

Flawed Theology, Heartless Religion

The problem that the Pharisees had was . . . well, it was complex. They didn't have a heart for God. And their theology was flawed. And the two go together: their self-centeredness determined their soteriology, and their made-up soteriology fixed their minds on self. The God of Scripture was excluded so that they could believe in a false god, one they imagined. My concern is that we evangelicals today are just like those Pharisees, in the very same way.

Theology is not revealed from heaven. It's the human attempt to understand the Scriptures. By "human," that means of course finite, flawed humans. It means humans controlled by the sin nature and influenced by Satan. Hopefully, those who construct theology are mature Christians and thus yielded to the Holy Spirit, so they mostly get it right. But getting it right is not guaranteed. Only the Scriptures themselves are truth revealed by God. And we must rightly understand what we read in the Scriptures.

Our modern American soteriology flows out of several contaminated springs. We have the popular notion that once we make a "decision" for Christ, that makes us "born again." So we have the assurance of forgiveness of sins and eternal life. So we then can live how we want without having to worry about the possibility of being judged when we die. So we believe that God is love, that we're under grace not law, that the Gospel sets us free, that salvation is a free gift from God, and that we must ever beware a "works" religion. There's no fear of God in our soteriology, only "reverence." My concern is that this soteriology we cling to is really a delusion.

Preachers teach Bible mixed with theology. If the theology is flawed, the teaching is likely false. Depending on pulpit ministry for one's salvation is therefore folly. A falsehood that contains a partial truth is a lie still. A system containing falsehoods and a lot of partial truths is a lie still. God holds us accountable not for what we have believed from a pulpit, but for our response to His Word. We personally need to read the Scriptures, understand the Scriptures, incorporate the Scriptures into our thinking and worldview, and then obey the Scriptures. That's the only way to avoid getting trapped in a lie; it's the only path to salvation.

God reveals Himself to us in the Scriptures. It's in the Scriptures that we encounter God. It's thru the Scriptures that we get to know God and develop love for God. It's by obeying the Scriptures, which is really obeying God, that we become godly and fruitful and experience biblical salvation. But if we depend on pulpit ministry for information about Christianity and find that sufficient and avoid the discipline of personal Bible study, and refuse to serve God in the way He expects, we reveal we don't really have a heart for God. We're just pretending. So the god we worship is likely a god of our imagination. We have constructed a self-centered religion. We're Pharisees. Doubtless, many are sincere in this belief system, this "pop" Christianity whose flawed soteriology I've just described; but so were the Pharisees sincere and committed.

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What's ultimately wrong? I submit that we have no fear of God. We are indifferent to Truth. We're supremely committed to self. I need to discuss these.

As for the fear of God, we've redefined it out of existence. We call it "reverence," a lovely word that's empty of any meaning. So having no fear of God, we suppose we're immune from accountability for how we live. The Apostle Paul said, "Woe is me" if he failed to live out Jesus' will for him (1 Corinth 9:16b). His "woe" means he feared the serious punitive consequences of failure. Whether he preached Christ voluntarily out of love or involuntarily out of fear was irrelevant (vv. 16-18), serving Jesus was his inner compulsion. Thus Paul writes in 2 Corinthians, "Knowing therefore the terror of the Lord, we try to persuade men" (5:11). Accountability was very real to Paul. God is greatly to be feared, love and grace notwithstanding. "Perfect love casts out fear" (1 John 4:18), doesn't mean we're immune from accountability; it means if we love God *obediently*, there's no fear of judgment (but we ignore that context).

Regarding indifference to Truth, let's understand that biblical truths demand a response appropriate to whatever it is that's being revealed. Truth is not merely information. Truth is not merely that which

corresponds to reality. Truth is God's will. It's a spiritual reality revealed to us. Truth requires us to do something about it. We're here to speak and to live out Truth. Living out Truth is living in light (John 3:21 and 1 John 1:6). So Truth demands commitment, and living it results in godliness. Inherent in Scripture's Gospel offer, for example, is the necessity of sharing it with others, and of living out the rest of our lives according to the will of the One who saves us by means of the Gospel. If we don't, we're being contemptuous of the truth of the Gospel. Hardly anyone today grasps how compelling biblical Truth is.

We are born into a "me" culture. America is not only "the land of the free," it's the land of narcissism. Our overblown ballooned culture holds myriads of interests ever before us to entice us away from spirituality. We have comforts and pleasures and gadgets galore ever available and the wealth to indulge in any or all of them. We go to church to get out of it what serves us, our needs and wants, all the while deceiving ourselves that we're there to "worship." The most astonishing (really, appalling) of all is that we've (ever so subtly) legitimated the notion that salvation is a free gift to anybody who wants it, without responsibility of any kind whatsoever due in return. Salvation is to bless "me" after this life that's all about "me" is over. No one grasps that the eternal Son came to earth to serve Israel, and by extension the entire human race, so that they in turn would serve God in His great purposes. Yes, the beatific vision is on offer in the Gospel, to those whose hearts are pure (Matt 5:8). Who's that? It's those who follow Jesus, that is, who obey His sermons and teachings, who imitate His pure character, and who voluntarily sacrifice themselves in serving God as Jesus did. Only those who love Jesus will commit to these responsibilities. Sentiment for Jesus is not following Him.

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The Pharisees are in the Gospel narratives not only because they opposed Jesus, but as examples to the Church of wickedness. They were proud, self-absorbed and self-righteous people. They didn't have the "circumcised heart" that Moses understood his people needed, viz, a desire for God, to know God, to love Him and to be like Him. We need to have a pure heart if we ever expect to see God, to be with Him and to enjoy Him (Matthew 5:8).

And we need something else, to know and obey and live the Scriptures. I repeat: We encounter God in the Scriptures. We therefore respond to the Scriptures as unto the Lord. That means if we ignore them, or if we have interest in them sufficient only to be able to think or converse knowingly about them, that's the depth (or lack thereof) of our interest in Jesus. If we imbibe the Word so that it becomes our life, we are in essence doing that with Jesus Himself. Jesus, the living Word, is our life.

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Dear Reader: I plead with you to think deeply and long about the cross. The cross changes everything. The cross must change *you*. The cross is not merely an event of great soteriologic significance. The cross reveals God as no Scripture possibly can. It reveals the transcendent nature of His love, His purposes in creation, His justice, and His will for His beloved human creatures. The cross is, if you're *in Christ*, where you died. You died to self and to your bondage to sin and to the world, and it ends your submission to Satan the ruler of this world. If you're dead to these and alive *in Christ*, you're alive to godliness and righteousness. The cross creates a radically new worldview by which to live, to think, to love. The cross circumcises the heart; it creates a desire greater than anything in existence to know God and to be with Him and to glorify Him. The cross creates a sense of gratitude so intense that only a life of sacrificial service to God can satisfy it. If the cross fails to effect any of this, something is wrong, very wrong, something that no words can repair.

If there's any theology that's revealed, it's the theology of the cross. If there's a new heart to be had, it's the cross that creates it. The Pharisees choked on the cross, and the cross in turn judged them. I pray that the cross isn't also the instrument of judgment for any of us.