

The Sacrifice of Fools

“Keep thy foot when thou goest to the house of God, and be more ready to hear, than to offer the sacrifice of fools: for they consider not that they do evil”

(Ecclesiastes 5:1)

Our opening verse demonstrates the importance of a correct approach in worship towards God. The emphasis is on hearing, and to avoid offering “the sacrifice of fools”. Fools offer blindly, out of a sense of ritual rather than from the heart. Their worship is empty, and because they choose not to “hear” the Word of God, it is not in harmony with His Righteous Requirements. The Old Testament records a number of occasions where foolish offerings were rejected, and we shall consider them in turn.

The Example of Cain:

Genesis chapter 4 recounts the offerings made by Cain, and his brother Abel. Cain brought the fruit of the ground, whereas Abel brought the firstlings of his flock. “And Yahweh had respect unto Abel and to his offering: but unto Cain and to his offering, he had not respect” (Gen. 4:4-5). This lack of Yahweh’s respect for his offering caused Cain to become very angry (vs 5), to the extent that he slew his brother Abel (vs 8). The New Testament however, provides the Divine assessment of these events:

“... we should love one another. Not as Cain, who was of that wicked one, and slew his brother. And wherefore slew he him? Because his own works were evil, and his brother’s righteous” (1 Jno. 3:11-12).

This is very significant: Cain’s offering was rejected because it was not in harmony with the Divine Command. But it wasn’t simply the case that Cain misunderstood what was required of him: “his own works were evil”. That implies his works were intentionally against what God commanded, and rather than to stand corrected, out of jealousy he slew his brother. The words of Proverbs 10 are very relevant here:

“the labour of the righteous tendeth to life: the fruit of the wicked to sin. He is in the way of life that keepeth instruction: but he that refuseth reproof erreth” (Prov. 10:16-17).

Cain’s offered fruit was sin: he refused instruction and rejected reproof. But Abel however, kept the instructions of the Almighty, and though he were slain, remained “in the way of life”. By contrast, Jude cautions us against false brethren who “have gone in the way of Cain” (Jude 1:11). The “way of Cain” is the broad way that leads to destruction: it is a way that is pleasing to man (Prov. 14:12), but not to God. Those who traverse this way assume they can worship on their own terms, in their own way, and not that prescribed by their Creator. But their ways are equally as evil as his – and their end will be the same.

Hophni and Phinehas:

These two men were the sons of Eli, the High Priest in the days of Samuel. They also became corrupt in their worship, and even stole from the sacrifices offered to Yahweh. Rather than to serve the Lord first in the offering of Sacrifice, they plunged a three pronged fleshhook into the pot, and “all that the fleshhook brought up, the priest took for himself” (1 Sam. 2:14). So the record continues: “Wherefore the sin of the young men was very great before Yahweh: for men abhorred the offering of Yahweh.” (1 Sam. 2:17).

But Eli himself was complicit in this corrupt practice, for the rebuke came to him:

“wherefore kick ye at my sacrifice and at mine offering, which I have commanded in my habitation; and honourest thy sons above me, to **make yourselves fat** with the chiefest of all the offerings of Israel my people?” (1 Sam. 2:29).

And again, to Samuel the word came:

“I have told him that I will judge his house for ever for the iniquity which he knoweth; because his sons made themselves vile, and he restrained them not. And therefore have I sworn unto the house of Eli, that the iniquity of Eli’s house shall not be purged with sacrifice nor offering for ever” (1 Sam. 3:13-14).

What a desolate situation that was: Eli was told that his sin would never be forgiven! As events transpired, the Philistines made inroads into the camp of Israel at Shiloh, they took the Ark of the Covenant into captivity, and Eli fell backwards off his seat, broke his neck, and died. But by contrast to Eli, who was not “ready to hear”: the young Samuel had his ears opened to the words of Yahweh: “Speak, Yahweh, for thy servant heareth” (1 Sam. 3:9). The prophet Jeremiah invited the rebellious of his day to consider these events at Shiloh:

“... go ye now unto my place which was in Shiloh, where I set my Name at the first, and see what I did to it for the wickedness of my people Israel. And now because ye have done all these works, saith Yahweh, and **I spake unto you**, rising up early and speaking but **ye heard not**; and I called you, but **ye answered not**: Therefore I will do unto this house, which is called by my name, wherein ye trust, and unto the place which I gave you and to your fathers, as I have done to Shiloh” (Jer. 7:12-14).

The lessons from Shiloh are plain: we must put Yahweh first in our considerations and offerings, and “hear” his commandments, to do them.

King Saul (1):

There were actually two occasions where Saul’s offerings were rejected. The first is recorded in 1 Samuel 13, where “Samuel said unto Saul, Thou hast done foolishly thou hast not kept the commandment of Yahweh thy God, which he commanded thee” (1 Sam. 13:13). The context is how Saul became impatient in waiting for Samuel to arrive, and he offered a sacrifice in order to procure Divine Favour towards his campaign against the Philistines. He offered a sacrifice which he ought not to have done, and therefore did so foolishly. And in so doing, he lost the kingdom: “... but now thy kingdom shall not continue: Yahweh hath sought him a man after his own heart, and Yahweh hath commanded him to be captain over his people, because thou hast not kept that which Yahweh commanded thee” (1 Sam. 13:14). To offer a sacrifice in a way that God has not commanded is to do foolishly – it is to “offer the sacrifice of fools”.

King Saul (2):

The second time Saul’s offering was rejected, is recorded in 1 Samuel 15. Here, Saul was sent on a mission to “utterly destroy” Amalek, but he did not do so:

“... but Saul and the people spared Agag, and the best of the sheep, and of the oxen, and of the fatlings, and the lambs, and all that was good, and would not utterly destroy them but everything that was vile and refuse, that they destroyed utterly” (1 Sam. 15:9).

When challenged on this by Samuel, Saul blamed the people, and sought to impute a religious motive to justify what he had done:

“Saul said, they have brought them from the Amalekites: for the people spared the best of the sheep and of the oxen, to sacrifice unto Yahweh thy God; and the rest have we utterly destroyed” (1 Sam. 15:15).

There is an important principle that emerges from a consideration of these things: we cannot worship God in any way that we choose. As Samuel said, “Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and **to hearken** than the fat of rams” (vs 22). The command is to “hearken” to the Word of God - as our verse has it: “be more ready to hear than to give the sacrifice of fools”.

Concerning Saul, Yahweh said to Samuel: “It repenteth me that I have set up Saul to be king: for he is turned back from following me, and hath not performed my commandments” (1 Sam. 15:11). The Lord takes no pleasure in those who “turn back” (Heb. 10:38), and so the sacrifice of the foolish king was rejected.

These actions placed Saul into a dire situation. 1 Samuel 28:6 describes how that Saul’s prayer for deliverance from the Philistines was not heard – and 1 Chronicles 10:13 gives the reason for his rejection: “so Saul died for his transgression which he committed against Yahweh, **even against the word of Yahweh, which he kept not**, and also for asking counsel of one that had a familiar spirit, to enquire of it”. If we wish to have our prayers heard therefore, we must give earnest attention to the Word of God, to both hear it, and do it – as the Proverbs has it: “the sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination to Yahweh: but the prayer of the upright is his delight” (Prov. 15:8).

Nadab and Abihu:

In these things concerning Saul, we have an association between the rejection of sacrifice and prayer. In addition to rejecting the animal sacrifices, Yahweh also rejected the offering of Incense on a number of occasions. We know that Incense represented prayer: “let my prayer be set forth before thee as incense ...” (Psa. 141:2 see also Rev. 8:4). And when we come to Nadab and Abihu (the sons of Aaron), we see how their incense was rejected:

“And Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, took either of them his censer, and put fire therein, and put incense thereon, and offered strange fire before Yahweh, which he commanded them not. And there went out a fire from Yahweh, and devoured them, and they died before Yahweh” (Lev. 10:1-2).

We have already seen from the example of Saul, that there are prayers that God will not hear (see also Jer. 11:14). We cannot approach His Throne presumptuously” our prayers must be ignited by the Word to ascend up acceptably.

There is some discussion as to precisely what their sin was. Some suggest that what they offered was not the incense prescribed by the Lord. Others that they went into the Holy of Holies which they ought not to have done. The text itself suggests another possibility: the record states that they “offered strange fire before Yahweh”. It was the fire itself that was incorrect, or “strange” as the old English suggests.

The correct manner by which Incense was to be offered is indicated in the commandments regarding the day of Atonement:

“and he [i.e. Aaron- CAM] shall take a censer full of burning coals of fire from off the altar before Yahweh, and his hands full of sweet incense beaten small, and bring it within the vail: and he shall put the incense upon the fire before Yahweh, that the cloud of the incense may cover the mercy seat that is upon the testimony, that he die not” (Lev. 16:12-13).

There was therefore a link between the Brazen Altar, and the offering of Incense. Coals of fire from the altar was used to ignite the incense, and both the coals and the incense itself were brought into the Holy of Holies – and into the presence of Yahweh. It is evident therefore, that to offer “strange fire” in connection with the incense was to use fire that was not from the Brazen altar, but was from some other source. Our prayers must be offered upon the association with the Sacrifice of Christ, and the Christ-Altar. To offer upon any other basis is to offer “strange fire”, which will not be accepted by our Maker.

King Uzziah:

Nadab and Abihu were not alone in their presumptuous approach to Yahweh: king Uzziah sinned in a similar way. 2 Chronicles chapter 26 records how he was blessed richly by Yahweh:

“he was marvellously helped, till he was strong. But when he was strong, his heart was lifted up to his destruction: for he transgressed against Yahweh his God, and went into the temple of Yahweh to burn incense upon the altar of incense” (2 Chron. 26:15-16).

Uzziah’s sin was different to that of Nadab and Abihu, in that in his case he had no right to offer incense in the first place: he was a king, and not a priest. It was not for him to offer the incense – he was, in effect, approaching the Divine Presence as his own High Priest, and offering strange incense. So, the priests tried to reason with him:

“they withstood Uzziah the king, and said unto him, it appertaineth not unto thee, Uzziah, to burn incense unto Yahweh, but to the priests the sons of Aaron, that are consecrated to burn incense: go out of the sanctuary; for thou hast trespassed; neither shall it be for thine honour from Yahweh Elohim” (2 Chron. 26:18).

Then the wrath of Yahweh was kindled against him:

“Then Uzziah was wroth, and had a censer in his hand to burn incense: and while he was wroth with the priests, the leprosy even rose up in his forehead before the priests in the house of Yahweh, from beside the incense altar. And Azariah the chief priest, and all the priests looked upon him, and, behold, he was leprous in his forehead, and they thrust him out from thence; yea, himself hasted also to go out, because Yahweh had smitten him. And Uzziah the king was a leper until the day of his death, and dwelt in a several house, being a leper; for he was cut off from the house of Yahweh ...” (2 Chron. 26:19-21).

Rather than to accept the priest’s rebuke, Uzziah became angry against them, and so in turn, the anger of Yahweh was demonstrated in his being smitten with leprosy until the day of his death. Again, we have an example of one who offered foolishly, and refused reproof.

In the examples above, we see offerings which were rejected by God. But there are offerings in which He delights: “ ... let us offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually, that is, the fruit of our lips giving thanks to his name. But to do good and fellowship forget not: for with such sacrifices God is well pleased” (Heb. 13:15-16).

Notice again, the link between sacrifices and prayer. For our prayers to be heard, we must hear the Word, obey the command, and give those sacrifices which are acceptable to our Maker. Giving Him praise in all things, we offer the thankful fruit of our lips, to do good, and find acceptance before the throne of Grace.

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