

Human Religion Only Deals With Symptoms

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[0 : 00] Amen. Amen.

Amen. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I want you to look at the Old Testament lesson for tonight, which is 1 Samuel 16, verses 14 to 23.

It's on page 253 of the Blue View Bible.

I have, in the course of the last three Sunday evenings, tried to talk to you a little bit about the great religions of the world. And, uh, I'm, uh, I'm impressed with the religions of the world.

I am always afraid to do that, to fear that I'm, you know, become a Muslim or a Jew or a Mormon or a Jehovah's Witness. And, uh, I'm sure that it's a very important study because I think the religions of the world raise very important questions.

[3 : 01] And, uh, and they, uh, attempt to answer the questions that they raise in a certain way.

And I don't think that you can study them without becoming very much aware of the enormous significance of the person of Jesus Christ.

And the depth at which, in the Gospels, the answers to the questions which the world-religion raise are discovered.

I, uh, I don't know that you would do anything but come running back to the Christian faith if you were to study.

It's simply because of the nature of the answer that is found. Tonight I want to look at, uh, perhaps another one of the world religions.

You may not, you may not consider it to be one of the world religions, but, uh, it's the kind of religion of universal human experience. It's a religion that we, uh, we all tend to subscribe to.

[4 : 18] We are all God's family. We're all God's children. We all face similar problems. We all find similar answers for what good they are. And, uh, we are no better and no worse than the person next to us.

And there is a tremendous bonding of our humanity, one with another, uh, simply by reason of the common possession of that vital reality, which is human experience.

And two men dying of thirst, no matter what their greed or their convictions may be, when they find a well, are both extremely grateful for water.

And, uh, so there is a tremendous bonding of human experience. But in order to look at the question perhaps more deeply, I want you to look at the story which we read, was read this evening, uh, concerning Saul and David.

The 14th verse of 1 Samuel 16. Now, the spirit of the Lord departed from Saul, and an evil spirit from the Lord tormented him.

[5 : 33] The spirit of the Lord was given in Old Testament times for special men in special circumstances. And, uh, it had certainly been given to Saul. Saul was of the tribe of Benjamin.

Benjamin was the least of the tribes of Israel. And Saul was, uh, anointed by Samuel to be king over Israel.

And, uh, he was a man who was head and shoulders above his fellow. So I've always enjoyed Saul and identified heavily with him.

When first in the course of my rapid growth, I became head and shoulders above my fellow. Now I find that little people are nasty and aggressive and much more.

Big people are slow moving and, uh, too accommodating. If you could only be mean and big, too, it would be a great advantage. But Saul was a big, big man.

[6 : 35] And, uh, he, uh, he was chosen, uh, because the people of Israel wanted a king. They saw the nations around them fighting under a king.

And they wanted a king for themselves. Someone who could be, in a sense, the focus of their national pride, the leader of their armies, the person who would fulfill the role of, uh, the rallying person, would do for Israel what Reagan does for the United States. We can discuss that in a coffee. Ha, ha, ha. But, uh, that's what they wanted. They wanted a king. And Samuel told them, if you knew how kings behave, you wouldn't want one. But they nevertheless persisted in saying that they wanted a king. And in due course, Samuel anointed for them King Saul. I might remind you at this point that if any of you have summer holidays and take your Bible along with you to read it and don't quite know where to start, start with Samuel. The first book of Samuel and the second book of Samuel. You'll find it's a book you can't put down. It's full of horrible stories. And, uh, gory stories. [7 : 56] And all sorts of things. But it's also full of the manifestation of the sovereign grace of God. So, if you want to know where to start for some enjoyable summer reading under an Arbutus tree, think of this.

Saul then is appointed as the king over the people. A man, head and shoulders above his fellows. And he sets about doing the business of being a king. He is a soldier. He's courageous. He's brave. He was the one who got the news that the Philistines were invading the territory of Israel. And he was out plowing in his field. Kings were more practical in those days than they are now. And he took his sword and carved his yoke of oxen up into pieces of meat and sent them to every part of the nation and said, unless you join me in repulsing the Philistines, this is what's going to happen to you. Which was a great piece of leadership because he immediately rallied the support that he needed. And they all came together and they drove the Philistines out of the country. But in the course of his career, Saul got into profound trouble. [9 : 13] He is one of the most tragic figures in the whole of the Old Testament. And if you want to see what a really great man can suffer, you should see what Samuel suffered, or what Saul suffered as king, when he was king over his people.

They needed at one time a priest. And so Saul, because he was king and didn't understand what his rights and what his role were, was disobedient and set himself up as a priest to his people and led their worship. And Samuel said, that's once. And he said, you will be deposed from being king over Israel. Then on another occasion he was with the prophets. And he took over the role and ecstasy of a prophet. And Samuel said, that's twice. You will no longer be king over your people. Finally, Samuel was called back from the dead by the witch of Endor, who raised up his spirit to meet Saul. And Samuel said to Saul, that's three times. And you see, what he was doing in all this was he was, in a sense, trying to fulfill the need for religion that the people have. [10 : 43] He was made a king, even though he wasn't God's anointed. He made himself a priest, even though he wasn't God's anointed. He assumed the role of a prophet, even though he wasn't God's anointed.

And then he became a kind of spiritualist, even though God had forbidden that in the land. You see, that's how human religion works. It goes after all these things that men see that they need, and we try to fulfill them in our own way, according to our own wisdom. And that's what Saul had done. And Saul, having done it, came to the place where he could no longer be used of God. So that's how the verse opens. The spirit of the Lord departed from Saul, and an evil spirit from the Lord tormented him. You see, you can't go from being one in due with the spirit of the Lord to one who isn't in due with the spirit of the Lord. [11 : 52] You go from one to another, from the spirit of the Lord who was with Saul, to an evil spirit who tormented him from the Lord.

We have all sorts of gradations of things. We think, well, there's super spiritual people, and there's not quite such super spiritual people. And then there's practical spiritual people, and then there's just sort of good people.

And then there's good guys who are a little bit immoral, and then you go down and down and down. But the Lord doesn't see things that way. You are either endowed, endued by the spirit of God, or you are endued with an evil spirit from God.

That is, God doesn't mess around with all sorts of in-between stages. And you can look at the story of Saul and see the reality of that and how it was worked out in his life.

And he was tormented by this evil spirit. And Saul's servants came to him and said, Behold, now an evil spirit from God is tormenting you.

[13:02] Let our Lord now command your servants who are before you to seek out a man who is skillful in playing the harp. And when the evil spirit from God is upon you, he will play it, and you will be well.

And again, they're looking for some kind of human solution to a deep despondency that Saul was in. And Saul had reason to be despondent.

Because being a man of great stature, when Goliath came and challenged his armies, it wasn't Saul that went out against him.

It was David. When the Philistines attacked Israel, it wasn't Saul ultimately that led the people against the Philistines. It was David. And you see, you begin to see the contrast between human religion, religion as we organize it and design it for ourselves, epitomized in the tragic character of Saul, and the religion which is God-anointed, which is epitomized in the character and person of David.

While you see the degradation of Saul going on, you see God's anointed coming up. And you see the difference between these men, between Saul and David.

[14:23] And that kind of difference still exists in the realm of human religion. You see what man aspires to and can't pull off in terms of Saul.

And you see the purpose of God being slowly and graciously fulfilled in the person of God's anointed who was David. So, the servants of Saul recognized this.

Saul said to his servants, provide for me a man who can play well. Bring him to me. One of the young men answered. One of the young men from the court of Saul.

One of the young men who was already familiar with the rumors about the character of this uniquely prepared man who was to be the fulfillment of God's purpose.

And he says to Saul, I have seen a son of Jesse, the Bethlehemite, who is skillful in playing, a man of valor, a man of war, prudent in speech, a man of good presence.

[15:31] And the Lord is with him. And so you have this terrible contrast between Saul, who was the king of the nation, and David, and from whom the spirit of the Lord had departed, and David, the anointed king whom God had appointed, and the spirit of the Lord is with him.

And so Saul said, send messengers to Jesse, David's father, and said, send me, David, your son, who is with the sheep.

And I would like to ask you, in your service for God, and I'm asking myself, how much time can you spend alone?

Can you face the fact of being alone? Can you put yourself in the place where God can teach you in a lovely way that a shepherd boy would have to be?

He would have to be in that place where, through the long, long hours of a summer day, the sun rises early in the morning, goes late to rest.

[17:12] He would be alone. And in that aloneness, God spoke to you. The problem for people who suffer from loneliness is not to find people to fill up that loneliness, but to become alone, to face that loneliness.

And I'm sure that the Lord wants to meet us in that loneliness. And your loneliness may be quite the most precious gift that God can give you.

Because if you can embrace that loneliness, you can take hold of that, what, what, what, uh, um, my Atman, for his high, as he calls it, Oswald Chambers.

And if in that loneliness you can discover the reality of God, what a tremendous gift that aloneness is.

And here was David. Send for me David, your son, who is with the sheep alone. And, uh, how important it is that we be in that place.

[18:30] That's why... People, you know, I really wonder about, about music, about these things that you put over your head.

Now, it's obvious that, that, uh, if you belong to my generation, you're going to be critical of that. There's no doubt about that. I mean, that's just as if you don't have to say that.

But, in a sense, it buffers our aloneness, doesn't it? It's not really taking hold of being alone and being quiet and being able to face it.

And I, I know that in my own life, David, I found it very difficult to be alone. To be alone for me was to be subject to all sorts of self-indulgent temptations.

To make a positive experience of being alone has to be a very gracious gift of God. Somebody in this congregation who was forced to be alone a great deal because of serious illness said laughingly to me, Thank God for my illness.

[19 : 48] You've forced me to come to church with being alone. And, uh, I just think that it's, uh, I don't know what to do with it because it's such a terrible test of our own spiritual character, of our own walk with God, as to whether we can't be alone.

Whether we can allow God to teach us in that situation. Or whether if we're alone we simply destroy ourselves. If we can't destroy ourselves with indulgence and with the things that crowd in on us.

Well, anyway, David was alone, and in his aloneness, caring for the sheep, God wonderfully prepared him. And so Jesse, his father, took an ass, and, uh, it was laden with bread and a skin of wine and a kid, and he sent them by David his son to Saul.

David came to Saul and entered his circus. And he was, uh, see this sort of strange way in which David was suddenly exalted from being a shepherd boy that everybody had forgotten about, to being in the king's court, a member of the king's household.

And in some mysterious way, God was working out his purpose in, uh, in David, while man's purpose in Saul was crumbling.

[21 : 21] So you get Saul, David, entering the service of the king. And Saul loved him greatly, and he became his armor bearer.

David won the affection of Saul. David won the affection of Saul.

Uh, it may be something for you to stop and think about here as to, uh, why David won the affection of Saul.

What was it that was supremely attractive about him? Certainly not that David was self-centered, but that in some way David was, that Saul could see in David something that he longed for.

Even though he was bitterly jealous of this man eventually. Even though he, in the course of David, playing the harp or the lyre for him. We have that terrible story in chapter 19 of how Saul picked up the spear and tried to bring David to the wall.

[22 : 37] And the hate was still there. The jealousy was there in spite of the affection that he bore. And Saul sent to Jesse saying, Let David remain in my service, for he has found favor in my sight.

Whenever the evil spirit from God was upon Saul, David took the lyre and played it with his hand. So Saul was refreshed, was well, the evil spirit departed from him. You see that, that almost perfectly expresses the inadequacy of human religion.

David's playing upon the lyre could relieve Saul of the symptoms of his disease, but couldn't heal him at the source of his disease.

And human religion can really handle most of the symptoms of human disease in many ways.

[23 : 50] But it can't deal with the problem at source. That's what needs to be done. We talk about renewal. The only person who can bring renewal to us is the one who created us in the first place.

And the, you see, that music of David's with all its charm and all, I tried to persuade Trisha to bring out her harpsichord and play for us at this point, so you could listen to it and feel the soothing effect that you could play.

But, you see, in a way it's like that. Our sort of human idea, our human cultural and religious concept very often can take away the symptoms of our disease, but not deal with the source of our disease.

What God has done for us in Jesus Christ is to deal with the source of our disease. Part of the massive rejection of Jesus Christ is that people don't want the source dealt with.

They only want the symptoms dealt with. They don't want the disease rooted out because, in a sense, they have identified so strongly with it.

[25 : 20] I saw the tragic person whose symptoms could be relieved. The terrible jealousy, the terrible depression, the terrible illness that had gripped the mind of Saul couldn't be dealt with by the music of Jesus.

And so, the really deepest needs of man can be dealt with by human religion, powerful as it may be, and moving as it may be.

That's why the heart of our Christian faith is the man on the cross crying, My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?

Nobody can come to terms with the reality of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ, without coming to terms with the reality of Christ's emptying of himself and the false world.

It's something enormously different than any human religion. There are many human religious problems for which many human religions have been developed.

[26 : 50] But they can't deal with the problem. So you see, the picture of Saul as man's anointed king, attempting to be a priest, attempting to be a prophet, attempting to be a sorcerer, delving into all these realms of religion.

And in that failing to be the man in whom the purpose of God was to be fulfilled. Then alongside him, in contrast, you have David, the anointed one of God, the God-appointed king, the Lord of him who was to be Lord, whose son was to be, whose son humanly in the person of Jesus Christ, was to be the King of kings and Lord of lords.

So I want you simply to take that picture of Saul and David from 1 Samuel 16 to see why it is human religion, even when it's called Christianity sometimes, only deals with symptoms.

It doesn't deal with the problem. It doesn't deal with the truth. It doesn't deal with the meaning of the Lord, but if you don't lose the awareness of the purpose that God is working out in our hearts and lives through Jesus Christ.

And settle for the happy religious medicine instead of the spiritual surgery, which will give us a new heart, which will bring us to a new birth.

[28 : 29] Amen.