

## **SEE WHAT PEOPLE DO IN GOD'S NAME!**

**Today's Text: Jeremiah Chap. 7; Mark 11: 15-19**

### **Extracts:**

- 1. The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord, saying, "Stand in the gate of the Lord's house, and proclaim there this word, and say, 'Hear the word of the Lord, all you of Judah who enter in at these gates to worship the Lord!... *Has this house, which is called by My name, become a den of thieves in your eyes? Behold, I, even I, have seen it,*" says the Lord [Jer. 7: 1, 2, 11]**
- 2. So they came to Jerusalem. Then Jesus went into the temple and began to drive out those who *bought and sold in the temple*, and overturned the tables of the *moneychangers* and the seats of those who *sold doves*. And He would not allow anyone to *carry wares through the temple*. Then He taught, saying to them, "Is it not written, '*My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations*'? *But you have made it a 'den of thieves.'*" [Mk 11: 15-17]**

*Late in 1987, I took advantage of my participation in an international conference in Tel-Aviv, Israel, to make a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. I arranged with a tour guide who took me alone everywhere that I wanted to see, especially as the place was not as dangerous then as it is today. By the end of the day, I was thrilled because the visit made the Bible much more real to me. However, I also had a feeling of disappointment. Almost at every site, whether by the Sea of Galilee, by the Jordan, or, more remarkably, in Jerusalem, you come across aggressive vendors who have commercialized what is supposed to be holy. They have bottled the water from the Sea of Galilee or the site where John the Baptist is said to have baptized Jesus Christ. They have packaged sands from Bethlehem and other places. All these are sold to tourists and pilgrims at exorbitant prices. The most popular meal by the Sea of Galilee is called "St. Peter's fish!" In Jerusalem, poor pilgrims are 'conned' to part with hard-earned currency on "where Jesus lay!" I came away wondering what people do in God's name.*

*Today's text has brought that experience vividly back to my memory. You do not need to go far to know what is going on in today's churches all in the name of God. If you think that your place of worship is immune from such practices, you are deceiving yourself! Why and how has the house of God been turned into a business? What are its implications for true worship? How can we get things back to what God wants? These and more are the issues that we shall examine in today's study.*

## 1. From praying to preying!

Take your mind back to when you first moved to your present place of residence a few years ago. Every place was fresh and clean. I am sure that you were determined to keep it that way. Some people are able to do so. However, for the majority of us, the place soon becomes unorganized, if not disorganized! The clothes that you were too tired to hang in the wardrobe a few days ago are still on the chair. The dirty clothes that have not been washed have piled up in the washroom. When last did you vacuum the carpet? Lately, have you not seen some unwanted visitors, such as cockroaches, cobwebs and dust? In like manner, the house of God can easily turn dirty, spiritually speaking.

When the risen Christ appeared to John on the island of Patmos, He had a message for each of seven churches in Asia Minor. For example, to the church of Ephesus, He recognized their good qualities but added, “Nevertheless, I have this against you, that *you have left your first love*” [Rev. 2: 1-4]. The church in Sardis was bluntly told, “You have a name that you are alive but *you are dead*” [Rev. 3: 1], while the church of the Laodiceans was rebuked for being *lukewarm* [v. 16]. Clearly, one message that rings through all the seven churches, which tend to represent the broad spectrum of today’s congregations, is that they were once pure but had now deteriorated. How can the house of prayer deteriorate into *preying* grounds?

It is quite simple! Let us see what Jesus resented when He came to the temple in Jerusalem several centuries after Jeremiah’s time [Mk 11: 15-19]. They can be summarized as follows:

### a) *There were buyers and sellers*

There were people who “bought and sold *in the temple*” [v. 15]. In other words, there was a demand to which suppliers responded. We are told that they sold “doves” [v. 15]. Under the Law of Moses, doves (or turtledoves) and other animals were used as sin offering or burnt offering [Lev. 14: 22]. Therefore, *the items for sale were those required for worship*. To facilitate exchange, there were also moneychangers in the temple to lend to the poor or to change money for worshippers from afar [Mk 11: 15].

Depending on where you worship, we all know that certain items are always in high demand. They may be communion bread and wine, bibles, hymn books, praying beads and crosses, candles and incense, anointing oil and handkerchiefs, etc. In the beginning, arrangements could be made to buy them from elsewhere. However, we may soon discover that we are out of stock when we badly need them during worship. So, a smart entrepreneur may set up a *convenience* shop within the church premises to carry the essential stock. Before you know it, the church leaders may decide to make the business an integral part of the church to also sell

videos, cassettes and books produced invariably by the pastor and his family!

b) *The practice was allowed by and benefitted the church leaders!*

Jesus would “not allow anyone to carry wares through the temple” and when the “scribes and chief priests heard it, ... they sought how they might destroy Him; for they feared Him, because all the people were astonished at His teaching” [Mk 11: 16, 18]. Obviously, the temple leaders were not about to stop the desecration of the temple because they were benefitting from it.

Who are the vendors of the religious items sold in your church? They are hardly outsiders or ordinary folks! They may actually be the family and/or close associates of the pastor or priest or the church committee. Their main motive is to make money. Who approves the recording of every sermon on cassettes or CDs or DVDs during worship? Who are the main buyers of those products outside of the pastor’s captive audience (his or her congregation locally or worldwide)? While technicians are doing the recording, are they also praying? Are they not similar to those in the time of Jesus who carried wares through the temple? If you were to preach against such practices, how much support would you get from the church leaders? Would they not see you the same way that the temple leaders saw Jesus Christ?

You can add more abominable practices to the above. For example, some people register a business with the name of a church and operate it as personal estate under an “a. k. a.” (‘Also known as’). That way, they are not accountable to their members and avoid personal income taxes on their collections as a church! I have heard of a pastor somewhere with less than a congregation of five (himself, wife and two children!) who would take pictures of large congregations in other churches nearby, and edit and send it to his associates in America as evidence of his “evangelical work” and the need for more financial support! Do you see what people do in God’s name?

**2. But preying has a negative impact on true worship!**

God brought Jeremiah to the entrance of the temple and asked him to observe the worshippers therein. God revealed to him how the people placed emphasis on *external religion* that was manifested in the following ways:

a) *The temple was a den of thieves*

God asked Jeremiah, “Has this house, which is called by My name, become a den of thieves in your eyes? Behold, I, even I, have seen it” [Jer. 7: 11]. We are told that the worshippers there stole, murdered and

swore falsely [v. 9], and oppressed strangers, the fatherless and the widows [v. 6]. Therefore, far from being the house of God, they had turned it into a den of thieves by refusing to repent and amend their evil ways [v. 3].

In like manner, God is speaking to you right now. Examine your practices. Are you cheating on your tithes and offerings? Then, you are robbing God [Mal. 3: 8]. Do you operate a church to make money instead of to deliver souls? Then, you are a thief and you operate a den of thieves.

b) *Rituals replaced true worship*

God spoke pointedly to the worshippers through Jeremiah, saying, “I did not speak to your fathers, or command them in the day that I brought them out of the land of Egypt, concerning burnt offerings or sacrifices. But *this is what I commanded them, saying, ‘Obey My voice, and I will be your God, and you shall be My people. And walk in all the ways that I have commanded you, that it may be well with you’*” [Jer. 7: 22-23]. With *unconfessed* murder, adultery and idolatry in their hearts, the people came into the temple and had the effrontery to pray, “The temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord are these” [v. 4].

How easy it is for us to assume that rituals will save us! We come to church early, sometimes twice a day. We receive communion at every service. We are very active in every church activity. We wear the best church robes with large crosses dangling to the floor. We speak in tongues even more than Paul! Our praise and worship albums and CDs are top of the charts. We have among the largest congregations in human history. Yet, we are not ready to obey God. Did He not say “to obey is better than sacrifice”? [1 Sam. 15: 22]. To prophesy or to speak in tongues or to cast out demons or to sing very well are gifts of the Holy Spirit but God will know us by our fruits, not gifts [Matt. 7: 21-22]! Therefore, if you cannot obey God, don’t call Him Lord! That will be mockery.

c) *Truth was persecuted*

God told Jeremiah, “This is a nation that does not obey the voice of the Lord their God nor receive correction. *Truth has perished and has been cut off from their mouth.*” In place of truth, “they have set their abominations in the house which is called by My name, to pollute it” [Jer. 7: 28, 30].

When you reject or downplay the absolute truth of God as revealed in His word, you are left with relative and shifting standards of human conduct. In no time, you have no standards at all. That is why in some of today’s churches, there are well known *practising* sexual perverts, thieves and

compromisers in the pulpit as ministers of God. I can imagine how God's heart bleeds when they open their mouths to pray and to exhort!

When undue emphasis is given to external religion, *lip service* (hypocrisy) replaces true worship. Without realizing it, people then worship “the queen of heaven” [v. 18] and the sun [Ezek. 8: 16] while supposedly inside the church. In vain do such people worship because God considers their hearts far from Him and their doctrines are the “commandments of men” [Is. 29: 13; Matt. 15: 7-9].

### 3. Happily, true religion is quite simple!

The word of God says, “*Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world*” [Jam. 1: 27]. God told the nation of Judah through Jeremiah, “If you do not oppress the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow, and do not shed innocent blood in this place, or walk after other gods to your hurt, then I will cause you to dwell in this place... forever and ever” [Jer. 7: 6, 7]. Therefore, true religion is much simpler than we make it. God referred to some acceptable practices in today's text as follows:

#### a) *Obedience is better than sacrifice*

This is what God has commanded, “Obey My voice and I will be your God, and you shall be My people” [v. 23]. To be honest with you, obedience is not easy for most of us! It involves doing what we don't want to do because we are afraid or impatient or it is demeaning, among other reasons.

Take the case of king Saul that faced imminent attack from the Philistines. The priest and prophet Samuel needed to perform some rituals before the attack and he asked the king to wait for him for seven days. At the end of the set time, Samuel had not shown up and Saul's troops were beginning to scatter in the face of pressures from the enemy. Out of fear, Saul performed the work of a priest that was not his spiritual role. Soon after he had made the burnt offering, Samuel showed up! When Samuel questioned why he did it, he replied, “I felt compelled.” Samuel told him, “you have done foolishly,” that is, he had acted as someone who did not trust God. For that, he lost his throne to David [1 Sam. 13: 1-14]. If you think that obedience is so hard, try the curses that go with disobedience [Deut. 28: 15- 68]!

#### b) *You are saved by grace for works!*

The worshippers in Jeremiah's days had thought that God would answer their prayers because they “had done all these works” [Jer. 7: 13]. They were fond of worshipping in high places [v. 31] as if that would bring

them closer to heaven! God called their worship abomination [v. 30] and reminded them of what He had done to Shiloh, the religious centre of the Jews during the era of the judges [v. 12].

The word of God says, “For *by grace you have been saved through faith*, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast, for we are His workmanship, *created in Christ Jesus for good works*, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them” [Eph. 2: 8-10]. In other words, “those who have believed in God should be careful to maintain good works (which are) good and profitable to men” [Titus 3: 8]. That was why God commanded those coming into His temple to demonstrate their faith and trust in Him by providing for the needy, namely, the stranger, the fatherless, the widow and the innocent [Jer. 7: 8- 10]. *Faith by itself without works is dead* [Jam. 2: 17].

#### 4. Conclusion: audit your practices!

Every church will run into spiritual problems as it expands. That is why it must invest in maintaining its spiritual strengths when Satan begins to send his messengers to mingle with the children of God. The early church did that by appointing seven deacons, including Spirit-filled Stephen and Philip, to take charge of administration while the apostles gave themselves “*continually* to prayer and to the ministry of the word” [Acts 6: 1-4].

“Continually” is not the same thing as “continuously”! The latter means to keep doing something “non- stop.” In spiritual matters, that is almost impossible! Continually, on the other hand, means to keep doing something *all the time* but with checkpoints along the way! That is why God gave us repentance as a tool to renew and maintain our relationship with Him *continually*. God is Spirit and He desires us to worship Him in spirit and in truth. So, we should stop trying to impress Him with our hollow rituals and human-defined rules and practices because we can never know His mind beyond what He has revealed to us. He has revealed that we must *first* obey before He can accept our rituals [Mal. 1: 11].

Audit your practices today, this moment. Then your church will no longer be a den of thieves but a house of prayer.