

You Can Be Free From a Religious Spirit

After Elisha watched Elijah ascend into heaven, the prophet went to the city of Jericho and performed his first miracle. The men of that city faced an environmental crisis: Their water was toxic, most likely because of the sulfur and other chemicals that had rained down upon nearby Sodom and Gomorrah years earlier. This poison had made the land barren (see 2 Kings 2:19-22) and it was affecting people and animals as well as plant life.

So Elisha performed a bold, prophetic act. He threw salt in the water and proclaimed: "Thus says the Lord, 'I have purified these waters; there shall not be from there death or unfruitfulness any longer'" (v. 21, NASB). His proclamation brought immediate cleansing.

This obscure story in the Old Testament offers us a picture of the gospel's power. The message of Jesus Christ heals us. The Holy Spirit brings life where death has reigned. He neutralizes the poisons that cause spiritual barrenness. He balances the pH level in our hearts and our churches so that spiritual growth and vitality is possible.

All of us would like to enjoy a healthy spiritual life. And we would love to see our churches thriving and growing. But the sad truth is that many of us are barren because of hazardous additives. We have embraced a gospel laced with legalism, performance-based religion and salvation by works—when Christ alone is our only source of life.

Jesus Himself referred to these toxins as "the leaven of the Pharisees" (Luke 12:1b). He told us that the Pharisees' brand of religion, which looked good on the outside, was deadly—and contagious.

Have you been infected? You can take your own pH test by examining these eight characteristics of a religious spirit.

1. A religious spirit views God as a cold, harsh, distant taskmaster rather than an approachable, loving Father. When we base our relationship with God on our ability to perform spiritual duties, we deny the power of grace. God does not love us because we pray, read our Bibles, attend church or witness, yet millions of Christians think God is mad if they don't perform these and other duties perfectly. As a result, they struggle to find true intimacy with Jesus.
2. A religious spirit places emphasis on doing outward things to show others that God accepts him. We deceive ourselves into believing that we can win God's approval through a religious dress code, certain spiritual disciplines, particular music styles or even doctrinal positions.
3. A religious spirit develops traditions and formulas to accomplish spiritual goals. We trust in our liturgies, denominational policies or man-made programs to obtain results that only God alone can give.
4. A religious spirit becomes joyless, cynical and hypercritical. This can turn a home or a church completely sour. Then, whenever genuine joy and love are expressed, this becomes a threat to those who have lost the simplicity of true faith.
5. A religious spirit becomes prideful and isolated, thinking that his righteousness is special and that he cannot associate with other believers who have different standards. Churches that allow these attitudes become elitist and dangerously vulnerable to deception or cult-like practices.
6. A religious spirit develops a harsh, judgmental attitude toward sinners, yet those who ingest this poison typically struggle with sinful habits that they cannot

admit to anyone else. Religious people rarely interact with nonbelievers because they don't want their own superior morals to be tainted by them.

7. A religious spirit rejects progressive revelation and refuses to embrace change. This is why many churches become irrelevant to society. They become so focused on what God did 50 years ago that they become stuck in a time warp and cannot move forward when the Holy Spirit begins to open new understanding. When religious groups refuse to shift with God's new directives, they become "old wineskins," and God must find more flexible vessels that are willing to implement change.
8. A religious spirit persecutes those who disagree with his self-righteous views and becomes angry whenever the message of grace threatens to undermine his religiosity. An angry religious person will use gossip and slander to assassinate other peoples' character and may even use violence to prove his point. Jesus, in fact, warned His disciples: "There will even come a time when anyone who kills you will think he's doing God a favor" (John 16:2b, MSG).

If the poison of religion has contaminated your walk with God, ask Him to pour a fresh understanding of His grace into your barren spirit—and then expect His new life to flow through you.