

Hating Religion, Loving Jesus



Gary Wilkerson September 18, 2017

I travel around the world for ministry, and when I'm in a Buddhist nation I pray for the people there to know Jesus. When I'm in the Muslim world, I pray for the people there to have a revelation of Christ. And when I'm in Israel, I pray for every Israelite to know Jesus. I want all the peoples of the world to know the reality of Jesus. Then when I return home, I pray every Christian would know Jesus too!

I hope you got that joke—but I also hope you know I'm only half joking. Our lives as followers of Christ are not about an identifiable religion. They are about a knowable Person, Jesus. There's a huge difference, and it makes all the difference in our daily lives.

The Bible tells us we have three things working against us in our walk with Christ: the world, our flesh and the devil. I've often wondered, "Why isn't religion included in that list? It works against our relationship with Jesus, too." Then I realized religion is in all three!

When I use the word "religion," what I really mean is religiosity. This is the idea that we place religion—our theological beliefs and practices—at the center of our lives, instead of the loving God behind it all. It's in Jesus that we live, breathe and have our being, not a system of beliefs or works.

When you look at it that way, religion becomes an expression of *our flesh*, meaning our sin nature. The Holy Spirit identifies our sinfulness to us, but our flesh uses religion as a front to resist repenting and make us feel good about ourselves. My Uncle Don Wilkerson calls this "front-sliding." Backsliding is when people fall away from Jesus by turning to gross sins. Front-sliding is falling in the other direction: turning away from Jesus and toward religion.

Let's face it, being religious can be a lot more comfortable than being full of Jesus' love. Being led by his love can make us seem a little crazy to the world. And that's how the world works against us. It makes us careful and cautious in loving and obeying Christ.

Satan certainly loves religion as well. If he can't get you to backslide—to numb all your senses through sin or addiction—he'll tempt you to front-slide. He'll shift your focus away from the cost of loving Christ and toward religious norms, rules and regulations that are doable and measurable. These don't produce life, as Paul says, but lead instead to death.

Please don't misunderstand me when I say we're to hate religion. What I mean is we're to hate those things that lead to spiritual death rather than to true life in Christ. Certain preachers say they hate religion, but what they really mean is they hate the holy, righteous rule of God that keeps them from indulging their fleshly desires. They preach a license to sin freely with no guilt. And that's the exact opposite of what I'm talking about. Hating religion doesn't mean loving your flesh; it means loving Jesus more.

One of the thrills of my life is continually learning just how big Jesus is.

Isaiah 6 contains a famously glorious passage about Jesus: "I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple" (Isaiah 6:1). Growing up, I had this vision of the Lord in mind—that he

was off in a distant place, removed from me, an entity I needed to address in the language of the King James Bible, as “Thee” and “Thou.”

Yet what does our high, holy God have to say about us lowly, sinful people who follow him? Isaiah tells us: “Thus says the One who is high and lifted up, who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly, and to revive the heart of the contrite” (57:15). Yes, our Father is holy, majestic and glorious—yet he abases himself to dwell within our humble, sin-stained hearts.

I think every child instinctively knows the difference between hating religion and loving Jesus. One day when my daughter was young, she popped up between the pages of the newspaper I was reading. I was tired and shooed her away, wanting just a few minutes to relax before working on the sermon I needed for the next Sunday. But she kept popping up, saying, “Daddy, I want to tell you something.” I just kept shooing her, thinking of the clock ticking away on my relaxation. This back-and-forth stopped when I finally said, “Honey, what do you want to tell me?” She answered, “I love you.”

She knew the difference between religion—my perfectionism as a preacher—and loving Jesus, which she was demonstrating to me. God’s Word makes it clear he wants us to approach him as my daughter did me—calling out to our “Daddy,” Abba, who’s nearby, not distant or beyond our reach.

David is the only person in Old Testament history who called God “Abba.” He wrote, “How precious to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! If I would count them, they are more than the sand” (Psalm 139:17-18). In other words, “You can’t count the number of precious thoughts God has about you. Pick up a handful of sand at the beach and ponder how many grains there are. That’s how many wonderful thoughts God has of you *at that very moment*. Now look at the sandy shore stretching to the horizon and consider all his loving thoughts toward you. They never end!”

By contrast, religion convinces us to be miserable—that our life is no good, that we keep trying only to keep failing, that we feel what’s the use of going on. But Jesus speaks the truth to us, telling us we have abundant life so we no longer have to wrestle in our heart. In short, a religious heart moves us away from Jesus, while his love always draws us nearer.

I found myself wrestling between these two realities on a recent trip to the Middle East where we held a pastors conference. Many of the dedicated pastors who attended traveled great distances to be there, so we wanted to ensure every session was worth their while. That kicked in my perfectionism. After every session, I focused my mind on the next one. During the breaks, I took walks through the city rehearsing my message for the next session. Yet all that time I was passing by people who’d never even heard the name Jesus.

When I realized that, I thought, “This isn’t right. I’m already prepared to speak to these wonderful pastors. All my rehearsing is overkill; it isn’t serving them, it’s just serving my perfectionism. And that is religion! Lord, make my moments on these streets like yours, when you walked through Jerusalem. I want to focus on the people I encounter. Holy Spirit, guide my steps.”

Once I prayed that, my heart was freed—and the exchanges I had with people were wonderful, Jesus-centered moments. I’m confident our exchanges are still echoing through eternity.

If we choose to walk as Jesus did—doing as he directs, not what our flesh dictates—we won’t have to curse the darkness.

One tendency of religious people is to focus on the darkness rather than the light. I hear so many Christians today spouting bitter words: “The culture is to blame,” or “The government is at fault,” or “That special interest group is a negative influence.” If you walk as Jesus did, you won’t curse the darkness because you’re already focused on the light you bring. Let me illustrate this.

Think of yourself as sitting in a church service when the lights suddenly go out. The entire place is totally dark. If a maintenance worker turns on just one small light in that room, it is immediately seen by everyone in the congregation, no matter where it’s placed. Friend, that is a picture of you in a totally darkened world. No matter how vast the dark space may be, your light can be seen by everyone in the vicinity. It can’t be hidden, so let it

shine! Then there's no need to be caught up in anguished conversations about our culture.

This kind of walk doesn't just move you out of religious mode but transports you into the love of Jesus. That never happens as a result of religious performance. As John reminds us, "We love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19).

If we try to accomplish the work of God in our own strength, apart from his love, there won't be any power behind it. Paul points out, "If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal" (1 Corinthians 13:1). By contrast, Christ's love gives us a pulpit everywhere, with the everlasting power of heaven behind it: "Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when the perfect [love] comes, the partial will pass away" (13:8-10).

When the Spirit moves us to speak in love, we are to do so, even if it makes us look a little crazy. My wife, Kelly, and I were at Times Square Church in New York City recently, and we went out to eat after the service. Without knowing why, I was moved to tell one of the waiters in our area that Jesus loved him. He looked at me not knowing what to say. Later I saw him telling the wait staff what I'd said, and I got some of the usual looks, as if I were nuts. Then an interesting thing happened: As we were leaving, a different waiter stopped me and asked if I would pray for him!

Friend, that is the difference between religion and Jesus' love. Loving Jesus means sharing his witness when it might make you seem crazy—and seeing the power of God move mightily. Loving Jesus is life-giving, active and FUN!

World Challenge workers in the Middle East and other closed nations have been reporting something very unusual. They're meeting people who've never heard the gospel but who have dreams and visions of Jesus. When they ask these people what those dreams are like, the people answer, "Jesus appeared to me and told me he loved me. When I woke, I determined to search out someone who knows this Jesus, or who carries this book you have, the Bible, so I can learn about him."

This transcends our fleshly idea of religion. We think that to become a Christian someone has to know spiritual laws, fall on their knees and pray a certain prayer. But that's not how Jesus explained faith to Nicodemus, a Jewish intellectual well-versed in religion. Nicodemus had a hard time understanding what Jesus meant by being "born again"; he asked, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" (John 3:4).

Nicodemus was trying to grasp God's ways through his fleshly mind. But Jesus pointed out that God's ways are never accomplished through our flesh: "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit" (3:5-6). This is the concept behind baptism: When we're dunked in the water, our old life is buried under the depths, and a whole new life begins when we surface. Suddenly we are seated with Christ in heavenly places, our lives no longer dictated by the flesh.

Friend, we've been given something much better than religion. It's time to take all fleshly religiosity out of our walk with Christ and rise up out of death to follow him to higher ground. That's the heart of what James calls "*pure religion* and undefiled before God" (*James 1:27, my emphasis*)—to take the love we've known and share it freely and abundantly with others. It removes all anxiety and loneliness from being a Christian—and it removes any fear about what we're to "do for the Lord," replacing it with a heart to receive and give his love. In a word, it changes everything for us. That is real, abundant life!

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