

Why Religion Is Wrong

In episode 12 of my new series, *Questions With God*, I ask the question, “What is the difference between religion and a relationship with God?” This, maybe more than anything, has become my life’s purpose—to show the world a God who doesn’t desire their decision, but rather their heart. Of course, this is easier said than done, because a decision is easy. Relationship is hard.

Religion, as I mean it here, is the antithesis of discipleship. Jesus never asked for converts; He asked for disciples. But of course, disciples are difficult to quantify, and religion has become big business. We like things neat and tidy and properly labeled. This isn’t a bad thing in most areas, but when you’re dealing with real people and the messiness of faith journeys, it’s a recipe for misunderstanding and disaster. I can’t tell you how many people we’ve met or filmed around the world who think being a Christian means saying a few words of affirmation to Jesus or simply going to church.

I lived much of my life steeped in religion, and I didn’t mind it at all. In fact, I liked it. I think that’s why religious people tend to fight so hard against the concept of true relationship with God. Religion is a warm blanket of rules, regulations, the knowable and the “normal.” It’s so attractive because it’s so attainable. Do this, do that, believe this, believe that and you’re in. Never once did I stop to ask myself this question, though: Into what?

The easy answer would be heaven. Religion likes to focus on either a destination or on consequences. Now I can’t wait to experience heaven, but that isn’t my focus while I’m here. My focus in this life has turned from getting to a destination to understanding my Father’s heart in the here and now. Religion is always looking forward or backward, but a relationship is

firmly rooted in the present. What are You saying right now? What are You thinking? How would You like me to react in this instance?

If I had to identify what I was most scared of in my past life, it would probably be the untethering of the knowable and the embrace of the possible. The knowable is safe. The possible could be anything. You're telling me God can speak to me, I can hear Him, and we can actually have a conversation? To someone who loves relationship, this is a basic truth. But to the religious camp, this carries the real possibility of disaster. What if you hear wrong and mess things up worse? What if people get hurt from your mistaken conversation with God? How are we supposed to police you if you're giving us the answer that "God told you" to do something?

I get it. I get the fears and the concerns. And I've made all the mistakes I used to be afraid of. I've heard Him wrong. I've hurt others as a result. But I've also actually heard Him for myself. I've encountered Him in ways so powerful that one moment in His presence changed me forever. I've heard Him correctly many times and .. .well, if I hadn't listened, I never would have made any of my films, millions around the world wouldn't have been able to see Him on display that way, and I would probably still be wallowing in my own religious misery.

Religion is easy; relationship is hard. It's often messy. It requires something of us beyond simple actions or disciplines. It requires our vulnerability. God is the most fearless person in the universe because He offers Himself up in the most vulnerable way possible. Love must always be chosen freely and honestly, with no coercion, pressure or even expectations. God has done everything in His power to show us that He loves us, yet He still leaves the ultimate decision to love Him back in our hands. He is the author of relationship, and when we turn that relationship into religion, we dishonor both God and the love He is offering.