

For yourselves?

Speak unto all the people of the land, and to the priests, saying, When ye fasted and mourned in the fifth and seventh month, even those seventy years, did ye at all fast unto me, even to me? And when ye did eat, and when ye did drink, did not ye eat for yourselves, and drink for yourselves? ... Thus speaketh the LORD of hosts, saying, Execute true judgment, and shew mercy and compassions every man to his brother.

Zechariah 7:5-9

In this passage, Zechariah brings the LORD's rebuke to those of the captivity who had come to Jerusalem, while the temple was in the process of being rebuilt, with questions about the form and timing of their prayers and rituals, which they had evidently been observing during the seventy years of exile. The answer given here sounds like an echo of the LORD's words to Judah through Isaiah, in chapter 58, back in the days while the first temple still stood. The rebuke there also condemns ritualistic fasting done for outward show, while the balance of their activity reflected self-serving and oppression of others. Thus, even through and after the captivity, the Jews were still plagued by the practice of ritualism without heart. Both Isaiah and Zechariah provide remedial motives for their hearers to pursue, focusing instead on delighting in the LORD and seeking the welfare of others, as opposed to pleasing themselves.

A similar question arose over 400 years later, when Jesus had begun his ministry, calling and equipping his disciples to announce the kingdom of God. In Matthew chapter nine, just after Jesus had called Matthew to follow Him and customarily celebrated Matthew's decision during a meal with him and his friends, the disciples of John the Baptist came to Jesus asking why His disciples didn't observe the regular fast days that they observed, along with the Pharisees, who had evidently established the ritual. It is interesting that this occurs just after Jesus had rebuked the Pharisees' criticism of His eating with Matthew's crowd, by referring them to learn Hosea's warning of the preeminence of mercy over ritualistic sacrifice (Hosea 6:6). Yet His answer to John's disciples was somewhat gentler, pointing them to understand that there is an appropriate time for fasting, when the heart is so burdened, but that the newly announced kingdom and its Messiah should be received with gladness, not mourning or ritual.

Through these examples, a convicting aspect of Zechariah's condemnation comes through, that when these rituals are performed, God says that you didn't do it "unto Me," but you did it "for yourselves." How much vain service, purportedly done "for the LORD," is actually performed for ourselves? Are our religious practices simply to satisfy ourselves that we have done our duty, and so congratulate ourselves, or perhaps even be applauded by others? These are the motives for which Jesus often condemned the Pharisees, yet they seemed to never understand. Let us hear the admonition of the prophets and the LORD, and examine ourselves, that we may delight ourselves in Him.