

Judgment and Promise:

God Speaks through the Prophet Jeremiah, #3

## “Worthless Religion”

Jer. 7:1-8:3

--CEFC 1/31/21;

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We may live in a secular age,

but I have no doubt that we human beings remain incorrigibly religious.

"Man is the ape that wants to be god," wrote philosopher Walter Kaufmann.

“Religion is rooted in man’s aspiration to transcend himself. . .

Whether he worships idols or strives to perfect himself,

man is the God-intoxicated ape.”<sup>1</sup>

It’s true--every human culture at every stage of human development

has displayed some form of religious expression.

And the Bible gives us a good reason for that—

it tells us that all human beings are created in the image of God,

and all human beings have some knowledge of God within them.

But the Bible also tells us that because of our fall into sin,

we human beings have suppressed that knowledge of the true God--

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<sup>1</sup> in his *Critique of Religion and Philosophy*, pp. 354,355, 359.

the one holy and supreme Creator of heaven and earth--  
and have turned away to worship other gods—  
gods of our own making.

We worship created things rather than the Creator.

Paul writes of our human condition—

**"For although they knew God,**

**they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him."** (Rom. 1:21)

Instead, they exchanged the glory of the immortal God

for that which is not God.

Because of that sinful human tendency

I am always very suspicious of religion—

religion of all sorts—

even religion that comes with a Christian face,

for as John Calvin said, we are by nature idol-making factories.

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Because we are fallen creatures, estranged from the true God,

our default position with regard to religion is what is commonly called **paganism**.

Essentially, paganism is the belief that there are forces beyond us which shape our destiny,  
and somehow, we have to try to get them to be on our side.

Through history that has manifested itself in idolatries of all sorts

including forms of ancestor worship and all forms of animism,

which deals with the spirits that live in the rocks and trees.

When I was in a village in Senegal, West Africa, with our missionary Dave Lanham,  
 an ancient tree there was considered the dwelling place of spirits,  
 and it was thought that if a woman got too close to it,  
 she might become infertile.

That tree was a powerful force in that village.

And that kind of belief is to be found around the world,  
 and it is certainly a part of the European heritage.  
 It may have added a Christian facade,  
 and has taken on some more sophisticated forms --  
 but I believe paganism still lies just below the surface in all cultures.

How many of you still say "Knock on wood," and even do it,  
 when you make some statement about how well things are going for you--  
 as in, "I haven't been sick in over five years--knock on wood"?

That expression is found in all the European cultures  
 and may reflect the pagan ideas of knocking on a tree so that the spirits within  
 don't hear what you've just said,  
 which tempts them to overturn  
 your immodest presumption of good fortune.

This is what all superstitions are about—  
 getting the unknown forces of fate or luck or good fortune to be with you  
 and not against you.

And superstitions still abound in our culture--

I remember when one of our boys was just learning his numbers.

We are going up an elevator and he asked,

“Dad, why isn’t there a thirteenth floor?”

Why should crossing your fingers make something good happen

or stepping on a crack or breaking a mirror result in misfortune?

But we don’t believe in these things, not really,

but the thought does enter our minds.

Scholars are uncertain as to the precise derivation of the word “superstition,”

though many believe that it may have come from the Latin word for “survivor.”\

The Latin writer Cicero said that “superstition” defines the faith

of people “who spend the whole day in prayer and sacrifice

in order that their children may survive them.” (using the word *superstites* there).<sup>2</sup>

Superstitious practices are a means of getting on the right side of those mysterious forces--

looking for security and prosperity in this uncertain world.

So there have often been superstitions associated with things like

marriage and childbirth--

The bride and groom seeing each other on their wedding day is considered bad luck;

or throwing rice at a wedding ensures that the couple will have many children

(though concern for birds has diminished that custom,

even if, in fact, rice doesn’t hurt birds at all).

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<sup>2</sup>*Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 6.240.

And superstition has always been prevalent  
 among those who venture out on the high seas--especially among fishermen.  
 One book recounts the myriad superstitions still alive  
 among the people who live in small fishing villages  
 in the northeast.<sup>3</sup>

For example, wives never say the word "Goodbye" to their husbands--  
 it's bad luck.

And, as you can imagine, superstitions abound among those involved in combat,  
 or in its civilized substitute—sports.

In my experience, baseball players are the worst--  
 perhaps because they have so much time to think about it.

Hall of Fame third baseman, Wade Boggs,  
 whom I knew in high school,  
 was once named one of the Top 10 Most Superstitious Athletes in America.<sup>4</sup>  
 He used to eat some form of poultry before every game.  
 He and his wife published a recipe book called *Fowl Tips* (spelled F-o-w-l)<sup>5</sup>--  
 which was reported to have 162 ways to cook chicken!

Superstition is a way of getting on the good side of the gods  
 by seemingly trivial actions or rituals.

It is a way of exercising certain quasi-magical powers.

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<sup>3</sup>See *History Today* article, 1994.

<sup>4</sup> by [Men's Fitness](#) magazine [\[40\]](#).

<sup>5</sup> *Fowl Tips: My Favorite Chicken Recipes* (1984).

Because of the sinfulness of our nature,  
 religious practice quite often degenerates into a form of superstition,  
 and we see this played out in the history of Israel in the Old Testament.

God revealed himself to Abraham and his offspring,  
 he spoke in his law to Moses on the mountain,  
 he continued to address the people through his prophets,  
 but over and over again, the people turn from him  
 and engage in perverse forms of religion—  
 in their own attempts to control God.

The pagan impulse in humanity keeps raising its ugly head. //

A. W. Tozer said, "Most men . . . play at religion as they play at games,  
 religion itself being of all games the one most universally played."

We look this morning at how the ancient Israelites at the time of Jeremiah  
 played this game—  
 and how religion was corrupted in his day  
 particularly as it related to the temple of God in Jerusalem.

Worthless religion—that's what Jeremiah is warning the people of God about.

The covenant relationship with the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob  
 had been corrupted into a form of pagan superstition.

Jeremiah wants them to know that

True religion must deal with the true God,  
*and religion without righteousness is reprehensible in God's sight.*

That's a lesson that we need to learn, too.

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Let's dig into Jeremiah 7 and listen carefully to this word of God.

Jer. 7:1--This is the word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD:

2 "Stand at the gate of the LORD's house and there proclaim this message:

" 'Hear the word of the LORD,

all you people of Judah who come through these gates to worship the LORD.

v. 3 "This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says:

Reform your ways and your actions, and I will let you live in this place.

4 Do not trust in deceptive words and say,

"This is the temple of the LORD,

the temple of the LORD,

the temple of the LORD!"

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It was almost as a magical chant—"This is the temple of the LORD"

"How can anything bad happen to us!

We have the temple of the Lord!"

And maybe the Israelites had some justification for such confidence.

A hundred years before during the reign of King Hezekiah,

the southern kingdom of Judah had been attacked by the Assyrians.

The enemy was at the city gates,

but the Lord promised to defend the city and to save it---

and he did.

An angel of the Lord wiped out the invading army in one night, and they withdrew.

So the people came to the conclusion—

“We may now be threatened by the advancing Babylonian army,

but God is on our side,

and the temple is his dwelling place.

Surely nothing can harm us so long as we have this temple.

We’re safe.”

But the prophet Jeremiah, proclaiming the word of the Lord,

says to them, “You are wrong!”

You might as well cross your fingers or knock on wood

for all the good that temple will do you.

Look at v. 8—

“But look, you are trusting in deceptive words that are worthless.

“Will you steal and murder, commit adultery and perjury,

burn incense to Baal and follow other gods you have not known,

10 and then come and stand before me in this house, which bears my Name,

and say, “We are safe”—safe to do all these detestable things?”

11 “Has this house, which bears my Name, become a den of robbers to you?”—

Has it become a hideout?

Do you see the sanctuary as a safe house for sinners?

Do you think you can continue in your wicked ways

and somehow get a pass because you enter into this building?

**“But I have been watching! declares the LORD.”**

“Nothing goes unnoticed—I see it all.” /

“You have mistaken the symbol for the reality it is meant to stand for.”

The reality is the relationship of God with his people--

the temple is the visible symbol of that relationship.

It was the means by which God’s presence was manifest in their midst.

But your indifference to God and his demands upon your lives

has ruptured the relationship--

so you are now foolish to trust in the temple.

“How will you escape my judgment upon your wicked ways?” says the Lord./

And to illustrate his point,

the Lord gives them a history lesson.

In v. 12, he directs their attention to Shiloh--a city to the north

where the Lord had also once had a visible symbol of his presence.

**“ ‘Go now to the place in Shiloh where I first made a dwelling for my Name, ‘**

**and see what I did to it because of the wickedness of my people Israel.”**

The tabernacle,

that tent of worship in which was held the sacred ark of the covenant

with the tablets on which were written the Ten Commandments,

that sacred tent had once been pitched in Shiloh.

But did that prevent an enemy victory over the people living there?

No, in the time of Eli the priest, the Philistines overran the army of Israel.

They plundered that place and seized the ark of God.

“This is what I did because of the wickedness of my people in Shiloh,” the Lord says,

“Will I treat you any differently?”

v. 14—“Therefore, what I did to Shiloh I will now do to the house that bears my Name,  
the temple you trust in, the place I gave to you and your ancestors.

15 I will thrust you from my presence,

just as I did all your fellow Israelites, the people of Ephraim.’

The temple of God is no good luck charm.

In thinking that it is

you have only perverted true religion.

**“You are trusting in deceptive words that are worthless.”**

You have turned a relationship with the living God

into a superstitious game of magic./

And this is a common perversion of religion--

taking an outward form and forgetting how it was supposed to function.

This sort of perversion is witnessed throughout history--

it seems to be a natural result of our fallen nature.

I think of the bronze snake that Moses made--

remember that?

Numbers 21--

The people of Israel in the desert were grumbling against God,  
and the Lord sent poisonous snakes in their midst as punishment.

The Israelites cried out to Moses, confessing their sin,  
and Moses prayed for them.

And the Lord told him to make a bronze snake and put it up on a pole,  
and anyone who is bitten can look at that snake and live.

Nothing else is said about that bronze snake

until we get to 2 Kings 18, during the reign of King Hezekiah.

We read there that the king, in his efforts to stamp out idolatry,  
had to destroy that bronze snake that Moses had made  
because the people were burning incense to it!

Instead of being a reminder of the way the Lord had graciously answered their prayer,  
this symbol became a false god--

they were worshiping before it as an idol.

It had become a superstitious fetish.

And didn't this same thing happen in the middle ages

with the supposed relics of the saints--

like "the pieces of the cross of Jesus,"

or the bones of John the Baptist, and all the rest--

these became talismans, good luck charms,

used to drive away evil spirits.

I think of the story of the soldier in World War II under fire.

He dives into a fox hole for safety and begins to dig in.

While he's digging, he discovers a crucifix.

All of a sudden, another man jumps into the fox hole with him.

"O great!" the first one says, "A chaplain."

He grabs the crucifix and says, "Now just tell me how this thing works."

We scoff at this sort of perversion,

but we must beware of perversions of our own.

For every inward relationship takes on some outward form--

Jesus, in fact, gave us two such forms himself--

baptism and the Lord's Supper.

These ordinances must never be ripped away from their proper context in the gospel

as signs of a relationship with God based on our faith in Christ alone.

They can't stand on their own--

as if they had some magical powers in themselves to convey blessing

(which is what pagans call "good luck").

No, the form is meaningless if we forget its function.

We can too easily focus on the symbol and forget the reality.

That's about as foolish as me cherishing my wedding ring and neglecting my wife.

And that applies to other religious forms, as well--

I think of our Bibles—

Just holding it, setting it on your coffee table or by your bed—

or even revering it, does no good.

We must actually read it,  
 and even then, we must read it in faith,  
 seeking the God who is revealed there.

When you say,

**“The temple of the Lord, The temple of the Lord, The temple of the Lord!”**

You are trusting in deceptive words that are worthless, the Lord says (v.8).

You would do just as well to carry a rabbit’s foot

or put a horseshoe above your door. /

**True Religion Isn’t Superstition,**

**and True Religion Is More than Mere Ritual.**

The prophet moves from an indictment of their false confidence

in the presence of the temple,

to a false confidence in what went on within it.

Look at v. 21—

**21 “ ‘This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says:**

**Go ahead, add your burnt offerings to your other sacrifices”—**

“Go ahead—perform all the prescribed rituals of sacrifice—

Present your burnt offerings, fellowship offerings,

sin offerings, and guilt offerings—

Do all you want, keep them coming—it doesn’t matter to me—

you might as well **“eat the meat yourselves!”** he says.

Make a great barbeque out of it, as far as I’m concerned.

It means nothing to me, nothing at all.”

“What?” they might say—“The Lord doesn’t care about our sacrifices?

Weren’t we commanded to offer them?

Jeremiah, how can you say God doesn’t want them?”

The Lord’s answer, through the prophet, is stunningly simple:

Just read your Bibles--carefully?<sup>6</sup>

v. 22—“For when I brought your ancestors out of Egypt and spoke to them,

**I did not just give them commands about burnt offerings and sacrifices,”**

The word “just” in v. 22 is added by the translator—it’s not in the Hebrew.

It’s put there to make the point that, in fact, God did give them commands

about burnt offerings and sacrifices, but not **just** those commands.

But the real point the Lord is making here is really one of chronology—

When he, in his love and grace,

brought the Israelites out of the bondage of slavery in Egypt

and he spoke to them on Mount Sinai,

he didn’t give instructions about how to offer sacrifices—not at first.

No, “when I brought your ancestors out of Egypt and spoke to them,

**I did not give them commands about burnt offerings and sacrifices,**

**23 but I gave them this command:**

**Obey me, and I will be your God and you will be my people.”**

He first gave them commands about how they are to listen to him,

to obey him, and to fear him.

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<sup>6</sup> C. Wright, 116.

He gave them the Ten Commandments—

They were to have no other gods before him

and they were to live in his ways in their relationships with other people.

They were not to murder, or commit adultery, or steal, or lie, or covet.

In other words, they were to treat other people

with dignity, respect, and honor.

And if they listened to his voice in obedience,

then they could live in relationship to him as his people.

Only after this, did he give them instructions about their religious ritual--

how, in their response to that relationship, they were to offer their sacrifices

as tokens of his holiness

and of their need of his grace and mercy.

The Lord wants them to know that **True Religion Is More than Mere Ritual.** /

When people of think of religion

they often think of the various ritual forms it takes—

they think of the things that religious people are supposed to do—

Go to church,

pray certain prayers,

read their Bible—

maybe in some circles, go to confession, take communion.

Good things, no doubt.

But none of these things has merit in themselves--

they don't make us righteous, or insure our prosperity.  
 Yet how easily we pervert these good things.  
 We invest our religious rituals  
 with a significance they were never meant to have.  
 Isn't this what Jesus was talking about in Mt. 6—  
 He talks about giving alms--putting money in the offering plate,  
 and praying and fasting--  
 those who do these things just to be seen by other people  
 have got all the reward they're going to get--  
 for God is not impressed.

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But why did the Israelites do it?

What went wrong?

How is religion corrupted so easily, even by the people of God?

Quite simply, they had come to a point

where the God they thought they were worshipping was not the true God.

The Lord says it earlier in Jer. 2:11—

**"But my people have exchanged their glorious God  
 for worthless idols."**

2:13 --**"My people have committed two sins:**

**They have forsaken me,  
 the spring of living water,  
 and have dug their own cisterns,  
 broken cisterns that cannot hold water."**

They had turned from their God.

For he is a living God, a personal God,

not a magical force.  
 and he is a holy God, a righteous God--  
 and the true worship of this holy and personal God  
 requires a moral response.

7:9 “Will you steal and murder, commit adultery and perjury,  
 burn incense to Baal and follow other gods you have not known,  
 and then come and stand before me in this house, which bears my Name,  
 and say, "We are safe "--safe to do all these detestable things?"

No, never!

You can't do that. It doesn't work that way.

Religion is corrupted when we separate our way of worshiping  
 from our way of living.

You can get away with that separation in pagan religion,  
 but not in the religion of the Bible.

Quite simply, **True Religion Requires Righteousness,**  
**for it involves a relationship with a holy God.**

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What?

Are you saying that religion is all about our trying to be good?

Are we saved by our good deeds?

Is it just a matter of obeying the rules?

Is that what counts?

No, I am not saying that at all—  
and neither is Jeremiah.

Our relationship with God always comes at his initiative—  
it is always grounded in his grace.

And we see it here—

Notice how the Lord identifies himself—

v. 3—he is **“the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel”**—

He has chosen Israel to be his people—

he had promised Abraham to make of him a great nation  
that would bring blessing to all nations—

It was a promise that Abraham simply received by faith.

And then in v. 7,

The Lord refers to **“the land I gave your ancestors for ever and ever.”**

The land was a gift—they didn’t deserve it. Far from it!

The Lord had saved these people from the bondage of slavery in Egypt.

But the Lord doesn’t save people, so that they can sin--

He calls them to himself so that they can become like him.

He had saved them so that they could reflect him as his image in the world.

This is what the covenant is all about--

from the beginning.

The Lord rescued the Israelites from slavery,

and then he gave them the law.

“You are mine, now become like me.”

He may be merciful to sinners,

but he is never indifferent to sin.

A relationship with God requires repentance—

a turning toward God that must include a turning from sin.

v. 3—“This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says:

**Reform your ways and your actions, and I will let you live in this place.”**

Here the Lord is laying out a promise which is also a threat—

This covenant arrangement of being my people

living in the land I gave you

can only work if you live in a certain way.

And what does it mean to “**Reform your ways and your actions**”?

Verse 5 sets forth the conditions that must be met--

**“If you really change your ways and your actions**

**and deal with each other justly,**

**if you do not oppress the foreigner, the fatherless or the widow**

**and do not shed innocent blood in this place,**

**and if you do not follow other gods to your own harm,**

**then I will let you live in this place,**

**in the land I gave your forefathers for ever and ever.”**

Notice carefully what God is concerned with here--

There are what we might call “religious sins” --

“going after other gods--idolatry”—false worship.

But just as prominent are what we might call “social sins”—false living.

**We must deal justly with other people--**

and that includes things like--

**not oppressing the foreigner--**

that person who has been displaced by war or economic hardship

and who finds himself among you as an immigrant.

**and not mistreating the fatherless--**

the children with no family network to protect them and support them,

vulnerable to the those who would prey upon them.

**and caring for the widows--**

those who are without a provider--

the economically destitute.

**and not shedding innocent blood--**

probably referring to the miscarriage of justice--

especially in accusing, convicting, and even killing people

who don't deserve it.

You must look out for the powerless in society

who have no recourse when justice is not done.

The Lord says,

only if you really concern yourself with these issues, with these people--

with the displaced,

with those with no protector,  
 and no provider,  
 those who are powerless--  
 only as you see that these people are dealt with justly  
 will I deal mercifully with you,  
 and meet with you  
 and provide for you and protect you in this place.

These are people created in my image—

people I care about,

people I identify myself with.

If you would be like me, you must care about them, too.

Then again, this moral requirement is picked up in v. 9—

The words there intentionally hark back to the Ten Commandments—

referring to theft, murder, adultery, and perjury,

and following after other gods--

the requirements of the covenant--

“This is what my relationship with you entails--

a commitment to righteousness.

Without that, our relationship is impossible.”

True worship requires a moral response,

for I am a God of righteousness and justice, says the Lord.

I require absolute allegiance and exclusive loyalty.

Do you understand that?

You can't live in a relationship with me in any other way?

Hadn't the Lord already compared his relationship with Israel to a marriage?

What kind of marriage can exist when a husband or wife

goes off with other lovers

and lives in deceit and falsehood?

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The hearts of these people are so corrupt

that the Lord tells Jeremiah not even to pray for them—

it will do no good.

Look at v. 17--

**“Do you not see what they are doing in the towns of Judah**

**and in the streets of Jerusalem?**

**The children gather wood,**

**the fathers light the fire,**

**and the women knead the dough and make cakes of bread for the Queen of Heaven. They  
pour out drink offerings to other gods to provoke me to anger.”**

You talk about family devotions!

The fathers and mothers and children all involved

in the worship of the Queen of Heaven,

probably some sort of fertility god.

The continued cry of both the popular priest and the false prophets

was “Do this and you will prosper--

do this and you will have life--

life to the full.”

But it was a false hope, it was a lie--

for in reality,

this pagan religion, this worthless worship,

this superstitious and idolatrous pursuit of life,

resulted in just its opposite--death.

For one thing,

it resulted in the death of their own children--

v. 31-- **"They have built the high places of Topheth in the Valley of Ben Hinnom**

**to burn their sons and daughters in the fire."**

They sacrificed their own children.

And their theology was so perverted

that they supposed that they were pleasing the Lord with this,

but the Lord says that such a practice was inconceivable to him--

**"something I did not command, nor did it enter my mind."**

Killing your own babies was an abomination in his sight.

And then there is the spiritual death that results

when, as we read in v. 15--

the Lord thrusts these people from his presence.

And then there is the death of their land--

far from bringing fertility to their crops and herds,

their idolatry only brings destruction--

v. 20-- **"Therefore this is what the Sovereign LORD says:**

**My anger and my wrath will be poured out on this place,**

on man and beast,  
on the trees of the field and on the fruit of the ground,  
and it will burn and not be quenched.”

In fact, death is the prevailing image with which this passage ends.

Just read it—it’s horrific!

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Theirs was a false worship, a worthless religion—  
it was out of touch with reality—the reality of the living God.

The Lord sums it up in v. 28,

**“*Truth* has perished; it has vanished from their lips.” /**

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Our God is a holy and righteous God,  
and any relationship with him demands a moral response.

And the New Testament, just as much as the Old, affirms this truth.

In Hebrews 12:14 –**“Make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy;  
without holiness no one will see the Lord.”**

Or Paul in 1 Cor. 6--

**“Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God?**

**Do not be deceived:**

**" Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers**

nor men who have sex with other men,  
 nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers  
 will inherit the kingdom of God” (1Cor. 6:9-10).

Religion is perverted when worship is separated from holiness—  
 as if God were unconcerned with righteousness.

Jeremiah warns us of such worthless religion,  
 and so does Jesus.

Concerning the religion of the scribes and Pharisees, the Lord Jesus says--  
 “You hypocrites! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel.

You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cummin.”

In other words, You are religious to a "T".

“But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—  
 justice, mercy, and faithfulness” (Mt. 23:23).

And Jesus said, “Many will say to me on that day,  
 ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name  
 and in your name drive out demons  
 and in your name perform many miracles?’

Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you.  
 Away from me, you evildoers!’ (Mt 7:22-23).

Outward religious devotion without the devotion of the heart,  
 evidenced by a commitment to righteous living, is simply paganism, pure and simple,  
 and our God will have none of it.

There can be no gap between worship and life,  
between Sunday and the rest of the week.

You can pray and read your Bible,  
you can sing hymns and worship songs with great gusto,  
and even enjoy the preaching of God's Word.

But if you feel no moral demand of God upon your life--  
a moral demand with very public and social dimensions—  
one that influences the way you treat real people,  
then you are not worshiping the God of the Bible.

The Lord will not put up with religion that is not concerned with righteousness.

You can offer all the right sacrifices,  
but not do what is right in God's sight.

You can keep all the religious rituals--  
and not be right before God.

You can even belong to the religious right,  
and not be right with God.

For the God of the Bible wants to change the lives of his people  
so that his image is restored  
and they more accurately display his character.

He wants to produce lives that in very practical ways  
demonstrate the reality of his reign in the world.

Listen to the Book of James--

“If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue,  
he deceives himself and his religion is worthless.

Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this:

to look after orphans and widows in their distress

and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.” (James 1:26,27)

We are to make disciples, Jesus said--

but disciple-making is not just a matter of

teaching someone how to become religious,

but how to become righteous,

It's about purging us of the paganism of our culture

a paganism that infects every one of us;

and instead, teaching them how to be filled with the Holy Spirit,

who leads us in the footsteps of Jesus Christ.

Let me be very clear—

We are not saved by our good deeds.

No, we are saved by the grace of God

found in the work of his Son who died and rose again.

We are saved as we are born again by the Spirit

and receive the Lord Jesus in faith.

And there is hope—

after that list of those wrongdoers who will not inherit the kingdom of God,

Paul says, “**And that is what some of you were.**

**But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified**

**in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ**

**and by the Spirit of our God."**

That's the good news of the gospel—

As we simply come to God in faith as we are in all our moral failure,  
we can be washed, we can be sanctified, we can be justified

**"in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ**

**and by the Spirit of our God."**

But to be real and alive, that faith must result in real repentance—

a turning to God by turning from evil.

And a faith without good works is a dead faith.

So beware of a truncated gospel—

a gospel of faith without repentance;

of forgiveness without transformation;

of profession without regeneration;

or of baptism without obedience--

a salvation from sin without a salvation for godliness.

That kind of religion is worthless in the sight of God.

And only the work of God by the Spirit can make any of this possible,

for we are all too much like Israel to ever save ourselves. /

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I like the story of Neils Bohr,

one of the premier physicists of the twentieth century,

when asked why he had a horseshoe hung on his wall--

“Of course I don’t believe in it,” he said.

“But I understand that it brings you luck  
whether you believe in it or not.”

Our God is not like that--

for whether we believe in him or not makes all the difference in the world.

He will not be our good luck charm.

True religion requires a personal trust--

a personal trust that requires a moral response--

Then we will be his people, and he will be our God,  
and we will truly live.

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### Prayer--

Jesus came into the temple in Jer. in his day--

and accused it of being a den of robbers.

Would he say the same of us--

not because we have moneychangers in the lobby,  
but because we have confused religion for righteousness--  
because we have confused a relationship with the living God  
with a superstition that we think will ensure our safety and good fortune.

May it never be, Lord--

protect us, Lord--

we know we are liable to those same sins.

Jesus said--

John 10:10 The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy;

I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.

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Closing Hymn: #315 *Let Your Heart Be Broken* [vv. 1,3,4,5

Benediction:

Num. 6:24 ` "The LORD bless you and keep you;

the LORD make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you;

the LORD turn his face toward you and give you peace." '

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Judgment and Promise:

God Speaks through the Prophet Jeremiah, #3

Jan. 31, 2021

## “Worthless Religion”

Jer. 7:1-8:3

As creatures created in God’s image, human beings are incorrigibly religious. But because we have turned away from the true God, our religious impulse is corrupted and is led astray by falsehood and misdirected toward idols. This can be true even of the people of God. Our passage this morning warns the Israelites of worthless religion, and the prophet’s words serve as a warning to us:

*Religion without righteousness is reprehensible in God’s sight.*

### I. True Religion Isn’t Superstition

### II. True Religion Is More than Mere Ritual

### III. True Religion Requires Righteousness

It involves a relationship with a holy God.

*The Problem of Sin  
and the Remedy of the Gospel*

Sermon Response:

## **“Worthless Religion”**

Jer. 7:1-8:3

- Are you superstitious (just a little bit)? Where does that come from? Why is superstition so common in our world?
- How do people try to use religion to manipulate God? How does religion function in their lives when they do this?
- How would Jeremiah’s message upset his listeners? Why would they find it offensive? How could we find it offensive?
- Why must a relationship with God include a demand for righteous living?
- Consider the things listed in Jer. 7:5-11. How do they translate into your life? What kind of righteousness does the Lord want to see in you?
- Think again about some of the New Testament passages that speak of the need for holiness— Heb. 12:14; 1 Cor. 6:9-11; Mt 23:23; Mt 7:21-23. How can we hold together this demand of righteous living with the grace of the gospel?
- What has God saved you for?
- Spend some time praying for the message of this passage to sink into you life and the life of our church.

