AVOIDING SPIRITUAL SCLEROSIS

Zechariah 7:1-14

By

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Zechariah Lesson 9

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I had to throw away a magazine article recently. I just couldn’t live with it in my house. It told how I could avoid heart disease and arteriosclerosis. The gist of it was that if I will stop eating the foods that I enjoy and start eating all sorts of things that I don’t especially care for, I may be able to avoid the hardening of the arteries that results from too much cholesterol. I realized that with an article like that in my home, I could never again enjoy a breakfast of bacon and eggs, with an English muffin smothered in real butter. The article went in the trash!

I’m kidding, of course. But I’m serious when I say that many people get spiritual sclerosis—hardening of the spiritual arteries—because they trash the warnings of God’s Word. I have both bad news and good news. The bad news is that like arteriosclerosis, spiritual sclerosis creeps up on you gradually as a result of certain bad spiritual habits that are as easy to fall into as eating too much fatty food. The good news is that, contrary to arteriosclerosis, you don’t have to give up everything you enjoy and begin doing all sorts of things you hate to avoid spiritual sclerosis.

Zechariah 7 describes the malady. Two years have passed since Zechariah’s eight night visions (1:7-6:8). Work on the rebuilding of the temple is progressing nicely. In two more years it would be completed. At this time, a delegation from the town of Bethel arrives to seek the favor of the Lord and to ask a practical question of the priests and prophets in Jerusalem. Zechariah’s reply is recorded in chapters 7 and 8.

The question involved the keeping of certain Jewish fasts. In 7:3, they mention the fast of the fifth month. In 7:5 Zechariah also mentions the fast of the seventh month. In 8:19, there is mention of two additional fasts, one in the fourth month and another in the tenth month. All were related to the fall of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. In the tenth month, Nebuchadnezzar besieged Jerusalem; in the fourth month, he penetrated the city; in the fifth month, the temple was burned; and, in the seventh month, Gedaliah, the Jewish gov-
error, was assassinated and the remnant fled (see 2 Kings 25). For the past 68 years, the Jews had observed these dates as fasts. But now, with the temple going up and Jerusalem being rebuilt, this delegation wondered whether they should continue to observe these fasts.

In his answer Zechariah addresses both this delegation and the whole nation (7:5). He points out that the Lord had scattered their ancestors to Babylon because of their spiritual sclerosis—the hardening of their spiritual hearts (7:12). He also indicates that the disease may be hereditary. The remnant that had returned from the captivity was showing some initial symptoms that they needed to confront to avoid the disease themselves. In chapter 7, the prophet shows them that...

**Outward religion without inward reality results in spiritual sclerosis.**

To avoid this disease, we need to know three things:

1. **Outward religion is a danger for all of God’s people.**

   The Jewish remnant had been meticulous in keeping these fasts, but their hearts were not in it. It had become an outward ritual, but the inward reality of walking with God was fading. The God who examines the hearts says, “I delight in loyalty rather than sacrifice, and in the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings” (Hos. 6:6). Through Zechariah He says, “Check your spiritual health. Make sure that you’re not drifting from inward reality to outward religion.” Our text reveals three warning signs that tell us we’re drifting into outward religion:

   A. Manmade: We focus on rules and rituals not ordained by God.

   It’s ironic, but true to human nature, that these people were concerned about something that God had not commanded, but at the same time they were neglecting what God had commanded. God had not told Israel to keep these fasts, but He had told them to obey His Word. The only fast that God had ordained was the annual Day of Atonement (Lev. 23:27). There wasn’t anything wrong with fasting on these other days to confess their sins and pray for the restoration of the nation. But God had not commanded these days as fasts. He had commanded them to “do jus-
tice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with [their] God” (Micah 6:8; Zech. 7:9-10). But they were dodging God’s clear commands, while keeping their manmade fasts.

We’re prone to do the same thing. Many Christians get hung up about keeping rules and rituals that the Bible does not command, while they neglect dealing with their hearts before God. They judge other Christians by outward appearance, but they tolerate serious sins, such as pride, gossip, and greed in their own hearts. They have their lists of behaviors that make you either a “spiritual” Christian or a “worldly” Christian, and they make sure that they keep everything on their good list and avoid everything on their bad list. The problem is, their lists aren’t in the Bible!

B. Motions: We go through meaningless activity in the name of spirituality.

Note 7:3: “Shall I weep in the fifth month and abstain, as I have done these many years?” There is more than a hint of weariness in those last three words. They were tired of going through the motions of what formerly may have been a meaningful activity for others. But for them it had become an empty form.

We need to be careful not to confuse what is biblical and thus must never be set aside with what is manmade and may be set aside. We may grow weary of Bible reading, prayer, or the Lord’s Supper, but we are not free to stop doing these things, because God commands us to do them. If they have become stale, we need to examine our hearts to determine why this is so. We need to seek God so that these things become what He intended, the means to a close, vital fellowship with Him. But we shouldn’t stop doing them.

I may need to vary the method without discarding the activity. For example, the Bible does command me to seek God through His Word and prayer, but it does not prescribe exactly how I am to do this. Reading through the Bible in a year is a fine thing to do, and we should do it many times (I am currently doing it again this year). But at other times, perhaps we should spend a year studying Romans in depth, or reading through the New Testament four times. The main thing is to grow in your understanding of God’s Word and to stay fresh in your relationship with God through His Word and prayer.
So, two danger signals of falling into outward religion are, following manmade rules and rituals; and, going through the motions without meaning.

C. Motive: We need to ask why we do what we do spiritually.

In 7:5-6, the Lord asks, “When you fasted and mourned in the fifth and seventh months these seventy years, was it actually for Me that you fasted? When you eat and drink, do you not eat for yourselves and do you not drink for yourselves?” God who sees the hearts saw that they weren’t doing their fasts or their feasts for the Lord. They were doing them for themselves.

Outward religion is always done for the person doing it, not to glorify or please the Lord. Jesus confronted the Pharisees, who practiced their religion before men to be noticed by them (Matt. 6:1). When they fasted, they let everyone know about it so they would be impressed with how spiritual they were. When they prayed, they stood in public and made loud prayers that everyone could hear. When they gave money, they wanted everyone to hear the many coins jingle in the metal collection box.

But Jesus wasn’t impressed! He told them to camouflage their fasting, so that no one would know what they were doing. When they prayed, they should do it in secret. When they gave, they shouldn’t let their left hand know what their right hand was doing.

We need to examine our motives in whatever we do for the Lord. Am I doing it from pride or self-righteousness? Am I seeking status or the applause of others? Am I trying to work off or cover up guilt for some sin, as if my activities can balance out or hide my sin? Am I trying to impress God with my activity, so that He will give me something that I want from Him? The only proper motive is to please and glorify God.

So take a spiritual health checkup. If you’re following manmade rules and rituals that have become meaningless motions, and if you’re doing these things for some selfish motive, you’re drifting into outward religion. It’s a danger for all of us all the time!

2. Outward religion leads to spiritual sclerosis.

Outward religion without inward reality with God leads to spiritual hardening of the heart. This had happened to the ances-
tors of the remnant in Zechariah’s day, as he points out in 7:7-14. Here’s how this works: You get the religious system down pretty well. You’ve got a routine for living the Christian life. You’re going through all the motions. Your motives aren’t right, but you’re oblivious to that. The outward appearance is that you’ve got it together as a Christian. But it’s mechanical and outward, not real personal fellowship with God.

As you go on like this, you begin to resist God’s Word when it confronts your life. Maybe it’s a sermon that steps on your toes. You keep your Christian smile in place, but inwardly you’re resisting God. Perhaps a brother in Christ attempts to help you grow in your walk with God. But he’s getting threatening, so you dodge him with excuses, all the while keeping up the good Christian front. Your spiritual arteries are hardening gradually without your knowing it! Zechariah outlines the signs and the results of the disease.

A. Signs of developing spiritual sclerosis:

(1) Refusal to pay attention to God (7:11).

“But they refused to pay attention” (7:11). These words describe the generation that had been sent into captivity in Babylon. Verse 11 ties back into verse 7. The former prophets, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Joel, Amos, Micah, and others, had warned the people of their developing spiritual disease, but the people ignored the warnings. They dodged the prophets’ messages that stepped on their toes. Perhaps they adjusted matters outwardly, so that they would look good to others, but they didn’t deal with the heart issues that God sees.

It’s like when you go to the doctor for a routine checkup. You’re feeling okay, but you know that you’re overdue for the checkup, so you go. The doctor looks you over, asks you some questions, reads your chart from the last checkup, and asks, “What kind of meals do you usually eat?”

You know what he’s getting at. You’ve gained some weight since the last time you were in to see him. But you don’t tell him the whole truth. You tell him what he wants to hear, but you fail to mention the potato chips and ice cream that are part of your basic food groups. He warns you that you need to take off 25 pounds and eat more fruits and vegetables and less red meat. You nod in
approval, and for about a week, you cut back on the junk food. Then you begin sneaking in a few potato chips, thinking to yourself, “The doctor doesn’t need to know!” But, of course, it’s not the doctor you’re hurting! You didn’t pay attention to the doctor’s warning because you don’t want to change!

Failure to heed God’s warnings is related to times of outward prosperity (7:7). Jerusalem and the outlying areas were inhabited and prosperous. They were eating their spiritual potato chips and thinking that they were healthy. “Why are these prophets ranting and raving about sin? Can’t they see that we’re all doing fine?” But God saw their hearts. Outwardly, they went to the temple and went through the religious rituals, but inwardly they were tolerating sin and not walking in reality with God.

(2) Refusal to submit to spiritual authority (7:11).

They “turned a stubborn shoulder.” This expression comes from an ox that refuses to accept the yoke (Neh. 9:29; Hos. 4:16). It refers to refusal to submit to God’s authority over your life and refusal to do what He would have you to do.

People who are developing spiritual sclerosis don’t like the idea of submission to authority. I have been told that people from dysfunctional homes don’t like it when I preach about obedience to God because they don’t relate well to authority figures, as if somehow that gives them a free pass when it comes to obeying God’s Word! Often these folks find a church that makes them feel good about themselves, without dealing with their sin. That leads to the next stage of the disease:

(3) Refusal to hear God’s Word (7:11).

They “stopped their ears from hearing.” There are different ways of doing this. You can blame others, thinking, “If they would just obey God, I would not have all these problems!” But you don’t deal with the log in your own eye. You can find a church that never deals with sin, at least not with personal sins of the heart. Liberal churches blast the sins of big business or the sins of our government or the sins of male chauvinists, but seldom confront personal pride, lust, greed, gossip, or selfishness. Seeker churches pretty much dodge sin completely, and focus on how God can help you succeed in your personal life. They don’t want to frighten sinners!
Like arteriosclerosis, spiritual sclerosis is a gradual process. But once it sets in, certain results occur:

B. The results of spiritual sclerosis:

(1) Your heart grows hard toward God’s Word (7:12).

“They made their hearts like flint so that they could not hear” God’s written or preached Word. Verse 12 is a strong Old Testament verse affirming the authority and inspiration of the Law of Moses and the prophets. The people’s refusal to pay attention and submit to God’s Word through His prophets led to such hardening of the heart that finally the people could not hear what these men faithfully proclaimed.

People with advanced spiritual sclerosis seldom, if ever, pick up their Bible with the intent of submitting their hearts to its message. They don’t want to hear sermons that confront their hypocrisy or sins of the heart. After a while, they are not even able to hear such things. Their spiritual arteries are blocked, so that God’s Word can’t get through to them. At this point they often protect themselves by attacking the messenger. In the Old Testament that meant killing the prophets. Since murder is illegal in our day, it usually means criticizing the pastor or finding a church with a more user-friendly message.

(2) You incur God’s fierce discipline (7:12).

“Therefore great wrath came from the Lord.” This is further described (7:14) as God’s scattering them like a storm wind, or tornado, among the nations. When God’s people harden their hearts against Him, He can get pretty tough in discipline to get their attention (“scourges,” Heb. 12:6). As A. R. Fausset puts it, “Hard hearts must expect hard treatment. The harder the stone, the harder the blow of the hammer to break it” (A Commentary Critical, Experimental, and Practical on the Old and New Testaments, with Robert Jamieson & David Brown [Eerdmans], 2:2:682). By the way, if you sin and everything is going great, you’re really in trouble, because you may not be God’s true child (Heb. 12:8)!

(3) God is silent when you cry for help (7:13).

If we refuse to hear God when He speaks, at some point He returns the favor (Prov. 1:27-28; Isa. 1:15; Jer. 11:11). Many
wrongly think that God is like Aladdin's Genie, waiting to make their wish His command, but He is not. If we continually refuse to obey Him, He won't come running to our aid the minute we need Him to bail us out. He will let us suffer the consequences of our sins to teach us not to sin.

(4) God turns our prosperity into desolation (7:14).

The land had been pleasant, with people living comfortably in it. But now it was laid waste because of their sin. Sin always takes a toll: physical health is ruined, families are shattered, bitterness, heartache, and grief abound. It's never a pretty picture!

(5) God visits our sins on our descendants.

It was the children and grandchildren of the guys with spiritual sclerosis who were trying to pick up the pieces in Zechariah's day. They had the hard job of clearing the rubble left by their parents and grandparents. God visits the sins of fathers on the children to the third and fourth generations (Exod. 34:7; Num. 14:18; Deut. 5:9). You may not like that, but it's true, even today. The children of the ungodly suffer. The children of the godly are blessed. The application is not to blame our parents for our problems, but rather to deal with our own sins, so that our children and grandchildren will not suffer because of us.

Outward religion without inward reality leads to spiritual sclerosis. What's the solution?

3. **Inward reality with God is the prescription for spiritual health.**

Much more could be said, but I want to point out two things:

A. Inward reality means living unto the Lord, not for self.

This is the converse of what the people were doing as reported in verses 5 & 6. Instead of fasting and feasting for themselves, they should have been doing it for the Lord. "Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God" (1 Cor. 10:31). His will should be the cause of our actions, His Word the guide, and His glory the goal or motive. The only thing that matters in the Christian life is that which is done unto the Lord. Any service that we render is not so that others will think
about how wonderful we are. It is done as an offering to the Lord, out of a heart of love and gratitude toward Him.

B. Inward reality with God results in outward obedience in our relationships with people.

Those who walk in heart devotion to God should “dispense true justice and practice kindness and compassion each to his brother.” They should “not oppress the widow or the orphan, the stranger or the poor.” They should not “devise evil in [their] hearts against one another” (7:9-10). True religion reveals itself in how we treat others (James 1:27), especially those who are weak and most vulnerable. Any “good ol’ boy” network, where political favors are traded for influence without regard to true justice, goes against God’s Word. Christians should not play favorites to the rich and powerful, but stand up for the political, social, and economic rights of the oppressed.

Of course a person can be involved in these godly behaviors for the wrong reasons, totally apart from God. But we can’t escape the fact that God’s Word always connects our relationship with Him and our relationship with others. John is pretty blunt: If we don’t love our brother whom we have seen, we cannot love God whom we have not seen (1 John 4:20). “By this the children of God and the children of the devil are obvious: anyone who does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor the one who does not love his brother” (1 John 4:10).

Conclusion

In True Spirituality (Christianity Today special edition, pp. 87-88), Francis Schaeffer writes, 

... there is no mechanical solution to true spirituality or the true Christian life... . It is not possible to say, read so many of the chapters of the Bible every day, and you will have this much sanctification. It is not possible to say, pray so long every day, and you will have a certain amount of sanctification. It is not possible to add the two together and to say, you will have this big a piece of sanctification. This is a mechanical solution, and denies the whole Christian position. For the fact is that the Christian life, true spirituality, can never have a mechanical solution. The real solution is being cast up into the
moment-by-moment communion, personal communion, with God himself, and letting Christ’s truth flow through me through the agency of the Holy Spirit.

Spiritual sclerosis, like arteriosclerosis, sneaks up on you gradually as you drift from reality with God to just going through the outward motions. Do a checkup: Are you real with God today?

If there are any signs of spiritual sclerosis, don’t trash this sermon! Your spiritual health is at stake!

Discussion Questions

1. How can we guard our hearts from legalism and ritualism?
2. Is all of God’s discipline directly related to our sin? Give biblical support for your answer.
3. How can we keep Bible reading, prayer, and other biblical means of grace vital and fresh?
4. In light of verse 13, should we always bail out those who are suffering the consequences of their sin? What guidelines apply?