

13 Tishrei, 5776 (26/9/15)

**Revitalizing Our Positive Spiritual Alienation** J. M. Terrett

Ha'azinu                      Give Ear              The Package Deal: Jew and Gentile  
 Torah:                      Deut. 32:1-52 (Second song of Moses)  
 Haftarah:                  2 Sam. 22: 1-51 (David's proto-Psalm)  
 Brit Chadashah:        Romans 10:17-11:12; 12:19; 15:9,10

Sermon: We need to maintain and strengthen our double grip on the truth as we wander through life on our pilgrimage home to our Father's Home in Glory. This is not a complicated endeavour, but it is not one that is easy to stay on top of. In 5776 we have to first tighten our grip of divine truth as it is revealed in the Bible even as our society moves further into the new brand of paganism which offers a radically different and aggressive approach to the meaning of life. Biblical spirituality is relegated to the status of primitive superstition which can no longer be taken seriously and believers face ridicule designed not only to silence us, but also to portray us as not quite right in our heads.

The next grip we have to tighten is our grasp of spiritual relevance. This is another way of saying that how we live our lives and what we believe, meet our needs from conception to the grave in whatever cultural setting we find ourselves and no matter what personal baggage or personal agenda it is our privilege to struggle with. For believers, spiritual relevance does not mean being up to speed with the latest fashions or the latest trends in science or culture. It means that we are able to apply our faith journey in ways which will both meet our own spiritual needs and which will provide us with a personal credibility which will form the basis of a dialogue with all and any truth seekers we encounter as we live our lives in our darkening world.

I want to talk to you this morning about this double grip (on divine truth and on spiritual relevance) because we have just passed the halfway point in our observance of the Fall Feasts and we are about to enter in the Sukkoth portion of these special days. We have looked at the positive nature of judgment during Rosh Hashanah and we have just finished looking at the power of atonement during Yom Kippur.

Now we are about to look at the double message of Sukkoth as our fall season slowly begins to turn into another awesome Canadian winter. Sukkoth is all about **pilgrimage** through this **temporary** life to the one which will never end. Nothing in this life is permanent and our entire cosmos is slowly wearing out as we plod through the ups and downs of our life towards our final destination.

In a very real sense, we are called to maintain our double grip because the closer we come to the end of the age the more we will be spiritually alienated from our increasingly pagan society and this should be seen as a good thing and not as a problem. I want people to consider me a good, reliable person who can be trusted and who has a both a firm grip of reality and of the meaning of life. But I want what I believe and how I live to make secular people uncomfortable and to challenge them to see how foolish and futile their lives are without faith in the living G-d of the Bible.

The passage I am basing my remarks on is I Peter 3:15 (I Peter 3:15, 16 in English): "**But sanctify Messiah as L-rd in your hearts and be ready always to defend yourself with gentleness and respect with anyone who asks you to give a reason for the hope that is**

***within you."***

In one sense it would be nice if we could just concentrate on walking with the L-rd and not be bothered having to constantly explain ourselves to people who have swallowed wholesale the twisted lies and falsehoods of a society which seems bent on destroying life on this planet as it frantically looks for life on other planets. As things heat up and get more confusing, people either want to sign up to escape to the relative safety of a colony on Mars or to wait patiently for the help only an extraterrestrial life form can give. Close but no cigar.

I admit sometimes I get tired of endlessly explaining my biblical spirituality to people with whom I have less and less in common and yet this is part of revitalizing the positive spiritual alienation which Sukkoth is all about. I recently had a very satisfying heated conversation with two of my nephews whom I dearly love and greatly appreciate. And since one of them openly rejected the faith he was brought up in, I hoped to be able speak a good word for the faith which I want to always have a strong double grip of (biblical truth and spiritual relevance).

I had heard he was coming back to faith and wanted to see if he were willing to let his old uncle in on what that was all about. Suddenly we were talking about two issues which he wondered why I was so passionate about – and you guessed it: abortion and homosexuality.

It did not turn into an argument, but it gave me the opportunity of defending myself before someone who asked me a reason for the hope which is in me, and I even was able to do it with gentleness and with respect, even though when both of them were little, they remembered how I had paddled their behinds when they had misbehaved.

I turned the tables on him and said that our society is attacking our spirituality using these two as sort of flag ship Trojan horses to infiltrate and demolish both our belief system and our spiritual relevance. I am not passionate about either issue – I am passionate about protecting life in the womb and I coined a phrase which explains how this could be done: ethical sexuality. We are inundated with an increasingly perverted sexuality which treats conception as an acceptable hazard that can be fixed by ending the life of a human foetus at the most vulnerable stage of our human development.

We got on homosexuality and I was not surprised at the lack of actual critical investigation to undergird his support of gay rights and he actually alluded to my failure to accept this kind of departure from biblical sexuality as a form of unjust persecution of this sexual minority.

Again, I turned the tables and said that my adherence to a biblical understanding of sexual integrity was under relentless attack as an unjust condemnation of the supposed sexual freedom which our society holds so very dear.

I sensed the great distance between our understandings of spirituality and the high degree of alienation between our positions. However, rather than wanting to bridge this gap, or repair this breach by altering my stand, I articulated for him my understanding of the nature of wholesome, acceptable sexual behaviour according to the Bible. Sexuality cannot violate kinship, gender or species. He seemed surprised that I had thought it through this much.

He listened and I listened and we began to develop one of the keys to sharing our faith in our estranged modern world – a mutual dialogue. I defined my terms, and asked as many

questions as he asked me and he understood that I had taken the time to think through my position and that I was not willing to abandon either my grasp of biblical truth or the spirituality which I wanted to keep relevant. Keeping it relevant means being able to explain it to our detractors in ways they can understand so that we are not silenced or appear as bigoted or prejudiced, even if this is the verdict our society has passed on our beliefs and on our spirituality. Being called bad names should never deter us from gently speaking the truth.

We will have less and less in common with the worldview of our society as various secular influences continue to replace our supernatural, biblical perspective and we will be maligned and ridiculed, but this is not too high a price to pay for remaining true to both our beliefs and our spiritual morality. Instead of looking at this burgeoning spiritual alienation as something which we should avoid or try to minimize, we need to see this increasing distance as the material out of which a dialogue can be maintained so that the reasons why we believe what we believe can be presented to truth seekers, with both gentleness and respect.

At Sukkoth we come to realize that just as the House of Jacob had nothing in common with the spirituality of the Egyptians among whom they lived or with the spirituality of the Canaanites among whom they were going to live; so the distance between us and our world will increase until we are truly only strangers and pilgrims wandering through increasing pagan darkness and increasing alienation towards our Father's home in glory.

Israel was told not to allow any of the spiritual corruption of their pagan neighbours to diminish the distinction which the Lord wanted to maintain between them and the darkness which surrounded them. And while Israel was to be militant and make war on their neighbours whenever they tried to conquer or infiltrate Israel, we too need to see ourselves as living in a state of war with the world through which we are travelling.

However, instead of physical weapons of carnal warfare, our weapons are spiritual and can be used to cast down fortresses (false arguments) and any idea or ideology that rises up against the knowledge of God. This does not mean that we endlessly spout Bible verses and indiscriminately preach condemnation and judgment whenever our worldview is challenged, as if we were threatened by a secular worldview and didn't want to listen to anything they have to say. Hear no evil, speak no evil, see no evil!

It means that we ask them why they hold whatever positions they hold to and thus earn the right for them to listen to what we have to say about why we hold to our positions and all of this without needless argument or unfortunate hostility.

There will be times when we will encounter people who want to rant and rave at us, but instead of falling into the trap of confirming their false impressions about the unreasonable and ignorant spiritual people who are also Bible believers, our desire for open dialogue with respect and gentleness will show them that we have nothing to hide and are not unreasonable or ignorant in what we believe or in the spirituality which we practice.

We are strangers and pilgrims in this world and we will have less and less in common with each passing year as our global world slides into greater and greater pagan darkness. We want to maintain and revitalize our positive spiritual alienation so that we can build a bridge for them to cross over into the kingdom and not allow them to pull us away from the kingdom by their sophisticated false reasonings which use issues like gay rights and abortion rights to

torpedo our faith and cause us to sink to their level or look stupid and sound bigoted.

I want to be appreciated and accepted by my friends and neighbours and by my colleagues and people I encounter as I go about the business of living, but in order for this to happen, I am not willing to either abandon my biblical faith or my spiritual relevance. I want to revitalize my positive spiritual alienation by using respect and gentleness to build a dialogue with anyone and everyone who asks a reason for the hope which is in me.

I may be thought foolish or even bizarre and weird by a world which is as different from us and our lifestyle as the Canaanites and Egyptians were from our people as they took up residence in the Promised Land. And just as we were forbidden to assimilate into the darkness of idolatry and fornication which the Egyptians and Canaanites embraced, so today we are also forbidden from adopting the beliefs and values of the darkening pagan world through which we are travelling. We are pilgrims of light, not darkness dwelling zombies!

I do not want to consciously alienate people by the rude or arrogant way that I speak or by the exclusive lifestyle which I adopt to make myself feel superior and unwilling to touch people of the world as unclean or inferior. However, our beliefs and our spirituality will alienate us from the world because we have very little in common with our secular society and that is not about to change and I do not want it to.

As we come into the week of Sukkoth, we need to embrace this positive spiritual alienation and speak to the issues with which the world wants to silence us and sink us. Honestly I find both abortion and homosexuality not only incredibly distasteful and not topics I want to dedicate a lot of time and energy to. However they are part of the secular propaganda with which we are inundated and unless I am ready to give a reason, both for the hope that is within me and for the spiritual relevance which disallows both of these aberrations, then I am not allowing the L-rd to revitalize our spiritual alienation. We are called to be salt and light and part of casting down fortresses involves building a dialogue with truth seekers in our darkening world, gently and with respect as a bridge to the truth of the Gospel, over and above the negative propaganda which His Spirit will disperse and dissolve one issue at a time and one dialogue at a time. Chag Sukkoth, fellow strangers and pilgrims and may our camping in 5776 be bright, powerful and overcoming even as our foolish world darkens more and more and as we keep our spiritual alienation positive and revitalized.