

10 Judgments Jesus Made Against Religious Church Systems

Every church and/or organization has a corporate culture with norms, rules and expectations that pressure participants to conform. Some cultures are good and some bad.

That being said, there are particular attributes that characterize false religions or become the norm during religious decline in a true faith such as Christianity. For example, “Every religious system in the world is centered upon a temple (or a sacred place) and has rites and ceremonies, has hierarchies and titles distinguishing men from one another, and has holy days and holy celebrations” (quoted from a teaching I heard from Pastor Tommy Moya several weeks ago).

The Old Testament prophets such as Isaiah, Micah and Amos decried religious ritual that was without true righteousness, humility and love for neighbor (Is. 1:10-17; 58; Amos 5:21-24; Mic. 6:8). The line of prophets arose starting in the 8th century B.C. primarily because Israel had a tendency to focus more on adhering to the temple ritual worship of the Levitical system than the ethical lifestyle required by the Law of Moses as found in the Ten Commandments. For this, the prophets pronounced judgment upon the nation, and God dispersed the people and, on two occasions, let enemies destroy their temple.

We have the same issue in today’s church, irrespective of the denomination or expression of the body of Christ. (Many Pentecostal, charismatic and evangelical churches have these same issues.) Not only that, but all leaders (including me) have to constantly grapple with some or all of the following issues internally to make sure we are never sucked into this

false system.

The following are 10 of the characteristics of false religious systems as taught by Jesus in Matthew 23:

1. There are onerous rules and regulations some call legalism (Matt. 23:1-3).

In the contemporary church, there are numerous man-made traditions and requirements that never arose from the Word, which have become an unnecessary burden upon believers. For example, in many Pentecostal churches the emphasis is on outward holiness related to attire, makeup, the cutting of hair, jewelry and other regulations. I have spoken to numerous young people who stopped attending church because these regulations made them feel weird in front of their unchurched friends. Fundamentalists in the past forbade any form of entertainment, including watching movies, listening to the radio, watching television, etc. These are legalistic efforts to bring holiness that have resulted in numerous churches losing their next generation.

2. The church leaders serve to receive prestige from men (vv. 5-7).

God makes it clear in His word that some religious leaders love the praise of men more than the praise of God (John 12:42-43). The judgment of God is against the leaders who are constantly posturing themselves within their denomination to attain the highest seats of authority and places of honor among men. Truly, some of the greatest people of God in the earth today are hidden from the public eye.

3. The leaders crave titles and moving up the ranks of hierarchical religious systems (vv. 8-11).

Today's church is replete with people who use titles to validate their ministries. I can't tell you how many people I

have met with the title apostle, bishop, doctor or archbishop on their business cards who have very little influence in the church and secular world. Truly God doesn't care about an apostolic title; God looks more at apostolic function and fruit. I have found that, the more a person speaks about their academic achievements and ecclesial titles, the more insecure they are as a person and about their ministry accomplishments.

I say this as a person who has been consecrated both a bishop and apostle and who flows in circles with leaders who use these titles. There is nothing wrong with these titles (both are biblical) as long as we don't flaunt them, crave them and depend upon them for validation and/or to hide that we do not have real apostolic function and fruit. Many of the greatest leaders in the church world do not insist upon people referring to them with a title.

4. The leaders have an entitlement mentality (vv. 11-12).

I believe in the biblical principle of serving the people of God as a prerequisite to being qualified to function in the same ministry as they do. For example, Joshua was called the servant of Moses; Elisha served Elijah; David served Samuel and Saul, and the 12 apostles served Jesus.

That being said, there has also been abuse of this principle since many people desire to become leaders partially because it enables them to be waited upon. I believe younger ministers should serve older, more mature ministers out of honor and proper protocol, but at the same time older ministers should not demand it or become abusive if they do not receive it. We do not receive titles in the kingdom so we can be waited upon but so that we can have greater opportunity to serve in the church.

The more mature a Christ follower is, the more they will celebrate service as the highest form of ministry and leadership. God resists those leaders who emotionally abuse

and/or lord it over those under their care (1 Pet. 5:3).

5. The leaders become a stumbling block to others seeking the kingdom (vv. 13-15).

It has been evident the past 30 years in both the evangelical and Roman Catholic churches that leaders can become huge stumbling blocks instead of assets to the kingdom. Whether it is lavish lifestyles, sexual misconduct, abuse of power, or other forms of narcissism, many believers have been turned off from Christianity by those who are supposed to represent it. Truly those who handle the Word of God will receive the most scrutiny at the judgment seat of Christ (James 3:1).

6. The leaders value and love money and wealth more than anything else (vv. 16-17).

While I do not believe church leaders should live in poverty, nor do I believe they should receive salaries from their churches that are greatly disproportionate to the average income of their congregation and/or community. The religious leaders Jesus denounced seemed to value gold more than the glory and honor of God. Leaders should never serve primarily for money but for the love of God and His people (1 Pet. 5:2).

7. The weightier matters of the Word are neglected (vv. 23-24).

Although I believe and practice the principles of tithing, fasting, church attendance and the like, they should never be an excuse for me to think I have fulfilled all of my Christian duties. Jesus says here that we ought to continue to tithe but also include in our lifestyle the practice of treating others with justice, mercy and faithfulness.

For example, if we tithe but treat our spouse poorly, neglect the poor in our midst, or mistreat others, our tithe will not do us any good. Then we are just like the Pharisee Jesus

describes in Luke 18:10-14.

8. Ritual is valued more than inner transformation (vv. 25-28).

In the church we all have our traditions and rituals; whether it is the high-church liturgies of the Roman Catholic, Orthodox or Anglican churches, and/or the more informal gatherings of the Pentecostals and evangelicals. The tendency for human beings is to fall into a routine and equate our routine with true worship. Jesus told the Samaritan woman that she worshipped what she did not know (John 4), which means that people can worship in ignorance and/or without a true experience with God.

Whether it is the sacraments of denominational churches or the shouting, shaking and tongue talking of the Pentecostals, human nature has a tendency to fall into habit patterns of outward worship bereft of the life-changing dynamic of encountering the living God. We do not have to do away with these rituals, sacraments and traditions but should integrate them with true heartfelt worship and passion for our Lord.

9. They honor the departed saints without living like them in the present (vv. 29-32).

I have found that it is much easier to study about revival than to actually work hard for it. It is much easier to study church history than it is to make history. Every denomination and expression of the church has its Christian heroes of the past, but very few denominations, churches and adherents attempt to emulate the life, passion and sacrifice of the saints of old (for example: Ignatius, Tertullian, Cyprian, Augustine, Luther, Calvin, Francis, Whitefield, Wesley, Edwards, Finney, Spurgeon, Moody, Hudson Taylor, John G. Lake, Wigglesworth, Maria Woodworth-Etter, Francis Schaeffer and more).

Jesus wants us to honor the prophets of old by living like them, not merely by building and revering their tombs.

10. They reject the prophets and wise men who confront their false systems (vv. 33-37).

Those who are captivated by a religious system will never listen to those speaking for God who are not of their denomination and/or do not have acceptable academic credentials. Sound familiar? The Pharisees and Sadducees rejected Jesus (John 7:14-18) and Peter (Acts 4:13) for the same reason. It is not an accident that in Luke 3:1-2 it shows that the Word of God came to John in the wilderness and not to an already established institutional leader. Thus, God bypassed the litany of prominent political and religious leaders and their systems (3:1) because they were so corrupt.

When a leader is captivated by their religious system or dead institution they become blind to the pure Word of the Lord. God has to bypass them and speak prophetically through those outside the dead institution. Those who are humble and have ears to hear (as Nicodemus in John 3) will recognize and receive the people God sends to them, irrespective of their institutional affiliation.

Truly, God cannot be contained in a temple, an institution, a denomination or any one religious system. He is Lord of all and will seek after those who worship Him in spirit and in truth (John 4:23-24).

May God help us to avoid these 10 judgments!

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