

How Religion Keeps You From Knowing Jesus

I grew up attending a small church in Indiana. I loved going to church. I loved the community and how there was always some sort of activity in which to participate. I grew up in the day of watching my Sunday school teachers tell the stories of the “greats” in Scripture, while sticking cutouts of Moses, Abraham and Jesus to a flannel graph background.

I was well-educated and informed on the happenings in Scripture. I was proud to be able to answer the questions my leaders asked. I marveled at the stories, listening intently to the details the lessons would bring. Children’s church was a dream as I watched puppet shows and won a large Hershey bar for being the kid that brought the most friends to church. There was always excitement and energy, and those early years are still etched in my memory.

As I grew and entered the youth group, the teaching of the Scripture matured, and I learned about the Apostle Paul and his instruction for living. I learned that abstinence, refraining from gossip and dressing modestly were all in the Bible. It amazed me, as I grew older, the amount of knowledge I was able to retain. As a young adult, I began to make mature decisions based on principles I learned in my youth, but what I didn’t realize was that I had learned much more than what the Bible taught.

Somewhere along the way, I picked up extra rules that—as I look back now—didn’t appear in the Bible at all. With the education of Scripture also came the inundation of religion. I learned the art of always appearing perfect because that’s what I thought Jesus wanted. I looked down on people if they struggled with a sin outwardly because, for some reason, I believed Jesus looked down on them.

I participated in the rituals of religion because I believed Jesus wanted me to, and they would make me a better person. In some ways, Jesus was painted as a guy that would be nice only if you followed His rules. If you didn't, He would look down on you from Heaven in disgust and disapproval. In those days, sinning was a death sentence in my mind.

I would live in guilt for days, or sometimes weeks, if I fell from the lifestyle that I believed I was supposed to be living. Even though I judged others, it paled in comparison to the judgment I placed on myself because I had adopted the mentality that Jesus judges. As I learned about Jesus, I also learned the ways of religion.

Because of the intense pressure to be perfect, the more I stumbled in sin, the harder it was to get back on track. I eventually found myself married to an abusive man that I was sexually involved with before marriage. Rather than letting my knowledge of Jesus lead me, I let religion guide me.

In that marriage, I completely shut myself off from God. I convinced myself that the God that I knew would never forgive all the sin and mistakes I had made. I believed He was watching my every move and actually wanted me dead. I would stay awake at night because I knew He was after me.

What religion sometimes teaches, Jesus never preaches.

I lived in a twisted vortex of perception in my mind until one night I couldn't take it any longer. I knew I needed rescue from my abusive husband and my own thoughts. The pressure of the two was too much to bear. As I contemplated suicide in my home, a tender voice spoke to my spirit and said, "Do you remember ME?"

Even though I had completely given up on God, He had not given up on me. That line drew me up from my bed and landed me sitting in my study. I kept hearing "Do you remember Me?" in my spirit. The voice in my spirit wasn't harsh. It wasn't full

of judgment or disappointment. It didn't speak in a tone of offense. It was quite the opposite.

It was full of grace and acceptance. It was warm and inviting, almost intoxicating. I didn't know how to deal with this Jesus because I hadn't known this side of Him before. I offered a rebellious prayer and told Him that if He was real, He better speak to me. With my hands shaking, I grabbed my dusty Bible and flipped open the pages. With that, He told me, "The righteous will have long life."

In a wave of raw emotion, I fell to the ground. Rebellious, rude and sin-ridden, Jesus met me where I was. I didn't recognize the Jesus I met that night. I had never experienced Him before. I hadn't seen Him displayed yet. He wasn't full of judgment and impending doom or pride; He was full of mercy—mercy that I had never experienced.

He didn't reject me because of my sin, as I believed He would. He accepted me as I was in all my mess. He didn't have a checklist to righteousness. He was righteousness *for* me. All the religion in the world cannot paint a clear picture of the grace of Jesus, because when I found Him, He looked nothing like religion.

This was not the same Jesus.

Maybe the Jesus you think you know looks a lot like whom I imagined. Maybe you're struggling with guilt and fear. If you think Jesus has given up on you, take time to get to know the real Jesus. I promise, He's more than you could ever imagine.

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