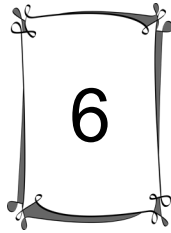


The background of the slide is a photograph of a scenic landscape. A paved road curves through a valley, bordered by a fence. To the left, a railway track with overhead power lines runs parallel to the road. The trees are in autumn, with yellow and orange leaves. In the distance, a large mountain peak is visible under a cloudy sky.

Sermons of Robert Murray M'Cheyne

**6. Formality not
Christianity**

Sermons
of
Robert Murray
M'Cheyne



Formality not
Christianity

“He is not a Jew, which is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision, which is outward in the flesh: but he is a Jew, which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God” Romans 2:28-29.

Formality is, perhaps, the most besetting sin of the human mind. It is found in every bosom and in every clime; it reigns triumphant in every natural mind; and it constantly tries to usurp the throne in the heart of every child of God. If we were to seek for proof that fallen man is “without understanding,” that he hath altogether fallen from his primitive clearness and dignity of intelligence and that he hath utterly lost the image of God in knowledge after which he was created, we would point to this one strange, irrational conceit by which more than one-half of the world are befooled to their eternal undoing: that God may be pleased with mere bodily prostrations and services, that it is possible to worship God with the lips, when the heart is far from him.

It is against this error, the besetting error of humanity, and preeminently the besetting error of the Jewish mind that Paul directs the words before us. And it is very noticeable, that he does not condescend to argue the matter. He speaks with all the decisiveness and with all the authority of one who was not a whit behind the very chiefest of the apostles, and he lays it down as a kind of first principle to which every man of ordinary intelligence, provided only he will soberly consider the matter, must yield his immediate assent — that “he is not a Jew, which is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision which is outward in the flesh: but he is a Jew, which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God.”

In the following discourse I shall show very briefly, first,

that external observances are of no avail to justify the sinner; and, second, that external observances can never stand in the stead of sanctification to the believer.

I. External observances are of no avail to justify the sinner.

In a former discourse I attempted to show several of the refuges of lies to which the awakened soul will run, before he can be persuaded to betake himself to the righteousness of God; and in every one of them we saw that he that compassed himself about with sparks of his own kindling received only this of God's hand, to lie down in sorrow. First of all, the soul generally contents himself with slight views of the divine law, and says: "All these have I kept from my youth up;" then, when the spirituality of the law is revealed, he tries to escape by undermining the whole fabric of the law; when that will not do, he flies to his past virtues to balance accounts with his sins; and then, when that will not do either, he begins a work of self-reformation, in order to buy off the follies of youth by the sobrieties of age. Alas! how vain are all such contrivances, invented by a blinded heart — urged on by the malignant enemy of souls.

But there is another refuge of lies which I have not yet described, and to which the awakened mind often betakes itself with avidity, to find peace from the whips of conscience and the scorpions of God's law; and that is, a form of godliness. He will become a religious man, and surely that will save him. His whole course of life is now changed. Before, it may be, he neglected the outward ordinances of religion. He used not to kneel by his bed-side; he never used to gather his children and servants around him to pray; he never used to read the Word in secret or in the family; he

seldom went to the house of God in company with the multitude that kept holy day; he did not eat of that bread which, to the believer, is meat indeed, nor drink of that cup which is drink indeed.

But now his whole usages are reversed, his whole course is changed. He kneels to pray even when alone; he reads the Word with periodical regularity; he even raises an altar for morning and evening sacrifice in his family; his sobered countenance is never wanting in his wonted position in the house of prayer. He looks back now to his baptism with a soothing complacency, and sits down to eat the children's bread at the Table of the Lord.

His friends and neighbours all observe the change. Some make a jest of it, and some make it a subject of rejoicing; but one thing is obvious, that he is an altered man; and yet it is far from obvious that he is a new man, or a justified man. All this routine of bodily exercise, if it be entered on before the man has put on the divine righteousness, is just another way of going about to establish his own righteousness, that he may not be constrained to submit to put on the righteousness of God. Nay, so utterly perverted is the understanding of the unconverted, that many men are found to persevere in such a course of bodily worship of God, while, at the same time, they persevere as diligently in some course of open or secret iniquity.

Such men seem to regard external observances not only as an atonement for sins that are past, but as a price paid to purchase a licence to sin in time to come. Such appears to have been the refuge of lies which the poor woman of Samaria would fain have sat down in, when the blessed Traveller, sitting by the well, awakened all the anxieties of her heart, by the searching words: "Go call thy husband, and

come hither.” Her anxious mind sought hither and thither for a refuge, and found it. Where? *In her religious observances:* “Our fathers worshipped in this mountain, and ye say that in Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship?”

She thrusts away the pointed conviction of sin by a question as to her outward observances. She changes her anxiety about the soul into anxiety about the place where men ought to worship, whether it should be Mount Zion or Mount Gerizim. Oh! if he would only settle that question, if he would only tell her on which of these mountains God ought to be worshipped, she was ready to worship all her lifetime in that favoured place. If Zion be the place, she would leave her native mountain and go and worship there, that that might save her. Oh! how fain she would have found here a refuge for her anxious soul.

With what divine kindness, then, did the Saviour sweep away this refuge of lies, by the answer: “Woman, believe me, the hour cometh and now is, when ye shall neither in this mountain, nor yet in Jerusalem, worship the Father. God is a Spirit, and they that worship him, must worship him in spirit and in truth.”

Now it is with the very same object, and with the very same kindness, that Paul here sweeps away the same refuge of lies from every anxious soul, in these decisive words: “He is not a Jew, which is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision, which is outward in the flesh: but he is a Jew, which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God.”

Is there any of you whom God hath awakened out of the deadly slumber of the natural mind? Has he drawn aside the curtains, and made the light of truth to fall upon your heart, revealing the true condition of your soul? Has he made you

start to your feet alarmed, that you might go, and weep as you go, to seek the Lord your God? Has he made you exchange the careless smile of gaiety for the tears of anxiety, the loud laugh of folly for the cry of bitter distress about your soul? Are you asking the way to Zion with your face directed thitherward? Then take heed, I beseech you, of sitting down contented in this refuge of lies. Remember, he is not a Jew which is one outwardly — remember, no outward observances, no prayers, or churchgoing, or Bible-reading can ever justify you in the sight of God.

I am quite aware that when anxiety for the soul enters in, then anxiety to attend ordinances will also enter in. Like as the stricken deer goes apart from the herd to bleed and weep alone, so the sin-stricken soul goes aside from his merry companions, to weep, and read, and pray, alone. He will desire the preached Word, and press after it more and more; but remember, he finds no peace in this change that is wrought in himself. When a man goes thirsty to the well, his thirst is not allayed merely by going there. On the contrary, it is increased every step he goes. It is by what he draws out of the well that his thirst is satisfied. And just so it is not by the mere bodily exercise of acting on ordinances that you will ever come to peace; but by tasting of Jesus in the ordinances — whose flesh is meat indeed, and his blood drink indeed.

If ever, then, you are tempted to think that you are surely safe for eternity, because you have been brought to change your treatment of the outward ordinances of religion, remember, I beseech you, the parable of the marriage feast, where many were called and invited to come in, but few, few were found having on the wedding garment. Many are brought within the pale of ordinances, and read and hear, it may be, with considerable interest and anxiety about the all

things that are ready — the things of the kingdom of God; but of these many, few are persuaded to abhor their own filthy rags, and to put on the wedding garment of the Redeemer's righteousness. And these few alone shall sit still to partake of the feast — the joy of their Lord. The rest shall stand speechless, and be cast out into outer darkness, where there shall be weeping, and wailing, and gnashing of teeth. You may read your Bible, and pray over it till you die; you may wait on the preached Word every Sabbath-day, and sit down at every sacrament till you die; yet, if you do not find Christ in the ordinances — if he do not reveal himself to your soul in the preached Word, in the broken bread and poured-out wine; if you are not brought to cleave to him, to look to him, to believe in him, to cry out with inward adoration: "My Lord and my God, how great is his goodness! How great is his beauty!" then the outward observance of the ordinances is all in vain to you. You have come to the well of salvation, but have gone away with the pitcher empty; and however proud and boastful you may now be of your bodily exercise, you will find in that day that it profits little, and that you will stand speechless before the King.

II. External observances can never stand in the stead of sanctification to the believer.

If it be a common thing for awakened minds to seek for peace in their external observances, to make a Christ of them, and rest in them as their means of acceptance with God, it is also a common thing for those who have been brought into Christ, and enjoy the peace of believing, to place mere external observances in the stead of growth in holiness. Every believer among you knows how fain the old heart within you would substitute the hearing of sermons, and the repeating of

prayers, in the place of that faith which worketh by love, and which overcometh the world. Now, the great reason why the believer is often tempted to do this, is, that he loves the ordinances.

Unconverted souls seldom take delight in the ordinances of Christ. They see no beauty in Jesus, they see no form nor comeliness in him, they hide their faces from him. Why should you wonder, then, that they take no delight in praying to him continually — in praising him daily — in calling him blessed? Why should you wonder that the preaching of the cross is foolishness to them, that his tabernacles are not amiable in their eyes, that they forsake the assembling of themselves together? They never knew the Saviour, they never loved him; how, then, should they love the memorials which he has left behind him?

When you are weeping by the chiselled monument of a departed friend, you do not wonder that the careless crowd pass by without a tear. They did not know the virtues of your departed friend, they do not know the fragrance of his memory. Just so the world care not for the house of prayer, the sprinkled water, the broken bread, the poured-out wine; for they never knew the excellency of Jesus.

But with believers it is far otherwise. You have been divinely taught your need of Jesus, and therefore you delight to hear Christ preached. You have seen the beauty of Christ crucified; and therefore you love the place where he is evidently set forth. You love the very name of Jesus — it is as ointment poured forth; therefore you could join for ever in the melody of his praises. The Sabbath day of which you once said: “What a weariness is it!” and “When will it be over, that we may set forth corn?” is now a “delight” and “honourable” — the sweetest day of all the seven. The

ordinances, which were once a dull and sickening routine, are now green pastures and waters of stillness to your soul; and surely this is a blessed change.

But still you are in the body — heaven is not yet gained. Satan is hovering near; and since he cannot destroy the work of God in your soul, therefore he tries all the more to spoil it. He cannot stem the current; therefore he tries to turn it aside. He cannot drive back God's arrow; and therefore he tries to make it turn awry, and spend its strength in vain. When he finds that you love the ordinances, and it is in vain to tempt you to forsake them, he lets you love them; ay, he helps you to love them more and more. He becomes an angel of light — he helps in the decoration of the house of God, he throws around its services a fascinating beauty, hurries you on from one house of God to another, from prayer-meetings to sermon-hearing, from sermons to sacraments.

And why does he do all this? He does all this just that he may make this the whole of your sanctification — that outward ordinances may be the all in all of your religion, that in your anxiety to preserve the shell, you may let fall the kernel.

If there be one of you, then, in whose heart God hath wrought the amazing change of turning you from loathing to loving his ordinances, let me beseech you to be jealous over your heart with godly jealousy. Pause, this hour, and see if, in your haste and anxious pursuit of the ordinances, you have not left the pursuit of that holiness without which the ordinances are sounding brass and a tinkling cymbal. I have a message from God unto thee. It is written: "He is not a Jew, which is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision, which is outward in the flesh: but he is a Jew which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in

the letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God.” He is not a Christian which is one outwardly, neither is that baptism which is merely the outward washing of the body; but he is a Christian which is one inwardly, and true baptism is that of the heart when the heart is washed from all filthiness of the flesh and of the spirit; whose praise is not of men, but of God.

Remember, I beseech you, that the ordinances are means to an end; they are stepping-stones, by which you may arrive at a landing-place. Is your soul sitting down in the ordinances, and saying, It is enough? Are you so satisfied that you can enjoy the ordinances of Christ, that you desire no higher attainments? Remember the word that is written: “This is not your rest.” Would you not say he was a foolish traveller, who should take every inn he came to for his home — who should take up his settled rest, and instead of preparing himself for a hard journeying on the morrow, should begin to take the ease and enjoyment of the house as his all? Take heed that you be not this foolish traveller. The ordinances are intended by God to be but the inns and refectories where the traveller Zionward, weary in well-doing, and faint in faith, may betake him to tarry for a night, that, being refreshed with bread and wine, he may, with new alacrity, press forward on his journey home as upon eagles’ wings.

Take, then, this one rule of life along with you, founded on these blessed words: “He is not a Jew which is one outwardly:” that if your outward religion is helping on your inward religion; if your hearing of Christ on the Sabbath-day makes you grow more like Christ through all the week; if the words of grace and joy which you drink in at the house of God lead your heart to love more, and your hand to do more; then, and then only, are you using the ordinances of God aright.

There is not a more miserably deceived soul in the world than that soul among you who, like Herod, lives in sin. You love the Sabbath-day, you love the house of God. You love to hear Christ preached in all his freeness and in all his fullness; yes, you think you could listen for ever if only Christ be the theme. You love to sit down at sacraments, and to commemorate the death of your Lord. And is this all your holiness? Does your religion end here? Is this all that believing in Jesus has done for you?

Remember, I beseech you, that the ordinances of Christ are not means of *enjoyment*, but means of *grace*; and though it is said that the travellers in the Valley of Baca dig up wells, which are filled with the rain from on high, yet it is also said: "They go from strength to strength." Awake, then, my friends, and let it no more be said of us, that our religion is confined to the house of God and to the Sabbath-day. Let us draw water with joy from these wells, just in order that we may travel the wilderness with joy and strength, and love and hope — blessed in ourselves, and a blessing to all about us.

And if we speak thus to those of you whose religion seems to go no farther than the ordinances, what shall we say to those of you who contradict the very use and end of the ordinances in your lives? Is it possible you can delight in worldliness, and vanity, and covetousness, and pride, and luxury? Is it possible that the very lips which are so ready to sing praises, or to join in prayers, are also ready to speak the words of guile, of malice, of envy, of bitterness? Awake, we beseech you; we are not ignorant of Satan's devices. To you he hath made himself an angel of light.

Remember it is written: "If any among you seemeth to be religious, and bridleth not his tongue, but deceiveth his own heart, this man's religion is vain. Pure religion, and undefiled

before God and the Father is this, to visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world.” “For he is not a Jew, which is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision which is outward in the flesh: but he is a Jew, which is one inwardly, and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God!” Amen.

