

Message #10

Zechariah 7:1-14

I want to begin today by sharing with you some things I have heard people say over the years about their church:

- 1) I love going to our church because we recite the Lord's prayer.
- 2) I love going to our church because every week we sing the doxology.
- 3) I love going to our church because we read the O.T. law and the 10 commandments.
- 4) I love going to our church because just being there makes me feel good.
- 5) I love going to our church because there is proper liturgy and religious pomp.

Many people love their religion. They love their religious stuff. They don't necessarily love the Word of God and they don't even care if they ever go through one book of the Bible and they certainly don't want to hear something that is deep, but they love their religious stuff. They love their Christmas candlelight services and early morning Easter Sunrise Services and they love their religious celebrations and their baby baptisms and their first communions. Most love it.

To most people, it doesn't matter if it is in the Word of God or not. In fact, most people don't think that is important at all because they just enjoy the religion; it makes them feel good.

I guarantee you this, most people have never, I mean never, stopped to ask, I wonder what God thinks about all of this. But there was one time in history when a bunch of men went to see Zechariah to ask him what God thinks about their religious stuff and what Zechariah told them was not what they thought they would hear. What he said was this:

GOD'S PEOPLE CAN PARTICIPATE IN ALL KINDS OF RELIGIOUS RITUALS AND HAVE HARD HEARTS THAT ARE NOT RIGHT WITH HIM AND BECAUSE OF THAT, THEY ACTUALLY RECEIVE NEGATIVE JUDGMENTS FROM GOD AND NOT HIS BLESSINGS.

Don't miss this. People can go through all kinds of religious rituals and never have hearts right with God.

Zechariah received eight amazing visions in one night in the second year of Darius' reign (520 B.C.). Two years had passed and now it was the fourth year of Darius' reign (518 B.C.) (7:1).

Zechariah had been communicating the fact that the people of God needed to turn from evil and return to the Lord.

Many of the people had taken the Word seriously and they got to work rebuilding the Temple and Jerusalem was once again full of life. New homes were going up, the Temple was being rebuilt and things were going along very well.

SECTION #1 – The religious men go to Bethel to ask a religious question. **7:1-3**

According to **verses 1-2**, on the 4th day of the ninth month, which is Chislev, which is the Babylonian name that refers to part of November and December, the city of Bethel sent a delegation of men to go to Jerusalem “to seek the favor of the Lord.” They were hoping for positive feedback about their religious services. They wanted to know God was happy with them just the way they were.

Bethel was located only about 10 to 12 miles north of Jerusalem. So these were part of the group that came back to the Promised Land and were in close proximity to the city. Now two key men who were sent were named Sharezer and Regemmelech, which are both Babylonian names.

Bethel had at one time been a city known for idolatry. When the people returned from Babylon, 223 men returned to the Bethel area (Ezra 2:28). Many of these people were connected to Benjamin (Neh. 11:31) and obviously these two were part of the group.

According to **verse 3**, the delegation went to Jerusalem to speak to the priests about getting a ruling on whether or not they should continue their mourning and fasting in the fifth month. Now the fast and mourning they are wondering about was the fast and mourning that remembered the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. and specifically the burning down of the house of the LORD (Jeremiah 52:12-13).

Ever since this had happened, the religious leaders of Israel had made this day a national fast and mourning day. They came up with their own man-made religious fast day and so now that the Temple was being built, these guys were wondering whether or not they should continue it. They wanted to know what God thought about their big fast day, now that they were back in the land and rebuilding the temple. They never thought about consulting God or His Word before they implemented the fast day, but now they want to know what He thinks.

God never ordered the nation to have this mourning and fast day; they had made it up themselves. People make up all kinds of religious things that are not in the Word of God. There are some bizarre things made up by men.

Typically those who make this stuff up aren’t real serious about what God has revealed in His Word. They are more concerned about their religious rules and traditions and laws and codes.

SECTION #2 – The answer from God to their religious question. **7:4-7**

The delegation from Bethel went to seek advice from the priests (**v. 3**), but God did not answer through the priests. The Word of the LORD came to Zechariah, who in fact was in a priestly family, but he was known as a prophet (Zechariah 1:1).

There is a tremendous point to glean from this. Questions need to be answered by the Word of God, not necessarily by religious leaders.

Religious leaders are only in a position to give true answers to questions as they know the Scriptures. I cannot tell you how many people are all messed up because of religion. They listen to religious leaders who do not know the Scriptures.

Now they had gone to the priests for answers but the answer is coming from Zechariah the prophet.

According to **verse 4**, God's Word came to Zechariah and instructed him how to respond. He says ask these boys three questions which, as Charles Feinberg said, are all designed to show "the sham and hypocrisy" of their attitudes and religion (*The Minor Prophets*, p. 305):

Question #1 - When you fasted and mourned was it really for God? **7:5**

There is only one national fast day that was prescribed by God in His Word and that was "the Day of Atonement" (Yom Kippur) (Lev. 16:29; 23:27, 29, 32). On that day, Israel was to mourn over her sins and the High Priest entered the Most Holy place with the blood of the sacrifice to make a national cleansing.

So when God says are these other mourning's and fasts really for Me. The real answer to this question is "No." God did not authorize it, they made it up themselves. Their fastings did not please God one bit. It meant nothing to God. Their religion was self-centered, not God-centered. **Their religion was based on their own feelings and whims, not on the Word of God.**

Now the men had asked about a fast in the fifth month (**7:3**), but when God answers He mentions the fifth month and the seventh month (**7:5**). All of the fast days for Israel had been implemented concerning the fall of Jerusalem in 586 B.C..

In the tenth month Nebuchadnezzar attacked Jerusalem (II Kings 25:1). In the fourth month the Babylonians took the city and the Jews fled (II Kings 25:3-4). In the fifth month the Temple was burned down (II Kings 25:8-10) and in the seventh month, Gedaliah, the Jewish appointed governor, was assassinated (II Kings 25:22-25).

To this very day, orthodox Judaism still observes the "fast of Gedaliah" in the seventh month. Four times a year the people fasted. They denied themselves food for one day and they mourned. But the problem with all of them was their motive.

Now every one of these fasts were not part of God's Word or law. The religious leaders invented them. People kept these fasts for years—586 B.C. to 518 B.C.. For 68 years these people went through all of their religious motions that to God meant zero.

This is a great question for all of us to ask ourselves. Are we really doing things for God or for us? When you sing or teach or give or pray, is it for God or for you?

Question #2 - Don't you eat and drink for yourselves? **7:6**

The real answer to this question is "Yes." Zechariah says what about your feast days. Zechariah says you do not do this for the Lord; you are doing this for yourselves.

Not only had the nation Israel fasted for the wrong reasons, but her festivals were for the wrong motives. She was not having festivals to get right with God; she was having them for fun. It is clear from the context that they were not eating and drinking with the goal of obeying God; they did it for themselves. He basically says you are a bunch of religious hypocrites. You are a bunch of self-righteous phonies. You love the religion, but you aren't serious about me or my Word.

I am convinced that many churches are right here. Many people are right here. Do you really believe that churches who are really living it up and putting on a public show are dead serious about carefully understanding the Word of God to the point that you reverence Him? Come on. It is a sham show. People like the religious show. They feel good about it. It seems to feel good. It makes you happy to do it. It is not reverent or serious about understanding God's Word. It is just like this in Israel.

Question #3 - Didn't the prophets tell you these things when things were prosperous? **7:7**

The answer is "yes they did." Zechariah is not the first to say this; the other prophets point this out, too.

When Israel was in a prosperous time, those other prophets told you that you were a bunch of self-righteous hypocrites going through all of your religious motions. **Instead of fasting and feasting, what they should have been doing was listening to the prophets of God and obeying the Word of God.**

SECTION #3 – God explains the reason why He does not favor them and answer their prayers.
7:8-12a

Now remember what you are about to see is done by people who are very religious who have their fast days and feast days and they regularly go to their worship services. God says here is the way you are in real life and here are the steps you need to take if you want My blessings. Every one of these things has to do with obeying God's Word. Here is a real twelve step program that can lead to blessings:

Step #1 - Obey the Word and dispense true justice. **7:9a**

Judicial decisions were not being made to mete out true justice. God says you make decisions that are true and right and are consistent with the Word of God.

Step #2 - Obey the Word and practice brotherly kindness. **7:9b**

There was no thought of showing lovingkindness and mercy to a brother. In fact, what had developed was brotherly meanness.

Step #3 - Obey the Word and practice brotherly compassion. **7:9c**

People right with God are compassionate and merciful people. Israel wasn't. They were hard, rigid legalists and law-focused.

Step #4 - Obey the Word when it comes to widows. **7:10a**

Widows were not getting help from the Babylonian government. There was no social security, or life insurance or pensions. Not only were the widows not cared for, but they were oppressed. God's people were taking advantage of helpless and defenseless people.

Step #5 - Obey the Word when it comes to orphans. **7:10b**

Many men had died at the hands of the Babylonians and it left many children as orphans. These people were going to worship services and didn't even care if the orphans had food or clothes.

Step #6 - Obey the Word when it comes to strangers. **7:10c**

The foreigner or non-Israeli was not protected and treated as God demanded (Ex. 21-22).

Step #7 - Obey the Word when it comes to the poor. **7:10d**

Many of these people were worshipping and could care less whether the poor person next to them even had a meal or place to stay.

Step #8 - Obey the Word and do not devise evil in your hearts. **7:10c**

This is a description of God's own people. They were actually devising evil plans to do evil things in their hearts. Instead of using their hearts and minds to learn about God, they were planning evil. I just heard a message given by person who said in today's world evil is on the internet and is one right click away. I guarantee you there are many people who go to church and they aren't clicking on things to pursue what is holy; they are clicking on that which is evil and then Sunday they say I'll go worship God.

Now these next steps have to do with their attitude about the Word of God. These people went to worship services but here was their real attitude about God's Word:

Step #9 - Obey the Word and stop refusing to pay attention to it. **7:11a**

They would go listen to the Word of God and then let it go in one ear and out the other.

Step #10 - Obey the Word and stop turning a stubborn shoulder to it. **7:11b**

These people stubbornly refused to apply the Scriptures.

Step #11 - Obey the Word and open your ears to hearing it. **7:11c**

This is what God-honoring worship does; it goes to worship with ears desiring to hear the Word of God.

Step #12 - Obey the Word because your hearts are hard like flint against it. **7:12a**

Do you understand what is being said here? These people were going to worship services and they had fast days and they had festival days and worship days and their hearts could not even hear the Word of God. They, not only weren't interested in truth, but their hearts were hard against it. They could not and would not hear the Word of God that was communicated by the men of God.

SECTION #4 – God explains the judgment action He took against His own people. **7:12b-14**

When God's people don't take God's Word seriously, God will do serious things against His own people. There are four judgment actions God took against Israel:

Judgment Action #1 - God sent great wrath against His own people. **7:12b**

This wrath came directly from the "Lord of hosts" and was aimed at His own people.

Judgment Action #2 - God refused to listen to their prayers and requests. **7:13**

Judgment Action #3 - God scattered His own people out among the nations. **7:14a**

Judgment Action #4 - God made their Promised Land a desolate land, not a blessed land. **7:14b**

People can have all kinds of religious rituals that mean nothing to God. He wants hearts that are tender and open to His Word.

God says I'm not impressed or interested in your fasting. I am not impressed with your feasting. I am looking for pliable hearts and minds that want to know My Word and apply it.

I look for people who love to hear My Word and obey it.

So the answer to the question "do we have the favor or blessings of God" is this—How serious are you about the Word of God.