

THE FORM AND SPIRIT OF RELIGION

NO. 186

A SERMON
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 BY THE REV. C. H. SPURGEON
 AT THE MUSIC HALL, ROYAL SURREY GARDENS

*“Let us fetch the ark of the covenant of the LORD out of Shiloh unto us,
 that, when it cometh among us, it may save us out of the hand of our enemies.”*
1 Samuel 4:3

THESE men made a great mistake—what they wanted was the *Lord* in their midst. Whereas they imagined that the symbol of God’s presence, the ark of the covenant, would be amply sufficient to bestow upon them the assistance which they required in the day of battle. As is man, such must his religion be.

Now, man is a compound being. To speak correctly, man is a spiritual being. He has within him a soul, a substance far beyond the bounds of matter. But man is also made up of a body as well as a soul. He is not pure spirit—his spirit is incarnate in flesh and blood. Now, such is our religion. The religion of God is, as to its vitality, purely spiritual—always so. But since man is made of flesh as well as of spirit, it seemed necessary that his religion should have something of the outward, external, and material in which to embody the spiritual—or else man would not have been able to lay hold upon it.

This was especially the case under the old dispensation. The religion of the Jew is really a heavenly and spiritual thing—a thing of thought, a thing that concerns the mind and spirit. But the Jew was untaught. He was but a babe, unable to understand spiritual things unless he saw them pictured out to him, or (to repeat what I have just said) unless he saw them embodied in some outward type and symbol.

And therefore, God was pleased to give the Jew a great number of ceremonies, which were to his religion what the body is to man’s soul. The Jewish religion taught the doctrine of the atonement, but the Jews could not understand it, and therefore God gave them a lamb to be slain every morning and every evening, and He gave them a goat over which the sins of the people were to be confessed, and which was to be driven into the depths of the wilderness to show the great doctrine of a substitute and atonement through Christ.

The Jewish religion teaches, as one of its prominent doctrines, the unity of the Godhead. But the Jews were ever apt to forget that there was but one God. And God, to teach them that, would have but one temple, and but one altar upon which the sacrifice might rightly be offered. So that the idea of the one God was (as I have already said) made incarnate in the fact that there was but one temple, but one altar, and but one great high priest.

And mark, this is true of our religion—Christianity—not true to so full an extent as of Judaism—for the religion of the Jew had a gross and heavy body—but our religion has a body transparent and having but little of materialism in it. If you ask me what I would call the materialism of our religion—the embodiment of the spiritual part of that in which we trust and hope—I would point, first of all, to the two ordinances of the LORD, baptism and the Lord’s Supper.

I would point you next to the services of God’s house, to the Sabbath day, to the outward ritual of our worship. I would point you to our solemn song, to our sacred service of prayer. And I would point you also—and I think I am right in so doing—to the form of sound words, which we ever desire to hold fast and firm, as containing that creed which it is necessary for men to believe if they would hold the truth as it is in Jesus.

Our religion, then, has an outward form even to this day, for the apostle Paul, when he spoke of professing Christians, spoke of some who had “a form of godliness, but denied the power thereof.” So

that it is still true, though I confess not to the same extent as it was in the days of Moses—that religion must have a body, that the spiritual thing may come out palpably before our vision, and that we may see it.

Now, three points this morning inferred from our narrative. The first point is this—that *the outward form of religion is to be carefully and reverently observed*. But my second and most important head is this—you will notice that *the very men who have the least of the spirit of religion are the most superstitiously observant of the form of it*. Just as you find the people here, who did not care for God, had a very superstitious regard for that chest called the ark of the covenant.

And then, my third point will be that *those who trust in the outward form of religion, apart from the spirit of it, are fearfully deceived, and the result of their deception must be of the most fatal character*. The first point I feel is necessary, lest I should lead any to despise the form of religion, while endeavoring to insist upon the absolute necessity of attending in the first place to the spirit of it.

I. In the first place then, THE FORM OF RELIGION IS TO BE REVERENTLY OBSERVED.

This ark of the covenant was with the Jew the most sacred instrument of his religion. There were many other things which he held holy. But this ark always stood in the most holy place, and it was rendered doubly sacred, because between the outstretched wings of those cherubic figures that rested upon the mercy seat, there was usually to be seen a bright light, called the Shekinah, which manifested that JEHOVAH, the God of Israel, who dwelt between the cherubims, was there.

And indeed, they had great reason in the days of Samuel to reverence this ark, for you will recollect that when Moses went to war with the Midianites, a great slaughter of that people was occasioned by the fact that Eleazar, the high priest, with a silver trumpet, stood in the forefront of the battle, bearing in his hands the holy instrument of the law—that is, the ark—and it was by the presence of this ark that the victory was achieved.

It was by this ark, too, that the river Jordan was dried up. When the tribes came to it, there was no ford, but the priests put the staves of the ark upon their shoulders, and they marched with solemn pace down to the waters' edge, and before the presence of the ark the waters receded, so that the people went through dry-shod.

And when they had landed in the promised country, you remember it was by this ark that the walls of Jericho fell flat to the ground. The priests, blowing the trumpets and carrying the ark, went before, when they compassed the city seven days, and at last, by the power of the ark, or rather by the power of that God who dwelt within the ark, the walls of Jericho fell flat down, and every man went straight up to the slaughter.

These people, therefore, thought if they could once get the ark, it would be all right and they would be sure to triumph. And while I shall have in the second head to insist upon it that they were wrong in superstitiously imputing strength to the poor chest, yet the ark was to be reverently observed, for it was the outward symbol of a high spiritual truth, and it was never to be treated with any indignity.

It is quite certain, in the first place, that *the form of religion must never be altered*. You remember that this ark was made by Moses according to the pattern that God had given him in the mount. Now, the outward forms of our religion, if they be correct, are made by God. His two great ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper are sent for us from on high. I dare not alter either of them.

I should think it a high sin and treason against heaven, if, believing that baptism signifies immersion, and immersion only, I should pretend to administer it by sprinkling—or believing that baptism appertains to believers only—I should consider myself a criminal in the sight of God if I should give it to any but those who believe.

Even so with the Lord's Supper. Believing that it consists of bread and wine, I hold it to be highly blasphemous in the church of Rome to withhold the cup from the people. And knowing that this ordinance was intended for the Lord's people only, I consider it an act of high treason against the Majesty of heaven when any are admitted to the Lord's Supper who have not made a profession of their faith and of their repentance, and who do not declare themselves to be the true children of God.

And with regard to the doctrines of the Gospel, no alteration must be allowed here. I know that forms of doctrine are very little compared with the spirit and the heart. But still, we must not alter even the form of it. It has often been said that we ought not to have a strict religion. I believe that is just the very thing we ought to have—a religion that is of such a cast that it does not know how to alter. A religion that comes from the Infallible Head of the church, that is, Jesus Christ our Lord, and which to the latest time is to be like the law and the prophets—not one jot or tittle of it must fail while the earth endures.

The men who think that we may alter this and alter that, and still maintain the spirit of religion, have some truth on their side. But let them remember that while the spirit of religion may be maintained in the midst of many errors, yet every error tends to weaken our spirituality. And beside that, we have no right to consider the effect upon ourselves merely. Whatever form of religion God has ordained, it is ours to practice without the slightest alteration. And to alter any one of the ordinances of God is an act of dire profanation. However reasonable that alteration may seem to be, it is treason against high heaven and is not to be permitted in the church of Christ.

“Hold fast the form of sound words,” said Paul, “which thou hast heard of me.” Or as I remember to have said before, while the form of religion is not power, yet unless the form is carefully observed, it is not easy to maintain the power. It is like an eggshell enclosing the egg. There is no life in the *shell*, but you must take care you do not crack it, or else you may destroy the life within.

The ordinances and doctrines of our faith are only the shell of religion—they are not the life. But we must take care that we do not hurt so much as the outward shell, for if we do, we may endanger the life within—though it may manage to live, it must be weakened by any injury done to the outward form thereof.

And as the form must not be altered, so *it must not be despised*. These Philistines despised the ark. They took it and set it in their idol temple and the result was that their idol god, Dagon, was broken in pieces. They then sent it through their cities and they were smitten with emerods. And then, being afraid to put it within walls, they set it in the open country, and they were invaded with mice, so that everything was eaten up.

God would not have any dishonor put even upon the outward form of His religion. He would have men reverently take care that they did no dishonor even to His ark—it might be nothing but gopher wood, but because between the wings of those cherubim God had dwelt, the ark was to be held sacred, and God would not have it dishonored.

Take care, you who despise God, lest you despise His outward ordinances. To laugh at the Sabbath, to despise the ordinances of God’s house, to neglect the means of grace, to call the outward form of religion a vain thing—all this is highly offensive in the sight of God. He will have us remember that while the form is not the life, yet the form is to be respected for the sake of the life which it contains.

The body is to be venerated for the sake of the inward soul. And as I would have no man maim my body—even though in maiming it he might not be able to wound my soul—so God would have no man maim the outward parts of religion, although it is true no man can touch the real vitality of it.

Yet one more remark and that a very solemn one. As the outward form is neither to be altered nor despised, so neither is it to be *intruded upon by unworthy persons*. You remember that this ark of the covenant, after it was brought back from the land of the Philistines, was set in the field of Joshua the Bethshemite, and the Bethshemites took off the lid, and looked into the ark of the Lord, and for this, the Lord “smote of that people fifty-thousand and three-score and ten men; and the people lamented because the LORD had smitten many of the people with a great slaughter.”

These Bethshemites had no intention whatever of dishonoring the ark. They had a vain curiosity to look within, and the sight of those marvelous tables of stone struck them with death, for the law, when it is not covered by the mercy seat, is death to any man, and it was death to them.

Now, you will easily remember how very solemn a penalty is attached to any man’s intruding into the outward form of religion when he is not called to do so. Let me quote this awful passage—“He”

(speaking of the Lord's Supper) "that eateth and drinketh unworthily eateth and drinketh damnation to himself, not discerning the Lord's body."

How frightful an announcement is that! A curse is pronounced upon the man who dares to touch even the outward form of religion, unless he has the power of it. And we know there is nothing which excites God's holy anger more swiftly than a man's attending to the ordinances of His house and making an outward profession of being in Christ, while he has no part nor lot in the matter.

Oh, take heed. The outward ordinances of Christ are not the vitality of religion, but nevertheless they are so solemnly important that we must neither alter nor despise them, nor rush into them without being invited—for if we do so, the curse of God must light upon us for having despised the holy thing of the Most High God of Israel.

And now, before I close this first head, let me remark that *the outward things of God are to be diligently cared for and loved*. We have in our reading had two instances of that. There was holy Eli—he knew very well that the ark of God was not God. He understood that it was but the outward sign of the inward and spiritual. Yet when the ark of God was taken, mark the poor old man's trouble—his heart broke and then he fell down and broke his neck.

Then there was that nameless woman. Her husband was the priest who attended to this very ark, but he was a man whose character I cannot describe better than by saying that he was a son of Belial. It is hard for a woman to believe religion if she has a minister for her husband who is profane and wicked.

This woman's husband not only committed wrongs against God, but against her. He was a filthy and unclean person who polluted the very courts of the Lord's house with his fornications—and yet she had such faith in her God that she knew how to love the religion which her husband, by his awful character, brought into disrepute. She knew how to distinguish between the man and his duty, between the priest and the priesthood, between the officer and the office.

I do wonder at her. I am sure there is nothing that staggers our faith like seeing a minister walking inconsistently. But this man was the chief minister, and her own husband living in known sin, and a sin which came home to her, because he sinned against her. I am sure it was a wonder that she believed at all.

But so strong was her faith and attachment to her religion, that though, like Eli, she knew that the ark was not God—that the form was not the inward thing—yet the form itself was so precious to her, that the pangs of child-birth were hurried on prematurely and in the midst of her pain, this still was uppermost—that the ark of the Lord was taken.

It was in vain to cheer her with the news that her child was born. It was an idle tale to her and she rejoiced not in it. She lay in a swoon. But at last, opening her eyes, and remembering that her husband was dead, and that, therefore, according to Jewish usage, it was her duty to give the child a name, she faintly opened her lips before she died and said, "Call his name Inglorious (Ichabod) for the glory is departed."

And then she added this reason for it—she did not say, "because my husband is dead," though she loved him. She did not say, "because my father-in-law, Eli, is dead," or, "because my nation has been defeated," but she added that all-significant reason, "because the ark of the LORD was taken." And she died.

Oh, I would to God that we all loved God's house, and loved the ways of God, and the ordinances of God, as much as she did. While we attach no superstitious importance to the outward ceremony, I wish we thought as much of holy things, because of the Holy One of Israel, as did Eli and this nameless, but noble woman.

Thus I have preached upon the first head and no ceremonialist here, I am sure, can differ from me, for they must all say it is true. Even the Puseyite will confess that this is just what he believes—that ceremonies ought to be carefully observed. But I shall not agree with Mr. Puseyite in the second head.

II. Now, it is a notorious fact that THE VERY MEN WHO HAVE THE LEAST IDEA OF WHAT SPIRITUAL RELIGION IS, ARE THE MEN WHO PAY THE MOST SUPERSTITIOUS ATTENTION TO OUTWARD FORMS.

We refer you again to this instance. These people would neither repent, nor pray, nor seek God and His prophets. Yet they sought out this ark and trusted in it with superstitious veneration. Now, in every country where there has been any religion at all that is true, the great fact has come out very plainly that the people who don't know anything about true religion have always been the most careful about the forms.

Do you want to know the man who used to swallow widows' houses and devour the patrimonies of the fatherless? Do you want to know the hypocrites, the deceivers, in the days of Christ? Why, they were the Pharisees who, "for a show made long prayers." They were the men who gave alms to the poor in the corners of the street—the men that tithed the anise, and the mint, and the cummin, and forgot the weightier matters of the law, such as justice and righteousness.

If you wanted to find the seducer, the unjust judge, the liar, the perjured man, in the days of Christ, you had only to ask for the man who had fasted thrice in the week and gave tithes of all he possessed. These Pharisees would do any wicked action and never stick at it, yet if in drinking wine, a small gnat should have fallen in and been swallowed with it, they would consider themselves defiled, because their law did not allow them eat a creature from which the blood had not been withdrawn. Thus they strained at the gnat, thus getting the reputation of being very religious, and swallowed the camel, hump and all. You smile. But what they did in their day is done now.

You know the Romanists—did you ever know one of them who did not think it to be a very high offense against the Majesty of heaven if he were to eat any meat on Good Friday? Do you know any one of them who did not think it necessary to keep Lent with strict punctilious observance? Notice how carefully they go to their places of worship on the Sabbath morning, how diligently they observe that sacred rite of crossing their foreheads with holy water. How necessary it is, that the holy water and everything else of the same kind should be tenderly cared for.

And do not the same persons in their own countries keep their theatres open on the Sabbath? Do you not find the very men, who are so solemnly observant of their religion in the morning, forgetting it all in the evening, thinking no more of the Sabbath, which they call "holy," than if it were any other day, but making it more a day of merriment than any day of the week?

Look again at our Church of England. God be thanked that there are so many true Evangelical men in the midst of it, but there are certain sections to whom my remarks will apply. Do you want to know the men who know nothing at all about the new birth, who do not know what it is to be justified by faith, who have not a spark of religion? Do you know where to find them?

They are the men who never say their creed without turning their heads the right way, that never said the name of Jesus without bowing their heads most reverently. They are the men who always take care that the church should be builded so as to be a goodly edifice, in order that the parishioners going there may see the glory of God in the glory of His house.

They are the people who mark every red-letter day, who take care that every rubric is attended to, who think that holly on Christmas is a most heavenly thing, and a few flowers upon the altar almost equal to the Lily of the Valley and the Rose of Sharon. These are the gentlemen who could no more preach without a cassock than they could live without a head.

Of course they have not any religion at all, and because the inner life is clean gone, evaporated, dissipated—they have to be so extremely particular that they observe the outward form of it. I know many Evangelical Churchmen (and they are generally precise enough) that would break through every form.

I could point you out this morning some two or three clergymen of the Church of England who are heretical enough to be sitting here and listening to the words of one who is a Dissenter, and of course, a

Schismatic—but who would no more think of calling me a Schismatic than they would think of flying, and would give me the right hand of fellowship with all their hearts.

I believe that many of them would forget the rubrics if they could, and if it were in their power, would cut their catechism all to pieces and turn half of their church prayer book out of doors. And these are the men who have the most religion—they care least about the form, but they have most of the grace within. They have more true religion, more evangelism, more of the grace of God in their hearts than fifty of their Puseyite brethren.

But let me come to Dissenters, for we are just as bad. I must deal with all alike. We have among us a certain class of people, a sort of dissenting Puseyites. Where the Puseyite thinks it necessary to keep Good Friday and Easter Sunday, these good brothers take as much care to keep holy day the wrong way, as the others the right way.

They think it would be a grievous sin to go to chapel on Good Friday and they are solemnly in earnest that they should never break the law of the church not to observe holy days. To them it is a very sacred thing that they should always be found in their chapel twice on Sunday. They think it highly necessary that they should have their children baptized, or that they should be baptized themselves, and that they should take the Lord's Supper.

That is all well and good. But alas! we must confess it, there are some among us who, if they are orthodox in their opinions and precise in their outward practice, are quite content to be utterly destitute of the power of religion. I must deal faithfully with all. I know in all our dissenting denominations there are to be found many self-righteous persons, who have not any religion at all, but who are the most precise people in all the world to stick up for the outward form of it.

Do you not know some old member of the church here and there? Well, you say, if anybody in the church is a hypocrite, I would say that old So and so is one. If you were to propose any alteration in anything, oh! how these gentlemen would bristle up, how they would draw their swords. They! they love every nail in the chapel door—they would not have a different color for the pulpit for the world. They will have everything strictly observed. Their whole salvation seems to depend upon the rightness of the form. Oh no, not they. They could not think of altering any of the forms of their church.

You know it is quite as easy for a man to trust in ceremonies, when they are severely simple, as for a man to rely upon them when they are gorgeous and superb. A man may as much trust in the simple ordinance of immersion and the breaking of bread, as another may trust in the high mass and in the prayers of priests.

We may have Rome in Dissent, and Rome in the Church of England, and Rome anywhere, for wherever there is a trust in ceremonies, there is the essence of Popery—there is anti-Christ and the man of sin. Oh! take heed of this, any of you who have been relying upon your ceremonies. This is just the truth—the more zeal for ceremonies—generally the less power of vital godliness within.

But now, how is it that the man who would not eat anything but salt-fish on Good Friday, cheats his neighbor on Saturday? How is it that the man who never would by any means go to anything but an orthodox sixteen-ounces-to-the-pound Baptist Chapel, can be found committing acts of injustice in his daily business, and perhaps more filthy deeds still?

I will tell you—the man feels he must have some righteousness or other—and when he knows himself to be a good-for-nothing rascal, he feels he has not got a moral righteousness, and therefore he tries to get a ceremonial one. Mark the man that drinks and swears, that commits all kinds of iniquity, and you will very often find him (I have known such cases) the most superstitiously reverent man that can be found.

He would not go inside a place of worship without taking his hat off immediately. He will curse and swear outside, perhaps—and it never pricks his conscience—but to walk up the aisle of a church with his hat on—oh! how frightful. He feels if he did so, he would be lost forever. He would not forget to tithe the mint, anise, and cummin, but all the while the weightier matters of the law are left totally unregarded.

Another reason is, because a religion of ceremonies is so much easier than true religion. To say *Ave Marias and Pater Nosters* is easy enough. You may soon get it over and it does not check the conscience much. To go to chapel twice on the Sunday—there is nothing very hard in that. It is not half as hard as turning to the Lord with full purpose of heart. It is not half as hard as breaking off one's sin by righteousness and putting one's trust in Christ Jesus alone. Therefore, because the thing is so easy, people like it better.

Again—it is so complimentary. When the Romanist beats his back and flogs his flesh, why is it that he likes that better than the simple Gospel, “Believe and live?” Why, because it just flatters his pride—he thinks he is beating the devil out of himself, but he is in reality beating him in—the devil of pride is coming in.

He whispers, “Ah! you are a good man to have flogged yourself like that! You will carry yourself to heaven by the merit of your wounds and bruises.” Poor human nature always like that. In fact, the more exacting a religion is, the better people like it. The more religion ties you up and binds you—if it does not touch the heart—the better people like to carry it out.

Hinduism has its great hold upon the people, because they can get a great stock of merit by walking with spikes in their shoes, or rolling themselves many thousands of miles, or drinking the filthy waters of the Ganges, or offering themselves to die. All these things please human nature. “Believe and live” is too humbling. To trust alone in Christ casts down man's high looks—therefore man says, “Away with it!” And he turns to anything rather than to Christ.

Besides, there is another reason. Men always like the religion of ceremonies, because it does not need the giving up of their favorite sins. “Why,” says a man, “if all that is needed for me to be saved is to have the Sacrament given me by the priest when I come to die, what a delightful religion that is! I can drink, swear, and do just as I like. I have nothing to do but to get greased at last with holy oil and off I go to heaven with all my sins about me.”

Says another, “We can have all our gaieties and frivolities, all the pomp of life and the pride of flesh—all that we need is to get confirmed. Then, afterwards, sometimes go to church, take a handsomely bound prayer book and Bible, be very attentive and observant, and the bishop will no doubt set us all right.”

This suits many men, because there is no trouble about it. They can keep on with their gaieties and with their sins, and yet they believe they can go to heaven with them. Men do not like that old-fashioned Gospel which tells them that sin and the sinner must part, or else they must be damned. They do not like to be told that without holiness no man shall see the Lord, and that old-fashioned text, “Except a man be born-again, he cannot see the kingdom of God,” will never be palatable to human nature.

Human nature does not mind what you tell it to do, so long as you do not tell it to believe. You may tell it to observe this, that, and the other—and the man will do it and thank you—and the harder it is, the better he will like you.

But once tell him, “Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners. Believe on Him and you shall be saved,” his pride is all up at once. He cannot endure it, and he hates the man who preaches it to him, and drives the very thought of the Gospel from his soul.

III. And now, in the last place, it is mine to warn you that TO TRUST IN CEREMONIES IS A MOST DECEITFUL THING AND WILL END IN THE MOST TERRIFIC CONSEQUENCES.

When these people had got the ark into the camp, they shouted for joy, because they thought themselves quite safe. But alas, they met with a greater defeat than before. Only four thousand men had been killed in the first battle, but in the second, thirty thousand footmen of Israel fell down dead.

How vain are the hopes that men build upon their good works and ceremonial observances! How frightful is that delusion which teaches for the Gospel a thing which is not “the gospel,” nor “another gospel.” But it is a thing that would pervert the Gospel of Christ.

My hearer, let me ask you solemnly—what is your ground of hope? Do you rely on baptism? O man, how foolish are you! What can a few drops of water, put upon an infant's forehead, do? Some lying

hypocrites tell us that children are regenerated by drops of water. What kind of regeneration is that? We have seen people hanged that were regenerated in this fashion. There have been men who have lived all their lives whoremongers, adulterers, thieves, and murderers, who have been regenerated in their baptism by that kind of regeneration.

Oh, be not deceived by a regeneration so absurd, so palpable even to flesh and blood, as one of the lying wonders that have come from hell itself. But maybe you say, “Sir, I rely upon my baptism, in after life.” Ah, my friends, what can washing in water do? As the Lord lives, if you trust in baptism, you trust in a thing that will fail you at last.

For what is washing in water unless it is preceded by faith and repentance? We baptize you, not in order to wash away your sins, but because we believe they are washed away beforehand. And if we did not think you believed so, we would not admit you to a participation in that ordinance. But if you will pervert this to your own destruction, by trusting in it, take heed. You are warned this morning. For as “circumcision avails nothing, nor uncircumcision, but a new creature,” so baptism avails nothing.

I may have some here who are saying within themselves, “Well, if I do not go to heaven, nobody will, for I have been brought up to my church as regularly as possible. I was regularly confirmed—my godfathers and godmothers stood for me in my childhood, and all after the right fashion. I have come here, it is true, but it is about the first offense I ever committed, coming into this Schismatic conventicle. If it please God to forgive me, I will never do so again. I always go to church, and I have no doubt that by taking the sacrament and saying my prayers I shall go to heaven.”

Ah, you are awfully deceived, for unless you are born again, you must come back to the old standard after all—unless you are in blessed union with the Lamb, unless you have found repentance for sin, unless you have true living faith in the Lord Jesus, you may keep all these things, you may observe every jot and tittle—but the gates of heaven must be shut in your face and “Depart from me, I never knew you,” must be your doom, even though you reply, “Thou hast eaten and drunk in our streets, and we have listened to thy voice.”

No, my friends, be you Presbyterians, Episcopalians, or Dissenters, it matters not—you have your ceremonies. And there are some among us who rely upon them. This one truth cuts at the root of us all. If this be our hope, it is a foul delusion. We must have faith in Jesus, we must have the new heart and the right spirit. No outward forms can make us clean. The leprosy lies deep within, and unless there is an inward work, no outward work can ever satisfy God, and give us an entrance into paradise.

But before I close, there is one thing I want you to notice, and that is that *this ark not only could not give victory to Israel, but it could not preserve the lives of the priests themselves who carried it*. This is a fatal blow to all who trust in the forms of religion. What would the Romanist think if I should tell him that his outward forms can never save him? And how he would grind his teeth if I were to tell him, as I do, that the outward forms can never save his priest, for his priest and he must be lost together unless they have some better trust than this!

But we have even in Protestant churches too much priestcraft. People say, “Well, if the Gospel does not save me, I am confident of the salvation of my minister.” Rest assured that he who serves at God’s altar is no more secure from destruction, unless he has a living faith in Christ, than you yourselves. Hophni and Phinehas are slain, and so must every priest be if he relies on ceremonies himself or teaches others to do so.

I cannot imagine a more frightful deathbed than that of a man who has been a priest—I mean a man who has taught others to trust in ceremonies. When he is buried, it will be said of him that he died in sure and certain hope of a blessed resurrection. But oh! the moment after death, when he opens his eyes to see his delusion!

While he was on earth he was fool enough to think that drops of water could save him—that a piece of bread and a cup of wine could renew his heart and save his soul—but when he gets into another world he will lose this folly, and then will the thought flash upon him, like a lightning flash, writhing his soul with misery—“Ah! I am destitute of the one thing needful. I had no love to Christ, I never had that

repentance which needed not to be repented of. I never fled to Jesus, and now I know that that hymn is true—

*‘Not all the outward forms on earth,
Nor rites that God has given,
Nor will of man, nor blood, nor birth,
Can raise the soul to heaven.’”*

Oh! how frightful then afterwards to meet his parishioners, to see those to whom he has preached, and to be howled at through the pit by the men whom he was the instrument of destroying by telling them to trust in a rotten foundation. Let me free myself from any such fear as that.

As the Lord my God lives before whom I stand this day—man, woman, my brother, my sister, in the race of Adam, if you rely on anything short of the blood of Jesus Christ, you trust in a lie. And if your salvation ends in anything short of a thorough change of heart, if it makes you anything less than a new creature in Christ Jesus, the bed is shorter than a man can stretch himself upon, you have a religion which is not equal to the necessities of your case, and when you need it most, it will reel beneath your feet and leave you without a standing place whereon to rest, overwhelmed with dismay and overcome by despair.

Now, before I send you away, let me make this last remark. I hear one say, “Sir, I renounce all trust in good works and ceremonies. Tell me how I can be saved.” The way is simply this. Our sins deserve punishment—God must and will punish sin. Jesus Christ came into this world and was punished in the room, place, and stead of all that believe on Him. Your business, then, this morning, is to make this inquiry, “Do I want a Savior? Do I feel that I want Him?” And my business, if you answer that question aright, is to say, “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ with all your heart and you shall be saved.”

Ah! there is one in heaven today, I firmly believe, who was always a worshipper in this place and at New Park Street—a young man who was led here to listen to the Gospel and was converted to God. And last Sabbath morning was caught away to heaven in the burning house at Bloomsbury—one of those young men who was taken out of the ruins, one who had been brought to a knowledge of the truth here.

It is stated in some of the papers that his mother was far from a religious woman and was somewhat given to drink. He had to struggle with some temptation and opposition, but he was enabled to hold on his way, and then, in such an hour as he thought not, the Son of Man came for him, and caught him to Himself in the midst of flames and crashing timbers and the uprising of smoke.

Oh! I may have one here, that ere another Sabbath morning comes, may be launched into eternity—if not by the same deplorable process—yet in as hasty a manner. And as my soul rejoices over that young man, to think that God should have honored me in bringing him to Christ before He took him up to heaven, I must lament that there are any of you in a peril so frightful as to be living without God, without Christ, without a hope of heaven—to have death hanging over you and yet do not tremble at it.

Oh! this morning I beseech you—close with Christ. “Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and ye perish from the way, while His wrath is kindled but a little; for blessed are all they who put their trust in him.”

Taken from The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit C. H. Spurgeon Collection. Only necessary changes have been made, such as correcting spelling errors, some punctuation usage, capitalization of deity pronouns, and minimal updating of a few archaic words. The content is unabridged. Additional Bible-based resources are available at www.spurgeongems.org.