

# Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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## A Biblical look at some of today's ideas: Religion

### Introduction

Good morning. Today's talk is the second in the series of words in common use today. Last week we commenced this series looking at the word "faith". This morning we will consider the word "religion" or "religious" as found in the New Testament. The New Testament in our English Bibles, of which there are several translations, is based on Greek manuscripts many hundreds of years old. Translators had the difficult task of deciding upon the correct meaning of Greek words. Those of you who have studied the Scriptures with a good Bible dictionary and Bible concordance will appreciate that it is not always easy to gain a precise understanding of Greek words. Therefore, as we compare translations we will find variations. For example, the Greek word that is translated "religion" is also sometimes translated "Judaism" or "superstitious".

A definition of the word "religion" as found in Collins' English Dictionary is as follows:

1. Belief in or worship of a supernatural power or powers considered to be divine or to have control of human destiny.
2. Any formal expression of such belief: *the Christian religion*.
3. [In certain Christian denominations] the way of life entered upon by monks and nuns: *to enter religion*.

Now, any one who has truly accepted the Lord Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord based upon His atoning work on the cross at Calvary might consider the above definitions rather feeble and/or inadequate. Therefore, this morning I would like to cover a number of scriptural references to the words "religion" and "religious". I will use the "New King James Version" unless otherwise indicated.

### A Religion that is based on Superstition

The first reference to consider is in Acts 17:22-23: "*Then Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, 'Men of Athens, I perceive that in all things you are **very religious**; for as I was passing through and considering the objects of your worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO THE UNKNOWN GOD. Therefore, the One whom you worship without knowing, Him I proclaim to you.'*" In the King James (Authorised) Version the word "superstitious" is used for the words "very religious". In this case, I think the King James (Authorised) Version translators got it right when they used the word "superstitious" as it captures the state of mind of the religious people in Athens with their multiple gods. Paul had walked around the city, including the area where all the various shrines to pagan gods were assembled and found a shrine marked "TO THE UNKNOWN GOD". To my mind, we have here one of the best illustrations of man's confused thinking. For all their pagan beliefs in "man made" images, idols and icons, there is a "just in case we have missed one" fear. Paul then proceeds to explain about the only one true God. Take opportunity after this broadcast to read Acts 17:16-34. In Paul's short sermon, he covers the resurrection of Jesus, the true God and creation, that God is the life giving God, that all people are essentially the same, of one blood, regardless of nationality, that we exist because of God, the need for repentance, coming judgement, the time of accountability, and that the world is divided into two types of people, those who mock at, and those who believe, the Gospel message.

There are many today who have the religion of superstition. It might be called by another name but the main spring of superstition is fear. If you want to know peace, then come to the Lord Jesus who said in Matthew 11:28, "*Come to Me, all you who labour and are heavy laden, and **I will give you rest**.*" Also Jesus said in John 14:27, "*Peace I leave with you, **My peace I give to you**; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid.*"

Rest and peace are often elusive qualities for many people in the world. With the Lord Jesus Christ as our Saviour and Lord, we can know rest and peace even in the most trying and difficult circumstances. The reason we can continue to know rest and peace is due to these precious qualities being in a Person. They are not dependent upon circumstances.

Now, like Paul, we too should be able to clearly see superstitious beliefs that some people hold and, like Paul, be able to point them to the only Saviour for mankind and outline the salient points of the Gospel to them.

### Religion that is based on Omissions

Let us move to our next consideration of religion which is based on omissions. Let us read Acts 25:18-19: *"When the accusers stood up, they brought no accusation against him of such things as I supposed, but had some questions against him about their own **religion** and about a certain Jesus, who had died, whom Paul affirmed to be alive."*

There are religions that seem to be very godly but reject one of the most important truths concerning Christianity. That is the truth of Jesus and the resurrection. Implied in this fundamental fact are the truths that Jesus is God, that He died to bring about a salvation that is freely available to all and that by His resurrection He demonstrates that death is conquered and life eternal is obtainable to those who believe in Him. A religion that denies the above is to be avoided no matter how worthy it seems to be, because it seeks to deceive and keep people away from life in Christ. Satan is a master of deceit. The Lord Jesus said to the Pharisees on one occasion, John 8:44, *"You are of your father the devil, and the desires of your father you want to do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own resources, for he is a liar and the father of it."*

It is true to say that God accepts no substitute or replacement for Jesus. No one else has the authority, power or ability to act on His or our behalf, whether it is for our initial salvation or our on-going daily communion. We read in 1 Timothy 2:5, *"For there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus."* Therefore, whatever religion, Christian or otherwise, which suggests that there is an alternative person or thing to pray to for intercession in any way, then that religion is false. Keep in mind 1 Timothy 2:5, as it is immensely important.

If you are familiar with the Gospels, then you will be aware of how many times the Lord Jesus took the religious leaders to task because of the introduction into the religious way of life things that were not found in the Scriptures. The Lord Jesus said in Matthew 23:23, *"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you pay tithe of mint and anise and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone."*

It is very important to have a correct understanding of God's word.

### A Hypocritical Religion

In this next Scripture, in Acts 26, we are with Paul where he is giving his testimony of his life before conversion and the changed life as a result of seeing the Lord Jesus on the road as he was going to Damascus. Speaking about his life before his conversion he states in Acts 26:5, *"They [Paul's accusers] knew me from the first, if they were willing to testify, that according to the strictest sect of our **religion** I lived a Pharisee."*

Here the word "religion" has the meaning of ceremonies for worship and the adherence to certain disciplines to be practised, possibly on a daily basis. In Acts 26:5 Paul was saying that his accusers should be able to confirm how he once lived. As we read the Gospels, we see that the Pharisees were the strictest of the strict in adhering to outward religious ceremonies and disciplines. Such disciplines had to do with washing, praying, what foods could and could not be eaten, restrictions associated with the Sabbath; the list was almost endless. The Lord spoke about them as being hypocrites because their heart was not right with God and their whole religious life was one of outward show to impress others. So on two occasions the Lord Jesus spoke to Pharisees and scribes as follows: Luke 11:43, *"Woe to you Pharisees! For you love the best seats in the synagogues and greetings in the marketplaces"*, and Luke 20:46, *"Beware of the scribes, who desire to go around in long robes, love greetings in the marketplaces, the best seats in the synagogues, and the best places at feasts."*

We can "go to church", or any other religious place, and follow the practices of that denomination and we might seek to live our lives by those disciplines but if our heart has not been touched by God's love then it is an empty religion. This is what Paul was referring to in Acts 26. Outwardly, he seemed to be a very godly Pharisee, but that did not stop him agreeing to murder Stephen; read Acts 7:55-8:1 and Acts 22:20. There is no excuse for that or any similar actions in the name of God or Christianity. The Lord's own words clearly taught the opposite to such hypocrisy. From time to time, on the news, we hear an arrested person say, "God told me to do it". That is clearly contradictory to one of the Lord's major messages, both "to love one another", addressed to believers, and "to love your enemies", the rule by which believers deal with others.

Finally, one last Scripture on this point of a hypocritical religion which the Lord Jesus mentioned in Luke 18:10-14, *"Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, 'God, I thank You that I am not like other men - extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax*

*collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess.' And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me a sinner!' I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."*

The Pharisee was full of himself, what he did and that he was not like others, even the man next to him - a tax collector. On the other hand, the tax collector was very conscious that he was a failure in God's eyes. He did not come boasting or condemning others. He came looking to God for mercy. In Romans 3:23 we have the verse which states simply, "*All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God*".

Paul's adherence to the Jews' religion did not help as it only highlighted the fact that he was a sinner. The scribes and Pharisees who loved the outward show, drawing attention to themselves, only demonstrated that they did not know God at all. It was the tax collector who appreciated that he needed mercy. We cannot earn our way into heaven, no matter how good we may think we are or seem to be to other people. A place in heaven depends upon whether we know Jesus as our Saviour and on Him alone.

### **A Religion of Self Inflicted Punishment**

We read in Colossians 2:20-23, "*Therefore, if you died with Christ from the basic principles of the world, why, as though living in the world, do you subject yourselves to regulations - 'Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle', which all concern things which perish with the using - according to the commandments and doctrines of men? These things indeed have an appearance of wisdom in self-imposed religion, false humility [asceticism], and neglect of the body [self abuse], but are of no value against the indulgence of the flesh.*"

In Paul's letter to the Colossians, he deals with a wide range of problems some of which are mentioned above. What I want to highlight is the self denial (asceticism) and self abuse. You will remember that at the commencement I read a quotation from a dictionary as to the meaning of "religion". It mentioned that in certain denominations those that followed the defined practices were monks and nuns. In some of these "religious orders", Christian and non-Christian, self denial and self abuse were and still are common today. So we have adherents to such a religion making themselves a virtual prisoner in a small chamber - like a self contained flat or room. They may physically afflict themselves to get rid of "wrong thoughts and desires" in an attempt to become more holy. They do not realise that the physical body was not the problem but the old nature in them that gives rise to wrong thoughts and desires. The old nature needs dealing with at the cross of Christ by accepting Him as Saviour and to see the teaching that deliverance is in Christ. This is the teaching of Romans. In Romans 7 we learn that the old nature cannot do anything right. At the beginning of Romans 8, we learn what is true of those who are in Christ and have the liberating power of the "*Spirit of life*".

Constantly punishing oneself is not the liberated life of a true Christian. Even today there are some Christians who are almost obsessed with constantly seeking forgiveness because of daily 'sinning'. It is a very negative attitude and outlook on the Christian life. It hinders progress in the person's soul. Spiritual growth is stunted and makes the Christian life an almost constant burden. This again is another self occupation. It is a victory for Satan who has reduced a Christian to being stuck to the starting block of the Christian race. There is no full assurance of forgiveness.

We need to get our eyes off self and on to Christ. As Paul stated in Philippians 1:21, "*For to me, to live is Christ*". This is the power of a positive attitude to live for Christ in this world so that when people see me they see a vision of Christ working and living through me.

### **True Religion at Work**

We read in James 1:26-27, "*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.*"

In James 1:26-27 we have initially the essential quality of self control. Lack of self control is a sign that the old nature, that which dominated our lives before we trusted Christ as Saviour and Lord, is still very much active and we have let it get out of control. Self control, in James 1:26, is illustrated by the bridled tongue. An unbridled tongue is destructive and hurtful to others. The word "religious" has the meaning of fearing or respecting God. An unbridled tongue is inconsistent with respecting God.

In Proverbs we have examples of the uncontrolled tongue: lying, flattery, perverse, wounding, spiteful and backbiting. These are destructive and hurtful and totally inconsistent with the Lord's own command to love one another. Therefore, when true religion is embraced the tongue is under control, the control of the Spirit of God.

In James 1:27 we see that sincere religion, that which is pure and undefiled, is active in good works towards others. So James brings two issues to our attention of a positive nature. First, we are to have a care towards "*orphans and widows in their trouble*". In our country, the government for many years has provided help for such as orphans and widows and their needs might not be so obvious. But, we should always be on the look out to help over and above what the government provides.

In addition to our own country, there are Christians in other lands who may well be counted in the category of "*orphans and widows*". Not all the governments of the world have the same care for their own citizens and in some countries Christians are discriminated against. The Bible teaches that we are to help believers in other countries as Paul himself did when he carried gifts of money to impoverished believers in Judea.

The second issue is at the end of James 1:27, "*keep oneself unspotted from the world*". The first issue was to look outwards; this second is inward. To be a useful person for Christ, we need to be a clean person, free from the evils of the world, unsullied and irreproachable. There should be no stain on our character, nothing that the unbelieving world can point the finger to and accuse us of hypocrisy. If that should happen, then our reputation as a Christian is tarnished. It damages the Christian testimony of our fellowship and it brings shame on our Saviour.

### **To Summarise**

Time forbids us to consider all the references to "religion" or "religious" found in the New Testament. I commend it to you for further study.

### **What we have seen may be summarised as follows:**

Do you have a religion that is based on superstition and fear? You need the assurance and peace of the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Do you have a supposed Christian religion that omits the basic fundamental point that Jesus is the Son of God and that He alone is the mediator between God and Man?

Do you live by a set of rules and try to earn your way to heaven? Is your Christian life only an outward show to impress others and also God? You need to start with the inside as God looks on the heart (see 1 Samuel 16:7).

Are you constantly asking for forgiveness, plagued with doubt and feeling helpless about sin? Seek the assurance that Christ Jesus has made you free when you accepted Him as your Saviour and Lord through true hearted repentance.

Finally live out your new life in Christ. As a Christian, you can have a positive impact where you are and on the people round about you. Demonstrate to a confused and doubting world that Christianity is the religion that works. Christianity is driven by true love, not the anger and hatred that we see in the world.

May the Lord bless you today and thank you for listening.

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