

If grace is God's unmerited favor coming to me, then religion is its opposite.

1. The religious spirit: an enemy of grace.

1.1. The spirit of religion is a major enemy of prophetic people.

“If anyone among you thinks he is religious, and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this one's religion is useless. 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” (James 1:26-27 NKJV).

- Honoring God with our lips while our hearts are far from Him (Matthew 15:1-9).
- Having a form of godliness but denying its real power (see 2 Timothy 3:5).
- People who think that by killing you they are doing God a service (John 16:2).

Religion can also “short-circuit” the ministry of the prophetic in your life:

- Religious spirits motivate people to resist God in their own hearts.
- Religious spirits oppose what the Spirit of God is doing in churches and places.
- In your heart or in the church:
 - Religious spirits substitute the words of men for the Word of the Father;
 - Take offense at the authority of the Son;
 - Substitute a false religious atmosphere for the Presence of the Spirit.

1.2. The religious spirit wages constant warfare against prophetic words and prophetic people.

- Historically, prophets and prophetic people have been strongly persecuted by religion.
- The enemy tries to snatch away the word that's coming to your heart.

2. Examining Ourselves About A Religious Spirit.

2.1. Religious striving.

“O foolish Galatians... Having begun in the Spirit, are you now made perfect by the flesh?”
(Galatians 3:1-3).

Question: Who is in charge of my spiritual growth?

- We need to trust the Holy Spirit to guide us and disciple us.
- The Galatians couldn't do anything in the flesh to make progress in the Spirit.
- We grow in the things of the Spirit by waiting on God and listening.

2.2. Religious sensibilities.

“Be of the same mind toward one another. Do not set your mind on high things, but associate with the humble. Do not be wise in your own opinion” (Romans 12:16).

Question: Do I only love and minister to people who are like me?

- Are we too refined to be lowly? Are we less effective at ministering to some kinds of people because our hearts are too critical of them?
- It's important that we not make ungodly distinctions between people, and it's important to be able to communicate with every kind of person.

2.3. Religious tradition.

Jesus warned us against “...making the Word of God of no effect [invalidating it] through your tradition which you have delivered. And you do many such things” (Matthew 7:13).

Question: Am I willing to follow the Word even where it conflicts with my tradition?

- God leads us into this test on purpose.
- Think of the times Jesus offended people’s religious traditions.
- It’s easier to fit into a comfortable slot than it is to be stretched.
- How do I react to what is new or different?

Perhaps every one of us has adjusted a doctrinal belief that we once held.

- The Bible doesn’t change but sometimes we need more light, so we can better understand what the Word was actually saying all along.
- Truths we consider vital were largely obscured in Church history for many centuries!
- Ask yourself why things are rubbing you the wrong way.

2.4. Religious hypocrisy.

- Hypocrites are literally “mask-wearers,” and their mark is the *double standard*.
- Learn from Solomon’s example: he mistook God’s anointing and blessings for God’s endorsement of his life and his lifestyle – but none of us is above God’s commands.

“The conclusion, when all has been heard, is: fear God and keep His commandments, because this applies to every person. For God will bring every act to judgment, everything which is hidden, whether it is good or evil” (Ecclesiastes 12:13-14).

Religious hypocrites “major on minors.” Notice: “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you pay tithes of mint and dill and cumin, and you have left undone the weightier matters of the Law, judgment, mercy, and faith. You ought to have done these and not to leave the other undone. Blind guides who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel!” (Matthew 23:23-24).

Question for self-examination: Who am I when nobody’s watching?

2.5. *A religious conscience... two different kinds!*

Take note of two extreme types of conscience:

- Some people have an overly sensitive conscience that actually cripples them.
 - Such people are miserable and live in expectation of God’s hand coming down and swatting them.
 - They haven’t received the word of Jesus, “Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom” (Luke 12:32).
 - “As a father pities his children, so the LORD pities those who fear Him. For He knows our frame; He remembers that we are dust” (Psalms 103:13-14).
- On the other hand, some have a conscience that is not sensitive enough or that has become seared.
 - A person with an overly sensitive conscience can’t receive God’s love, but a person with a seared conscience presumes upon God’s love.
 - He doesn’t worry about his sin because he is “OK with God.”

Question: What is God’s real opinion of me, and what is His real estimation of my conduct?

How can we keep our consciences in a healthy balance?

1. Learn to confess sins quickly to God (1 John 1:9).
2. Don't live by other people's opinion of what is sin and what isn't. "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 Corinthians 4:3b-4).
3. Trust God to cleanse you and sanctify you as you spend time in prayer and in the Word:

"Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me. Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Therefore let us, as many as are mature, have this mind; and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal even this to you" (Philippians 3:12-15).

2.6. Religious blindness.

"Jesus answered and said to them, 'You err, not knowing the Scriptures nor the power of God'" (Matthew 22:29).

- Not knowing the Word, or thinking we are already "masters of the Word" will cause us to view God's truth as something novel or false when we hear it.
- We can also err by limiting God.

Question for self-examination: How might I be limiting God? "Yes, again and again they tempted God, and limited the Holy One of Israel" (Psalms 78:41).

2.7. Religious presumption.

“And Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Ethiopian woman whom he had married: for he had married an Ethiopian woman. And they said, ‘Has the LORD indeed spoken only by Moses? Has he not spoken also by us?’ And the LORD heard it” (Numbers 12:1-2).

- Religious presumption causes some to despise authorities (see 2nd Peter and Jude).
- We cannot deny the reality that God has delegated authority to people. Christians should display a greater respect for authorities. Don’t be like “...those who walk according to the flesh in the lust of uncleanness and despise authority. They are presumptuous, self-willed. They are not afraid to speak evil of dignitaries, whereas angels, who are greater in power and might, do not bring a reviling accusation against them before the Lord” (2 Peter 2:10-11).
- Honoring authority includes the civil authorities. We have a positive command to pray for them. Reviling leaders is religious presumption, because it presumes that you know better than God, who put that person whom you don’t like into that office.
- Warning: the fact that God has used you does not automatically grant you authority over other people in the Church in general. Consider Miriam and Aaron.

Question: Has my ministry caused me to exalt myself over others, and over leadership?

2.8. Religious superiority over others in general.

“But this crowd that does not know the law is accursed” (John 7:49).

Question: Have our experiences or knowledge led us to exalt ourselves over others?

- Sometimes we lord it over other believers because we see them as ignorant.
- “Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight” (Romans 12:16 ESV).

2.9. Religious judgments.

“Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?” (John 1:46); “My brothers, do not hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, with partiality” (James 2:1); “You are an offense to Me, for you do not savor the things that are of God, but those that are of men” (Matthew 16:23b).

- False religious judgments include judging by outward appearances, and a critical spirit.
- God detests it when we don’t receive people because of partiality (for example, because of education, economics, or ethnicity).
- The enemy’s goal is to keep you from responding properly when God sends you something in an “unacceptable” package.
- A critical or fault-finding spirit is the enemy’s accusing voice. Through our criticism, we proclaim what’s in the Devil’s heart about how my fellow Christian fails to measure up.

“What if they’re wrong, though?”

1. What qualifies me to judge? “Who are you to judge another’s servant? To his own master he stands or falls. Indeed, he will be made to stand, for God is able to make him stand” (Romans 14:4).
2. When it comes to matters of sin, the Bible gives the work of rebuking and correction mostly to the eldership of the Body. “Speak these things, exhort, and rebuke with all authority. Let no one despise you” (Titus 2:15).

3. Be careful when restoring a fallen brother. “Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted” (Galatians 6:1).
4. Religious judgments and criticism are the opposite of prophecy. Jesus wants to bring *edification, exhortation, and comfort* to his Church (1 Corinthians 14:3).

Question: Why am I being critical in an irritating situation? What is actually provoking me?

True discernment lets me see God’s work. It lets me hear God’s heart for somebody and shows me how God wants to untangle the works of the Devil in that person’s life.

2.10. Religious zeal.

“Therefore let those who suffer according to the will of God commit their souls to Him in doing good, as to a faithful Creator” (1 Peter 4:19).

- Religious zeal is the desire to vindicate ourselves and fight for “our” truth.
- The history of the Church shows a vicious cycle of persecution of renewal movements. Only humility can break these cycles.

Question for self-examination: How "dead" am I?

Stand Against The Religious Spirit

- Learn to forgive people quickly and bless them.
- Learn to overlook things (Proverbs 19:11).
- See yourself and others through the eyes of grace!
