

Religion Worthy of God (Matthew 23:1-12)

Our word "religion" comes from a Latin word that pretty much means "to reconnect with God." Religion, in other words, is that which is suppose to help us live our lives in such a way that we reconnect with the God who created us. But we humans have all sorts of ideas about how it is that we can and should do this. No wonder then that there are more than 4,200 religions,¹ although no one really knows the exact number.

Even within our own religion, Christianity, there have always been a multitude of ideas about how our religion should be practiced. For example, in the 400's there was a 13-year-old named Symeon who, under the influence of his mother Martha and inspired by a lecture on the Beatitudes, developed a zeal for Christianity. Symeon practiced Christianity by subjecting himself to all kinds of difficulties. One year, he spent the whole of Lent without eating or drinking. Then he took to standing continually upright for long stretches of time until his limbs would actually give out. Eventually Symeon decided that his religion required him to live on a small platform on top of a pillar. The pillar was about 15 yards off the ground, and the platform was no bigger than one square yard. According to Edward Gibbon in his History of The Decline and Fall of The Roman Empire, "In this...lofty station, Symeon "resisted the heat of thirty summers, and the cold of as many winters... He sometimes prayed in an erect attitude, with his outstretched arms in the figure of a cross, but his most familiar practice was that of bending his meager skeleton from the forehead to the feet..." After 37 years, Symeon died, "without descending from his column."

Then there was Agnes de Rochier, a Christian who lived in the 1400s. At the age of 18, Agnes asked to be entombed in a cell inside a church. Workmen built a brick cell around Agnes' body, leaving only a small opening through which Agnes could breathe, hear the prayers and church services, and receive food. She lived eighty years inside this self-imposed prison, practicing her peculiar form of Christianity.

Symeon and Agnes lived a long time ago, but we all know that there are just as many strange ways that Christianity is practiced today. All sorts of people practice our religion without reading the Bible or attending church. As a result, they come up with all sorts of ideas, beliefs, practices, and rituals. In fact, in his book entitled When Religion Gets Sick, well-known counselor Wayne Oates discussed "how neurotic and psychotic persons can take perfectly good religion and twist and distort it into something sick and evil to serve their own purposes."²

¹ <http://www.adherents.com>

² Killinger, John, "When Religion Makes You Sick"

If only we could get all Christians to carefully read today's gospel lesson. For in our gospel lesson for today, Jesus set the record straight with regard to being a follower of his, with regard to Christianity, with regard to our religion. Talking to a crowd and to his disciples, Jesus used a visual example with which the crowd and his disciples were familiar. He knew that a picture is worth a thousand words. So, Jesus used the scribes and the Pharisees to illustrate what good religion is and what bad religion is. Jesus used the example of the scribes and the Pharisees to lift up nine different characteristics of the religion he would have us follow, religion that is worthy of God .

First, Jesus began by actually being complimentary to the scribes and the Pharisees. He said that they "sit on Moses' seat." In other words, they were carrying on that which had come from God through Moses, the servant of God. Their religion was grounded in scripture. Thus, Jesus said, "do whatever they teach you and follow it." This tells us that scripture should be the basis for our religion too.

But, **second**, Jesus pointed out that the scribes and Pharisee didn't practice what they preached—or taught. They knew and taught God's instructions through Moses in scripture, but they didn't live their religion's guidelines. This reminds me of a certain man loved to go to revivals. He loved to get up and testify. He made his witness over and over again, publicly admitting his past sinful life. He had done it all--lied, cheated, stolen, pushed dope, spent time in jail, and broken all the Ten Commandments and then some! It was his custom at the end of his long recital of wrongdoing to smile and say, "I thank God that through all those wicked years, I never lost my religion." Poor foolish man. Like the scribes and Pharisees, he just didn't get it. If we're followers of Jesus, if we're practicing his religion, we will be living as he did—doing the things he did, based on scripture.

Third, Jesus pointed out that the scribes and Pharisees "tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others." A religion that makes life more difficult for others is not a religion worthy of the God who sent Jesus to minister to others in his name. Jesus here made it clear that our religion should seek to help others—by showing them love—through compassion, forgiveness, justice, peace, and hope.

Fourth, Jesus said that the scribes and Pharisees themselves were "unwilling to lift a finger" to remove the burdens from those around them. Someone who understood the importance of helping others was a woman named Osceola McCarty, who died not too long ago at the age of 91. You may never have heard of Osceola, but she lived her life to help others, most of whom she would never personally meet. You see, Osceola McCarty washed other peoples' clothes all of her life. And every week, she put a little aside in a savings account. The money added up, and in the summer of 1995,

Osceola McCarty donated \$150,000, most of her life savings, to the University of Southern Mississippi to help students get an education and have a better life than she did. Her unselfish gift inspired others to give as well. About six hundred persons have added over \$330,000 to the original scholarship fund. Furthermore, Osceola's example of helping others inspired Ted Turner to give his billion dollar gift to the United Nations. Like Osceola, if we're practicing good religion, the religion Jesus said was worthy of God, we will not only be aware of those who are struggling around us—we will do what we can to lift their burdens.

Fifth, if we're practicing the religion Jesus would have us practice, we won't be doing it for what we get out of it—for example, attention and praise. Jesus said, "They do all their deeds to be seen by others; for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long. They love to have the place of honor at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have people call them rabbi." The scribes and Pharisees wanted to be sure that everyone saw how holy they were. Thus they wore bigger phylacteries than anyone else. Phylacteries were leather or wooden boxes that contained certain scripture verses (Exodus 13:1-10, 13:11-16; Deuteronomy 6:4-9, 11:13-21). The phylacteries were tied to the forehead and wrist. The fringe or tassels were worn on the borders of the garments, to remind the Jews of God's commandments. Jesus said that the scribes and Pharisees wore bigger boxes and longer fringe than anyone else to impress others. They used their religion to get attention and praise. In 1953, a man arrived at the Chicago railroad station to receive the Nobel Peace Prize. He stepped off the train, a tall man with bushy hair and a big mustache. As the cameras flashed and city officials approached with hands outstretched to meet him, he thanked them politely. Then he asked to be excused for a moment. He walked through the crowd to the side of an elderly black woman struggling with two large suitcases. He picked them up, smiled, and escorted her to the bus, helped her get on, and wished her a safe journey. Then Albert Schweitzer turned to the crowd and apologized for keeping them waiting. It is reported that one member of the reception committee told a reporter, "That's the first time I ever saw a sermon walking."

Sixth, Jesus said that if our religion is worthy of God, we will humbly consider ourselves students. Jesus said, "you are all students." We'll realize that we need to open ourselves up to learning. And lest we think that we can learn what Jesus wants us to learn from just any ol' book or any ol' person spotlighted by Oprah, Jesus makes it very clear from whom we are to learn.

So, seventh, we're to look to Jesus as our teacher. Jesus said, "you have one teacher....you have one instructor, the Messiah." We should sit so faithfully at

Jesus' feet, we should know the Jesus of our gospels so well, that we know how he would behave and have us behave in every situation of life.

Eighth, Jesus said, "call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father--the one in heaven." In saying these words, Jesus made it clear that our religion is to be based on a close personal relationship with God. And I believe he was also making it clear that we are to have a close personal relationship with one another. For if God is the Heavenly Father of each one of us, then are we not all brothers and sisters?

Ninth, if our religion is worthy of God, we will live as a servant. Jesus said "The greatest among you will be your servant." Symeon the Stylite and Agnes de Rochier spent a lot of time in relationship with God, praying, but they didn't do anything with the closeness they developed with God. A rabbi and a soap maker went for a walk together. The soap maker said, "What good is religion? Look at all the trouble and misery of the world! Still there, even after years--thousands of years--of teaching about goodness and truth and peace. Still there, after all the prayers and sermons and teachings. If religion is good and true, why should this be?" The rabbi said nothing. They continued walking until they noticed a child playing in the gutter. The child was very, very dirty. And then it dawned on the soap maker. He exclaimed, "Rabbi, soap cannot do any good unless it is used!" "Exactly," replied the Rabbi. "Exactly. So too our religion cannot do any good unless it is used." If, our religion is worthy of God, we will place ourselves in his hands, trusting that he will take our servanthood and use it and us in building his kingdom.

Nate Saint was one of five missionaries murdered by members of the Auca Indian tribe in Ecuador. When he died, he left behind a son named Stephen. As Stephen grew up, he missed having a father to guide and love him. Stephen wondered if his father's death had served any purpose. Then, in 1986, Stephen Saint traveled to Timbuktu, Africa, on a mission trip himself. At one point, he found himself stranded in a small town among hostile people. He made his way to a nearby Christian church. The African pastor welcomed Stephen, and the two men began discussing their faith. The pastor said that when he became a Christian, the people of his town shunned him, his teacher beat him, and his family tried to kill him. But, the pastor explained, he had found great inspiration in the stories of Christian martyrs. For instance, he asked, had Stephen ever heard of a missionary to Ecuador named Nate Saint? The story of his murder had made a profound impact on this African pastor's faith. At that moment, Stephen Saint realized the gift that God was giving him. He had traveled halfway around the world to hear from a stranger's lips how his father's sacrificial servanthood had been used by God in building his kingdom.

Grounded in scripture. Practicing what we preach. Never creating or adding to the burdens of others. Doing all we can to lift the burdens of others. Being humble, knowing our place in relationship to God and humankind. Realizing that we should always be open to learning more about God. Faithfully sitting at the feet of our teacher, Jesus. Being in close relationship with God and with one another. Serving God and humankind, even sacrificially. Nine guidelines for us to follow if we want to practice the religion of Jesus—if we want to have a religion worthy of God. Amen.

-- Terry Chamberlain Diehl; Hickman Mills Community Christian Church; November 2, 2008