

What Is Different About You?

Can Someone Tell What Your Religion Is Just by Watching You?

When I was college age, I took a year off to work full-time in order to have the money to return to school. I worked for a company that rented forty foot trailers to trucking companies and my job was to inspect the trailers before and after they were rented. Our country at the time was going through a severe gas shortage and so the federal government enacted a nationwide program to curb gas usage. If your license plate ended with an even number or a letter, you could only purchase gas on even numbered days of the month. If your license plate ended with an odd number, then you could buy gas only on odd numbered days. The branch manager called me into his office and said he had a job for me to do. Because his car was on empty and his license plate ended with an even number, but it was an odd numbered day, he wanted me to switch out the license plates of the assistant manager which ended with an odd number with his so he could go get gas. This was of course illegal and dishonest. Everyone in the office knew I was a professing Christian going into ministry, but he still asked me to change out the plates. What was I to do? How should a Christian respond in that situation? Today we are looking at what is different about you and would others know what your religious beliefs were by watching how you lived. Our big idea today is, "Make it clear who is the Lord of your life!"

The big problem with this sort of a topic is that it faces the very real possibility of falling into the same ditch the Pharisees plunged into when they tried to promote a truly Jewish lifestyle. We are quite familiar with Jesus' criticism of the Pharisees. In fact the term Pharisee is synonymous with the word hypocrite. **Then the Lord said to him, "Now then, you Pharisees clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside you are full of greed and wickedness.** (Luke 11:39 NIV) The Pharisees did all they could to make a good impression on others, but they had no substance to their religion. As Jesus declared, they were full of greed and wickedness even though they seemed to those who didn't know them well that they were super spiritual. They were normal sinners who wanted everyone to think they really walked with God and had a special relationship with Him. It is much easier to pretend you are all in on your Christian faith than it is to actually be so. Just recently, someone who has been to our church services maybe once a year over the course of three years needed a place to keep his car, so he parked in our church parking lot. To make it seem though that he was a real part of our church, he left a Bible on his dashboard. I guess for him, that is practicing his Christianity.

Hypocrisy is everywhere and not just in Christian circles or among the Pharisees. At the risk of pushing a Christian lifestyle without true Christian faith, we will deal with a critical issue for the Church and for you. Paul, the most important missionary of his time and perhaps of all time quickly discovered the quite distinctive differences in lifestyles of those who were Jews and non-Jews around the world. The moral fabric of non-Jews was debased and full of rot. The Ten Commandments were not even on the radar for them. If you just spend a little bit of time looking into the moral behavior of Greek and Roman gods and goddesses, you get a glimpse into the fragmented morality of non-Jewish culture. The problem for many Christians who had recently converted from pagan backgrounds was that they possessed no moral foundation upon which to build their new lifestyles. They were in a sense, starting from scratch when it came to putting into practice real Christianity. The book of Ephesians, which is actually a circular letter, meaning that copies of it were sent not just to the church at Ephesus but also to other churches in the region we now call Asia Minor was used by Paul to help the new Christians without any God-centered moral background find out what Christianity was in practice. Christianity has a foundation of both faith and action and no Gentile without Christ was to be an example of how to live. **So I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking.** (Ephesians 4: 17 NIV)

The idea that Christian freedom means you can do whatever you want because Jesus freely gives you the forgiveness of sin and eternal life is a myth. Christianity, as decided by Jesus Himself, is built on the foundation of doing what God has said to do. **If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love.** (John 15: 10 NIV) The gist of this is that although you may declare your love for Jesus, you are not a Christian if you are not doing what God says to do. Let me give an example that no one really likes to give deep thought to, but it sent shock waves through the early Church. A couple, Ananias and Sapphira were key members of the Christian community. When a wealthy believer, Barnabas sold a field he owned and gave the proceeds of the sale to the work of Christ, it set an example for others. A couple, Ananias and Sapphira decided to make a similar sacrifice, at least seem like they were, and they sold a piece of property and brought the proceeds of the sale as an offering to Christ. At least that is what they told everyone. What they actually did was give a portion of

the selling cost and kept the rest for themselves. That of course would have been proper and fine if they had not lied and acted like they gave all they got as an offering. It did not go well for them. **Then Peter said, "Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land? Didn't it belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn't the money at your disposal? What made you think of doing such a thing? You have not lied to men but to God." When Ananias heard this, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard what had happened.** (Acts 5: 3-5 NIV)

This does not mean that Christians everywhere are to sell property and bring the proceeds to the church as an offering to the Lord. The point here is that God takes seriously obedience, and honesty and integrity are central to being in Christ. Let me give another example that is often shocking to Bible readers. When Jesus told the disciples that He was going to be killed in Jerusalem and on the third day be raised from the dead, Peter was having none of it. **Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. "Never, Lord!" he said. "This shall never happen to you!"** (Matthew 16: 22 NIV) Peter felt quite self-assured that he was doing Jesus a favor by getting Him to see the bright side of things, to not be a pessimist. Jesus' reaction to Peter was devastating. **Jesus turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men."** (Matthew 16: 23 NIV) Here was a good Christian man, even a disciple nonetheless who Jesus called Satan. Why? Because Peter wanted to have an optimistic outlook? No! It is because the Scripture already laid out what was to happen with the Messiah and Peter had either not taken the time to look into it or ignored it altogether. By rebuking Jesus, Peter made his opinion more important than what the Bible actually said, making himself essentially the Lord. What if Peter remained that way? Would we still call him Christian?

There is a very clear separation between those who are in Christ and those who are not. True Christianity is markedly different from the Gentile way of thinking and living. Here are three characteristics of true Christianity and of course there are more but these three must be noted. First, true Christians pay careful attention to the Bible. They know it is authoritative for them and their way of life if they have Christ as Savior. As true Christians they are determined to know and follow the Bible. Second, they adjust their lives to the Bible rather than adjust the Bible to them. I could make a long list of ways people who say they are Christian reject parts of the Bible simply because they don't agree with it. Third, true Christians put their faith in Jesus Christ as their Savior in totality and give Him authority to rework their personality and shape their behavior each day.

It is fascinating how easily people who claim Christ as Savior fall away from true loyalty to God. We should all be horrified by how common it is to do so. Despite the fact that Peter swore he would never deny Christ, a little servant girl in the dead of night was all it took for Peter to claim he was not a follower of Jesus. **A servant girl saw him seated there in the firelight. She looked closely at him and said, "This man was with him." But he denied it. "Woman, I don't know him," he said.** (Luke 22: 56-57 NIV) If it was so effortless to get Peter to not show any difference between himself and the Gentiles, is it really that far-fetched that any of us might do the same? How many people who say they are Christian don't give ten percent of their income back to God in offerings? **"Will a man rob God? Yet you rob me. "But you ask, 'How do we rob you?' "In tithes and offerings."** (Malachi 3: 8 NIV) This despite the fact that the Bible says if you don't, you are stealing from God. How many Christian people make attendance at church worship services optional or barely attend any despite the fact that the Bible insists we loyally meet with other believers in order to build up one another. **Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another — and all the more as you see the Day approaching.** (Hebrews 10:25 TLB) How many Christian people hold grudges for weeks, months and years even though commanded by the Bible to forgive? **Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.** (Colossians 3: 13 NIV) How many Christian people never say a word about their Christian faith to their neighbors, their co-workers or people they meet? **But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."** (Acts 1: 8 NIV) How many Christian people don't like certain people, let alone love them? **Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God.** (1 John 4:7 NIV) Our big idea today is, "Make it clear who is the Lord of your life!" Paul insists that Christians are different, in some ways radically different from those who are not Christian. Are you?