

The Cart Before the Horse

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Introduction

According to “the phrase-finder” website, the expression “putting the cart before the horse” has been around at least since Cicero, over two thousand years ago. Of course no one actually hitches a horse to a wagon that way, no one is quite that silly. The phrase has always been a metaphor for getting our processes and our logic all backwards, on matters that are more subtle and less mechanically obvious than the direction of the horse relative to the cart.

One huge error in religion is the belief that we can and must earn God’s favor by moral rectitude and religious works. Five hundred years ago leading priests and scholars rejected the notion that fasting, prayer, pilgrimages and moralism were required in order to receive God’s grace. The motto of the Protestant Reformation since then is that we are saved by grace, through faith as the free gift of God, not by works, so that no one can boast about saving themselves.

As a result, evangelicals have an ambivalent attitude towards Lent. Lent was begun in the early centuries of Christian faith to motivate repentance, contrition, and a desire for deeper holiness. So for many Christians the fish-only Fridays and other attempts at fasting or "doing without" a favorite, such as chocolate, combined with the extra prayers and worship services, are performed with a religious zeal in the hopes that these acts of worship will atone for sins and balance the account in God's eyes. To the evangelical this promotes the error of works-righteousness.

Is there a proper way for the evangelical to observe Lent? Tonight’s lesson from Isaiah 58 is helpful. The Israelites were doing the kind of stuff that many Christians do during Lent,

with fasting and extra worship services, yet they felt that God was ignoring them. In the prophet's rebuke we learn that these Israelites had put the cart of human effort in front of the horse of God's mercy.

Let us pray: *Father God, Convict us of those places in our lives where we are hypocrites. In our worship help us to open our hearts in surrender to your mercy, that the world may know by our witness that you are merciful and kind to the undeserving. In Jesus' name, amen.*

1. Is God Ignoring Us?

Backwards logic, with the cart in front of the horse, is the problem in Isaiah 58. Because the Israelites are doing religious works to make God pay attention to them and bless them, they are angry that God is not blessing them, not answering them. They wonder if God is even ignoring them. This raises an important point: Does God ignore people sometimes?

Classical theology states the issue this way: Does God listen to the prayers of sinners? The Letter of James says that the double-minded person will not get anything they ask for, and the Apostle John in his writings seems to suggest that God only hears the prayers of the righteous. Yet the sinner comes before God with a broken and contrite heart in Psalm 51, and in Luke 18 Jesus tells of the Pharisee who kept all the commandments yet prayed wrongly, while the prayer of the tax collector, beating his breast in sorrow and repentance, was approved by God.

The best way to discern whether a prayer is being heard and approved by God, depends on where the person is standing on the moral continuum, and where that person's heart is on the attitude continuum. The best place a person can be under God is in the place of righteous humility: Righteous on the moral spectrum, with an uncluttered conscience, and humble on the attitude spectrum, aware that grace alone is the power of faithfulness just as much as the horse is

the power of the cart it pulls. In the scriptures Daniel is such a person. Then there are those who have fallen off the moral pedestal, and they are humble before God in repentance. King David in Psalm 51 is an example. God responds to the broken and contrite heart, and the person knows that it is mercy alone that motivates God. God is not blessing the sin, or pretending it never happened. God is forgiving the sin, in mercy.

But the Israelites in Isaiah 58 are convicted by the prophet of a double problem: First, on the moral spectrum they are guilty of all kinds of stuff, like exploiting the system to cheat others and benefit themselves. Second, on the attitude spectrum they have the gall to assume that God owes them his attention and blessing because they are bowing down and praying and doing other religious works. *Look God, aren't I religious? Why are you ignoring me?*

This is the false idea that God can be appeased by religion for its own sake. That was never true, as Isaiah points out. The reason the Israelites feel ignored is that they want God to bless them for the sake of their religious works, and meanwhile, ignore their sins. This would have the effect of showing divine approval for their sins and of vindicating their hypocrisy, and God could only do that by bearing a false witness to himself and his holiness. So it is not that God is ignoring them; they are simply not in a posture that allows God to do anything for them. Were they humble about their sins, so that their religious zeal was motivated by repentance rather than by magic thinking, God could show them mercy, and they would bear testimony to God's mercy. But because they are proud of their religious works and expect God to do something for them accordingly, they would interpret any blessing from God as validation and vindication rather than as mercy, and that would encourage them to keep right on sinning.

I do not think it is too much a stretch to ask whether God's hands are similarly tied by the attitudes of America's evangelicals these days. If God is unable to bless us, some will say it is

because our religion is wrong. No, actually, our religion is just fine, springing as it does from God's self-revelation. We are New Covenant people in continuity with the Old Covenant people of Isaiah 58. But like the people in Isaiah 58, we are depending on right religion to atone for our sinful distractedness. Let me name three distractions: 1) professional ambition, 2) material pleasures, 3) desire for clout in a culture that says that being political is more important than being prayerful. Friends, can God bless the evangelical movement in America when it is so distracted and self-serving? God is urging us to see our neighbors as he sees them, hurting and lonely people who need to know God loves them and is concerned for the injustice that they suffer, often at the hands of the very same system where we have done just fine.

2. Working to Become Righteous

But there is another place on the spectrum of attitude and morality where the person stands in the wrong place before God. That place may be the most dangerous place of all, for it is the place where the person is solid on the moral spectrum, and on that basis takes an attitude of pride and entitlement toward God. The moral effort includes being both personally moral and doing right by one's neighbor with generosity and compassion.

The Bible locates many Pharisees as being in that place. And this is where the Bible gets a little bit ambiguous, and where evangelical attitudes become ambivalent again. The evangelical concern here again is works righteousness. Religious works like fasting do not make a person right with God, the Bible everywhere speaks to that. But this other dimension, this love-your-neighbor side, there seems to be more to it. Isaiah 58 seems to suggest that if people lived right and were kind to others, especially those who needed help, they might actually become right with God and God would answer their prayers, their light would dawn and glory would return to the nation. Jesus seems to indicate the same thing in Matthew 25, when he describes

that those who do the very things described in Isaiah 58, clothing the naked and feeding the hungry, are the people God will save at the last judgment, whereas those who neglect compassion, kindness and generosity will be lost. But we “grace-alone” evangelicals turn to the apostle we like best, Paul, who tells in First Corinthians 13 that if he were to give all that he had to the poor, and suffer martyrdom, but did not possess love, he would gain nothing by it spiritually in terms of his standing with God. And there is the statement Jesus makes, when some will stand at the door saying, “Lord, did we not do mighty works in your name?” and he will answer “I never knew you. Depart from me, workers of iniquity.”

It seems to be that the attitude we take towards God makes all the difference. If we are doing super things for society to make the world a better place, but we do them not to show the way to God but instead to promote duty, or to advertise how magnanimous we are ourselves, or to prove that humankind has it within ourselves to solve our problems, then God has no part in it. Much good has been done by those who did not acknowledge God’s role in it. One of the reasons why Jane Addams is so famous is that her work for societal redemption rivaled in scale the Christian benefactions of the Salvation Army and the YMCA, but her outlook and motivation was thoroughly secular and humanist.

The person who does many super-duper things on their own energy and fundraising skills, and then expects God to reward them for it, as though they can push God’s buttons or pull God’s strings, is going to be gravely disappointed. God cannot bless a situation where the cart is trying to pull the horse. God is glorified when we, in our humility, express kindness and mercy as our tribute to the character of God. We are not called to achieve righteousness by works. We are called to put righteousness to work, to allow the horse to pull the cart.

3. Putting Righteousness to Work

The banner scripture for the evangelical is Ephesians 2, 8 and 9, which I already quoted for those of you who were paying attention. For it is by grace we are saved through faith, and this not by works, it is the free gift of God, so that no one can boast. But then there is the matter of verse 10, which states, “For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works which God prepared in advance for us to do.”

Now the picture begins to clear up. The works that God wants to see us do are to be done because we have been created in Christ Jesus, and we are entering into works that God has already prepared for us in advance. The horse is now in front of the cart. So there is no place left for pride. There is no room for the humanist thought that it is my own spark of goodness that is causing me to do philanthropy. For the believer in Jesus, there is only humility, and it is humility that draws us into the heart of God, from which we are able to discern God’s will and plan for us.

The general picture of the works that God desires are stated over and over: They fit under the umbrella of justice, or of generosity, depending on which side of the coin you like better. These are the works described in Isaiah 58 and Matthew 25, and many other places as well. These works testify to the character of God, and because of that, they are anchored in God’s Spirit, so that we begin to show these traits of God in our life with God. These spiritual traits, called fruits, include love, kindness, and goodness, the spiritual basis for these works of redemption described as feeding and clothing the poor.

We do not do these things in order to save ourselves. We do these things because we are rejoicing in our salvation, and we want the world to know this great God who in mercy will save even a wretch like me. The grace-alone evangelical cannot raise any objection anymore. Grace brings the living and active Spirit of God into the heart and life of the believer, and the Spirit of

God is powerful. Good fruits follow. Good works happen in the life of a true believer. It is not the works that save, the works happen because the believer is saved and living in the power of God. The cart follows the horse.

So the evangelical who eschews Ephesians 2 verse 10, and cuts Matthew 25 out of the New Testament, and pretends that all it takes to be right with God is right religion, is not an evangelical at all, but is making the same errors that the Old Covenant people were making in the days of Isaiah 58. For a true evangelical does not shred the Bible into tatters and pick and choose favorite verses out of the pile. The evangelical takes the scriptures as the whole, and receives them in their entirety, as the very Word of God.

On the back page of the bulletin you will see a list of the ministries of justice and kindness that we sponsor locally with our budget support and volunteer hours. We do these things because God is good and kind, not because we think we earn anything for ourselves. These things are our church's gospel witness to our community. You are invited to participate.

Conclusion

As readers of the whole Bible, then, what shall the evangelical do with Lent? If, as we stand before God, the attitude we take towards God makes all the difference, then, for the evangelical, Lent can be time for attitude adjustment. Once we peel back all the levels of tradition and misunderstanding and get back to Lent as it was first practiced, we may find that this was really what Lent was for: to remind us of all that Jesus suffered on our behalf, in order to restore us to humility toward God. From that place of humility we can receive the life and power of God, personally present in our hearts to inspire us to do the works that show the world, especially those in need, that God is good, loving, and merciful.

It is not our works that push God's buttons, forcing him to bless us. That kind of thinking has the cart in front of the horse. It is our humility that draws us into the heart of God. Let that journey into the heart of God, the journey of humility, take place this Lent season, so that the power of God can pull you along, in faith, into the life and works that God has prepared in advance for you. Amen.