

## **IS YOUR RELIGION LEGIT? (Zechariah 7:1-10; 8:18-23)**

Her name was Margaret. Every day, Margaret went through the same ritual. It might be better described as a battle, a test of the wills, even a wrestling match. The same time each day, with clock-work precision, she would make her way to the bathroom, open up a cabinet, and retrieve a huge bottle of castor oil.

Next, she would go to the kitchen, open up the silverware drawer and select a table spoon. At the sound of the drawer opening and the silverware rattling, her Yorkshire Terrier, Patches, would immediately go into hiding. Patches attempted to hide because he knew what was coming.

Inevitably, Margaret would catch Patches, hold him down, pry open his mouth, and feed him his daily dose of castor oil. A friend had convinced Margaret that by giving Patches castor oil daily, he would be the recipient of strong teeth, a beautiful coat, and a long life. It was her love for Patches that led her to put him through the wrestling match, the squirming, and the fighting while she got the castor oil down his little doggie throat.

One day, during this daily ritual, as Patches was kicking his little legs, he made flush contact with the bottle of castor oil and sent it flying across the kitchen floor. Immediately, Margaret let go of Patches and went to the pantry to get a towel to clean up the mess.

When she returned, she saw a sight that made her laugh out loud—there Patches was in the kitchen floor, standing over a small puddle of castor oil, licking it up. At that very moment, Margaret realized that Patches didn't object to the taste of castor oil; he just didn't like having it force-fed to him.

In the same way, most people (not all, but most), don't object to religion. They just don't want it shoved down their throat (story told by Kevin Harney in his book *Seismic Shifts*).

While religious practice in our country has waned in recent decades, Americans are still, very much, a religious people.

A few years ago, Frank Newport, a social scientist and the Editor-in-Chief for Gallup polls wrote a book entitled, *God Is Alive and Well*. While there is some disheartening news about the decline in church attendance and the growing number of people who do not identify with any particular religious group, Newport concludes, on the basis of his scientific research, that America is still a highly religious nation. He also claims that he expects religious expression to grow rather than shrink in the near future.

What does God have to say about religion? Not much. Not a single time do the words *religious* or *religion* appear in the OT. *Religious* shows up just twice in the NT, and *religion* turns up five times. Nowhere in the Bible does God claim to have created religion, nor does He even endorse it.

What is religion? According to the dictionary, religion is “a specific fundamental set of beliefs and practices generally agreed upon by a number of persons or sects.” And how many religions are there in the world? Today, in 2020, there are estimated to be 4,200 separate religions of which Christianity is the largest. While there are many branches and divisions and denominations, Christianity is just one of the 4,200 religions in the world

I think it is safe to say that religion, for the most part, is man-made. The Bible hints at that. In Colossians 2:22 the apostle Paul mentions “human precepts and teachings,” and in the next verse explains, “These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion.” In Acts 17, Paul was walking around the city of Athens taking in the architectural beauty of the city and he took note of all the idols and altars to various gods. In v. 22 of that chapter, Paul addresses a distinguished group of leading citizens, and he says, “Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious.” He was neither complimenting nor insulting them. He was just making a statement of fact. They were indeed religious, but we would argue that their religion was man-made.

The only time where *religion* or *religious* is used more than once in the same chapter is in James 1:26-27 where *religious* is found one time and *religion* twice. Listen to what James wrote:

If you claim to be **religious** but don’t control your tongue, you are fooling yourself, and your **religion** is worthless. Pure and genuine **religion** in the sight of God the Father means caring for orphans and widows in their distress and refusing to let the world corrupt you.

James contrasts what he calls “worthless” religion with what he terms as being “pure and genuine.”

Whether you realize it or not, each person in this room and each person who hears the sound of my voice is religious. You may not think of yourself as religious, but if you hold certain beliefs about God, and if you engage in certain religious practices such as Bible reading, prayer, and either private or public worship, you are religious. The question you and I must answer is this: “Is our religion worthless, or is it genuine?”

Recently, I have heard my stepson Lance use a certain word a couple of times. When he wants to put his stamp of approval on something, he says, “That’s legit.” I am going to borrow that word from him this morning and ask, “Is Our Religion Legit?”

Zechariah delves into that very subject in the book that bears his name. It is the 11<sup>th</sup> and the longest of the Minor Prophets. It is 14 chapters long while Daniel, one of the major prophets, is just 12 chapters. Daniel’s chapters are longer and takes up far more space than does Zechariah (14 pages of text as opposed to less than 8). Zechariah is an interesting book. It is an example of what is called apocalyptic literature, and it uses symbolic language, visions, signs and wonders to convey its message.

The word *apocalypse* means something different than how it is often used in popular culture. If you hear or read the word *apocalypse* today, it usually refers to a great disaster or the end of the world. The word, however, simply means *unveiling* or *revelation*. The word is used 18 times in the NT. We are told in 1 Corinthians 1:7 that we “wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ.” The last book of the Bible unveils or reveals that Jesus is the undisputed King of heaven and earth, and in the end, He wins, and if you are with Jesus, you are on the winning side.

Zechariah has much to say or to reveal concerning the Messiah. Within the pages of his prophecy, we see “the second coming of Christ, His reign, His priesthood, His kingship, His humanity, His Deity, His building of the Temple of the Lord, His coming in lowliness, His bringing of permanent peace, His rejection and betrayal for 30 pieces of

silver, His return to Israel as the crucified One, and His being smitten by the word of the Lord” (C.I. Scofield).

In addition to doing all of that, Zechariah also helps us to answer the question as to whether our religion is legit. Look with me at Zechariah 7:1-7.

## **I. OUR RELIGION IS LEGIT IF IT HELPS US TO COMMUNICATE OUR LOVE FOR GOD.**

The Jewish people in Zechariah’s day faced a theological dilemma. They were in a quandary; so, they sent representatives to the priests and the prophets to request help in answering their question.

The Law of Moses taught the people to fast only on the Day of Atonement, but over the years the religious leaders had instituted additional fasts. When they were in exile in Babylon, they began fasting . . .

- on a certain day each year to mourn the day King Nebuchadnezzar began his siege of Jerusalem.
- in memory of the day Jerusalem was captured by the Babylonians.
- to remember the burning of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple.
- to commemorate the assassination of Gedaliah and the massacre of some eighty men from the cities of Shechem, Shiloh, and Samaria.

Now that some of the Jews had returned to their homeland and the temple was in the process of being rebuilt, some of the people were wondering whether or not they should continue the fast that marked the destruction of the temple. They wanted to know if that tradition should be continued.

It was when they asked that question that God had a word for the people through the prophet Zechariah. He answered their one question with a series of questions. Look again at vv. 4-7. Basically, God was asking the people, **“Who is your religion for? Is it for you or for Me?”** He wanted to know when they were fasting whether they were doing it for Him or for themselves, and when they were feasting, was it for His glory or their own selfish pleasure?

We need to ask ourselves that same question. Do we do what we do for God or for ourselves? That is the heart of the matter. Our religion is not legit, if it is done purely for selfish reasons. We need to investigate our motivations.

- Why do you attend Sunday School? Is it because that what you’ve done that all your life?
- Why do you come to church? Is it because you will feel guilty if you don’t?
- Why do you give your money when we take up an offering? Are you hoping God will bless you if you do?
- Why do you read the Bible? Is it so you can check off “Read Bible Daily” on your offering envelope?
- Why do you pray? Is it so you can get stuff from God?

Are we serving God because we love Him or we attempting to make ourselves feel better about ourselves? When we do religious things, are we doing it for God or to be seen by and applauded by others?

Jesus took the Pharisees and the religious leaders to task in the Sermon on the Mount because He knew that when they gave, and when they prayed, and when they fasted, it was all about getting recognition for themselves.

The point Zechariah is making is that our religious activity should be done as a means of expressing our love for God.

Like the hub of a bicycle tire from which the spokes extend, our devotional activities should proceed from our love for God. If Jesus isn't at the center then all of life is out of balance.

Church isn't about me, and it is not about you. It is not about perpetuating tradition for tradition's sake. If we are not here for God, then we are here for the wrong reason. Why are you here?

A minister said that while he was traveling in the African nation of Ghana, he learned that in the dominant language of that country, there is only way to ask the question, "What is your religion?" You have to ask, "Whom do you serve?" That makes perfect sense. Regardless of our denominational loyalties, and our statements of faith, and our pious sounding words, when it comes down to it, our true God is the one we love and serve.

Our religion is legit if we use it to communicate our love for God. If others can't tell we love God by what we do, then how much do we really love God?

## **II. OUR RELIGION IS LEGIT IF IT HELPS US TO DEMONSTRATE GOD'S LOVE FOR OTHERS.**

Look again at Zechariah 7:8-10. Once again, being inspired by God, Zechariah had a message for the people. He was telling them that the way to love God was to love people. The way to love a God we can't see is to love people we do see.

If our religion—our love for God—doesn't cause us to show God's love to others then it lacks God's stamp of approval. Earlier, we looked at what James, the brother of our Lord, wrote in James 1:27. He wrote, "Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world." As important as it is, that verse doesn't say a word about having correct doctrine. Our vertical love for God will display itself in a horizontal love for others. That is what God requires.

Many of the other Minor Prophets hit on the same theme. We read in Micah 6:8, "He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God."

Turn back to Amos 5:21-24. God isn't looking for religious exercises and worship services. He wants us to be just in our dealings with others. In Hosea 6:6 God tells us, "For I desire mercy, not sacrifice." God isn't so much looking for us to give Him things but for us to show love to people.

Did you ever see the movie *Fried Green Tomatoes*? There is a scene in the movie in which a woman named Idgy and her friend Ruth are running a restaurant, the Whistle

Stop Café, which they borrowed money to buy. Idgy is the outspoken one, and Ruth is quiet.

It is lunch time; thus, Idgy is busy waiting on tables. She drops off a plate of cornbread at one table, fills coffee cups at another. While she is doing so, the town sheriff is complaining to Idgy about giving food to black people in the backyard of the restaurant. He warns her that by doing so she is going to run off her white customers. Idgy doesn't take the time nor see the need to explain her actions.

When she goes back to the kitchen to fix some more coffee, she sees Smokey Lonesome at the lunch counter. Smokey is a homeless man who hangs around town. Idgy had fixed him a plate full of fried chicken, mashed potatoes, and corn. As she watches him, she notices that his hand is shaky, and he can't get the fork to his mouth without dropping his corn. Idgy walks over to him and says, "Come on outside, Smokey." Smokey thinks that Idgy is going to send him on his way, but she doesn't. She pulls a pint of whiskey out from her apron and gives him a drink to help calm his nerves. She tells him a funny story to encourage him. Ruth is shown watching from the screen door.

In the very next scene, it is nighttime, and we see Smokey lying down in a storage shed. Quietly, Ruth enters the shed and drapes a blanket over Smokey. He says, "God, bless you, Ma'am." And the scene ends.

In his book *The Reflective Life*, Ken Gire reflects on that scene. He suggests that in that scene we can see three pictures of Jesus. He contends that in the actions of Idgy, we can see **the mature Christ**. Even though Idgy has no use for organized religion, and even though she smokes, drinks, gambles, and curses like a sailor, she is concerned about people, and she goes out of her way to care for the needy. In her kindness, we see the mature Christ.

He says that Ruth's character pictures for us **the emerging Christ**. Ruth watches her friend Idgy, and she learns from her. The scene ends with her showing care to Smokey because Idgy has modeled compassion for her.

According to Gire, in the scene we have the mature Christ, the emerging Christ, and there is one more picture of Christ. You may have missed it. It is more easily understood when we view the scene through the lens of what Jesus said in Matthew 25. Jesus spoke about what will happen when He returns. He will separate the world into two groups—the sheep and the goats. He will invite the sheep to join Him in His kingdom. His reasons for doing so is that when they saw him hungry, they fed Him. When they saw Him thirsty, they gave Him something to drink. When they saw Him naked, they clothed Him. When they saw Him sick, they looked after Him. When they saw Him in prison, they went and visited Him. They will ask when they ever saw Jesus in such conditions, and He will say to them, "Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of Mine, you did for Me" (Matthew 25:40).

The third picture of Jesus is found in the person of Smokey Lonesome. He shows us **the needy Christ**.

If you were going to portray a role in the movie, which one would you want to play—Idgy, the mature Christ; Ruth, the emerging Christ; or Smokey Lonesome, the needy Christ? Gire wrote, "I want to be like the Christ who turned the water into wine, not the Christ who thirsted on a cross . . . I want to be the Good Samaritan, not the man who fell among thieves."

We don't always get to play the role we want to play because sometimes bad things happen to good people. Remember that whenever you come across a needy Christ, you have a golden opportunity to become an emerging Christ by showing that person the love of God. And it just may be that there will be times when you are the needy Christ giving others a chance to become an emerging Christ. There is great value to be found both in suffering and meeting the needs of those who suffer. When we love those who are hurting, we are actually loving God with His love.

That brings us to the final point. Let's look at 8:18-23.

### **III. OUR RELIGION IS LEGIT IF IT HELPS US TO MOTIVATE OTHERS TO SEEK OUR GOD.**

Here in this passage, the prophet Zechariah foretells of a wonderful time. He says that His kingdom will become a place of feasting instead of fasting. He promises that God will become so evident in the lives of His people that others will come to them wanting them to introduce them to their God.

If our religion is really real, then the lives we live will impel others to want to know the God we serve. I wonder, has anyone ever grabbed hold of you and begged you to introduce him/her to your God? Jesus said that we are the salt of the world. Salt has numerous qualities, but one aspect of salt is that it creates thirst. Are we making people thirsty for our God?

We know that God is real, but how can we impress upon others that God is real? Jesus told us in John 13:35, "By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you love one another." There is no greater proof of God's reality than you and I showing love to one another.

As I was preparing for this message, I recalled something that took place in March of 1998. At the time I was pastoring the FBC of Hinton. One Monday afternoon I was sitting at my desk in my office at the church when I received a phone call from a man who was a complete stranger at the time. His name was Jim Fain. At that time, he was the Chairman of the Pastor Search Committee from his church. He told me that the committee had received my name from Henry Chennault, who was their interim pastor. He asked if I would be willing to send the committee an updated resume.

The next day or two I sent that resume along with a letter to the committee. The letter was dated March 17, 1998. One paragraph of the letter read, "At the moment Jim called on Monday, I was watching a video of Henry Blackaby that was taped at Falls Creek a few years back. He was talking to ministers about the subject of prayer. In his opening remarks, he read Zechariah 8:20-23. The last verse, verse 23, forms my prayer for you. I pray that God would work so mightily in and through the First Baptist Church of Stillwater and that His presence would be so obvious in your midst, that many from the community of Stillwater would show up on your doorstep with the hope that you would introduce them to the God who is clearly present in the life and work of your church."

That is my prayer for this church?

As I close this message, I want to borrow one more time from Ken Gire. In his book *The Reflective Life*, he includes a chapter called "God's Mission Statement for Our Life." He makes the case that God's mission statement for us is the two Great Commandments,

which teach us to love God with all of our heart, soul, and mind, and to love our neighbor as we do ourselves. Gire wrote:

To passionately love God and other people.

That is what matters.

This is *all* that matters.

And all that God requires.

But it requires our all to fulfill.

That is the mission statement, so to speak, of the reflective life. *Not to see better or to hear better but to love better.* To better love all that is sacred. And of all that is sacred, nothing is more sacred than God and the people He created as the object of His affection.

He wrote that at the end of the day as we are lying upon our bed, we should rehearse our conversations, actions, and decisions, and ask ourselves:

Have I loved well?

If we can answer yes to that question, it is enough.

It may not be enough for our employer. It may not be enough for our fellow workers. It may not be enough for all the carpools and committees and other things on our calendar.

It may not even be enough for us.

But it is enough for God.

And that should make it enough for us.

That is what makes religion legit—love. To show the love of God, you must receive His love. Have you received God's love by receiving His Son?