

Sometimes people object to Christianity by saying things like, "There are too many hypocrites in the church!" I know a pastor who used to respond to that by saying, "Well, come on in—there's always room for one more!"

I'm just letting you know that this message will make us all squirm a little, and maybe a lot. The opposite of true religion is false religion, and who among us isn't guilty of a little play-acting about our religion? The problem is, we're usually not fooling anyone.

A rather pompous pastor was once teaching confirmation class, and was trying to impress upon the students the value of living a Christian life. After a rather lengthy introduction, the pastor asked his payoff question, "Why do people call me a Christian?"

After a moment's pause, one youngster said, "Maybe it's because they don't know you."

Who among us doesn't have a public face and a private face? Who among us does not know the embarrassment of having the mask slip, exposing the private face for all to see? Although we can be phonies and not practice what we preach, God calls you and me to practice true religion, which means that we say with our lips and our lives, "I am not good; I am forgiven."

In each Gospel, Jesus spends a significant amount of time speaking out against the Pharisees, who proudly called attention to their own good deeds but were not compassionate toward others. In other words, they did not practice what they preached.

Nobody likes a phony, but we are probably better at spotting phoniness in others than we are spotting it in ourselves. The insincerity of a phony is eventually discovered. The phony likes to use people. The phony is usually thinking, "Me First." The phony is a pretender.

The worst phony of all is the phony Christian. Phony, hypocritical Christians can hurt the faith of others and they eventually come to believe their own lies.

And the scariest thing about phony religion is how quietly it sneaks into my heart and how easily it convinces me of this beautiful lie: I do good things, therefore I'm good, and if I'm good, then I have God's blessing. Yes, you heard me right. That is a lie--a beautiful lie, one that resonates with us very deeply--but a lie nonetheless. If only good people can be accepted by a good God and His good followers, then we are all lost. Do not think God can be fooled. Don't think you can throw God off your trail with a few good deed decoys. The Pharisees followed approximately 613 rules that interpreted the commands of God, but Jesus still described them as white-washed tombs, beautiful on the outside, and on the inside filled with death, because their hearts were far from God. Although they were devoted to doing good things, they somehow were not in love with God. Does that sound familiar to you?

Well, don't be afraid. Jesus did not come looking for quote-unquote good people. Nowhere does Jesus say, "I'm building my church and only the good people may apply." Jesus confounded the

do-gooders and astounded the outsiders by claiming that the type of people God wants are people that are painfully aware of how good they are not.

The renewal of true religion happens when we confess that the religion of our goodness is false. True religion happens when we know that we are lost sheep who have been found by the Shepherd. This is the true Christian faith. You have a God who receives you and communes with you. He does not leave you in your sins, but changes your heart with His love, so that you are able to say, "There is hope for others—look at what God has done and is still doing with someone like me."

Can you see in your life where phony religion can be overcome by the true religion that comes from the cross of Jesus?

The renewal of true religion happens when we confess that the religion of our goodness is false. The focus is all wrong. True religion locks into place when we make sure that our focus is on Jesus. In His suffering, he paid the price I should've had to pay for my sins, but Jesus wouldn't let me. I know in my heart of hearts that I am not good; but I am forgiven. In spite of my lame, half-hearted, hypocritical attempts to "do good," Jesus gives me His goodness and invites me to wear it like it's my own, but it is all about Him. We need to say this when there is conflict, so that repentance leading to forgiveness becomes a way of life for us. We need to say this to our children, so that they don't go around burdened with the guilt of not being good, but are free in the joy of being forgiven. We need to say this in our churches so that no one fails to enter them because they feel unworthy, and we need to say this in our church so that no one who enters this place leaves without being invited to experience real forgiveness and renewal in Jesus.

A pastor once overheard a woman who was a member of the church talking to a stranger who was sitting in the back pew. "May I help you?" the woman asked. "No," said the stranger. "I only came into this church to pray. I'm not really a member anywhere." "Well," the woman said, "I want you to know that whatever burdens you have, you don't need to bear them alone. Our people will help you to bear your cross."

The renewal of true religion happens when you remember just how much you have been helped by Christ and begin looking for others to help. It is service rendered not out of fear or obligation, but service rendered out of thankfulness. Or, to say it another way, you do what you do because you love Jesus. To be loved by Father, Son and Spirit and to love Him in return—and to love other people as an offshoot of that relationship—goes beyond mere religion. It is the life we're all looking for, and it is here for you, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.