

Belief in Christ or Religion

Religion can be dangerous. Look at what happened on Sept 11, all in the name of religion. Long before Waco and Jonestown, spiritual fervor has created a battleground where some have been saved and others have been lost. Believing in Christ and following His teachings can be looked at as a belief and not necessarily a religion. Back in Jesus' day there were many religions, but none included belief in Jesus. In fact they were anti-Jesus.

The danger of being religious can be seen as early as our first parents. Adam and Eve's fatal mistake occurred in an attempt to be more like God. Their error was not that they stopped believing in God, but that they began believing in a way that had been forbidden.

Their first son also tried to trust God on his own terms. The Lord rejected Cain's bloodless sacrifice but honored the sacrificial lamb offered up by his younger brother. Burning with anger, Cain became so jealous that he killed Abel and ruined his own life in the process.

The people of Israel also got in trouble for trying to serve and worship God on their own terms. On the threshold of the Promised Land, some Jewish men accepted an invitation from the local women to be guests at a pagan religious event. Within hours, thousands of Jewish people had died (Num. 25).

Saul, the first king of Israel, was no different. He lost his kingdom by making religious errors. When Samuel the priest didn't show up in time to offer a pre-battle sacrifice, Saul thought it was necessary to offer the sacrifice himself. He was wrong (1 Sam. 13:8-14; see also chapter 15).

Even David got in trouble for being religious. After being confirmed as King of Israel, he called for the sacred chest that contained the Ten Commandments of God. With enthusiasm, he led all Israel in a procession to bring the holy object to Jerusalem. Yet when the oxen bearing the ark of the covenant stumbled, and when a priest named Uzza put out his hand to make sure that the ark did not fall, God struck the priest dead. David reacted with fear and anger. How could he live with such a God? Only after rereading the Law of God did David realize he had done the right thing in the wrong way (1 Chron. 13; 15:12-15).

Why does God make an issue of what we believe and how we serve and worship Him? Because He is looking for those who will worship Him in spirit and in truth (John 4:23-24), not ritualistically and ignorantly. God wants to be worshiped from a heart that is responding to the truth about His love and grace.

It may sound complex, but it isn't. All God really wants is for us to know and love His Son. Good religion will follow (James. 1:26-27).

Christ Is Someone To Know And Trust

Christ is more than a system, tradition, or belief. He is a Person who knows our needs, feels our pain, and sympathizes with our weakness. In exchange for our trust, He offers to forgive our sins, to intercede for us, and to bring us to His Father. He cried for us, died for us, and rose from the dead to show that He was all He claimed to be. Conquering death, He showed us that He can save us from our sins, live His life through us on earth, and then bring us safely to heaven. He offers Himself as a gift to anyone who will trust Him (John 20:24-31).

Religion Is Something To Believe And Do

Religion is believing in God, attending religious services, taking catechism, being baptized, and receiving communion. Religion is tradition, ritual, ceremony, and learning the difference between right and wrong. Religion is reading and memorizing Scripture, offering prayers, giving to the poor, and celebrating religious holy days. Religion is singing in the choir, helping the poor, and making amends for past wrongs. Religion is something that was practiced by the Pharisees, those Scripture-loving, conservative, separatistic, spiritual leaders who hated Christ enough to call for His death. They hated Him not only because He broke their traditions in order to help people (Matthew 15:1-9) but because He saw through their religion to their hearts.

Religion Doesn't Change Hearts

Jesus likened the religious Pharisees to a group of dishwashers who clean the outside of a cup while leaving the inside dirty. He said, "Now you Pharisees make the outside of the cup and dish clean, but your inward part is full of greed and wickedness. Foolish ones! Did not He who made the outside make the inside also?" (Luke 11:39-40). Jesus knew that a person can change his image without changing his act (Matthew 23:1-3). He knew that religious credentials and ceremony cannot change the heart. He told one of the most religious men of His day that unless a person is "born again" by the Spirit, he cannot see the kingdom of God (John 3:3). Yet from that day until now, many of the most religious people in the world continue to forget that while religion can give attention to outward appearance, only Christ can change the heart.

Religion Makes Much Of Little

Jesus spoke to religionists who had a passion for detail when He said, "Woe to you Pharisees, because you give God a tenth of your mint, rue, and all other kinds of garden herbs, but you neglect justice and the love of God. You should have practiced the latter without leaving the former undone" (Luke 11:42). Jesus saw our tendency to make rules and to focus on "morally correct" behavior instead of keeping our eyes on the bigger issue of why we are trying to be so right. While the Pharisees were big on knowledge carried out to its logical conclusions, they forgot that God doesn't care how much we know until He knows how much we care. It was this greater "why" that the apostle Paul had in mind when he wrote, "If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. . . . If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing" (1 Corinthians 13:1,3).

Religion Offers The Approval Of Men Rather Than God

Jesus reserved His strongest criticism for religious people who used their spiritual reputation to get social attention and honors. To such religionists Jesus said, "Woe to you Pharisees! For you love the best seats in the synagogues and greetings in the marketplaces" (Luke 11:43). Then, speaking to His disciples, He said of the Pharisees, "All their works they do to be seen by men" (Matthew 23:5). Jesus saw clearly into the practice of religion, which holds the opinions and attention of man to be more important and desirable than the approval of God.

Religion Makes Hypocrites Of Us

Jesus said, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like graves which are not seen, and the men who walk over them are not aware of them" (Luke 11:44). What looks better than being dressed right, attending religious services, and doing things that mark us as decent, God-fearing people? Yet how many religious scholars, ministers, and faithful followers withhold honor and encouragement from their wives, attention from their children, and love from their doctrinal enemies? Jesus knew what we often forget: What looks good may have a heart of evil.

Religion Makes A Hard Life Harder

Because religion cannot change a heart, it tries to control people with laws and expectations that are not even kept by the religionists who interpret and apply the rules. With this "burden factor" in mind, Jesus said, "Woe to you also, lawyers [experts in religious law]! For you load men with burdens hard to bear, and you yourselves do not touch the burdens with one of your fingers" (Luke 11:46). Religion is good at describing high standards of right behavior and relationships, but poor at giving real and merciful help to those who realize they have not lived up to those expectations.

Religion Makes It Easy To Deceive Ourselves

It's been jokingly said, "I love humanity. It's people I can't stand." The Pharisees acted out a similar idea, but it wasn't funny. According to Jesus, the Pharisees prided themselves in honoring and building memorials to the prophets. The irony is that when they met a real prophet they wanted to kill Him. Barclay says, "The only prophets they admired were dead prophets; when they met a living one, they tried to kill Him. They honored the dead prophets with tombs and memorials, but they dishonored the living ones with persecution and death." This is the point Jesus made in Luke 11:47-51 and in a parallel passage in Matthew 23:29-32. The Pharisees had fooled themselves. They didn't think of themselves as prophet-killers. Religionists don't see themselves as the God-rejecting people they are.

Religion Hides The Key Of Knowledge

One of the greatest dangers of religion is that it causes us to be a danger not only to ourselves but also to others. To the very religious biblical experts of His day Jesus said, "Woe to you lawyers! For you have taken away the key of knowledge. You did not enter in yourselves, and those who were entering in you hindered" (Luke 11:52). Religionists take away "the key of knowledge" by distracting people from the Word of God and from a "right attention of heart" by the unnecessary additions of denominationally correct traditions and expectations. Rather than leading people to God, religionists shift the focus to themselves and their own rules. Religionists are those who trust the beliefs and actions of their religion to do what only Christ can do.

Religion Leads Its Converts Astray

In Matthew 23:15 Jesus said, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel land and sea to win one proselyte, and when he is won, you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves." Converts of religion are in double jeopardy. They bring a double enthusiasm to their new way of life, and with zeal they blindly defend their blind teachers. They put themselves in the trust of people who have exchanged a system of rules and traditions for the life, forgiveness, and relationship of an infinite Savior. Religion is important in its place (James 1:26-27), but only when it points us to the Christ who died for our sins and who now offers to live His life through those who trust Him (Galatians 2:20; Titus 3:5).