

Eternal Life
July 15, 2018

All over the world there are billions of people who are religious. They believe in a god or gods of some sort. I have divided all of these people into two broad categories. The first category are those people who doubt they are good enough, but work hard at being so. We can call these the active religious category. They are constantly striving to do more and more religious stuff in order to be accepted, in order to find peace.

They do all kinds of things to try to be acceptable to the god they worship. The things they do we could describe as religious activities. Prayers, sacrifices, fasting, rituals, and making pilgrimages to holy places are the kinds of activities people do to try and be acceptable to their god or gods.

The second category of people are those who assume they are good enough, or hope they are. This is the inactive religious category. These are making no real effort at religion. If they engage in religious activities they do so grudgingly out of some sense of duty or they do so out of desperation when their normal life is threatened in some way.

Maybe you see yourself in one of these two groups. Today I hope to show you an alternative to these two.

In any religion you can see both groups. Even in churches there are both. Jesus warned that not everyone who gathers with His church is a true believer. I have found that to be true. People attend churches for lots of reasons, not all of them the right reasons.

There are people attending a church who fit into that first category. They have not understood the gospel and are still seeking God's acceptance. The Christian knows that by faith in Jesus' death and resurrection for sin we are already accepted by God. Jesus took our sin upon himself on the cross. And we have gained His right standing with God. We don't have to try to win or earn God's acceptance. We already have it.

But there are people in churches who have not understood that message. So they try to please and appease God through their religious activities like church attendance. Somewhere they had drilled into them that God expects Christians to be in church on Sunday mornings. So they come. But they keep missing the good news.

The Bible is clear on what basis we get an acceptance to God .

Ephesians 2:8-9 (RSP*) Salvation is a gift of grace from God, not something you can earn in any way.

The second category of people, the inactive religious, is also represented in Christianity if not by attending a church. If asked what religion they are they might say Christian. But they do not normally attend a church.

They are fairly satisfied with themselves and their lives. They figure that God would strike them with illness or some other calamity if He were not happy with them. Since things are rolling along pretty good for them, they figure they have enough religion to get into heaven. They are self-assured people. You may know such people.

Both of these attitudes are based on a false sense of what religion is about. They assume that religion is just about getting into heaven. But the most important commandment in the Bible points in a different direction.

Mark 12:30 (NIV) Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.

Now, yes, you will do religious activities when you love God this way. But the activities are a result of what is taking place inside of you. You do them because of the joy you have at already having a right relationship with God. And relationship with God is what this verse is all about.

Jesus knew this. He expresses this in his prayer in John 17. Let's read this aloud together.

John 17:3 (NIV) Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.

There are several points to gain from this verse.

1. Eternal life is first and foremost a relationship.

In one of Mark Twain's short stories he tells of a man dying and going to heaven. He describes heaven as a nice place, but there is no relationship with God. Oh, God is far off in some castle and you can visit him if you want. But you can just live for eternity without doing so.

This isn't the picture of heaven the Bible relates. Instead the whole focus of heaven is God, just like it should be on earth. We may do some running and jumping around in the joy of heaven. But the main thing about heaven, about eternal life, will be enjoying God. We will live in the presence of God. Eternal life is about relationship to God.

While there will be millions of us in heaven Jesus' statement points to something more individual, more personal, more intimate. Eternal life isn't just knowing about God. It is knowing God.

In the Old Testament the people speak of seeking God's face. This is a figure of speech for seeking communion with God, seeking a meeting with God. Even God uses this phrase to encourage Israel to pray. Well eternal life is all about being with God.

2. Eternal life comes in knowing the right God.

Like Christians there are other religions in the world that believe there is only one true God, the creator of all things. That means we believe in the same kind of God as they do. That does not mean we worship the same God. Our beliefs about the gods we believe in are so different that it is evident we are speaking about different deities. We are not just describing different aspects of the same deity.

Jesus says that eternal life is knowing the one true God. Judaism, Islam, and Christianity cannot all be right. They cannot all worship the same God. At least two of them must be wrong. If Jesus is right, the others are wrong. If one of them were right, then Christianity would be wrong. To say we worship the same god is illogical. The same kind of god is not the same god.

3. Jesus cannot be divided from God.

Over the years of my life, several people have told me of their belief in God. They went on to tell me of their lack of interest in Jesus. They said Jesus wasn't important.

But Jesus cannot be separated from God. Jesus made this point over and over again.

Matthew 10:32-33 (NIV) Whoever acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven. But whoever disowns me before men, I will disown him before my Father in heaven.

John 14:6 (NIV) Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

John 14:10 (NIV) The words I say to you are not just my own. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work.

(Matthew 11:27; Luke 9:26; Luke 9:48; Luke 10:16; Luke 10:22; John 5:24)

These and other statements by Jesus leave no wiggle room. Either Jesus is as important as God or none of what the New Testament says can be trusted. And if it is true then everything Jesus says must be heeded.

So why do some people accept the God of the Bible and yet reject Jesus?

One reason people reject Jesus is they do not want a Lord. They do not want to submit themselves to someone else, even God. As one young woman told me, "No one is going run my life but me." She was a regular church attendee, but not for any of the right reasons.

Another reason people reject Jesus is they do not want His help.

They reject the idea that they need help to get to eternal life. Needing help hurts the pride of people. We want to be able to do everything for ourselves. We want to be able to earn heaven, not receive it as a gift. Pride has them wanting God to owe them eternal life. Jesus has us owing God for eternal life. So any talk of sin and needing a Savior turns them off. They don't want to need Jesus' help. So they reject Jesus and all he stands for.

Heaven is not just a place where we will escape the heartaches and pains and work and boredom and diseases and wars and pollution and sin... of earth. Heaven is where we get to live with God without all the distractions and temptations of earth.

I am sure everyone here wants to go to heaven. Everyone here wants to avoid hell. Everyone here wants to be done with physical hunger and pain and suffering. But those are the extras that come with a relationship with God. The main focus of eternal life is God himself.

If all you want is heaven, you will miss it. Instead, set your heart on knowing God Himself and you get heaven thrown in as a bonus.

Seek the face of God by faith in Jesus Christ.

RSP* = Robin Shifflett Paraphrase