

Broomfield



# PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH MINISTRY OF THE WORD

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## Religious Pretense Exposed

### Default Program

When God created this world, He entered into a relationship with us that was predicated upon our conduct.

Genesis 2:16-17, “And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat: But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die.”

Based on this passage, we have concluded that part and parcel of our creation is an inbred passion to please God by what we do. Well you know Scripture and how Adam violated this command and ate of the forbidden fruit. And yet I want you to notice a very important point: Though Adam fell from a state of grace<sup>1</sup> nevertheless he and his posterity, on account of their creation, still long(ed) to relate to God on the basis of their deeds — this is what I have called, “Their Default Program.”

In fact, we see evidence of this “Default Program” throughout redemptive history:

Isaiah 29:13, “Wherefore the Lord said, Forasmuch as this people draw near me with their mouth, and with their lips do honour me, but have removed their heart far from me, and their fear toward me is taught by the precept of men.”

The people of God at the time of Isaiah thought that being a child of God meant simply doing the right things. Yet the truth is that God was after their heart! God provided for their salvation Himself through the cross.<sup>2</sup> The message of the Bible from the fall onward is NO LONGER ought we to concern ourselves with earning God's favor — God has done that for us through Christ OUR CALL now simply is to enjoy this relationship and so be faithful to it. Our call is to commune with Christ “as we sit in the house, as we walk by the way, when we lie down, and when we rise up.”

Yet unfortunately, the “default program” instilled in us at creation wars against this message<sup>3</sup> such that we long to substitute a genuine walk with God for religious pretense, a show, activity void of the heart. And thus we read the all-too common exhortation:

Jeremiah 2:13, “For my people have committed two evils; they have forsaken me the fountain of living waters, and hewed them out cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water.”

During Jeremiah's day, God's people forsook a saving relationship with Christ for a system of works

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<sup>1</sup> Compare Genesis 3:1-7

<sup>2</sup> Compare Genesis 3:15

<sup>3</sup> Compare Galatians 5:17

righteousness. Rather than trusting Christ as the basis for their relationship with God, they relied upon religious activity, offerings and sacrifices, the work of their hands, their religious pretense!

We see it at the time of Ezekiel. God's message to Ezekiel concerning his countrymen was this:

Ezekiel 33:31, "And they come unto thee as the people cometh, and they sit before thee as my people, and they hear thy words, but they will not do them: for with their mouth they shew much love, but their heart goeth after their covetousness."

Throughout redemptive history God sent His prophets to preach the good news that salvation was by grace. Yet God's people turned their backs upon this message, refused to listen, and so opted for the man-made religion of the nations. Speaking of the Jews, Paul said this:

Romans 10:3, "For they being ignorant of God's righteousness, and going about to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted themselves unto the righteousness of God."

Paul also said it to Titus:

Titus 1:16, "They profess that they know God; but in works they deny him, being abominable, and disobedient, and unto every good work reprobate."

Truly the issue of time and eternity — the issue that confronts every child of God — is will you be satisfied with the righteousness of Christ and so enjoy a relationship with God on account of His work?

**\*\*Or\*\***

Will you forsake Christ for the religion of self-righteousness by which your salvation is predicated upon what you do, think, feel, or say?

Sadly, by the time of the passage at which we are looking, the people of God had abandoned Christ for the show, and so related to God on the basis of their own sacrifices, the offerings of their own hands. They felt their religious service gained them favor with God. The people of Israel thought that if they did the right things, spoke the right words, and offered the acceptable sacrifice God would be pleased.

So, when we come to a passage such as this that declares God's people have abandoned their Lord for a show it shows the result of such living.

Lest we be found to be like them — playing church, relating to God on the basis of external acts of devotion, and holding to a form of godliness while denying its power — let us examine this text because it exposes the vanity of religious pretension.

## **The Catalyst**

Notice the catalyst that brings religious pretense out into the open.

1 Samuel 4:1-2, "And the word of Samuel came to all Israel. **Now Israel went out against the Philistines to battle, and pitched beside Ebenezer: and the Philistines pitched in Aphek. And the Philistines put themselves in array against Israel: and when they joined battle, Israel was smitten before the Philistines: and they slew of the army in the field about four thousand men.**"

I want you to see that failure is the fuel that feeds religious pretense!

Notice the background to this passage. The Philistines were a Mediterranean people and were descendants of Ham.<sup>4</sup> They are mentioned as one of the “Sea Peoples” in Egyptian texts, who settled on the southwest coast of Palestine<sup>5</sup> about the same time that God's people were entering the Promised Land (~1200 BC).<sup>6</sup>

Originally from Crete,<sup>7</sup> they held to a city/state federation over which ruled five independent and sovereign lords stationed in five capital cities: Gath, Ashdod, Ashkelon, Ekron, and Gaza.

As we'll see in 1 Samuel 5, the Philistines did not wipe out the Canaanite population on the coast when they arrived. Rather, they maintained a symbiotic relationship with the indigenous population — feeding off of them as the population enjoyed their protection. And yet, because of the limited size of Palestine, conflict between Israel and the Philistines was unavoidable.

Now as to the cities of our text, Ebenezer and Aphek lay 25 miles west of Shiloh. Both were over 20 miles North of the boarder of the land claimed by the Philistines which would imply that the Philistines in our passage were trying to expand their territory.<sup>8</sup> In fact, a study of the dating of Judges and 1 Samuel would indicate an overlapping of the two books such that the battle of our text, dated at 1104 BC (Samuel would have been about 17 years old here) would have coincided with Samson's activities in Judges 14. So it may very well have been Samson's activities which lead the Philistines on their current course of action.<sup>9</sup>

Notice the text:

1 Samuel 4:1b, “Now Israel went out against the Philistines to battle, and pitched beside Ebenezer: and the Philistines pitched in Aphek.”

As the Philistines were the aggressor here, Israel was placed in the position of the responder such that they came to the nearest city to Aphek, Ebenezer, and there they prepared for battle.

1 Samuel 4:2a, “And the Philistines put themselves in array against Israel.”

In other words, they assembled on the plain in preparation for war. At this point you must see that when it came to warfare, the Philistines were technologically more advanced than Israel. The Philistines brought to Palestine the knowledge of “metalsmithing.” Because Israel descended from slaves and so had a limited knowledge of metallurgy, early on they were at the mercy of the Philistines when it came to metal products-like farming equipment (not to mention weapons for war). For example:

1 Samuel 13:19-22, “Now there was no smith found throughout all the land of Israel: for the Philistines said, Lest the Hebrews make them swords or spears: But all the Israelites went down to the Philistines, to sharpen every man his share, and his coulter, and his axe, and his mattock. Yet they had a file for the

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<sup>4</sup> Compare Genesis 10:14, 1 Chronicles 1:12

<sup>5</sup> The Philistines, mentioned nearly 150 times in 1 and 2 Samuel, were so entrenched and dominant in the coastal areas and the foothills of Canaan that they eventually gave their name — Palestine — to the entire land!

<sup>6</sup>This is not to say that we do not read of the Philistines before the time of Moses, for we do (cf. Gen. 20-21; 26). It is to say that as a people group, they did not come to Canaan *en masse* until the time of Moses. In fact, studies indicate there were two Philistine settlements in Canaan, one early and smaller, and another much larger and later (cf. Nelson's New Illustrated Bible Dictionary on the Philistines).

<sup>7</sup> Compare Amos 9:7

<sup>8</sup> The *LXX* reads, “It happened at that time that the Philistines mustered to fight Israel and Israel went out...” According to this text, Israel was forced into battle by the Philistines.

<sup>9</sup> Compare Eugene H. Merrill's *Kingdom of Priests*, pages 176-177

mattocks, and for the coulters, and for the forks, and for the axes, and to sharpen the goads. So it came to pass in the day of battle, that there was neither sword nor spear found in the hand of any of the people that were with Saul and Jonathan: but with Saul and with Jonathan his son was there found.”

Because of their limited knowledge with the forging of metal, Israel generally found themselves on the receiving end of Philistine aggression.

1 Samuel 4:2b, “and when they joined battle, Israel was smitten before the Philistines.”

In the Hebrew this is better read as “clashed” or “deployed.”<sup>10</sup> In other words, after all the hoopla and shows of strength, the two armies engaged! Now when this occurred we read this:

1 Samuel 4:2c, “Israel was smitten before the Philistines: and they slew of the army in the field about four thousand men.”

Two things stand out here: First, God's people fought bravely. The men who died did not die fleeing, but fighting in the field of battle. Second, there is a difficulty in the translation here for “thousand.” While the term could be translated as “thousand,” nevertheless it could also be translated as “units” — i.e., “military units.”<sup>11</sup> Having said this, there is a comparison here between Israel's initial loss and their ultimate loss. After their first clash with the Philistines, Israel lost 4,000 or 4 units of men.<sup>12</sup> After their second clash, Israel lost 30,000 or 30 units of men.<sup>13</sup>

The point that stressed here is that Israel's first encounter with the Philistines here in verse 2 resulted in a painful yet relatively light loss. It was a minor defeat in comparison to the many that would die in the coming days. It was a nosebleed at the hands of the Philistines!

And it is this that serves as the catalyst for the manifestation of the religious pretense found in verses 3 -4. It is not major devastation or intense tragedy. With both of these the child of God is forced to be real before God or die. RATHER it is the nagging set backs which hurt, are noticeable, but really only make us uncomfortable.

Truly, shows of religion thrive in the land of discomfort. Agur said this:

Proverbs 30:7-9, “Two things have I required of thee; deny me them not before I die: [1] Remove far from me vanity and lies: [2] give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with food convenient for me: Lest I be full, and deny thee, and say, Who is the LORD? or lest I be poor, and steal, and take the name of my God in vain.”

When the child of God is faced with extremes, the temptation is not to fake it, but to abandon the Lord. Extreme wealth or poverty can push the sinner over the edge into forsaking God. Phony religion doesn't thrive in extreme want or plenty, but provide just enough hard-ache to keep a man humble, and you will have religious shows all over the place. This is evidenced by the famous quote of Karl Marx, “Religion is the opiate of the masses.”

Marx could say this because heartache and trial reveal and instigate Religious Pretense! And our text shows this to be true also. When Israel was pushed to the point of discomfort, their faulty religion was exposed. Therefore, we conclude that the catalyst in exposing religious pretense is discomfort.

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<sup>10</sup> Compare also 1 & II Samuel, Robert Gordon, page 93

<sup>11</sup> Compare also 1 Samuel 17:18; 29:2; 2 Samuel 18:4

<sup>12</sup> Compare 1 Samuel 4:2

<sup>13</sup> Compare 1 Samuel 4:10

Now brothers and sisters I dare say that religious pretense is alive and well in our land. In fact we've had many opportunities to witness it the past five years. Recall what happened religiously after September 11, 2001, religious service attendance rose significantly. Now, we would have rejoiced had the attendance been sustained. We would have rejoiced if the gospel became known in our country. We would have rejoiced if this tragedy had humbled many unto repentance and faith. But it didn't. Within no time at all, the "show" faded away.

Now with the recent events of hurricane Katrina I suspect we will see a similar show of religious pretense. Why? Trials and difficulties of life do not create true religion, they only reveal the genuineness of our religion. When we don't get what we want, when we feel threatened our default program says to offer more, give more, pray more, study more, go to church more, become more religious, appease God more and God once again will bless us and this land.

Trials are a good catalyst in revealing where the focus of our heart really is.

Because this is the case let us beware of our religion. If trial and tribulation tempt us unto greater devotion in the hope that God will relent, then we know our "default program" is alive and well.

Accordingly, we must flee this youthful lust. We must preach to our souls and cast aside thoughts of religious pretense. We must ever and always labor to relate to God on the basis of His grace and not the work of our hands! We must watch over our hearts with all diligence. Our disposition in and throughout trial must be that of David:

Psalm 51:16-17, "For thou desirest not sacrifice; else would I give it: thou delightest not in burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise."

Proverbs 4:23, "Keep thy heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life."

What a strong declaration at the time of a trial!

In essence it is David denying the temptation to think that if he did this religious duty, God would relent! This needs to be our disposition!

## **The Accusation**

And yet when a person's walk largely is comprised of Religious Pretense notice the result: Accusing God.

1 Samuel 4:3, "**And when the people were come into the camp, the elders of Israel said, Wherefore hath the LORD smitten us to day before the Philistines?** Let us fetch the ark of the covenant of the LORD out of Shiloh unto us, that, when it cometh among us, it may save us out of the hand of our enemies."

This is an incredible statement that actually is an accusation. When it came to figuring out why Israel had lost, notice the conclusion of the elder — It is not that God had absented Himself from the field of battle, nor that God was unable to deliver them, nor that God was weaker than the Philistine gods RATHER, it is that God actually intervened on the side of the enemy and worked for Israel's defeat!

Again, listen to their statement: "Wherefore has the LORD defeated us to day before the Philistines?" (1

Samuel 4:3b). The elders here are not making a statement about the sovereignty of God in war — as is spoken in other parts of Scripture.

Amos 3:6, “Shall a trumpet be blown in the city, and the people not be afraid? Shall there be evil in a city, and the LORD hath not done it?”

Deuteronomy 32:39, “See now that I, even I, am he, and there is no god with me: I kill, and I make alive; I wound, and I heal: neither is there any that can deliver out of my hand.”

Proverbs 16:33, “The lot is cast into the lap; but the whole disposing thereof is of the LORD.”

These are all glorious statements which affirm the complete and total sovereignty of God over creation. But these truths are not what the elders are affirming here. They are not declaring that God is sovereign, they are accusing Him of wrong-doing. In essence they are saying that this defeat is a sign that God no longer favors us!

This raises these questions:

- What have we done to make God oppose us?
- Why has His love for us waned?
- What sacrifices have we failed to offer?
- What more must be done?

From this I hope you see the end of religious pretense — the questioning of God and His goodness in times of trouble. Truly, accusation is always a part of phony religion!

## **Doctor's Diagnosis**

It wasn't until I became friends with two doctors that I learned something of the process behind a physician's diagnosis. Some in our culture today think that doctors, like ancient seers, have insight into the realm of the unknown. You go in complaining of an achy back and somehow they make the determination that you have kidney stones!

Family of God listen, the process for determining an illness is not mystical. Rather it follows a strict pattern: Observation, which leads to exploration, which ends in diagnosis. In other words, based upon the symptoms that are observed and described, and the results of the tests performed, and what is known about the body and processes the doctor makes an informed guess about what the problem is.

This is not to downplay what they do, but in the words of a physician friend, “it’s not rocket science, it’s observation and diagnosis.”

Because this is this case, we too must become physicians of the soul! We must observe the symptoms that exist in our walks with God and draw conclusions as to the health of our relationship with the Lord.

Accordingly let us hear the exhortation.

Where questioning of God exists. Where we indict Him for something that we don’t like and accuse Him of ill-will, neglect, and cruelty and draw His goodness into question we have the classic symptoms of religious pretense. This must always be our diagnosis!

This means that no matter how much we think that we have loved God, been faithful to His covenant, studied

and known His word, learned to pray, and have delighted ourselves in the Lord if trial or tribulation makes us accuse God, that is a sign/symptom that our walk has contained a kernel of merit such that it really has consisted of. heart far from God, a reverence consisting of tradition learned by rote, and religious pretense.

## Prodigal Son

In fact, notice with me the following case study. Luke 15 shows us the epitome of false religion.

In this parable of the Prodigal Son we also have the parable of the Prodigal Brother. You know the story. A young man longs to see the world and so asks for his share of the estate. After receiving his inheritance, he abandons his father and brother to farm by themselves, and goes to a distant land. There he wastes his money with loose living. In time he returns a broken individual where he receives forgiveness from his father, but not his brother.

Luke 15:25-30, “Now his elder son was in the field: and as he came and drew nigh to the house, he heard music and dancing. And he called one of the servants, and asked what these things meant. And he said unto him, Thy brother is come; and thy father hath killed the fatted calf, because he hath received him safe and sound. And he was angry, and would not go in: therefore came his father out, and intreated him. And he answering said to his father, Lo, these many years do I serve thee, neither transgressed I at any time thy commandment: and yet thou never gavest me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends: But as soon as this thy son was come, which hath devoured thy living with harlots, thou hast killed for him the fatted calf.”

The key to the bitter response of the older brother is found in verse 29: “But he answered and spoke to his father, 'Behold! For so many years I have been [literally] slaving you...”

Do you see the problem of this older son?

The spirit with which the older son had done his work for “all these years” was NOT the spirit of a son, BUT the spirit of a slave. He had served not out of love and gratitude, BUT out of merit/duty! Frederick Danker wrote of this verse:

“When he says I have served..., the mask drops, revealing the frigidity of the soul. The father thought he had a son! But to the older son the father's house spelled slavery.”<sup>14</sup>

The error of the older brother was his relating to the father on the basis of merit. To behold a feast thrown in honor of his brother was to conclude on the part of the oldest son that somehow the prodigal earned the feast. Leon Morris wrote of the elder boy:

“He did not really understand what being a son means. That is perhaps why he did not understand what being a father means. He could not see why his father should be so full of joy at the return of the prodigal.”<sup>15</sup>

Now when we assume the line of thinking represented by the prodigal brother — or as seen in the people of Samuel's day — the response is understandable. To observe a celebration in honor of “a bum” when you have done far more and received far less is to not receive the reward due to you on account of your merit. It arouses the feelings of anger at the injustice and impartiality of it all and so the result is to ACCUSE THE FATHER OF ILL!

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<sup>14</sup> Frederick Danker, *Jesus and the New Age*, page 277

<sup>15</sup> Leon Morris, *Luke*, TNTC, page 267

So again notice: Where questioning God exists, when indicting Him on account of a certain providence occurs., and God does something that you don't like and the accusations start to fly so also exists religious pretense, playing church, and heartless religion in spite of what your prior feelings may have been.

Now next week we are going to continue in our examination of Religious Pretense. However I don't want to leave you hanging.

What do you do if you find that the house of God “speaks of slavery”? What do you do when you walk with Christ has been a show?

Christ addressed these questions in the parable we just referenced.

Luke 15:31, “And he said unto him, Son, thou art ever with me, and all that I have is thine.”

Here the father assures his eldest son of two things: First of his position, “son.” Secondly of his possessions: “all that I have is yours.”

When accusations against God exist we have forgotten that we are children of God. God’s posture toward us is that He loves us, is working all things for our good and that He delights in us. And when we consequently seek to obtain the blessings and favor of God through our effort Christ addresses our religious pretense by showing us that we are His child and that all that He has is ours!

And thus Christ, through the father, exhorts the Christian here: Do you understand that You are my child? All that is mine is yours? What you are seeking while you are laboring in the fields is that which you already have received from me?

Ephesians 1:3, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ.”

All who struggle with religious pretense think that if they do this or that, God will bless them. In Christ, we have every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places. And thus we no longer need to relate to God as slaves in search of a blessing! Rather, we can and must relate to God as sons and daughters who have received God's blessing!

Such is the nature of the relationship we have with God. While we are off trying to please Him and getting mad when things don't go our way He is working all things in order to bring us to the end of ourselves and to the point where we are assured of His love for us in Christ!



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## **About the Preacher**

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