty, not many noble. Why? That no flesh should glory in his presence.

That's why he didn't call many folks. Aren't many rich people going to heaven? The Bible says so. God's got nothing against rich people, but it's pretty hard for them to be poor in spirit.

And it says here that not many wise men. You don't get there into the kingdom head first. You get in heart first.

The only thing I know of that's got his head and heart in the same place is cabbage. And you're no cabbage. And then, not many mighty.

How many presidents of the United States can you think of that you believe were born again, spirit-filled, New Testament Christians? Pretty disheartening, isn't it? I'm having trouble right now trying to think over it. Not many mighty. Not many noble.

That's the bluebloods, you know, whose ancestors came over on the Mayflower. Trouble with this ancestor business, it's like potatoes. The best part's usually under the ground.

And the Lord did not choose many. Thank God it doesn't say that he didn't choose any. They can get saved, but not many of them do.

But he did not choose many because no flesh, no flesh. It may be wise flesh. It may be mighty flesh.

And it may be noble flesh. But it cannot please God. Sometimes I think we Southern Baptists have just about rededicated ourselves to death.

We're just always running on the church aisle, rededicating. And nine times out of ten, it's the same old Adam doing it. And God couldn't use old Adam if he came down a thousand times and rededicated it.

We're running an old Adam improvement society. And people who have never died to sin and risen to walk in newness of life are marching down our street, dedicating themselves. That old nature is only one thing God says he wants done with.

It must be crucified. And it was crucified. You died when Christ died.

I have been crucified with Christ. That old nature. I was dead in sin.

Christ died for sin. I'm dead to sin. You can't crucify yourself.

The Holy Spirit has to do it. That's one form of murder that you can't commit. You can take poison, shoot yourself, drown yourself, but you can't crucify yourself.

That's impossible. The Holy Spirit has to do it. But it was done on Calvary.

And that which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. And the new creature only can please God. And how we need to learn that today.

We're pouring the oil on strangers. We're making imitations of the Holy Spirit. Then David called all the musicians together.

It's about time to do that again. If ever the church needed sanctified music, it is today. Church music has fallen on evil days.

The church used to go to the jungle, and now the jungle has come to the church. I believe in letting the world sing the songs of the world. We've got a better song to sing.

Let me take my voice and let me sing only always for my King. That just about rules out everything else. Gospel singing is first of all a matter of the heart, not arts.

It's all right to learn how. It's all right to have the art. But we're to make melodies in our hearts to the Lord.

Dr. Bell, Billy Graham's father-in-law, wrote, It is my opinion that should our Lord enter one of the, quote, worship, unquote, services now being contrived for youth, with their offbeat and frenetic music, nightclub atmosphere, flashing of lights and slogans, the emphasis on psychedelic art, he might well wade in and say, My house will be called a house of prayer, but you've made it a den of psychedelic emotionalism. Somebody asked Billy Graham what he thought about this kind of music. He said, It has gotten out of hand.

Anything that whips young people into a frenzy is bad, it seems to me. I often am disturbed by what has happened to teenagers after they listen to it. If I were 17 today, I'd stay as far away from it as I could.

What we're hearing today in the world, and sometimes in the churches, certainly not hard, and a lot of it's not even art. Not even singing. Why, there are tomcats with a tailcoat and a screen door that can get out a better note than some of these fellas selling a million records.

They haven't hit a sound note yet. I've listened for one and hoped maybe sometime they'd hit it. Never do.

Ernest Hemingway said, We're living in the millennium of the untalented. We're deluged with writers who can't write, actors who can't act, and singers who can't sing, and they're all making a million dollars a year. They've got the records now.

They talk about the top 40, you know. I'd sure hate to hear the bottom 40. There is no such thing as gospel rock.

If it's gospel, it's not rock, and if it's rock, it's not gospel, but because the whole thing came out of hell to start with, out of paganism, and you try to varnish it up and make it look like the gospel, you're fooling nobody but yourself. Why, even the world must be surprised at what they hear going on sometimes today in church sanctuaries in the name of the good Lord. Finally, everything was in order, and here they went, and they had a great time because they were doing it right this time.

That's what revival is. A revival is God's people doing God's work God's way. Just that.

But there was one who didn't like it, and that was David's wife. He'd married Saul's daughter, and she had a lot of bad blood in her veins, and she despised him, made fun of him, said, you sure did make a sight out of yourself there, rejoicing before the ark, and God struck her with barrenness, which for a Jewish woman is quite a curse the rest of her days. And when you do God's work, God's way, and God's people do it, there will be some people who won't like it, but they've already been smitten with barrenness from the presence of the Lord.

I read that Jesus cleansed the temple, and when he cleansed the temple and ran all that crowd of money changers out, everybody got happy. The little children were waving palm branches and crying Hosanna, and the lame were coming in limping and going out leaping, and the blind were coming in sightless and going out seeing, and everybody was happy except the Pharisees. They had a little meeting over in one corner.

And then they came to Jesus and said, these kids, we don't like this kind of thing. Jesus said, if you never read out of the mouths of the babes and sucklings, thou wast perfect in praise. The more childlike you are, the more Christian you are.

A revival is when childish church members become childlike church members. It's quite a different thing. But they did not have the revival until they cleaned up the temple.

Have you noticed that? And you never will. Until we deal with sin in the church, you can have all the primatings you want to, After the battle of Ai, Joshua lay on his face before God, and God said, Get up. Wherefore liest thou this on thy face? No time to pray.

Israel is sin. We've got to deal with sin. We don't want to deal with that today in the church.

We're trying to have a revival and keep our eyes shut to the sin in the church. That must be faced. God won't even look at us.

If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me. So let me ask you in closing just this tonight. Are you one of God's people? Are you doing God's work? And are you doing it God's way? Now, if you're what you've always been, you're not a Christian.

A Christian is somebody who's had a change. Many men, being Christ, he's a new creature. If you're just what you've always been, except that you've joined the church, well, you're just as lost as you ever were.

That's serious. We've got so many unconverted church members. And then are you doing God's work? When you hire a church staff today to do church work, and then we come out on a Sunday to watch them

do it, we're all on the staff.

All of us. The church at work is simply the church living for Jesus Christ seven days in the week, driving trucks, raising children, teaching school, working in the shop and the office, wherever a Christian is living for Jesus. That's the church at work.

Not just what goes on in church on Sunday. We're so mixed up about church work. What is church work? Well, it's just we try to stir each other up on Sunday and get renewed strength and recharge our batteries.

But church work, really, the work of the church, is God's people living for God every day of the week. We're all called to full-time Christian service. You're supposed to live for God every hour of the day, every day of the week, every week of the month, every month of the year.

What's that but full-time Christian service? Everybody's been ordained in that sense. The other day I heard of a fellow who said, I'm an ordained plumber. Well, that's all right.

There are ordained plumbers in that sense, and an ordained truck driver, and an ordained school teacher. If you're living for God, you've been ordained to live for him, not in the same sense that a preacher has, but truly ordained. We're all supposed to serve God.

But you can be one of God's people, and you may be doing God's work, still not doing it in God's way. You can go to church and not worship in spirit and in truth. Have you ever asked yourself, why do I do what I do in church? What do I go for anyway? Moses said to the Lord back there in the Old Testament, How shall it be known that we are your people, Lord? What's the trademark? What's going to mark us as God's people? Is it not in that thou goest with us? There's only one thing that distinguishes a church from everything else on the face of the earth, and that's the presence of God among his people.

And that's what God said, My presence shall go with thee, and I'll give thee rest. I get in so few services where the thing that impressed me most was the presence of God. How many meetings have you ever been in in the last year? You've been to church a lot.

How many meetings have you been in where the thing that impressed you most was not the music or the building or this or that, but the presence of God? Now, he's there, but were you aware of it? Brethren, we have met to worship. All is vain unless the Spirit of the Holy One comes down. I was in a meeting long, long ago in Georgia.

One morning before the service started, my friend Doug White, brother of K.O. White, an old friend of mine, he and his wife came and sat down there before the meeting even began. We had a meeting those two weeks. I tell you, everybody was active, some for me and some against me, but the whole crowd was active, and that helps.

And he turned to his wife before the thing had even started and said, God's here. That's all he said. We hadn't sung, we hadn't had anything.

He said, God's here. But that's what I long for for the rest of my ministry. I don't care a thing for the rest of it if only somebody can be so conscious of God that they feel like slipping out on tiptoe.

And if we felt it, we wouldn't jabber the minute we get out the door about a lot of silly things if really we'd met God. It would be a wonderful day if people become so conscious of God in the church that they can't

say the things they usually say when they get out the door. And that's the mark.

David said, how will we know it? God said, I'll be with you. So, let me ask you to go out of here tonight asking yourself three questions. Am I one of God's people? Actually.

Or am I just what I've always been? Am I doing God's work? Not just church work. You can do church work and not be doing God's work. And am I doing it God's way? You can do church work and be one of God's people and not do it God's way.

This is serious business. We preachers have to guard against it. We get so used to being preachers and so used to being Christians we get in a rut.

We're not conscious of the sense of God's presence in us. I hope you will be serious enough that this will haunt you tonight in your thoughts before you go to sleep. And you will check.

Am I one of God's people doing God's work God's way? We're not going to have an invitation. We're not going to sing. We're going home.

I think sometimes we think we have to give an invitation every time. And we do and we shake the tree too soon. Oh, he gets a basket full of green apples.

It takes time. It takes time to face some of these things. Now you go out and think about it.

And I hope you'll come back under conviction. Maybe something's happened. I hope.

Between this and the next one if there is any next one. Shall we stand, please? Forgive us, O Lord, for borrowing all these arks from the Philistines. Forgive us for going out to the world to find out how to do it.

Thou hast said, my ways are not your ways, my thoughts are not your thoughts. Help thy church to get back to where we get the ark on the shoulders of the Levites. And learn what it means to have a personal responsibility to do the work of God.

May the Holy Spirit fasten this truth so in the hearts of these people that they won't forget it. And it'll bear fruit tonight and tomorrow and henceforth. And that there will grow out of these meetings a little group of new Levites who will carry the ark on their shoulders and not transfer their responsibility.

We thank thee for thy presence tonight among us according to thy word. And we trust thee for the application of it to our hearts. In Christ's name.

Amen.

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