

Honest to God Religion

Joshua 24:14-15 CEB "So now, revere the LORD. Serve him honestly and faithfully. Put aside the gods that your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates and in Egypt and serve the LORD. ¹⁵ But if it seems wrong in your opinion to serve the LORD, then choose today whom you will serve. Choose the gods whom your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you live. But my family and I will serve the LORD."

Matthew 7:16-21 CEB You will know them by their fruit. Do people get bunches of grapes from thorny weeds, or do they get figs from thistles? ¹⁷ In the same way, every good tree produces good fruit, and every rotten tree produces bad fruit. ¹⁸ A good tree can't produce bad fruit. And a rotten tree can't produce good fruit. ¹⁹ Every tree that doesn't produce good fruit is chopped down and thrown into the fire. ²⁰ Therefore, you will know them by their fruit. ²¹ "Not everybody who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will get into the kingdom of heaven. Only those who do the will of my Father who is in heaven will enter."

James 1:17-27 CEB Every good gift, every perfect gift, comes from above. These gifts come down from the Father, the creator of the heavenly lights, in whose character there is no change at all. ¹⁸ He chose to give us birth by his true word, and here is the result: we are like the first crop from the harvest of everything he created. ¹⁹ Know this, my dear brothers and sisters: everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to grow angry. ²⁰ This is because an angry person doesn't produce God's righteousness. ²¹ Therefore, with humility, set aside all moral filth and the growth of wickedness, and welcome the word planted deep inside you--the very word that is able to save you. ²² You must be doers of the word and not only hearers who mislead themselves. ²³ Those who hear but don't do the word are like those who look at their faces in a mirror. ²⁴ They look at themselves, walk away, and immediately forget what they were like. ²⁵ But there are those who study the perfect law, the law of freedom, and continue to do it. They don't listen and then forget, but they put it into practice in their lives. They will be blessed in whatever they do. ²⁶ If those who claim devotion to God don't control what they say, they mislead themselves. Their devotion is worthless. ²⁷ True devotion, the kind that is pure and faultless before God the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their difficulties and to keep the world from contaminating us.

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One of our great temptations is to try to reduce our life to a matter of choosing between two extremes. We like clear and simple choices. Lexington BBQ or eastern BBQ? Vacation at the coast or in the mountains? Cats or dogs for pets? State or UNC? One of the big arguments in Christianity has been, "Are you saved by faith or by works?"

By the time that Martin Luther lived in the early 1500s, there was almost exclusive emphasis on strict obedience in order to be acceptable to God. God was an angry judge who demanded absolute compliance with the law. Anything less than that would certainly damn you unless you took clear action to get forgiveness of your evil ways. Martin Luther was a Catholic priest who lived in constant guilt and terror because he knew that he wasn't perfect. And then he read the book of Romans and heard of salvation by faith. Paul wrote in Romans 3:28, "A person is justified by faith and not by doing what the Law tells him to do." (NJB)

Over the five centuries since Martin Luther discovered Paul's message we've tended to move to an extreme understanding of that message. Often today, we hear this expressed as "Believe in Jesus Christ and you will be saved!" Believe that Jesus lived and died and was God's Son and you will go to heaven when you die! That is the extreme opposite from the teaching of hundreds of years ago that going to heaven was the direct result, not of believing something, but

doing something. You had to be baptized. And even if you were a newborn baby who had never even wet your first diaper, if you died without being baptized, you were doomed. We have managed to reduce all of our Christianity to two extreme methods that determine two extreme outcomes – bliss without end or torture without end. And fear of that torture was the only thing that would force us to make the right choice. Faith or works, believe the right things - or do the right things? The stakes were enormous! We simplified how we understood Christianity to the point of totally distorting it!

Let's try to have a better understanding of Christianity and of what God expects from us. First of all, we would be less confused if everywhere we read the word *believe* in scripture we would substitute the word *trust*. Believing isn't a matter of thinking that Jesus existed. It's a matter of trusting in Jesus, just like you might say, I believe in my son or daughter. You mean that you trust them to work hard and do the right thing. You can rely on them. And that has a great effect on your relationship with them. Real belief in Jesus means you trust what Jesus said, and trust what Jesus did, and because of that trust, you want to know what he taught, and you want to live the life that he lived. Trusting plays out in our actions.

So...faith or works? Paul said, "A person is justified by faith and not by doing what the Law tells him to do." But Paul also said in the previous chapter, "It isn't the ones who hear the Law who are righteous in God's eyes. It is the ones who do what the Law says who will be treated as righteous. (Romans 2:13 CEB) Does Paul speak with forked tongue? I don't think so. We hear Jesus speak of both faith and action in his teaching. He said, "I assure you that whoever hears my word and believes in the one who sent me has eternal life and won't come under judgment but has passed from death into life." (John 5:24 CEB) But in our text from Matthew's Gospel today, we hear Jesus say, "Therefore, you will know them by their fruit. ²¹ "Not everybody who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will get into the kingdom of heaven. Only those who do the will of my Father who is in heaven will enter." The situation is not a choice between believing or behaving. It is the welding together of trusting and doing. It's not an *or*, it's an *and*.

We need to consider the question of why we choose to act in a good way rather than an evil way. For some people, the major reason is fear – fear of God's wrath and the torment of Hell. But think about the passage we heard from Joshua. Joshua had led the Hebrew people into the land of Canaan after they had been rescued from slavery in Egypt. Now they had arrived at their destination and Joshua told the people to decide whom or what they would serve. Choose the God of Abraham or choose the gods of Egypt. Joshua doesn't base the choice on fear. He doesn't say, choose the God or Abraham or go to Hell. But he does remind the people of how good God has been to them and he infers that they should choose to serve God out of gratitude for all that God has done.

Our passage from the letter of James begins with the same logic. "Every good gift, every perfect gift, comes from above. These gifts come down from the Father." And following this reminder of God's loving generosity, James says that we should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to get angry. Anger doesn't result in righteousness. In response to all that we've been given, we're to resist anger and wickedness. We're to be people who do God's will, instead of people who just believe God exists.

But shouldn't we be afraid of going to Hell? If that's all or most of what motivates us, then we have a barren and bleak relationship with God. If we behave primarily because we live in fear, what kind of relationship is that? Do you want your children to obey you because they're scared spit-less of you? Is quaking in fear and drowning in guilt what is meant by the expression that we

are children of God and brothers and sisters of Christ. If fear of torture was the dominant relationship in a neighbor's family, we would describe it as dysfunctional, sick, or even criminal.

Last Sunday in adult education we heard the story of a preacher who declared that if he didn't believe that every word in the Bible was true, just the way it was written, then he would take all of his Bibles, pour coal oil on them, and burn them – and go out and have himself a good time. All too often, we picture the Bible as a set of restrictive rules that are meant to shackle us and keep us from enjoying life. We picture the Ten Commandments as the “Thou shalt nots.” And it's only the fear of Hell fire that keeps us from enjoying life.

We cheat ourselves when we reduce the whole point of Christianity to whether we will fly with wings or burn in Hell. The Christian life is not just about dying and going somewhere. That's such an inadequate and confined understanding. It's as small a vision of Christian life as it would be to only be able to see in black and white, never experiencing the joy of blue and red and green and yellow and pink and chartreuse. It's like only hearing drums, but never hearing melody or woodwinds or brass or strings or singing.

Jesus told his disciples that the kingdom of God was near. He said the kingdom is within you. James writes that we are to welcome the word that is planted deep inside us – the very word that is able to save us, he says. James says that there are those who study the perfect law, the law of freedom, and then they live it. They put it into practice and they are blessed by it. They begin to live in the kingdom of God, here and now. God gave us one mouth and two ears. James says that we need to be quick to listen and slow to speak. If we listen to the other person's point of view, we are more likely to understand them, more likely to sympathize with them, more likely to care about them. It is the pathway to loving our neighbor.

James instructs us to be slow to grow angry. Anger causes us to tear down other people rather than lift them up. Anger exaggerates. Anger hurts and destroys. Anger, James says, doesn't produce righteousness. It doesn't build up God's kingdom on earth as it is in heaven; anger tears down the kingdom.

God invites us to be children of God, to live as family. Come, experience the joy of living a kingdom of heaven life, beginning now. Choose understanding instead of anger. Choose compassion instead of selfishness. Live in gratitude, not in fear. Look out for the needs of others rather than looking over your shoulder to see if you've been caught being imperfect. Honest to God religion is a life of love and sharing, a life as God's own family, a meaningful life of joy. Don't live in fear. Live in response to God's gracious love. Amen.

Sisters and Brothers,

Move beyond knowing to trusting and let that trust determine your living.

Don't cringe in fear. Instead, be motivated by thankfulness.

Listen a lot. Speak carefully. Don't let anger spoil your life.

Turn you attention from yourself to those in need.

Rather than fleeing from Hell, joyfully surge into God's Kingdom,

Living with joy and love here and now - and forever more!