

Religion

I have been accused of being anti-denomination, but I am not; I am anti-religious system. I am against it when I see it in me. Our religious acts must never be an end in themselves but only a means to an end. That is, our religious acts are done to build ourselves up to be able to help others. Our goal is to bring others to a closer walk with Jesus. This is not just a problem in the “high” church but also in smaller non-denominational churches. Just because one church has more rituals than another and has more structure does not mean that less structure and less ritual is better.

The questions are: “Is the Holy Spirit in control of the service?”/ “Has being there made me better able to help others?” / “Have I had an encounter with God?” / “Have I internalized the Word, thus changing me?”

I was leading the singing at a Bible study and was picking the music we would be singing. The Holy Spirit said to start with the song *Bind Us Together*. I did not recognize the voice that was speaking to me. I said to myself, “No, we always sing that at the end of Bible study.” I picked a different song. When my pastor came in to start he said to me, “Let’s start with *Bind Us Together*.”

I rejected the leading of the Holy Spirit because of my religion. That is, we sing *Bind Us Together* at the end not at the beginning. You may think that that was a small thing, but it is the perfect example of religion getting in the way of the leadership of the Holy Spirit. It also comes into play when the Bible says something that conflicts with our religious position. We end up being robbed of God’s best for us.

If we think of a person that always does the right thing, a really good Christian, what’s Satan going to do to fight that person and the good that they do? They are not going to rob a bank or kill or get drunk, how can they get tripped up? What the devil will do is make them religious. (In this writing I will use the term “religion” to mean an outward expression.) They may start with spending 10 minutes a day reading the Bible and then do it a long time. Then they miss a day and feel guilty; if they don’t understand confession and the mercy of God they can feel condemned by God. Satan will say to them, “If you were a Christian you would not have missed daily Bible reading.” They are afraid to talk to God because they don’t want God looking their way. Now they are totally ineffective as a Christian. We are saved by the shed blood of Jesus, not on whether we read the Bible 10 minutes a day or not.

One evangelist has based his ministry on this. He said he wasn’t sinning but felt guilty all the time. He didn’t understand the mercy of God and was miserable all the time. He said if he were sinning, at least sin has pleasure for a little time. I know people who have labored over something they did in the past and even though they say they have asked forgiveness they cannot get to where they are free from the guilt of that sin. In Christ there is no condemnation.

Romans 8:1 There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit.

2 For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus hath made me free from the law of sin and death.

Jesus said to woman caught in adultery, “...Neither do I condemn thee: go, and sin no more.” **John 8:11**

Again Jesus says, **John 3:16 “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. 17 For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved.”**

The word “religion” appears 5 times in the King James Bible. Twice it says the “Jews’ religion”. The other three times it is defined as “religious worship, especially external, that which consists of ceremonies, religious discipline”.

There are two words for “religious”. The first is to revere, to worship. It appears another 9 times but translates worship and devout. The second word means “fearing or worshipping God or to tremble”. One translation uses religion but a better word might be “pious”.

Christianity is not a religion but a relationship. Every denomination has some religious ceremonies and if they are understood and practiced correctly they are OK. But, the outward expression is not an end in itself. We have all said, “Let’s try to get so and so to church.” Our goal is not to get someone to church but to get that person in correct relationship with God. A person can do all the denominational rituals and if it is not internal it will not help that person.

James 1:26 If any man among you seem to be religious, and bridled not his tongue, but deceiveth his own heart, this man's religion is vain.

27 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.

In verse 26 the first word “religious” means to tremble, fearful or worshipping. The second time, “religion” is external ceremonies. Vain means devoid of force, truth, success, result, useless and of no purpose. If we do not control our tongue or speech our ceremonies, even if they seem pious or correct, are useless and of no purpose and we become self-deceived. Ouch, that hurts.

In verse 27 we see the pure outward expression of our relationship with God is: To visit (to look at or after, inspect, examine with the eyes, to look in order to help or benefit, care for, provide for, look about for) the fatherless and widows in their pressure, oppression, affliction, tribulation, distress or trouble. To keep themselves spotless, irreproachable, unsullied and free from censure, or vice; this is more than just not killing someone. This is a lifestyle.

Philippians 4:8 Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things.

If we go to a religious ceremony then gossip or talk ugly about or to someone our ceremony is useless. Philippians 4:8 is where our thought life should be. Don’t think I am anywhere close to where I should be, but we all should go over these verses periodically.

One true story an evangelist told was about a man who was a known alcoholic and wife beater. He was a member in good standing of his church. He got saved and found out he had been made

the righteousness of God. He started telling people he was the righteousness of God and got kicked out of the church within 3 months.

2 Corinthians 5:21 For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him.

Jesus was well received when changing water to wine, healing people, and feeding people but when he started throwing money changers out of the temple and healing on the Sabbath his family and friends thought he was deranged.

Mark 3:21 And when those who belonged to Him (His kinsmen) heard it, they went out to take Him by force, for they kept saying, He is out of His mind (beside Himself, deranged)! AMP

Matthew 12:46 While he yet talked to the people, behold, his mother and his brethren stood without, desiring to speak with him.

2 Timothy 3:1 This know also, that in the last days perilous times shall come.

2 For men shall be lovers of their own selves, covetous, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy,

3 Without natural affection, trucebreakers, false accusers, incontinent, fierce, despisers of those that are good,

4 Traitors, heady, highminded, lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God;

5 Having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof: from such turn away.

6 For of this sort are they which creep into houses, and lead captive silly women laden with sins, led away with divers lusts,

7 Ever learning, and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth.

Here the Holy Spirit is warning of **having a form of godliness but denying its power.**

Revelation 3:14 And unto the angel of the church of the Laodiceans write; These things saith the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of the creation of God;

15 I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would thou wert cold or hot.

16 So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth.

If a person is a cold Christian no one knows he/she is a Christian. If Christians keep themselves fired-up and hot then they are doing a good job evangelizing and they are an example of Godly living. But, if people are lukewarm, non-Christians see that person and know that they are a hypocrite because their conduct does not reflect the love of Jesus. Spew means to vomit or throw-up. I am not sure what that means but I don't want to find out.

The book of Galatians deals with that church trying to rely of circumcision and the keeping of Mosaic Law to get to Heaven. Paul says those people teaching that should go ahead and emasculate themselves.

Galatians 5:12 I could wish that those who trouble you would even cut themselves off! NKJV

I am going to go through Galatians and highlight a few verses. If you ever feel guilty about not obeying a man-made rule, study Galatians.

One evangelist said that he read the whole newspaper every day. He was spending 30 minutes to an hour and a half every day. He had done this from a young age. He decided to fast the newspaper and read the Bible instead. He said that he never went back to the newspaper. He went on to say if someone says or makes a law that you can't read the newspaper, he is going to start reading it again. I spend 10-30 minutes each day reading the news and God has only said to me to watch how much time I spend. One Bible teacher said God told her to quit reading novels because she was spending too much time reading them. God has not told me to not read novels. When I first started playing soccer it became an obsession. God had me stop playing. He never told me to not let my children play.

Here are three examples of God leading someone to make a change in what they were doing but we must never make laws saying we cannot read newspapers or novels or play soccer.

In the first chapter God says: **Galatians 1:6 I marvel that ye are so soon removed from him that called you into the grace of Christ unto another gospel:** They were moving from salvation by grace to salvation by circumcision (or works).

Galatians 2:3 But neither Titus, who was with me, being a Greek, was compelled to be circumcised:

4 And that because of false brethren unawares brought in, who came in privily to spy out our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, that they might bring us into bondage: Here we see that God has called us to liberty. He also says that a reliance on the flesh or works is bondage.

Later in Chapter 2, Paul calls Peter out for not associating with Gentile believers.

Galatians 2:16 Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Jesus Christ, that we might be justified by the faith of Christ, and not by the works of the law: for by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified.

Galatians 2:21 I do not frustrate the grace of God: for if righteousness come by the law, then Christ is dead in vain. That is a strong statement; if we try to gain God's favor by obeying rules then Jesus' death was of no value.

Every word in Chapter 3 is important to this topic. We would all do well to read this chapter once a month ("once a month"? - see how easily a rule can slip in) or anytime we feel like we needed to "do something" to obtain God's favor. **Galatians 3:1 You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you?....** God says we are foolish and bewitched if we rely on the flesh.

There is a place in Jesus where the only thing you feel guilty about is not feeling guilty.

We find the account of Naaman in 2 Kings 5. Naaman, the commander of the army of the king of Aram, had leprosy and went to Elisha for healing. Elisha sent word for him to dip seven times in the Jordan River. This made him mad but he came to his senses. After the healing Naaman said,

2 Kings 5:18 In this thing the Lord pardon thy servant, that when my master goeth into the house of Rimmon to worship there, and he leaneth on my hand, and I bow myself in the house of Rimmon: when I bow down myself in the house of Rimmon, the Lord pardon thy servant in this thing.

Naaman has asked the Lord for forgiveness ahead of time for bowing down to an idol. This guy has real insight into the mercy of God. He knew God would forgive him because God was

on his side and wanted what was best for him. Before we jump on him for bowing to an idol remember he did not know of God's commands; he only knew God's mercy.

I have read the Jewish rabbis around 100-500 AD(?) would argue for weeks over the question: Is having a false tooth carrying a burden on the Sabbath? and other things like that.

Hosea 6:6 For I desired mercy, and not sacrifice; and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings.

Matthew 9:13 But go ye and learn what that meaneth, I will have mercy, and not sacrifice: for I am not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.

Matthew 12:7 But if ye had known what this meaneth, I will have mercy, and not sacrifice, ye would not have condemned the guiltless.

I have been convinced for years that God cares more about how I treat people than what my doctrine is. Should our doctrine be correct? Yes. Is how we love and treat others more important? Yes. My wife and daughter would get all over me about not being personal with wait staff at restaurants. I left big tips but a lot of times I could not remember what our waiter looked like or their names after they had told us. One time I complained about a cashier at a store not smiling or hardly even speaking to me. My wife then asked if I smiled or spoke pleasantly to her. Ouch, no I didn't.

Philippians 3

3 For we are the circumcision, which worship God in the spirit, and rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh.

4 Though I might also have confidence in the flesh. If any other man thinketh that he hath whereof he might trust in the flesh, I more:

5 Circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, an Hebrew of the Hebrews; as touching the law, a Pharisee;

6 Concerning zeal, persecuting the church; touching the righteousness which is in the law, blameless.

7 But what things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ.

8 Yea doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ,

Paul calls all his religious acts dung when compared to a personal relationship with Jesus.

Luke 15

11 And he said, A certain man had two sons:

12 And the younger of them said to his father, Father, give me the portion of goods that falleth to me. And he divided unto them his living.

13 And not many days after the younger son gathered all together, and took his journey into a far country, and there wasted his substance with riotous living.

14 And when he had spent all, there arose a mighty famine in that land; and he began to be in want.

15 And he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country; and he sent him into his fields to feed swine.

16 And he would fain have filled his belly with the husks that the swine did eat: and no man gave unto him.

17 And when he came to himself, he said, How many hired servants of my father's have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger!

18 I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee,

19 And am no more worthy to be called thy son: make me as one of thy hired servants.

20 And he arose, and came to his father. But when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him.

21 And the son said unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in thy sight, and am no more worthy to be called thy son.

22 But the father said to his servants, Bring forth the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet:

23 And bring hither the fatted calf, and kill it; and let us eat, and be merry:

24 For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found. And they began to be merry.

25 Now his elder son was in the field: and as he came and drew nigh to the house, he heard musick and dancing.

26 And he called one of the servants, and asked what these things meant.

27 And he said unto him, Thy brother is come; and thy father hath killed the fatted calf, because he hath received him safe and sound.

28 And he was angry, and would not go in: therefore came his father out, and intreated him.

29 And he answering said to his father, Lo, these many years do I serve thee, neither transgressed I at any time thy commandment: and yet thou never gavest me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends:

30 But as soon as this thy son was come, which hath devoured thy living with harlots, thou hast killed for him the fatted calf.

31 And he said unto him, Son, thou art ever with me, and all that I have is thine.

32 It was meet that we should make merry, and be glad: for this thy brother was dead, and is alive again; and was lost, and is found.

The older brother can be us if we don't watch out. The father tells him, "**all that I have is thine**". That is where we are; everything is ours. We didn't have to work at it. It came because of our relationship with Jesus. If someone on death row gets saved he gets the same reward as me. Even though I have done more good deeds than the person on death row, I can never be upset because God has shown mercy to him. I should rejoice with God and the angels.

The older brother should have had the same response as the father-let's party. Instead of relying on the love of the father, he relied on his works to be in good relationship with his father. Because everything the father had was his, the son could have given a party for his friends and invited the father as the guest of honor.

James 1:26 If any man among you seem to be religious, and bridled not his tongue, but deceiveth his own heart, this man's religion is vain. 27 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.

In closing I want to reiterate, our religious acts are to help widows and orphans and keep ourselves unspotted by the world. Our religious rituals should build us up and motivate us to do service to the church or to evangelize the unsaved.