

7. Religious, but lost

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According to the dictionary, here is a definition of 'religion':

"a set of beliefs concerning the cause, nature, and purpose of the universe, etc. when considered as the creation of a superhuman agency or agencies, usually involving devotional and ritual observances, and often containing a moral code governing the conduct of human affairs."

There are billions of people around the world who are very religious. Going through their religious rituals and claiming that being religious makes them feel close to their gods.

The recent visit of Pope Benedictus to America stirred up a great religious hype within the catholic community as well as others in the United States. I also remember when Dalai Lama was in Tucson sometime ago, that made Buddhists go to chanting.

The world is filled with religions – every shape and form – to fit just about everyone's interest. By nature, men have an undeniable religious impulse, and they also have an undeniable rebellion against God. What men want most is not the elimination of religion, but their own religion without the one true God of the Bible.

You may say, "Hold on, partner, isn't Christianity a religion?" The majority of people call it a religion, but it is not. Christianity is a lifestyle of regeneration through Jesus Christ who is God Himself.

Religion is made by human to approach God. It makes human be prideful for one's own accomplishment through one's religion. Humans want a religion in one's own terms to appease one's own spirituality. However, it has one draw back. It still leaves emptiness in one's heart no matter what humans do.

The first idolatry started in the Garden of Eden when Adam and Eve decided that they wanted to be like God. From their sinful heritage, their first son Cain brought his own style and term of worship to God.

Genesis 4:3-5 And in the process of time it came to pass that Cain brought an offering of the fruit of the ground to the Lord. 4 Abel also brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat. And the Lord respected Abel and his offering, 5 but He did not respect Cain and his offering. And Cain was very angry, and his countenance fell.

Cain chose to serve God the way he wanted, not the way it should be done like Able. What Cain did is such a typical way of human. When God rejects our way of worship or the way we approach Him because they are wrong, rather than seeking the Lord's way, we tend to get mad at Him.

I hope and pray that we learn not to be religious, but be obedient to our Lord Jesus.

A. A WRONG ASSESSMENT OF THEMSELVES

Romans 2:17-20 Indeed you are called a Jew, and rest on the law, and make your boast in God, 18 and know His will, and approve the things that are excellent, being instructed out of the law, 19 and are confident that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, 20 an

instructor of the foolish, a teacher of babes, having the form of knowledge and truth in the law.

The Jewish people of Paul's day were extremely proud and confident in the fact that God gave His holy law to them as a nation and they were chosen people of God by which they thought that they were secured for their salvation.

But the question is, "Does the possession of such privileges and advantages guarantee a righteous life? Is having the law the same as living the law?" No. Greater knowledge brings greater accountability to act on that knowledge and much responsibilities to others:

1. a guide to the spiritually blind
2. a light to those who are in spiritual darkness
3. an instructor of the spiritually foolish
4. a teacher of spiritual babes

I remember an incident at a funeral that I was conducting for a friend of mine. His late wife was a catholic born-again believer. During my short teaching, I mentioned that the deceased is in heaven because of her relationship with Jesus Christ. Out of blue, her sister yelled at me, "She is a catholic." To that sister, her religion was more important than knowing God through His Son Jesus personally. I felt sorry for her religious blindness.

B. THE RIGHT ASSESSMENT BY GOD

Romans 2:21-24 You, therefore, who teach another, do you not teach yourself? You who preach that a man should not steal, do you steal? 22 You who say, "Do not commit adultery," do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? 23 You who make your boast in the law, do you dishonor God through breaking the law? 24 For "the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you," as it is written.

By listening to what Paul just said I am sure that any self-righteous Jew would have thought, "A way to go, Paul, that's us, the Jews. We are the chosen people by God to go to heaven, because we are special." But all of a sudden, Paul throws them a horrendous curve at this time.

According to Paul's accusations against the Jews, even though they possessed and taught the law, they were breaking the very law.

In pointing out their sins, Paul focuses particularly on three violations of the law: stealing, adultery and idolatry.

1) Stealing

The Jewish religious leaders at Paul's time thought that they were special in God's eyes because of the possession of the law and teaching it. Yet they were breaking it by being full of robbery and self-indulgence. A good example of that was the market place in the temple. They had turned the temple into a profit-making enterprise for their own selfish greed. Jesus called them thieves and robbers for leading the people, God's sheep, away from the true Shepherd.

You may say, "We don't have that kind of people anymore." Oh really? What about those so-called TV evangelists, such as Benny Hinn, Creflo Dollar, Rodney Howard-Browne, Paula And Randy White, Fred Price and Robert Tilton.

According to the Los Angeles Times July 27, 2003, "Hinn's salary is somewhere between half a million and a million dollars per year. He also gets royalties from the sales of his books; Personal perks for Hinn, family and his entourage include a \$10 million ocean front mansion; a private jet with annual operating costs of about \$1.5 million; a Mercedes SUV and convertible, each valued at about \$80,000.

His "layovers" between crusades included hotel bills ranging from \$900 per night to royal suites that cost almost \$3,000 for one night's stay. Layover locations included Hawaii, Cancun, London, Milan and other exotic locations.

Beverly Hills shopping sprees – Receipts showing Hinn's daughter receiving \$1,300 in petty cash; her boyfriend getting \$2,550 for babysitting; \$23,000 in cash dispersed to Hinn and his wife; and, \$25,000 in cash for expenses for a crusade – 30 minutes away from Hinn's home"

If you are thinking, "You cannot talk against God's anointed like that." Do you still think Benny Hinn is in ministry for service to God or for money? He is NOT God's anointed, period.

1 Timothy 6:3-5 If anyone teaches otherwise and does not consent to wholesome words, even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which accords with godliness, 4 he is proud, knowing nothing, but is obsessed with disputes and arguments over words, from which come envy, strife, reviling, evil suspicions, 5 useless wranglings of men of corrupt minds and destitute of the truth, who suppose that godliness is a means of gain. From such withdraw yourself.

Again, you may say, "I am not one of those TV evangelists, so this doesn't apply to me." Think again. Non-believers at your job will not watch TV evangelist programs, but they work with you and watch you everyday. Do they know what you do is honest and clear? I hope so.

2) Adultery

Jesus clearly pointed out that adultery wasn't limited to just carrying out the act. Lust in the heart constituted adultery as well according to Him. The scribes and Pharisees, whose unrighteousness Jesus clearly had in mind when He was teaching on this subject, would have been guilty of this sin right along with everyone else.

Matthew 5:27-28 "You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not commit adultery.' 28 But I say to you that whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

Do you lust after someone who is not your spouse? You single people, do you have sex before marriage as if it is nothing wrong? You married people, do you have illicit sexual relationship with someone outside of your marriage? Stop it in the name of Jesus. "But I love that person," you may say. If that person is not your spouse, it is nothing more than lust and it is a sin against your Savior Jesus.

Hebrews 13:4 Marriage is honorable among all, and the bed undefiled; but fornicators and adulterers God will judge.

3) Idolatry

Though the Jews did bow down to idols under the wicked kings of Israel and Judah previously, idolatry as an organized practice for the Jews was nonexistent in New Testament times. However, the Jews had made an idol out of the money that meant for Jewish temple worship by hoarding it for themselves.

As I have said before several times, we may not have physical idols in our lives, we can still commit idolatry by replacing God with something else in our hearts.

Whenever we sin against God, like apostle Paul warned the believers in Rome, we are giving chances to non-believers to have opportunities to blaspheme Him.

To me, that is my biggest fear – giving the enemies of God to blaspheme His precious name because of my stupidity. God willing, it may never come to that.

C. THE CIRCUMCISION IN OUR HEARTS

Romans 2:25-29 For circumcision is indeed profitable if you keep the law; but if you are a breaker of the law, your circumcision has become uncircumcision. 26 Therefore, if an uncircumcised man keeps the righteous requirements of the law, will not his uncircumcision be counted as circumcision? 27 And will not the physically uncircumcised, if he fulfills the law, judge you who, even with your written code and circumcision, are a transgressor of the law? 28 For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh; 29 but he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the Spirit, not in the letter; whose praise is not from men but from God.

Another reason why the Jews thought they have God's guarantee of salvation is circumcision. But in truth, circumcision or baptism – or any ritual in itself for that matter doesn't save anyone. Though circumcision was a sign of God's covenant relationship with Israel, it was a symbol of faith. And that faith must be present for salvation.

A person can be circumcised physically and still lost, or be uncircumcised physically and be saved. It is circumcision of the heart – a new heart created by the Holy Spirit – that brings eternal life, not physical circumcision. And true salvation brings glory to God, not to human effort.

In our modern day in the United States, we may not make a big issue about physical circumcision as an evidence of individual salvation. But people tend to replace it with other Christian aspects as the 'mandatory requirements' for salvation. Here are a few examples:

- Baptism
- Communion
- Scripture memorization
- Participation in high-profile evangelism rallies
- Political activism
- Tithing
- Lists of "dos and don'ts"
- Christian "lingo"
- Attending a particular denominational church
- Speaking in tongue

Many American people go to church three times in their lives: when they are hatched; when they are matched; when they are dispatched. The first time they throw water, the second time they throw rice; and the third time they throw dirt.

Not all of these things, in and of themselves, are necessarily bad. Some of them, in fact, are vital to the life and ministry of the church. But can any of them save an individual? Can any of them take the place of faith in Christ's life, death and resurrection? No, they can't.

All the outward signs of religion may earn us praise from men, but they will not earn us praise from God. The evidence of our rightness with God is not contained in outward signs or works. The evidence is found in the work of God in our hearts, which shows itself in fruit.

D. APPLICATION

Religion gives false sense of security to anyone who pursues it. What we really need is a close relationship with Jesus which we must cultivate with daily devotion and total obedience to His command.

John 15:10-11 If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love, just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love. 11 These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may remain in you, and that your joy may be full.