

Theme: Worship

Series: A Theology for Living

MISUNDERSTANDING GOD

It has become a common thing for Christians to distinguish Christian faith from religion. It has always struck me as an odd statement. But if we understand religion to be man's search for God, then I think we can make that distinction. Christian faith is God finding man.

Religion is about externals. And almost everyone is religious. According to the Christian poster, George Barna, about 9% of Americans either don't believe in God or don't know if he exists. So, 91% of Americans believe in God. But what are we to make of the American religious scene? Only one third of Americans believe that Jesus lived a sinless life. Only 24% believe in a literal Satan. And about 75% of Americans believe that salvation can be achieved by good works. Eighty-three percent of Americans identified themselves as Christians, yet only 49% of these individuals described themselves as absolutely committed to Christianity. About 40% identify themselves as born again Christians. (<http://tinyurl.com/3b7wen>)

Other studies suggest that most Americans do not believe in hell. And depending on the poster, 17-40% attend church at least once a month.

Religion comes in all flavors. But basically, religious people do what they do because they think they can impress God or because what they do brings comfort to them. So, they go through rituals and sing hymns or praise songs whichever it may be. They follow ancient rituals or make up new ones. But, all the while, God is kept at a distance or is not there at all.

This describes the very state of spirituality during the last days of Israel. And I suspect that they were a bit confused by the judgment that God handed to them. I think it is easy to become religious. It is predictable, does not require us to think, does not involve a lot of effort. We just follow the tradition and we have met our religious obligation. This is precisely what Israel did. They had compartmentalized their religion from their daily life. Religion is what they did on the Sabbath, what they did at the Temple on certain days but it had nothing to do with everyday life.

Like us, they looked forward to the Day of the Lord. For them, it was when God will come and make Israel the only kingdom. The Messiah would come and the golden age of Israel would ensue. Do we not do the same thing? We look to the second coming with great anticipation. We think it will be a time of great joy and celebration when God will put all things right and we will enter the joy of our God. We will rule with Christ forever.

But God questioned their vision of the future, what are you looking for in the future? Instead of being a great day of joy and celebration, it would be a dark day of judgment. And listen to the horror that God describes. It will be like a man, who runs from a lion, scared to death, only he runs into a bear. Or he leans against the wall and a snake bites him. It will be a day of gloom and darkness.

If this was not bad enough, look at what God says next. He hates their religion! God hated and rejected their festivals. Israel had three major festivals a year that lasted a week or longer. They also celebrated Passover and Yom Kippur. In some of the assemblies they could gather on the solemn occasion to repent of their sin. God declares in the strongest of terms, he hates their assemblies. He rejects their burnt offerings and turns his ears away from their singing of hymns and songs and music. It is as if God was no longer going to church and they did not even notice.

Is it possible for us to do the same thing? Is it possible that we can gather for worship and sing our songs and pray our prayers and preach our sermons and God never shows up because he so hates what we do? It could happen if we turn our faith into mere religion.

Religion is all about me and my search for meaning and purpose. It all about me and my search for God. It is all about what I want and like. Do we not judge the sermon based on whether or not we liked it? Don't we respond to music because we like it or don't like regardless of how it illustrates the sermon or the message it contains? I want this kind of music because I grew up with it or because it makes me feel good or comforts me or because grand ma use to sing it. I want this song or that song because it is the hip new thing on the radio or because it just makes me excited, not like those old boring 16th century songs about God. When we want sermons that make us feel good, when we want music that makes me nostalgic or happy or comfortable, and when we carefully watch the clock, are we not perilously close to turning our faith into religion? We can study the psychology of religion and figure out how to manipulate your feelings and make you feel like you had an experience with God. This is particularly true when music and sermon are catered to your wants. Is that what we want? Are we not in danger of turning our faith into mere religion?

What is all of this about? It is about externals. It is about doing things our way in the name of serving and worshipping God. God's intention was to live in **relationship** to Israel. It was to be a **living relationship**. God would not be distant from them. In fact, he was in

their midst.

Israel's 40 years in the wilderness was by no means their finest hour. But it was a time when they were close to God. God was in their midst. He led them by a cloud of smoke and a pillar of fire. When the Tabernacle was set up, his Shekinah glory settled on the Tabernacle symbolizing his presence among the people. And they did not bring offerings to him everyday. But they brought their obedience and they kept the law and they lived in relationship to him. Now, the relationship was gone. They hardly thought of the Law and they never kept it. None of their sacrifices meant anything, they were mere religious acts, empty symbols. Therefore God said, let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever flowing stream. But even this horrible act of judgment was ultimately meant to be an act of redemption. They had gone so far, their hearts were so hard that they could not hear God. Only something drastic would get their attention. God's purpose even then was redemption.

Surely we can learn from Israel. It is so easy for us to drift off into the same place. We do the same things over and over again. We get up on Sunday morning when we would rather sleep. We fight with the kids and change their clothes three times. We just can't seem to get in gear and get to church on time. And when we are here everything irritates us, the teacher whines on, the music drags on, the preacher drones on. And you did not meet God. But you did not meet God because you have not been living in a relationship with him. You have been practicing religion and not faith. You have not spent time in prayer or Bible Study. In fact, you may have left your Bible on the back deck of your car where it road around all week for others to see your neglect. You have not sat in silence before God meditating on his Word. And you did not get up this morning with the expectation that God would meet you at church. And you do not know if he was here today or not. That is, if you simply practice religion.

Somewhere along the way, we misunderstood God. We thought that God liked our rituals. But our rituals are empty without obedience and without relationship. To obey is better than sacrifice. Worship becomes meaningful only when we love God and live in a daily relationship with him. The hymns, the songs, and prayers and sermons only become a delight when we have delighted in God all week.

Why are you here? Is to practice religion? Or, are you here to express your faith in the living God who loves us and is worthy of our worship?