

A Form of Religion

Deuteronomy 33:44-52

Paul's warning to Timothy is clear. The danger is clear. He writes to Timothy,

2 Tim. 3:1 "But know this, that in the last days perilous times will come: 2 For men will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, proud, blasphemers..."

And the list goes on. But Paul is able to summarize those people who represent the perilous times of the last days.

2 Tim. 3:5 "...having a form of godliness but denying its power. And from such people turn away!"

A form of godliness. An outward form. An external form. An appearance. All of those things are meant to be critical of these people. They have a pretense of true religion, only a show of faith. In reality, they are empty. Devoid of anything that is real and true. They just look good on the outside. A form of godliness. But no actual evidence in their lives. They have a form of godliness but deny its power! That's the problem of the last days. That is the problem of our day. And that was the problem of Moses' day! The people had just a form, an empty form, of godliness.

The Greek word for godliness is the most comprehensive word for all that is included in the living out of the Christian faith. Godliness is a good translation. The older word is piety. We might use the word devotion. Or spiritual dedication and commitment. Actually, if you use the word religion rightly and properly, that's what the Greek word means as well. True religion. True Christian faith and earnest Christian life inseparably joined together with a fullness of genuine sincerity.

The problem is, however, then and now, is that too many people have a form of religion, only a form of religion, one which has no power to transform their heart or their life. So it will be until the end of the age. That's what we encounter here in Moses 32.

Remember where we are, after my being away for a couple weeks. This chapter is a great song of salvation, a song that recounts the great glory of God's work of salvation for his people, as a testimony against them to turn from their sin in truth faith and repentance. So here, again, is that focus on true religion. Not just the outward form, but true faith.

I. TRUE FAITH IS A MATTER OF THE HEART.

Look at these words. This is not a letter of the Apostle to a particular New Testament Church. These aren't the words of Jesus, taking something from the past history of Israel and making a new and distinct application for the lives of New Testament Christians. This is the law, the second giving of the law, Deuteronomy. And the point is that even then, in the Old Covenant, with Moses even as the law was given to the people of God, the issue was always an issue of the heart. Never did God simply seek from his people an external form of law-keeping that was separated from the willing and total commitment of their hearts.

v.44-46

Set your hearts.... That's the focus.

Just a quick reminder of a basic biblical truth, that we human beings have two parts, two components. They can be distinguished from one another, but they can never be separated. Nor can they be addressed one without the other. There is the physical part, the external, outward, tangible part. Flesh and

bones. And then there is the non-physical part. The internal and inward part. The heart! Sometimes called the spirit, sometimes simply the soul. I use all those words interchangeably, as I believe Scripture does.

Surely God addresses the physical aspect of our humanity. Our bodies. And we read about sins against the body, sins of the flesh. For example, perhaps the most obvious,

1 Cor. 6:18 “Flee sexual immorality. Every sin that a man does is outside the body, but he who commits sexual immorality sins against his own body. 19 Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? 20 For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God’s.”

But God also addresses the heart. Regularly and consistently. When Jesus was asked,

Matt. 22:36 “Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?” [His answer was clear.]. 37 Jesus said to him, “‘You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ 38 This is the first and great commandment.”

He is, of course, quoting Deuteronomy 6:5, so this emphasis upon the heart didn’t begin with Jesus’ teaching in the New Testament. It was always the focus of God’s law. Remember,

Deut. 10:12 “And now, Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you, but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all His ways and to love Him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, 13 and to keep the commandments of the LORD and His statutes which I command you today for your good? 14 Indeed heaven and the highest heavens belong to the LORD your God, also the earth with all that is in it. 15 The

LORD delighted only in your fathers, to love them; and He chose their descendants after them, you above all peoples, as it is this day. 16 Therefore circumcise the foreskin of your heart, and be stiff-necked no longer.”

Always, always, the focus of what the Lord requires of his people is a focus upon their hearts. “Therefore circumcise the foreskin of your heart, and be stiff-necked no longer.”

Paul uses that same image of circumcision, the focal point of the outward emphasis of Old Testament religion, in order to make the same point. True faith, true religion, true godliness is a matter of the heart.

Rom. 2:28 “For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh; 29 but he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the Spirit, not in the letter; whose praise is not from men but from God.”

A Jew in the Old Testament had to be circumcised, by definition.. Or, if female, she had to be represented by a circumcised male, her father or her husband. But that was never enough. “Therefore circumcise the foreskin of your heart, and be stiff-necked no longer.” I proclaim the same message with the same emphasis to this day. True faith is a matter of the heart.

But it is not a merely subjective experience. That is to say, we don’t have the freedom, each one of us, to decide for ourselves what is right and what is wrong. This emphasis upon the heart doesn’t leave to decide for ourselves how we will serve and worship God. For with Moses here in Deuteronomy 32,

A. God calls us to a focused commitment to his word.

The focus of our hearts is not mere emotion. It is not a merely

subjective, personal religious experience. That focus of our hearts must have a proper definition. Look again at,

v.46

This law was never intended to be oppressive. It was never to be a burden but rather a blessing.

Deut. 11:18 “Therefore you shall lay up these words of mine in your heart and in your soul, and bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. 19 You shall teach them to your children, speaking of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up. 20 And you shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates, 21 that your days and the days of your children may be multiplied in the land of which the LORD swore to your fathers to give them, like the days of the heavens above the earth.”

Neither were these laws to be a form of mere external conformity, addressing only outward behavior. The behavior defined and prescribed by these laws was to be a matter of heart. Thus the focused commitment of our lives to all the precepts and commandments of his law is a matter of the heart. It is a matter of love. “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.”

And that love, that focused commitment, is expressed by your obedience.

B. God calls us to the devotion of obedience to his Word.

Notice again how verse 46 ends. The words of God’s law upon which we set our hearts must bring about the response of obedience.

v.46 “Set your hearts on all the words which I testify among you today, which you shall command your children to be careful to

observe—all the words of this law.”

Indeed, as Jesus puts it so clearly,
John 14:15 “If you love Me, keep My commandments.”

That’s actually something of a promise, an encouragement, as it could be translated, “If you love Me, you will keep My commandments.”

That’s the point. That’s the emphasis. And this obedience, this obedience of love, is directly connected with the promise and hope of the gospel itself.

1 John 5:3 “For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome. 4 For whatever is born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith. 5 Who is he who overcomes the world, but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?”

Do you believe that Jesus is the son of God? You who do, this is the encouragement, that despite your conflict with sin, despite the temptations of this world, despite the sinful lusts of your own heart, you will overcome the world! God will enable you to overcome the world. God will enable you to do the very thing he commands you to do, which is to show your love to him by keeping his commandments as a matter of your heart.

And even in Deuteronomy, even in the day of Moses, we see clearly the encouragement of good success in that lifelong endeavor. For,

C. God calls us to a useful and fruitful endeavor.

This call to loving obedience is not one of burdensome despair. Nor is it a matter of self-help or self-improvement. As we

read in verse 47, it is not a futile endeavor. It is not vain, or empty. Or meaningless. There is a purpose to this call of God which we typically call sanctification, growing in obedience or advancing in the pursuit of holiness. It is the path by which we come to know God, by which we come to live with God in fellowship with him. It is the path by which we truly are able to enjoy God, to delight in him. And to enjoy his blessings upon us, the greatest blessing being his pleasure in us!

Look at,
v.47

This is life. Real life, meaningful life. That you walk with the Lord in all his ways. That's the purpose, the useful and fruitful endeavor to which we are called—namely fellowship with God. And beloved, that's life. That's the meaning of life. And the enjoyment of that life is the very blessing of God that is promised to his people who love him.

Deut. 30:15 “See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil, 16 in that I command you today to love the LORD your God, to walk in His ways, and to keep His commandments, His statutes, and His judgments, that you may live and multiply; and the LORD your God will bless you in the land which you go to possess.”

In the language of the Old Covenant, that meant a long and prosperous life in the promised land which the nation of Israel was about to inherit. “...by this word you shall prolong your days in the land.” That doesn't translate to the prosperity gospel of our day, the promise of earthly wealth and prosperity, good health, nor even the assurance of being able to live to a ripe old age. Some godly people die quite young, and many don't enjoy a huge measure of earthly riches. But the promise is much greater than all of those things. The useful and fruitful endeavor to which we

are called is not defined by the riches of this world, but by the riches of true fellowship and communion with God. Now, in this world, and for ever.

But there is, of course, a problem which we all know about. The problem of sin. Our sin. And so, as we see here,

II. TRUE FAITH COMES TO TERMS WITH SIN.

v.48-51

Moses himself would physically inherit the promised land. He would die on the mountain. And be buried. And there is a reason for that, a lesson to be emphasized and proclaimed. Namely this, that,

A. Throughout this age, we continue to live under the burden of death.

And we live under that burden, we live under that curse, because of sin. “The wages of sin is death.” That's the curse. And until the end of this age, the consummation of the ages, until the end of the world when Jesus returns to fully and finally that last remaining enemy to be destroyed, we continue to live under that burden. In other words, we die. We are mortal and corruptible creatures. And this flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God. It must be transformed.

That has been the case ever since Adam and Eve sinned in their rebellion against God in the Garden of Eden.

Gen. 2:15 “Then the LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to tend and keep it. 16 And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, “Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; 17 but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.”

We know the history, of course. They did eat of that forbidden tree. They did gain the knowledge of evil, they fell into sin. And they immediately received the curse of death.

Gen. 3:17 Then to Adam He said, "Because you have heeded the voice of your wife, and have eaten from the tree of which I commanded you, saying, 'You shall not eat of it': "Cursed is the ground for your sake; In toil you shall eat of it All the days of your life. 18 Both thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you, And you shall eat the herb of the field. 19 In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread Till you return to the ground, For out of it you were taken; For dust you are, And to dust you shall return."

They died. They were expelled from the presence of God. They lost the glory of their created state of innocence. Their bodies became mortal flesh and their souls became slaves to sin. By nature, Paul would describe that condition in Ephesians 2, they became children of wrath.

And that is the curse from which we are redeemed by the blood of Jesus. That is, of course, the central meaning of the promise of the gospel. But the point here in Deuteronomy 32 with the death of Moses is to reaffirm and renew the sense of the burden of death, the burden of the curse. We remain under that curse, even as Christians. Until the end of the age.

But...and this is so important. But there is hope, as there is in Deuteronomy 32.

B. Throughout this age, we are able to live with the confident hope of eternal life.

Notice how this chapter ends,
v.52

Moses saw the land. He would physically inherit it, he

wouldn't live there in the flesh. But he saw it. He lived with that hope, that certain confidence of God's promise to his people, that is was "the land which I am giving to the children of Israel."

Abraham, we are told, had that same hope, didn't he?

Heb. 11:8 "By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to the place which he would receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. 9 By faith he dwelt in the land of promise as in a foreign country, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise; 10 for he waited for the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God."

And so it is by faith that we live as well. With Moses, we can see that promised land. And that is our confident hope too. It is what Peter would call our living hope! And that is a great foundation for the praise which we freely offer to God.

1 Peter 1:3 "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His abundant mercy has begotten us again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, 4 to an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, 5 who are kept by the power of God through faith for salvation ready to be revealed in the last time."

Unless Jesus returns soon, all of us will die as Moses died, still waiting for the inheritance. But we wait with hope. With confident hope. With confidence assurance. We too wait "for the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God." We wait for that inheritance which is reserved for us, undefiled, an inheritance that does not and will not fade away. "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His abundant mercy has begotten us again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead."

That's the context of this whole book of Deuteronomy, the second giving of the law. And that is the context by which we, today, are called to the very same thing as the people of Israel, to set our hearts upon the word of God. And to be careful to observe all the words of his law. True faith is a matter of heart. It is not just a form of godliness, an outward form. It is not just a pretense, an external show of some vague form of spirituality. No true religion is the expression of the heart by which we show forth our love to the God who has redeemed us. People of God, "Set your hearts on all the words which I testify among you today."