

Are Religious Activities Enough To Bring Us Close to God?

Christianity is more than the sum total of the things that we do for God. Jesus said: "Every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire. Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them. Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven. Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity" (Matthew 7:19-23).

If our religious activities are not enough to make us acceptable to God, then what does make us acceptable? Christ's answer is that we have to bear fruit. Prophesying, casting out devils, and doing many wonderful works are not fruits of the Spirit which are personal character qualities infused into us by the Spirit (see Galatians 5:22-23). The problem is that most of us view our religious activities as fruit. Fruit grows on a tree or a vine. It does not grow apart from what it is attached to. Outward activities are not fruit because they can be done without the attachment to the tree or vine. Christ is the vine, and we are the branches (see John 15:5). Spiritual fruit only grows when it is attached to the vine which is Christ; and it receives its nourishment from the vine through the branches. When fruit falls to the ground, it begins to decay. This also applies to the fruit of the Spirit, which are not our religious activities or the outward manifestations of the Spirit (see 1Corinthian 12:7-11).

The peace of God and His strength are fruits of the Spirit

that flow into us through the Spirit of Christ when it is within us. They are not the result of our own religious activities or outward circumstances. Yielding to God is what generates spiritual fruit, and it does not come about by chance or by our efforts. It is a function of being at rest in God. This is one of the paradoxes of Biblical spirituality. The less we try using our own efforts, the further we get spiritually. This is not a popular concept in today's Christianity.

Churches which assume that we have to go to their church buildings and participate in their rituals in order to find God or to be with God confuse fruit with outward religious activities. His Spirit needs to be in the attendees before they arrive to church so that they can share their gifts with the others at the church gathering. So much emphasis is placed on the rituals that the Spirit is just an afterthought instead of the reality behind them. "God that made the world and all things therein, seeing that he is Lord of heaven and earth, dwelleth not in temples made with hands; Neither is worshipped with men's hands, as though he needed any thing, seeing he giveth to all life, and breath, and all things" (Acts 17:24-25). When people place excessive importance on rituals or other religious activities for connecting with God, it is a sign that the spiritual aspect of Christianity is being neglected. We need to live by faith in Christ.

All of our activities need to be energized by the Spirit. Paul says in Philippians 2:13: "For it is God who worketh [] in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure". We are not reduced to inactivity when we are at peace. God energizes us towards good works (see Titus 2:14). This idea is not promoted in our religious culture because our cultural emphasis on self-reliance has also influenced our Christianity. Dependence on God is viewed as a crutch instead of something that enhances our humanity. We need inner peace to function well; and this requires our humility toward God; but many believe

that we need worry and anxiety to be productive; “And the way of peace have they not known” (Romans 3:17).

Personal humility toward God is what brings us the Spirit and its fruit. The Bible aptly describes it in 1Peter 5:5-7 which tells us to “be clothed with humility: for God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble. Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you in due time, Casting all of your care upon him; for he careth for you.” This is basic Biblical spirituality which applies to both the Father and the Son (see John 5:23-24; 14:1; Proverbs 3:5-6, Philippians 4:6-7, James 4:6-10, Psalms 37:7, 55:22, Isaiah 26:3-4, 55:7-9, and Galatians 5:22-23). The Father’s graces flow into us through Christ’s Spirit when it lives within us. This is why our faith in Christ is the prerequisite for everything in Christianity, “Who by him do believe in God, that raised him up from the dead, and gave him glory; that your faith and hope might be in God” (1Peter 1:21). The man Christ Jesus qualifies for our faith because He is also God the Word; and when we have the Spirit of the Son, we also have the Spirit of the Father within us because the Father inhabits the Son (see John 14:23; 17:21-26; Romans 8:9).

Biblical spirituality brings us inner peace and strength from God when we cast all of our care on the Lord; and they are not brought about by our own will-power, striving, or spiritual exercises. We are naturally disposed towards anxiety if we do not unconditionally trust in God through Christ; and the law of sin will continue to dominate our lives (see Romans 7:14 thru 8:2). Even with our rituals, prayer, Bible reading, praise and worship, we could still be neglecting the spiritual aspect of Christianity because our religious activities need to have the Spirit as their basis. None of these things are adequate substitutes for receiving the Spirit. The Spirit within us is our connection with Christ. “It is the spirit that enlivens; the flesh profits nothing” (John 6:63). When the Spirit is within us, our entire lives can be sanctified

wherever we are and in whatever we are doing.

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Email comments to aiello235@.