

Week 6 – Christianity is a Relationship; Not a Religion – James 1:26-27

Scripture Reading: James 1:22-27

Introduction

As we've been going through this sermon series, we've been looking at Christian clichés or sayings that serve as a kind of shorthand we often use to express some truth or another

And, as we've seen, the problem with many of the “bumper stickers” isn't that they are *wrong* but that they are *misleading*

When some of you have asked me what “bumper sticker” we'll be taking on next you've responded with, “What's wrong with that? It sounds fine to me.”

But what we need to understand is that there is a critical difference between something that *sounds* right and something that *is* right and we need to employ biblical discernment to recognize which is which

That's the case with our bumper sticker for today that says – Christianity is a relationship; not a religion

It's easy to see why this saying gained popularity

The word “religion” is spoken in such a derogatory tone in many pulpits that it's not surprising that same attitude has spread to the people in the pews

Many well-meaning Christians have come to understand religion as a kind of straightjacket of rules and regulations that just get in the way of their relationship with God

And being labeled a “fundamentalist” is something virtually no Christian would seek

So many are Christians are heard to say, “Yeah, I'm a Christian but I'm not religious” as if it were a badge of honor

I have to admit, the idea of focusing more on “relationship” than rules and duties is an attractive one as more and more people claim to believe in God while at the same time choosing to not link themselves to a religious tradition

There is a seismic shift underway as people are forsaking doctrinal distinctions, orders of worship, and rules for living in search of a way to personally connect with God

But, if we aren't careful, we can go overboard and begin to use the excuse of shunning religion so we can live more like the world by ignoring God's clear commands

How we define “religion” is at the heart of why it sounds right to say that Christianity is a relationship and not a religion so let's start there as we unpack today's bumper sticker

I. “Religion” Defined

In come Christian circles “religion” is synonymous with trying to earn one's own salvation or merit with God by doing certain things

And if you define “religion” as man attempting to win the approval of God through his own efforts, then Christianity is definitely not a religion and a Christ-follower would be right to say they aren't religious

But is that an accurate definition of “religion?”

Let's read through our focus verses again as we seek to come up with a proper definition of the word “religion” because it's always best to begin with God's Word and **James 1:26-27** mentions “religion” twice and being “religious” once:

*If anyone thinks he is **religious** and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's **religion** is worthless. **Religion** that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.*

James uses the practice of religion as living so as to please God and I believe we would agree that living as a true follower of Christ would please God making biblical Christianity a religion as James defines it

But we know that language changes over time so we may well wonder what a more modern definition of “religion” is
Let’s look at one of my favorite dictionaries the 1913 version of Webster’s Dictionary

This is how it defines “religion”:

“The outward act or form by which men indicate their recognition of the existence of a god or gods having power over their destiny, to whom obedience, service, and honor are due; specifically, conformity in faith and life to the precepts inculcated in the Bible, respecting conduct of life and duty toward God and man.”

So, the 1913 Webster’s uses a few more words but basically says the same thing as James – that religion is living in a way that pleases God and says that we find that way of living taught in the Bible

But I have to admit that the definition I was most surprised by was the one given by Dictionary.com which defines religions as:

“A set of beliefs concerning the cause, nature, and purpose of the universe, especially when considered as the creation of a superhuman agency or agencies, usually involving devotional and ritual observances, and often containing a moral code governing the conduct of human affairs”

That is a remarkably astute definition

But the thing that really caught my attention is that it comes very close to how they define the German word, *weltanschauung* or as we would say it in English, “worldview”

They define worldview as “a comprehensive conception or image of the universe and of humanity’s relation to it”

Those definitions all paint pretty much the same picture and we would have to say that Christianity is most definitely a religion under those definitions

In fact, if we accept those definitions, we have to come to the conclusion that all people are “religious” in some way because everyone behaves in accordance with the way they view the world

One writer humorously observed that a person is religious even if they religiously deny they are religious because everyone has a worldview

That means that even atheists who deny God’s existence are “religious” as they order their lives according to their concept of a godless world

So where did this whole idea of it being better to not be considered “religious” come from?

I think it probably had its origin in the New Testament of all places as we read about the Pharisees and Jesus’ opposition to them

After all, they were the religious elite – the rule followers – and Jesus regularly condemned them so who would ever want to be like them?

And when we look in the dictionary we find that to be called Pharisaic, or like the Pharisees, is not exactly a badge of honor

But what we fail to recognize about the Pharisees is that they had a warped worldview that didn’t conform to a biblical worldview at all – they were quite religious but they were following and conforming to the wrong religion

Jesus called them hypocrites not because they were too fervent in doing what God wanted them to do – in other words for being too religious – but because they weren’t living according to God’s law at all

The problem was that they were living according to the wrong worldview –the rules that they had invented themselves – as we see in **Mark 7:5-8** – let’s look at that passage together

And the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, "Why do your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?" And he said to them, "Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, "This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men."

You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men."

The fact that you can't be successful if you're playing basketball according to the rules of rugby doesn't mean that the problem is in being a rule follower but that you are following the wrong rules

And the only problem with being religious is whether one is following the only true and pure religion found in God's Word

So rather than casting off the mantle of religion we need to understand that we are actually worshiping God when we are obedient to him and that we show our love for him by doing what pleases him according to his Word

Circling back to the objection we considered at the beginning of this section that a person cannot be justified by God through keeping the Law, we must add a hearty "Amen!"

No one has ever been or ever will be reconciled to God through their performance

But that's not what's at issue here

What we are talking about is the ongoing, day-to-day Christian life whereby we order our lives in accordance with the Bible –

Seeking to please God out of a heart of gratitude through following his commands as we find them in Scripture and as the Holy Spirit empowers us to do so

And rather than being the way to reconciliation, obedience to Scripture is meant to evidence that reconciliation has taken place and we do those things not to earn God's favor but because we are his children and desire to be like him

Speaking of that, let me assure you, it's okay to dislike the rote ritualism, empty ceremonies, and threadbare traditions found in a lot of churches – God doesn't think a whole lot of those things either

Jesus chastised the Pharisees for that very thing in **Luke 11:39** after they had made an issue over the practice of ceremonial hand washing

But true, biblical religion is pleasing to God and we just need to have a proper definition of it as we order our lives because the religion we practice is a reflection of our relationship with God

The next thing we need to consider is that our bumper sticker sets up a false dichotomy

II. A False Dichotomy

Saying "Christianity is a relationship; not a religion" establishes the premise that we must choose between having a relationship with God or practicing a religion

But the real division isn't between relationship and religion and we actually have two divisions

The first is whether our religion is true or false and the second is whether our relationship with God is a reconciled one or whether it remains estranged

We've already looked at true religion and compared it to false religion so let's focus on the relationship division

The New Testament is clear that everyone has a relationship with God

One is either God's enemy or they have been reconciled to God and are now his child and saving faith in Jesus transfers a person from the one to the other

Romans 5:10-11 says that quiet plainly

For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life. More than that, we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

That “if” at the beginning of verse 10 could just as easily be “since” because Paul isn’t saying it’s a question but a fact and Paul is saying that the fact that God showing so much love to us while we were his enemies means even greater blessings now that we are his friends

But the point is that no one lacks a relationship with God – that’s not the problem

It’s just that the relationship most people have with God is a hostile one

Many who claim Christianity is a relationship and not a religion do so because they want to claim that Christianity is about love and not legalism

There’s another dirty word for you – legalism certainly has its share of negative press

But what if we have a skewed definition of “legalism” just like we did with “religion”?

To the degree that we define legalism as the false doctrine that salvation is gained through good works we would never want to be accused of being legalists

But what if legalism meant “striving to strictly follow the commands we find in the New Testament”?

What could be wrong with that?

We read in **1John 2:3-6** that obedience to what God commands is how we show that we have a proper relationship with Jesus

And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments. Whoever says “I know him” but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him, but whoever keeps his word, in him truly the love of God is perfected. By this we may know that we are in him: whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked.

And according to **John 14:15** doing what Jesus tells us to do is precisely how we demonstrate our love for him

Those of you who are parents will identify with this concept

How would you define your relationship with your child if they didn’t do the things you asked of them?

Such a careless or even rebellious relationship could hardly be called loving because love doesn’t require an atmosphere devoid of standards and obedience – just the opposite

Because obedience to God is one very significant way we show we love God

So if religion is a worldview by which we order ourselves and love is demonstrated by obedience to what God commands what does that tell us about Christianity?

Relationship and not religion is how many well-intentioned Christians try to describe how Christianity is different from all the other religions in the world

And Christianity is different but its difference is in the fact that it’s a religion that is based on a relationship

III. Christianity = Religion based on a Relationship

When we think of all the other religions in the world we recognize that they are all centered on man

In other words, man is the initiator and the deity is the beneficiary of man’s efforts

A person performs some rite or sacrifice or good deed and paradise is his reward if the deity he serves is pleased

Those religions are what we would call “works-based” and allow man to reach a higher plane or state of being by virtue of his own efforts

And it's that concept of religion that led to the denial that Christianity is a religion at all

But, as we've seen, Christianity is indeed a religion but it's a religion that is completely different because it's based not on the works of man but on the relationship that God established with his children

In Christianity, God is the initiator and man is the beneficiary

Look with me at **Romans 8:3**

*For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. **By sending his own Son** in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh*

And **Romans 5:8** tells us that God took the initiative for the benefit of his enemies

In fact, Christianity is so different from all other religions that it actually says that we cannot save ourselves or please God

Isaiah 64:6 tells us that God views "*all our righteous deeds*" as if they were nasty, pus-filled bandages

Think of that time you saw a discarded Band-Aid floating in the public pool – hardly a thing that would impart honor!

But **Colossians 2:13-14** tells us that God did for us that which we couldn't possibly do for ourselves

And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross.

And all we have to do, in fact all we can do, is accept God's gift of salvation through faith as we see in **Ephesians 2:8-9**

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.

In Christianity a right relationship with God is a gift that God bestows upon the underserving according to his grace – it's not something that must be, or even can be, earned

The only way to please God is by having a proper relationship with his Son and God has provided the only way to do that

So we must accept that saying "Christianity is a relationship, not a religion" isn't right even though it sounds good

Because Christianity isn't an either/or proposition regarding relationship and religion; it's a both/and thing

It is religion based on a relationship

Yes, those who have accepted Christ have entered into a proper relationship with God but God has also told us what he expects of his children

God has given us his written Word to assist us in seeing things as he sees them so that we might act as he would have us act as the Bible informs our worldview

Holiness and obedience to the commands and precepts of Scripture is extremely important to God

The longest chapter in our English Bible is Psalm 119 and the entire chapter concerns God's Word and how we should cherish, observe, and obey it

But we have to realize that – unlike other religions – those things are evidences of a changed heart – the characteristics of being a new creation – and not the means by which we attain righteousness

God has commanded us to be holy as he is holy [**1Peter 1:16**] and he desires for us to grow in the grace and knowledge of him [**2Peter 3:18**] but we do those things *because* we are his children and want to be like him

As Christ-followers we obey not to gain our even maintain our salvation or to earn God's love but out of gratitude for having already received the blessings of those things and because we want to be like our Savior

Conclusion

French mathematician, Blaise Pascal, is credited with coming up with the concept of the “God-shaped hole” that resides in every human heart

Basically, that there is a void or innate longing in every person that only God can fill although people try to fill it with all manner of things instead of God – including false religions that rely on the efforts of mankind

And false religion can slip into the church and masquerade as Christianity as some who claim to follow Christ are actually following some form of man-made religion in the name of Jesus

There are those who profess to be believers who are still unsure and plagued by doubt that they are good enough to measure up

That when they stand before God he might determine that he won't accept them into his heaven because they haven't quite measured up to some “goodness” standard

Sadly, those folks are falling prey to a man-made religion that has the worldview that acceptance is based on performance not truly understanding that performance isn't the way to justification

Christianity, however, begins with accepting God's offer of a reconciled relationship with him and builds outward from there into a worldview or religion that is intended to permeate the entirety of our lives

When you have the right relationship and the true religion, you don't have to try to seem religious

You don't have to try to put on airs and pretend to be something you're not

You simply act in accordance with what you are which is a new creation indwelt and empowered by the Holy Spirit to know and to do what God desires because your relationship to him results in the desire to please him

So we need to stop telling others that “Christianity is a relationship and not a religion” because it isn't accurate

And it may well keep us from being able to tell people what we're really trying to convey:

That Christianity isn't a bunch of rules that say do this but don't do that

It's not striving to be good enough and worrying that you're not

It's not comparing yourself to other people and pretending to be “holier than thou”

Being a Christian is having my sins forgiven through the perfect sacrifice of the Son of God, Jesus Christ on my behalf

It's having the God who created the universe and who was once my enemy as my heavenly Father

And it's about living so as to please him because of my love and gratitude for the relationship that I enjoy with him

Christianity is *the* true religion based on the only relationship that matters for all eternity

Let's pray

James 1:22-27 (page 1011)

But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing.

If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.