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**“What things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ”
(Philippians 3:7).**

Genuine Religion

Central Truth: True religion is found in a personal relationship with Christ.

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Topic: Christianity: Meaning of.

This lesson text is one of the most beautiful passages in the Bible, the crown jewel of Paul’s epistle to the Philippians. It sets forth the value of knowing Jesus Christ and gives an excellent description of genuine religion.

Genuine religion is a personal relationship with God through Jesus. Therefore, not all religions are true. Many do not worship our God or recognize Jesus as the way to God. Much religious ritual which is attractive and satisfying to the flesh is false. Each person must discern between religions, choosing the true and rejecting the false.

Paul was a very religious man before he became a Christian. He had observed all the rituals of Judaism. An accusation of breaking God’s laws could never be sustained against him. He was one of the Pharisees, the strictest sect in ancient Judaism. And yet, like the rich young ruler who came to Jesus, he had to ask, “*What lack I yet*” (Matthew 19:20). Rituals and ordinances can never satisfy the heart or meet the requirements of true religion. Here are six qualities of genuine religion.

Genuine Religion Is Fraternal (Philippians 3:1)

True religion recognizes a family relationship with God. It looks up to God and says, “*Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name*” (Matthew 6:9). That is more than a figure of speech. He is your Father and you are His child because, “*As many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name: which*

were born . . . of God” (John 1:12, 13). When you are born of God and become a child of God, you have a family relationship with Him. God says, *“I . . . will be a Father to you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters”* (II Corinthians 6:17, 18).

True religion recognizes a family relationship with men and women of like faith. That is why Christians often refer to one another as “Brother” or “Sister.” That is more than a custom of address; it is a Bible truth. The Bible instructs us to *“love as brethren”* (I Peter 3:8). In the church family we are all equal, though God has chosen certain ones to be spiritual leaders of the others.

True religion recognizes Christ as head over all. *“He is the head of the body, the church: . . . that in all things he might have the preeminence”* (Colossians 1:18). This is the touchstone of all doctrine. If a person errs on the person and work of Christ, nothing else in his doctrine matters. This is what distinguishes cults from churches. Jesus is Lord, and He only is Lord.

Genuine Religion Is Joyful (Philippians 3:1, 3)

“My brethren, rejoice in the Lord. . . . Rejoice in Christ Jesus” (verses 1, 3). That is the Christian’s theme. There is much in which we cannot rejoice, but we can always rejoice in the Lord.

Christian joy is personal. Paul does not use the personal pronoun *you* when he writes, *“rejoice in the Lord,”* but it is understood. While sinners rejoice in their sinful rebellion, you rejoice in the Lord. When you go into the field, carrying the precious seed of the gospel, go with rejoicing (Psalm 126:6). When you think of your dear Lord and Savior, *“rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory”* (I Peter 1:8). Do not be content in seeing others rejoice in Him. Experience the joy of the Lord in your own heart, *“for the joy of the LORD is your strength”* (Nehemiah 8:10).

Christian joy is spiritual. We rejoice *“in the Lord.”* Hear the testimony of the prophet Habakkuk. God informed him that invasion was coming upon his country. The land would be devastated, the government overthrown, and the people taken into captivity. It was a terrifying prospect. But Habakkuk saw a time when there would be no fruit in the field, no cattle in the fields or in the stalls. It was a picture of complete devastation of an agricultural economy. But he trusted instead of fretting, saying, *“I will rejoice in the LORD, I will joy in the God of my salvation”* (Habakkuk 3:18). When you can rejoice in nothing else, you can rejoice in the Lord.

Christian joy is sanctifying. It was appropriate for Paul to write *“rejoice in the Lord”* to the Philippians. It was safe because their joy would

be *“in the Lord.”* The joy of sinners is brief and deceptive (Job 20:5); however, *“the ransomed of the LORD shall return, and come to Zion with songs and everlasting joy upon their heads: they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away”* (Isaiah 35:10).

Does your religious faith produce joy in your heart? It does if you have genuine religion.

Genuine Religion Is Exclusive (Philippians 3:2)

True religion excludes those who do not follow the Lord Jesus. They are called *“dogs”* in verse 2 of the text. Jesus warned, *“Give not that which is holy unto the dogs, neither cast ye your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn again and rend you”* (Matthew 7:6). Not all people who call the name of Jesus are true Christians. They must be excluded from the fellowship of the people of God.

True religion rejects what is impure. *“Beware of evil workers.”* Jesus will say to some who claimed to preach, cast out demons and do miracles in His name, *“I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity”* (Matthew 7:23). Christians are to have no fellowship with the works of darkness (Ephesians 5:11). They heed God’s call, *“Depart ye, depart ye, go ye out from thence, touch no unclean thing; . . . be ye clean, that bear the vessels of the LORD”* (Isaiah 52:11).

True religion has no confidence in rituals. Paul speaks of the *“concision”* rather than the *“circumcision.”* It is a rebuke of false circumcision, a sign of the covenant in the flesh when the heart is not in covenant with God. Such people circumcise only their bodies, placing great value in the ritual, but they are rejected because of uncircumcised hearts. Real circumcision of the heart means that *“the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world”* (Galatians 6:14). That is the only kind of circumcision that matters.

Genuine Religion Is Worshipful (Philippians 3:3)

True religion worships God in spirit. God is seeking people who worship Him in spirit and in truth (John 4:23, 24). That is the only worship He will receive. It is so rewarding that it is worth seeking (Psalm 27:4). The psalmist wrote, *“A day in thy courts is better than a thousand [elsewhere]. I had rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God, than to dwell in the tents of wickedness”* (Psalm 84:10). That is why Christians gather to worship God together and to encourage one another in the things of the Spirit.

True religion remains Jesus-centered. Isaiah 61:10 gives this as the reason for rejoicing in the Lord: *“He hath clothed me with the garments of salvation, he hath covered me with the robe of righteousness.”* Jesus has provided that for us. He is the way to God, the truth concerning God, and the life from God (John 14:6). No one comes to the Father but by Jesus (Acts 4:12). Therefore, true religion is centered on Him alone. It is Jesus first, Jesus last, and Jesus all the way between.

True religion is spiritual, having “no confidence in the flesh.” Why should we have confidence in the flesh? *“I know that in me (that is, in my flesh,) dwelleth no good thing: for to will is present with me; but how to perform that which is good I find not”* (Romans 7:18). John writes that *“the lust of the flesh”* is of this world and is contrary to the Father (I John 2:16, 17). True religion depends solely upon the grace of God and not at all upon the works of the flesh. No ceremony, however beautiful it may be and however impressively presented, can bring you to God. True religion is a matter of the spirit.

Genuine Religion Is Humble (Philippians 3:4-6)

True religion does not boast of its accomplishments (verse 4). If a person had begun to boast of his religious activities, Paul could have topped him. He was a devout adherent of the strictest sect of Judaism in his day. Not even one charge of wrongdoing could be proven against him. Yet he would boast only in the Lord, not in his accomplishments. He knew that anyone who trusts in his own heart is a fool (Proverbs 28:26). Paul trusted in Jesus.

True religion does not glory in rituals (verse 5). Many Jews thought that circumcision would protect from hell and guarantee heaven to them. Paul wrote, *“In Christ Jesus neither circumcision availeth any thing, nor uncircumcision, but a new creature”* (Galatians 6:15). What a tragedy that so many depend upon sacraments or ordinances to give them a right standing with God. The only basis for glory is in the Lord Jesus. *“God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world”* (Galatians 6:14).

True religion does not depend on fleshly heritage (verse 5). Paul describes himself as an Israelite by race and the Hebrew son of Hebrew parents (meaning he was a full-blooded Jew). Many Jews thought themselves to be the “chosen people” who were guaranteed of God’s acceptance by physical birth. True religion knows better. Jesus said, *“That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit”* (John 3:6). That is why Jesus said, *“Ye must be born again”* (John

3:7). True religion does not trust in the inheritance or the accomplishments of the flesh.

Genuine Religion Is Christ-Centered (Philippians 3:7-11)

Christ is of the highest value (verses 7, 8). He is higher than any past attainment or any future potential. So what I considered “*gain*” from the past, I now consider “*loss*” for Christ. And what I might attain in the future is now “*dung*” (refuse, rubbish) for the privilege of having Christ. He is the “*pearl of great price*” of which Jesus spoke; He is worth selling all you have to attain Him (Matthew 13:45, 46). You have everything Christ has when you have Him; so giving up everything you have is a small price to pay.

Christ is the source of righteousness (verse 9). There are two kinds of righteousness which you might seek. *Self-righteousness* is the good you are able to do by self-discipline and without God. *Imputed righteousness* is the righteousness of God himself which is imparted as your own by His grace. Paul’s desire was to have no righteousness of his own, but the righteousness of God which comes through faith in Jesus Christ. That is the righteousness God imputed to Abraham in response to his faith (Genesis 15:6). Christ is the source by whom you can be made righteous, also.

Christ is the key to everything (verse 10). You can know Him in a personal, intimate way. You can become more deeply and intimately acquainted with Him. To know Him is to have life eternal (John 17:3), and that is a cause to glory in the Lord (Jeremiah 9:24). When you know Him, you know the power flowing out from His resurrection. It is a power present now to lift you out of the practice of sin and give you deliverance as you die to self and live for Him. Christ is the key to everything you need to live godly in this ungodly world (II Peter 1:3).

One of our Christian songs testifies, “Christ is all I need; Christ is all I need.” And He is! You have everything when you have Christ, and you are filled with God through your union with Christ. Have nothing to do with any religious system which looks to any other than Jesus Christ.

Questions for Discussion

1. How can you distinguish between true and false religion?
2. In what sense are all Christians children in the family of God?
3. Why is true religion joyful?

4. Why is true religion exclusive?
5. Why is true religion spiritual?
6. Why is true religion humble?
7. What two kinds of righteousness might you seek?
8. Why is self-righteousness unacceptable to God?