



VERY RELIGIOUS

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The world of religion without the Gospel of Jesus Christ is ruthlessly demanding. It imposes rules and rituals that cannot generate life or hope.

Instead...

- It increases guilt without a Savior (as a means of controlling others).
- It increases wounds without a Healer (by depersonalizing people).
- It increases bondage without a Deliverer (by magnifying the institution above the individual).
- It urges ideal behavior without regenerating the heart.

Religion may cover itself with colorful robes and ornate décor, but underneath are ordinary humans—broken and ashamed, lost and undone, despairing and afraid.

One common form of religion promotes expiation, cleansing, and forgiveness *in exchange* for deeds of self-denial, confession, restitution, righteousness, generosity, and kindness. Implied, if not expressed, is the suggestion that one's good deeds must outweigh in value and quantity one's bad deeds, known and unknown.

The sure result of that is unmitigated uncertainty of where you stand with God, hoping against hope that you will make it into the Kingdom of God.

Another common form of religion promotes dualistic hypocrisy—creating a virtual life, somewhat separated from real life—as the way to dismiss guilt and shame. In some measure, regardless of one's deeds—good or bad—such people claim right standing with God, based on His “unconditional promises” in the Bible, regardless of their lifestyle.

The result is a fractured soul—head and heart stand at odds; the outer life and inner life are out of sync. They talk the talk without walking the walk.

A third common form of religion establishes an elite in-group, with various ranks of followers, creating an insider-feel for some and an outsider-feel for others. It may be based on certain

special knowledge or material wealth or conformity to some defined standard of behavior. This feeds our natural craving for approval and competition for power, but leaves us empty of true love and friendship, as there's always a price of admission yet to be paid.

Apostle Paul found the people of Athens, Greece, to be *“very religious in all respects”* (Acts 17:22), yet they were pagans who worshiped many gods made in the image of humans and beasts. Religion cannot save you. Religion cannot get you into the Kingdom of God.

The world is full of such religions, some of them even calling themselves Christian.

Religious Mimicry

Jesus warned (Matthew 7:21): *“Not everyone who calls out to Me, ‘Lord! Lord!’ will enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Only those who actually do the will of My Father in heaven will enter.”*

Why would people mimic true religion? Because they perceive some advantage for themselves. Perhaps acceptance, perhaps safety, perhaps power—perhaps all three!

Even in the animal world, mimicry serves two general purposes: avoiding predators or luring prey.

Batesian mimicry, for example, is when a harmless organism looks like a dangerous one, to deter potential predators or competitors.

Some animals, like the Marine Betta, are just trying to be left alone. They have tiny white spots all over their dark bodies and one big black dot towards their tails called an eyespot. If a predator comes close, they can dart headfirst into a hole, leaving their tail end exposed. To a clueless predator, the tail looks suspiciously like the head of a Whitemouth Moray Eel, who they do *not* want to pick a fight with.

Other mimicry is nefarious. Aggressive mimicry takes a “wolf in sheep's clothing” approach, where an animal looks like prey or a harmless species in order to lure an unsuspecting victim.

The freshwater Alligator Snapping Turtles disguise themselves among the dead wood and mud at the bottom of rivers and lakes, wiggling a small growth on their tongue within its open mouth. This growth mimics the movement and appearance of a worm, while the turtle lies in wait until a fish takes the bait and becomes dinner.

The Anglerfish is characterized by the presence of a fleshy growth on the front of their heads. These growths act as fishing lures—similar to the alligator snapping turtle—and are used to attract prey towards their open mouths. Some anglerfish take this to the next level, with the

lures varying in shape from globular to looking like fleshy worms. Some lures even contain bioluminescent chemicals which make them shine in deeper water where sunlight cannot penetrate.

The Death's-head Hawkmoth is identifiable by the skull-like markings near its head. These insects do not use vision-based mimicry; instead, they mimic the *smell* of bees, allowing them to get close to hives without being stung. The moth intends no harm to the bees; instead, they hide among them to feed on the honey stored in the hive.

And these examples are analogous to human behaviors. There is nothing new under the sun.

Jesus taught us to *"beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves."* (Matthew 7:15). That is most clearly false religion. There are many who would turn following Jesus into a religion of form, without the divine power of an endless life. mimicking the true.

Another Way

We say that the Gospel of Jesus Christ presents a relationship, not a religion. It is God's own invitation into His Family, as He predicted through the prophet Jeremiah (Jeremiah 31:31-33): *"The day is coming," says the Lord, "when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and Judah. This covenant will not be like the one I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand and brought them out of the land of Egypt. They broke that covenant, though I loved them as a husband loves his wife," says the Lord.*

"But this is the new covenant I will make with the people of Israel after those days," says the Lord. "I will put my instructions deep within them, and I will write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people.

However, acknowledging that there is such a relationship and even talking about it may not make it so in your life.

I suppose we are all bound to one degree or another in a religious pursuit of God. In fact, the word "religious" often simply connotes habitual devotion, usually to God but not exclusively. The word has been adopted for more casual use, based on the example of unswerving *devotion to routines* employed by earnest practitioners of religion. So, you might brush your teeth *religiously* after every meal—that usually has nothing to do with God.

True religion is the practice of one's faith—one's relationship with the Father, the Son, and the Spirit worked out in everyday life—in your home, at your school or job, in your leisure time activities and hobbies. If your relationship with Jesus Christ doesn't effect how you function in every other relationship, then to that degree you are playing the hypocrite.

Religion cannot get you into the Kingdom of God, and yet without *true* religion you cannot remain in the Kingdom of God.

Paul urged the Philippians with these words (Philippians 2:12-13): “*So then, my beloved... work out your salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.*” “It is God who is at work in you.” He works it into you, and it is up to you to work it out—with reverent carefulness. True religion is the outworking of true faith in Jesus Christ.

True Religion

Paul wrote to Timothy concerning the sound teaching that was “*in accordance with true religion*”—what he called elsewhere (Titus 1:1) “*the truth that leads to true religion.*” This involved care for widows, respect for elders, and diligent service for employers (1 Timothy 6:3). He also warned him to avoid “*godless philosophical discussions,*” which corrupt faith (2 Timothy 2:16). He described for Titus what true religion looks like (Titus 2:12-13): “*to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age, looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus... zealous for good deeds.*”

James provided a definition of “genuine religion” (James 1:27): “*Pure and genuine religion in the sight of God the Father means caring for orphans and widows in their distress and refusing to let the world corrupt you.*”

Notice that he said *nothing* about church rituals or attire, because your religion is how you live *outside* of the church’s meetings.

Your relationship with Jesus may be real, but if it is not *compelling*, then He is not *Lord* of your life (you’re still calling the shots). We all know it is easier to *say* that you love Jesus and are loved by Him than to *live* by that principle.

Paul explained himself in this regard to the church in Corinth (2 Corinthians 5:13-15 AMP): “*If we are beside ourselves [mad, as some say], it is for God and concerns Him; if we are in our right mind, it is for your benefit, For the love of Christ controls and urges and impels us, because we are of the opinion and conviction that [if] One died for all, then all died; And He died for all, so that all those who live might live no longer to and for themselves, but to and for Him Who died and was raised again for their sake.*”

What a challenge to the modern mind—to live “*no longer to and for themselves*”! Definitely a counter-cultural approach. Even worldly religion is to and for oneself. When your deeds of kindness to others are the means of your own salvation, it cannot be said that you are living “*no longer to and for [yourself].*”

Karl Marx said that religion is “the opiate of the masses,” disconnecting people from the here and now and dulling their motivation for improving the world. It certainly can be, if it’s not truly Jesus-centered.

On the other hand, Jesus Christ is here, now. The Kingdom of Heaven is here, now. In contrast to “disconnecting people,” Jesus is reconnecting us to the Father, to each other, and to the creation He has made for us. Instead of “dulling our motivation” He is firing us up to “serve the Lord with gladness” and to serve one another diligently.

Apostle Paul set this before us as a clear goal (Galatians 5:13-14):

“You were called to freedom, brethren; only do not turn your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. For the whole Law is fulfilled in one word, in the statement, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’”

The Gospel message is about receiving the resurrection life of Jesus, so we will no longer worry about failing or losing or dying. We won’t be reluctant or afraid to give ourselves away.

Jesus said (John 11:25-26), *“I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me will live even if he dies, and everyone who lives and believes in Me will never die. Do you believe this?”* This news changes everything!

Mere religion changes nothing.

The New Way

“John’s disciples came to Jesus and asked, ‘Why do we and the Pharisees fast often, but your disciples don’t fast?’” (Luke 5:33). John’s disciples were sincere men. They believed the Law and the Prophets. They had been baptized for repentance. They were students of religion. They had religious hope. But they were not followers of Jesus.

They fasted... often.

I suppose they also prayed... often.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught (Matthew 6:1-6):

“Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them; otherwise you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven.

“So when you give to the poor, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be honored by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. But when you give to the poor, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving will be in secret; and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.

(You see, some Pharisees made arrangements to be accompanied by servants who would blow a horn at the appropriate moment, just before their master handed a coin to a needy soul, so passersby would turn to see why the trumpet sounded, just in time to notice the “generosity” of the almsgiver. This is where we get the expression, “tooting their own horns.”)

“When you pray, you are not to be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners so that they may be seen by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. But you, when you pray, go into your inner room, close your door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.”

(Some would rise to their feet to draw attention to themselves as they prayed, or station themselves at a busy street corner to perform their ritual publicly.)

Even if you don’t do such things to be seen by others, beware if you feel comforted or proud of yourself for fasting (or any other religious discipline—Bible reading, prayer, expressive worship, telling others about Jesus). Such feelings should be regarded as warning signals, not consolations.

In our day, there are people who love to make a show of religion. Of such, Paul warned Timothy (2 Timothy 3:1-5 MSG):

“Don’t be naive. There are difficult times ahead. As the end approaches, people are going to be self-absorbed, money-hungry, self-promoting, stuck-up, profane, contemptuous of parents, crude, coarse, dog-eat-dog, unbending, slanderers, impulsively wild, savage, cynical, treacherous, ruthless, bloated windbags, addicted to lust, and allergic to God. They’ll make a show of religion, but behind the scenes they’re animals. Stay clear of these people.”

True religion is not what the world demonstrates. Real Christianity is a sub-culture in every nation and every generation. It is the Jesus culture. What looks most like religion, seldom is.

For instance, even in local churches, when people (even church leaders) scoff contemptuously at those they consider “other than” or “less than” themselves, or treat some people preferentially because it may be to their advantage to do so—that is not true religion.

Colossians 2:16 So don’t let anyone condemn you for what you eat or drink, or for not celebrating certain holy days or new moon ceremonies or Sabbaths. ¹⁷ For these rules are only shadows of the reality yet to come. And Christ Himself is that reality. ¹⁸ Don’t let anyone condemn you by insisting on pious self-denial or the worship of angels, saying they have had visions about these things. Their sinful minds have made them proud, ¹⁹ and they are not connected to Christ, the head of the body. For He holds the whole body together with its joints and ligaments, and it grows as God nourishes it.

²⁰ *You have died with Christ, and He has set you free from the spiritual powers of this world. So why do you keep on following the rules of the world, such as,* ²¹ *“Don’t handle! Don’t taste! Don’t touch!”?* ²² *Such rules are mere human teachings about things that deteriorate as we use them.* ²³ *These rules may seem wise because they require strong devotion, pious self-denial, and severe bodily discipline. But they provide no help in conquering a person’s evil desires.*

Again, we return to James for a succinct definition of true Christ-centered religion (James 1:27):

“Pure and genuine religion in the sight of God the Father means caring for orphans and widows in their distress and refusing to let the world corrupt you.”

And again, he said nothing here about austere living or self-affliction as a demonstration of piety.

Paul affirmed (1 Corinthians 13:31): *“Three things will last forever—faith, hope, and love—and the greatest of these is love.”* These three things are the essentials of true religion—faith in Jesus, hope in Christ, and the love of God in action. Therefore, let these serve as the guidelines of your religion. Let them act as guardrails for your life.

As you are going, focus on this: generous forgiveness (in the short term) and selfless love (in the long term).

In Matthew 6:14-15, Jesus said, *“If you forgive those who sin against you, your heavenly Father will forgive you. But if you refuse to forgive others, your Father will not forgive your sins.”*

In an unexpected and dangerous storm on the lake, Jesus arose from sleep and rebuked the wind and the waves and a sudden calm settled upon them. Astonished, his disciples asked each other, *“What KIND of man is this?”* (Matthew 8:27).

Matthew then began to unpack the answer to their question. Jesus exhibited authority to expel demons, setting oppressed people free (Matthew 8:28-34). Then He demonstrated authority to expel guilt and bondage, forgiving individuals their sins and healing their cursed bodies (Matthew 9:1-8). At the end of this passage, Matthew noted this about the crowd’s reaction: *“Fear swept through the crowd as they saw this happen. And they praised God for giving humans such authority”* (Matthew 9:8).

“For giving HUMANS such authority.” This authority was not remarkable because Jesus was the Son of God, but because He was a Son *of Man*. He was one of us. If you doubt what I am saying, consider this, among the final words of Christ to His disciples after His resurrection (John 20:21-23): *“Jesus said to them again, ‘Peace be with you; as the Father has sent Me, I also send you.’ And when He had said this, He breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the*

Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, their sins have been forgiven them; if you retain (refuse to forgive, as in Matthew 6:15) the sins of any, they have been retained.”

Why has God given you the Holy Spirit? To share with you His everlasting life *and* to give to you authority to carry on *“all that Jesus began both to do and to teach”* (Acts 1:1).

In this chaotic and dangerous world, typical emotional responses range from *fight* to *flight* to *freeze*. But by the power of the Holy Spirit, we can be free from the control of *anger* or *avoidance* or going *arctic*—instead, we can act in *agape* (God’s love). This is the New Way.

The Holy Spirit is in you to give you, in Jesus’ name, authority to actually forgive people their sins and set them free. This is our authority. This is our charge. This is our mission. This is our warfare.

Will you accept the call of true religion?

Will you lay down your self-righteous impulses?

Will you live for the honor of Jesus’ name, instead of your own?

Will you take up the mantle of grace and mercy? (*“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.”* Matthew 5:7)

This is true religion. Make it yours today.