**RELIGION OR RELATIONSHIP?**

**(Matthew 12:43-50)**

It was in May of 1971. He sat down at his white, grand piano at an estate in England. In just one session he composed the melody and wrote most of the lyrics of what proved to be the most successful single of his solo career. The artist was John Lennon, and his song was “Imagine.” The song begins:

Imagine there’s no heaven  
It’s easy if you try  
No hell below us  
Above us only sky  
Imagine all the people living for today

Imagine there’s no countries  
It isn’t hard to do  
Nothing to kill or die for  
And no religion too  
Imagine all the people living life in peace

Despite Lennon’s assurances that it is easy and not hard to imagine such things, I do have difficulty doing so because it is so opposite of the way the world is. There are some 195 countries in our world, and every day people are killing and dying. Honestly, I don’t want to imagine there is no heaven because if heaven does not exist, Jesus lied and all of the apostles were badly mistaken. I would like to believe there is no hell, but unfortunately, it is an inconvenient truth. As to the idea of there being no religion, that is especially hard to imagine.

Here we are in June of 2019, and this month it is estimated that the world’s population is 7.7 billion people and rising. Of that number, it is estimated that 84% of us, which is roughly 6.5 billion, are religiously affiliated. Only 16% of the world’s population do not belong to a religious group. That is not to say that all of them don’t have religious beliefs or practices of some kind because you don’t have to belong to a certain religion to be religious.

There is hardly any culture at any time in the history of the world that was not religious. Religion is simply a set of beliefs and practices. Most usually, those beliefs and practices revolve around a Supreme Being or Beings which the followers of that religion wish to please.

Why are most people religiously inclined? I think it is because most people, deep down, realize something is wrong on the inside. They realize they are broken, and they believe the God they want to please is not pleased with them. They turn to religion as a way to earn the favor of their god.

This is what make the Christian faith so different from most other religions. One scholar wrote: “Christianity is not simply one among many religions, but differs from all others in that its content is divinely revealed and its outward expression by believers is not an attempt to secure salvation but a thank offering for it.”[[1]](#endnote-1)

The word *religion* is never used in the OT. It shows up only five times in the NT. It is used of the Jewish faith, first by Pilate and later by Paul, but never specifically of the Christian faith. That is not to say Christianity is not a religion. It is, but it is different from all others.

What is God looking for? What does God want? Jesus answers that question in a conversation He has with some men who were very religious. Turn to Matthew 12:43-50.

We have to keep in mind to whom Jesus was speaking. His audience is identified in v. 38. Who were the scribes and Pharisees? The scribes were experts and teachers of the Law of Moses. They were professional students and it was their job to make sure that oral tradition and the Scriptures were preserved and faithfully transmitted to the generations that followed. They always belonged to the party of the Pharisees.

So, who were the Pharisees? They were not a political party, but they were a religious party that stressed strict observance to the Law. They believed that the Babylonian exile was caused by Israel’s failure to keep the Law. They promoted living an ethical and morally upright life so as to be blessed by God.

With those things in mind, let’s read our text. There are two things I want us to notice.

1. **JESUS WARNS US AGAINST A BLIND TRUST IN RELIGION.**

Jesus was well-aware that the scribes and the Pharisees slavishly obeyed the laws of the OT. Are you familiar with the word *punctilious?* That is a good word to describe these folks. They were strict, exact, precise, and thorough in their effort to not do what was forbidden and to do what was demanded.

Jesus uses His knowledge of these hyper-religious people to construct a parable of sorts. Verses 43-45 seems a bit odd and out of place, but Jesus is making an important point and issuing a stern warning with His story.

It appears that demon-possession commonly occurred in the ancient world. Still today, missionaries in remote and primitive parts of the world come across it often. I think some of what we call mental illness may be demonic activity.

Regardless, Jesus paints a picture of a demon who has left his human host. Maybe this demon had been cast out just as Jesus had done for a man earlier in our chapter. Maybe this demon voluntarily left. We are not told. In any case, he is seeking another home. He remembers “Old Joe,” we’ll call him. The demon thinks to himself, “You know, things were going well for me when I occupied Old Joe. Those were the good ole days. I wonder how things are now for Old Joe?” He goes back to his old home—the heart and life of Old Joe.

The end of v. 44 tells us that he found it “empty, swept, and put in order.” What does that mean? It means that Old Joe had decided it was time to mend his ways. He is now trying to live a reformed life. Maybe he has “got religion,” as they say. He has quit his cussin’ and his drinkin’ and his runnin’ around. He is endeavoring to live a moral, clean life.

Old Joe’s heart is swept and put in order, but there is just one problem—his heart is empty. It is unoccupied. Religion isn’t enough to fill your heart. It can make you mighty proud. It can cause you to strut around pleased that you have turned over a new leaf. If, however, the Holy Spirit doesn’t come to live inside of you, your heart is empty That is a dangerous place in which to be.

In the story Jesus tells, the demon returns and finds a “Vacancy” sign on the outside of Old Joe’s heart.” The demon tries the door and sure enough, it is unlocked. He opens the door, and a devilish grin comes over that demon’s face—the heart is empty.

The demon, however, is disappointed by one thing. Old Joes’s heart is disgustingly clean. “Ughh,” the demon says to himself. But he knows just what to do. He goes and finds seven other demons who are more wretched than himself. He issues an invitation: “I’ve found a great place for us to live. Come join me.” Those eight demons move in to Old Joe’s heart and make it their home, and poor Old Joe is now far worse off than he ever was. He falls off the wagon. He starts keeping company with low-lifes and joins them in their low-living. Those demons are happier than they have ever been.

Jesus is warning the religious folk—and we might be among that crowd, so we better listen up—that moral reformation is not enough. Trying to be good isn’t good enough. Ridding your life of bad habits is insufficient protection against demonic activity. You are still at risk if all you have done is reformed your ways.

Listen to what John MacArthur said in a sermon a number of years ago. Powerfully, he pointed out, “Cleaning up the life superficially on the outside . . . will only intensify the probability of damnation.” Those are strong words.

Satan has no problem with religion and religious people as long as those people are putting their trust in their religion. Satan loves to use religion and religious people. He does it all the time. What we need to realize is that it doesn’t even have to be false religion. Satan is quite pleased to use the members of Christian churches. These are people who are trusting their profession of faith, rather than actually trusting the One in whom they say they believe.

Having faith in your faith leaves your heart empty. Having faith in your church membership is meaningless. What you and I need is faith in the Person and work of Jesus Christ.

Let me summarize the warning Jesus gave to religious people who are trusting their religion. Let me give you three specific warning statements.

* **Warning #1: Demons Are Real and Repossession Is Possible.** Satan loves for our modern world to mock the idea that demons are real. If people are not worried about him and his underlings, they will live unguarded lives, and he can work unhindered behind the scenes.
* **Warning #2: Acts of Moral Reformation Are Just Not Enough.** Being a good person and a nice neighbor serves only to leave your heart empty and unoccupied. At any moment a demon can waltz in and make himself at home in your heart and life.
* **Warning #3: If you are Not filled with the Holy Spirit, Watch Out!** To be a Christian means Jesus has taken up residence in your life by means of His Holy Spirit. Paul wrote quite clearly in Romans 8:9, “Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to Him.”

Let’s reframe the story Jesus told. Let’s suppose that the demon in our story is longing for the good ole days and decides to return to Old Joe, but unbeknownst to that demon, Old Joe has become a Christian. The Holy Spirit of Jesus resides in His heart. Now that he has become a Christian, let’s call him, “New Joe.” The demon finds New Joe and discovers that the door to his heart is locked; so, he knocks. New Joe looks out the window and says, “Jesus, I don’t recognize the person at the door. Would you answer the door?

Jesus says, “Gladly.” Jesus opens the door and that demons is startled out of his wits.

That evil spirit immediately recognizes Jesus, and he stammers, “I, uh, I think I, I think I have the wrong house.”

Jesus answers firmly, “Yes, you do have the wrong house.” And that demon flees with a shriek.

New Joe asks, “Who was that?”

Jesus answers, “Nobody to worry about. He had the wrong house.”

When Satan or his demons come knocking, let Jesus answer the door.

A.W. Tozer wrote, “The best way to keep the enemy out is to keep Christ in” ([Tozer on the Holy Spirit](https://www.amazon.com/Tozer-Holy-Spirit-365-Day-Devotional/dp/1600662013?tag=desigod06-20), 27).

That brings us to the second statement I want to make. It is based on vv. 46-50. Let me set the stage. Jesus, His disciples, the scribes, the Pharisees, and others were all in a house having this conversation. Suddenly, Jesus gets word that His mother and His brothers are outside, and they are wanting to talk to Him.

Matthew does not tell us what Mark includes. Mark tells us what prompted Jesus family to come to Capernaum. We read in Mark 3:20 that Jesus was so busy He didn’t even have time to eat. Then in v. 21 we read, “And when His family heard it, they went out to seize Him, for they were saying, ‘He is out of His mind.’”

Jesus’ had heard reports of what was going on, and they thought He had lost it. Presumably, they were going to bring Him back to Nazareth so He could rest and recover. At this point, His brothers did not yet believe that Jesus was the Messiah. They didn’t understand what He was doing.

I find the situation a bit humorous. Jesus is 30-plus years-old. He is famous. Multitudes are following Him. He is inside a house with some movers and shakers of the Jewish faith. They are having a deep discussion. His family shows up without any warning. Someone slips in the door and says, “Excuse me, Jesus, but your Mom wants to talk to You.”

If you had been Jesus, what would you have said? I might have said, “I’m kinda busy right now? Did she say what she wanted?”

Jesus was in complete control of His emotions. He didn’t run outside. He didn’t act miffed, concerned, or upset. He took the news and the interruption as a teaching opportunity. That brings us to the second statement.

1. **JESUS CALLS US TO A PERSONAL RELATION-SHIP.**

Upon hearing that His mother and brothers were waiting outside to talk with Him, Jesus asks dramatically, “Who is My mother, and who are My brothers?” He makes a sweeping gesture toward His 12 disciples and says, “Here are My mother and My brothers!” Then, Jesus makes the application: “For whoever does the will of My Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.”

Jesus is saying, “What is important is not religion; it is relationship, and proof of your relationship with Me is your obedience to My Father.”

Earlier, I quoted John MacArthur as saying that if I all we do is clean up the outside of our life we only succeed in intensifying the probability of our own damnation. He followed up that statement by adding:

There are plenty of people calling for morality, but we’re calling for a relationship with Jesus Christ; that is our message. Out of that relationship comes true morality, as generated and affected and maintained by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Let me be clear about something. Jesus is not saying that it is our obedience that gains for us membership into His family. No, Scripture is quite clear that we are saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. It is not our obedience that saves us. Our obedience makes it clear that we are already saved. By the same token, it is our lack of obedience that gives clear evidence that we are not rightly related to God.

Look at the again at v. 50. We have encountered the words “does the will of my Father in heaven” once before. Let’s look back at Matthew 7:21. What we say is either negated or affirmed by what we do.

A few years ago, *The Wall Street Journal* ran an article that asked, “Why work out when you can just buy the clothes and look like you did?” The article explored a growing trend in the athletic apparel market—people are buying sports clothing without actually playing and sports or even exercising. The article noted, “The U.S. athletic apparel market will increase by nearly 50 percent to more than $100 billion at retail by 2020, driven in large part by consumers snapping up stretchy tees and leggings that will never see the fluorescent lights of a gym.” For instance, sales of yoga apparel increased by 45 percent but yoga participation grew by less than five percent.

The trend isn’t confined to yoga. Outdoor and camping retailers have debuted new lines of hiking boots and flannel shirts for people who have no intention of actually hiking and camping. Retailers are also rolling out jogging pants and preppy, $90 men’s running shorts for men who will never jog.

The article quoted one buyer of athletic apparel who likes to wear yoga pants around town but who seldom has time to work out. She said, “When you put on your workout apparel, you think, ‘Huh, maybe I should think about working out today.’”[[2]](#endnote-2)

The Apostle Paul wrote to believers and encouraged them to put on the new man. When you put on your new nature, that is not time to think about maybe obeying God. If the Holy Spirit lives in you, that is your desire, to obey God. Quoting again from Romans 8, Paul wrote, “For those who live according to the flesh, set their minds on the things of the flesh. Those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit” (v. 5). He added a few verses later, “You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you” (v. 9).

God sets before us a choice. We can choose religion or we can choose relationship. Jesus warns us against the first; He calls us to the second. What will your response be?

1. J.D. Douglas, ed., *New Bible Dictionary* (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1982), from J.B. Job in his article, “Religion,” p. 1017 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Sara Germano, "Yoga Poseurs: Athletic Gear Soars, Outpacing Sport Itself,"*The Wall Street Journal (8-20-14).* [↑](#endnote-ref-2)