

Practical Religion
LESSON 3: REALITY

Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth. (1 John 3:18)

Introduction: *Make sure your religion is real!* “Real religion is not mere show... It is something inward, solid, substantial, intrinsic, living, lasting... It may be weak and feeble, and mingled with many infirmities... [but] is it *real?*” (Ryle, p. 45).

I. The importance of having *real* religion.

- a. Biblical Reality and Danger of Unreality
 - i. The parables of Christ contrast true and nominal believers—the sower; the wheat and tares, the two sons, the ten virgins the talents, the wedding supper, the two builders—to show the uselessness and danger of unreal religion.
 - ii. Christ calls the scribes and pharisees hypocrites eight times in one chapter, but never once used such harsh words for prostitutes and tax collectors (Mt. 23:33).
- b. Unreality in Christian Graces
 - i. Unreal *repentance*. Esau, Herod, and Judas all felt sorrow over sin, but never repented.
 - ii. Unreal *faith*. Think of Simon Magus. Even demons believe in God (Ac. 8:13; Ja. 2:19).
 - iii. Unreal *holiness*. King Joash had the appearance of holiness so long as Jehoiada the priest lived, but when he died, the religion of Joash died too (2 Ch. 24:2). There wasn’t anything suspicious about Judas, but he was a thief and a traitor (Jn. 12:6).
 - iv. Unreal *love*. Tender expressions, shows of affection, and calling each other ‘brother’ or ‘sister’ or ‘beloved’ may be merely a simulation of love (1 Jn. 3:18; Ro. 12:9).
 - v. Unreal *humility*. Christ does not charge the Pharisees for *not* praying, nor for praying too shortly, but for praying *unreal* prayers (Mt. 23:14).
 - vi. Unreal *worship*. There were many formal worship services in the Jewish temple and synagogues, but their hearts were far from God (Mt. 15:8).
 - vii. Unreal *talk*. “And they come to you as people come, and they sit before you as my people, and they hear what you say but they will not do it; for with lustful talk in their mouths they act; their heart is set on their gain” (Ez. 33:31).
- c. Denominational Unreality
 - i. For some, religion is mere *membership*, coming out of habit, compulsion, or fear. This is *no better* than being members of a senior’s bingo club and *more abhorrent* than a Hindu temple. It is *Churchianity*, not Christianity.
 - ii. For some, religion is mere *simplicity of worship*—no choir, stained-glass windows, stage lighting, fog machines, guitars—while their religion is as dull and lifeless as the walls of their sanctuary. They love the regulative principle more than the Bride of its Author.
 - iii. For some, religion is mere *ritual*. It shocks them to see anything in the pulpit but a suit, anything in the liturgy but tradition, and anything in the pews but conformity. When the ritual ends, they forget it all and participate in worldly folly. This is caricature religion.
 - iv. For some, religion is *evangelical fads*, always talking about the latest controversy and minutest doctrines. They proudly associate with Reformed organizations but find little

time to associate with the lowly in the church, their “beloved brothers and sisters.” This is the favoritism of which James warned (Ja. 2:1-4), counterfeit religion of the worst sort.

- v. For some, religion is mere *experience*, referring back again and again to some former experience of grace, never getting on with religion, and scarcely having any regular experience of grace. Then the excitement finally fades and they return to old ways.

II. Tests by which we may prove whether we have *real* religion.

- a. Test *what place religion occupies* in your inner man.
 - i. Your head? Your feelings? Or your affections? Real religion in the Holy Spirit holds the reins, swaying the affection, leading the will, directing the tastes, influences our decisions, fills the most inmost heart. *Is this your religion?* (Ac. 8:21; Ro. 10:10).
- b. Test *what feelings toward sin* your religion produces.
 - i. Real religion has a deep view of the sinfulness of sin as deserving the wrath of God, as being the cause of all misery, quarrels, sickness, and death—! Sin will ruin us eternally except we hate it, fight against it. *Is this your religion?*
- c. Test *what feelings toward Christ* your religion produces.
 - i. Nominal religion acknowledges Christ, bows to him, but has no real hope in him, does not glory in him as Redeemer, Lord, and Friend. Real religion honors Christ externally *and* has genuine confidence and delight in him, love for him, and comfort from him as the food, light, life, and peace of his soul. *Is this your religion?*
- d. Test *what fruit your religion bears* in your heart and life.
 - i. Graces of repentance, faith, hope, love, humility, kindness, self-denial, and patience will vary among believers, but they will *invariably* be found if at all in seed form in *all* real believers. *Is this your religion?*
- e. Test *what feelings and habits you have toward the means of grace*.
 - i. Is Sunday a sweet foretaste of heaven in a world mad with sin and trouble? Are the preaching and sacraments a joyful experience for you? Or are these cold habits and irritating interruptions in your week? Do you find it burdensome to pray, or despite your feelings do you go to him and find much-needed rest? *Is this your religion?*

III. Personal Application

- a. Inquiry: *Is your religion real or unreal?*
- b. Warning: *If your religion is unreal*, great is your danger and exceeding guilt in God’s sight! (Mt. 7:22, 23).
- c. Advice: *If your conscience is pricked*, stop trifling and playing with religion—be honest, thoroughgoing, and wholehearted followers of the Lord Jesus Christ.
- d. Encouragement: *If your religion is real*, and you have taken up the cross of Christ, persevere, unmoved by difficulties and opposition! (Ph. 2:12).