

The Problem of Self-Righteous Religion

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Our society has become increasingly critical of religion. When people think of religion, they think of dark, powerful institutions. They think of the Catholic church buying the silence of abused children. They think of televangelists scamming millions of dollars from the simple-minded. They think of conspirators to cover up sexual scandals among church leaders. What can be said in defense of religion like this? Nothing.

Sadly, religion has been abused for thousands of years. Its corruption has frequently been the reason people have turned away from God. We do not need to look any further than the Bible to see how religion can be distorted. Israel corrupted their religious practices to their detriment. Their abuse caused the pagans to blaspheme the Creator.

In Jesus' day, the corruption of religion was rampant. The Pharisees used religion as an instrument of self-promotion. Jesus rebuked how they had corrupted the practices of charity, prayer, and fasting. Of course, there was nothing inherently wrong with these activities. The problem was how the Pharisees were using these actions. They did not seek to exalt God through their religious observances. The Pharisees used religion to exalt themselves. Jesus condemned their abuse (Matt. 6:1-18).

Religion can become the vehicle through which all manner of evil is perpetrated. This is not a reflection of religion itself, but a reflection of the hearts of those who pervert it. When religion is distorted, religion serves the purposes of man, not God. Our hearts must be analyzed by the scriptures for the sake of properly engaging religiously to the glory of God.

For example, James is the only author in the New Testament that wrote about the practice of religion. He wrote, "If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world (Jas. 1:26-27). Notice three points James makes about pure religion.

- 1. Religion can be defiled or pure.**
- 2. Religion can become worthless.**
- 3. The heart makes the difference.**

The condition of our hearts will be reflected in the religion we practice and promote. If our hearts are selfish, our religion will be self-righteous. In this article, we will consider the critical difference between self-righteous religion and pure religion.

The Difference Between Self-righteous Religion and Pure Religion

1. Self-righteous religion is a mechanism of self-promotion; whereas, pure religion humbles us before God. Jesus once told a parable about a contemptuous, self-righteous Pharisee and a humble tax collector. The Pharisee used religion to deceive his heart. He thought he was better than other people. On the other hand, the tax collector, who was considered a social outcast and traitor, was humble. He acknowledged his sin and begged God to be merciful (Luke 18:9-14).

Both of these men practiced the same religion. Yet, Jesus stated only one of the men was justified: the humble tax collector. The Jewish religion was intended to instill humility. No people on earth should have known more about God's grace than Israel. Yet, for some, they used religion as a means of self-promotion. The same problem persists today.

Pure religion humbles us before God. No people on earth should know more about God's grace than Christians. Yet, for some, they use Christianity as a means of self-promotion. Everything we are or hope to become is owed to God. Without Him, we are nothing. He empowers. He sustains. He saves. Our only boast is in Him.

2. Self-righteous religion is a mechanism for self-justification; whereas, pure religion is merciful. A lawyer once asked Jesus what he needed to do to inherit eternal life. Jesus answered with a question: what was written in the law. The lawyer rightly answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself (Luke 10:27).

Then, the lawyer asked Jesus, "Who is my neighbor?" (Luke 10:29). He asked this question in an attempt to justify himself. He was trying to get Jesus to declare him to be in a favorable condition before God. After all, he was a dedicated practitioner of the Jewish religion. Jesus responded to the man's self-righteous question by teaching the Parable of the Good Samaritan. This parable exposed the man's merciless treatment of his neighbor. His attempt at self-justification had proven ineffective before Jesus.

We cannot justify ourselves to God. Being religious is not enough to be justified. Justification is an act of God's mercy. His mercy comes from His grace (Rom. 3:21-25). God has treated us in ways we do not deserve. By faith, God has declared us to be in the right when we deserve death. Thankfully, as James wrote, mercy triumphs over judgment (Jas. 2:13). Therefore, God's mercy towards us must affect how we treat our neighbors. Pure religion produces merciful practitioners.

3. Self-righteous religion is a mechanism for pride; whereas, pure religion fosters self-giving love. James does not use the description "pure religion" without qualification. He gave an example of the practice of pure religion. Pure religion is demonstrated by visiting widows and orphans in their affliction and living a moral life. Note the importance of practicing pure religion by visiting widows and orphans.

When we are inflated with pride and motivated by self-promotion, we will ignore widows, orphans, and everyone else we appraise less than ourselves. If this happens, the only thing that is worthless is our religion. Pure religion is practiced through self-giving love. Pure religion is about sacrifice and service. Pure religion is about helping people who cannot repay for the service rendered. This is precisely how Jesus acted towards us. He selflessly served salvation to people who cannot repay His service. Therefore, pure religion is about Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

What kind of religion are we practicing? Is our religion a mechanism to strengthen pride, or is our religion cultivating humility? Is our religion an exercise in self-exaltation, or is our religion reflecting the glory of God? Is our religion seeking to give us an advantage, or is our religion shaping us into people focused on serving the weak? Only by a careful examination of our hearts can these crucial questions be answered.