

**THE AXE AT THE ROOT—A TESTIMONY
AGAINST PUSEYITE IDOLATRY
NO. 695**

**A SERMON
DELIVERED ON SUNDAY MORNING, JUNE 17, 1866
BY C. H. SPURGEON
AT THE METROPOLITAN TABERNACLE, NEWINGTON**

*“But the hour cometh, and now is,
when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth:
for the Father seeketh such to worship him. God is a Spirit:
and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth.”
John 4:23-24*

THE woman’s conscience had been aroused by Christ’s declaration of her sin. He was touching upon matters of the most vital importance, and her depraved heart naturally shrunk from the lancet. From the truth which was becoming inconveniently personal she flew to that natural resort of the carnal mind, namely, to religious discourse upon points of outward observance.

Instead of confessing her sin, and asking how it may be forgiven, she must needs say, “Our fathers worshipped in this mountain; and ye say, that in Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship.” The carnal heart dreads the contact of spiritual truth, and finds a most convenient way of avoiding it by running to questions of holy places, holy times, and holy customs.

Jesus, to her astonishment, informs her that the question which she had asked was of only temporary importance. There had been a time when it was well to know that salvation was of the Jews, and that the rival temple of the Samaritans was an imposter, but He says in effect to her, “Woman, believe Me that question is of no importance now, for the hour cometh, yea, and now is, when the external is to be abolished and the ritualistic is to be put away, and a purer, simpler, and more spiritual worship, is to take its place.”

The worship which our Lord Jesus Christ established involved a change. That is implied in the expressions here used. He announced to her that the hour was just then come when all questions about this or that place must cease, and be superseded by spiritual worship. Our Lord gave a very brief, but I think a very instructive description of what this worship was to be.

If you observe carefully the words, you will see that it was a *distinguishing* kind of worship, for He mentions *true* worshippers. There had been but little distinction before, so long as they all passed through the same outward form they all seemed to be worshippers, but a distinction was now to be made clear and manifest. Merely outward worshippers were now false worshippers, and only those who pressed into spiritual worship were to be regarded as true.

The Gospel of Christ is a great discerner and an accurate judge. Christ has the winnowing fan in His hand. He sits as a refiner. He is compared by the prophet to the “refiner’s fire” and to “fuller’s soap,” and hence you see He discerns at once between worshippers and worshippers. There they stand both alike with bended heads, perhaps both repeating the same words, but the Savior distinguishes, “there is,” saith He, “a false worshipper, and there is a true worshipper, and he alone who is spiritual is true.”

He announces further that under the Gospel *God is to be worshipped in the character of a Father*. True worshippers shall worship the Father. This had not been the case before. The Lord had been adored as the Adonai, and revered as JEHOVAH, but to say “Our Father which art in heaven” remains the prerogative of the enlightened Christian who, having believed in Christ, has received power to become a son of God.

True Christian worship addresses God, not merely as Creator and Preserver, or as the great Lord of the Universe, but as one who is very near of kin to us, our Father, beloved of our souls. Jesus likewise states that Gospel worship is to be of a kind which does not result from the man himself merely, but comes from God, and is *a work of grace*. This is implied in the sentence, “The Father seeketh such to worship him,” as if no true worship would come from any man unless God sought it.

True devotion under the Christian dispensation is not merely human but also divine. It is the work of the Spirit in the soul returning to its author, or as our hymn puts it—

*“Prayer is the breath of God in man,
Returning whence it came.”*

These are very grave points, and draw a broad line of distinction between the living worship of the chosen of God and the dead formal worship of the world which lieth in the wicked one.

Furthermore, the Savior goes on to say that they who worship God are to worship Him *“in spirit.”* No longer with the visible sacrifice of a lamb, but inwardly trusting in Him who is the Lamb of God’s passover. No more with sprinkled blood of goats, but heartily relying upon the blood once shed for many. No longer worshipping God with ephod, breastplate, and mitre, but with prostrate soul, with uplifted faith, and with the faculties not of the body but of the inward spirit.

We who worship God under the Christian dispensation are no longer to fancy that bodily exercise in worship profits anything, that genuflexions and contortions are of any value, but that acceptable worship is wholly mental, inward, and spiritual.

But He adds, lest there should seem an omission in the description, “must worship him in spirit *and in truth,*” for though we should profess to worship God only with the spirit and so despise forms, yet unless the soul shall truly love, and really adore, and sincerely bow, our worship will be as unacceptable as though it were formal and outward. See then, brethren, putting the whole three together, the worship under the Christian dispensation which God ordains, and which He accepts through Christ Jesus, is a worship distinguished by an inward vitality from the outward worship of the carnal mind.

It is the worship of a child towards a father, feeling within himself a kinship with the divine. It is a worship wrought in us by God the Holy Ghost, because the Father has sought us out and taught us how to worship Him. It is a worship which is not outward, but of the inner man, and occupies not hand, eye, and foot, but heart and soul and spirit, and it is a worship which is not professional and formal, but real, hearty, earnest, and so acceptable before God.

Let me give a sketch of this worship as it actually exhibits itself. A man may have been to a place of worship from his youth up, and he may have fallen into a habit of repeating a sacred form every morning and every evening, he may even have been a tolerably diligent reader of the Word of God, and yet though this may have been continued for sixty years and more, he may never once have worshipped God after the fashion prescribed in the text. But see him! the Father seeks him, truth comes home to his soul, and in the light of that truth he feels himself a sinner, and feeling himself so, he cries, “Father, I have sinned.” That is his first true worship.

See, brethren, his spirit feels it, he means what he says. All that he said before was as nothing, but that first cry “I have sinned” has in it the vitality of worship. He hears the story of the cross, the full atonement made by God’s appointed sacrifice, and he prays, “Lord, I believe in Jesus, and I trust Him,” here is another specimen of true worship, here is the spirit resting upon God’s appointed sacrifice, and reverencing God’s way of salvation by accepting it. Being saved by the precious blood of Jesus, he cries, “Father, I bless Thee that I am saved, I thank Thee that my sins are washed away.” This is true worship.

Whether a man sings in the assembly, or sings alone, whether he prays aloud, or prays in silence, if he feels gratitude to God for pardon received, he offers the true worship. The whole of the Christian’s life, consisting as it must do of dealings with the invisible God through Jesus Christ by his heart, is a life

of worship, and when at last he comes to die, you perceive that his worship will not cease with death because it has always been spiritual, and did not depend upon the body.

So that while the outward man fails him, the inward spiritual man grows more strong in devotion than ever it was before. And when at last the spirit leaves its earthly tenement and is disembodied, it has still a song for God, and throughout eternity its spiritual worship can continue, which worship must have been suspended if it had been connected with the body, and not with the immortal part of man.

If I understand the Savior's words, and I hope I do, not only theoretically but practically, He means that those of us who are His true worshippers must worship Him with our better and our nobler part, and our soul, with all the power she has, must pay reverence to the unseen God.

Brethren, this is the kind of worship that men will not render to God, they will render Him anything else but this, and until divinely effectual grace shall work such worship in man's heart it is obnoxious to him, he will worship God with robes, and incense, and flowers, and banners, but he will not consent to worship Him in spirit and in truth.

I. I shall proceed to my work by giving A BRIEF OUTLINE OF THE HISTORY OF WORSHIP, in connection with the doctrine that we are now to worship more manifestly than ever God in spirit and in truth.

It appears from Scripture that worship *before the flood* was of the very simplest form. The outward ordinances were very few, the chief of them being the offering of sacrifice. This was probably instituted by God Himself when He clothed Adam and his wife with skins of beasts. It has been thought that He then indicated to them the slaughter of beasts for sacrifice. Certain it is that the first worship of fallen man was by sacrifice.

There was connected with this no doubt the meeting of gracious hearts for prayer, and also the ministration of truth, for Enoch also, the seventh from Adam, prophesied concerning the coming of the Lord, so that they appear to have had what was tantamount to a ministry, and the sons of God had appointed times for meeting.

But this simple form of worship seems to have been too high, too spiritual for fallen man at the first, at any rate the seed of the serpent could not endure it, for Cain at the very first commenced a schism. Instead of bringing a sacrifice by blood he must needs bring a sacrifice of the fruits of the ground. Perhaps he was a man of taste, and desired to bring something that should look more decorous than a poor bleeding victim. He would lay those rich grapes, those ruddy fruits upon the altar, and those fair flowers that gemmed the bosom of the earth, surely he might consecrate those. At any rate he was the first man who set up taste and self as the guide in religious worship, and God had no respect unto his sacrifice.

The two stood by their altars, Abel by faith, exercising spiritual worship, offered a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain. Cain's offering was possibly even more fair to look upon but it was of his own invention. Abel was accepted, but Cain discarded.

The ultimate result of man's sinfulness in connection with this early type of worship was general neglect of all religion. The sons of God seem to have maintained their simplicity for a time, but at last by unholy alliances with the ungodly race there arose a widespread neglect of all thought of God, so that they were married and given in marriage, and they ate and they drank till the day when the flood came and swept them all away. Depraved nature thus refused to render spiritual worship.

After the flood we find worship restored in very much the same form, let us distinguish it as the *patriarchal* method of worship. The head of a family was accustomed to offer sacrifice, and no doubt if Job be taken as a type thereof family prayer and household religion were maintained. But you see very early the indication that man, although he could not forget God, for the deluge had struck to the very heart of manhood an awful dread of the Most High, began to interpose symbols and visible objects between God and himself.

The use of teraphim became very common, so that in the house even of Abraham's ancestors teraphs were found. And when we come down to the time of Jacob, we find one of his wives stealing her

father's images, thus proving that Laban, one of a once God-fearing family, had become a worshipper of God through the medium of images. Thus was it among those who still had some knowledge of God. But the nations being dispersed, soon lost the pure idea of the invisible One, and worshipped gods of their own devising.

From the plagues of Egypt, which were no doubt intended to be a blow against all Egypt's gods, we find out that in addition to the worship of the calf or bull, the Egyptians paid religious reverence to flies, the river Nile, the elements, beetles, and all kinds of creatures. And throughout the world, as a general rule, through the introduction of visible symbols of the unseen Being, the Lord Himself had become forgotten, and spiritual worship had almost ceased, except in one elect household, and even there, alas! how fallen had spirituality become!

Keeping to the line of grace, we shall now introduce you to the *ceremonial* form of worship which God instituted after the more spiritual method had entirely broken down. He saw that the children of Israel whom He loved were but a mob of slaves. Their spirits had been broken by bitter bondage. Like the poor African race of the present day they seemed as a whole incapable of rising at once to mental dignity, and needed to pass through a generation or two before they could as a nation achieve manly self-government.

So when He brought His people out of Egypt the Lord did not try them with an altogether spiritual form of worship, because of the hardness of their hearts among other reasons, though He was still to be worshipped as a spirit, yet He gave them certain outward signs by which they might be enabled to understand His character.

A great deal has been made of the symbolical worship of the Jew, as if it were an excuse for the man-made symbolism of the Roman and Anglican Antichrist. We would remark that nothing ought to be made of it at all now, since it has been positively declared many times in Scripture that the age of the shadow has gone, and that the age of the substance now reigns.

Whatever may or may not have been the excellence of the old Jewish economy—and being divinely ordained, God forbid we should say a word against it—yet the apostle Paul always talks of it as being but a yoke of bondage to which we are no more to submit ourselves, being but the shadow and not the very image of the good things which were to come. And he speaks of it as a thing so passed away, that to go back to it is to go back to the rudiments, and not to go onward in the full-grown manliness of Christianity.

If there were no other passage my text might show that the ceremonialism of the Jew is no excuse whatever for ceremonialism now, but that we ought to stand in direct contrast to that, hearing the Savior declare, that whatever may have been before His time, the hour had come when the true worshipper must worship the Father in spirit and in truth.

Remember that symbolic worship was suitable merely to the infancy of God's church, and that now having received the Spirit of God to dwell in us it would be as unsuitable as would the swaddling bands of babyhood to full-grown men. Besides, even while it existed it was spoken of as soon to be superseded by a new and better covenant. It was frequently broken through by divine authority.

Elijah though not of the house of Levi offered sacrifice, and prophet after prophet as he arose manifested and declared by his actions that God did not intend to give the Levitical form of worship undivided sway, but that when He poured His Spirit upon special men they were to break through all ritual regulations in order to show that they were not meant to be fixed and permanent.

It is not sufficiently remembered that the most of God's people in the Jewish nation had very little to do with this symbolic worship. When they were all in the wilderness, and gathered round the one tent called the tabernacle, they might all see the fiery cloudy pillar. But when they came into the land which God had given them, what had they most of them to see? Why the temple itself the most of them would only see once or twice in a year. Scarcely any one ever saw the ark, the cherubim, or the golden candlestick. They were always within the veil, and only once in the year did the high priest enter that sacred place.

Even the place where the sacrifices were carried on continually, no one entered but the priests, so that to at least eleven tribes out of twelve the ceremonies were mainly invisible. Little was done outside the court of the priests, but the most of the sacrifices, and of the typology of Judaism, was as much a hidden thing as the spiritual things of God are to us at the present day. And thus there was a great exercise of the spiritual faculties, and comparatively little of outward display.

Moreover, it is to be remembered that there was *nothing whatever visible for the Jew to worship*. It is not so in the symbology of that false church which is trying to raise up and revive the beggarly elements. There men bow before a cross, a piece of bread inside a box is revered and treated with worship. Cast-off cloths and rotten rags called relics are the objects of adoration, but there was nothing like this with the Jews, they did worship toward the temple, but they did not adore the temple, or mercy seat, the altar, or any other emblem.

Is it not said expressly, “Ye saw no similitude”? When God descended upon Sinai, and all the people worshipped there, they saw nothing which they dared to worship. God was to them still invisible, and they had to exercise their mental faculties in the worship of the invisible God. When at one time it was thought that the miraculous powers of the brazen serpent entitled it to worship, Hezekiah called it Nehushtan, that is, a piece of brass, and broke it to pieces. So that with all its splendor of imagery, embroidered vest, and glittering breastplate, to a great extent there was a powerful element of spirituality even about Aaronic worship. I mean, of course, only to spiritual men.

David himself utterly outstripped the outward, when he declared, “Sacrifice and offering thou dost not desire,” and when he said again, “Thou desirest not sacrifice, else would I give it thee.” The prophet declares that God is weary of their sacrifices, and in another place the Lord Himself says that if we could come before Him with rivers of oil, or ten thousand of the fat of fed beasts, He would not accept us with these. To obey is better than sacrifice, is told us even under the law. So that even there, though not as distinctly as now, the spirituality of worship was taught and declared.

But dear friends, what became of this accommodation of worship to the childhood of the church? You know that very soon after Israel came out of Egypt they said, “Let us make gods that they may go before us.” They could not do without a visible God. Do not think that when they set up the calf they meant to worship the calf instead of JEHOVAH, that would be a slander upon them. They worshipped JEHOVAH through the calf—that was their plea, for they said, “Tomorrow is a feast unto JEHOVAH.” They thought to represent JEHOVAH by a bull, “they changed their glory into the similitude of an ox that eats grass.”

Though severely rebuked, it was the constant sin of Israel to desire to worship God under the favorite Egyptian emblem of the bull. At last they had gone so far into idolatry that they were driven far away, and in captivity they were so chastened, and moreover brought into such contact with the abominations of idolatry that they were heartily sick of it, and no Jew has been an idolater since.

Still, spiritual worship they would not offer, and therefore fell into rigid ritualism, reverencing the mere letter of the law, and fighting over trifling refinements of regulation and observance, so that in Christ’s day they made broad their phylacteries and the borders of their garments, but they forgot the Great Spirit who is to be worshipped in spirit and in truth.

Since that day the Lord has been treated by carnal men in one of three ways. Either God is adored by outward symbols as among Brahminists, Romanists, Puseyites, and other idolaters, or else He is worshipped through ritualism, as among too many who claim to be orthodox, who contend for prearranged, and unbending forms, written or unwritten as the case may be, or else men show an utter indifference to God altogether, and then rush into superstitious reverence for something or other which is evil, and therefore to be dreaded and spoken of with awe.

This is the history of religious worship, that let spiritual worship assume what form it may, man always will if he can, get away from it and forget his God and set up something seen, instead of bowing down before the unseen. Hence the necessity of the second commandment in the Decalogue, “Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in

the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth: thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I the LORD thy God am a jealous God,” and so on.

This is not a command against worshipping another God, that is the first commandment, but a command against worshipping God under any shape, or through any medium or under any symbol, for He is a Spirit, and must be worshipped in spirit and in truth and not by symbols. Against this command the human mind is always dashing itself, and in one shape or another idolatry is the ruling religion of mankind.

Christ comes to tell us that now His worship is to be wholly spiritual, even the altar which belongs to antediluvian times is gone, for we have an altar of another kind. Even the sacrifice which belonged to the early period has departed like a shadow, because we have the sacrifice of Christ in which to trust.

As for the institutions which suited the infancy of the church, they also have disappeared, for now Jesus would have the worship of men enlightened by the indwelling of the Holy Ghost. He would have us understand that a perfect revelation demands of us, that in the perfection of our spiritual powers we should adore the invisible God without the interference of visible signs.

Now He would have us cast away all outward types and signs, except the two which He has Himself ordained, and even these are types of the Savior’s manhood and not of His Godhead at all, to be only valued because of the spiritual communion which they enable our hearts to hold with Jesus. Baptism being intended for spiritual men, that they may enter into the Savior’s death and burial, and the Lord’s supper that the same persons may remember His body broken and His blood shed for them, the water, the bread, the wine, being mere emblems, not to be treated with reverence, but put to their proper emblematic use.

II. I shall now, in the second place, try to ACCOUNT FOR THE EXTREME RARITY OF SPIRITUAL WORSHIP.

The reason is, my brethren, because man has fallen. If man were what he once was, pure and holy, I cannot conceive of his wanting holy places and crosses, copes, and dalmatics, crosiers, and chasubles. I cannot conceive of the temptation to bow down before a bull, or a Virgin Mary, or a wafer. There the noble creature walks in paradise, and if he reclines beneath a shady tree, he lifts up his eyes and says, “My Father, You have made this grateful shade, here I will adore You,” or if he walks in the full heat of the sun, he says, “My God, it is Your light that shines on me—I adore You.”

Up yonder on the mountain’s brow, or down by the gleaming river, or the silvery lake, he needs build no altar, his altar is within himself, he needs make no temple, his temple is everywhere. The morning is holy, and the evening is holy, he has no prescribed hour of prayer, it is devotion all day long. His morning bath is his baptism, each meal is his Eucharist. Depend upon it, the nearer we get back to the nakedness of worship, the nearer we get to its truth and purity, and it is because man has fallen, that as his body wants clothing, so he is always dressing up his religion.

Moreover, it is far more difficult to worship God in spirit than in form. To patter through a dozen Ave Marias or Paternosters is so easy, that I can nearly go to sleep over them. To repeat a form of prayer in the morning and evening is a very small matter, and one can be thinking of the shop all the while. To go to church or chapel so many times a week is a cheap duty, and one may still be a thief or a hypocrite, but it is hard, very hard, to bring the heart down to humble penitence, and the soul to holy meditation.

The last thing that most people will do is to think. The noblest part of our nature is still the least exercised. Humbly to tremble before God, to confess sin before Him, to believe Him, to love Him—this is spiritual worship! Because this is so hard, men say, “No, no, let me crawl on my knees around a shrine! Let me kneel down before a pyx, let me help to make a cope, or to manufacture some pretty piece of millinery for the priest to wear. Let me go every morning to the steeple house and come out in half an hour, and feel I have done my religion.” That is quite easy, but the hard part of religion is the part of spiritual worship.

And yet again, to worship God spiritually men would have to part with their sins. There is no effect produced upon a man’s conscience by his being sprinkled, or by his taking the sacraments, he can do all

that and be as much a pleasure-lover, or a worshipper of mammon, as he was before. But to worship God spiritually, a man must give up his sins, must overcome his pride and lust, and his evil concupiscence must be cast out of him.

Many persons might honestly declare, “I do not mind worshipping God if it consists in doing penance, or going without meat on Fridays, but if I am to give up my sins, love God, seek Christ, trust to Him, I cannot attend to that.”

Furthermore, man, for the most part, somehow cannot get the idea of this spiritual worship into his brain. Oh the many times I have tried to preach spiritual worship here, and yet I am conscious that when I try at it I do not interest many of you, and some of you think, “if he would only give us more metaphors, more anecdotes, and so on.” I say I will do that, for I believe we should speak by parable, but sometimes I do not know how to clothe these spiritual things without making you look at the clothing rather than the spirit.

It is not your worshipping God by words in hymns and prayers, or sitting in a certain place, or covering your faces at certain times that is acceptable to Him, true worship lies in your heart paying reverence to Him, your soul obeying Him, and your inner nature coming into conformity to His own nature, by the work of His Spirit in your soul. And because men can scarcely get the idea of this till the Holy Spirit gives it to them, this is a reason why it is so rare, so exceedingly rare.

There is one other reason, dear friends, why spiritual worship is unusual, and that is because man cannot traffic in spiritual religion. The priest is up at arms directly. “Oh,” saith he, “spiritual! spiritual! why they will do without me one of these days. Spiritual—why, if you tell these people that every place is holy, and that there are no holy places, and that one believer is as much a priest as another, and that prayer is as acceptable at home as it is in a particular spot, why,” says he, “*there is an end of me.*”

Yes, sir, there is an end of you, and the sooner the better for the world, for of all the curses that have ever fallen upon the human race the priesthood is the worst. Its claims are imposture, and its actions are full of deceit. In the age of witches and ghosts priesthood might be tolerated, but he who now sets himself up as a priest is as much a common nuisance as a fortune teller. Nothing has been such a nightmare upon the intellect of man, nothing has sat like old Sindbad the Sailor upon the back of humanity, like the pretensions of the priesthood.

God forbid that Christianity should even for a moment endorse the lie! Christ has put it all down. Christ says, “All ye are brethren,” and He says of the whole body of His elect, “Ye are a royal priesthood.” Concerning all the saints, Scripture declares, “Ye are God’s clergy,” for that is the Greek word in the passage—“Ye are God’s heritage.” We know no clergy and no laity, we know nothing whatever now of priesthood and of the common people, for ye are made priests and kings unto God to offer spiritual sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God by Jesus Christ.

III. Turning from that point, a third subject is this, WHY IS SUCH WORSHIP TO BE RENDERED?

Why did not God ordain worship by windmills as in Tibet? Why has He not chosen to be worshipped by particular men in purple and fine linen, acting gracefully as in Roman and Anglican churches? Why not? He gives two reasons which ought to suffice. The first is, *He Himself seeks spiritual worship.* It is His own wish that the worship should be spiritual.

And in the second place, He is Himself a Spirit, and is to be spiritually worshipped. Whatever kind of worship the great Ruler desires He ought to receive, and it is impertinence on my part if I say to Him, “No, not that, but this.” It is true I may say, “I am very sincere in all this, very earnest in it. It suits my taste. There is a beauty about it. It excites certain emotions which I think to be devotional.”

What is all that but saying, “Great God, You have chosen such and such a way of being worshipped, but I will not render it to You”? Is not that in effect saying, “I will not worship You at all,” for must not worship, to be worship, be such as the person worshipped himself will accept?

To invent our own forms of worship is to insult God. And every mass that is ever offered upon the Romish altar is an insult to heaven, and a blasphemy to God who is a Spirit. Every time any form of

worship by procession, celebration, or ceremonial of man's invention is offered to God, it is offered in defiance of this word of Christ, and cannot and will not be received. However earnest people may be they have violated the imperative canon of God's Word, and in fighting for rubrics they have gone against the eternal rubric that God as a Spirit must be worshipped in spirit and in truth.

The second reason given is that God is a Spirit. If God were material, it might be right to worship Him with material substances, if God were like to ourselves, it might be well for us to give a sacrifice congenial to humanity, but being as He is, pure Spirit, He must be worshipped in spirit.

I like the remark made by Trapp in his commentary on this passage, when he says that perhaps the Savior is even here bringing down God to our comprehension, "for," saith he, "God is above all notion, all name." Certainly, this we know, that anything which associates Him with the grossness of materialism is infinitely removed from the truth. Said Augustine, "When I am not asked what God is, I think I know, but when I try to answer that question, I find I know nothing."

If the Eternal were such a one as you are, O man, He might be pleased with your painted windows. But what a child's toy must colored glass be to God! I can sit and gaze upon a cathedral with all its magnificence of architecture, and think what a wonderful exhibition of human skill. But what must that be to God, who piles the heavens, who digs the foundation of the deep, who leads Arcturus with his sons? Why, it must be to Him the veriest trifle, a mere heap of stones.

I delight to hear the swell of organs, the harmony of sweet voices, the Gregorian chant, but what is this artistic sound to Him more than sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal? As a sight, I admire the choristers and priests, and the whole show of a grand ceremonial, but do you believe that God is imposed upon by those frocks and gowns of white, and blue, and scarlet, and fine linen? It seems to me as if such a notion brings down God to the level of a silly woman who is fond of finery.

The infinite God, who spreads out the heavens and scatters stars with both His hands, whom heaven and earth cannot contain, to whom space is but a speck, and time is as nothing, do you think that He dwells in temples made with hands, that is to say, of man's building? And is He to be worshipped with your organs, and your rood screens, and your gaudy millinery? He laughs at them, He treads on them as being less than nothing and vanity. Spiritual worship is what He regards, because He is a Spirit.

My brethren, if you could get together a procession of worlds, if you could make the stars walk along the streets of some great new Jerusalem, dressed in their brightest array; if instead of the songs of a few boys or men you could catch the sonnets of eternal ages; if instead of a few men to officiate as priests you could enlist time, eternity, heaven and earth to be the priesthood, yet all this would be to Him but as a company of grasshoppers, and He would take up the whole as a very little thing.

But let me tell you that even God Himself, great as He is, does not despise the tear that drops from a repentant eye, nor does He neglect the sigh that comes from a sinner's soul. He thinks more of your repentance than of your incense, and more of your prayers than of your priesthods. He views with pleasure your love and your faith, for these are spiritual things in which He can take delight. But your architecture, your music and your fine arts, though they lavish their treasures at His feet, are less than nothing and vanity.

You know not what spirit ye are of. If you think to worship my God with all these inventions of man, you dream like fools. I feel glowing within me the old iconoclastic spirit. Would God we had men now like Knox or Luther, who with holy indignation would pull in pieces those wicked mockeries of the Most High, against which our soul feels a hallowed indignation as we think of His loftiness, and of that poor paltry stuff with which men degrade His name.

IV. WHAT THEN? What is the practical drift of this? Why two things.

The first is, my dear brothers and sisters, I mean you who have learned to worship God in spirit and in truth, who have got above the beggarly elements of the outward, and can worship Him in spirit and in truth, what then? why, in the first place, let us be particularly jealous of anything which looks at all like going back to ceremonialism.

As a matter of taste I have a great liking for noble architecture. Many an hour have I lingered in the ruins of some splendid abbey or our own majestic buildings still used for sacred worship. I have a great delight in a well-painted window. I cannot say that I like most Dissenting painted windows, because they look to me as if they were a sort of would be if you could. I cannot say I have any kind of liking for most of our Dissenting Gothic, for it seems to me such a paltry thing to build a front just like St. Paul's or Westminster Abbey, and then as if to cheat the Lord to make the back part shabby. I cannot say I care for that kind of thing. But a really splendid place of worship I admire, as a matter of taste.

I like an organ very well, as a matter of musical taste. But my brethren, I feel that these are times when we must stand out even against allowable things, lest going one step we should go another. I do pray you therefore if you have any influence anywhere always use it in favor of simplicity, and if you see at any time in the churches of which you are the members a tendency to creep on to something a little nearer, a little towards the way of Rome, cry "Halt!"

Let us rather go back to the barns in which our fathers worshipped, or better still to the hill side, and to the green sward than go forward to anything like symbolism, which will tempt the soul away from spiritual worship.

We ought ourselves to guard against falling into formalism by means of simplicity, for we may do it the one way as well as the other, by laying it down as a rule that a service must begin with prayer or begin with singing, that the preacher must preach at such a time in the service, that the service must commence, continue, and conclude in some fixed fashion. That seems to me to have a tendency to breed another form of ritualism inconsistent with worshipping God in spirit and in truth.

I am afraid I have hardly grace enough to worship God by two or three hours together in silence as our Quaker friends do. I do enjoy a quarter of an hour's silence every now and then. To sit quite still seems to me to be an admirable way of getting into contact with God. Our service is so much words, words, words, that I am almost afraid you get to think as much of words as other people do of banners, and flags, and so on. Now, to sit still, to get away from words, if so your heart keeps to God, is better even than preaching and singing.

Juan De Valdes, a Catholic, but a good Protestant for all that, remarks that the vulgar in seeking to remember Christ by the crucifix do not exercise their mind but stop at the crucifix, and therefore that which was intended to be a help becomes a hindrance. So the learned get their Bibles which should help them to think upon divine things, but being content with having read the letter of Scripture they often fail to reach the spiritual truth which it contains, and so after all do not worship God.

Remember that while we should be jealous of anything which would make it easy to be of formal worship which might be adopted, yet we may still after all have missed the main thing, the worshipping of God in spirit and in truth.

Let us make it a matter of heart-searching as to whether we ourselves have been in the habit of worshipping the Father in spirit and in truth.

Dear friends, I am fearful of some of you that you do not do this. If the preacher happens to be away you do not feel in so good a frame, somebody else takes my place, and there are certain feeble folk among you who feel as if the Sabbath had lost its enjoyment. But God is here, and you might worship God as much surely without me as with me. And though the instruction received from one man may not seem so edifying as that which may come from another, and possibly may not be so, yet still if your object be the worship of God, which should be the main object of our gathering, surely you should do that as well under the ministry of Mr. A as Mr. B.

I am afraid too that many of you are content with singing through the hymns, now all that singing which is not thought-singing is of no use. You may have very sweet voices, but God does not regard your voice, He hears your heart, and if your heart does not sing you have not sung at all.

When we stand up to pray it may be that the preacher's words may happen to be suitable to your case, but it is not prayer so far as you are concerned, though it may be as far as he is, unless you join in it.

Recollect that if you do not put your hearts into the worship of God, you might for that matter as well be at home as here. You are better here than at home for other reasons, because you are in the way where good may come to you, but for worship's sake you might as well have been in bed as here. You who have no spiritual worship may even clog the devotions of those who have. An invisible savor of death unto death may be stealing from you, helping to pollute or to render dead the worship of those who truly adore God.

At any rate, my dear hearers, if you have not with your whole hearts loved and worshipped God, repent over it, and pray the Holy Ghost to make you spiritual. Go to Christ's cross, and trust in Him, then, and not till then, will you be capable of adoring the most High God in a style in which He can accept your worship. God grant that this may be impressed upon the hearts of all of us, that we may worship God in spirit and in truth.

PORTION OF SCRIPTURE READ BEFORE SERMON—JOHN 4:1-30

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.