

'God Hates Religion!'

by Rev. Robert Griffith

I am taking a break from our current teaching series just for this week while I address a really important issue. If you have connected with any of my teaching over the years you will have heard me say many times that God hates religion. I know it's provocative. I know some people may be confused, if not offended when I say God hates religion because they may have identified God with religion. It is therefore important that the term religion is defined and differentiated from genuine Christianity and the gospel. This sermon is my humble attempt to do just that.

The English word 'religion' is etymologically derived from the Latin word *religo*, meaning to 'bind up.' Now you can't get much clearer than that right up front! Religion binds people up in rules and regulations or in ritualistic patterns of devotion. Christianity, on the other hand, sets us powerfully free and was never meant to be a religion.

By stark contrast to religion, Christianity is the dynamic spiritual life of the risen Lord Jesus indwelling our spirit so as to create functional behaviour to the glory of God.

Sadly, mankind has attempted to force Christianity into the moulds and forms of religion for centuries. That is evident by all the steeples and sanctuaries and ecclesiastical programs that dot the landscape of societies across the world.

It is the propensity of fallen mankind to formulate religion - to take that which is of the invisible God and attempt to make it visible, tangible and controllable which then produces man-made religion! The apostle Paul refers to it as "self-made religion" (Colossians 2:23), and goes on to indicate that it is of no value against fleshly indulgence. In essence, Paul is saying that "religion is of no value against man's sinfulness." In fact, religion is a co-dependent enabler of the sins of mankind. It is itself an addiction.

Religion is essentially idolatry. Men and women worship their man-made formations and structures - their ideological idols formed in the concrete of inflexible minds. When the apostle Paul came to Athens (Acts 17:22), he observed their idols and exclaimed, "*Men of Athens, I observe that you are very religious in all respects.*" The Greek word that Paul used for "religious" literally means "*to have great respect for demons.*"

To see how God feels about religion, note the following passages of Scripture:

".. every abominable act which the Lord hates they have done for their gods, for they even burn their sons and daughters in the fire to their gods." (Deuteronomy 12:31)

"I have had enough of burnt offerings .. Bring your worthless offerings no longer .. I hate your new moon festivals and your appointed feasts; they have become a burden to Me .. So when you spread out your hands in prayer, I will hide My eyes from you .. I will not listen .." (Isaiah 1:10-15)

"I hate, I reject your religious festivals; nor do I delight in your solemn assemblies...take away from Me the noise of your songs; I will not even listen to the sound of your harps." (Amos 5:21-24)

Religion, as described by contemporary definitions and experienced by so many millions who claim to be God's people, is so far removed from what God ordained and what God desires that it may very well be the exact opposite of true Christianity. For example, not one of the definitions of religion I found (and I found many!) contained the word *relationship*.

That is very significant because a quick browse through the Bible will reveal to even the most unenlightened mind that the Christian faith is *all* about relationships! From Genesis to Revelation we have the story of God creating us to be in relationship with Himself and with each other. The whole Bible is about relationships and where they went wrong and what God did to fix that and what we are meant to do (and not do) to participate in His global campaign to re-establish close, eternal, intimate relationships with His lost children.

I am not talking about man's relationship to God in some abstract philosophical sense. That's what religion does - that's what philosophy does. I am talking about our personal relationship with God, one-on-one - an intimate communion. That concept is foreign to religion, but that is what the Bible is all about! That's what the Great Commission and the Ten Commandments are about - and every teaching and instruction from Jesus and Paul and all the New Testament writers – it's all about RELATIONSHIP and none of it is about religion!

So to contrast genuine Christianity with religion, let me give you my simple definition of religion as I understand it from Church history and have seen and experienced in more than 40 years of front line ministry in the Church:

Religion is our feeble attempt to establish and maintain a relationship with God through every means possible other than that which He ordained, provides and empowers.

Now before you say "Amen!" and think that you are not a victim of this insidious evil which masquerades as Biblical Christianity, be warned, because I believe every one of us is touched by religion in some way. Some of the most powerful and effective demonic spirits in Satan's army are religious spirits. They are the demons who spend all their time in the Church working on Christians like you and me; the ones who went after the believers we read about in Galatians. Those believers were totally and powerfully set free in the Spirit of God and they knew what it was to have a dynamic, personal, life-changing relationship with the living God. Yet within a few short years they had been bewitched by religious spirits and were trying to relate to God through dead religious works again. That's why Paul warned Timothy (1 Tim. 4:1) that in the last days there would even be doctrines taught by demons! I believe many of those doctrines lead us into the bondage and prison of religion – the same religion Jesus exposed when He condemned the Pharisees in Matthew 23 and the same religion Jesus set us free from when He gave His life for us.

You were included in Christ when you heard the truth about your salvation and believed it. At that point the Holy Spirit of God was released in you to make it all real and introduce you to the risen living Lord. In Ephesians 1:3-14, Paul states emphatically that everything you could possibly want, or imagine, and even things that you can't imagine, are all yours for free. It's all part of the package, and it is all or nothing. Therefore we have the assurance that God chose us and adopted us as sons and daughters and lavished His grace upon us in Christ; our salvation and eternal life with God is a free gift with no strings attached; nothing we do or don't do could ever save us, or cause us to lose our salvation; our eternal relationship with God was secured on the cross by Jesus before we were even born – before we could say yes or no, before we could sin or rebel; we have been totally and wonderfully set free by the grace of God to love and serve. When we believe that truth, we receive the Truth: Jesus Christ.

There is no other name under heaven by which we can be saved, except the name of Jesus. The only way into a relationship with the Father is through Jesus, and by accepting it as a free gift - not just once, but every day! To know Him at all is to know Him as a free gift. To participate in His life, ministry and fellowship, we have to understand His grace, because nothing in the kingdom of God is bought, sold or traded. It's all given and received, received and given free!

So we need all that assurance to be able to discern the religious traps that would make us slaves to performance again. We need the empowering presence of God in our lives to be able to rest in that assurance, revel in our relationship, and be kept free from those influences. The trouble is, they can look so plausible. I'm sure the Galatians would not have chosen to desert the gospel, if they realised that was what they were doing, and nor do we. But well-meaning Christian brothers and sisters, many of them teachers in the Church would say: 'So you've accepted Jesus - great start! But now you need to press on into the higher things of God, by having a daily quiet time, reading and memorising the Bible, praying, fasting etc. You get in for free, but you get on at your own expense!'

Now these disciplines are all great – but not as a basis for being accepted or not accepted by God. Instead of looking at Jesus and being blown away by His love and grace and empowering presence in our life, we are enticed once more by religion to look at ourselves. The free relationship of love with God in Christ is traded for our performance - that is so deadly in our walk with God.

One of the great things about freedom is that when you know you are free - law, religion, other people and the devil himself can no longer manipulate you. My highest goal for each believer I preach to and minister alongside is that you become so secure in God's love and acceptance, that nobody can manipulate you or obligate you or make you feel guilty or oppressed in any way ever again. That is my prayer and that, my friend, is God's will for you. God wants you free. God wants you to respond to Him out of love and gratitude, and never out of obligation or guilt. Those are the devil's tactics, the world's tactics. That's the flesh. That's religion. Jesus died to save us from that whole world of manipulation and guilt. That's what Jesus meant when He said in Luke 4:18: *"The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the captives."* That's what Paul meant when He said in Galatians 5:1: *"It is for freedom that Christ has set you free."*

When you experience this freedom - when you allow this teaching to get past the barriers in your mind and take root in your heart, you will discover an inexpressible joy like you have never experienced in your life; you will find freedom, spontaneity and a sense of confidence because you know it ultimately all depends on God, not you. You will even sleep well at night because the guilt and sense of not measuring up will all be gone. You'll also sleep well at night because you will have worked so hard that day for the Lord for the sheer joy of it! Your attitude will be, *'Lord, You've done everything for me - now what can I do for you?'* It won't take Him long to show you what to do. It will be hard work and it will be wonderful work - all done without a shred of guilt, obligation or manipulation!

God wants to produce life in us - impregnate us with the ministry of the kingdom of God. This life will be released in us through the intimacy of prayer, Bible study, worship, listening and responding to good teaching, obedience etc. That is the purpose of those things in our lives – never to gain acceptance or make God pleased with us. Under the law - prayer and Bible study, worship, service and obedience become legal requirements. Under grace, in Christ - the exact same activities are transformed in the context of a love relationship.

The Bible is not a book of answers and rules for life. It is the revelation of God's love and a sharing of His thoughts and His heart. There may be a lot that we will never understand and appreciate about our Lord in this earthly life, but the Holy Spirit has preserved some of God's most intimate and revealing thoughts on paper for us and that's how we should approach the Bible and prayer and worship - from the point of a relationship. Loving God should be our only motivation for any of those activities and spiritual disciplines.

Jesus and Jesus alone is the gospel. Jesus and Jesus alone is our salvation. Whenever we add anything as an 'improvement', we have removed ourselves from the power of the gospel and seek once again to save ourselves by our self-righteousness. This is the essence of religious behaviour, which despises God's grace. Religion is an ugly distortion of relationship. We fully experience the freedom we have in Christ when we look to Him alone, not just for our salvation, but for our ongoing walk in the Christian life, depending on Him in all things. Our response is love and gratitude for all He has done for us. God is enough and He wants us to live freely in His love and grace, free from the power and penalty of sin, free from guilt and shame and free from religious expectations and rule-keeping. He wants us to return His love freely, as we learn to know Him more.

How then shall we live? Quite simply we live by choosing every day between relationship or religion and the difference between the two is unmistakable:

Relationship causes us to be dependent

Religion drowns us in our own strength

Relationship produces passion in our lives

Religion produces complacency

Relationship compels us to serve

Religion drives us to apathy

Relationship draws us towards what's risky

Religion draws us to something comfortable and predictable

Relationship drives us to our knees

Religion drives us to our platforms

Relationship births love for the lost

Religion births love of our rules

Relationship brings change and freedom

Religion forces conformity and bondage

Relationship brings forth life and fruit

Religion brings decay and spiritual death

So that is why the word 'religion' should never, ever be used to describe anything to do with the Church Jesus birthed or the gospel we are called to preach and to live. That is why I believe God hates religion because it stands opposed to everything He is and everything we are called to be in Christ, through Christ and for Christ.