

Sabbath School Today

With the 1888 Message Dynamic

Health and Healing

Lesson 11: “Optimism: Happiness and Healing”

“Unbelieving Israel, not having the righteousness which is of faith, and so not appreciating the great sacrifice that the Heavenly Father has made, *sought righteousness by virtue of the offering itself, and because of the merit of presenting the offering*” (A. T. Jones, *Lessons on Faith*, p. 81, emphasis added). Israel came to believe the very act of giving an offering or making a sacrifice was what saved them, not the supreme sacrifice of the cross that their sacrifice foreshadowed. They could never find joy in the Lord who they believed expected an endless round of sacrifices.

There are some who are concerned that the “most precious” message teaches happiness and joy without responsibility. Afraid to believe the Good News is better than they think, they manufacture prerequisites that must be performed before the reality of the gospel is effective for them. Many think reciting a prayer that they believe, and confessing and repenting, provide the objective evidence that they are Christians. Almost always, the heart change necessary to make the objective act genuine is completely ignored.

A disturbing e-mail suggests a situation where this was taken to the extreme. A small boy, appearing to be about five or six years old has been caught stealing. His religion demands that he be punished in a way that forces him to confess his sin to the world, and repent of it for the rest of his life. The boy’s arm is placed in front of a car tire. A series of pictures depicts his father watching beside him as the car slowly advances so the tire crushes his arm. The purpose is to render his arm useless so he will never again be capable of using it to steal. Apparently, this is accepted as evidence that he has forever repented of stealing.

Jesus would never approve of self-mutilation as an acceptable method of gaining His approval for salvation. He told Israel: “I hate, I reject your festivals, nor do I delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer up to Me burnt offerings and your grain offerings, I will not accept them; and I will not even look at the peace offerings of your fatlings” (Amos 5:21, 22).* God tells them exactly what He means in verse 24: “But let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.”

Wherever you find rites and ceremonies emphasized in religion you can be sure there is a detour around the principle of the cross. No amount of rituals and ceremonies will force our hearts to love His law, because our sinful natures naturally hate it. The inevitable result is anger toward a God who requires the impossible. Generally we cannot admit this anger is really directed at God, so it is directed at those who disagree with us. We look for people who agree with our philosophy, and, like ancient Israel, add

ten thousand traditions, exactions, and hair-splitting distinctions in a vain attempt to give evidence of our own righteousness and to associate only with those who agree with us.

A. T. Jones comments on this: “What could possibly more fittingly describe a dead formalism than does this? And yet for all this conscious dearth in their own lives, there was still enough supposed merit to cause them to count themselves so much better than other people that all others were but as dogs in comparison” (op. cit.).

Just because it is possible to pervert the concepts of confession and repentance, the necessity for them remains. If saying the words is not enough, how is genuine confession and repentance possible? As we would say today, how do we get the “real deal”?

Ellen White analyzed the confession of Judas as being forced from his guilty soul by an awful sense of condemnation and fearful looking to judgment. His confession was defective because “there was no deep, heartbreaking grief in his soul, that he had betrayed the spotless Son of God and denied the Holy One of Israel” (*Steps to Christ*, p. 24).

The heart-broken prayer of David after his great sin illustrates the nature of true sorrow for sin (read it in Psalms 32:1, 2 and 51:1-14). “A repentance such as this, is beyond the reach of our own power to accomplish; it is obtained only from Christ, who ascended up on high and has given gifts unto men. Just here is a point on which many may err, and hence they fail of receiving the help that Christ desires to give them. They think that they cannot come to Christ unless they first repent, and that repentance prepares for the forgiveness of their sins. It is true that repentance does precede the forgiveness of sins; for it is only the broken and contrite heart that will feel the need of a Saviour. But must the sinner wait till he has repented before he can come to Jesus? Is repentance to be made an obstacle between the sinner and the Saviour? ... We can no more repent without the Spirit of Christ to awaken the conscience than can we be pardoned without Christ” (ibid, pp. 25, 26).

It is the work of the Holy Spirit to convict the heart of sin. Once conscious of our helplessness to do anything about it, the Spirit directs our attention to Calvary and gives us the capability to follow Paul’s advice to the jailer in Philippi: “Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ” (Acts 16:31). Salvation lies not in doing this or that good thing but in believing truth. As with everything in the gospel, even belief, repentance, and confession are gifts from Christ. Only when our hearts are melted by the love demonstrated at the cross, can we accept the message that puts any scrap of my merit permanently in the dust. Only the repentance and confession of Christ, demonstrated at His baptism and gifted to us through faith (which in itself is a gift), is the “real deal” for the searching world. Force, self-mutilation, or sacrifice will never cleanse and restore the stony self-righteous heart. It is only with humble appreciation of the cross that we can receive the healing of our heart that alone brings genuine happiness in the Lord.

—Arlene Hill

* Bible quotations are from the New American Standard Bible (NASB).