

INTRODUCTION

Most of us remember Biology classes in high school or college where we looked at specimens preserved in a jar of formaldehyde. The chemical formula for formaldehyde is CH_2O . In its basic form, it is a poisonous, pungent gas. But when in a solution, it becomes a strong preservative used as embalming fluid, and as a preservative for laboratory specimens. Biologists use formaldehyde because they can put a lifeless organism in it and it keeps it looking “alive” for many years. In our passage of scripture today, Jesus addressed a dead religion that appears to be “alive”—a “faith in formaldehyde.” His audience was some hyper-religious people called Pharisees and the teachers of the law (often called “scribes”). These religious men were like the “Taliban” of today. They practiced their religion so strictly they made life miserable for everyone around them.

Jesus got along great with the common people, but he was always having trouble with the religious folks. Mark Twain once wrote: “Having spent a considerable amount of time with religious people, I can understand why Jesus liked to be with tax collectors and sinners.”

Before we get into what Jesus said, notice the reaction of His audience in verse 53: “When Jesus left there, the Pharisees and the teachers of the law began to oppose him fiercely and to besiege him with questions, waiting to catch him in something he might say.”

Some people assume Jesus was a nice, diplomatic gentleman who never said anything to upset anyone. In fact, He so infuriated the religious crowd they finally crucified Him. Jesus didn’t just come to comfort the afflicted; He came to afflict the comfortable. And this message may upset some of you. You may prefer your pastor would just be one of those mild-mannered pastors who preached nice sermonettes to christianettes who smoke cigarettes! But I have made a promise to my Boss, that I would teach through His Word verse by verse. In this passage Jesus give six significant characteristics of dead religion.

1. Your religion is dead if outward appearance is more important than inner purity (37-41)

When Jesus had finished speaking, a Pharisee invited him to eat with him; so he went in and reclined at the table. But the Pharisee, noticing that Jesus did not first wash before the meal, was surprised. 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. You foolish people! Did not the one who made the outside make the inside also? But give what is inside the dish to the poor, and everything will be clean for you.”

Now, young guys, Jesus wasn’t teaching you don’t have to wash your hands before you eat. This Jewish practice of washing hands had nothing to do with cleanliness—it was all about ceremony. The Pharisees went through a washing ritual before every meal to show how religious they were. Their law said they had to use as least as much water as would fill one and one-half egg shells. They would pour the water from their fingertips downward, rubbing the fist of each hand into their palm, then they would pour the remaining water from their wrists downward letting the water drip from their fingertips—it was a ceremony. I have seen Orthodox Jews doing the same thing in restaurants in Israel as a ceremony.

When Jesus refused to observe this religious practice, His host was shocked. Jesus accused the Pharisees of being so obsessed with outward appearance ignored inner purity. He compared them to cups that were shiny and clean on the outside, but filthy and corrupt on the inside. This had always been God’s position. He said through the prophet Isaiah 750 years earlier: God says: These people say, “Stand by yourself, do not come near to me; for I am holier than you.” These people are a smoke in my nose, a fire that burns all day.” (Isaiah 65:5 NKJV) This is the origin of the phrase “holier than thou.” God used it to mock their religious arrogance. One danger of religion is that it makes you feel = you are superior to others because you practice the rituals and they don’t. God is so irritated by this attitude He compared it to smoke that gets in your nose.

Are you more concerned about your outward appearance or your inner purity? This is a very important principle that Jesus is teaching here. We find it also in I Samuel 16:7. Samuel was looking for a new king and all of David’s older, stronger brothers were paraded before him. Samuel said: “The Lord does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.” That’s powerful! Are you more interested in how you look on the outside than on the inside? Before you came to church today, you probably took a shower, washed your hair, and slipped into some of your finest clothes—why? You wanted to look good—but for whom? Thanks for looking good, because man does look on the outward appearance, and it’s a lot easier on us when you look good.

But God doesn’t care about whether you look good and clean on the outside. He is more concerned about what’s in your heart. We can’t see your heart—but God can. Some say they want to dress up nicely to go to church because God deserves their very best. If it were really true, why don’t I wear a tuxedo, or you ladies wear a formal gown? If you can demonstrate your love to God by what you wear on the outside, why don’t all of us guys buy \$3,000 Italian suits, and why don’t you ladies all wear the kind of beautiful dresses the Rose Queens and Duchesses wear? Does that mean that you don’t love God as much if you wear something you bought at Wal-Mart instead of at an upscale store?

I look pretty nice today in my double-breasted suit, huh? But there is something you can’t see [removes coat; shirt is torn and stained]. All you could see was the outside, but underneath, I don’t look so nice. God is able to see deeper than our shirts or our skin; He can see our hearts.

For some people, the most spiritual thing they do is get dressed up for church. Years ago, Amy Grant recorded a song that went:

I know a man, maybe you know him too.
You never can tell, He might even be you.
He knelt at the altar and that was the end;
He’s saved and that’s all that matters to him.

His spiritual tummy, it can’t take too much;
One day a week, he gets his spiritual lunch.
On Sunday he puts on his spiritual best
And gives his language a spiritual rest.

(Amy Grant “Fat Baby” from *Age to Age*, Myrrh Records 1982)

Sadly, that describes the attitude of many who think dressing up can hide an impure heart. To a person who is hanging onto a dead religion, their heart may be corrupt but externals are important. They can go out on a Saturday night and sow wild oats, because then they’ll dress up and attend church on Sunday and pray for a crop failure! That’s faith in formaldehyde!

2. Your religion is dead if ritual acts are more important than a personal relationship with God (42)

“Woe to you Pharisees, because you give God a tenth of your mint, rue and all other kinds of garden herbs, but you neglect justice and the love of God. You should have practiced the latter without leaving the former undone.”

These Pharisees were so conscientious in their observance they didn’t just tithe their money; they even tithed the herbs that grew in their gardens! Long before God gave the Ten Commandments, He instituted the principle of giving Him the first and finest 10% of everything we produce. Some people say tithing is not taught in the New Testament, but in this verse, Jesus put His stamp of approval on it. He says when it comes to tithing, “it should not be left undone.” That’s the same thing as saying, “it should be done.” I believe, teach, and practice that at least the first 10% of a Christian’s income should be returned to the Lord through the local church. Without a doubt, Jesus affirmed tithing.

But the point of his statement has more to do with what they *weren’t* doing. They didn’t practice justice nor did they demonstrate God’s love. It’s so easy to get wrapped up in doing religious acts we forget the really important things.

In the 21st century we have our own rituals. For some, as we have said, it may be getting up and getting dressed, parking in the same place, sitting in the same pew, and leaving church without meeting God. Even your offering can become a ritual if you give it without a heart of joy and thankfulness to God. For others, reciting the Lord’s Prayer or that memorized prayer you mumble before you eat can become a ritual. We like rituals because they make us feel good about ourselves. But God is interested in so much more than our rituals. He wants to have a love relationship with us! That’s what He said through the prophet Micah: “He has shown you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.” (Micah 6:8)

The only way you can walk humbly with God is to have a personal relationship with Him. Whenever I think of walking with God I always think of how it was in the Garden of Eden before sin invaded that perfect place. We read in Genesis 3 that God walked in the Garden in the cool of the evening. Adam and Eve walked with Him until they sinned—and then they hid! Do you have a daily sense that you are walking and talking with God? Religion always keeps God at a safe distance. But in Jesus we can boldly approach the throne of grace. Like the old hymn “In the Garden,” you can say,

“I come to the garden alone
While the dew is still on the roses;
And the voice I hear falling on my ear
The Son of God discloses.

He speaks and the sound of His voice
Is so sweet the birds hush their singing;
And the melody that He gave to me
Within my heart is ringing!

And He walks with me, and He talks with me,
And He tells me I am His own;
And the joy we share as we tarry there;
None other has ever known!”

(“In the Garden,” words by Austin Miles)

Religion can’t say that.

3. Your religion is dead if being seen by other is more important than serving God (43-44)

“Woe to you Pharisees, because you love the most important seats in the synagogues and greetings in the marketplaces. Woe to you, because you are like unmarked graves, which men walk over without knowing it.” In the synagogue, the front seats in the synagogue were reserved for the most respected Pharisees, and they were facing the congregation! To be asked to sit in one of those seats was an honor. Out in the marketplace, the most religious Pharisees were greeted with a loud voice and their position and title were announced.

I was talking to a man once and he said, “I go to church, but I don’t consider myself to be a Christian. Oh, I believe in God, but I mainly go to church to *see* and to *be seen*.” He felt attending church was good for his standing in the community and it was good for his business. That’s a guy who admitted he is holding onto a dead religion!

Jesus warned against performing religious acts just to be seen by others. He said: “Be careful not to do your acts of righteousness before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven. So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by men I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full.” (Matthew 6:1-2)

If you serve others just so people will notice how good you are, you have the wrong motive. People may applaud your good works, but human applause is the only reward you’ll receive. Our motive should be to serve God with no desire for recognition and honor. Even when our motive is pure, sometimes you are noticed and honored. When that happens just pass all the honor and glory to Jesus.

In verse 44, Jesus mentioned “unmarked graves.” If a Jew walked on a grave, they were rendered ceremonially unclean and had to go through a ritual cleansing. An unmarked grave was as dangerous as a hidden mine because they might be rendered ceremonially unclean by inadvertently stepping on that ground. Jesus said these religious Pharisees were like unmarked graves. Without even knowing it, their attitude was causing others to become unclean. They were trying to make people religious, but they were actually driving them away from God!

Religion can become fatal if it is allowed to be a substitute for knowing God. For instance, there’s nothing wrong with brushing your hair. But if you decided to substitute brushing your hair for breathing, brushing your hair would kill you in about seven minutes. There’s nothing wrong with performing acts of kindness. But if religious acts are done to be seen by others and they become a substitute for knowing God, they can become eternally fatal.

4. Your religion is dead if rigid rules are more important than love that liberates (45-46)

One of the experts in the law answered him, “Teacher, when you say these things, you insult us also.” Jesus replied, “And you experts in the law, woe to you, because you load people down with burdens they can hardly carry, and you yourselves will not lift one finger to help them.”

These “legal experts” were also called “scribes.” Like judges today, their job was to “interpret” the Old Testament law and to officially rule on what could or could not be done. Through the years, the scribes added thousands of pages of laws to the written Old Testament. A good Jew was expected to obey *all* of them—what a burden! In modern terms, Jesus was telling the experts in the law to “lighten up!”

Through the years I’ve used the Campus Crusade witnessing tool called the Four Spiritual Laws. I’ll ask someone, “Have you ever heard of the four spiritual laws?” Not these hyper-religious scribes—they would walk up to someone and ask, “Have you heard of the 4,962 spiritual laws?”

Dead religion reduces faith to a long list of rules and regulations. God had something to say about it through Isaiah: The Lord says, “These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is made up of rules taught by men.” (Isaiah 29:13)

In addition to all the laws, they had plenty of “loopholes” too. For instance, it was against Jewish law to carry a load on the Sabbath, but notice how the lawyers got around that law:

“He who carries anything, whether it be in his right hand, or in his left hand, or in his bosom, or on his shoulder is guilty; but he who carries anything on the back of his hand, with his foot, or with his mouth, or with his elbow, or with his ear, or with his hair, or in the fold of his shirt, or in his shoe, or his sandal is guiltless, because he does not carry it in the usual way.” (*Sabbath rules from the Talmud*)

The modern counterpart of the scribes and Pharisees are called “legalists.” They have reduced the Christian life down to a long list of “thou-shalt-nots.” Their definition of a Christian is

someone who *doesn't* do a bunch of things. It's like the old cheer from South Alabama that said, “I don't drink, and I don't chew, and I don't go with boys that do!”

Some modern legalists (an oxymoron) will tell you a Christian woman can't wear makeup or cut her hair, and Christian men *must* keep their hair short—and there will be absolutely *no* body piercing or tattoos of any kind! Some will tell you you can't play cards or dance or go to any movies. They burden people down with their long list of rules. If you want more information on being set free by grace from legalism, get my tape, “Hey, a Christian Can't Do That!” from Romans 14.

Even though he was a real legalist, I loved my step-grandfather, Papa Jack. There was a whole list of things he wouldn't do on Sunday, and I respected him for it. One Sunday, he came to visit Montgomery to hear me preach. After church we had lunch with Cindy's folks and Cindy's dad asked Papa Jack if he would like some fresh tomatoes out of his garden. Papa Jack made it clear] he couldn't pick tomatoes on Sunday. But he said, “I'll show you which ones to pick for me!” So we walked out in the garden and he pointed out the tomatoes and I'd pick 'em! His religion didn't allow him to pick tomatoes on Sunday—but at least, he didn't insist *I* couldn't pick them for him!

There is something more important than legalism—and that is love. Jesus said all the rules of the Old Testament could be boiled down to two: love God with all you've got; and love your neighbor as yourself. If you love God you won't do things that go against His will and Word. If you love your neighbor, you won't hurt him. That's the kind of love that truly liberates you!

5. Your religion is dead if reliving the past is more important than recognizing God's present activity (47-51)

“Woe to you because you build tombs for the prophets, and it was your forefathers who killed them. So you testify that you approve of what your forefathers did; they killed the prophets, and you build their tombs. Because of this, God in his wisdom said, ‘I will send them prophets and apostles, some of whom they will kill and others they will persecute.’ Therefore this generation will be held responsible for the blood of all the prophets that has been shed since the beginning of the world, from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah, who was killed between the altar and the sanctuary. Yes, I tell you, this generation will be held responsible for it all.”

The generation that was alive when Jesus spoke these words was a living contradiction. Their forefathers rejected and even murdered many of the Old Testament prophets. For instance, we appreciate Jeremiah, but he was hated during his time because he warned if the Jews didn't repent, God would destroy Jerusalem and the temple. The Jews threw him in a pit to die, and he was only released when the Babylonians overran Jerusalem. Six hundred years later, the Jews in Jesus' day revered Jeremiah and built fancy tombs to commemorate his memory and others. Jesus' generation killed the greatest prophet, John, and they refused to recognize the Messiah—Jesus.

Dead religion always is looking back to the good old days when things used to be so good. You’ve heard of honeybees, and even killer bees, but in the church today we have a dangerous species I call “used-to-bees.” I’ve met people who have never attended Green Acres in the almost 11 years I’ve been here and they say something like, “Oh, I used-to-be active in the church back when Ed Bowles was pastor.” Or some of you who come talk about when you “used-to-be in the choir” or “used-to-be a children’s teacher” or “used-to-be active for the Lord.” But that was back in the good old days. Dead religion is always looking in the rearview mirror and longs for the “good old days.”

In every church there are folks who don’t like all the “new-fangled ideas.” Even in our church, there are those who want to do church exactly like we did things back in the 70s. Their favorite song is “Gimme’ that Old Time Religion.” I like that song, too, but when I sing it, I’m talking about 2,000 years ago—not thirty years ago! This is the 21st century and we must appreciate the wonderful past, but we must be looking around to see what God is doing now. Someone said the seven last words of a church are: WE’VE NEVER DONE IT THAT WAY BEFORE. Traditions are wonderful—except when they become sacred cows. Paul warned: “See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ. For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and you have been given fullness in Christ.” (Colossians 2:8-10) Jesus died and He rose from the dead, but sometimes Christians forget that He is alive today, and He is actively working in our lives and in our world.

6. Your religion is dead if preserving a religion is more important than experiencing life (51-54)

“Woe to you experts in the law, because you have taken away the key to knowledge. You yourselves have not entered, and you have hindered those who were entering.”

In the final mark of dead religion, Jesus spoke about “the key to knowledge.” Jesus claimed these experts had removed the key to “enter” into something. And even worse, they kept others from entering in. I believe Jesus was talking about entering into life. Jesus came that we might have “life and live it to the fullest.” (John 10:10) In order to enter into that kind of eternal life, you must have the key to knowledge. What is it? **THE “KEY TO KNOWLEDGE” IS: ALL THE BIBLE IS ABOUT JESUS.** If you don’t understand that, you’ve missed the entire point of the Bible. The scribes saw the Bible as an extensive list of rules and regulations, but Jesus understood that all the Old Testament was written to point people to Him.

On the afternoon of the resurrection, Jesus appeared to two disciples walking on the road to Emmaus. He showed them the key to knowledge. It’s found in Luke 14:27 “And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he (Jesus) explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.” “Moses” means the first five books of the Old Testament, which is often called the Torah, or the “Law.” He also showed them how all the Old Testament prophets pointed to Him. Elsewhere Jesus said to the scribes in John 5:39-40, “You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life.” You can study the scriptures, but if

you don’t use the “key”—Jesus—then you miss the whole point. How sad today that there are many people who are religious, but they don’t have life because they have missed the key.

We kick around the terms “liberal” and “conservative” a lot. I am not ashamed to say I am politically and theologically conservative. But when it comes to methodology, or how to do things, I am liberal. I want to try new ways to reach people for Christ. I know some people who aren’t liberal or conservative, they are what I would call preservative. They are mostly interested in preserving their own religious ways. Sadly, they don’t want a dynamic relationship with God.

Wilbur Rees expresses the attitude of a religious person: “I would like to buy \$3.00 worth of God, please. Not enough to explode my soul or disturb my sleep. I don’t want enough of Him to make me love a black man, or accept that migrant worker. I want ecstasy not transformation. I want the warmth of a womb, not a new birth. I don’t want the real Christ—the flesh and blood one ... He will keep me from my appointment to get my hair done and make me late for my cocktail party. I want no living, breathing Christ—but the one I can keep in its crib with a rubber band. The plastic one will do just fine.” (Wilbur Rees, quoted by Charles Swindoll in *Improving Your Serve*.)

The opposite of having a dead religion is to have a living relationship with God. Everything Jesus had to say was negative, and I’ve presented it that way. But as I finish, I want to turn those six marks of dead religion around, and look at the other side. Because on the opposite side of each negative mark is a positive statement of how you can have a living relationship with God.

Positive principles of a personal relationship with God:

1. God values inner purity more than outward appearance!
2. God cherishes you more than He values your rituals!
3. Pleasing God should be more important than pleasing people!
4. When you know God, you experience liberty—not bondage!
5. God is at work right now; He wants you to join Him!
6. God wants you to enjoy life, not endure a religion!

So which do you choose? A real relationship with God or a faith in formaldehyde? I encourage you to come to Jesus Christ and allow Him to show you the difference between religion and life! Walter Martin has written a sequel to C.S. Lewis’ *Screwtape Letters*. If you recall, the demon Screwtape is writing to give sinister instructions to Wormwood, another demon. He writes,

“By all means encourage your subject to embrace hell’s perfect synonym for true religion—churchianity. You must arrange to make him a devout Methodist or Anglican, or Baptist or Presbyterian, or what have you. He must come to accept the church as a type of religious social club where people congregate. Nothing more. In a word, Wormwood, help him to become more religious, but for hell’s sake, not more Christian!” (Walter Martin, *Screwtape Writes Again*)

OUTLINE

YOUR RELIGION IS DEAD IF:

1. Outward appearance is more important than inner purity (37-41)

God says: These people say, "Stand by yourself, do not come near to me; for I AM HOLIER THAN YOU." These people are a smoke in my nose, a fire that burns all day." *Isaiah 65:5 NKJV*

"The Lord does not look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart." *I Samuel 16:7*

2. Ritual acts are more important than a personal relationship with God (42)

"He has shown you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God." *Micah 6:8*

3. Being seen by others is more important than servicing God (43-44)

"Be careful not to do your acts of righteousness before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven. So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full." *Matthew 6:1-2*

4. Rigid rules are more important than love that liberates (45-46)

The Lord says, "These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is made up of rules taught by men." *Isaiah 29:13*

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6. Preserving a religion is more important than experiencing life (51-54)

THE KEY TO KNOWLEDGE IS: All the Bible is about Jesus

"And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he (Jesus) explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself." *Luke 24:27*

"You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life." *John 5:39-40*



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To put it in Texas terms, “You’re mighty welcome to use any and all of my ingredients; just make your own chili!”

For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes