



# FOLLOWING JESUS

Relationship or Religion?



**Mart DeHaan**



*introduction*

# Following Jesus

Relationship or Religion?

**s there a distinction** worth making? Or is it only a matter of terms? Is it significant that Jesus was hated by the religious leaders of His day? This booklet is written with the conviction that there is a fundamental difference between following Christ and being

religious, and that a glimpse of the Pharisees in Christ's day can give us insight not only into this difference but also into ourselves.

*Mart DeHaan*

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*one*

# The Problem of Being Religious

**R**eligion has long been a cause of tension and conflict. Long before 9/11 and Osama bin Laden's fatwa to "every Muslim who believes in God and wishes to be rewarded to comply with God's order to kill Americans," people of faith have been killing one another in the name of religious devotion. Long before the Sunni and Shiite religious division caused conflicts in Iraq, or "the Troubles" between Protestants and Catholics

in Northern Ireland, spiritual fervor has created a battleground where some have been saved and others have been lost.

A recent survey showed that 85 percent of Americans classified themselves as “religious.” Perhaps this is true in the broadest definition of religion: “manifesting faithful devotion to an acknowledged ultimate reality or deity.” In that sense one could be religious about the environment or physical fitness or patriotism, leaving out God altogether. But that’s not what I have in mind. I want to focus on how those who believe in God, even those who call themselves Christians, can be more focused on the routines or rituals of religion than on what they should be focused on—Jesus Christ.

## **Religion: Important or Worthless?**

To keep a balanced view on the subject of religion, it’s important for us to live with the tension of two seemingly contradictory ideas: that religion is important and that religion is worthless. Religion is important because the Bible is full of religious practices that either point us to God or provide a channel for expressing our relationship to God.

Both Old and New Testaments are full of religious laws, principle, belief, and ritual. If we think of religion as action or conduct indicating belief in, reverence for, and a desire to please God, then it is clear that religion provides a pattern of

doctrine and belief (TITUS 2:1), shared experience (ACTS 2:37-47; HEBREWS 10:25), and outward show of inner faith (1 JOHN 3:17-18).

But religion is worthless if we begin to think that those actions themselves are the most important thing. When we think that religion is about singing songs, praying, giving money, or even studying the Bible, we have missed the point entirely. Those things are good but only if they are expressions of our relationship with Christ. These activities don't give us that relationship. Knowledge or actions merely give us a way of expressing our personal faith in Christ. This is important. If our focus is on our actions or what we know, then the picture of Christ becomes blurry. These actually get in the way when they become attempts to earn salvation (EPHESIANS 2:8-10), spur thoughts of perfecting ourselves (GALATIANS 3:1-3), or displace Christ (COLOSSIANS 2:6-8).

Religion and Christ are not mutually exclusive, but they are very distinct. James, a New Testament writer and brother of Christ, wrote, "Pure and



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undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world”

(JAMES 1:27).

Religion can be many good things, but it cannot be a substitute for Christ. Religion is *something* we believe and do.

It can include some or all of the following activities: belief in God or a god; attendance at religious services or having some religious affiliation; sending children to religious schools; being kind to others and giving to the poor; behaving correctly; baptism; receiving communion; reading and studying the Scriptures; praying; celebrating religious holidays; teaching a religious class; singing in the choir.

Religion can be one of the biggest ego trips around. We thrive on being recognized as a good and godly person or to be thought of as someone of whom God approves. It might seem better to be recognized as a good person than as a godless one, but Jesus reserved some of His severest criticism for religious people who were using their spiritual reputation to get social attention and honors. ▀



*Religion can be many good things, but it cannot be a substitute for Christ.*

➤ **Religion is dangerous**, not because it's bad but because it is often good enough to turn our trust away from Christ. Our tendency is to reject confidence in what Christ can do and replace it with something that we can do for ourselves.

Religion never changes the heart—the core of the problem. It simply prescribes behaviors that allow us to put a shiny polish on the surface issues. That's why Jesus told a Pharisee and ruler of the Jews that he needed to be *born again* (an internal, spiritual birth) if he was ever going to see and be a part of God's kingdom (JOHN 3). Prayer, communion, confirmation, baptism, or volunteering for church causes may make us look good to others, but if it's just going through the motions, it doesn't impress God. Jesus said, "That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit" (3:6).

Receiving Christ can do what religion can never do (3:16). Trusting Christ changes the heart. It brings the source of love within us. It's a humbling process. It means



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acknowledging the ultimate worthlessness of our external clean-ups, giving ourselves over to the mercy of God, and trusting Him to do through the Spirit what we are trying to do for ourselves. Religion is what we do for God on the outside. Christ is what God does for us to change us from the inside.



*two*

# Religion in the Bible

## Religion in the Old Testament

**T**he danger of being religious can be seen as early as our first parents. Adam and Eve's fatal mistake was an attempt to be more like God. Their error was not that they stopped believing in God, but that they began believing in a way they shouldn't have. Their first son also tried to trust God on his own terms. The Lord rejected Cain's sacrifice but honored the sacrifice offered by his younger brother. Burning with anger, Cain

became so jealous that he killed Abel and ruined his own life in the process.

But this issue isn't just something for an unfortunate few. The whole nation of Israel also got in trouble for trying to serve and worship God on their own terms. Barely a month after God had miraculously led them out of Pharaoh's clutches in Egypt and assisted their crossing the Red Sea, the people tired of not being able to see their God. Although they had fervently agreed to do all that God said, in Moses' absence, they pooled their golden jewelry, melted it down, made a calf of gold, and began to party. The result?—God was angry, Moses was furious, and thousands of Israelites died (EXODUS 32).

Saul, the first king of Israel, was no different. He lost his kingdom by making religious errors. When Samuel, the priest, didn't show up in time to offer a pre-battle sacrifice, Saul thought it was necessary to offer the sacrifice himself. He was wrong (1 SAMUEL 13:8–14; see also CHAPTER 15).

God is concerned about what we believe and how we serve and worship Him because He is looking for those who will worship Him in spirit and in truth (JOHN 4:23–24), not ritualistically, superstitiously, or ignorantly. God wants to be worshiped from a heart that is responding to the truth about His love and grace. It may sound complex, but it isn't. All God really wants is for us to know and love His Son. Good religion will follow (JAMES 1:26–27).

## Christ and the Pharisees

Jesus knew the problems of religion. He was hated by some of the most religious people in Jerusalem. While the sinners and outcasts of society were attracted to Him, the religionists of His day—the Pharisees, scribes, Sadducees, and priests<sup>1</sup>—were, with few exceptions, His bitter enemies. The Sadducees and Pharisees of Jerusalem were always trying to discredit Jesus. They had no use for Him and His “radical” ideas that challenged their well-established traditions. And they were convinced that the world would be a better place without Him.

### ➤ **JEWISH RELIGIOUS GROUPS IN THE NEW TESTAMENT**

**Pharisees**—*A Jewish religious group vigorously adhering to the Scriptures and to a large collection of oral traditions that applied the Law of God to daily life.*

**Scribes**—*Experts in biblical law (also called lawyers). The Pharisees depended on the scribes to provide the correct interpretation of Scripture.*

**Sadducees**—*An upper-class Jewish religious group that rejected the oral tradition of the Pharisees and insisted on a rigid interpretation and adherence to the Law of Moses.*

**Priests**—*Descendants of Aaron who inherited the responsibility of attending to the ritual of the temple in Jerusalem. They were often associated with the Sadducees.*

But the Pharisees were not all bad. Many of them were craftsmen and tradesmen, and they identified

with the common man while being respected as some of the most godly and spiritually committed Jews. They believed in the God of Israel, advocating a God-centered life, and were determined to protect Israel from being compromised or absorbed into a Gentile world. The Pharisees also believed that Israel's future depended on whether or not they honored and practiced the Law of God; they not only struggled with what the Law said but how it applied to the smallest details of life. They also held tightly to the traditions of their spiritual forefathers, carefully memorizing, repeating, and entrenching themselves in the ancient practices.

The Pharisees, however, took some wrong turns in their attempt to make the Law of God relevant and practical to Israel. As they made an effort to show what the Word of God “looked like” in daily life, their concrete applications became an end in themselves. Before long, they were lost in specifics and, according to Jesus, were “teaching as doctrines the commandments of men” (MATTHEW 15:9). They focused solely on the details<sup>2</sup> and lost the purpose of the law—to love.

2) *There were about 6,000 Pharisees at the time of Christ. They had a reputation for holding lengthy discussions on such “**fine points**” as whether it was lawful to eat an egg that had been laid on the Sabbath.*

### *The Problem with Jesus*

Religionists saw Jesus as dangerous. He was a threat to them because anyone who accepted Him would never need the religion of the Pharisees. While the Pharisees were good at detailing obedience to the Law, Jesus taught that God would forgive the worst sinner. Jesus also caused a commotion that threatened to destabilize the delicate religious and political balance of power in Israel. He had a reputation for doing unexplainable things. He taught with an air of authority and shifted attention from external matters of religion to internal attitudes of the heart. In His great Sermon on the Mount (MATTHEW 5:1-11), Jesus taught that God is not looking for people who are doing well in their religion. He's looking for people who depend on God in every area of life, who grieve for the nature and results of sin, who willingly live under God's authority, who accept God's rightness, who care for others, who have clean hearts and motives, and who work towards reconciliation between people and with God.



***Jesus taught that God is not looking for people who are doing well in their religion. He's looking for people who depend on God in every area of life.***

Jesus did not flatter these religious leaders. He didn't leave room for the notion that they were godly men who had merely made a mistake about Him. He said that if they had known His Father, they would have known Him. To their face, He called them hypocrites (MATTHEW 16:3) and blind leaders of the blind (15:14). This isn't the storyline many of us might expect. We might expect Jesus' enemies to surface among the atheists, secular thinkers, and criminal elements of society. That wasn't the case. Street people were attracted to Jesus. Sinners were among His friends. Even Pilate, the pagan Roman governor of Judea, was inclined to give Jesus more consideration and benefit of the doubt.

Jesus also took the time to teach His followers about the Pharisees. He clearly stated that the Pharisees were their leaders, and they must do what they told them to do. Then He said, "But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach" (MATTHEW 23:3 NIV). He then told the Pharisees where they had gone wrong<sup>1</sup> (LUKE 11:37–52): They looked good on the outside but their hearts remained filthy with pride.

<sup>1</sup> In the Old Testament, God stated a truth that **the Pharisees had somehow overlooked**: "The LORD does not see as man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart" (1 SAMUEL 16:7).

### *The Problem with Details*

When the Pharisees tithed, for instance, they gave a percentage of *all* their increase. If they owed God a tenth of the harvest, they would give God 10 percent of *everything*, including their herbs, even though the Law specifically said it wasn't necessary to do so. The Pharisees' willingness to do more than was required was not bad. Their mistake was that in attending to details they forgot to love, thus missing the whole point of the Law (MATTHEW 22:37-40). Religion, as good and necessary as it is, can sidetrack us with details that consume our attention. There is no substitute for a heart of love and justice that reflects a right relationship with God Himself.



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### *The Problem of Wanting Approval*

The Pharisees loved the approval of others. They liked being seen in the right places and doing the right things that would have everyone talking (LUKE 11:43). But Jesus said that unless they changed, the Pharisees were going to the same hell as the godless. The only difference was that Jesus reserved His severest criticism for religious people who were using their spiritual reputation to

get social attention and honors.

We all love to be appreciated by others and approved for something praiseworthy in us. That's not bad. What is bad, however, is when the opinions of others become more important to us than the opinions of God. What is dangerous is when the flattery and approving attention of others becomes like a narcotic, numbing us to our lack of love for others, to the presence and mind of God, and to the fact that in our sober moments we know that our reputation is far better than we are. Being good at the rules of religion enables us to get the praise of others. Submitting to Christ, however, is the only way to have the favor of God. This is true even after a person has accepted Christ and entered into the religion of the church.



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The question of whether we are going to play to the grandstands or to God continues to be an issue for as long as we live.

### *The Problem of Covering Up*

Imagine what it would be like to have two kinds of people in the world: brick-givers and brick-takers. Every time you meet one of them, a brick is either

added to your pile or one is taken off. Jesus would be one of the brick-takers. The Pharisees would be brick-givers since they added to life's burdens. This function of religion became apparent as Jesus responded to a question posed by a lawyer (an expert in biblical law) of the Pharisees. He said, "Woe to you also, lawyers! For you load men with burdens hard to bear, and you yourselves do not touch the burdens with one of your fingers" (LUKE 11:46). Jesus knew His audience. These religious experts attached hundreds of additional obligations to the Law of God. Yet they themselves had ways of sidestepping the Law.

By contrast, Jesus consistently upheld the high ideals of the Law while making merciful provisions for the repentant sinner. Jesus understood the healthy tension between the holiness and the love of God when He said: "Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light" (MATTHEW 11:28-30).

### *The Problem with Honoring the Past*

The Pharisees deceived themselves as they proudly honored and built memorials to the prophets. The irony is that when they met a real prophet (JESUS), they wanted to kill Him. They honored the dead prophets with tombs and memorials, but they

dishonored the living ones with persecution and death (LUKE 11:47-51). The Pharisees had fooled themselves. They didn't think of themselves as prophet or Messiah killers. They didn't realize that their empty religion actually made them enemies of God. The sinful nature of humans has always been at war with the Spirit. Religion is powerless to restrain the self-centered, self-protective obsessions of our sinful human nature. It takes a living Christ to change the human heart.

👉 William Barclay says: "The only **prophets** they [the Pharisees] admired were dead prophets; when they met a living one, they tried to kill Him."

### *The Problem of Damaging Others*

One of the greatest dangers of religion is that it causes us to be a danger not only to ourselves but also to others. To the very religious biblical experts of His day, Jesus cautioned them that they had taken away from the people "the key of knowledge" (LUKE 11:52). The Pharisees, for instance, took away the key of knowledge from "the man on the street" by replacing the Word of God with tradition and trivia, attempting to discredit Christ (JOHN 14:6), and distracting others from a *right attention of heart* (the "lamp" in LUKE 11:33-35).

Jesus was probably referring to the key of a *right*



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*attention of heart,*<sup>¶</sup> which if it is a right attention will be focused on the Scriptures and Christ. Prior to His instructions to the Pharisees (see LUKE 11:42–44), Jesus said, “No one, when he has lit a lamp, puts it in a secret place or under a basket, but on a lampstand, that those who come in may see the light. The lamp of the body is the eye. Therefore, when your eye is good, your whole body also is full of light. But when your eye is bad, your body also is full of darkness. Therefore take heed that the light which is in you is not darkness” (LUKE 11:33–35). In other words, if a person’s “lamp” (his eye or attention of heart) is right, then he will be

filled with the knowledge of God. But if his “lamp” is obstructed, then a person will be full of darkness (empty of the light and knowledge of God).

¶ *When rules become our principles, and when actions replace **attitudes of the heart**, we have probably given in to a religion that has replaced Christ rather than one that serves Him.*

### *The Problem of Misleading Converts*

Another thing the Pharisees did wrong was to mislead their converts. Jesus called the Pharisees “blind leaders of the blind” (MATTHEW 15:14) and said their followers would be doubly blind. Not only was the new convert still spiritually blind, but he had unknowingly placed himself in the trust of a religious teacher who couldn’t see where either one of them was going. The implications are stunningly severe. Religionists like the Pharisees and their converts are headed for a terrible awakening. Jesus assured us of this when He said: “I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven” (MATTHEW 5:20).

The problem with religion is that, in matters of ultimate and most extreme importance, it offers hope where there is no hope. For that reason, an atheist or agnostic is probably in a safer place than the person who has been converted to religion. He is not apt to assume that he has made peace with God. The religious person, however, wrongly thinks he knows what he has to do to make it to heaven or to walk with God—even if he is not sure that he’s “quite there” yet. Misguided religious converts think they have chosen to be a good person. They recognize the wrongness of those who have no place in their heart for God and feel pity for those who show by their behavior and associations that they

are willing to risk eternity for a few more hours of pleasure. They are certain they've made a better choice and have found a pastor, a priest, or a rabbi they like, trust, and are sure is on God's good side. They enjoy the religious ceremonies that help them feel closer to God and better about themselves. But once they put their key in a door marked "destiny," they discover their leader was a fraud and the door leads to nowhere.

Although Jesus showed the Pharisees the error of their religion, only a few took Jesus' words to heart. Nicodemus, a Pharisee and a member of the Jewish ruling council, came to talk to Jesus at night. Nicodemus was sure that Jesus was a teacher sent by God (JOHN 3:1-2), but Jesus revealed that He was much more. When Jesus died, Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea, another member of the Jewish council, prepared Jesus' body for burial and placed Him in the tomb (19:38-40). Other officials secretly believed in Jesus but were unwilling to openly admit it (12:42-43). The traditions



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of the Pharisees endured for many more years as the Christian church was established and grew.

## Religion in the Early Church

Saul of Tarsus (later known as the apostle Paul) inherited the religious tradition of the Pharisees. He described himself as a Pharisee and the son of a Pharisee (ACTS 23:6). Before his life-changing encounter with Christ (ACTS 9), Saul believed that his standing with God was determined by his relationship to the Law.

After his conversion, Paul defined his standing with God in new terms. Now what counted was his relationship to Christ. He became concerned about faith in Christ, showing the love of Jesus to others, and reminding fellow believers that all of us will one day answer personally to Christ the Lord. When it came to arguable issues of scriptural application, Paul was no longer preoccupied with the legal rulings of the scribes. Instead he pleaded with other members of the family of God not to judge one another in questionable matters. In his letter to the Romans, he wrote, “Who are you to judge another’s servant? . . . So then each of us shall give account of himself to God. Therefore let us not judge one another anymore, but rather resolve this, not to put a stumbling block or a cause to fall in our brother’s way” (ROMANS 14:4,12–13).

Many of us need to learn from Paul’s “after Christ”

point of view. In an attempt to protect ourselves from compromise, we adopt his “pre-Christ” perspective. Adopting the way of the Pharisees, we have developed our own lists of what a follower of Christ will or will not do. The only trouble is that someone could keep every point on some of our lists and still be no closer to God. A person could “religiously” refrain from alcohol, some types of music, tobacco, gambling, and illegal drugs and still be godless. A person could attend church, give money, offer prayers, and read the Bible while still being angry, critical, and mean. What counts, however, is what comes from the Spirit, not what comes from our sinful human nature. Christlike attitudes of love are so different from our natural inclinations that they drive us to the Spirit for wisdom, enablement, and a fresh assurance of forgiveness. It is better to let our struggle with principles that are impossible to keep drive us to Christ than to occupy ourselves with the formalities of religion and miss Him altogether.

In his New Testament letter to the Romans, Paul reasoned that the Law was given to show us our need of a Savior who is superior to religion in every way possible (ROMANS 3:20; 10:4). Paul argued that religious laws never had, never would, and never could save anyone from sin.

To the distracted Christians in Corinth, the apostle Paul repeated Jesus’ teaching about the need to stay focused on love. He made it clear that even

spiritual gifts, knowledge, faith, and self-sacrifice are trivial pursuits if done without the love of God (1 CORINTHIANS 13). Paul also knew what it was like to struggle with human criticism and to be found unacceptable by members of one's own spiritual family. That's why he wrote to critics in Corinth: "With me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by a human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself. For I know of nothing against myself, yet I am not justified by this; but He who judges me is the Lord" (4:3-4). Later Paul wrote, "We dare not class ourselves or compare ourselves with those who commend themselves. But they, measuring themselves by themselves, and comparing themselves among themselves, are not wise" (2 CORINTHIANS 10:12). Paul had learned to take criticism with grace, not because it didn't hurt but because he had found that human recognition and honor don't count (PHILIPPIANS 3:1-10). All that counts is hearing Christ say, "Well done, good and faithful servant." Paul had been a Pharisee. He knew the difference between being recognized by religion and being approved by Christ. He knew that the way of salvation was through Christ alone.



*three*

## **Staying Focused on Christ**

### **Christ as the Center of Religion**

**O**n the one side is religion—a something; on the other side is Christ. Christ isn't a something, He's a *Someone* we can know and trust. When we have Christ at the center of our lives, all our doing has meaning, purpose, and a true focus. Religion can be many good things, but it cannot be a substitute for Christ. Religion without

Christ is hollow and self-centered. We use our actions to make ourselves feel good or look good. Religious actions *with* Christ have purpose and meaning and satisfy us completely. There's nothing basically wrong with religion or being religious just as long as our motivation is correct and our focus remains on Christ rather than on ourselves or a person or thing. The sacraments of baptism and communion are ways to help us relate to and stay in communion with Christ and His church, but they should never become rituals that are done out of mere habit, formality, tradition, or superstition. 📌



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📌 *Religion isn't wrong just as long as our **focus remains on Christ** rather than on ourselves.*

In exchange for our trust in Him, Christ does many things for us that religion cannot do. He loves us and shows us how to live (JOHN 15:13; ROMANS 8:35; 1 JOHN 2:6). He declares us “not guilty” and forgives us (ROMANS 3:24; 5:1; EPHESIANS 1:7). He gives us His Spirit and lives

within us (JOHN 14:16–17; COLOSSIANS 1:27). He rescues us from Satan’s power (COLOSSIANS 1:13). He brings us into God’s family (JOHN 1:12; EPHESIANS 1:5, 11). He brings us to God (1 TIMOTHY 2:5) and gives us peace with Him (ROMANS 5:1). And He gives us eternal life (6:23).

Christ is also superior to religion. He is the all-encompassing Person who is everywhere we look. When we look backward, we see that He is the Creator and eternal Word who was not only *with* God from the beginning, but who actually *is* God (JOHN 1:1–3). When we look forward, we see Him coming as our King and Judge who will one day rule the earth and judge every heart (ACTS 1:6–11; ROMANS 14:7–12). If we look up, He is our Savior and Lord who alone can reach down and save us while at the same time He is our loving and wise Lord (JOHN 3:13–16; PHILIPPIANS 2:9–11). By looking down, we see him holding us in His hands as our Provider and Sustainer (COLOSSIANS 1:16). As we turn to the right to see what is morally correct, He becomes our Teacher and Example (1 PETER 2:21; 1 JOHN 2:6). Should we turn left—the opposite direction from what is “right,” and therefore to what



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is wrong, He becomes our Intercessor and Advocate (1 JOHN 2:1–2). And finally as we look within ourselves, we see Him as our Life, our Peace, and our Strength (GALATIANS 2:20; COLOSSIANS 1:27).

## How to Focus on Christ

We pray, read and study the Bible, and worship in order to remain in a close relationship with Christ. Praying is our way of communicating with God. When we have a close relationship with anyone, we make sure we stay in contact whether they live just a few miles away or on the other side of the world. Communicating with God every day is important to stay focused on Him. Just as you communicate with friends, so you should regularly communicate<sup>■</sup> with God through prayer.

↪ *“Seek the LORD your God, and **you will find Him if you seek Him** with all your heart and with all your soul”*  
(DEUTERONOMY 4:29).

Another way to keep Christ as the focus of our lives is to read the Bible as well as study it to know how Christ wants us to live. When we are highly interested in a subject or a person, we spend time surfing websites to learn more about the subject. We might even read an entire book on the subject, either a biography or a “how-to handbook.” The Bible is both of those in one, giving us the biography of Christ’s life as well as the “how-to” live with and for

Him. Spending time with the direct words of God in Scripture provides the perfect tutorial.

Regular worship is also important for keeping our focus on Christ, but we must be sure to be fully engaged in worship and actively seek God's leading. If we allow ourselves to drift through the service or focus on ourselves rather than God, we can easily turn an opportunity for worship into a shallow, religious tradition, with us mindlessly going through the motions.

On the issue of religion or Christ, there is no option of exclusively selecting one or the other. Religion without Christ makes us merely a "sounding brass or a clanging cymbal." Religion with Christ fills us with his light and his love. 🌿





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