

Question: Some people are very religious, but they live the same kind of lives as those who are not religious. What would Jesus say about this?

Religion and the practice of the Christian faith are not the same things. Careful religious observance by those who believe in Jesus should result in their becoming genuine followers of Jesus whose daily lives are in the process of being transformed into his likeness, but all too often there is a deep disconnect between participation in an assembly for religious worship rituals and the way people behave in their daily lives.

The words in the Bible that are translated as religion or religious all refer to worship as experienced in various systems of external observances. They sometimes refer to the celebration of Jewish feasts like Passover or to the work of one who officiates in a worship service like a priest. The apostle Paul once used the word for religion to include the superstitious actions performed in worship of false gods. Upon observing the many idols worshipped by the Athenians, Paul said to them, “Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious” (Acts 17:22-23). He then continued his speech by telling them about the God who made the whole world and who is Lord of heaven and earth (Acts 17:24).

While there are certain outward religious worship forms prescribed for believers in Jesus, these are not as important to God as matters of the heart and daily life. The Old Testament prophet Micah questioned the people of God, saying: “With what shall I come before the LORD and bow down before the exalted God? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?” (Micah 6:6-8). No amount of worship and sacrifices could make up for a lack of justice, mercy and humility before God. Instead, Micah admonished: “He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8). In some of his strongest words of condemnation, Jesus said: “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices-- mint, dill and cummin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law-- justice, mercy and faithfulness” (Matthew 23:23).

Instead of mere religion, Jesus called for discipleship. A disciple is one who follows and learns from the teacher. Jesus called for his disciples to follow him in self-denial (Matthew 16:24), looking to his example so they could follow “in his steps” (1 Peter 2:21) and be “transformed into his likeness” (2 Corinthians 3:18). Jesus said, “This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples” (John 15:8). That fruit would include qualities of character that Jesus demonstrated like “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control” (Galatians 5:22-23). Thus, the final instructions of Jesus were to “go and make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:19).

The only religion that is acceptable to God is the pure and faultless religion that results in things like control of the tongue and active care for widows and orphans in their need (James 1:26-27). Jesus did not come into this world to establish just another religion with its rules and rituals: he came to establish a life-changing relationship with people so he could lead them into the presence of the eternal Father.

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