

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	The Psalms		Pastor/Teacher
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A Sacrifice of Thanksgiving

One of the most difficult realities to accept in the Christian life is that there really are people who are like whitewashed tombs. There are those who do everything right on the outside but are inwardly dead and rotting. The most famous example of this for most Christians is, of course, the Pharisees in the Gospels. They performed many pious rituals that impressed lay people while they callously devoured widows and orphans.¹ We would like to think that the New Testament Church would be free of such hypocrisy, but a quick survey of Acts and the epistles would show otherwise. This is the primary problem Jude appears to be concerned with,² and Paul mentions multiple men who were at one time co-laborers with him and then apostatized.³ And indeed this is actually a marker of the end times when Satan is doing his best to distract and disrupt the Church, as several passages tell us.⁴ Therefore we sadly cannot expect that there will be no hypocrites in any given church, but Psalm 50 reminds us that God is not fooled. He knows the heart of each man, woman, and child, and will ultimately separate the sheep from the goats when Christ returns to earth.⁵

1. Psalm 50:1-6 The Lord summons his court in judgment against his own.
 - a. Asaph begins this psalm with three different names for God. “El, Elohim, Yahweh.” This triple reference emphasizes God’s royal majesty and signals that this psalm will be an especially dramatic one.
 - b. The Lord summons the whole earth to his court in verse 1, and the heavens and the earth in verse 4. The Lord called the heavens and the earth to be his witnesses when they made their covenant,⁶ and he is now calling them as witnesses to his case that Israel has broken that same covenant. This is the most overwhelming testimony imaginable: God does not call just a handful of witnesses, as in human courts. He calls *all of creation* to testify against Israel. There is simply no chance that Israel can prevail against the Lord and vindicate herself in this trial. All of the conceivable evidence in creation is already marshaled to testify to the righteousness of the Lord (e.g. verse 2) and *against her*.

¹ For example, “And in his teaching he said, ‘Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes and like greetings in the marketplaces and have the best seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at feasts, who devour widows’ houses and for a pretense make long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.’” - Mark 12:38-40

² “These are hidden reefs at your love feasts, as they feast with you without fear, shepherds feeding themselves; waterless clouds, swept along by winds; fruitless trees in late autumn, twice dead, uprooted.” - Jude 12

³ For example, 1 Timothy 1:20 and 2 Timothy 4:14.

⁴ For example, “Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons, through the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared, who forbid marriage and require abstinence from foods that God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth.” - 1 Timothy 4:1-3

⁵ I am referring to Matthew 25:35-46, which is too long to quote here in its entirety.

⁶ “I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore choose life, that you and your offspring may live, loving the LORD your God, obeying his voice and holding fast to him, for he is your life and length of days, that you may dwell in the land that the LORD swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give them.” - Deuteronomy 30:19-20

- c. Verse 2 says the seat of God’s judgment is Zion, so he is, in fact, judging Israel from her capital city. This makes sense, as the Tabernacle (later the Temple) was designed to be a copy of God’s heavenly throne room.⁷ The Lord frequently warned the priests that if they did not perform their duties properly, the people would be unprotected from the just wrath of God against their sins.⁸ Psalm 50 describes just such a judgment against his people.
- d. Verse 5 is almost certainly referring to the covenant-making ceremony of Exodus 24, where the people swore to obey and Moses took the blood of the sacrificed animals and threw it on both the altar and the people.⁹ This is notably quite a different ceremony from the one in Genesis 15, where the Lord takes the threat of the covenant’s curses upon himself alone.¹⁰
- e. Verse 6 says that the Lord is both the Judge and the offended party making his claim in this case. Normally, in a human court, this would of course be a terrible conflict of interest. You could not trust a fallen sinner to be impartial and unprejudiced in his own case, but the heavens themselves testify to the perfect righteousness of the Lord.

2. Psalm 50:7-15 The Lord addresses his people as a whole.

- a. God begins his court case before all of creation with a relatively gentle rebuke (compared to the next section, verses 16-22) that sounds as if at least some of the people can be lovingly persuaded to obey more faithfully.
- b. The main point in this section is that many of the people are sacrificing with bad assumptions and for the wrong reasons. This is not surprising when you read about pagan religion around Israel at the time. Pagans would frequently try to bribe the gods to get what they want or look the other way when they did something wrong. If you read the epic poetry of Homer or Virgil you will notice, for example, an archer promising to sacrifice thousands of cattle to Apollo if he will make a single arrow hit its mark. The bigger the offer, the more likely that the gods would accept it. Psalm 50 very clearly implies that a lot of this pagan mentality had infected the Israelites’ thinking about the Lord. They thought that as long as they kept up the steady stream of sacrifices like paying your income tax, they would keep the Lord content and pacified. This, of course, was not the case.
- c. We should note that all of God’s reminders here and in the next section can be summarized with the phrase, “You thought that I was one like yourself” from verse 21. It is natural for us to try and understand God through the lens of our daily experience, and therefore imagine that he must be like the people we regularly interact with. The vast majority of serious errors in both theology and practical matters, however, comes from exactly this failure to realize that God is fundamentally unlike us in so many ways. In verses 8-13 the Lord reminds us that he does not need sacrifices for food, like creatures need to eat. Further, while we may own property with respect to one another on this earth, we do not own any property with respect to God. Considered from his perspective,

⁷ “They serve a copy and shadow of the heavenly things. For when Moses was about to erect the tent, he was instructed by God, saying, ‘See that you make everything according to the pattern that was shown you on the mountain.’” - Hebrews 8:5

⁸ “And Moses said to Aaron and to Eleazar and Ithamar his sons, ‘Do not let the hair of your heads hang loose, and do not tear your clothes, lest you die, and wrath come upon all the congregation; but let your brothers, the whole house of Israel, bewail the burning that the LORD has kindled.’” - Leviticus 10:6; compare passages like this with Exodus 19:24.

⁹ “And Moses took half of the blood and put it in basins, and half of the blood he threw against the altar. Then [Moses] took the Book of the Covenant and read it in the hearing of the people. And they said, ‘All that the LORD has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient.’ And Moses took the blood and threw it on the people and said, “Behold the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words.”

¹⁰ “When the sun had gone down and it was dark, behold, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, ‘To your offspring I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates.’” - Genesis 15:17-18

the Lord owns everything and we are merely stewards of his creation and he can give and take away as it pleases him. Over the years of his teaching ministry, R. C. Sproul often said that the most basic lesson of Theology 101 that we always ought to keep in mind is that God is God and we are not. Psalm 50 is one of the simplest and best proofs of that point.

- d. It appears that the people of Israel were still continually offering sacrifices and burnt offerings. If the author of this psalm is the same Asaph whom David appointed in 1 Chronicles 16:5 to lead worship in the Temple, it makes sense that sacrifices are still continuing. What is alarming is to think that even during the time of David, when Israel seemed to be at its spiritual height, that this rebuke would be necessary!
- e. Verses 14-15 make clear that the Lord desires the hearts of his people far more than their animal sacrifices. He wants a sacrifice of thanksgiving and the fulfillment of their promises to him at Sinai.
 - i. Recall that the Ten Commandments themselves are framed as grateful responses to the Lord's deliverance from Egypt. As we read them every week, the Lord reminds the people that he has rescued them from the house of slavery before placing obligations on them.
 - ii. The vows in verse 14 could refer to both the promises which individual Israelites made to the Lord¹¹ as well as their collective oath of obedience at Sinai. The point is that the Lord is always faithful to his covenant promises, and the people have to hold up their end too.
 - iii. These verses are designed to strike the hearts of believing Israelites and wake them from sleepy complacency. This is why they seem so much more like sympathetic pleading than the condemnation which is coming in the next section.
- f. Verse 15 makes clear that if the people keep their vows and fulfill the covenant of Moses, then the Lord will surely deliver them from all their enemies.
 - i. If they had done this, they would never have gone into Exile. But as we know, they did not keep their vows and so they were not delivered from the Assyrians or Babylonians.
 - ii. What is most disturbing about this warning and the eventual fulfillment of the Exile is that the believing Israelites are included here. The Lord will turn to address the hypocrites next, but since verse 7 he has been warning all his people, the sheep and the goats together. And indeed when the Exile came it did include both the faithful and the unfaithful together because as a whole they failed and were failed by their mediators.

3. Psalm 50:16-22 The Lord condemns the hypocrites among his people.

- a. Verse 16 clearly marks off the following verses as a distinct section from what has come before. Now the Lord is not addressing the entirety of Israel; he is focused especially on those who outwardly perform all kinds of pious rituals but are spiritually lifeless.
- b. It is helpful to have Romans 2:28-29 in mind as we read this part of the psalm.¹² Circumcision, which was given as a sign to all the children of Abraham (including both Jacob and Esau, for example), symbolized God cutting away at the stony shell of sin around the heart so that his Word would pierce through and reach the inner man. In

¹¹ For example, 'And she vowed a vow and said, "O LORD of hosts, if you will indeed look on the affliction of your servant and remember me and not forget your servant, but will give to your servant a son, then I will give him to the LORD all the days of his life, and no razor shall touch his head.'" - 1 Samuel 1:11

¹² "For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God." - Romans 2:28-29

other words, this is an Old Testament sign of regeneration, or being born again with new life, after which a person believes the Word and is saved. For someone who has an uncircumcised heart, on the other hand, the Word goes in one ear and out the other even if he has received physical circumcision in his flesh. This is the kind of person Psalm 50:16-22 addresses.

- c. We see in verse 16 that the wicked here recite the statutes and covenant of God correctly. They could recite the Ten Commandments and much more, very easily with no mistakes. But rather than take the Lord's words into their hearts, verse 17 tells us they toss those words over their shoulder like trash.
- d. Verses 18-20 describe several specific sins that show the hard hearts of the hypocrites.
 - i. They may not steal themselves, but they approve of thievery. This may mean letting others do their dirty work or just failing to aid the victims. Likewise they may not commit adultery themselves, but they are pretty comfortable with others who do. They make no effort to punish such people according to the Law of Moses and so purify Israel.
 - ii. The clearest sign of hypocrisy which hypocrites themselves give is their speech. It's harder to pin someone down and condemn him for speech, so hypocrites let their guard down here, giving their tongues "free rein for evil." A clever hypocrite will not directly steal or do violence, but he will verbally eviscerate his own brother, likely to make himself look more pious by comparison and give more cover to his play-acting. This is why it is *extremely* necessary to consider a candidate for ministry's habits of speech. If he has habits of distorting the truth, putting others down to lift himself up, or other strong signs of an unrestrained tongue, he should not be trusted with official authority.
- e. Verse 21 shows what fills the void when we ignore the Word of God. To the extent that we are not filled with his self-revelation, we will fall into imagining that God is like us.
 - i. In this specific case, the problematic assumption is that if God does not immediately bring down curses upon sinners the moment they sin, he must be looking the other way. He must be either ignorant or unconcerned.
 - ii. If we believe God's Word rather than our natural assumptions, we will not be fooled into thinking that God is blind to our sins, or to anyone else's.
- f. Verse 22 is a violent warning about the end of the hypocrite's road. If your heart is a stone that will not receive and believe the Word of God, the Law and the Gospel, there will be no one to deliver you from God's just wrath.
 - i. This is deeply disturbing if we think of ourselves standing naked with only our sins before the judgment seat of God, but it also means no wolves in sheep's clothing will escape justice. We may be fooled and trust in a popular celebrity preacher who seems to have all the answers and all the charisma to articulate them while hiding a heart of darkness, but God is never fooled. Not even for a moment.
 - ii. Furthermore, the Holy Spirit often uses exactly this kind of terrifying warning to cut through a stony heart. So if this warning hits you in a way the Law of God never has before, repent and believe God's promises of salvation, and you shall be saved! As you are reading this it is not too late, but it may be soon.

4. Psalm 50:23 The Lord will save those who heed his Word.

- a. Those who do heed these warnings show themselves to have circumcised hearts, as the Apostle Paul describes in Romans 2:29. By offering genuine, heartfelt thanksgiving to the Lord and ordering their lives according to his Law, they show themselves to really love him.
- b. In verses 7-15 the Lord addressed all who are outwardly part of the people of Israel. In verses 16-22 he warned those who are outwardly but not inwardly his people of their impending damnation if they do not repent. Here at the end he turns to those who are both outwardly and inwardly Israelites.
- c. We must notice both the continuity and the discontinuity between the people of God in the Old and New Testaments here.
 - i. The Church today is not under the threat of the curses of Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28 because Christ bore the curse of the Law for our sakes on the Cross. Therefore while Christ will cut off particular faithless churches as he does in the letters to the seven churches in Revelation 2, he will not call the heavens and the earth as witnesses against the whole Church the way God does here. We live as exiles and sojourners on this earth with respect to our unbelieving neighbors and the civil authorities,¹³ but we cannot be cut off from our Temple or our King, the way Israel was.
 - ii. The distinction between the visible and invisible people of God, however, still applies to us in much the same way. There are tares among the wheat in the Church, and this will continue to cause us pain and sorrow until Christ returns for his bride. Then as now, God is not fooled by any hypocrite, and will expose all their deceptions if they perish without begging Christ for forgiveness.
- d. The appropriate conclusion for us is much the same: if your heart has been made new by the Holy Spirit, this Word from the Lord will get through to you. Confess your sins and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. Give thanks for his great salvation and trusting him order your life according to his Law. Not in order to earn your salvation, which has already been completely paid for, but in order to give all the glory and credit to God as you live your life in the world.

¹³ “Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.” - 1 Peter 2:11-12