

Return unto the Lord

(Sermon Notes) By Warren Zehrung – 8/31//2013

I fear that a lot of brethren who hear these words – “**Return unto the Lord**” – would say – I have no need of returning because I never left the Lord in the first place.

It is a common mistake throughout history – that so many who have gone off track continue to believe that they are right with God. They do not measure themselves against the Word of God – the Bible – the Holy Scriptures. This world is deceived – and we can all easily be deceived. There is some good advice for all of us here in Isaiah.

Isaiah 55:

- 6** Seek ye the LORD while he may be found, call ye upon Him while He is near:
- 7** Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts: and let him **Return Unto the LORD**, and He will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon.

This week marks the 50th anniversary of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s iconic “I Have a Dream” civil rights speech delivered from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C.

Though vast strides have been made in voting rights, integration and employment opportunities, Dr. King would be appalled at the crumbling families and moral decay that has ensued in this half-century.

In today’s sermon I will be quoting some of the hopes, and dreams of Martin Luther King that should have been better heeded.

Dr. King learned a great deal from India’s Mohandas Gandhi. Known as 'Mahatma' (great soul), Gandhi was the leader of the nationalist movement against British rule, and is widely considered the father of his country.

Employing non-violent civil disobedience, Gandhi led India to independence from British domination and inspired movements for non-violence, civil rights, and freedom across the world.

Gandhi’s doctrine of non-violent protest to achieve political and social progress was hugely influential in Martin Luther King’s life.

Of course, whether men realize it or not – it is all based on Jesus’ teaching to turn the other cheek.

Luke 6:

- 29** And unto him that smites thee on the one cheek offer also the other; and him that takes away thy cloak forbid not to take thy coat also.

In today’s sermon I am going to quote some of the sayings of Martin Luther King – because **in his own way** he plead with the people of his day to **return unto the Lord**.

Jesus made a statement about leadership that is rarely adhered to in this world: “He that is greatest among you shall be your servant.”

Matthew 23:

11 He that is **greatest** among you shall be your **servant**.

Do we understand that Jesus is saying, “Be a servant first and always?” Do we understand that it is those who are willing to “lower themselves” to serve others who will be the ones to reign and rule with Jesus Christ?

Why is it that so many who are in church leadership positions believe that the way to best serve is from the top of their authoritative pyramidal structure?

When Jesus Christ, the Son of God walked the earth He was indistinguishable from the man on the street.

Jesus taught, “Whosoever shall seek to save his life shall lose it; and whosoever shall lose his life shall preserve it.”

How did Jesus serve us? He gave His life for us that we might live! And He did that setting an example for us to serve in like manner.

In the world, a servant would wash his master’s feet – not the other way round. Notice this role reversal (from what we would consider the norm) by Jesus with regard to this all important subject of serving:

John 13:

13 Ye call me Master and Lord: and ye say well; for so I am.

14 If I then, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet; ye also ought to wash one another's feet.

15 For I have given you an example, that ye should do as I have done to you.

16 Verily, verily, I say unto you, The **servant** is not greater than his lord; neither he that is sent greater than he that sent him.

17 If ye know these things, happy are ye if ye do them.

Jesus was saying that in the Kingdom of God the **Master serves the servant**.

Brethren, we are to live according to the rules of the Kingdom – Now! We should squelch personal ambition and servingly condescend to men of low estate.

Romans 12:

16 ...Mind not high things, but condescend to men of low estate.

Our attitude should focus on being the servant’s servant.

1 Samuel 25:

41 And [Abigail] arose, and bowed herself on her face to the earth, and said, Behold, let thine handmaid be a **servant** to wash the feet of the **servants** of my lord.

Certainly, our carnal mind says to us, “You’ll never get ahead like that – and you certainly won’t be respected – you’ll be looked down upon.” Again:

Matthew 23:

11 “He that is **greatest** among you shall be your **servant**.”

That declaration goes contrary to our understanding of things – but it is the way things should and must be from God’s point of view. It is counter intuitive to our carnal mind – like Christ’s often repeated saying, “The last shall be first, and the first last.” Our carnal mind asks, “Which is it?” It just does not compute in the senseless carnal mind!

Martin Luther King experienced this dichotomy when accepting the Nobel Peace Prize for the civil rights movement at Oslo, Norway.

When explaining the polar extremes of “War and Peace” he was at a loss for words in trying to describe how he had to **“battle” for peace** by means of non–violence.

Specific Purpose Statement: In today’s sermon we will be investigating some of the contradiction and excess which men in authority often take upon themselves.

And, sadly, even in God’s Church there is all too often a proclivity in our brethren to respect a celebrated and **distinguished name** – rather than a servant leader who busies himself by serving the needs of the weak.

That is what Jesus meant when He said:

Mark 6:

4 A prophet is not without honor, except in his own country, and among his own kinfolks, and in his own house.

Our lives must be acceptable to God. We should not expect to receive honor and respect from men – anymore than Jesus was accepted by the Pharisees of His day.

During His public ministry, Jesus Christ was continuously badgered and harassed by the religious leaders of His day. The Orthodox Rabbis or Pharisees even sought continuously to kill Jesus.

The Pharisees were not able to grasp the **spiritual** implications of Christ’s words.

They wanted to be in power. They wanted to be in control. They loved the chief seats in the synagogues. They loved the uppermost rooms at the Feast. They loved to be seen in public.

The Pharisees twisted the words of Christ to say that it was their prerogative to make the rules that men were to live by:

Matthew 23:

- 1 Then spoke Jesus to the multitude, and to his disciples,
- 2 Saying, The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat:
- 3 All therefore whatsoever they bid you observe, that observe and do; but do not ye after their works: for they say, and do not.

All therefore whatsoever they [all inclusive – Moses, and the Pharisees when they spoke according to Moses] bid you observe, that observe and do;

Jesus was not saying that the Pharisees – because they had the office and the authority – could do as they pleased – carte blanche.

The unconverted Pharisees thought that they could capitalize on their positions of authority.

The Pharisees and the Orthodox Rabbis contend that they have been given absolute authority to have the final say – even to the extent that God has relinquished His sovereign rule to them.

The Catholic Pope believes the same thing – that he rules at God's pleasure – that he holds upon this earth the place of God.

Pope Leo XIII stated that the pope holds "upon this earth the place of God Almighty."

When the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat they believe that their will has become God's Will. They draw the people to look to themselves – and not to God and His Word.

We have the very similar problem in the Church of God when ministers cause the brethren to look to them – rather than to God and His Word.

They commonly demand that the brethren be loyal to them – when that is God's privilege, right and prerogative alone.

Isaiah 29:

- 13** Wherefore the Lord said, Forasmuch as this people draws near me with their mouth, and with their lips do honour me, but have removed their heart far from me, and their reverence toward me is taught by the precept of men:

Jesus quoted Isaiah in Matthew 15:

Matthew 15:

- 1** Then came to Jesus scribes and Pharisees, which were of Jerusalem, saying,
2 Why do thy disciples transgress the tradition of the elders? for they wash not their hands when they eat bread.

Brethren, please notice here that the disciples are not being accused of violating the Law of Moses or the Law of God – but of transgress the tradition of the elders.

The tradition of the elders – that is the Talmud. The Torah is the Law of God. Big difference!

God tells us over and over not to add to His Word – but that is exactly what the Pharisees have done.

The Talmud – the tradition of the Elders – is the body of Jewish civil and ceremonial law and legend. It was **added** by men! It is not the Law of God.

Notice how Jesus turns the conversation around on the Pharisees:

Matthew 15:

- 3 But He [Jesus] answered and said unto them, Why do ye also **transgress the commandment of God** by your tradition?
- 4 For God commanded, saying, Honour thy father and mother: and, He that curses father or mother, let him die the death.
- 5 But ye say, Whosoever shall say to his father or his mother, It is a gift, by whatsoever thou might be profited by me;

The Pharisees were saying – “I’d like to help you out Mom and Pop, but my resources are all tied up down at the synagogue.”

In their mind they were free to **override** God’s Commandment to:

Exodus 20:

- 12 Honour thy father and thy mother: that thy days may be long upon the land which the LORD thy God gives you.

Matthew 15:

- 6 And honour not his father or his mother, he shall be free.[Free to break God’s Law. Their manmade tradition countermanded God’s supreme Law.] Thus have ye made the commandment of God of none effect by your tradition.
- 7 Ye hypocrites, well did Isaiah prophesy of you, saying,
- 8 This people draw nigh unto me with their mouth, and honor me with their lips; but their heart is far from me.
- 9 But in vain they do worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men.

Of course we would say that we would never do such a thing.

Brethren, we must **Return Unto the Lord** – our roots – the basics – the principles of Jesus Christ – and weed out all wrong practice and teaching that has crept into our Church culture.

Put these in your notes – these are a few verses where God says not to change up **His Word**.

Deuteronomy 4:

- 2 Ye **shall not add** unto the word which I command you, neither shall ye diminish ought from it, that ye may keep the commandments of the LORD your God which I command you.

Deuteronomy 18:

- 20 But the prophet, which shall presume to speak a word in my name, which I have not commanded him to speak, or that shall speak in the name of other gods, even that prophet shall die.

Isaiah 8:

- 16 Bind up the testimony, seal the law among my disciples.

Proverbs 30:

- 5 Every word of God is pure: he is a shield unto them that put their trust in him.
- 6 **Add thou not** unto his words, lest he reprove thee, and thou be found a liar.

Revelation 22:

- 18** For I testify unto every man that hears the words of the prophecy of this book, If any man **shall add** unto these things, God shall add unto him the plagues that are written in this book:
- 19** And if any man shall **take away** from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part out of the book of life, and out of the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book.

But the Pharisees **added** the **huge Talmud** of rules, ceremonies, and regulations that God never spoke.

*Within the Church of God, and among many in the ministry, there is a way of thinking that is not that much different from that of our errant predecessors – the Pharisees.

It is happening today within God's Church.

They would rather be served than to serve. They would rather rule than to be ruled. They honor God with their lips, but where is their heart?

When I was relatively new in the ministry of Jesus Christ I worked for a pastor who had this same Pharisaical mindset. Let me relate the story to you:

The pastor had gone on vacation and a young married man in the congregation came to me rather distraught. With tears in his eyes he related to me how he had been treated shabbily by the pastor. He felt that the pastor had been unusually harsh and unfair. He went on to relay some of the details of what had taken place.

It did sound to me like that pastor had been unfeeling and heavy handed, but I went on to convey to this heartbroken young man what the duty of a pastor was.

I told him that the pastor's responsibility was to watch over his spiritual life, and they are accountable to God and that the pastor would not have done what he did – except that it was really spiritually profitable and for your ultimate good.

I quoted Hebrews 13:17 to the young man:

Hebrews 13:

- 17** Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you.

When the pastor returned from vacation I asked him what had happened and how was he trying to help the young man.

The pastor said, "**No, I wasn't trying to help him.** I just didn't like the way he was doing it – and I wanted it done my way. I'm the pastor – and that means that I get to do what I want to do!

I'm the pastor – and I get to do what I want to do!"

That pastor believed that he could do **whatever he wanted**, - **not what was right** in God's sight for the member – but whatever he wanted because he was the Pastor.

I was flabbergasted. That really rocked my boat. More and more I was beginning to see that there were those ministers among us who possessed no understanding of God's way.

That pastor needed to **Return Unto the Lord** but he did not.

As soon as Joe Tkach did away with clean and unclean meats, that pastor went out and filled his freezer with shrimp and pork chops.

As soon as Joe Tkach did away with the Sabbath, that pastor began to disfellowship the brethren who observed the Sabbath.

That is not the end of the story.

After all that heresy and dishonor to God's people, the man who is the president of the largest Church of God group today fired me and gave **that same pastor** the congregation of over 600 brethren. They are all gone today. The saints of God were wasted. Brethren, this is very serious!

These men do not follow God's instructions – and yet they require the brethren to look to them and follow them.

There is **no man** between a Church member and Jesus Christ.

1 Timothy 2:

5 For there is one God, and **one mediator** between God and men, the man Christ Jesus;

The Church of God ministry was **incorrectly** taught that they could rule over the brethren's lives, and that if they made a mistake – it really wasn't a mistake – because God would set it right.

Scripture like Isaiah 44:26 were used to show that whatever the minister did was the Will of God.

Isaiah 44:

26 *God confirms the word of his servant, and performs the counsel of his messengers."*

That is true – but **only** when **what a minister does** is in total conformity with God's Word – the bible. Not when he is acting on his own.

Return Unto the Lord.

Isaiah 55:

6 Seek ye the LORD while he may be found, call ye upon Him while He is near:

7 Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts: and let him **return unto the LORD**, and He will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon.

I love this concept of "**return unto the Lord**" because it supports the premise that man was once with the Lord and that it is possible to come back to Him once again.

Herbert W Armstrong established a motto for Ambassador College in 1947 that ran throughout all the classes and activities: “**Recapture true values.**”

It is the same thought as “**Return Unto the Lord**” in that the only place to find True Values in within the Word of God.

Mr. Armstrong realized that education had lost all knowledge of **the purpose and true meaning of life.**

Modern education does not know, and fails to teach: What is Man? Why was man created? What are the True Values? What is the way to peace, happiness, abundant well-being in life as a whole?

In today's modern world, the development of the man himself, his character, right sense of values, knowledge of the real purpose of life, and the laws that govern happiness, peace and abundant well-being is neglected.

Mr. Armstrong realized that it was necessary for all the Church to “**Return unto the Lord.**”

*Where are the efforts in God’s Church today to **get out the warning** of coming tribulation and imploring the brethren to deeply repent?

Martin Luther King Sermon

Fifty-nine years ago on Feb 28, 1954 – almost ten years before his “I Have a Dream speech – **Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. traveled to Detroit – (little did they realize that they would be bankrupt today) – to preach his sermon on “**Rediscovering Lost Values.**”

That sermon had a theme very much like “**Return Unto the Lord.**”

In that sermon Martin Luther King was **pleading** with the congregation to get back to the roots of Christianity.

Return Unto the Lord!

I want to share some of the thoughts of this sermon with you because in some ways Martin Luther King depicts a wisdom that is being lost in God’s Church.

Martin Luther King begins by citing the biblical story of how Joseph and Mary had to return to Jerusalem because they left Jesus behind after the Feast of Passover.

Martin Luther King’s words are set off with quotes “”. [My comments are bracketed]

Martin Luther King tells the congregation:

“If we are to go forward – if we are to make this a better world in which to live, we’ve got to **go back.**”

[Go back to what? Go back and **Recapture true values – Return Unto the Lord**]

“We’ve got to rediscover these precious **values** that we’ve left behind.

“There is something wrong with our world, something fundamentally and basically wrong.

"If we are to really find the cause of man's problems we will have to look in the hearts and souls of men.

"...we aren't good enough.

"...our moral genius lags behind.

"The problem is with man himself and man's soul.

"We haven't learned how to be just and honest and kind and true and loving.

"And that is the basis of our problem.

"If we are to go forward today, we've got to go back and rediscover some mighty **precious values** that we've left behind.

[Brethren, the ministry of the Church of God has forgotten these **precious values**.]

"That's the only way that we would be able to make of our world a better world, and to make of this world what God wants it to be and **the real purpose and meaning of it**.

[When I read these words of Martin Luther King I couldn't help but think of Herbert Armstrong's words in **Recapture true values** "The real purpose and meaning of it." Herbert Armstrong and Martin Luther King were saying the same thing at the same time nearly sixty years ago.]

"The only way we can do it is to go back, and rediscover some mighty precious values that we've left behind.

[And then Dr. King effectively utilizes the Biblical story of Jesus being left behind in Jerusalem at the Feast of Passover.

Luke 2:

41 Now his parents went to Jerusalem every year at the feast of the Passover.

42 And when he was twelve years old, they went up to Jerusalem after the custom of the feast.

...Jesus tarried behind in Jerusalem; and Joseph and his mother knew not of it.

Luke 2:

45 And when they found him not, they turned back again to Jerusalem, seeking him.

"THEY WENT BACK – BECAUSE THEY HAD **LOST SOMETHING PRECIOUS**.

[Martin Luther King then builds on this premise – **Return Unto the Lord**, – **Recapture true values** – or as he said it then **rediscovering lost values**.]

"Sometimes, you know, it's necessary to **go backward** in order to go forward.

"And so that was the thing that Jesus' parents realized, that, that they had to go back and, and, and find this mighty precious value that they had left behind, in order to go forward.

"They realized that. And so they went back to Jerusalem and discovered Jesus, rediscovered him so to speak, in order to go forward to Nazareth.

“We’ve left a lot of precious values behind; we’ve lost a lot of precious values. And if we are to go forward, if we are to make this a better world in which to live, **we’ve got to go back.**”

“We’ve got to rediscover these precious values that we’ve left behind.

“I want to deal with one or two of these mighty precious values that we’ve left behind, that if we’re to go forward and to make this a better world, we must rediscover.

“The first is this – the first principle of value that we need to rediscover is this – that all reality hinges on moral foundations.

“In other words, that this is a moral universe, and that there are moral laws of the universe, just as abiding [more so] than the physical laws.

“Even if we don’t know it in its Newtonian formulation, we, we know it intuitively, and so we just don’t jump off the highest building in Detroit for the fun of it—we, we, we don’t do that.

“Because we know that there is a law of gravitation which is final in the universe.

“If we disobey it, we’ll suffer the consequences.

“But I’m not so sure if we know that there are, are moral laws, just as abiding as the physical law. I’m not so sure about that.

“I’m not so sure we really believe that there is a law of love in this universe, and that if you disobey it you’ll suffer the consequences.

“I’m not so sure if we really believe that.

“Now, at least two things convince me that, that we don’t believe that, that we have strayed away from the principle that this is a moral universe.

“Most people can’t stand up for their convictions, because the **majority** of people might not be doing it.

[These are sound Scriptural principles that Dr. King quoted.

Exodus 23:

2 Thou shalt not follow a multitude to do evil;

Brethren, we are not lemmings that follow the group into the sea...since everybody is doing it, it must be right??? Where is the courage of our convictions?]

“Some things are right and some things are wrong. Eternally so, absolutely so. It’s wrong to hate.

“It’s wrong to throw our lives away in riotous living.

“No matter if everybody is doing it. It’s wrong! It always will be wrong! And it always has been wrong. It’s wrong in every age, and it’s wrong in every nation.

“Some things are right and some things are wrong, no matter if everybody is doing the contrary. Some things in this universe are absolute.

“The God of the universe has made it so.

** “The thing that we need in the world today, is a group of men and women who will stand up for right and be opposed to wrong, wherever it is.

“Some things are wrong, whether anybody sees you doing them or not.

“Some things are right, whether anybody sees you doing them or not.

[Keep in mind that Dr. King is preaching in a Baptist Church that teaches that the law is done away – and yet he is courageous to declare **God’s Moral Law.**]

“Our world hinges on moral foundations. God has made it so! **God** has made the universe to be based on a **moral law**.

“We’ve got to know somehow that it’s right to be honest and just with our brothers.

“This is a **law-abiding** universe.

“This is a **moral** universe.

“It hinges on moral foundations.

“If we are to make of this a better world, we’ve got to go back and rediscover **that precious value that we’ve left behind**.

“And then there is a second thing, a second principle that we’ve got to go back and rediscover.

“And that is that all reality has spiritual control. In other words, we’ve got to go back and rediscover **the principle that there is a God behind the process**.

[Return Unto the Lord]

[Remember when Jesus quoted Isaiah? “This people draw nigh unto me with their mouth, and honor me with their lips; but their heart is far from me.”]

** “We must remember that it’s possible to affirm the existence of God **with your lips** and deny his existence with your life.

* “The most dangerous type of atheism is not theoretical atheism, but practical atheism - that’s the most dangerous type.

“And the world, **even the church**, is filled up with people who pay lip service to God and not **life service** to God.

[Brethren, do the ministers of God’s Church know this today?]

“There is always a danger that we will make it appear externally that we believe in God when internally we don’t.

“We say with our mouths that we believe in Him, but we live with our lives like He never existed.

“That is the ever-present danger confronting religion. That’s a dangerous type of atheism.

“And I think, my friends, that that is the thing that has happened in America.

“That we have unconsciously left God behind. Now, we haven’t consciously done it, we, we have unconsciously done it.

“You see, the text, you remember the text said, that Jesus’ parents went a whole day’s journey not knowing that he wasn’t with them. They didn’t consciously leave him behind.

“It was unconscious. They went a whole day and didn’t even know it. It wasn’t a conscious process.

“You see, we didn’t grow up and say, now, good-bye God, we’re going to leave you now.

“We had gone a whole day’s journey, and then we came to see that we had unconsciously ushered God out of the universe.

“A whole day’s journey - didn’t mean to do it. We just became so involved in things that we forgot about God.

“As a young man with most of my life ahead of me, I decided early to give my life to something eternal and absolute.

“To God who is the same yesterday, today, and forever. The God who threw up the stars, to bedeck the heavens like swinging lanterns of eternity.

“That’s the God that I’m putting my ultimate faith in. That’s the God that I call upon you to worship this morning.

“Go out and be assured that that God is going to last forever.

* “If we are to go forward this morning, we’ve got **to go back** and find that God.

“That is the God that demands and commands our ultimate allegiance.

“If we are to go forward, we must go back and **re**discover these precious values...

“That all reality hinges on **moral** foundations and that all reality has **spiritual** control.”

“God bless you.” MLK 1954

Brethren, we have heard it all our years in the Church of God, “Recapture True values.”

“Rediscover These Precious Values.”

“Return Unto the Lord.”

End