

Bite Size Bible Study

Religion vs. Relationship #77

By Pastor Lee

Some people define religion as a system of ethics, a code of conduct, an ideology, or a creed. To a Hebrew person it is none of these. Such definitions are misleading, deficient, and inaccurate. A Hebrew understands his daily life of faith in terms of a journey. His religion was synonymous with the way in which he chooses to live. If he truly knows God, he is at God's disposal all of the time, and walks in close relationship with Him throughout his life.

Ceremonialism and ritualism alone do not meet God's requirements for a good life. Those who act justly and love mercy and walk humbly with God do please Him.

He has shown you, O mortal, what is good.

And what does the Lord require of you?

To act justly and to love mercy

and to walk humbly (prudently) with your God. Micah 6:8 (NIV)

The essence of religion is our relationship with God, and walking in His path of wisdom and righteousness, displaying His way of service to others.

How do we recognize those that are living this way?

Jesus said:

By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thorn bushes, or figs from thistles? Likewise, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them. Matthew 7:16-20 (NIV)

What does it mean to do God's will? Aren't we saved by grace?

Grace is God's unmerited favor and He gave it to all of us. But we still have something to do for it to be effective and appreciated in our lives. In Judaism, action is everything. The action is usually toward one's fellow man.

The religious observance that God the Father considers pure and faultless is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being contaminated by the world. James 1:27 (CJB)

It is not a Jewish belief that you are saved by works. It is through the way we live our lives that demonstrates our faith in God and His redemptive powers.

James reflects this Jewish attitude of showing one's faith through what they do (i.e. action) in the letter he sent to the diaspora churches.

What good is it, my brothers, if someone claims to have faith but has no actions to prove it? Is such "faith" able to save him? Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food, and someone says to him, "Shalom! Keep warm and eat hearty!" without giving him what he needs, what good does it do? ¹⁷ Thus, faith by itself, unaccompanied by actions, is dead.

But someone will say that you have faith and I have actions. Show me this faith of yours without the actions, and I will show you my faith by my actions! You believe that "God is one"? Good for you! The demons believe it too — the thought makes them shudder with fear!

But, foolish fellow, do you want to be shown that such "faith" apart from actions is barren? Wasn't Abraham avinu declared righteous because of actions when he offered up his son Yitz'chak on the altar? You see that his faith worked with his actions; by the actions the faith was made complete; and the passage of the Tanakh was fulfilled which says, "Abraham had faith in God, and it was credited to his account as righteousness." He was even called God's friend. ^[Isaiah 41:8; 2 Chronicles 20:7] You see that a person is declared righteous because of actions and not because of faith alone. James 2:14-24 (CJB)

Note that James does not say that there is no faith but by its self it is of no use. The actions reveal the presence of that faith when those actions reflect God's characteristics and the relationship of that individual to God.

Said another way, Faith is internal and has no outward appearance. The actions, that that faith causes the person to do, reveals the relationship with God and the following of His direction and teaching.

Faith doesn't save anyone; only by the sacrifice of Jesus will we be saved. But faith causes us to follow the Holy Spirit's directed actions, which reveals our relationship with God. These actions are a testament to the character of God to the rest of the world.

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