

Throw Away Your List of 'Good' Christian Behaviors

It's well past time for you to throw away your Christian checklist. But first, quickly, what are the things you *do* as a Christian?

If you've spent any time in church at all, you probably immediately list prayer, Bible study and attending church services. And if you're a relatively new believer, you may find those activities incredibly meaningful and even exciting. If you're really into spiritual disciplines, you may also think of fasting, praying in the Spirit, giving, sharing your faith with others and perhaps more.

But too often, our spiritual lives can become all about doing certain things. As long as you pray, read your Bible and go to church, you somehow check off a list in your head and feel you're at least a reasonably OK Christian. Don't do those things and you have to start expending emotional energy to quiet the little imps of guilt building up in your soul.

But have you ever known someone to become a believer because they just couldn't wait to do those certain behaviors? "I've just got to become a Christian so I can spend 30 minutes a day reading my Bible and sit in church an hour every Sunday." Not a chance! Any time our spiritual life becomes about a list of behaviors, it quickly becomes dry, empty and potentially destructive.

And yet there *are* things Christians do. Our behaviors *do* make a difference.

So how are we to think about our Christian behaviors without letting them become dry, empty or worse? Why do we do the things we do? What's the point?

Jesus' Perspective

Jesus experienced his worst opposition from the religious leaders, who were extremely good at doing the right things. He had very strong words for those who made it all about behavior.

- "But then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you. Depart from Me, you who practice evil'" (Matt. 7:23).
- "These people draw near to Me with their mouth, and honor Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me" (Matt. 15:8).
- You "have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. These you ought to have done without leaving the others undone" (Matt. 23:23).
- "So you also outwardly appear righteous to men, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and iniquity" (Matt. 23:28).

This understanding becomes especially important for those who are conscious of spiritual warfare. We can wear ourselves out flinging around spiritual weapons, *doing* things in an effort to win against the devil and experience Christ's freedom. We can argue about the tactics and strategies involved, and feel ever more guilt when our behaviors don't result in the positive outcomes we hope for.

Jesus did not come to give us a list of behaviors to do. He didn't come to give a new religion or to beef up our courage or strength so we could do more things.

No, Jesus came to give us life.

"The thief does not come, except to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly" (John 10:10).

Yes, there are things you and I do as believers. Yes, you will pray and study God's Word. Yes, you will connect with other

believers regularly. Yes, you will learn to plead the blood of Jesus and share your faith. Yes, your Christian walk will be impacted by all those things that you do.

But all those behaviors are not the point. If we focus on the behaviors, the disciplines, we are in grave danger of becoming like the Pharisees—looking good in the outside, but “inside are full of dead men’s bones” (Matt. 23:27).

Doing the right thing must never eclipse the fundamental importance of a relationship with the right One.

Think about your relationship if you’re married, or trying to become married. Yes, the things you do are important. You may make yourself look physically attractive. You may give your sweetheart gifts. You may cook and clean, mow the lawn or provide financially. And those behaviors make a difference. But if there’s no heart-connection, no growing relationship, no deep knowing of that person, all the things you do become meaningless.

Why Do What We Do?

So what’s the point of all the spiritual behaviors we engage in? Does this mean we can just stop doing them all, since they don’t really matter? Not at all!

Jesus said the behaviors matter: “These you ought to have done without leaving the others undone” (See Matt. 23:23).

Behaviors make a difference. (They help you stay out of jail, for example.) Once your heart is being changed Christian behaviors can greatly help your spiritual growth and maturity. But if your behaviors are an outside cloak you put on and your heart is not being changed, they’re worthless.

If your religious behaviors are not resulting in a deeper connection with Jesus and fostering your character growth to become more like Him, you need to make a change. Remember, the

devil goes to church every time the doors are open, and he knows the Bible better than you do. It's the heart that counts.

Here are some suggestions:

- If your weekly church attendance is drudgery, pray about whether God wants you to consider another church. Or change your focus from attending to giving something of yourself into the weekly services so you become more engaged.
- If your Bible study is dry and empty, change it up. Read another version. Consider an audio Bible, a different Bible reading plan or reading in a different physical location. Or do it with a good friend, your spouse or a small group.
- If your prayers are rote and nothing more than words, do something different. Something in your life stirs up emotions—joy, anger, pain, excitement, frustration. Get into God's presence and express those emotions. Write, sing, draw, scream—do it communicating to God. And then get quiet and see what He has to say to you.
- If your spiritual warfare efforts are nothing more than gritting your teeth, stop. Just stop! Focus your efforts instead on seeing Jesus clearly as your King, your Savior. Let your imagination be captured by His victory over the enemy. Let His victory infiltrate your soul, and then you will be able to stand against the enemy instead of wearing yourself out.

At heaven's gate God will not be asking you how much of the Bible you memorized, how many church services you attended, how much money you gave, or how many spiritual warfare prayers you prayed.

No, He will be looking to see if He sees His Son Jesus in you.

All we do comes from who we are becoming. Make sure your

“becoming” is in order, and all the behavior stuff will almost take care of itself.

Your Turn: Is your spiritual life tied up in a list of behaviors? Are they making a positive impact on your heart? Do you need to change things so your heart is growing most? Leave a comment below.

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