

RELIGIOSITY

*“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You shut the door of the kingdom of heaven in people’s faces.”
—MATTHEW 23:13*

Religiosity or legalism is again and again one of the great barriers to the Christian life. Jesus warned of three issues in particular that take away from the simplicity and freedom we are meant to have in Him.

The first issue is the imposition of laws and regulations by the Pharisees and teachers of the law replacing the relationship. When God gave the law to Moses, it was in the context of an intimate relationship with Him. Over time, the content of the law replaced the context in which it was given. Jesus said, “They tie up heavy, cumbersome loads and put them on other people’s shoulders...” (Matthew 23:4). The heavy loads were the commandments, which Jewish leaders had expanded to 613 laws, layer upon layer of new rules to qualify the Ten Commandments. All these laws were restrictive, oppressive, heavy, and above all controlling.

Any understanding that the Gospel imposes a heavy burden is the opposite of what Jesus came to do. He said, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28). If we are not enjoying a personal relationship with Christ, we will substitute the context of the law for the content. The context of the law is what enables us to keep the content, because it is Jesus in us who is our enabler.

Secondly, Jesus warned about the externals replacing the internals. He said of the Jewish leaders, “Everything they do is done for people to see” (Matthew 23:5). A mark of religiosity is that you are always looking over your shoulder to be seen by others. God does not enter into the equation, and if you do not have God, all you have is an audience. The third issue Jesus warns about is position replacing principle. The Pharisees loved to be called rabbi, teacher, father, but the position they enjoyed replaced the principle. That is, God Himself, and Christ, alone, is our Father and Master in the sense that He is the only one who imparts new life.

What Jesus thought of religiosity is the very thing that crucified Him. The religious hierarchy of His day had the externals, but not the internals; the content, but not the context; and they held the positions, but not with God. When Jesus came on the scene and said that it was all about God, about life and relationship, liberty and joy, they crucified Him. But God raised Him from the dead in order that we might be indwelt by His Spirit, and enjoy a meaningful, intimate relationship with Him, free of the condemning and burdening restraints of religiosity.

PRAYER: Dear Lord, I know I cannot keep the laws without your indwelling Spirit. Thank You, for the work You are doing in me.

TO REFLECT UPON: Am I living in dependence on Christ in keeping the laws of God?