

Title; Missing the point  
Text: Zechariah 7.1-14  
Theme: True Obedience  
Series: Zechariah #8  
Prop Stmt: The efforts of works righteousness are not just useless; they are poisonous.

Read Text:

God chose the nation of Israel to be an example and an attraction to the world. God's intention was to show his glory through them. Well, how does God show his glory through people? A related question is, how can God show his glory through people who are so rebellious, stubborn, and sinful? Certainly, God can show the glory of his power through judgment. He can show the glory of his righteousness by expressing righteous condemnation, but there is more to God than righteousness. God is also merciful. In fact, God loves to show his mercy and prefers to show his mercy. So, God chose the nation of Israel to be a people through whom he could reveal his mercy without compromising his righteousness. Well, how do you do that? How did God do that?

The primary way that God revealed his righteousness was by giving to Israel the law. The law that God revealed to Moses who recorded it and taught it to the nation of Israel was not only a constitution that governed the everyday life of Israel, but it was their teacher. The law instructed them about God. The expectations and standards of the law taught them that God was holy and righteous and could not condone sin and rebellion. In fact the law helped them understand what sin and rebellion was by addressing and defining issues such as idolatry, stealing, lying, immorality, coveting, dishonoring your parents, abusing the weak, bribing officials, homosexuality, swearing, etc.

A very basic understanding of God's law made this very, very clear: I have sinned against and offended my Creator. What can I do about it because if I take this law seriously, I keep offending God? Well, the law also revealed that there was a means by which the sinner and rebel could be forgiven. That means was by offering a sacrifice that was prescribed by the law. There were specific laws about what kind of sacrifice for what kind of sin and who could offer it, and when it had to be offered, etc. You could not come up with your own law or your own remedy. You had to follow what God had revealed.

But there was another very, very important factor. In order for the sacrifices for your sin to be effectual (effective for forgiveness), you had to actually believe it. In our way of thinking, "your heart had to be in it." If you were just going through the motions, it did not work. In fact, it was worse than not working. If your heart was not in it, then what you were doing was a sham. It was a lie. You were doing something that you did not believe in, which meant that you were assuming that God did not know or that God did not care. In other words, God will give me a pass if I just go through the motions.

What is the thinking behind that idea that "God will give me a pass if I just go through the motions"? It is "work-righteousness." In other words, I can impress God, others and myself by doing sacrificial, regular, and accepted religious actions. Now, you might be

able to impress others and certainly yourself by doing to sacrificial, regular and accepted actions, but you cannot impress God. In fact, God is increasingly offended by your actions because you think you can deceive him. The reality is this: You are deceived! And when you are deceived into thinking that your efforts give you a pass from God, then you will use that pass that you think you have as an excuse for sinful behavior. Not only that, but you will be tempted to look for other things that you can do in order to earn a few more passes, so that you can continue to sin, without having to face the consequences.

So, here are three very, very important points to grasp.

- 1) People who embrace works-righteousness are the most difficult people in the world to convince that they are actually sinners who deserve the righteous, wrath of God. They can't accept the reality of their need because they assume that they have all of these merits and points based on the many "good" things they have done. It is devastating to come to grips with the fact that every "good" thing that we do is not good, but only adds to our condemnation.
- 2) People who embrace works-righteousness create their own economy of forgiveness. In other words, they (not God) assign value to their "good" or religious activities. So now you have to create a system where this sin is worth so many bad points, and now you have to do a good or religious act that is worth the same or a few more points in order to take care of it.

Honestly, it's pretty easy to pick on religious systems like Roman Catholicism because of their system of codifying sins and offenses and assigning Hail Mary's and Our Father's and other things you have to do like candle lighting and prayers to saints as meritorious deeds that supposedly compensate for sin. It is pretty easy to point out the fatal flaw in that. But what is not easy to see is the tendency in my own heart to assign values to things that I do and compare myself to other people and think that somehow I am loved more, or forgiven more, and, frankly am just fundamentally better than someone else because of the things that I do. The bottom line is this. I cannot contribute a feather's weight of righteousness to my standing before God. God's law was given to reveal my need.

- 3) The Law not only revealed my need and revealed a way for people who lived in the Old Testament to be forgiven, but the entire law pointed forward to Jesus Christ. That is why, in order for a person who lived in the OT era to be forgiven, that person had to believe what God had revealed ("their heart had to be in it") and if their heart was in it, if they truly believed in what God had revealed, then, the evidence of that faith would be a life that pursued obedience to God's Word.

Zechariah was a prophet who lived around 500 B.C. In chapter 7 he records the words of God that God revealed to him in response to a specific situation.

1. **Here's the situation and the question.** (1-3)

Note: Hosea, Joel, Amos, Micah, Zephaniah all date their lives and ministries according to the kings of Judah or Israel. Zechariah gives the dates of his oracles and visions according to a foreign king, which is a reminder that all is not right. The people of God are living under the dominion of a foreign power. So, while things are better than they were during the invasion, things are not yet where they ought to be. In fact, a related question that the Jews had was: “is the exile over?” How were they supposed to know when it was over? This influenced a situation that came up in one of the cities of Israel.

The residents of a town called Bethel (House of God) were having this debate. Should we keep fasting like we’ve been doing for the past 70 years? In the Old Testament law, there was only one day a year when the nation of Israel was commanded to fast, and that was on the Day of Atonement. But, in 586 B.C., the city of Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians and they basically destroyed it and burnt the Temple to the ground. So, in an act of mourning, ever since then, the Jews would fast one day during the 10<sup>th</sup> month in remembrance of when the Babylonians laid siege to Jerusalem. Then they would fast one day during the fourth month in remembrance of when the city walls of Jerusalem were broken through. Then they would fast during a day in the 5<sup>th</sup> month in remembrance of when the Temple had been burned and they would fast one day during the 7<sup>th</sup> month in remembrance of when Gedaliah (governor appointed by Nebuchadnezzar) had been assassinated. There is nothing wrong with fasting and you are free to fast, if you want to. What you are not free to do is to demand that other people fast, just because you want to. Neither are you free to assume that you are better than others because you fast when other don’t. Just so that we are clear... There was one day a year when all of Israel was supposed to fast. But, the Jews had added four more days of fasting, and now, it had become expected.

So now that the Temple was being rebuilt (it was about halfway completed) and now that Jerusalem had some leadership again, the question was raised, should we keep fasting in the 5<sup>th</sup> month and 7<sup>th</sup> month? It obviously did not make sense to some while to others, it had obviously become tradition, and woe be unto you should you ever break tradition.

Many of you know how these conversations go don’t you? You grow up in a family where certain things are done (like eating rice pudding on Sunday afternoon), and those certain things don’t make a great deal of sense to you, so you ask. “How come do we this?” And the brilliant answer comes back, “Cause we have always done it this way.” You say, “Yea, I know, but how come we have always done it this way.” Then comes the next brilliant response. “Stop asking questions and clean up your room like you are told.” Answers like that don’t satisfy do they? So, eventually when you have the opportunity, you stop eating rice pudding on Sunday afternoon and then what happens? Grandma gets involved, right? I mean, Grandma could have been dead for 23 years, but she still gets involved. “What would your Grandma think if she knew that you did not eat rice pudding on Sunday afternoon. Of course, you are thinking that Grandma would probably be jealous because she was probably sick and tired of making rice pudding every week of her life, but of course you can’t say that. Well, something like this was going on in Bethel. And no one can argue rules like the Jews.

Should we or should we not keep fasting on the 5<sup>th</sup> month and the 7<sup>th</sup> month. The other two fasts were not questioned. So a couple of guys go to Jerusalem to ask Zechariah. This itself represents a change.

Bethel was a city in the former Northern Kingdom, called Israel as opposed to the Southern Kingdom called Judah. Bethel was one of two cities where an alternative religion (idolatry) was established so the residents of Israel would not go to Jerusalem for the religious festivals or sacrifices. Prophets would go there and preach against the idolatry and would be persecuted and killed for it. Now, Bethel is sending a delegation to Jerusalem and asking a prophet what they should do. Granted, the northern kingdom was wiped out 200 years before this event, but, this is a bit of progress.

## 2. Here's the answer. (4-7)

They came in order to ask a question and God ends up asking them a question. When you fasted and mourned in the 5<sup>th</sup> month, was it for me? But, the question wasn't just for this delegation, was it? Notice (v.5) that this is for all of the people and the priests as well.

Do you understand what God is getting at? Let me explain it this way. Let's say that you get busted for drunk driving and you have a court date before the judge. Your lawyer gets together with you and says, "Ok, this judge is usually pretty tough on these cases, so here is what you need to do: 1) You need to start going to AA meetings. 2) You need to enroll in an alcohol abuse course or better yet, join a program at a clinic or alcohol rehab center. 3) Go to church and see if you can get a letter from the priest or minister, or whoever, it really does not matter as long as it sounds religious, saying that you are really trying to turn your life around. Etc.

In other words, here is how you work the system. Do all of these things, and the judge may go easy on you. Now, what is missing in all of that counsel? Repentance! What is the attorney saying? If you want to minimize the consequences, do these things so that you can get your old life back. But, your old life is the problem! That is exactly what is going on here. The exile in Babylon was the result of generations of rebellion and the exile was bad. So, for many of the Jews, they were mourning the circumstances of the exile way more than they were grieving over their sin. Even their fasting was done in an effort to get God to change their circumstances. But, here is very important, and yet very difficult truth to grasp. God is infinitely more concerned about changing you than he is about changing your circumstances.

But, that is not how most people see it. In fact, that may not be how you see it. We are very tempted to think that God is the ultimate force or power that we need to leverage in order for us to get for ourselves the life that we think we deserve. In other words, God is the means to an end and the end is our happy, healthy, successful and wealthy life. So, when something threatens your happy, healthy, successful and wealthy life, you are tempted to go to church or some equivalent of running to God, right? Because you tend to think that these bad things happen because you did not go to church enough, or give enough money, or ..... And there are plenty of people who will sell you that poison. And

will try to convince you that if you only think happy thoughts about God, and do positive things that God will come through for you and you will be successful in life. That is not the point. We do not fast, or serve, or worship, or trust, or follow God so that our lives will be coated with heavenly Teflon that keeps all negativity from sticking to us. God is so glorious that he is worth my trust and my obedience no matter what.

So, how do you know when God has really changed your heart? One of the ways you will know is when you rejoice that your bad circumstances led to a change in your heart. How many of you would choose the bad circumstances if they led to a change of heart? Obviously, a change in heart will evidence itself in a change in your life.

### 3. **Here's the real issue.** (8-14)

The real issue is that these people had completely missed the point, just like their forefathers had (v.7). If they were fasting because they were truly broken over their sin, then they would not keep on sinning, right? But, if you look at religious activities as a way to get your way, then your fasting, praying, offerings, church attendance, etc. is nothing more than a bribe to pay off God to look the other way when you break his law.

But, you cannot bribe God. You have nothing that he needs. Your fasting does not earn you points that causes God to overlook other things. But, when we think that our fasting, or our Bible reading, or our good deeds give us favor, we are blind to our own sin. I was trying to help a person once who was so proud of the fact that she spent 2 hours every day reading the Bible. But, she was arrogant, condescending and mean. But, in her mind she was entitled to be arrogant and mean because she did not know anyone who was more dedicated to reading the Bible than she was. But she was missing the point!

The word of the LORD came to Zechariah (v.8), and once again (v.9) God identifies himself as the LORD of hosts. Remember that some of the visions that Zechariah saw (chapters 1-6) inform our understanding of this title. Yahweh holds power over the unstoppable angelic forces who, upon his word can instantly exercise total domination over any situation in the universe. He is the LORD of hosts. This God, who sees all, knows all and is all, says, in essence, "I have your number." I know what you are doing. You are lying to me. You are fasting because you want your old life back, not because you are sorry for your sin and the reason I know that, is because you are still looking for ways to take advantage of the people in your community and business. You are oppressing the widow, the fatherless, the sojourner and the poor because they do not have anyone to defend them. The way you treat the person who has no voice, and no standing, and no recourse says volumes about you.

I remember a few years ago during the height of the recession, when some of the major corporations who were doing business with some of the local tool and die shops were making outrageous demands. They were demanding that these tool and die companies slash their prices to the point where the shops could not stay in business and if the shop said so, then the corporation threatened to cut all business ties with them completely. And then to add insult to injury, after the parts were delivered, some of the companies would

simply refuse to pay. When the little guy would complain the corporation would say, “sue me” knowing full well, these little tool and die companies did not have the resources for that. They were begging, borrowing and shifting things around just to meet payroll and stay afloat, which many did not make it.

How do you pay the little guy? How do you treat the waitress? How do you treat the guy who cuts your grass? How do you treat the new person at work? How do you treat the intern? How do you treat your little sister, or brother? How do you treat those who are challenged physically? How do you challenge those who are challenged mentally? How do you treat the worst player on the baseball team? How do you treat the slowest kid in your class? Husbands, how do you treat your wife? Dads, how do you treat your children? How do you care for the people who are under your care?

The story of the Bible is the story of two ways for people to live. You can live God’s way or you can live man’s way. Living God’s way begins by trusting Christ as your Savior and submitting to him as your king. Living man’s way means you try to be the king of your own life. The Southern California band Thrice, just released a brand new album with a very insightful song called Black Honey. The song was written by the band’s lead singer who said that the idea for the song was this image he had of a person who was continuously swatting at a swarm of bees in order to get their honey, not realizing that he would get stung. In other words, families and other relationships that are made up of people who are all just trying to get what they want are like the person swatting at a swarm of bees because they want the honey. But they get stung and stung and stung and they can’t figure out why. The chorus reflects what it is like to live man’s way. “But I’ll do what I want, I’ll do what I please, I’ll do it again till I’ve got what I need, I’ll rip and smash through the hornet’s nest, Don’t they understand I deserve the best.” Man’s way promises you honey, but in the end it only delivers stings.

But, when you go God’s way you trust in Christ. As a result your life is going to look more and more like Christ. And one of the most amazing and compelling aspects of the life of Christ is how he leveraged his power and his position in order to serve those who were under his care. The way he demonstrated leadership was by seeking to help every single person around him be loved, treasured, valued, esteemed, encouraged and helped. Christ enhanced the lives of every person who followed him.

Like the OT Jews, our mission is to be a people who actually live as the people of God. We profess faith in Christ, but the evidence of the authenticity of our faith will be reflected in how we live. If it’s a dog, it will bark. A genuine believer will produce gospel fruit. One of the gospel fruits is caring for people who are under you, instead of using them to advance yourself. It is not just a secret to being a good person, or manager, or boss, it is a reflection of Christ.