



Next Level Religion

Do You Want to be Religious?

When I was still in seminary, working on my doctorate, I was asked to do a wedding for a young couple. I had never officiated a wedding before, hardly ever preached in my life, so I was quite overwhelmed by the thought of it. I really didn't like speaking in public much which is of course strange for someone studying to be a pastor but that was the case. The groom was the son of a quite wealthy lawyer who happened to be representing at the time the second most popular and successful televangelist in the world. If I mentioned his name, you would probably know it right away. At the time, he was in the middle of a scandal which would in the end destroy his television empire and wreck his ministry. The house where the wedding took place was huge and elegant. As I was wandering about, talking with various guests, suddenly the crowd all surged toward an older man who had just walked in the door. After greeting the throng, the televangelist sat down at the white grand piano in the center of the spacious living room and started entertaining everyone with his fabulous playing of hymns. Finally the wedding took place in the back yard and afterward several people came to me congratulating me on a beautiful wedding sermon. One of those guests who came to me was this world famous televangelist and he warmly shook my hand, looked me in the eyes and told me I had done a wonderful job. He perhaps knew it was my first wedding ever and I certainly believe he was being kind. The irony of this was that he had been caught soliciting prostitutes and apparently had been engaged in this for years. News of what he had done was broadcast worldwide and it smashed not only his ministry but also his marriage. Every adult at the wedding knew what had happened and it must have seemed a bit odd for him to be present at the celebration of a new marriage given his infamous destruction of his own. I wondered then and I do now what sort of religion was this televangelist practicing?

As we mentioned last time, James the brother of Jesus made a strong statement of how a true religion would look when it was fully lived. Here is what he said. **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.** (James 1: 27 NIV) We already discussed the first characteristic of "true religion", that of looking after orphans and widows in their distress but now we will explore the second characteristic, what literally reads, **"to continually keep himself pure from the world"**. This is a pretty straight-forward assessment of how our religion is to be. Every person who practices Christianity and wants to walk with God constantly is on guard against anything that would contaminate him or her, every way defilement can come in that one's life. This sounds perhaps legalistic and controlling and of course the person who practices true religion may see it that way. Consider this. When I hike through the hills, my eyes are on the path making sure a venomous snake is not within striking distance. I am vigilant when it comes to spoiled food. If I find mold on it I throw it away. I check my receipt to make sure I haven't been overcharged. I try to make sure my clothes are clean when I go somewhere, and I brush my teeth to keep them fresh and clean. Why is it that we somehow think moral purity, mental and psychological purity is not at least just as valuable, if not more so for us?

Perhaps you have noticed how God made purity a prerequisite for the way His people were to worship and practice their faith. He insisted that pure gold was to be used for the articles in the Temple and before that the Tabernacle. **Take fine flour and bake twelve loaves of bread, using two-tenths of an ephah for each**

loaf. Set them in two rows, six in each row, on the table of pure gold before the Lord. (Leviticus 24: 5-6 NIV) Likewise the incense used for worship was also to be made of pure frankincense. **Then the Lord said to Moses, "Take fragrant spices — gum resin, onycha and galbanum — and pure frankincense, all in equal amounts, and make a fragrant blend of incense, the work of a perfumer. It is to be salted and pure and sacred."** (Exodus 30: 34-35 NIV) The lambs which were offered as sacrifices were required to be without defect. **If he brings a lamb as his sin offering, he is to bring a female without defect.** (Leviticus 4: 32 NIV) The purpose of these very specific and rigid regulations regarding the mechanics of religion was that all the parts of the sacrificial system were a reminder that God is perfect and His intention in the end is to make all of His people perfect also. Listen carefully to the prophecy of Daniel, the ancient prophet who was given specific details of how it would be at the end of the world. **Many will be purified, made spotless and refined, but the wicked will continue to be wicked. None of the wicked will understand, but those who are wise will understand.** (Daniel 12: 10 NIV) Daniel declares that God will purify many but not those who continue in wickedness. Peter notes that since we are on our way to a new heaven and earth where there will be righteousness everywhere, all Christian people must give it their best to become pure and as he puts it, "blameless". **But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness. So then, dear friends, since you are looking forward to this, make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with him.** (2 Peter 3: 13-14 NIV)

There are two ways to go when it comes to purity. We can pursue it, or we can turn away from it. The choice is ours. Joseph wanted no part in the temptations of the wife of the man who was his slave owner. **Now Joseph was well-built and handsome, and after a while his master's wife took notice of Joseph and said, "Come to bed with me!" But he refused...How then could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?" And though she spoke to Joseph day after day, he refused to go to bed with her or even be with her.** (Genesis 39: 6b-8a, 9c NIV) David on the other hand cast his eyes on impurity and made it his friend. **One evening David got up from his bed and walked around on the roof of the palace. From the roof he saw a woman bathing. The woman was very beautiful, and David sent someone to find out about her. The man said, "Isn't this Bathsheba, the daughter of Eliam and the wife of Uriah the Hittite?" Then David sent messengers to get her. She came to him, and he slept with her.** (2 Samuel 11: 2-4a NIV)

I could list numerous examples of those in the Bible who pursued purity and others who turned away from it. Solomon let greed and lust push him from God. Ruth rejected the idolatry of her homeland and pursued God in Israel. Samson let his lust destroy his calling from God and Moses walked away from the riches of Egypt to live fully with God. What stands out are the changes that impurity creates in the human personality. Apathy in Solomon, depression in David, bitterness in Jonah and despair in Samson all reflect what can happen when one chooses to live an impure life. The human personality is fragile and only a little bit of sin and loss of purity can damage it beyond repair...at least in this life. David, the great king who certainly could write books on what it was like to live whole-heartedly for God and then turn away from him to pursue impurity had this prayer and it really is the prayer we all should voice daily. **Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.** (Psalm 51:10 NIV) The only way we really can develop purity and make our lives so much better is for God to work supernaturally in us to alter the way we see sin and temptation and good and purity. We must be reworked if we are to be truly happy and live a life of peace.

Once Christ begins to work in you, motivating you to live a pure and good life, there is one simple shift you must make if you are to progress far in goodness. The Psalmist gives great counsel, whether you are a young man, or young woman, a senior adult or middle aged. **How can a young man keep his way pure? By living according to your word.** (Psalm 119: 9 NIV) If you want to live a happier and more peaceful life, take time each day to find out exactly what the Bible says is to live right and put it into practice as soon as possible. Whether it is not gazing lustfully at a woman not your wife or holding your tongue and not making every critical, judgmental comment that comes to mind, be a person of purity and live the good life!