

Beware a Bargaining Relationship with God!

We are not discussing here the attitude of people who deny any claim by God on them and on how they live. We are discussing attitudes of people who think of themselves as within the circle of God's people and fool themselves by a bargaining attitude to God.

This can come in a number of forms. Through the Law of Moses God had arranged religious observances for His people, which included animal sacrifices, the use of incense, a place of worship at God's courts, special festivals, such as on the first day of the month and on the Sabbath. God also expected His people to pray to Him. However, prophets like Isaiah, Hosea, and Amos proclaimed God's rejection of the people's use of these practices in a bargaining way. Isaiah wrote, "Hear the word of the LORD, you rulers of Sodom. Listen to the teaching of our God, you people of Gomorrah! Of what use to Me are your many sacrifices?" asks the LORD. 'I have had enough burnt offerings of rams and enough fat from fattened calves. And I do not delight in the blood of bulls, lambs, and he-goats. When you come to appear before Me, who has asked from your hands for this trampling of My courts? Do not bring any more worthless food offerings. Incense is detestable to Me. I cannot endure the festival on the first of the month, the Sabbath and the calling of an assembly. I cannot endure the idolatrous cult and the festive assembly. My soul hates your festivals on the first of the month and your other appointed feasts. They have become a burden to Me. and I am tired of putting up with them. When you spread out your hands, I shall hide My eyes from you. Even when you make many prayers, I shall not listen.'"

People were going through the motions without a penitent, receptive attitude. They thought they were earning God's favour by a mechanical observance of what He had instituted. God wanted people to approach Him with penitent hearts, and He required that His mercy to them obliged them to show faithful love to their fellow human beings. Isaiah wrote: "Your hands are full of blood. Wash yourselves! Make yourselves clean! Remove your evil deeds from My sight. Stop doing evil. Learn to do good. Seek justice. Straighten out the oppressor. Bring justice to the orphan, and plead the case of the widow. Oh, come, let us argue the case together!' says the LORD. 'Though your sins are like scarlet, they will become as white as snow. Though they are red like crimson, they will become like wool. If you are willing and obedient, you will eat the good things of the land. But if you refuse and rebel, you will be devoured by the sword.' For the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

In the history of God's people all genuine reformation has begun with a call to repentance. Martin Luther saw the danger in people's buying indulgences from Tetzal and assuming that their purchase gave them God's forgiveness without penance. The sacrament of penance had become a series of mechanical steps, sorrow in the heart, oral confession of sin to a priest, and doing things, such as saying prayers or going on pilgrimages to make "satisfaction." There was little explicit connection between it and ongoing repentance and faith in Jesus Christ, who had won forgiveness by God's grace. The first of his *Ninety-Five Theses* was, "Our Lord and Master Jesus Christ, in saying "*Repent, etc.*" [where the Latin was often understood as "Do penance"] *meant the whole life of the faithful to be an act of repentance.*"

The Pharisees of Jesus day earnestly set out to keep the Law of Moses and the traditions that their elders had added as a fence around the Law, to make infringements of the Law less likely. The trouble with legalists is that they look for the remedy for breaches of the Law in more Law. They interpreted the Old Testament Sabbath Commandment in ways that overlooked the needs of hungry disciples and sick and sinful people. They thought that long prayers could cover over their devouring of widows' houses. They criticised Jesus for eating with people who had a bad reputation. Several times Jesus quoted Hosea 6:6 against a bargaining attitude to God, which saw no need for personal repentance and freely criticised others who did not come up to their own ideals: "It is not those who are healthy who need a doctor, but those who are sick. But go and learn what this means, '*I desire mercy, and not sacrifice*' (Hosea 6:6). For I have not come to call righteous people, but sinners." Against a wooden and unsympathetic application of the Sabbath commandment Jesus pointed out that, although the bread of the presence was reserved for the priests, the high priest, to whom David went for food, had a right and duty to use it to feed other people who were hungry. Jesus said, "Or have you not read in the Law that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple desecrate the Sabbath and yet are blameless? But I tell you that Something greater than the temple is here. If you had known what this means: '*I desire mercy and not sacrifice*' (Again, Hosea 6:6), you would not have condemned the blameless. For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath."

Our church has done a good deal in making sure that its doctrine and practice is in line with God's Word, and has often rejected false doctrines and practices. A person can be so very careful in saying, doing, and teaching the right things that he thinks that his rightness and his condemnation of what is wrong put him in a bargaining position with God. God requires a repentant attitude to Him, and faithful, compassionate love to fellow human beings. The chief needs of sinners are instruction, repentance, and forgiveness. From those who have received His mercy God expects compassion. Jesus made His point with a series of "not...but" expressions. Not the healthy, but the sick, need a doctor. God desires not sacrifice, but mercy. Jesus had come to call not the righteous, but sinners. However, Jesus was not suggesting abandonment of all sacrifice and prayer in favour of an internal Quaker-like religion. The Pharisees were very fussy in applying the command to give a tenth of even their garden herbs. Jesus denied that duty to God is always: "not...but". It is "both...and." "You have neglected the weightier matters of the Law: justice, mercy, and faithfulness. You should have done the latter things without neglecting the former."

A bargaining attitude to God should be resisted in our worship also. We need forms for worship. We have a regular order of service, but should remember that we do not approach God by observing human rules. Varying our forms of worship and modernising the language we use do not of themselves make worship sincere. We do not approach God by way of Law. The devil wants us to approach God by way of the Law. We should come before God as unworthy, repentant receivers, not as

people who do things and expect a corresponding response from God. We worship as people who are trustingly dependent on God's faithful love. We call our time in church on Sundays church "services", and easily and mistakenly slip into the attitude that the chief thing is what we do, serving God as we pray, praise, and give thanks. Rather the chief thing is God's servicing us with His gifts of forgiveness and strength for a renewed life of faithful love. We must beware mouthing words in prayer when our thoughts are miles away. When we begin a prayer, "Lord, God, heavenly Father", we must ask, "Apart from the fact that God does not speak directly as He did to the prophets, would we be utterly dumbfounded if He answered, 'Yes, what do you want?'" We must beware making petitions to God in the form of petitions, but with the attitude that we are making concessions to God, or thinking that our praying is a means of meritorious bargaining. We must not tell a child who has used bad language to wash his mouth with soapy water if it gives him the impression that following our rules has removed his sin.

Although we were by nature blind to God, and under the sentence of eternal death, God has sent Jesus to become sin for us, instead of us. Being in church without hearing God's Word benefits no one. Because we live only through the Gospel, we come before God as repentant receivers, lay our sins at Jesus' cross, and, refreshed by God's merciful Word and Sacrament, we begin our lives and work afresh in the power of Christ's resurrection.