

607 Do I Have to be religious to be a Christian?

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God's Answers to Life's Questions

The word “religion” conjures up many ideas in people’s heads. Some people in the name of religion do strange things, wear strange clothes, and say strange words. Throughout his public ministry, Jesus had to deal with Pharisees, who were very religious people, but often misguided by their own self-righteousness. Today we have people who carry crosses across the country to make a point or lift their hands. Others have bumper stickers on their cars or wear jewelry declaring their beliefs. Some religious workers wear special garments or collars. Is this the kind of “religion” Jesus wants. Do we have to be religious to be a Christian?

Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount devotes eighteen verses to religious appearance. Jesus said in Matthew 6:1-4, “Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven. Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”

Jesus called these folks, “hypocrites.” Hypocrites are actors or pretenders. They pretend to be something that they don’t intend to be. They do what they do to be seen and be praised by others. While they may receive accolades from others, they don’t receive the blessing of God. Their hearts were more focused on receiving praise than in giving to God. Their love was not for God but for themselves, so they sounded a trumpet for everyone to see what great compassion they had for the needy. While God wants us to give to help the poor, He wants us to do it secret. Our left hand is not to know what our right hand is doing. Jesus is asking us to do things for a more noble purpose than self.

Jesus then speaks about prayer in Matthew 6:5-8, “And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you. And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.” The problem was not so much praying in public as it was their motives.

They would pray loud and long in the synagogue or on street corners. Prayer is a good thing, and we all need to pray. Pious Jews prayed three times daily, once in the morning, once in the afternoon, and once in the evening. When time for prayer came, no matter what they were doing they stopped to pray. Some of these hypocrites made a point of being in a very visible place to be seen and praised by others. We should know: No public actions can ever serve as a measure of the reality of an individual’s personal relationship with God. Repeating phrases, saying religious things, assuming religious postures or lifting up hands doesn’t make one righteous before God.

Jesus tells a parable in Luke 18:9-14 about two men who were praying. He told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt: “Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.’” Now here is a man who is pretty sold on himself. He was praying not to God but to himself—reading his

resume about how righteous and good he was and how unlike other people he was.

But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up 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, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.” The humble tax-collector (publican) was so ashamed of himself that he would not even lift his eyes to heaven (the way they prayed in those days). Beating his breast showed his sorrow and anguish for his sinfulness. He knew that he was a sinner and needed God. The Pharisee didn’t need God; the Pharisee probably thought God needed him.

The Pharisee was so full of himself that he really had no place for God in his life. He couldn’t be justified because in his own mind he didn’t need to be justified. He didn’t need God. Jesus began the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5:3, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” A person poor in spirit is like the tax-collector not the Pharisee. He sees his spiritual poverty and utter need for God’s grace and direction. There is a great difference between being religious and being righteous. Righteousness springs from a relationship with the Lord in heaven not from showy religion. We are all like the tax-collector; we need the grace of Christ to forgive us of our sins.

Jesus said of the hypocritical Pharisees in Matthew 23:5-12, “They do all their deeds to be seen by others. For they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long, and they love the place of honor at feasts and the best seats in the synagogues and greetings in the marketplaces and being called rabbi by others. But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brothers. And call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven. Neither be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Christ. The greatest among you shall be your servant. Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.”

Jesus Himself, though He was the Son of God, who created the world looked at himself as a servant. He said in Matthew 20:25-28, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” Jesus could have exalted himself, but he lived his whole life as a servant, giving of himself to others in kindness and love. Doing His Father’s will was the focus of Jesus’ life and motives.

In Philippians 2:5-8, Paul helps us understand the thinking of Jesus. He said, “Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.” Jesus, as our example, with humility takes the form of a servant. He made himself nothing and was willing to die a shameful and painful death so that we might live free from sin. We need that humble, servant attitude in our lives as well.

The Scriptures never speak of Jesus as “religious.” Yet we can clearly see the devotion of Jesus to His Father. Jesus once went without a meal and told his disciples, “My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me and to accomplish His work” (John 4:34). Jesus tells us in John 15:8-11, “My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be My disciples. Just as the Father has loved Me, I have also loved you; abide in My love. If you keep My

commandments, you will abide in My love; just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love. These things I have spoken to you so that My joy may be in you, and *that* your joy may be made full."

Jesus loved His Father by keeping His commandments. He asks us to "abide in" His love by keeping His commandments. This is a noble and a righteous motive. This is true religion, when one acts humbly out of love and faith, not out of selfish ambition. The Christianity of the Bible is not made up of gold crosses, elaborate rituals, or theatrical performances. There were no organs for hundreds of years. The only thing in the New Testament regarding our dress is that we be modest and respectful. The Bible doesn't tell us that one posture is more reverent than another. These things come from the minds of men not from God. They are a show of religion, but they don't make anyone righteous.

Jesus said at the close of the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 7:21-23, "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven *will enter*. Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness.'" One can say all the right words and appear to do the right things, but true righteousness comes from doing the will of the Father who is in Heaven, not from appearances or performances.

James spoke of the religious person in James 1:26-27, "If anyone thinks himself to be religious, and yet does not bridle his tongue but deceives his *own* heart, this man's religion is worthless. Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of *our* God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, *and* to keep oneself unstained by the world." Religion here speaks of what one does in the pew at church. A person who talks ugly all week long is just fooling himself if he thinks God will accept his worship on the Lord's day. Pure and undefiled religion is when one serves widows and orphans and keeps his life pure from sin. The world does not always see or approve what God does.

According to 1 Samuel 16:7, "God *sees* not as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart." Many people have their criteria for what a religious person is supposed to be like, but their view is quite different from God's. God said in Isaiah 55:8-9, "For My thoughts are not your thoughts, Nor are your ways My ways," declares the LORD. For *as* the heavens are higher than the earth, So are My ways higher than your ways And My thoughts than your thoughts." Just because we "feel" something is religious or like something does not mean that God approves of it. Judge not according to appearance, but judge with righteous judgment (John 7:24)

Judging with righteous judgment means coming to understand the will of God for our lives and living by His will. Paul said in Ephesians 5:15-17, "Therefore be careful how you walk, not as

unwise men but as wise, making the most of your time, because the days are evil. So then do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is." Some people in Paul's day followed what he called "will worship," that is self-made religion. They took some things from Judaism, some from the pagan religions, and some from the traditions of men. He said, "If you have died with Christ to the elementary principles of the world, why, as if you were living in the world, do you submit yourself to decrees, such as,

'Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!' (which all *refer to* things destined to perish with use)—in accordance with the commandments and teachings of men? These are matters which have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and self-abasement and severe treatment of the body, *but are* of no value against fleshly indulgence" (Colossians 2:20-23). You see, human "religion" appears wise, but it doesn't really help. It doesn't get below the surface into the heart of a person. It might be able to control and manipulate, but man-made religion doesn't change the heart or life. What people need today is not more religion but more faith, love, and obedience to the Lord Jesus.

True righteousness comes from His grace and His cleansing blood. You can't be righteous through good works or through your talents. You can only be righteous when with faith and repentance you are obedient to the will of the Father who is in heaven. He wills that those who come to Him through Jesus believe in Him, repent of their sins, confess the name of Jesus before others, and be baptized (immersed) in water for the forgiveness of sins. True faith means a close relationship with God, including prayer, Bible study, personal devotions, and assembling with the church regularly. It means humble service and pure living. Wouldn't you like to please God?

Righteousness means doing things the way that God wills, not the way people want. That has to be the criterion by which we make all our decisions. What does God want? In a pluralistic society like ours, many churches have gone door to door asking people what they want. They imagine that the church should be a church of the "people." Well, you can get a crowd that way. You can give the people what they want, but you might miss God doing so. Paul urged Timothy in 2 Tim. 4:2-4, "preach the word; be ready in season *and* out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine but *wanting* to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires, and will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn aside to myths." My friend, aren't we already seeing some of that? Some religious services are little more than performances, and some preaching is little more than story after story without the Word of God. Ear tickling is popular, but only the pure gospel can save souls. Today more than ever, we need God's word, not pop psychology or "feel-good" religion. We don't need religion we need to repent. We don't need religion, we need to be right with the Living God. I hope you'll get your life right today!

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