

“RELIGIOUS OR FAITHFUL TO JESUS?”
Isaiah 55:1-13, I Thessalonians 2:1-12, Acts 17:16-34
February 22 & 23, 2025

“When a woman is pregnant, it is a result of an intimate encounter in private. That encounter shows up in public months later. If nothing happens in public, that means that nothing was generated in private. Intimate relationships in private typically produce results that are displayed in public.

“God wants new life in Him to be manifested. He wants the life of Jesus, lived thousands of years ago, to become your experience. He wants the intimacy of your relationship with Christ to bring about the power of His presence in you no matter what your circumstances. He wants your joy to be full, as His presence shows up in your life.

So “how do you know when that life is manifested? Some pregnant women I know throw up, but that doesn’t take away the joy of the new life within them. Some have trouble sleeping, but that doesn’t take away the joy of the new life within them. Some have trouble walking, but that doesn’t take away the joy of the new life within them. For when life is manifested, it overrides the inconveniences that they’ve had to endure.

“See, a lot of Christians are looking for happiness. They want a better house, a bigger car, or nicer circumstances. There’s nothing inherently wrong with that. But when they don’t get those things, they don’t have joy. That’s because life hasn’t been manifested in them.

“Even if you have to throw up the house, if you’ve got life, you still have joy. Even if you have to lose the job, if you have life, you have joy. Even if you have to lose the circumstances, if you have life, you have joy. Your joy will be full because your body is full with the manifestation of Jesus Christ.”¹ But if joy isn’t in your life on the outside, it is because the joy of the Lord isn’t first on the inside. Joy is the end result of having Christ Jesus in you.

¹ (Tony Evans, *Tony Evans’ Book of Illustrations*, [Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2009] pg. 303-304, #907)

Joy comes to you as you let Jesus become so a part of your life that everything you do demonstrates Him in you. There are a lot of people who call themselves Christians who do not have joy because they have not yet let Jesus become the Lord of their life. They may have claimed Jesus as their Savior, but they have not yet made that essential step of letting Jesus live in them and so live through them. They're what could be called CINOs - Christians In Name Only. They claim the name, but they have no personal relationship with Jesus, so they are limited in what they can do for the Lord because they are operating on their own strength and their own wisdom. Their life is not yet manifested by having the living Christ within them.

These folks tend to want to practice religion more than desiring to be faithful witnesses for Jesus. Since they don't know Jesus personally, they want to earn their own salvation by going through the motions of religious practices. They may attend church regularly; they may even become leaders within the life of the church; they might even become seminary professors, or pastors, or even bishops. They may work hard to do all the right things and say all the right things, but it's only empty religion. It's not faithful obedience to Jesus. They want to follow God based upon their own standards, which then become mixed up with the world's standards, and they are unable to find the fullness of the Lord in their lives, because they have not fully committed to be a follower of Jesus Christ.

Now, don't get me wrong. Religious practices are good, but not if that's all there is to your faith. Just going through the motions of faithfulness does not give you Salvation from your sins - a relationship with Jesus Christ as your Savior and Lord saves you from your sins. Living a good life by doing religious things only makes you a good person - it does not make you a Christian. Letting Jesus Christ be the Lord of your life, letting Him guide and direct you each day so that you can do His work - THAT is what makes you a Christian. Going to church every

week, being a leader in the church, working in missions, or singing in the choir, or being on the trustees committee of the church does not make you a Christian. You could even teach Sunday school or be a pastor of a congregation and find yourself outside of the Kingdom of God. It's not about us working hard to earn our own salvation. It's got to be a commitment to Jesus Christ as your Savior, followed up by letting Him guide you to serve Him, that makes you one of His followers.

Living by your own strength, relying upon your own power, trusting your own knowledge, and doing your best to live right, might get you places here in this world, but it will not get you to a right relationship with the Lord. Oh, you may have a great life here, but it won't get you to heaven.

And that's what the Apostle Paul was trying to help people to understand. He found himself in Athens, and he wanted the people there to find the Way, the Truth, and the Life found only in Jesus Christ. Listen to this next section of our walk through the Book of Acts. This is Acts 17:16-34. (READ Acts 17:16-34)

The people of Athens seemed very religious because "*the city was full of idols*" (17:16). Paul was greatly distressed to see so many idols. But he found one platform, one altar that gave him hope. It was inscribed, "*To An Unknown God*" (Acts 17:23). The people of Athens didn't want to offend any of the "gods" so they had idols placed around the city to honor every one of them. So as not to miss any "god" they did not yet know about, they had this altar there, just to cover all the bases. They were religious in so many ways, yet their religion was empty because they were not worshipping the One and Only God, the Lord God Almighty.

And because they were worshipping all of the "gods" without worshipping the One and

Only God, all their religious practices were never going to amount to anything, because they were missing the Only One that mattered.

So Paul spent his time in the synagogue and in the marketplace telling everyone about the God they were missing. He showed love to them by letting them know about “*the Good News of Jesus and the resurrection*” (17:18). Finally some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began talking with him and he got invited to the “*meeting of the Areopagus, where they said to him, ‘May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we would like to know what they mean.’ (All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.)*” (17:19).

The Epicureans, “who took their name from their founder, Epicurus (341-270 BC), tended to be materialistic in outlook. For them either the gods did not exist, or they were so far removed from the world as to exercise no influence on its affairs. They taught a rudimentary atomic theory, and in their ethics they stressed the importance of pleasure and tranquility. They have often been falsely represented as sensualist in outlook, but in fact they had a lofty view of ‘pleasure’ and scorned sensualism.

“The Stoics, founded by Zeno (340-265 BC), took their name from the *stoa* or colonnade where he taught. They stressed the importance of Reason as the principle which was inherent in the structuring of the universe and by which men ought to live. They had a pantheistic conception of God as the world-soul, and their ethics stressed individual self-sufficiency and obedience to the dictates of duty.”²

So Paul began to explain the good works of God to them as they would be able to

² (I. Howard Marshall, *The ACTS of The Apostles*, [Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1980] pg. 183-184)

understand. But he confronts their religious practice first. He says, *“People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship - and this is what I am going to proclaim to you”* (Acts 17:23b). He goes on to explain how God created the whole universe and gave us all life through Him here on the earth. *“God did this so that [we] would seek Him and perhaps reach out for Him and find Him, though He is not far from any one of us. ‘For in Him we live and move and have our being’* (This is from the Cretan philosopher Epimenides). *“As some of your own poets have said, ‘We are His offspring”* (This is from the Cilician Stoic philosopher Aratus), (Acts 17:27-28).

Paul uses their own teachers to show that God is THE Lord God Almighty. He speaks to them where they are at, and leads them on toward his conclusion, that God is the only God, not the idols of gold or silver or stone made by human hands. Therefore, since God is God, and there is none other, we should repent of our humanistic ways and seek to follow Him, who has already supplied us the way of Salvation through His Son, Jesus Christ, who died on the cross and rose from the dead. Paul was inviting them beyond their limited view of God and called them to go deeper in their faith to find Jesus as the Son of God who paid the price for all our sins in His death and resurrection.

Some of the folks there heard him and believed his teaching about Jesus. Most were noncommittal, however, and only wanted to hear him speak about Jesus again at a later date. They were focused upon their religious practices of pleasure and reason that they could not get beyond it to see God’s Salvation through Jesus Christ.

Sounds a lot like today, doesn’t it? People still worship pleasure and reason to the point

that they disregard the Salvation of Jesus Christ. They work hard to find meaning in life, but they always come up empty. They continue to search for purpose in life, yet they never quite get to the point of accepting what Jesus did for all people once and for all on Calvary. Their eyes and ears and hearts are so focused on the things of this world that they cannot comprehend what God has done for us through Jesus.

Tony Evans gives us a great example of this kind of mindset. He says, “I had a speaking engagement once that required about a forty-five minute drive. So I got my directions. It was a men’s breakfast at a church, so I left my house with plenty of time to spare, put the directions beside me in the seat, glanced at them, and then got on the freeway headed to the breakfast. After driving for about forty minutes, I glanced at the directions to double-check my exit. I made sure it was the right one, then I exited and made a left turn. I began driving past the mall, past the light, past another light, and I wasn’t seeing anything I thought I was supposed to see. I figured I hadn’t gone far enough, so I kept driving.

“Things were getting worse, not better. I figured that I ought to pull over and ask somebody. So I pulled over to a convenience store, thinking that I could trust the people who worked there to give me directions. A clerk told me that I hadn’t gone far enough. Now, I thought that the church was supposed to be not too far off the freeway, but I figured I had missed something and assumed that the clerk knew what he was talking about. After all, he was from the area. He told me to just keep going and that I’d run right into it. I got in the car and kept going.

“I started seeing cows and realized that I was now in the country. Something about this didn’t feel right. I wasn’t arriving at where I thought I was supposed to be. So I figured I’d asked the wrong person. I needed to talk to somebody else, get somebody else’s opinion. So I

asked another guy.

“Time was getting late. I was supposed to start speaking at 7:30 a.m. I’d given myself plenty of time, but now it was 7:15 and I didn’t know where I was. I was in a bad situation. So, I asked somebody else. They said they’d never heard of the church. It was now 7:20 and I was getting a little nervous because I hate being late to anything. I started winding down my window at stoplights, asking random people to help me find my way. It was 7:25 a.m., then 7:30.

“I had gone to five different people to tell me where I was supposed to be. Everybody meant well, but nobody could tell me where I needed to go. I decided to read the directions one more time. I picked it up and looked at it closely. Originally, I had only glanced at it. Then I let well-meaning people try to help me. Now, I decided to look closely at the directions. What I found was when I exited the freeway, I should have turned RIGHT, not left!

“First of all, I listened to myself and turned left. Then I listened to everybody else and really went farther out of the way. But the instructions said ‘turn right.’ Because I did not pay attention to the instructions but listened to my own understanding and listened to everybody else’s understanding, I went left when I should have gone right. So I had to backtrack, and when I backtracked and went two blocks to the right of the freeway, I found the church.

“I had lost time; I had lost patience, I was sweating, frustrated, mad, and irritated because I had gone the wrong direction. (Can anyone relate to this incident?)

“Some of us have gone left. Proverbs 14:12 tells us “*There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death.*” Where I wound up was wrong. A lot of us have spent five, ten, fifteen, twenty, even thirty years going left and you’re running out of time; the hour is late. It’s time to backtrack because where God wants to take you is really not that far away.”³

³ (Tony Evans, *Tony Evans’ Book of Illustrations*, [Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2009] pg. 19-20, #26)

Paul made it clear, *“In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now He commands all people everywhere to repent”* (Acts 17:30). We have only a little time left to choose the right path, to leave our focus only on religious activities and come to faith in Jesus Christ our Savior. And not just to come to faith in Him, but to build an intimate relationship with Him so that we find Him making an obvious difference in our lives. We are to focus on following Jesus Christ in all our ways so that we can help others find Him, too. And that happens only as we focus carefully upon the Word of God, study it, learn it, put it into practice in our lives, and then display it in how we present ourselves to the people of the world.

If you haven't yet let Jesus become Savior AND Lord of your life, REPENT and turn to Him for guidance and direction to keep you on the right path. If you've accepted Jesus as your Savior, but have been living the way that YOU want to live, REPENT and turn back to Jesus. You've taken too many “lefts” in your life. Turn right back to Jesus. If you've found Jesus, and have been following Him diligently, but others don't know it because you haven't shared it with another, REPENT, and let those around you know how much Jesus means to you. Don't let another day go by that you miss sharing Jesus. If you're a faithful follower of Jesus, sharing Him with all those around you, never give up! Look at the differences you're making in their lives as you direct them back to the right path by staying true to His Word.

So, let go of the religion, and take up true faith in Jesus Christ! Let's pray.

Father, thank You for Your Word of Truth and Life found in the Bible! Thank You for calling all people to You so that we might have real life. Touch our hearts today, Lord, so that we might turn our lives completely over to You, for You are the One who leads us to life, not death. Open our eyes, our ears, our hearts and our minds to see clearly the life You give to us through Jesus Christ our Savior. Grant us the courage to live for Him all our days, in every way, so that the whole world might know that He is Savior and Lord. This we pray in Jesus' Name. Amen.