

The Priorities Of The Kingdom Of God

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If we asked a hundred people, "What is a Christian?" we would get a variety of "answers." The responses would vary according to the location and spiritual state of the culture where the question is asked.

Many responses would reveal a basic misunderstanding of what constitutes true religion and therefore true morality.

It is easy to miss God in religion--any religion, including Christianity.

One way is to think of religion as only a form. Know the teachings. Say the right words. Go through the rituals. Follow the procedures. Obey the rules. Observe the right days.

It is all very neat and pre-packaged. No fundamental principles to guide us. No eternal values to challenge and motivate us. We simply learn "how to do it." God does not have to get involved in our lives, much less change our personal priorities.

That is the way the Scribes and Pharisees did it. They paid tithe of mint and anise and cumin, but neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith (Matthew 23:23). They could murder the Son of God, and yet be religiously scrupulous about where to put the blood money.

It is said that although Herod the Great would not eat pork because it was against his religion, he thought nothing of murdering members of his own family. This prompted the saying, "I would rather be Herod's pig than his son." At least his pig was safe.

So if religion consists only in official beliefs and outward forms, it can be adjusted and adapted to fit our personal purposes and plans. Religion becomes detached from morality and moral principles. So does God. People can choose a "god" that lets them do what they want to do and even approves it.

Another way to miss the real point in religion is to put the main emphasis on group and institutional relationships. "Belonging" is the thing. Don't talk about a personal

relationship with God through Jesus Christ. Just be firmly tied to the institution. Be accepted. Become a member. Hold office. Get involved in programs and projects. Spend time and money on good causes. Establish a rich church heritage. Point with pride to the preachers in the family.

Mix in a little patriotism. "I'm an American. I'm for God and country. Doesn't that make me a Christian?" A personal faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and obedience to Him as Lord somehow "get lost in the shuffle."

Mrs. Randall (not her real name) attended church regularly but showed no evidence of a genuine commitment to Christ. One day her pastor approached her about her standing with God. Immediately and firmly she let him know that she had identified with a little white church back in Oklahoma when she was a child.

The pastor replied quietly, "What would happen if that little white church burned down? Your religion would be gone up in smoke."

Another way to miss the truth is to center religion in one's inner impressions and emotions. This makes religion a matter of metaphysics, not morality. When this happens, religion becomes a matter of subjective experience instead of objective truth.

Years ago I walked into a store to purchase some food items. As I talked with the proprietor, our conversation turned to spiritual things. I attempted to present the objective facts of the gospel to her, but she looked at me with starry eyes and an esoteric smile.

Then she proceeded to inform me that "God" is in everybody and everything, and that I would discover the Universal All within me through meditative exercises that would release the cosmic dynamic within my godlike potential. (At least I think that is what she said. Maybe it was the godlike potential within my cosmic dynamic. Or was it the cosmic potential...?).

Anyway, this never comes to grips with the real issues of true religion: God, sin, and salvation.

We never find God by rummaging around in our minds or surfboarding on the waves of our emotions. We must look beyond ourselves--to the cross of Christ.

The real issue is forgiveness for sin, justification by faith, and moral reconciliation to the one true God. The guilty soul does not need *meditation*; it needs *mediation*, and the only Mediator between God and mankind is the Man Christ Jesus (1 Timothy 2:5).

Before we go any further, it is important to understand that observances, relationships, and experiences are proper and valuable when they are consistent with The Scriptures. They are the *expressions* of true religion, but not the *essence* of true religion.

So what is the essence of true religion? What really matters with God?

The Bible expresses the answer in various ways. As we noted earlier, Jesus said that "justice and mercy and faith" are "the weightier matters of the law" (Matthew 23:23).

Also, in Romans 14:17 we read: "For the kingdom of God is not food and drink, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit."

These passages and others like them all refer to the same thing. They describe the substance of true religion, that is, true Christianity.

So let us examine the priorities of the kingdom of God as listed in Romans 14:17.

First, *righteousness*. True religion comes from the heart, that is, the set of the will. Unless the heart is right, there is no acceptance and fellowship with God, no genuine Christian experience. Without holiness no one will see the Lord (Hebrews 12:14). Jesus said that the pure in heart shall see God (Matthew 5:8).

So then, morality has top priority with God. The cross proves that. Jesus Christ came "to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself" (Hebrews 9:26). He gave Himself for us "that He might redeem us from every lawless deed" (Titus 2:14).

God is serious about righteousness. If He were not, He would not have done what He did by the cross to bring righteousness to us and to make us righteous.

Then *peace*. Peace is more than a calm feeling. It is the cessation of hostilities, unconditional surrender, full reconciliation with God. The heart abandons all controversy with God, drops all charges against Him, and comes into full agreement with His will and His character. The result is a clear conscience and a satisfied mind. It implies faith, trust, confidence. Peace *with* God brings the peace *of* God to the soul.

When the heart (the will) no longer struggles against the will of God but wholeheartedly embraces it, there God's kingdom rules. There is peace.

Also, we have *joy in the Holy Spirit*. "The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God" (Romans 8:16).

Being God's children, we obey the Spirit, walk in the Spirit, live in the Spirit. The fruit of the Spirit is evident in our lives. We no longer resist the efforts of the Holy Spirit to get us to obey the truth. Instead, we have received the love of the truth and we welcome the light and guidance of the Spirit.

The Holy Spirit shows us "the things that have been freely given to us by God" (1 Corinthians 2:12). His presence and His ministry in our lives result in "joy inexpressible and full of glory" (1 Peter 1:8).

This is the happy, abundant life. This is the real Christian life.

This life can be your life right now if you make God's priorities your priorities. Jesus said, "Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you" (Matthew 6:33).

Surrender to the King. Open your heart to Jesus Christ. He will come in, cleanse you from sin, and set up the kingdom of God in your heart and life. That is the moment you truly begin to live. Do it now.