

# Religion: Form or Force?

by J. Glyn Owen

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*The sermon explores the critical distinction between having a mere form of godliness and embodying the true power of genuine faith in Christ.*

**Duration:** 46:26

**Scripture:** Genesis 1:3, Matthew 6:33, John 15:7, Romans 4:17, Colossians 3:16, 2 Timothy 3:5, Revelation 3:1

**Topics:** "Religion"

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## Description

In this sermon, the speaker emphasizes the power that comes from having the almighty God dwell within our hearts. The Bible portrays this concept in various ways, such as God dwelling in us through His word. The consequences of having a form of religion without the power of God are tragic, as it misrepresents the gospel. The gospel is not just a moral philosophy, but good news that provides both the standard of God and the power to live according to it. The speaker encourages Christians to avoid those who have a form of godliness but deny its power.

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## Transcript

I would like to take two or three, maybe four, Sunday evenings to look at a passage of Scripture and a theme which is suggested by that fifth verse in the third chapter of 2 Timothy, a passage which introduces something which is exceedingly relevant and important for all of us as Christian people. Here the apostle is referring to some who, according to him, have a form of godliness, or of religion, a form of godliness, but they are denying the power of it. And he did, the Christian, the young man Timothy to whom he is writing here, he did have nothing to do with such people, people who have a form of godliness, but who are at the same time denying the real power of it.

Good and the shepherd that the apostle was, it was inconceivable that he should not at some stage or other forewarn his young convert and assistant Timothy of the dangers that would emanate somewhere toward the end of the age. And here we have at least one aspect of that teaching of the great apostle Paul concerning some of the perilous times that would await the church before the consummation of the age. He really does warn Timothy, and through Timothy and through the guidance and direction of the Spirit in providing the word for us in the twentieth century, he warns us likewise, of perilous times that must come to pass before the age comes to its conclusion and its consummation.

Well now Paul's eyes then are focused on the last day. And here he tells young Timothy of some of the difficult things that will take place. Now when you read the list that we have of the prevailing sins of the last

day, or of the last days, you will notice of course that they're all prevalent at all times.

And there hasn't been an age hardly since apostolic times, I don't think there has been an age, not that all these sins were prevalent. Nevertheless the apostle would seem to be suggesting that when the conscious is drawing nearer, when the king is about to descend with the clouds of heaven in his glory to receive his people to himself, and the last final judgment occasion is about to dawn, evil will spread as never before. Leading up to that climactic occasion it would seem that all these sins that characterize the several ages of history will come as it were and will mushroom as it were toward a harvest.

But of all the iniquities that the apostle seems to put his finger on, there is something here in our text which is exceedingly relevant to a religious people. I deliberately use that word religious. There is this awesome possibility that in the midst of the most profound ungodliness there should nevertheless be a religious people who simply have the form of godliness.

And who are not only content with that, but in their heart of hearts they are actually opposing and frustrating and fighting against and denying the essential power of true religion in the heart. And so my subject is religion, form or force. Something external and visible only or something that is deeply inward, subjective, inexperienced, and from the depths within, as it were, forming a kind of dynamite or dynamic mainspring that gives birth to character and conduct that is acceptable in the sight of God.

Now we look at this tonight and this is a kind of introduction to what we are going to be looking at later on. The first thing I want to call your attention is to this notable description of religion. And I shall be using that word tonight probably, if I'm consistent, because that is the word that the Apostle Paul uses here.

It's translated godliness. It's the word for piety or the word for religion. It doesn't necessarily mean godliness in the highest loftiest New Testament sense, but it means religion, it means piety.

It may be godliness if it is true and if it is genuine, but it need not be genuine, and in this case it probably isn't. So we should be translated as such. So whether I'm consistent or not, at least you will know what the Apostle is getting at.

A notable description, having a form of godliness or a religion, but denying the power thereof. Now, underlining, underlining this text is a concept of true religion, a concept of genuine piety, of godliness properly so called. And the Apostle is judging this furious species as one who knows what the genuine article is.

And what he's saying here is this. Genuine religion has two sides to it, two aspects to it. And he uses two Greek words.

First, there is an external aspect, *morsosis*, that's the word. It's the form, it's the pattern, it's the shape of one's life, viewed as from the outside. Religion shapes your life.

But then, says the Apostle Paul, that's only the half of it. Now, genuine religion is not all form, it's not all visible to the human eye, it's not all what you can see. There is another element altogether to it.

There is something that is intangible and invisible and in words. There is this other word, *dominus*, power. You can't see it, but you can see its effect.

You can't put your hand on it, and yet you know it's there. And the concept of genuine religion that comes through here is this beautiful, this balanced concept of things. It has an outward pattern, it has an inward dynamic.

Now, you will appreciate this, when I say to you that simply looking at this description of genuine religion, I have found most challenging. For it is so easy for us, and it is perhaps even more of a danger, more of a peril, for a minister of the word, than for anyone else. I don't know about that, but it certainly is easy for the minister of the word to be content with the outward form.

With the things that are visible, the things that are evident, the things that are obvious. And to forget the all importance of the corresponding feature to which the apostle Paul here refers, the dominus, the power, the inner power that should always generate behavior, and not only generate it, but regulate it. Now, I wanted to look at these two things briefly in the first place.

First, religion has form, morphosis. One of the famous German New Testament scholars, and one of the best, says that this verbal noun as it is, morphosis, translated form, this verbal noun denotes, A, the activity of shaping, or the result of that activity. And then he goes on to add that, with reference to the activity of shaping, he says, as, for example, when one shapes a tree.

Now, I don't know what picture that brings up in your imagination, but it brings something very clearly to my memory and to my imagination. In certain parts of the south of England, I have seen, on a number of occasions, privet bushes and privet hedges that have been cultivated. You may have them here.

If I knew about them, I would refer to them. Well, I don't, but you may know of them here. And these privets have been shaped.

I remember a place, and I can't tell you where it is, but it's somewhere in the south of England, where outside the house there is a beautiful lawn, and they must have cultivated these privets over a period of years. Privet bushes, privet hedges, but they've all become decorated, and you have a host of birds there. When you come along, you think, these are birds.

But, you see, the privets have been steamed. The privets have been cut and trimmed and shaped to represent a flock of birds. I remember one place in the north of Ireland, where you had two massive pheasants on either side of the gateway to the garden.

The same principle. Privets shaped. Now, what the Apostle Paul says here is this.

Godliness, religion, genuine religion, has shape. Something, you can see that it takes form, patterns. Different from someone else, maybe, but it is essentially religion.

And in the truly godly person, of course, it is godlike. In a general way, this may be true of all religions, but in the Christian faith, it is a likeness, it is a resemblance to God. Life on its exterior side, its external side, is shaped after God.

Thinking of Christian experience or Christian piety, then, its form would take some such pattern as follows. The first thing about Christian experience is that it begins with the acceptance of what God has revealed. This is the beginning of the shape it takes.

Every Christian experience really begins here, as far as the outward side is concerned. Other things may have taken place undercover, in the depths of the soul. But viewed from the human perspective, this is where Christianity begins in the soul.

By the acceptance of what God has said about himself, about man, about the world, about human needs. In other words, the acceptance of what God has revealed. You may always know godliness as envisaged in the Bible in this way.

It is characterized by an acceptance of God's self-revelation, revelation of himself, and his revelation of all else. A truth revealing about life in general. Then, of course, it goes beyond that.

It involves a participation in the salvation that God has provided. Not just the knowledge that God has provided salvation, but a participation in it. This involves the forgiveness of sins, and our regeneration, and our justification, and our adoption, to use other New Testament images or metaphors.

This is the pattern of experience that grows where there is a genuinely godly man or a godly woman. That should lead, of course, in turn, to a confession of faith. And the confession of faith is a very beautiful one in the New Testament.

It has at least three sides to it. A verbal, as if thou shalt confess with thy mouth that Jesus is Lord. A sacramental side, by baptism and participation in the Lord's table.

And a practical side of manifestation of the new life in a character that corresponds to the faith we profess. And then, of course, over and above that, you can see it taking shape, can't you? Over and above that, there is the discipline to maintain what has begun. By the reading of the Word of God.

By seeking his face and fellowshiping with him and his people. By obeying his commandments. By doing his will.

By even facing the most humdrum duty in his name and for his sake. And this is the way it goes on. You can see it taking shape.

All these features would give shape to the religious life of a Christian man or Christian woman. That's the significance of this word, form. My friends, is this the shape of Christianity that men see in your life and mine? But look at the other.

True religion has not only morphosis but dynamism. Dynamic. Or dynamite.

Again, Paul is thinking very particularly, of course, of Christian piety rather than piety in general. And what he is saying is this. This shaping of the outward life is not really simply a matter of intellectual omniscience.

Or living up to human standards or what have you. As a matter of fact, what he is saying is this. That what really molds the form or the shape of the external life is this inner power.

This dynamic in the soul. This power within. And it's because of this power within that life takes the shape it does.

In the experience of the godly man or the godly woman. Now, we shall have much more to say about this. But I do want, at this very stage, just for us to get some concept of what ought to be going on in our lives.

In terms of experiencing the power of God. If you pursue the rest of Scripture, you will find that God is said to indwell his people. Now, you say, that's very familiar.

I've known that for a very long time. So there's no need to dwell on that. Oh, but isn't there? Do you know of anything which is more stupendous than this? And that the almighty God, the Lord, the creator of the ends of the earth, who never is weary and never is tired and never flumbers, never sleeps, never, never, never, never has to pause to see if he can do what he will.

But he, the almighty God, can come and live and does come to live in the human heart. As some of us were discussing on Thursday night in our Bible study group, there is a beautiful little hymn which my wife and I have become, or a song that my wife and I have become familiar with recently about God, who is big enough to rule the vast creation, but small enough to live within my heart. The almighty God has come into the hearts of his people to live.

This is where the power comes from, you see. It's not from the circumstances of the hour. They may be opposing.

They may be difficult. They may be a whole array of difficulties. But the power comes from the fact that the omnipotent God has come to live in our hearts.

If you notice how the Bible spells this out, how variegated the pictures are and the portrait is, if you pursue the rest of the New Testament, you will find that this comes through in a myriad ways. First of all, the word of God has come to dwell in us. God dwells in us by his word.

Oh, what God has done by his word. You go back to the book of Genesis and you will see that when God said, therefore, God's word, let there be and there was, has never hiatus between the command of the almighty and the performance of that command, said long enough for his will to be fulfilled. God's word has come to dwell in our hearts.

If you remain in me, says Jesus, and my word remain in you, you can ask what you will and it will be done to you. You see it? The same mighty word for thy creation sprang into being. My word has come to live in you and if it remains in you, says Jesus, you can ask what you will and it will be done.

Let the word of Christ, says Paul to the Galatians, dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another, etc., etc. So let the word of Christ dwell richly in you. Let it have free play, free expression, the word.

Again God indwells us, of course, by his Holy Spirit. Don't you know, says Paul to the Corinthians in 3:16, and something similar again at the end of chapter 6, don't you know, he says, don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you? Look at your body. Look in the mirror.

And you get home. Of course you're familiar with your form and with your features. But look in the mirror tonight before you go to bed and say to yourself, God's Holy Spirit has come to dwell in that body.

This body of mine is the very temple of God. God has come to dwell here. And because you are sons, says Paul to the Galatians, God has sent forth the Spirit of his Son into your heart.

The Spirit of God dwells in his people. Again the New Testament puts it like this. It says that Christ is dwelling in us.

Christ lives in us. You remember Paul's very classical word in Galatians 2.20, where he describes his own Christian experience in this way. He says, I have been crucified with Christ.

And I no longer live. But Christ lives in me. Now you see the significance, a part of the significance of that is brought out when you and I remember that this is the Christ of the Resurrection.

This is the Christ who was crucified on Calvary Street but who rose again. And who is alive forevermore. And he's alive in me, says Paul.

This is my experience. This is what explains me. Why I'm no longer the man I was as they called me Saul of Tarsus, but I'm the new man that they called Paul.

It's because Christ has come to live in me. John speaks of the power of God in us by referring to the, and it's a very, very strong word. And you might, you might shy away from it.

But he says that the very, the Greek word is firm. You know where it comes from. The paternal bane.

And he says, such man or a woman that is born of God cannot go on sinning because the seed of God remains in him. And his pedigree is such. He can't go on sinning.

He has to stop. The holy seed of God is implanted within him. And it's so powerful.

It's so mighty. He can't go on as monkey did. He's got to stop.

And he's got to turn around. Brothers and sisters, have you got it? This is power. Power.

Power. It's the power of God in us. By his Spirit.

By his word. His Christ, the anointed one has anointed us with his own anointing and goes on living in our heart. And the divine seed and the divine nature of Peter adds are all in him.

Now you see, the Christian life is a life of shape, outward form. You can see the pattern of it. But the pattern is produced by a mighty power.

The Apostle Paul was right when introducing himself in this epistle to the Romans. He says, I'm not ashamed of the gospel of Christ because it is the promise of God. The power of God.

Right unto salvation. Now you can see it's not true. While the Apostle Paul in that same epistle to the Romans tells them in chapter 2, Look, he says, don't allow this age, this world that we're living in, to shape or to mold your life.

To squeeze you into its mold. Oh, the world is ever with us and the prince of this world and they all try to shape our life and their shaping is a misshaping. And God let it.

He says, don't let the world squeeze you into the world's mold. But rather, yield your body to God as a living sacrifice. And then you will know what is the good and acceptable and perfect will of God.

And you will grow up into Christian maturity. In other words, you will carry with you and you will experience an ongoing power of God in your soul. That will transform the outward life as well as the inner life of the mind and the spirit.

To bear the shape that is God on earth. And consistent with the gospel, a kind of shape that will, in the words of the Apostle elsewhere, beautify the gospel of grace. Now, I just want to mention tonight now this perennial danger that we have.

Having a form of God in this world, in the last times there will be all kinds of problems, all kinds of things. And they will all have reached their highest pictures as well. All the frenzy of evil will have come to a climax.

On all hands, you read these things, they're terrible things. But here especially, he says, here is one species, here is one particular problem of the latter day. There will be men who have a form of religion.

They would like to call it Godliness. But it's a form of religion. Whilst he says, not only are they missing or lacking the necessary power, but they're even denying it.

They're not only without it, but they're opposing it. There is something exceedingly challenging about this. Now, theoretically, I suppose, this could take place by neglecting the one or the other of these two aspects of genuine godliness or piety or religion.

By neglecting the outward form, the behavior, the service, or by neglecting the inner power. Theoretically, you can have either or, and you can go to one extreme or the other. And we have them, of course, in the 20th century.

You have people, and all their emphasis is upon, you know, we must appear right before men. We must be doing the right thing. We must never go out of step.

And that's all right as far as it goes. Indeed, it is necessary. But then you have the other species, and they talk always about the experience of the soul.

We've got to be experiencing this about God, this about His Spirit, this about His Word. And we've got to have this thrill in the soul all the time. Now, that's all, it may all be in accordance with the Word.

But when these two things are divorced, the one from the other, you have something that is completely contrary to the biblical picture. We need the outward form, but so too do we need the inner power. We need the morphosis, but we need the dunamis.

And the tragedy of the church, and it would seem that it's moving towards a climax in the latter days, is that somehow or other we will have forgotten the inner side of things. We shall maintain the outward, the visible, what men see, and we may be deemed to be impeccably religious. But without the inner power.

Now, the causes for the separation of form and power may be numerous, and may be quite varied. In some cases, one has known it to be so because of ignorance. Now, I don't want to be unkind now, I don't mean to be.

But some people come to the Lord Jesus Christ, and they have very little knowledge of things. And their concept of the Christian life is just what they've seen in somebody else. That's very good as far as it goes.

And what they've seen is a godly character, a weakened character maybe, a persuaded character. And perhaps at the moment of their conversion, Christian life to them is just a matter of living. What I do in the world, what men see, now that's important.

But that's not all the Christian life, you see. Most of the Christian life is like the iceberg submerged in the depths. Two-thirds of it are in the hidden places.

And the most important aspect of any godly life is the hidden parts. But you see, there are many people who come to the Lord and who make a profession of faith just because of what they see in other people that may attract them. Or challenge them, as the case may be.

And then they come to think that the Christian life is just a matter of how I am and what I do and how I behave before people. Now please don't misunderstand me, this is very important. But it's not the whole of the Christian life.

And if I come to think of my main power from day to day as simply having all the shops in the window so that everybody can see what's going on and I must say the right words and I must be in the right place at the right time. Well you see, I'm on the way to becoming a Pharisee, not a godly man. It's important that we should be irreproachable in the eyes of men and women.

You see this is the balance. And yet that is not the whole of life. There's much, much, much, much else.

So you see, it's important to tell young Christians, look, yes, yes, if any man is in Christ Jesus, he's a new creature, he's got to behave differently. He's got to walk differently, he's got to talk differently. Everything's got to be different, all our attitudes, yes, yes.

But oh my friends, it is all very important also that we should tell every young Christian there is an inner life of the soul to be cultivated. An inner relationship with God. There is a power of God to be experienced in the soul of a man without which he cannot begin to live, let alone continue.

Or sometimes people make this mistake and they are simply concerned with the outward life because of an unworthy motive. You say, what unworthy motive can inculcate in people a desire to be caressed externally in terms of behavior? Well, I'll tell you, it's things like this. There are children of Christian parents who know that their parents are disappointed in them that they don't make a professional sense.

And the temptation is, if they respect their parents, is to put on a show. And especially if there's any undue pressure from mom and dad or from grandma and grandpa. The temptation is, I must put on a front.

I must be as they are. And my friends, our very eagerness to see our children saved can sometimes make little parents love them. It's out there, a certain temptation.

And unless our faith is in God, who raised the dead, we shall be tempted to do it because we love our children. Now that's only one illustration. I have no time to deal with others.

I don't want to prolong the service tonight. But you see, this is possible within Lillet, even in a genuinely Christian life. We can become so concerned with outward things.

Isn't that the story of some of the churches in the New Testament? You remember some months ago we were in the book of Revelation with the church of Sardis, for example. Jesus said to that church of Sardis, He says, I know your deeds. You have a reputation of being alive.

But you are actually dead. See, the points for shape were there. Oh, they were there for the hour of worship, the hour of prayer.

They sang the hymns. They joined in together. They went through it all.

You could not help them. But says the Son of God, though the shape is impeccable, the form is blameless. There's no dominion.

Look at it. Wasn't Ephesus on the way there? Having forsaken her first love, that church was on the way toward the same tragic end. And Lord Isaiah was there already.

Oh, the danger of it and the consequences of it are many. The consequences of thus having a form of religion whilst denying its power are tragic in the extreme. You see, if we walk this way and if we become like this, we completely misrepresent the gospel.

The most important thing about the gospel is that it not only tells us the right thing, the way of God, the will of God, the standard of God for men and women on earth to prepare for eternity, but it provides the power. The gospel is not a moral philosophy which tells you this is right and that is wrong. The gospel is good news and the good news is this is what God requires and God provides what He requires by His own indwelling in the soul and His own living there.

Doesn't really help anybody in society just to be impeccable in our behavior unless we can explain to men and women in the power of Satan how it is that we're able to live above the flesh and the devil. And unless it is evident that the God who we worship is the God who provides power, power. And of course, you know, form without power invariably leads to cynicism.

I don't want to encourage any of you to read the life of Adolf Hitler, but if you ever, if you will, you will realize that as with Mahatma Gandhi, this is the kind of thing that put him off from the gospel too. It was to meet people who would talk about law and order spiritually. They just had it.

You know, everything had to be in place. Everything had to be right and proper. But there was no end of power.

It all seemed to be, you know, some vegetable show in London a few years ago, just when we were in Westminster Chapel, somebody was disqualified because he'd brought in some very beautiful stairs and tied them on with a safety pin where they should have been growing and been tree-lined. We can bring in some mode of activity or mode of living and just tie it on to an ungodly heart or an ungodly soul. We can do so much in the power of the flesh, but the real thing of the scriptures, godliness, piety, religion, pure and undefiled before God, as James speaks of it, is something that is generated from heaven, that's for sure.

Then in the soul, heaven comes into the soul, God comes into the soul, the Spirit comes, the Son comes, the Word comes, the seed of God comes in, and God brings forth fruit in fallen men and women. That's what godliness is. Now I close then.

Why do people reject or oppose this inner power? And I can only indicate perhaps the first step we must take from here, and I appear in an evening service next time. It's hard to see. We do not like the power of God.

Oh, somebody will say, this is what I yearn for, this is what I pray for, I pray for power. Brothers and sisters, do we ever pray for power? If we do, do we realize what we're asking for? You see, if God exercises His power within us, it means that He controls us. And am I not right in saying that in all our

hearts, the real battle is the battle against divine control? Oh, we'd like to have power to be like somebody else, to do what somebody else has done.

Oh, we'd like to have the power to achieve, of course we would. But you see, that's not God's way. The power of God in my soul is not to be or do like somebody else, but it is to be and to become what God wants me to be, and to do what God wants me to do, and to go where God wants me to go.

And that's different. And in order to be and to do and to go as it pleases Him, He must have control. And you see, that's why people deny the power.

It's much easier, you see, to read the New Testament without hearing the voice of God, saying, oh, I know the doctrine. I know sanctification. I know exactly what it means.

I can spin it out. I know it. I can tell you all about it.

And I can tell you what's right, and I can tell you what's wrong. It's all on the intellectual level. That's not the New Testament or the book of Acts, nor of Ephesus.

That's not the Christianity or the book of Acts, nor of Ephesus. There is an intellectual level. There is truth for the mind.

There is a sense of right for the conscience. But there is this experience of the living God indwelling the soul, empowering, mastering. That's why we don't want the power, and that's why many of us do not have more power in our lives.

We don't want to be mastered. We want to go our own way, and we can use the power of God for our own ends, all right, but we can't do that. Brothers and sisters, here is a beautiful pattern, but it's more than that.

It's the divinely appointed pattern whereby we may adorn the doctrine, beautify the gospel, represent our Lord worthily in an unworthy world, and be in his hands, if he would, the instrument for the gathering of men and women and boys and girls to himself, having the force, which is appointed, produced by the power of the Spirit, on and forth. Let us pray. O Lord, our God, we thank you for your wonderful grace and mercy toward us, particularly in that you have written to us your holy words with the very finger of the Spirit.

And you have given us with your infallible words to indicate the way of righteousness and the way of peace and the way of godliness. Lord God, teach us your way. Continue with us and speak to us and mold us, fashion us after your way, and enable us, increasingly as opportunity and life is given to us, enable us, we pray, to fit into the portrait as you have given it of the godly man and the godly woman.

Through Christ, your Son, our Lord. Amen.

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