

Faith Walk! - Sermon Discussion

Date : 5 Nov 2023 **Sermon**
Title : True Worship Matters
Speaker : Rev Shannon Chan
Text : Isaiah 29

INTRODUCTION

Most of you would know that we have finished “Our Love Is” series last Sunday. For those of you who have been following our Transformed by the Word daily Bible reading journey, the assigned Bible passage for today is from the book of Isaiah 29. And as I was studying this chapter, it seemed to me that the prophet may have been trying to underscore for us that in the life of the people of God, true worship matters - It certainly matters to God.

There are multiple themes in the Book of Isaiah which some scholars liken it to a mini-Bible with 66 chapters. Today, we will focus on a central theme made up of twin facets in Isaiah 29 – highlighting the interplay between Judgement and Hope, and what Bible scholar Dr John Oswalt suggests as the “perversion of the leaders and the destruction that must follow” - destruction in order to purify. You are encouraged to read the whole chapter of 29 later to better appreciate the content message.

Isaiah painfully pointed out that any hope for the nation would come only through judgement – This won him no friends because it’s a hard message that no one wanted to hear. The nation was going to be purged with cleansing fires of judgement to become a clean and bright lamp (Isa 4:2-6), and through whom all the nations of the world would be blessed – this spoken of in the Abrahamic Covenant back in Genesis.

Three Arenas - True Worshippers Should be Mindful Of

A. First Arena – The Plight of Spiritual Blindness (v9-12)

Some scholars believed that the “Woe to Ariel” in v1 refers to Jerusalem - literally translated as Lion of God. When God’s people do not obey Him, He allows a spirit of blindness to come over them, referred to in v9 as “blind yourselves and be sightless”. At the same time in v10, God has blinded the spiritual eyes of the prophets so that they and the people are unable to see the truth. V11-12 pointed to us that the Word of God was sealed by God to become a “closed book” and cannot be read by the people.

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A spiritually blind person cannot see the truth nor understand Godly wisdom. They live a worldly life marked by self-centeredness, self-referencing, selfishness and sin. In the end times, spiritual blindness, hardness and hardening of heart will become the norm. People will reject God and His word, right will become wrong and wrong will become right. Increasingly, we will see people engaging in unimaginable wickedness. This is the day and time that we are living in right now. In every media, it's unbelievable to see how quickly sins, disorder of every kind, evil and lawlessness have progressed.

We therefore need to protect our hearts and guard against spiritual blindness in our own lives. We need to get back to the basics and be grounded in the word of God, the foundation from which we teach and instruct. Otherwise, when things happen to us, we can be misled, misdirected, misguided, deceived and our faith derailed because we don't know well enough the Word of God – This means the whole counsel of the Word of God is needed for both sinners and saints alike, and not cherry-picking from the Word of God what we like or is nice.

German Pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer, well-known for his book “Cost of Discipleship”, said in another book “Life Together” that he wrote: The basis upon which Christians can speak to one another (needs to be out of the word of God) is that though he(she) is a sinner, he(she) can share in God's grace and glory and be God's child. This recognition gives to our brotherly speech, the freedom and candor that it needs, we admonish (out of the word of God) ... to go the way that Christ bids us go (the Bible tells us how Christ wants us to go). We warn one another against the disobedience (to the word of God). We are gentle and we are severe with one another, for we know both God's kindness and severity. And that is life together as the people of God.

B. Second Arena - The Peril of Mechanical Worship (v13-14)

In v 13, God says, “These people come near to me with their mouth, they honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is based on merely human rules they have been taught.” Sadly, Isaiah was referring to God's people, not unbelievers, who were worshipping mechanically and being ritualistically correct. Then they presumptuously believed that God was obliged to bless the worshipper who did the rituals correctly. They did not love God or obey Him, nor were they really loyal to Him. Their thoughts and decisions were bent away from Him, wanting more of what He can do and give, rather than wanting God himself. It is a case of wanting more of the blessings than wanting the Blessor.

Many of us can sound very spiritual with all the spiritual jargon and churchy words and appear to be very pious. Yet in our hearts, we do not love God nor obey Him. where obedience is concerned, we are to obey completely and not cherry-pick what

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we don't want to obey. If God says to do ABC and do it now, we do ABC and do it now, not ABZ or do it later. Partial or incomplete obedience is disobedience. When this happens, what mechanical worship can look like today is give the appearance of Christian spirituality without the substance, like a nicely decorated cake on the outside but hollow inside.

Furthermore, mechanical worship can all too quickly become meaningless worship, one which looks and sounds like a good version of Christianese, jargon, singing, but is superficial with no substance and nor genuine relationship with God on the inside. And here's the thing: False worship imitates true worship but without the true encounter with God. False worship possesses the form of godliness but without the power of God – with no power to transform lives of worshipper or the people around. False worship prefers tradition to God Himself. We can be lulled into a false sense of security with all the trappings of religion and religiosity. We can convince ourselves that because we are going through the motions of worship, we are in a good place spiritually.

But God is not interested in our rituals or religious activities. Rituals and practices are not necessarily bad thing, but it becomes an issue when we idolize them. God is more interested in our hearts and wants a relationship with us, not just our religious observances. So, for example, observing Sabbath but having no time for or interest to build a relationship with the Sabbath Giver.

It is easy for us to slip into a routine of worship, mouthing words, platitudes sounding very spiritual without even realizing that our hearts maybe far from God. We can become so focused on the external aspects of worship that we neglect the internal, the condition of our hearts for God. It is all too easy to do these rituals, the music, the liturgy, even the call to serve and yet, refuse to live the examined life. If we do all these rituals and service to the neglect of tending to our heart before God, then we are off-balance. We need to spend time tending to our hearts before God. It was also Socrates who said that an unexamined life is a life not worth living. It is therefore important for us to regularly examine our hearts and ask ourselves whether our worship is true, genuine. Are we truly God seeking, or are we merely going through the motions. Guard against mechanical worship which can slide into meaningless worship.

C. Third Arena – The Primacy of Holiness (v15-24)

Verse 15-16 “Woe” is pronounced on “those who go to great depths to hide their plans from God, who do their work in darkness” and think that no one sees them or will know what they do. Can the pot say to the Potter, “You know nothing”? In verse

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15, Isaiah points firmly to the foolishness and futility of trying to deceive God, to act as if we know it all and our Maker knows nothing.

Omnipresence means always present and omniscience means all knowing. In the latest movie Mission Impossible 7: Dead Reckoning, we encounter the entity – AI (artificial intelligence). It seemed to know everything that is going on and it seemed to be everywhere. Whilst AI is useful and helpful, but we have to be careful to not let the day come when we begin to worship it, no matter how smart it gets. Because our Maker is the only omnipotent, omnipresent and omniscient God – And we cannot just turn Him off or shut Him down at our will. Whereas AI, in the next Mission Impossible continuation, they will try to shut that thing down and turn it off.

Our Maker cannot be shut down or turned off which is wonderful, beautiful and reassuring. Beyond this, the promises made in Isaiah 29: 17-24 go beyond physical restoration, they deal significantly also with the spiritual needs of the nation and the people of God. God's promise that from out of judgement, God's people will be able to demonstrate His holiness or acknowledge the Holiness of the Holy One as translated in the NIV version of the Bible. The ESV translation talks about sanctifying the Holiness of the Holy One. It is actually to declare the Holiness of the Holy One, to embrace the precepts of God and submit to Him.

At the end of Isaiah 29, God's people will be able to demonstrate His holiness – that the kinds of attitudes and conduct, their choices that resulted in the nation's dark times in which they were living at that time, will be radically changed. Instead of hardness of heart and willfulness, they will reverence the Holy One by their glad obedience. For us, however, in the times in which we live, we need to be mindful that, it seems, what a pastor said, "Lots of people are praying and lots of people are repenting, but so few are changing their lifestyles." Nancy Leigh De Moss who is a Christian writer, states bluntly: The fact is, if people are not changing their lifestyle (their behavior, their conduct, their attitudes), they are not truly repenting. And if we are not repenting, then all our singing, praising and praying are useless – perhaps worse than useless, because all the noise and activity may deceive us into thinking that we are OK and that we are experiencing revival. But that's just pseudo holiness.

Instead, we are called to take time to be holy. We are charged by our Holy Forever God to be holy because He is a holy. It was Robert Murray McCheyne, the 19th century Scottish preacher who said, "The greatest need of my people is my personal holiness." That means that the greatest need of our spouse, our children, our family, our friends and fellow workers is not our acts of service, our friendship, our abilities, our financial support nor even our verbal witness of our faith, but first and foremost, they need most to see in us is that we are true worshippers of God who are a true reflection of what God is like – who demonstrate God's holiness in our lives.

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CONCLUSION

Our lives will either create a hunger and thirst for God in the lives of others, or it will be repulsive to them. So, what have we done with God's holiness? – Do we just sing about it, talk about it, discuss it? Or is it a life we live out and live from the inside out? So be a true worshipper who guards against spiritual blindness, mechanical worship and pseudo holiness. Because – True worship flows from holy hearts and holy lives.

A. Review Sermon Application

Purpose: Reflect on how you have been embodying God's truth.

- 1a. How successful have you been in fulfilling what you/your group had committed to do for the last FaithWalk!?
- 1b. What were some challenges you faced and what would you like to celebrate?

2. Appoint someone to read Isaiah 29 :9-24 slowly.
 - a. Why must the hope for the nation of Israel come only through judgement and to be purged with cleansing fires of judgement to become a clean and bright lamp (Isa 4:2-6) through whom all the nations of the world would be blessed?

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B. Relate Sermon Content

Purpose: Relate with the Truth and Resolve for Transformation.

3. Why must worshippers be mindful of the plight of spiritual blindness?
 - a. What can we do to guard against spiritual blindness?
 - b. What is one thing you can do in the week ahead to avoid spiritual blindness?

4. Why must worshippers guard against mechanical worship?
 - a. What areas of our lives do we exercise selective obedience only?
 - b. What areas of our heart needs tending to?

5. What does the primacy of Holiness mean to you?
 - a. Examine your life and see if it requires a change in your lifestyle?
 - b. What are you going to do about it now that the Holy Spirit has put His finger on it?
 - c. How can your group members encourage or help you to achieve 4b. above in the following week(s) till your next meeting?

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C. Testimonies, Prayer and Action

Purpose: Give glory to God, seek Him and embody His Word.

6. Share your experience of being convicted to change your lifestyle

OR

Give thanks to God that when you read God's Word, reflect and meditate on it, and allow it to transform your life, your life will speak and others will know your God.

7. With a prayer partner, bring all that have been shared to God, seeking the Holy Spirit's guidance on how to demonstrate God's Holiness in our lives. Pray also for your group and our church to be true worshippers and reflect God in our lives.

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