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RELIGION OR CHRIST: What's The Difference?

Is there a distinction worth making? Or is it only a matter of terms? Should we be encouraged that one opinion poll found that 85 percent of Americans consider themselves somewhat or very religious? Should we take a second look, in light of the fact that in Jesus' day He was hated by conservative religionists?

This booklet is written with the conviction that there is a fundamental difference between Christ and religion, and that a study of the Pharisees of Christ's day can give us insight not only into this difference but also into ourselves.

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THE DANGER OF BEING RELIGIOUS

From the beginning, religion has been dangerous. Long before the Japanese nerve-gas cult Aum Shinrikyo, people of faith have been killing one another in the name of God. Long before Waco and Jonestown, spiritual fervor has created a battleground where some have been saved and others have been lost.

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.

*Our worst errors
are always
religious ones.*

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 Chr. 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 (Jn. 4:23-24), not ritualistically and

***Danger
follows those
who trust God
on their
own terms.***

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 (Jas. 1:26-27).

WHAT'S THE REAL DIFFERENCE?

Religion and Christ are not mutually exclusive, but they are very distinct. James, a New Testament writer and brother of Christ, wrote, “Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world” (Jas. 1:27). Religion can be many good things, but it cannot be a substitute for Christ.

Religion Is Something To Believe And Do:

- Attending religious services
- Enrolling children in religious schools
- Showing acts of kindness
- Avoiding immorality
- Believing in God
- Having religious affiliation
- Being baptized
- Receiving communion
- Studying doctrine

*Religion is
something
to believe and do.*

- Reading the Scriptures
- Offering prayers
- Celebrating religious events
- Teaching religious classes
- Giving aid to the poor
- Singing in the choir
- Being recognized as a godly person

Christ Is Someone To Know And Trust:

- Someone who is very near
 - Someone who has authority to help us
 - Someone who can forgive us
 - Someone who can declare us righteous
 - Someone who can set us apart for God
 - Someone who can bring God to us
 - Someone who can bring us to God
 - Someone who can include us in His will
 - Someone who can guide and teach us
 - Someone who can be our example
 - Someone who never leaves us all alone
 - Someone who can be trusted
 - Someone who can defend us
 - Someone who can intercede for us
 - Someone who can enable us
- Someone who can respond to our emotions
 - Someone who can feel our pain
 - Someone who can give us joy

*Christ is
Someone
to know and trust.*

- Someone who can give us peace
- Someone who can give us hope
- Someone who can give us love
- Someone who has proven His love for us
- Someone who has died for us
- Someone who rose from the dead for us
- Someone who can live His life through us
- Someone who can take us all the way Home
- Someone who can assure us of heaven

WHAT WAS RELIGION LIKE IN CHRIST'S DAY?

Jesus knew the dangers of religion. He was hated by some of the most religious people in Jerusalem. While the sinners and outcasts of society were attracted to Him, the religionists of His day—the Pharisees, scribes, Sadducees, and priests—were with few exceptions His bitter enemies.

Jesus did not flatter these religious leaders. He didn't leave room for the notion that they were godly men who had just made a mistake about Him. He said that if

they had known His Father, they would have known Him. To their face, He called them hypocrites and blind leaders of the blind.

This isn't the storyline many of us might expect. We might expect Jesus' enemies to surface among the atheists, secular thinkers, and criminal elements of society. That

PHARISEES—A Jewish religious group that attempted to keep Israel free of Gentile contamination by vigorously adhering to the Scriptures and to a large body of oral tradition that applied the Law of God to the details of daily life.

SCRIBES—Experts in biblical law (also called lawyers) who were often found among the Pharisees. The Pharisees depended on the scribes for a right interpretation of Scripture.

SADDUCEES—An upper-class Jewish religious group that rejected the oral tradition of the Pharisees and insisted on a rigid interpretation and adherence to the Mosaic Law.

PRIESTS—Descendants of Aaron who inherited the responsibility of attending to the ritual of the Temple in Jerusalem. They were often associated with the Sadducees.

wasn't the case. Street people were attracted to Him. Sinners were among His friends. Even Pilate, the pagan Roman governor of Judea, was inclined to give Jesus more consideration

and benefit of the doubt. The religious Sadducees and Pharisees of Jerusalem,

however, were always trying to discredit Jesus. They had no use for Him, and they were convinced that the world would be a better place without Him.

A Closer Look At The Pharisees. They were not all bad. Respected as some of the most godly and spiritually committed of the Jews, they were:

- **Theists**, who because of their belief in the God of Israel, advocated a God-centered life.
- **Separatists**, who were determined to protect Israel from being compromised, swallowed, and absorbed into a Gentile world.
- **Biblicists**, who believed that Israel's future depended on whether or not they honored and practiced the Law of God.
- **Populists**, many of whom were craftsmen and tradesmen, therefore

identifying with the common man.

- **Pragmatists**, who wrestled not only with what the Law said but how it looked and applied to the smallest details of life.
- **Traditionalists**, who carefully memorized, repeated, and entrenched themselves in the ways of their spiritual forefathers.

The Pharisees, however, took some wrong turns in their attempt to make the Law of God relevant and practical to Israel. As they made an effort to show what the Word of God “looked like” in daily life, their concrete applications became an end in themselves. Before long, they were lost in specifics and, according to Jesus, were “teaching as doctrines the commandments of men” (Mt. 15:9). They focused on the details and lost the heart.

WHY WAS CHRIST A THREAT TO RELIGION?

Religionists saw Jesus as dangerous. He caused a commotion that threatened to destabilize the delicate religious and political balance of power in Israel. He had a reputation for doing unexplainable things. He taught with an air of authority and shifted attention from external matters of religion to internal attitudes of the heart. He taught that God is not looking for people who are doing well in their religion, but is looking for:

- *The poor in spirit*, who recognize their dependence on God in every area of life.
- *Those who mourn*, grieving the nature and results of sin in

themselves or in others.

- *The meek*, who are willing to live under the authority of God.
- *Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness*, accepting the rightness that comes from God.
- *Those who are merciful*, giving undeserved relief to others in the face of misery.
- *The pure in heart*, who are clean on the inside.
- *The peacemakers*, who are working to reconcile people to their God and to each other (Mt. 5:1-9).

Christ was receptive to broken hearts rather than proud religion. He was a threat to religionists because anyone who accepted Him would never need the religion of the Pharisees. While the Pharisees were good at detailing obedience to the Law, Jesus taught that God would forgive the worst sinner. Years later, an

apostle of Christ and former Pharisee named Paul argued that religious laws never had, never would, and never could save anyone from sin. In several New Testament letters, Paul reasoned that the Law was given to show us our need of a Savior who is superior to religion in every way possible.

Christ is superior to religion in any direction you look:

- **Back**—He is the Creator and eternal Word who was not only with God from the beginning, but who actually is God (Jn. 1:1-3).
- **Ahead**—He is our coming King and Judge who will one day rule the earth and judge every heart (Acts 1:6-11; Rom. 14:7-12).
- **Up**—He is our Savior and Lord who alone can reach down and save us while at the same time provide a lordship that

is loving and wise (Jn. 3:13-16; Phil. 2:9-11).

- **Down**—He holds us in His own hands as our Provider and Sustainer (Col. 1:16).
 - **Right**—As we turn to the “right” to see what is morally correct, He becomes our Teacher and Example (1 Pet. 2:21; 1 Jn. 2:6).
 - **Left**—As we turn away from what is “right,” and therefore to what is wrong, He becomes our Intercessor and Advocate (1 Jn. 2:1-2).
 - **Within**—He is our Life, our Peace, and our Strength (Gal. 2:20; Col. 1:27).
- This is the all-

encompassing Person the Pharisees missed. How did they miss Him? How could they wait with all Israel for the coming Messiah, only to want to kill Him when He came? Let’s take a closer look at what Jesus Himself said.

WHAT WERE THE MISTAKES OF THE PHARISEES?

In Luke 11, Jesus confronted the Pharisees with several deficiencies of their religion. Let's see what their faults tell us not only about the Pharisees but also about ourselves.

THEY SETTLED FOR LOOKING GOOD



A major chemical company recently ran a series of image-changing advertisements designed to

convince the public that it was concerned about the environment. The television evening news carried the story of a group of protesters who weren't convinced that the company was as concerned as it claimed to be. One protester held up a sign that named the company. It read: We won't be fooled. Clean up your act, not just your image.

The protester's sign reminds me of what Jesus said to the Pharisees. Luke 11:39 likens them to a group of dishwashers who clean the outside of a container, while leaving the inside dirty. He said:

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? But rather give alms of such things as you have; then

indeed all things are clean to you (vv.39-41).

Jesus was referring to the careful and technically exact ritual of handwashing that Pharisees practiced before sitting down to a meal. They washed before eating and between courses not for cleanliness reasons, but because they prided themselves in fulfilling their ceremonial law. Jesus knew, however, that the “ritually clean” religion of the Pharisees didn’t go below the surface. Their image was good, but their act was bad.

Religion never changes the heart of the problem. It deals with surface issues. That’s why on another occasion Jesus told a Pharisee and ruler of the Jews that he needed to be *born again* (an internal, spiritual birth) if he was ever going to see and be a part of God’s kingdom (Jn. 3).

Prayers, communions, confirmations, baptisms, or

volunteering for church causes may look good. Standing on form, however, won’t fool God. Jesus said, “That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit” (Jn. 3:6). Receiving Christ can do what all of the religion in the world could never do (Jn. 3:16).

***Religion
can change
the outside; but
only Christ can
change the heart.***

Trusting Christ changes the heart. It brings the Source of love within us. It’s a humbling process. It means acknowledging the worthlessness of our external clean-ups, giving ourselves over to the mercy of God, and trusting Him to do through the Spirit of Christ what we could never do for ourselves.

THEY MADE MUCH OF LITTLE



I envy people who are good at the game of Trivial Pursuit. They have a mind and memory for detail that must give them a great advantage in life over people like me. I sometimes can't remember the name of a friend, or where I put my glasses.

Like all other strengths, however, a capacity for trivia can become a weakness if not kept in check. Jesus described the dangers of getting lost in details when telling the Pharisees that a fault of their religion was to

major on minor issues.

Woe to you Pharisees! For you tithe mint and rue and all manner of herbs, and pass by justice and the love of God. These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone (Lk. 11:42).

In other words, the little things have their place as long as we don't let them get in the way of the more important issues.

The Pharisees were the logicians of Judaism. They made a science of carrying the Law to its logical conclusions. They prided themselves in their ability to think a matter through down to the smallest detail. When they tithed, for instance, they gave a percentage of *all* their increase. If they owed God a tenth of the harvest, they would give God 10 percent of *everything*, including their herbs, even though the Law specifically said that it was not necessary to do so.

The Pharisees' willingness to do more than what was required was not bad. Their mistake was that in attending to details they forgot to love. According to Jesus, that means they ended up missing the whole point of the Law (Mt. 22:37-40).

The trouble with religious detail is that it feels like it's working when it isn't.

The Pharisees were like the man who goes to the auto dealer to buy a new car. While there, he notices some accessories that seem to be just what he needs to add a touch of class to his new "wheels." An hour later he leaves the showroom with a smile, clutching his purchase of a coffee mug, dash compass, map holder, and manufacturer's key

chain. Like the Pharisees, he leaves with more than he came for—and less. With trinkets in hand, he gets in his old car and heads for home.

Religion, as good and necessary as it is, can fill us up with lesser details that easily get the better part of our attention. What makes the problem difficult to detect is that the process of getting good at the fine points of Bible study, prayer, or giving can feel like it's working when it isn't. There is no substitute for a heart of love and justice that reflects a right relationship with God Himself.

A few years after Christ, the apostle Paul repeated Jesus' teaching to distracted Christians in Corinth. He made it clear that even spiritual gifts, knowledge, faith, and self-sacrifice are trivial pursuits if done without the love of God (1 Cor. 13).

THEY LOVED THE APPROVAL OF OTHERS



Religion can be one of the biggest ego trips around. What deserves more honorable mention than to be recognized as a good and godly person? Or what plays more to our sense of self-importance and pride than to be thought of as someone of whom God approves?

It might seem better to be recognized as a good person than as a godless one. Wouldn't it be better to be known as a priest or pastor than as a pornographer or prostitute?

Maybe not. Jesus said that unless something changed, the Pharisees were going to the same hell as the godless. The only difference was that Jesus reserved His severest criticism for religious people who were using their spiritual reputation to get social attention and honors. To the religionist Jesus said:

*Woe to you Pharisees!
For you love the best
seats in the synagogues
and greetings in the
marketplaces (Lk. 11:43).*

We all love to be appreciated by others. We love to be approved by those who see something praiseworthy in us. That's not bad. What is bad, however, is when the opinions of others become more important to us than the opinions of God. What is dangerous is when the flattery and approving attention of others becomes like a narcotic, numbing us

to our lack of love for others, to the presence and mind of God, and to the fact that in our sober moments we know that our reputation is far better than we are.

Being good at the rules of religion enables us to get the praise of men. Submitting to Christ, however, is the only way to have the favor of God. This is true even after a person has accepted Christ and entered into the religion of the church. The question of whether we are going to play to the grandstands or to God continues to be an issue for as long as we live.

The apostle Paul knew what it was like to struggle with human criticism and to be found unacceptable by members of one's own spiritual family. That's why he wrote to critics in Corinth:

With me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by a human court. In fact, I do

not even judge myself. For I know of nothing against myself, yet I am not justified by this; but He who judges me is the Lord (1 Cor. 4:3-4).

Later, Paul wrote:

We dare not class ourselves or compare ourselves with those who commend themselves. But they, measuring themselves by themselves, and comparing themselves among themselves, are not wise (2 Cor. 10:12).

Paul had learned to take criticism with grace, not because it didn't hurt but because he had found that human recognition and honor don't count (Phil. 3:1-10). All that counts is hearing Christ say, "Well done, good and faithful servant." Paul had been a Pharisee. He knew the difference between being recognized by religion or being approved by Christ.

THEY PRACTICED COVERUP RATHER THAN DISCLOSURE



“Hi, my name is Joe, and I’m an alcoholic.” It’s first base in the Alcoholics Anonymous path of recovery. Unfortunately, it’s also an element of humility that is all too often missing in religion. One of the most common feelings among churchgoers is the disconnected sense of being with people who aren’t being real. They feel shoulder-to-shoulder but far apart from people who put on Sunday clothes and Sunday faces to go through

the motions of Sunday worship. Many like it that way. Others, however, are crying out on the inside. “Wait. This isn’t right. This isn’t real. We’ve all got problems. Why can’t we admit our struggles with worry, anger, fear, envy, bitterness, shame, and lust so we can encourage and comfort and hold each other accountable?”

Jesus would agree. He 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 (Lk. 11:44).

The following story from *The People’s Almanac #2* illustrates a similar problem of dishonesty:

Once when Prussian King Frederick the Great visited Potsdam Prison, every convict he spoke to claimed to be innocent.

Finally he came across one man under sentence of death for stealing who simply said, “Your Majesty, I am guilty and richly deserving of punishment.” Frederick turned to the prison governor and said, “Free this rascal and get him out of our prison, before he corrupts all the noble innocent people in here.”

From God’s point of view, religious people can be like that prison community. Religious beliefs, ritual, and association often give people a way of denying their shame, guilt, and need of a savior. Instead of encouraging people to declare their inability to save themselves, religion gives people a front and cover for their unresolved problems.

Efforts to gloss over our problems with religious activity is a self-protective reaction that goes back to

the beginning of human history. After our first parents sinned, they were stunned by their loss of innocence. They used fig leaves to cover themselves and fled among the trees to hide themselves from the presence of the Lord. When the Lord came into the Garden, Adam admitted that he had hidden himself because he was afraid.

People have been hiding themselves behind the trees of religious activity and behind the fig leaves of human effort ever since. Rather than humbling ourselves and admitting our need of Christ’s saving death and saving life, we try to do enough religion to compensate for our sins.

In the process, we hide ourselves from Christ, who offers His mercy only to those who humble themselves in needy and broken honesty.

THEY ADDED TO LIFE'S BURDENS



Imagine what it would be like to have two kinds of people in the world: brick-givers and brick-takers. Every time you meet one of them, a brick is either added to your pile or one is taken off. Jesus would be one of the brick-takers. The Pharisees would be brick-givers. This function of religion became apparent as Jesus responded to a question posed by a lawyer of the Pharisees (an expert in biblical law on whom the Pharisees depended). He said:

*Woe to you also, lawyers!
For you load men with
burdens hard to bear,
and you yourselves do
not touch the burdens
with one of your fingers
(Lk. 11:46).*

Jesus knew His audience. These religious experts attached hundreds of additional obligations to the Law of God. Yet they themselves were masters of the loophole. They even had ways of sidestepping the law of the Sabbath, which forbade carrying a burden on that day.

William Barclay quotes pharisaic tradition, which said:

He who carries anything, whether it be in his right hand, or in his left hand, or in his bosom, or on his shoulder is guilty; but he who carries anything on the back of his hand, or with his foot, or with his mouth, or with his elbow, or

with his hair, or with his money-bag turned upside down, or between his moneybag and his shirt, or in the fold of his shirt, or in his shoe, or in his sandal is guiltless, because he does not carry it in the usual way of carrying it out.

Religious insiders still practice the art of brick-giving while having ways of excusing themselves from the obligations they place on others. For instance, many religious leaders teach that daily family devotions is a must, while acknowledging that they themselves have reasons for not being able to do it. Many religious people teach that Christians under grace, while not being under the law of the tithe, should start with the legal requirement of 10-percent giving and then add to it. Other religious teachers insist that God hates and prohibits divorce under all

circumstances. But they know that God Himself divorced Israel because of her prolonged spiritual adultery, and they know that Moses the Lawgiver permitted divorce because of the hardness of people's hearts (Dt. 24:1-4; Mt. 19:1-9).

By contrast, Jesus consistently upheld the high ideals of the Law while making merciful provisions for the repentant sinner. Jesus understood the healthy tension between the holiness and the love of God when He said:

Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light (Mt. 11:28-30).

THEY DECEIVED THEMSELVES



I've heard it jokingly said, "I love everybody. It's people I can't stand." The Pharisees acted out a similar phrase without trying to be funny. Jesus said that the Pharisees prided themselves in honoring and building memorials to the prophets. The irony is that when they met a real one, 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 when He said:

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! Because you build the tombs of the prophets and adorn the monuments of the righteous, and say, "If we had lived in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partakers with them in the blood of the prophets." Therefore you are witnesses against yourselves that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets. Fill up, then, the measure of your fathers' guilt (Mt. 23:29-32).

The Pharisees had fooled themselves. They didn't think of themselves as prophet killers or Messiah

killers. They didn't realize that their empty religion actually made them enemies of God. The flesh has always been at war with the Spirit. Religion is powerless to restrain the self-centered, self-protective obsessions of the flesh. It takes a living Christ to change the human heart.

History repeats itself time after time when people give themselves to religion rather than to Christ—just like the religious people Jesus confronted. With their lips they honor God and the Scriptures, but when a child or a mate confesses Christ as Savior they suddenly see red.

Very religious parents often resent the fact that their child thinks there was something wrong with the religion in which he was born, baptized, and confirmed. Parents who have been churchgoers all of their lives are often

incensed to hear a son or daughter talk about being “born again,” the very words that Jesus used when talking to a Pharisee named Nicodemus (Jn. 3:1-16). Religious parents, however, who resent the fact that their child wants to follow Christ need to do some real soul-searching. A negative

Religious parents who resent that their child wants to follow Christ need to do some real soul-searching.

reaction to a son or daughter who says that he or she has accepted Christ is a fairly strong indicator that the parent is in the same condition of self-deception as the scribes and Pharisees whom our Lord lovingly but firmly confronted.

THEY TOOK AWAY 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.” And as He said these things to them, the scribes and the Pharisees began to assail

Him vehemently, and to cross-examine Him about many things, lying in wait for Him, and seeking to catch Him in something He might say, that they might accuse Him (Lk. 11:52-54).

Here Jesus said that religionists who were against Him had taken away from the people “the key of knowledge.” What was the key Jesus had in mind? There seemed to be a number of possibilities. The Pharisees, for instance, took away the key of knowledge from “the man on the street” by (1) replacing the Word of God with tradition and trivia, (2) attempting to discredit Christ (Jn. 14:6), and (3) distracting others from a “right attention of heart” (the “window of light” in Lk. 11:33-35).

While the Scriptures and Christ are both keys of knowledge, I believe that Jesus was probably referring

to the key of “a right attention of heart,” which if it is a right attention will be focused on the Scriptures and Christ. The section of Luke 11 that we’ve been looking at is preceded by verses 33-35, where Jesus said:

No one, when he has lit a lamp, puts it in a secret place or under a basket, but on a lampstand, that those who come in may see the light. The lamp of the body is the eye. Therefore, when your eye is good, your whole body also is full of light. But when your eye is bad, your body also is full of darkness. Therefore take heed that the light which is in you is not darkness.

In other words, if a person’s “lamp” (his eye or attention of heart) is right, then he will be filled with the knowledge of God. But if his “lamp” is obstructed, then a person will be full of

darkness (empty of the light and knowledge of God).

While Jesus was teaching these truths about the lamp of the body and the key of knowledge, He was invited to a Pharisee’s house for dinner. As it turned out, Jesus completed His lesson around the dinner table. As a dinner guest of a Pharisee, Jesus pointed to the light-blocking obstacles that the Pharisees had placed over their own eyes (their attention of heart). The Teacher showed them that by their religious externalism, their majoring on minors, their love for approval, their selfish coverup, their legalistic brick-giving, and their self-deception that they had not only lost the light for themselves but also for others. In this way, they had taken away the key of knowledge.

THEY MADE CONVERTS TO HELL



Imagine being given a key by a trusted religious leader. You put the key in a door labeled “destiny,” and when you open it you find yourself looking into the flames of hell. The Pharisees were setting up their converts for that kind of terrible surprise. In a passage very similar to Luke 11, 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
(Mt. 23:15).

Jesus may have called the religious converts “twice as much a son of hell” because converts are often more zealous for their faith than those who have come to take their faith for granted. Proselytes have made a major change of life and are ready to defend and promote it with fresh enthusiasm. They know they don’t have all the answers, but they are trusting their leaders, who supposedly know much more than they do.

This trust would put the Pharisees’ converts in real jeopardy. Since Jesus called the Pharisees “blind leaders of the blind” (Mt. 15:14), their followers would be doubly bound. Not only is the new convert still spiritually blind, but he has unknowingly placed himself in the trust of a religious teacher who cannot see

where either one of them is going.

The problem with religion is that, in matters of ultimate and most extreme importance, it offers hope where there is no hope.

For that reason, an atheist or agnostic is probably in a safer place than the person who has been converted to religion. He is not apt to assume that he has made peace with God. The religious person, however, wrongly thinks he knows what he has to do to make it to heaven, or to walk with God—even if he is not sure that he’s “quite there” yet.

The implications are stunningly severe. Religionists like the Pharisees and their converts are headed for a terrible awakening. Jesus assured us of this on another occasion when He said:

I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the

scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven (Mt. 5:20).

Put yourself in the place of a misguided religious convert. You think you have chosen to be a good person. You recognize the wrongness of those who have no place in their heart for God. You feel pity for those who show by their behavior and associations that they are willing to risk eternity for a few more hours of forbidden pleasure. You think you’ve chosen better. You’ve found a pastor, a priest, or a rabbi that you like. You trust him, and are confident that he is a good man who would never be an enemy of God. You like it when he leads you in religious ceremony that helps you to feel closer to God and better about yourself. But once you put the key he gives you in a door marked “destiny,” it’s too late.

LESSONS FROM A CONVERTED RELIGIONIST

There were about 6,000 Pharisees at the time of Christ.

As we have noted, they had a reputation for holding lengthy discussions on such “fine points” as whether it was lawful to eat an egg that had been laid on the Sabbath.

Saul of Tarsus (later known as the apostle Paul) inherited this religious tradition. He described himself as a Pharisee and the son of a Pharisee (Acts 23:6). Before his life-changing encounter with Christ (Acts 9), Saul believed that his standing with God was determined by his relationship to the Law.

After his conversion, Paul defined his standing with God in new terms. Now what counted was his

relationship to Christ. He became concerned about faith in Christ, showing the love of Christ to others, and reminding fellow believers that all of us will one day answer personally to Christ the Lord.

Paul's frame of reference changed from the Law to Christ, from fine points to fundamentals, and from externals to internals.

When it came to arguable issues of scriptural application, Paul was no longer preoccupied with the legal rulings of the scribes. Instead he pled with other members of the family of God not to judge one another in questionable matters. In his letter to the Romans he wrote:

Who are you to judge another's servant? . . . So then each of us shall give account of himself to God. Therefore let us not judge one another anymore, but rather resolve this, not to put a stumbling block or a cause to fall in our brother's way (14:4,12-13).

Many of us need to learn from Paul's "after Christ" point of view. In an attempt to protect ourselves from compromise, we adopt his "pre-Christ" perspective. Adopting the way of the Pharisees, we have developed our own lists of what a follower of Christ will or will not do. The only trouble is that someone could keep every point on some of our lists and still be no closer to God. A person could "religiously" refrain from alcohol, rock music, tobacco, gambling, and going to movies and still be godless. A person could

attend church, give money, offer prayers, and read the Bible while still being angry, critical, and mean.

What counts, however, is what comes from the Spirit, not what comes from the flesh. Christlike attitudes of love are so different from our natural inclinations that they drive us to the Spirit of Christ for wisdom, enablement, and a fresh assurance of forgiveness. It is better to let our struggle

Replacing the love of Christ with keepable lists is a sure way to become like a pre-Christ Paul.

with unkeepable principles drive us to Christ than to occupy ourselves with the formalities of religion and miss Him altogether.

THE DANGERS OF APPLICATION

Many of us believe that Bible study must be accompanied by questions like, “What difference does it make?” and “How does it apply to my life?” We have seen how prior generations could preoccupy themselves with a study of Revelation, Daniel, and the Minor Prophets without coming to terms with the problems that were making them anxious, hierarchical, competitive, unemotional, demanding, critical, mean, and possessive.

Certainly, it is good to struggle with questions like, “What will this truth look like in my life?” But that is also how prior generations came up with their lists of what Christian living “looks like.” They don’t smoke (unless they’re burning with

anger), they don’t drink (unless they’re getting wired with coffee), they don’t enjoy questionable entertainment (unless it involves gossip). That’s what the Pharisees were so good at.

When rules of application become our principles, and when actions replace attitudes of the heart, then we have lost a grip on our religion, and it now has a grip on us.

When rules of application become our principles, and when actions replace attitudes of the heart, we have probably given in to a religion that has replaced Christ rather than one that serves Him.

WHY IT MAKES SENSE TO KEEP OUR FOCUS ON CHRIST

In exchange for our trust in Him, Christ does many things for us that religion cannot do. For example:

- He loves us (Jn. 15:13; Rom. 8:35).
- He brings us to God (1 Tim. 2:5).
- He brings God to us (Col. 1:15).
- He bought us for God (Eph. 1:7).
- He defends us before God (1 Jn. 2:1).
- He declares us “not guilty” (Rom. 3:24; 5:1).
- He reconciles us to God (2 Cor. 5:19).
- He sets us apart for God (1 Cor. 1:30).
- He gives us peace with God (Rom. 5:1).
- He makes us acceptable to God (Eph. 1:6).

- He forgives us (Eph. 1:7).
- He frees us from bondage (Rom. 8:2).
- He qualifies us for adoption (Eph. 1:5).
- He makes us heirs of God (Eph. 1:11).
- He gives us His Spirit (Jn. 14:16-17).
- He gives us a new focus (Col. 3:1-2).
- He lives within us (Col. 1:27).
- He brings us into God’s family (Jn. 1:12).
- He intercedes for us (Rom. 8:34).
- He rescues us from Satan’s power (Col. 1:13).
- He places us into God’s kingdom (Col. 1:13).
- He gives us eternal life (Rom. 6:23).
- He shows us how to live (1 Jn. 2:6).

A STUDY IN CONTRASTS

There are two sides to many issues in Scripture. This is true of the subject of religion. To keep a balanced view, it's important for us to live with the tension of two seemingly contradictory ideas.

Religion Is Important.

The Bible is full of religious practices that either (1) point us to God or (2) provide a channel for expressing our relationship to God. Both Old and New Testaments are full of religious law, principle, belief, and ritual. If we think of religion as action or conduct indicating belief in, reverence for, and a desire to please God, then it is clear that this religion provides:

- a pattern of doctrine and belief (Ti. 2:1).
- shared experience (Acts 2:37-47; Heb. 10:25).

- outward show of inner faith (1 Jn. 3:17-18).

Religion Is Worthless.

It is worthless if we depend on any external actions to make us right with God. Whether before salvation or after, no amount of religious knowledge or action can save us. Knowledge or action can only give us a way of expressing our personal faith in Christ. In that sense we must avoid:

- attempts to earn salvation (Eph. 2:8-10).
- any thought of perfecting ourselves (Gal. 3:1-3).
- anything that displaces Christ (Col. 2:6-8).

Religion is dangerous, not because it is bad but because it is often good enough to turn our trust away from Christ. Our tendency is to reject confidence in what Christ can do and replace it with something that we can do for ourselves.

THE TEST OF OUR RELIGION

Imagine that you are making application for heaven. What would you list as your qualifications?

- I have always believed in God.
- I'm thought of as a religious person.
- I have tried to live a good life.
- I have been baptized.
- I go to church.
- I haven't done anything really bad.
- I have friends who will vouch for me.

I hope by now you realize that if you were to list any of those qualifications on an application for heaven, it would indicate that you don't yet understand the worthlessness of religion.

The only application that would be accepted by heaven would be one on which you listed your

qualifications as follows:

- I can cite no merit of my own.
- I have been a sinner from birth.
- I am coming not in my name but in Christ's.
- I believe He is the Son of God and my Savior.
- I have accepted His sacrifice for my sins.
- I believe He rose from the dead.
- I have put my trust in Him to save me.

This is the confidence of the apostle Paul who, to distinguish between religion and Christ, wrote:

By grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works [pure religion], which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them (Eph. 2:8-10).

DEFINING OUR TERMS

Christ—the second person of the triune God who became a member of the human race, lived a sinless life, was crucified, and rose from the dead to offer salvation to all who put their trust in Him.

Communion—a symbolic ceremony of bread and wine to remind believers of Christ's death for them.

Cross—the form of execution by which Christ suffered and died in our place to pay for our sins.

Faith—personal trust which, when placed in the person of Christ, forms the heart of true religion.

Justification—to be “declared righteous.” In salvation, God extends to all who trust in Christ the legal status of being right with Him.

Legalist—someone who trusts the Law to do for him what only Christ can do.

Religion—a system of thought and conduct expressing belief in God.

Religionist—someone who trusts religion to do for him what only Christ can do.

Repentance—a change of mind evidenced by a change of behavior.

Resurrection—the act by which Christ rose bodily from death, showing the value of His sacrifice and His ability to live His life through all who trust Him.

Salvation—God's loving offer to save from the past, present, and future effects of sin everyone who puts his faith in Christ.

Sin—any violation of God's moral laws; carries the penalty of eternal death.

Water Baptism—a symbolic ceremony that is an outward declaration of personal belief in Christ.

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