

“Religion”... Jesus was famous for tangling with the “religious leaders”....- Who would want to have any part in religion???

“Religion” – it tends to get a bad rap today... Even among Christians, nobody wants to be thought of as being “religious”... owww... (one of the worst insults)

And it’s a very common thing, for a Christian to claim “I’m not religious – I just have a relationship with God”... But, that’s a bit like saying, “I’m not alive – I’m just not dead”...

You see, within the Bible (and even within the dictionary), the word “Religion”, refers to “the worship of God”. And a religious person, worships God... And by that definition, any true Christian, **must** be religious...

If you claim to have a relationship with God, but you do not worship God, – you don’t know God at all...

James 1:27 (ESV)

²⁷ Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.

And that fits pretty well with what Paul said about worship: (Remember: Worship of God is Religion), and Paul said:

Romans 12:1-2 (ESV)

12 I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your

spiritual worship. ² Do not be conformed to this world (IOW don't be worldly, like everybody else), but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

You see, James and Paul – they're both giving a picture of what undefiled religion is – it's the worship of God, and **true/undefiled** worship, is accompanied by Godliness – it's a holiness within, giving birth to a righteousness, which works out, as acts of justice and mercy toward others...

Alright:

So, if “religion” is the worship of God, and if pure and undefiled religion is Godly worship and Godly living, I sincerely hope and pray that this church would become the most religious church in this town. – that we would be a church who:

- worship God
- are known for their Godliness and righteousness;
- known for our acts of justice (always fair) and mercy
- known for our love of God; and
- for our love towards others...

I suspect, that the reason so many Christians cringe at being thought of as “religious”, is because James was drawing a distinction between “**pure** religion” and “**corrupt** religion” –

a distinction between “**undefiled** religion” and “**polluted** religion”. And we can’t tell the difference.

But that’s what **unbelievers** do. An unbeliever may hear of an occasional example of polluted religion (or empty religion), and come to the conclusion that **all** worship of God is polluted. But is that true???

No!

If “religion” is the worship of God (and it is), let’s not ever be ashamed of being religious. How could we possibly ever be ashamed of being known as worshippers of God???

But, let’s be fair dinkum about it (the real deal).

Because, **be** in no doubt, Jesus is absolutely **scathing** of those who **corrupt** religion – of those who **corrupt** the worship of God, and that’s what we see unfolding in today’s Bible Reading.

Now, there’s 2 types of religious leaders in today’s reading, and Jesus is scathing of **both** of them: There’s the Pharisees, and there’s the Scribes (Religious Lawyers)...

I’m splitting this message over 2 weeks. And so, we’re going to be looking at what Jesus said to the Pharisees, this week, and we’re going to be looking at what Jesus said to the Scribes, next week.

But I’ll tell you the difference between the two groups:

The Scribes, are the professionals (if you like). They studied the Scriptures (the Old Testament), and especially they studied what's known as "The Book of the Law", or the Pentateuch – it's the first five books of the Bible: Genesis; Exodus; Leviticus; Numbers; Deuteronomy.

And the Scribes knew the Scriptures inside-out and back-to-front (especially "The Book of the Law")... And they saw it as their job, to interpret the Law... And we'll talk more about that next week, because Jesus is scathing of how they did it – they did what lawyers often do – make things a whole lot more complicated than they need to be, and build in loop-holes, to get them off the hook...

So, that's one group – the Scribes – the professionals – the religious law makers...

But the other group, were the Pharisees. They were not priests; They were not the official religious teachers of the Law – they were a lay purity movement if you like... The Apostle Paul used to be a Pharisee, and he referred to the Pharisees as the strictest of the religious parties...

They were a group of people, who received the teaching of the Scribes, and kept all of their rules and regulations, fastidiously, **and** frowned upon anybody who didn't....

So, they'd be a fun group to hang out with, wouldn't they???

Anyway, it was a Pharisee, who invited Jesus to his place for lunch. And when they sat down to dine (or recline at table as they did back then), he was surprised that Jesus didn't have a wash before He ate...

Now, we all know it's a good idea to wash our hands before we eat, don't we???

I remember my sheep instructor (when I was a grubby student) used to say, "*Wash your hands, you lot (if you've been handling sheep), otherwise you'll end up with Anthrax.*"... And that was probably good advice.

But with the Pharisees, it wasn't so much about infection control – it was about "ceremonial purity".

In the Old Testament, there's examples of a good host, providing for their guests to wash, but the Scribes and Pharisees had turned it into a new rule.

And so, before tucking into lunch, their rules prescribed that you had to have this little hand-washing ceremony. And they would use water, to pour over their hands. And the amount of water you had to use, and the way you had to use it, was all prescribed in minute detail in the rule-book the Scribes had produced. I think it's what's called the Mishnaⁱ.

You see, the Pharisees believed, that to achieve holiness, and maintain holiness, one had to separate oneself from sinners... And that's what the word "Pharisee" means – "Separated ones"... But what if they accidentally bumped into a sinner on the street, or what if they touched a hand-rail after a sinner

had touched it... And that's why they had this rule, that they had to wash – just in case any sin had rubbed off onto them...

And Jesus highlights the absurdity of this, and how their **other** rules are based on the same kind of absurdity.

He said: **you Pharisees cleanse the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside you are full of greed and wickedness.**

And, it's sort of a pun (play-on-words)... They **also** had rules about cleaning their cups and dishes... And what Jesus is saying, is: "How crazy is it, to clean the outside of a cup or a dish, and not the inside."...

And that's exactly what they were doing to themselves... They took a great deal of care to ceremonially cleanse the outside of their bodies, to wash off everybody else's sin. But that didn't make them holy, because on the inside, they were filthy: full of greed (extortion/plunder/theft) and wickedness...

God created the inside and the outside – He knows us intimately. And God misses nothing. The Lord, can see deep into the heart, and He knows everything – even those things that we successfully manage to keep hidden from others... He knows...

And yes, the Pharisees may manage to keep all of their silly rules, but on the inside, they were just as wicked as ever.

And so Jesus says: ⁴¹ **But give as alms those things that are within**

The giving of Alms, is showing mercy. It is to care for those who have nothing:

- to give food to the hungry;
- shelter to the homeless;
- an offering to cripple who is unable to work...

And if the Holy Spirit is living within us, we will be filled with mercy and grace and love. And the giving of alms, is a natural outpouring of the Holy Spirit within us. We will love others, because God has filled us with **His** love.

And so, everything is clean. The work of the Spirit is testimony to the purifying work of God within.

But the Pharisees didn't have the Holy Spirit within – they were filled with sin. So, what would it mean for **them** to give what was within? Well, the first step, would be “Repentance”. For them to become holy, they would have to hand over all of their sin to God:

All of the:

- greed;
- wickedness;
- selfishness;
- lust;
- pride

Repent of all of our sin, and the Lord casts it away, and He will wash us clean, and **then** we'll be pure on the inside....

Clean hands and clean crockery, do nothing to make us holy. Did your mum ever say to you, “*Cleanliness is next to Godliness*”? It’s nothing of the sort. **Clean-freaks** don’t get to heaven – Repentant sinners do.

A repentant heart before the Lord – that’s the path to holiness. And of course, we know, that the blood of Jesus is what purifies us. Water isn’t up to the task... We repent of sin, and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and in His grace and mercy, we are purified and made holy.

But the Pharisees hadn’t taken that path, and so Jesus says:

⁴² **“But woe to you Pharisees!**

“Woe” is like saying, “I’m so sorry for you”; “Things are not good for you” – “Woe for you”... Why???

Because they were fastidious at religiously doing **some** things, but they neglected what’s most important...

Take tithing as an example:

The word “tithe”, means “tenth”. To tithe, is to give to God the 1st 1/10 of everything that one earns or produces...

And some folk today claim to tithe, and I’ve been asked, well, is that:

- 10% of gross income, or 10% of my profit?
- 10% before tax, or 10% after tax?
- Does it have to include “capital gains” – do I have to tithe on that???

And when questions like that are asked, straight away, I realise that when it comes to giving back to God (what belongs to God anyway), ,, If one is worried about these sorts of questions, it's a bit of an indicator that one's heart is wanting to hold on to stuff, rather than letting it go... You see, it shouldn't be about "How much can I keep", but about "How much can I give"...

In the Bible, the Tithe was mainly used to fund ministry. It paid for the living of the Levites who manned the temple. Imagine how well funded, the ministry and mission of the Christian church would be, if every Christian was regularly tithing 1/10 of everything they earned or produced...

If:

- Every 10th fattened steer, belonged to God;
- Every 10th truckload of wheat, was for Him;
- Every 10th bale of cotton; or wool or hay, was sold for God;
- 10% of the rent you earned;
- 10% of the lease payments you receive;
- 10% of the capital gain of your shares;
- 10% of the capital gain of your house/farm...

That's what it means to tithe. And when one's heart is right before God, that's not a problem.

In fact, I've always found, that the more one earns, generally, the harder they find it to tithe, because 10% of a little, doesn't seem like much. But 10% of a lot.... Hmm Surely God doesn't expect me to give that much away.

But when we do, God always makes sure we have enough.

And the pharisees, **they** were fastidious in their tithe. They even tithed on the herbs in the garden... *Oh, we're having roast mutton tonight. Let's have a bit of mint with that.* And they'd go out to the herb patch, and pick a sprig of mint: 20 leaves there, so 2 of those leaves we'll put into the offering – the pastor can have that on his dinner...

Alright, and they would concentrate on even getting trivial matters right. They made sure they met the Law – Just. But they missed what's truly important – “You tithe on the herbs in the dinner pot, but you **neglect justice and the love of God.**”

You see, those things, are matters of the heart. They tried to be right with God (through their tithe), but they didn't love their brother... **justice and the love of God** was missing...

And so, they kept their “rule” of tithing, but their hearts weren't generous towards others...

But the lesson on tithing doesn't end there. When it comes to tithing, and giving an offering to God: Today, people are divided on this. Some folk are adamant that Christians should tithe, and others say, “No, that's an Old Testament thing – a thing of the Law – we don't do that anymore.”

So, which is it?

I guess, the way I see the New Testament understanding, is we are to give as we are able. And we are to give, sacrificially – it’s probably going to hurt – we’re definitely going to miss it – that’s what a sacrifice is – giving up something that we hold dear, because we hold our Lord, more dear.

And how much a person puts in the offering, is between them, and God, so I’m not going to tell you how much you should put in the offering. What is the Spirit of God telling you? I know, I have to make sure it’s not “the flesh” that I listen to, but the Spirit of God. And it’s pretty likely the Spirit of God will tell you to give much more than I would ever dare ask for...

So, I’m not going to tell you what you have to give, but:

For me personally, I’ve always had the attitude, that if we are to give as we are able, and if we are to give sacrificially, well God commanded those under the Old Covenant to give 10% of gross, - that means “it’s do-able”. Therefore, if I am to give as I am able, by faith, I know that I am able to give 10% of my gross income, and if I find I can’t manage that, then I need to restructure my priorities so I can...

And this verse in particular, has always been a challenge me, to give a tithe, **or more.**, because Jesus says to the Pharisees, “You’ve been tithing (fastidiously), but you **neglect justice and the love of God**. And then He said: These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others.

Which is what many Christians do. Many Christians will say, “I don’t tithe – I don’t give much money to the church. I give in other ways. I’m about justice and the love of God”... But for me, it seems pretty clear that Jesus is saying, we should be doing both... And if I truly love God, I’m also going to love Him with my wallet – by giving sacrificially...

As I studied the Bible reading for today, I found myself thinking of Malachi. Malachi was the last prophet in the Old Testament. And the reason I thought of Malachi, was these 3 things:

1. The priests, who were supposed to be teaching the word of God, had corrupted the teaching, and that’s what Jesus is chastising the Scribes and the Pharisees about – their teaching was **also** corrupt;
2. Their worship was tainted (bad religion). Why? Because they didn’t have justice or mercy, and they didn’t fully love God... And that’s what the Pharisees were missing.
3. They were **robbing** God. – That’s the word that God used “**you are robbing Me**”.” How were they robbing God? In their “**tithes and contributions**”... “**Bring in the full tithe**”, God said, “**that there may be food in my house.**” And then there will be blessings again...

Anyway, I guess the Pharisees got **one** thing out of 3 right (they did tithe), but even then, they missed what’s truly important... Generous hearts. Yes, they were giving, but they weren’t doing it out of love, but out of rule-keeping.

You see, when it comes to “giving”, it begins with a tithe – that’s what belongs to God, and if we **don’t** give it to Him, that’s robbing God... But God also expects His people to be merciful, and to care for those who are unable to support themselves, and this, the Pharisees were **not** doing. And this is what we should do (not instead of our offering to God, but as well as our offering to God).

And the Prophet Malachi foretold the coming of Jesus, and the coming of John the Baptist. And he foretold that they would come before the Day of Judgment. And they would come with a message of repentance – to repent of these things – to repent of all sin and wickedness.

And here Jesus is, doing exactly what was foretold – He was calling the Pharisees out on their defiled religion.

For the Pharisees, it was all an external religious show – they did it for recognition. And so, they came across as being all very important, and so they got the good seats in the synagogues and they were ‘looked up to’ in the market places...

My how things have changed. A bit of showy religiousness doesn’t open many doors in our culture... But it did in theirs.

And yet, in God’s eyes, they were **not** holy. In fact, they were a source of defilement – a **hidden** source of defilement.

They were like unmarked graves... You see, with the Jewish ceremonial law, if a person came into contact with a corpse, they were ceremonially unclean. And an unmarked grave, if it was accidentally dug up, or if you stumbled into an unmarked tomb, you could unwittingly become ceremonially defiled...

And that's why Jesus referred to the Pharisees, as "unmarked graves" – **they** were a hidden source of defilement.

It's ironic... They claimed, "Follow our ways and you'll be holy", but instead of providing the promised holiness, their teachings led to defilement.

So, what do we do with this?

Is anyone here religious? Is anyone here, a worshipper of God??? Let our religion be pure and undefiled... And never about showiness.

It's about loving God with every part of our being – Loving God with everything we have, and everything we are...

And true/undefiled worship, is a worship that:

- loves God;
- flows from an inner holiness (that we find in Christ Jesus);
- where we are filled (by the Holy Spirit), with Grace and Mercy for others
- honours God in all that we do.

True religion, is to honour God from our hearts and in our actions.

ⁱ Morris, L. (1988) *Luke: an introduction and commentary*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press (Tyndale New Testament Commentaries).

ⁱⁱ Malachi 3:8