

“Religion” – Rather than Intimate Relationship with God

It is very easy to settle with something less than the close relationship that God desires to have with each of us individually.

It is easy to just know about God rather than know Him intimately.

We can even be so busy serving Him to miss out on the joy of intimate fellowship with Him.

Certain things can become substitutes for intimacy with our Creator God.

“Religion” rather than relationship

The heart of Christianity is neither law or religious duty, but a love relationship with Jesus Christ.

Matthew 15:8 [NIV] *“These people honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.”*

Those who settle for rules and rituals, as did the Pharisees in Christ’s day, instead of intimacy have a “*form of godliness*” but do **not** know the presence or the power of God in their lives.

2 Timothy 3:1-9 [NIV] *“But mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days. People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, **having a form of godliness but denying its power.** Have nothing to do with them. They are the kind who worm their way into homes and gain control over weak-willed women, who are loaded down with sins and are swayed by all kinds of evil desires, always learning but never able to acknowledge the truth. Just as Jannes and Jambres opposed Moses, so also these men oppose the truth, men of depraved minds, who, as far as the faith is concerned, are rejected. But they will not get very far because, as in the case of those men, their folly will be clear to everyone.”*

There are still people in Christian churches that fit this description, following the Pharisees of Christ’s day who were blinded to the person and message that Jesus Christ brought from God.

Right words, but wrong heart! Right actions, but no relationship.

Relying on religious routine

Religious routine is the first thing we grab hold of when the freshness of God’s presence dries up.

When our prayers and Bible study become empty, with no new revelation being received and accepted, we are faced with two choices.

We can fall back on religious routine and continue to do what we have done in the past but try a little harder.

Or we can humble ourselves before God and ask Him to show us why the spring of fresh revelation has dried up and how we can have His presence in our lives restored.

The solution to this “lukewarmness” is to “seek God’s face” more earnestly.

This will mean finding out what He wants to change in our lives that most likely will mean moving out of our “comfort zone”.

All of us to some degree would rather fall back into the comfort of religious ritual than risk the personal sacrifice of pride and change what God is asking us to change.

Revelation 3:17-20 [NIV] *“You say, ‘I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.’ But you do not realise that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked. I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so that you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so that you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so that you can see. **Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest, and repent. Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me.**”*

Christ was asking these Christians to move out of their “comfort zone” and accept and act on His rebuke and discipline [disciple making].

Don’t become a modern-day Pharisee

If we continue to maintain an outward form of godliness through ritual and routine with no “heart relationship” with God, we will very soon become like the Pharisees of Christ’s day.

Amos 5:21-24 [NIV] *“I hate, I despise your religious feasts; I cannot stand your assemblies. Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. Though you bring choice fellowship offerings, I will have no regard for them. Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps. But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!”*

God hates religious ritual with no loving relationship.

Matthew 23:25-36 [NIV] *“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. **Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean.** “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men’s bones and everything unclean. In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness. “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You build tombs for the prophets and decorate the graves of the righteous. And you say, ‘If we had lived in the days of our forefathers, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.’ So you testify against yourselves that you are the descendants of those who murdered the prophets. Fill up, then, the measure of the sin of your forefathers! “You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell? Therefore I am sending you prophets and wise men and teachers. Some of them you will kill and crucify; others you will flog in your synagogues and pursue from town to town. And so upon you will come all the righteous blood that has been shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Barakiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar. I tell you the truth, all this will come upon this generation.”*

If we have this hollow Pharisaical attitude towards our creator God this is the verdict we will receive on the judgement day when we kneel before Jesus Christ on His throne.

Matthew 22:34-40 [NIV] *“Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together. One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: “Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?” Jesus replied: “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the*

second is like it: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."

This is the law that Jesus commands we should be obeying, the law of love that stems from our heart.

Don't seek a human mediator rather than a personal meeting with God

Another way we can miss out on intimacy with God is to let other people go to God for us instead of seeking God ourselves.

This is the mistake that the Israelites made.

Exodus 20:18-21 [NIV] *"When the people saw the thunder and lightning and heard the trumpet and saw the mountain in smoke, they trembled with fear. **They stayed at a distance and said to Moses, "Speak to us yourself and we will listen. But do not have God speak to us or we will die."** Moses said to the people, "Do not be afraid. God has come to test you, so that the fear of God will be with you to keep you from sinning." The people remained at a distance, while Moses approached the thick darkness where God was."*

The history of human religion [rather than true Christianity] is the story of an almost desperate rush to have a king, a mediator, a priest, any go-between rather than meet with God ourselves.

Such an approach avoids the need for personal change.

This is the convenient way to religious respectability without demanding moral transformation.

None of us humanly like to be told by God through His ministry we are wrong and need to change. Such discipline hurts our human pride.

Too often Christians let the pastor spend time with God in prayer and study to give God's message each week to help them feel righteous by listening yet not responding to that message.

"Second-hand Christianity!"

Is this all we desire?

Are we keeping our distance from God like the Israelites in Moses' day?

Hebrews 10:19-22 [NIV] *"Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, **let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water.**"*

Scripture makes it clear that every believer has the right to come personally into God's presence. In fact God invites us to come.

We can know God intimately.

We can hear Him speak to us personally.

That is why God calls each of us to draw near to Him constantly.

Do **not** send someone else.

James 4:8 [NIV] *“Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded.”*

If we remain at a distance from God and rely on a human mediator, we will miss out on the joy of intimacy, and our Christian life will remain shallow and weak.

Don't let busyness be a substitute for intimacy with God

Intimacy with God requires a quiet focussed life, to seek God in stillness and solitude.

We cannot enter meaningfully into prayer, worship, meditation and listening to God's voice in the midst of noise, busyness and hurry.

We must make time each day to be alone with God a first priority in our life.

Mark 1:35 [NIV] *“Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed.”*

Christ left us this example.

Luke 10:38-42 [NIV] *“As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. **She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said.** But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, “Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!” “Martha, Martha,” the Lord answered, “you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. **Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.**”*

This story of Mary and Martha shows us clearly that while there is a time to be busy, there is also a time to sit quietly at the Master's feet in worship, adoration and fellowship with Him.

This is what Jesus our future husband wants more than anything else.

This quiet fellowship must come even before our desire to serve Him.

We can easily fall into the trap of seeing our busyness in Christian service as a good reason for not having time to sit quietly at Jesus' feet and listen to Him.

Service must never become a substitute for intimacy.

Work must never take the place of worship.

If Jesus was to come into our home as He did that of Mary and Martha, what would He personally say to us?