

The Nazarene's Program

Not Ceremony, but Service Out of a Heart of Love

(Sermon delivered at the Foundry Methodist church, Washington, D. C., August 2, 1914, by Rev. H. F. Huntington, of Pawnee City, Neb.)

Between the Mediterranean sea and the Arabian desert lies a strip of land called Palestine, which in the days of the Christ, stretched from Dan to Beersheba. This little country is isolated from the rest of the world by rugged mountains on the north, the desert on the east, the wilderness on the south, and the sea on the west. The Jews, who claimed the land as theirs, had been in bondage to Egypt, later in bondage in Babylon, and in the days of the Nazarene were subject to the world power which had its center in Rome.

In the northern part of this land, in the province of Galilee, was a little town of no importance, and, it seems, of bad repute. The Romans of that period would not have considered that any good could come out of Israel, and the Jews, in turn, thought that nothing good could come out of Nazareth. Nazareth was the despised of the despised.

There lived in Nazareth a pious and kindly Israelite by the name of Joseph with Mary his wife. Although of the lineage of David, they were peasant folk who lived a simple life. We easily presume, and with no little reason, that their home was in a cabin, and that their fare was of a humble sort. In that home, with no halo about his head, there grew up a lad who attracted no attention for precocity. From the day Joseph took Mary and the young child and fled into Egypt, to the day he entered upon his public career at the age of thirty, we have but one glimpse of him. That was at the age of twelve when he reasoned with the doctors in the temple.

Returning to Nazareth the son of Mary continued subject to his parents, he played and worked, ran errands and attended school, and learned the traditions of his race, as did the other boys of the village.

What could be expected of one who came from such an insignificant country, from among despised people, from a village despised by that despised people, and from peasant parentage?

Yes, the land was small, but it was the bridge between the civilizations of the earth; with Mesopotamia on the east, Egypt on the south and Europe on the west. The race was despised, and yet there was there a better race, with richer traditions, and higher ideals? The Greeks contributed philosophy, the Romans government, but the Jews contributed that which is of more value to the world than all else, they contributed the idea of Jehovah God. The parents of the Nazarene were peasants, but where could better blood and greater love be found? And these, good blood and true love, are a richer heritage than royal robes and jeweled crown. And the town? Despised as the town was it afforded a better atmosphere for the growth of a world figure than did Jerusalem itself. The simple, unconventional life of Nazareth was in striking contrast to the complex, and stereotyped life of Jerusalem. The simple life in Nazareth, a life of thought and toil, prepared the Nazarene to tear the husks of tradition from the germ of truth.

Palestine was a world in a miniature. From the tropical climate of the region about the Dead sea to the snow clad summit of Mount Hermon, there was every variety of climate with a corresponding variety in vegetable and animal life. From this epitomized world came the Nazarene with a universal religion suited to the needs of all men, in all lands, and for all times.

Before the religion of Jehovah could be given to mankind as a world religion it had to be freed from the dead letter of Judaism. To do that Jesus broke with the established order, and as a result died for the Truth.

It is one thing to judge a man of the past who went against the ideas and convictions of his day; it is quite another thing to judge such a man when he is a contemporary. We judge the times of the Nazarene in the light which the

Nazarene brought, but it was not so with his contemporaries. They had not had that light.

According to the religious standards of his day Jesus was a Sabbath breaker. Fidelity to the Sabbath was a Jewish virtue which was much boasted. Jewish soldiers had allowed themselves to be slaughtered rather than resist an attack on the Sabbath. If men had died rather than break the holy day, could not Jesus' disciples suffer the inconvenience of hunger rather than break the day? Going through the grain field they plucked the heads and rubbed out the grain in their hands. All food for the Sabbath should have been prepared the day before, and this was equivalent to reaping and threshing. It was a gross violation of the law. But man had made the traditions, while God had made nature, and the laws of nature which God made were higher than the ceremonial laws which man had made. The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath.

In the synagogues he broke again with the religionists by healing a man on the Sabbath day. It was only a withered hand, and might have waited until the following day. But his critics would have hauled a sheep out of the pit on the Sabbath, and a man was worth more than a sheep. Life is of great value, and why should this man wait another day to have his hand restored?

On the Sabbath Jesus saw in the synagogue a woman who had suffered for eighteen years. She was bent together. Jesus had compassion on her and laying his hand upon her, healed her. But instead of rejoicing to see the woman straighten up, the ruler of the synagogue was indignant because Jesus healed on the Sabbath. It was the spirit of the prodigal's brother and of Jonah.

On the Sabbath day by the pool at the sheep-gate in Jerusalem Jesus found a man who had been "for thirty-eight years in his infirmity." Jesus again broke the Jewish law by healing a man. At Jesus' command the man carried his bed away with him, and thus he too broke the Sabbath. In spite of his great miracles there were those who said that he was not of God because he did not keep the Sabbath (John 9: 16). It all resolves itself into this, that the Sabbath was nothing to Jesus except as it might minister to the needs of men. The Nazarene's concern was for man's welfare because he loved men, and that is why he clashed with the defenders of tradition who loved traditions more than they loved men. It may be that we have spent more time and energy as the champion defenders of a day than we have spent as the champions of the highest interests of men. The Nazarene was interested in men, not in institutions, except as they ministered to men. Following his example we will seek for all men the Sabbath rest for the sake of men.

Jesus broke with the traditions of the elders in the matter of the ceremonial washing of hands, and charged the hypocrites who accused him with a more serious offense. The commandment of God said, "Honor thy father and thy mother"; but when a needy parent came asking for help, they put their religion before the claims of parents and declared that their property had been pledged to God. But the washing of hands was nothing compared with honor and love for parents. The ceremonial washing of hands was swept aside because it contributed nothing to life, and man was not made for ceremony.

The Pharisees bathed after returning from the market place. In fact it required so much time to keep them from being defiled that only those with leisure could be holy. The man who had to toil from early to late must be defiled much of the time, and that idea is not yet eliminated from the religious conceptions of some. A certain priest is spending his life delivering a great message to multitudes of people throughout this country. Another priest speaking of him declared that he was doing more good than if he remained in his parish, yet it was a mistake so far as the good of the priest was concerned, because traveling about all the while, he did not have time to lead a priestly life. But Jesus' teaching leads us to the conclusion that holiness which is incompatible with a busy, useful life is not holiness at all. The Nazarene, himself a toiler, loved toilers.

The religionists of the Nazarene's day were too holy to associate with sinners, and when Jesus ate with publicans and sinners he was severely criticised. The ceremonial holiness of the religious leaders put them in a class by themselves, but Jesus was not ceremoniously holy, his holiness was the holiness of love and he loved the sinner as much as the saint. The sinners needed him, so he mingled with the sinners and actually ate with them, talked with them, and let them know that he loved them. In declaring that he desired mercy and not sacrifice, he was in line with Hosea (6:6) who represented God as saying, "I desire goodness, and not sacrifice; and the knowledge of God more than burnt-offerings." Because Jesus ate with sinners and did not observe the system of fasting, they called him a friend of publicans and sinners, a glutton and a wine-bibbler.

It is easily seen that to have added Christianity to Judaism would have been like putting new cloth on an old garment. Judaism stood for ceremonialism, Christianity stands for life. The danger which threatens any religion is that it may become stereotyped and formal. One wonders if Jesus were to appear in America as he did in Judea, whether he would not cause as great consternation among the religionists of today as he did among the religionists then. One denomination can not mingle with another because that other denomination sings hymns instead of psalms, and singing psalms is a vital part of life; one denomination can not unite with another on account of the mode of baptism, and baptism, especially a given mode of baptism, is a vital part of life; or they are kept apart because of the difference of attitude assumed in time of prayer, as if striking an attitude was prayer; or they are kept apart because of a difference in name, as if vital religion was contained in a name. About the middle of the sixteenth century a denomination split on the question of buttons and pockets, and nine-tenths of the issues which keep the evangelical churches apart today have as little to do with the religion of the Nazarene. What a spectacle we must present before a Christ who made mercy, justice, service, and love the requirements of God! Five church spires in a town of as many hundred people, and three of those churches partially supported by missionary money. We build altar against altar while great areas of our country are wholly without the church, while hundreds of thousands of foreigners in our own land do not have the gospel, to say nothing of millions living in total ignorance of the fact that the Christ lived and revealed a loving God to a sick world. Not only that, but the greatest obstacle to the federation of the church in the foreign field is the "traditions of the elders" in the church at home.

A religion in which ceremony is the prominent thing makes it possible for a man to be a good religionist and at the same time a thief and a murderer. Witness the money changers in the temple, and the mob before the house of Pilate. That was long ago. Yes, that was long ago, but the tendency to put law for life is the same in every age.

If the following story is not a true one, it is, nevertheless, within the realm of possibility, and the like of it happens daily: A robber was holding up a train. The passengers were lined up in the aisle with their arms above their heads. The bold outlaw was going through their pockets. He came to one who said, "You would not rob a clergyman, would you?" "To what church do you belong?" asked the bandit. And when he was told, he said, "You make take your arms down, I belong to the same church."

Whenever a church overshadows love for God and man with requirements which are outside of life, it encourages men to be religious rather than Christian. When a man can cheat his fellow man on Saturday, and crowd his way up to the communion table on Sunday, there is something radically wrong with his conception of the teachings of the Nazarene. We need more of the spirit of Him who swept ceremonialism aside and put in its place service that flows out of a heart of love.

Jesus' program was a program of service. This is what he said when he stood up in the synagogue in Nazareth to read: "The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he anointed me to preach good tidings to the poor; he hath sent me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord." And then he startled his old