

“How to Distinguish the Difference Between Good and Bad Religion”
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This morning I want you to use your imagination and visualize with me for a moment Jesus dying on the cross. What do you suppose motivates him to make that voluntary, agonizing, life consuming sacrifice? What causes him to go clear to the wood through death and hell for your forgiveness and mine? I think it’s his religion, his faith, and his friendship with God.

Now imagine that same scene again, only this time look at the scribes and the Pharisees beneath Jesus’ cross. Notice them wagging their heads and taunting Jesus, saying, “He saved others, but he can’t save himself.” (Luke 23:35) What do you suppose motivates them? What causes them to hate Jesus so much that they orchestra his crucifixion and then delight in watching him suffer and die? Again, I think it is their religion.

Watch the Apostle Paul as he holds the coats for some of the crowd while they stone Stephen to death. What do you think motivates Paul to incite that mob to murder? Isn’t it his religion? Now look ahead with me years later after Paul has met the risen Christ on his way to Damascus. Listen to what he writes to the Corinthians and to you and me, “So faith, hope, love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.” (I Corinthians 13:13) Now, what inspires these words? Again, I think it is his religion.

Like anything else religion can be good or it can be bad. Water can cleanse and give life, or it can drown and destroy. Fire can warm our homes and cook our food, but out of control it can burn and kill. It’s the same with religion. Sometimes we divide people into two groups, the religious and the non-religious, and often assume that being religious is better. How many times have we heard it said, or maybe even said it ourselves, “I don’t care what they believe in, just so long as they believe in something.”

Yet, look at some of the acts of bigotry, hatred, and violence that have all been done in the name of God. Not all roads lead to God. Not everyone who speaks about God comes from God. Just as we need to be on the lookout for counterfeit auto parts, look alike Gucci’s, phony telemarketing schemes, we also need to be wary of counterfeit, fake, bad religion.

Bad religion condemns Socrates to drink hemlock and burns women at the stake for witchcraft.

Bad religion recruits children to fight in Crusades and practices torture during the Spanish Inquisition.

Bad religion baptizes slavery and racial segregation in the United States and preaches that apartheid is God’s will in South Africa.

Bad religion inspires mass suicides in Guyana and Southern California and condemns a whole class of people to live as untouchables in India.

Bad religion plants terrorist bombs in Belfast and turns airplanes into guided missiles in New York City, Pennsylvania, and Washington, DC.

It's not true that one religion is as good as another, and that all religious interpretations are equally valid. There are bad religions and demonic misrepresentations.

**Listen now to Jesus speak out against some of the bad religion of his day.
(Please read Matthew 23:23-24 and 27-28)**

In the Gospel of Luke Jesus suggests one way we can distinguish good religion from bad.

(Please read Luke 6:43-45)

**I've already talked a lot about
the dark side,
the downside,
the bad side**

of religion. Now let's look at religion at its best. In the Old Testament the book of Proverbs teaches:

(Please read Proverbs 3:5-7)

The prophet Micah writes:

(Please read Micah 6:6-8)

In the Gospel of John Jesus says, "By this will everyone know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." (John 13:35)

In his First Letter the disciple John writes:

(Please read I John 4:7-9, 15-16 and 20-21)

Did you notice that only one of these Scriptures asks us to believe in God. All the others urge us to "trust in God with all of our hearts," "to walk humbly with God," "to love God and to love others as God loves."

Faith at its best is not just adherence to a set of ideas, dogmas, rituals, or laws, but also a personal, firsthand relationship with God. This is the first characteristic of authentic religion. Authentic religion, religion at its best,

will exalt God, not someone else;

will encourage us to obey God, not someone else;

will teach us and inspire us to talk and to walk with God ourselves.

An old proverb says, "Seeing is believing," and this is true. "Seeing is believing." However, the reverse of this proverb isn't always true. We can believe without seeing, without experiencing. Let me illustrate what I mean. I've lived and traveled in many parts of the United States, but I have yet to visit the coast of Maine in the summer.

Several of my friends who have been there have told me what a magical, beautiful, peaceful place it is, and I believe them. Yet, I've never been there. I've never seen it for myself.

It can be the same with God and faith. We can believe in God without ever experiencing God for ourselves. We can inherit our faith from our families, learn about it from books and websites, borrow it from our friends, believe it merely on the say-so of others. But genuine faith only happens when we experience God for ourselves...and faith at its best will teach us how to do this, and, in fact, will insist that we do this.

One day after worship, the famous Scottish historian, Thomas Carlyle, wrote these words in his diary, "What this parish needs is a preacher who knows God otherwise than by hearsay."

This is true for all of us. We all need to be on speaking terms with God, and religion at its best will teach us how to do this. In the words of the prophet Micah, it will show us how "to walk humbly with our God."

The second characteristic of authentic religion is love: love for God, love for people, and love for the world. Many religions today, including some popular interpretations of Christianity, are not life affirming but life denying. They picture this world as a horrible place, full of temptations, troubles, and tears from which we must be rescued. For them, religion's sole purpose is to secure our individual salvation from these terrible experiences.

"I've come not to condemn the world," says Jesus, "but to save the world." (John 3:17) The disciple John writes, "For God so loved the world..." (John 3:16) Jesus commands, "Go and make disciples of all nations." (Matthew 28:19)

Now to me, these teachings do not sound like the tenets of a world denying, purely individualistic kind of religion. Authentic Christianity does not turn its back on the world. It doesn't see its sole purpose as preparing you and me for one final trip to heaven. At its best, Christianity is concerned not only about eternal life, but also about this life.

In the words of Micah, Christianity also is concerned about "justice" and "kindness." In the teachings of Jesus it involves not only loving God, but also loving our neighbor. The disciple John goes right to the heart of the matter when he writes, "Those who say, 'I love God' and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, can not love God whom they have not seen."

Any faith that encourages us to focus primarily on ourselves;

Any faith that promises us that God will provide everything we want: improved health, improved finances, improved personality;

Any faith that downplays difficulties, promising a life without them

rather than a power to live through them;
Any faith that leads us to pray, “God bless me and my wife, my son,
John and his wife, us four and no more”;
is not genuine faith. Genuine faith leads us beyond ourselves and our self
preoccupation and inspires us to love and to serve others. “As you did it to one of the
least of these my brothers and sisters,” says Jesus, “you did it to me.” Matthew 25:40)
Now, this is religion at its best. This is love at its best.

An ancient legend states that at the entrance to heaven every one of us will be asked
one, maybe two questions. The first question is, “Did you come alone?” If our answer
is, “Yes, I came alone,” a second question will follow, “How could you? How could you
come alone?”

Genuine faith inspires us to reach out, to care, to love.

Paul writes, “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is
no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” (Galatians 3:28)

Genuine faith draws people together. It attracts and includes, rather than divides and
excludes. It creates community. It loves.

A third characteristic of genuine religion is its universal application. Real religion is
not confined to special occasions or to certain aspects of our lives. “In all your ways
acknowledge God,” says Proverbs. It doesn’t say,
acknowledge God only on Sunday mornings; or
acknowledge God only when you want your child baptized or your
daughter married or your father buried; or
acknowledge God only when you are feeling lost, alone, or in trouble.

Proverbs says, “In all your ways acknowledge God.”

Real religion has an integrity that affects and directs all of our lives:

- Our politics as well as our prayers;
- Our money as well as our morals;
- Our business decisions as well as our family decisions;
- Our sexual behavior as well as our order of worship.

To follow God in Christ is to follow God in Christ everywhere, not just in those areas of
our lives labeled as “religious.” Authentic religion has a mind-set and a heart-set that
allows God to guide us in everything we say and do.

So, why then does there seem to be so much bad religion in our world today? Perhaps,
it’s just because good news is often no news, and it is the bad, the abnormal, the
outrageous, that almost always attracts all the attention.

However, I suspect bad religion is flourishing for other reasons deeper than this. In
America today

over ninety percent of people polled say they believe in God;

**over sixty percent belong to some community of faith; and
on any given weekend almost forty percent are in public worship.
Why then aren't we making more of a difference for good?**

**Is it because many of us are
only half-hearted in our worship and prayer habits?
only half-knowledgeable about the life and the teachings of Jesus?
only half-way willing to trust and to follow Christ?**

**The best way I know to expose bad, fake, phony religions and to minimize their appeal
is to place beside them a great religion:**

**A religion that teaches us how to have a firsthand, personal
experience with God;**

A religion that teaches and practices an all-inclusive love;

A religion that informs us and guides us in every aspect of our lives.

**May God inspire us and empower us to redouble our own efforts to practice this kind of
religion.**