

## Discipleship Series for New Believers

### Lesson 12: True Religion versus the Spirit of Religion

By Kristin Bone

The main difference I see from the scriptures between the spirit of religion and pure religion is obedience to God. Religious people will not obey God or surrender everything to Him. However, true Christians embrace the cross and deny their desires that come from the flesh.

Jesus spoke on the two greatest commandments which sum up the whole of Christianity. He said, “The first of all commandments is: ‘Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ This is the first commandment. And the second, like it, is this: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these,” (Mark 12:29-31). Obviously God intends for us to love Him first which is our first calling. Our second is to show love to our neighbor.

I John 5:3 demonstrates to us how we know if we truly love God. It says, “For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome.” God desires for us to love Him with all our hearts, and we do this by walking in simple obedience to Him.

The Bible shows that the test between being religious and godly comes in the area of obedience. If you obey God in what He tells you to do, then He claims you as His own. But if you walk in willful disobedience to Him and have religious pretense, God will reject you. This truth is found in Matthew 7:21-23 which states, “Not all people who sound religious are really godly. They may refer to me as ‘Lord,’ but they still won’t enter the Kingdom of Heaven. The decisive issue is whether they obey my Father in heaven. On judgment day many will tell me, ‘Lord, Lord, we prophesied in your name and cast out demons in your name and performed many miracles in your name.’ But I will reply, ‘I never knew you. Go away; the things you did were unauthorized.’” The spirit of religion will not obey God. It will do other things such as preach and teach, prophesy or exorcise demons. But the true test of real Christianity is obedience out of a heart of love for God.

The Pharisees were religious to the uttermost. They had the spirit of religion, and yet they did not truly know God. Matthew 15:7-9 shows us how they honored God with their profession but not with their lives. This is what Jesus had to say about them. “Hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy about you, saying, ‘These people draw near to Me with their mouth, and honor Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me. And in vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.’” We cannot just go to church and talk about how we love God. We have to really live it out. Our hearts are near to Jesus when we are walking in God’s truth. We are near to Him with more than just our songs when we are doing what He tells us to do.

The spirit of religion will even obey God in many ways, but it will not let God go in and deal with the heart of the matter. The religious spirit will cling to something it is not willing to give up. And whatever this issue is that is dear to this person's heart will hinder them from truly walking with Jesus. This can be seen in the parable of the rich young man. Since his youth he had obeyed the Ten Commandments. Yet, Jesus spoke to him in love as He saw that there was one lust he was holding back from God and not letting God deal with. Jesus told him, "Go your way, sell whatever you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, take up the cross, and follow Me. But he was sad at this word, and went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions." (Mark 10:17-22).

This principle about the spirit of religion can also be seen in Matthew 23:25-28. The Pharisees would allow the Lord to deal with certain issues in their hearts. They allowed Him to deal with the outside issues, but they were not willing to yield their whole heart and all control to Him. They only wanted to allow God to deal with surface issues. Jesus was not pleased with this sort of worship as can be seen from the following remarks. "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you cleanse the outside of the cup and dish, but on the inside they are full of extortion and self-indulgence. Blind Pharisees, first cleanse the inside of the cup and dish, that the outside of them may be clean also. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but inside are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness. Even so you also outwardly appear righteous to men, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness." (Matthew 23:25-28).

Jesus calls us to be absolutely surrendered to Him and to have no hidden parts of our hearts unyielded to Him. He wants to be able to come into our hearts and not be limited by our will or our flesh as to how far He can go in our lives. He wants complete control of our lives. Anyone who gives Him less than this is either growing in the Lord, and He will bring them to the point of complete surrender, or else, they have the spirit of religion that only worships Jesus in pretense and not in true obedience.