

But go ye and learn what that meaneth

by William MacDonald

Transcript

“But go ye and learn what that meaneth, I will have mercy, and not sacrifice.” (Mt. 9:13)

God is far more interested in how we treat other people than in how many religious ceremonies we go through. He prefers mercy to sacrifice. He places practical morality above ritual. It might seem strange to read that God doesn't desire sacrifice, because it was He who instituted the sacrificial system in the first place. But there is no contradiction. While it is true that He ordered the people to bring sacrifices and offerings, He never intended these to take the place of justice and kindness. “To do justice and judgment is more acceptable to the Lord than sacrifice” (Prov. 21:3)

The Old Testament prophets thundered out against people who observed all the proper rituals, yet who cheated and oppressed their neighbors. Isaiah told them that God was fed up with their burnt offerings and religious holidays as long as they oppressed the fatherless and widows (Isa. 1:10-17). He told them that the fast God desired was to treat their employees fairly, to feed the hungry and clothe the poor (Isa. 58:6,7). Unless their lives were right, they might as well offer a dog's head or swines' blood (Isa. 66:3).

Amos told the people to stop their religious observances because God would continue to hate these rituals until justice and mercy flowed like a mighty torrent (Amos 5:21-24). And Micah warned that what God wants more than ritual is reality—the reality of fairness, justice, mercy and humility (Micah 6:6-8).

In our Lord's day, the Pharisees earned His scorn by pretending to be religious with long, public prayers while evicting widows from their homes (Mt. 23:14). They were careful to give God a tenth of the mint in their garden, but this could never take the place of justice and faith (Mt. 23:23). It is futile for us to bring our offering to the Lord if our brother has a valid grievance against us (Mt. 5:24); the gift is acceptable only after the wrong has been righted. Attending church regularly will never serve as a cover-up for dishonest business practices during the week. There is no use giving mother a box of chocolates on Mother's Day if we treat her hatefully during the year. Or a shirt to father on Father's Day if we do not show love and respect to him the rest of the time.

God is not fooled by externals or rituals. He sees the heart and our day-by-day behavior.

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