

REFUSING TO WORSHIP GOD IN HIS HOUSE

"And he did that which was right in the sight of the Lord, according to all that his father Uzziah did: howbeit he entered not into the temple of the Lord. And the people did yet corruptly." II Chronicles 27:2.

The brief biography of Jotham reveals that he had certain sterling qualities that demand admiration in every age. Jotham was a rugged man of high ideals, irreproachable morals, and strong character. He was a man of splendid native ability. He was a king by right of birth, and also by right of ability. He had qualities of intellect and of leadership that fitted him for his high position. He had gifts to match his royal office. Jotham was energetic and willing to work. He did not believe that he had come to be ministered unto, but rather to minister. He was a keen and courageous warrior, and a wise and constructive statesman. The inspired historian who recorded the events of his life tells us that his great success as a ruler was attributed directly to the fact that "he prepared his ways before the Lord his God."

Having said all these complimentary things about him, the author made one adverse criticism of him. He pointed out one fault in him, namely, that he refused to worship God in His house. Of course, vast multitudes in our day do not regard that as a fault. Many today consider it as a mark of intelligence and broad-mindedness.

What was wrong with Jotham? It was not that, though outwardly clean, he was corrupt in his private life. It was not that he was a grafter, using his high office for the feathering of his own nest. With regret the author recorded this one criticism of Jotham: "he entered not into the temple of the Lord." That was the one conspicuous inconsistency in his otherwise excellent character, and it marred the effect of the whole. Like many others, he did not feel the need of worshiping God in the temple. With reference to Jotham's refusal to worship God in His house, I should like to emphasize two things:

I. The Causes

Why did Jotham refuse to worship God in His house? If someone had asked Jotham why he refused to worship God in His house, I am sure that he would not have made some excuses for his conduct which are made so frequently in our day.

Jotham never would have accounted for his absence on the grounds that there were hypocrites in the temple. He was far too honest to have offered that excuse. Those who say that they do not come to church because of hypocrites being there are never sincere. They are always hypocritical themselves. Nor would he have excused himself on the grounds that the preacher was always preaching from the Bible rather than on the current issues of the day. I am sure that Jotham would not have told you that he could worship God on the lake or on the golf course just as well as in the temple. He would not have confessed that he was staying away from the public worship services because he was unwilling to be challenged with the responsibilities that he did not have the dedication to meet.

Why, then, did Jotham refuse to worship God in His house?

1. He had never formed the habit of doing so in his boyhood.

The habits which are formed in childhood are carried over into adult life. Occasionally, somebody, who regards the truth lightly, will say the reason

he does not go to church is because he was forced to go in his childhood. He goes on to say that he was forced to memorize many chapters of the Bible. But when he is asked to quote one of those chapters, the best he can ever do is to say, "Jesus wept."

2. He was prejudiced against going to God's house.

Jotham's father, Uzziah, was a devoutly religious man. One day, the man dared to usurp the office of priest. The officiating priest withstood and rebuked him. King Uzziah, in direct disobedience, entered the holy place of the temple, where none but the priest were permitted to go, and for his irreverence and his presumptuous act of burning incense upon the altar he was stricken with leprosy. He was compelled to leave the temple, to resign as king, and to spend the remainder of his life in isolation. He never entered God's house after that. Jotham never forgot that horrible experience of his father and refused to cross the threshold of the temple. For the rest of his life he nursed a prejudice against the temple and those who ministered therein. Remember this: sin is never excusable. Nothing justifies shirking one's responsibility to God.

3. He was not conscious of any need for his going to the temple.

He was young, successful and prominent. He had not yet skinned his shins on life's grim realities. His hands were full to overflowing with big and challenging tasks. He was busy organizing and leading armies, building cities and forts, and shaping the destiny of a nation. However, the fact that Jotham's life was so full that he did not feel any need of worshiping God in His temple does not prove that no such need existed.

Had Jotham taken time to think the matter through, he would have realized how inconsistent it was for him to undertake to build up the temple with one hand while he was tearing it down with the other. He would have realized the foolishness of giving to the support of the temple, while at the same time acting toward it in a fashion that, if it had been followed by the rest of the people, would have resulted in its absolute destruction.

II. The Consequences

While Jotham was upright in his dealings, he never entered God's house in order to mingle his prayers and praises with God's people. And what was the result? The very next words in the text tell us: "And the people did yet corruptly." That was the consequence.

1. Jotham impoverished himself.

Jotham's refusal to worship God in His house did not work his destruction, but he thereby deprived himself of many wonderful spiritual blessings.

2. Jotham impaired the work of the Lord.

His absence did not abolish the services in the temple, but it did weaken them. They would have been more effective if he had been there. While no man is absolutely essential or indispensable to a church, he is needed by it.

3. Jotham influenced his people to sin.

His people admired and honored their able king, and were eager to be like him. The good they saw in him, they attributed to Jotham alone. When they sought to be like him, they joined him in ignoring the temple. The tragedy of Jotham's life, therefore, was not altogether in the positive harm that he did, but rather in the positive good that he failed to do. He did not fight the temple, but he refused to give it his active support and to help lead it in an aggressive battle for righteousness.

Jotham's failure to enter into the temple of the Lord had a disastrous effect upon his subjects. His evil influence in this matter led into iniquity the very ones over whom God had made him king and whom God expected him to lead in paths of righteousness and purity. If the king did not need to go to God's house, why should they, his subjects? While his character was strong enough for him to live a clean life and remain away from the temple, his subjects were not that strong. King Jotham, like so many in the twentieth century, ignored the Bible truths about being his brothers' keeper.

Jotham's example was ruinous to the morals of his nation. Spiritual apathy on his part became moral degradation in its wider issues. As an individual Jotham may have considered himself justified in dispensing with the public worship of God, but when other men who were weaker than he, who were more inclined to yield to the grosser temptations of life, and who were men of less self-control, followed his example then the inevitable result was moral corruption and national ruin.

Let us suppose that Jotham felt himself justified in staying away from the temple. He may have said, "My father's life was ruined by dabbling there with things that didn't concern him." He may have argued, "Therefore, I am going to keep out of it altogether." But in the meantime, in ways unseen, by influences of which he never knew, Jotham's example spread ruin through his nation. The people did corruptly. The example of one influential man became contagious and resulted in the ruin of many. Jotham forgot, as we often forget, that the influence of one bad habit is sufficient to offset the influence of many good habits. It is not our consistency in many things that men judge us by, but our inconsistency in one thing. A man may be a good husband, a kind father, and a generous friend; and yet if the world can detect in that man's life one glaring inconsistency, as, for example, that he is not honest in his financial dealings, or that his moral character is not above reproach, then you may be sure that by an unerring instinct the world will judge that man, not by what he is, but by what he is not; not by the many good things that he does, but by one or two glaringly bad things in his life. You may say that is an incharitable judgment, that it is unfair. Nevertheless, it is true.

Oftentimes Christians remark that it is surely no one else's business what they do, but such is not the case. No man can do wrong and his fellows not suffer. No man can guess the full consequences of his transgression. This truth has been expressed in verse by an unknown writer as follows:

"The slightest breeze that ever blew
Some slender grass has wavered,
The smallest life I ever knew
Some other life has flavored.

We cannot live our lives alone,
For other lives we touch
Are either strengthened by our own,
Or weakened just as much."

To his own sorrow Jotham discovered this to be so. He turned his back upon the house of the Lord and his multitudinous subjects followed his example. Like the lone sheep in Sion, Switzerland, which, to escape an enclosure, leaped from the top of a two hundred and twenty foot precipice, only to be followed in quick succession by the remaining one hundred and ninety-nine in the flock. Jotham's influence led his people astray.

There was not only an active phase to Jotham's influence, but a passive side as well: his religion was not a driving force to halt the wicked. God intended that it should be. There is truly a very definite power in right living and when the leadership is crooked or impure the effects are felt throughout the land. In this matter, Jotham was like Lot, who, when he wanted to win his own loved ones, "seemed as one that mocked" unto them. Neither Lot nor Jotham had influenced for good upon others.

What was true of them has always been true all down through the centuries -- and it is just as true today. The unsaved laugh at any man's religion which will not take him to church.

An illustration of how inactive, passive influence works was seen on one occasion when a mother visited her condemned son in his cell, waiting the hour of his execution for murder. The bitter son told his grieving mother, "I would never be here now if it had not been for you." She weepingly rejoined, "I never told you to do any harm." "No," sneered the son, "but neither did you ever tell me to do any good." We influence others for evil just by failing to influence them for good.

Jotham represents a type with which we are familiar. There are few things which give one more genuine regret than to see the son of parents, who have been conspicuous for their zeal in the promotion of the Kingdom of God, forsaking entirely the practices which his parents and his church expected him to carry on, gladly and worthily. The parents were as devoted Christians and members as any in the church, but the son seldom or never crosses the threshold of a place of worship. And he asks, "Why should I?"

Full of the vigor of youth, at the age of twenty-five, Jotham worked out his own scheme of life, and in it there was not any room for the services in the sanctuary. His case is by no means abnormal. Doubtless Jotham convinced himself that he had plenty of justification for his conduct in holding himself aloof from the temple services. Jotham's conduct, thought out in the silence of his own room, had an

influence far beyond himself. His example had a marked influence for evil upon all who knew him. Religious indifference on his part actually led to grosser sins on the part of others. "The people did corruptly."

Every person who habitually refuses to worship in God's house is helping along, to the limit of his personal influence, this degradation of life for the entire country. It does not matter how upright or patriotic one may be in his own life, his influence, like that of Jotham, is a direct contribution to the corruption of the nation. With the approaching of another season, I appeal to you not to live the life of summer atheism. Resolve now that wherever you go you will be loyal in your attendance upon the worship services of the Lord's church there.

It is not at all infrequent that one hears that comment: "I don't have to go to church to be a Christian. I can live for God just as well outside the church as I can on the inside." How could anyone live as well running with the devil's crowd as he could associating with the Lord's people?

The first part of that statement is admittedly true. Going to church does not make one a Christian and no one has ever yet gone to heaven on that basis, and no one ever will. Salvation comes entirely through an experience known as the new birth, which is brought about as a result of the individual's faith in Christ.

The statement, "I can live for God just as well outside the church as I can on the inside," is utterly false. One simply cannot live for God outside of the church as well as on the inside. As Theodore Roosevelt once wrote, "Yes, I know all the excuses. I know that one can worship the Creator in a grove of trees, or by a running brook, or in one's own home just as well as in a church. But I also know as a matter of cold fact that the average man does not thus worship."

The attitude of any particular people toward the house of God determines the destiny of that nation. The great British statesman, William E. Gladstone, truly said, "Tell me what the young men of England are doing on Sunday, and I will tell you what the future of England will be." Beware of anyone or anything keeping you from the house of God. Every Christian needs to be in one of the Lord's churches.

Jotham's refusal to worship God in His house caused his own beloved son Ahaz to turn out to be an enthusiastic servant of Satan, and a rebel against God and the Scriptures. Because the father refused to worship God publicly, the son became so wicked that when he died his subjects refused to bury him with the other kings of Judah (28:27). In describing the wickedness of Ahaz the Bible says that he "burnt his children in the fire, after the abomination of the heathen whom the Lord had cast out before the children of Israel" (28:3); and that he "shut up the doors of the house of the Lord" (28:24). And why not? His father did not have any use for the house of the Lord; why should the son? Parents who ignore the house of God and neglect their church-going obligations should not be surprised to learn some day that their children have helped to bring about the closing of some place of public worship. The absence of any church member from the worship services is a vote to close its doors. Influence, especially that of parents, is

tremendous. Example is still one of the most dominant factors in character building. If parents want their children to love the church, they must manifest a love for it in their own lives. In a very real sense, our children are what we make them by our example.

General Robert E. Lee told a story pertaining to his own influence upon his son, Robert, Jr. He said, "One winter day at Arlington I was walking across the fields in a deep snow. Directly I heard behind me the voice of my little boy saying, "Father, I am putting my feet in your footsteps. I am following right after you." General Lee solemnly declared, "Never before was I so impressed with the power of unconscious influence."

A father accidentally backed his car over his little boy and killed him. Sad as that was, there is something worse. In this city there are fathers and mothers in whose arms God has put helpless little babies, and they have been carelessly sinful. Listen, it is not as bad to run an automobile over a boy as it is for a parent to run the car of evil influence over a child, and send his soul to hell.

Dr. R. E. Neighbour was expressing this vital truth in verse when he wrote:

"Dear Daddy:

When I'm a great big man like you,
I want to do just like you do;
I's goin' to go just where you go,
I want to know all that you know;
I's just a-growing awful big,
And walking in the tracks you dig;
I think it won't be very long,
I's growin' fast, and getting strong,
And soon I'll go to town with you
And be your partner all day through;
I'm just a little, great big man,
A'gettin' like you fast's I can.

"Dear Son:

I'm glad you want like me to be,
Yet, I must change some things I see;
If you will do just what I do,
And follow me the whole length through,
Then, I will pray for strength and power,
To walk the Christ life every hour,
And leave tracks all along the way,
Which lead to joy and endless day."

Just as Jotham needed to worship God in His house in order to obey God, to prove his love for God, to learn the Word of God, and to allow his influence to count for God and for good, so we need to do the same thing today for exactly the same reasons. Parents set examples and their children say, "My parents don't go to church. Why should I?" It is vitally important for you to realize what another has said:

"My life shall touch a dozen lives before this day is done,
Leave countless marks for good or ill ere sets the evening sun.
This is the wish I always wish, the prayer I always pray:
Lord, may my life help other lives it touches by the way."