

The Danger of Turning Religion Into an Idol

Trevor is a good pastor friend. While having lunch with him one day, I could tell he was overwhelmed. When I inquired about his tired appearance, he replied, "I've been busy working for God for nearly four decades, and I'm exhausted." Tears started welling up in the corner of Trevor's eyes. "Pete, do you ever wonder how much is enough? How good is good enough?"

I just listened.

"Most of my **ministry** has been spent living in fear that I'm not good enough for God," he continued. "From day to day I question whether or not He really loves me. And if I'm honest, most of my ministry has been fueled by this fear. And the harder I try, the more I feel like I'm failing."

My friend is hardly alone in his struggle. Many of us in ministry wrestle with trying to please God with our good deeds. I call this the "spiritual treadmill," a condition that causes us to work harder and harder and never feel like we're really making any progress toward pleasing God.

Make no mistake: The spiritual treadmill is a trap. It's a lifestyle that leads us into believing freedom will exist at the next level. It causes us to think if we could do just a little more for God, then we'd know He loves and accepts us. But once we reach our goal, the spiritual bar gets raised. We end up falling short and feel the need to make up for our failures.

This striving is nothing new to our generation.

In the early church, Gentiles were forced to live like Jews in order to be acceptable to them. Behind this social crisis,

however, a more fundamental theological issue was at stake: Was the truth of the gospel the basis for determining fellowship between Jewish and Gentile Christians, or was it the law?

Jewish Christians were taking **salvation**, which comes through faith in Jesus and what He did on the cross alone, and were adding to it other rules and regulations. In essence, they said that circumcision is needed along with Jesus for salvation: Jesus + circumcision = salvation.

Now we look at that and think that's silly. You don't have to be circumcised to be a Christian. But the reality is that almost every generation and every culture has been tempted to add something to that equation. For instance:

Jesus + being immersed in water = salvation

Jesus + doing Communion a certain way = salvation

Jesus + voting Republican (or Democrat) = salvation

Jesus + church membership = salvation

There are dozens and dozens of things that we've tried to force into that equation in ministry. And each time we do that, we are mixing law and grace—and becoming dangerously close to turning **religion** into an idol.

Paul went on to say the Jews had a great system of rules but that Jesus still needed to come to save them anyway. Obeying their rules and being good—"trying to be good"—didn't work (Gal. 2:18, MSG).

Pleasing God is a great longing, but it cannot be our primary motivation when ministering to members of the church or it will imprison our hearts. When our motive is trusting God, our focus is then living out who God says we are.

As a follower of Christ, you have received a new heart. You

have a new identity. You've already been changed and now you get to mature into who you already are.

Paul was saying the central issue is not about a list of achievements in ministry. We can't achieve **godliness** through rule following or upping our numbers. It's not about working a little harder, doing a little more.

The central issue is what God is doing. What counts is the inward transformation that He alone can do in our hearts, which truly heals the wounds of our past, allowing us to start living the life He created us to live.

Pete Wilson *is the founding and senior pastor of Cross Point Church in Nashville, Tenn. He is the author of Plan B, Empty Promises and most recently, Let Hope In. Pete desires to see churches become radically devoted to Christ, irrevocably committed to one another and relentlessly dedicated to reaching those outside of God's family. Pete and his wife, Brandi, have three boys.*