

Religiosity or Spirituality?

by Zac Poonen

The sermon emphasizes the importance of distinguishing between religiosity and spirituality, and the need for radical repentance to become truly spiritual.

Scripture: Malachi 1:8, Matthew 5:21, John 5:34, Galatians 5:24, 2 Timothy 3:5

Topics: "True Repentance", "Religiosity vs. Spirituality"

Description

Zac Poonen emphasizes the critical distinction between religiosity and spirituality, warning that many Christians may engage in religious activities without true spiritual depth. He explains that while religiosity focuses on external actions and appearances, spirituality is rooted in the heart and a genuine relationship with God. Poonen illustrates this difference through biblical examples, highlighting that true spirituality requires radical repentance and a commitment to self-sacrifice, unlike the legalistic mindset of religious individuals. He urges believers to seek God's approval over human recognition and to prioritize love and obedience over mere compliance with rules. Ultimately, Poonen calls for a deeper understanding of faith that transcends mere religious observance.

Transcript

One of the greatest dangers that faces the Christian in his pursuit of a holy life is that of ending up being religious and not spiritual. Religiosity is often mistaken by the undiscerning believer for spirituality. But there is a world of difference between the two. The former is human, the latter is divine. The law could make people religious, but not spiritual. Religiosity is taken up with the external, visible things. Spirituality is primarily a matter of the heart.

God's word warns us that there will be many in the last days who have a form of godliness without its power - in other words, they will be religious, but not spiritual (2 Tim. 3:5). They will go religiously to meetings, pray and read the Bible daily and even attend all-night fasting and prayer meetings, tithe their income, etc. But they will still seek honour from men, live for themselves, love money and be interested in gossiping, etc. Such people are religious, not spiritual. They have a form of godliness without the power. Here are some examples.

If you are more interested in going to meetings than in crucifying the flesh (Gal. 5:24), you are religious, not spiritual. If you are more interested in reading your Bible every morning than in controlling your tongue the whole day, you are religious, not spiritual. If you are more interested in fasting and prayer than in being free from the love of money, you are religious, not spiritual. If you are more interested in evangelism than

in personal sanctification, you are religious, not spiritual.

All the activities of religious people mentioned in the above examples are good. But it is a question of priorities. It is right priorities that makes a man spiritual.

Religious people are interested in the written word alone ('the letter') and end up having the righteousness of the law. Spiritual people however are interested in the Word being manifested in flesh and blood, and thus end up having the righteousness of God, the divine nature.

Religious people justify their actions by quoting the words or actions of some man of God. Spiritual people however, never seek to justify themselves before men.

Religious people are more interested in men's opinions than in God's opinion. Spiritual people care only about God's opinion. Religious people can meditate for years on the words of praise that some elder brother spoke concerning them. Spiritual people, on the other hand, like Jesus, refuse to receive testimony from men (Jn. 5:34). They know that other men do not know the corruption that they see within themselves, and so they realise that the praise of men is worth less than nothing.

Religious people are legalistic and are under the law. They think in terms of the minimum necessary in order to please God. This is why they calculate exactly how much 10% of their income comes to and then offer it reluctantly to God. In the Old Testament, this attitude finally ended up in the Israelites offering blind sheep and sick bulls as sacrifices to the Lord (Mal. 1:8). It is possible to have an identical attitude to the New Testament commandments. A sister can think in terms of the minimum necessary in order to keep the letter of the word that commands her to be subject to her husband; or the minimum necessary covering required for her head in the meetings - without the beauty of her hair being totally hidden! Men and women can think in terms of the minimum necessary in order to be 'spiritual' without altogether giving up everything. "What is the minimum that I have to give up of this world?" is a question that is always in the minds of such people. Such can never be spiritual. They can only be religious.

Jesus' attitude was totally different. He never sought to discover what the minimum requirement was to please His Father. On the contrary, He sought to find out what the maximum was so that He could offer everything to the Father. Therefore when He studied the law as a young lad, He sought to find out the spirit behind each commandment. Thus He understood, for example, that it was not enough to merely avoid adultery in the flesh (even though that was the minimum required by the law). As He sought His Father's face and meditated on the law, He got light. He understood that the spirit behind that commandment was that one should not even lust (covet) in one's heart. Likewise, He saw that anger and murder were similar. And so on. Thus He understood the spirit behind the law. It was thus that He opened a new and living way through the flesh and inaugurated the new covenant.

An earthly bride who is deeply in love with her bridegroom never thinks of the minimum necessary to please her partner. On the contrary, she thinks of what the maximum is that she can do. This is the attitude of the bride of Christ too. It is here that we see the distinction between the servant and the bride. Those under the law can only be servants. The employee works for wages and is therefore very calculative in his service. He measures his work by the clock. If he works overtime, he expects extra wages. One who is a son (or a wife), on the other hand, will work for any length of time - not for reward, but out of love. Herein lies the difference between religiosity and spirituality.

The attitude of mind that thinks, "What can I get out of the Lord?", leads to religiosity. On the other hand, the attitude that thinks, "What can the Lord get out of the one earthly life that I have?", will lead to true spirituality. It will then become natural for us to go the second mile when the minimum requirement is to go just one mile.

Adam made a covering for himself with fig leaves. This is symbolic of religiosity - to make oneself presentable before men, and even before God! Jesus cursed the fig tree covered with fig leaves (Mk. 11:13, 14,21) - because there is a curse on all religiosity. God hates it. God gave Adam another covering - of skins. And this is a symbol of true spirituality - God's own nature which He gives us, not what man manufactures himself. When Jesus came to the fig tree, it was not the season for fruit. We can say that the old covenant was not the season for the fruit of the Spirit. That legalistic system that led man to bondage has been abolished now. God ordained it for a period to show man his need. The law was never given as a means for sanctification. Heb. 8:7 says that it was a faulty system - just because it could not make a man spiritual, but only religious. One has to enter into the new covenant in order to become spiritual.

God gave the law to see if man would be satisfied with an external righteousness that brought the honour of men, or whether he would seek for more. Since most believers are satisfied with an external righteousness, they remain content with the law and a covering of leaves - human religiosity. The gospel is the power of God unto salvation. It curses and withers up the leaves and gives us the true sanctification that God intended man to have.

But to receive this gospel, we must repent radically first. The word 'radical' means 'proceeding from the root upwards'. And this is exactly what is meant by a radical repentance. John the Baptist who came as the forerunner of Jesus with a message of repentance, said that Jesus would lay the axe to the root of the trees. Every sin comes forth from a root. If we repent of the sin (fruit) alone, we have not been radical. For example, backbiting comes from the root of a wrong attitude towards a brother. Radical repentance will deal with the wrong attitude, and not just with the backbiting. To deal with the external act would be equivalent to snipping off the fruit with a pair of scissors. Jesus however has not come with a pair of scissors, but with an axe (to deal with the root). He looks for genuine fruit - not just leaves. Where He sees only leaves, He curses and withers up the leaves even today (where people allow Him to do it), so that He can make them fruitful. Many other sins too are the result of a wrong attitude within us of seeking our own or of loving money, etc. The spiritual man is the one who judges the root of sin within himself, in God's light and who is not content with just snipping off the fruit to impress men.

Religious people are easily deceived. It is possible for a husband to have a wrong attitude towards his wife for 6 months and yet to have such self control that he never says anything to hurt her. But then one day he explodes in anger. If he then imagines that he had victory for 6 months but fell into sin just for a moment (when he lost his temper), he is deceiving himself. He had been accumulating sticks of dynamite for 6 months. Then at the end of that time, when a small match was lit, the whole stack exploded. He was living in sin all the time, but it was not manifest externally for a long time. It was not the matchstick that caused the explosion, but rather the dynamite that had been collected over the 6 month period.

If we don't fight the battle to keep ourselves 'in the love of God' in our attitude towards others (Jude 21), then we sin, even if we continue to have a good testimony externally. Since most believers do not have discernment, they may even consider us to be spiritual. To be satisfied with their opinion is as foolish as asking someone who has no idea whatsoever of music to evaluate our musical ability!

We must call sin 'sin' if we are to be radical in our repentance and be freed from religiosity. Anger must be called by its real name - that is 'murder' (Matt. 5:21,22). If you do not do that with each sin, you are doomed to a 'religious' life all your days. You will never become truly spiritual. A religious person can be very exact when it comes to matters of external righteousness. The Pharisees even paid tithes of their mint, dill and cummin. They would not move even 1 millimetre away from external righteousness. Yet they went miles away from love, mercy and goodness. So can it be with those pursuing righteousness today. It is possible to be 100% exact in external righteousness and yet to miss the path of love altogether. The path of new covenant righteousness is the path of love - and we must be alert to ensure that we do not move even 1 millimetre away from this path. This is the way of spirituality.

More people go to hell, through false religion than through outward worldliness. This is why we must be careful to distinguish between religiosity and spirituality. Our external works, even though good, can yet be a form, if they are not motivated by a fervent love for the Lord. Such works are dead works, for the power of love is not behind them. We are commanded to repent of dead works - that is, religious works that have not come from a heart of devotion to Christ (Heb. 6:1; 2 Cor. 11:3).

God loves cheerful givers - not only of money but of obedience as well. When obedience to God becomes a burden, it is clear that we have strayed away from the path of spirituality and are now treading the road of religiosity. Everything that we give to God under the new covenant must be given out of love - joyfully and voluntarily. Otherwise we become legalistic and are back under the old covenant - with the spirit and attitude of a servant and not that of a son.

Jude speaks in his epistle of three people who were religious, but not spiritual - Cain, Balaam and Korah (Jude 11). Let us consider them, one by one.

Cain was not a godless man. He was a deeply religious man who believed in offering sacrifices to God (Gen. 4:3). Abel also offered sacrifices to God. But the difference between the two sacrifices and between Cain and Abel was the difference between hell and heaven, the difference between religiosity and spirituality. Cain and Abel symbolise two ways in which people have trodden - the way of religiosity and the way of spirituality. Cain is a type of those who offer external things to God - money, services, time, etc. Abel, on the other hand, symbolically laid himself on the altar, when he killed the lamb and laid it on the altar.

Religious people can give gifts, pray, and do many good works - but they do not understand what it is to offer themselves. They may pay their tithes exactly, But they will not put their self to death in the moments of temptation. That is the difference between the old and the new covenants. You could enter the old covenant without dying to self. But it is impossible to enter the new covenant without dying to self. Jesus did not come to offer tithes, but to give Himself as an offering acceptable and well-pleasing to God. Cain and Abel symbolise the broad and narrow ways of approaching God - the way of religiosity and the way of true spirituality. You can be a servant without death to self. But you cannot be a son without it.

God answered Abel's sacrifice with fire from heaven. But nothing fell on Cain's offering. When a man consistently dies to self day after day, there will be a fire from heaven on his life and his ministry. This is the genuine baptism of the Spirit and fire that John the Baptist said that Jesus would give, to those whose roots He had first axed. On the other hand, a brother who merely does the right things externally, may have a good life, but the fire and the anointing of heaven will be missing from his life. Satan's counterfeit 'baptism' which tickles the emotions (which is what most are enjoying today) is worthless garbage

compared with the genuine baptism of the Spirit and fire that Jesus sends upon His disciples who choose the way of the cross.

Balaam was another religious man. He was a preacher who wanted to serve God, but who was also interested in making money and meeting great men in the world (Num. 22). He sought honour and financial gain for himself in the name of the Lord. There are many, many false prophets, like Balaam today. Their doctrines are all fundamentally right, according to the letter of the word. But undiscerning believers cannot recognise that they are motivated by the spirit of Balaam (loving money and honour). These are the ones about whom Paul writes in Phil 2:21, saying that they all seek after their own interests. There were people in the church in Pergamum who lived by this doctrine of Balaam (Rev. 2:14). There is no difference between seeking for honour and seeking for money in the church. Both are but different variations of the same spirit of Balaam.

Korah was another religious man. He was from the priestly tribe of Levi (Num. 16). But he was dissatisfied with the ministry allotted to him by the Lord. He desired to be more prominent, like Moses was. This covetousness (cloaked with a religious garb), was what proved to be his destruction finally. He and his co-rebels, Dathan and Abiram, and their families, are the only ones recorded in Scripture who went alive into hell (Num. 16:32,33). So seriously did the Lord take this sin of rebellion against the authority that He Himself had appointed over His people.

Most elders, preachers and pastors today are self-appointed. To rebel against them may not be serious. It may sometimes even be necessary! But to rebel against one who has been appointed by God would bring upon one the severest judgment of God. A spiritual man would never even dream of doing such a thing. But religious people will. Such is the spiritual foolishness that accompanies religiosity.

Korah symbolises those who are in an unhealthy competition with others in the church. When you find it difficult to praise and appreciate a God-fearing brother, it is an indication that you have something of the spirit of Korah in you. When you criticise him, then you are full of the spirit of Korah. If you can listen to others criticising him, then you are like the 250 rebels, who joined Korah, and who were also judged by God.

We can never become spiritual if we do not discern between religiosity and spirituality. It is the need of the hour - for it is concerning the last days that it is written that many would have the form of godliness, without the power (which is the word of the cross). The Spirit has also specifically warned that many Christians would turn away from the way that God has appointed for us to be godly, and turn to other religious means - such as avoiding marriage and certain types of food, etc.

Man has invented many other counterfeits too, such as the public confession of sin (to become 'humble') and not taking medicines when sick (to increase 'faith'), etc, etc. All these are but doctrines of demons, meant to lead Christians away from the true secret of godliness (Read 1 Tim. 3:16 to 4:5).

The only way to true spirituality is by offering oneself to death daily as Jesus did (Rom. 8:36; 2 Cor. 4:10-12). Every other way is a counterfeit.

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