
Being Religious (According to Jesus)

BOB HEERSPINK

How would you define spirituality? Is it what you think or is it what you do? Today it is more common to hear people describe themselves as spiritual. Some will even say: I am spiritual but I am not religious. What exactly does that mean; and is it even possible to separate spirituality from religion? Stay tuned.

DAVE BAST

From ReFrame Media and Words of Hope, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

BOB HEERSPINK

And I am Bob Heerspink.

DAVE BAST

So Bob, I have to tell you, I am a little bit sick of hearing the phrase: Spiritual but not religious. I think what it really means is: I am anti-religion, or at least anti the Christian religion.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, there is this kind of a nebulous sense that we are spiritual beings, but as soon as you mention religion or any kind of religious practice, that is when people say: Whoa, that is not for me.

DAVE BAST

Unless it is meditation or something real vague or sort of Eastern or mystical; but you know, the traditional practice of the Christian faith – going to church and praying and worshipping, reading the Bible – that is off limits for the “spiritual types.”

BOB HEERSPINK

Okay, so we are Christians; are you comfortable, Dave, saying Christianity is a religion?

DAVE BAST

I have to confess that I have often said: No, Christianity is not a religion; it is a relationship with Christ. I will bet you have said that, too.

BOB HEERSPINK

I have said that, too.

DAVE BAST

You have made that point; so on the other side, we are kind of knocking religion, too, sometimes.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, and obviously there are religions that have really led people down wrong paths. I mean, there are a lot of bad things that have happened in the world because of false religion.

DAVE BAST

Well, including the Christian religion. That can become a kind of pro-forma practice, you know, of just going through the motions; and frankly, the spiritual but not religious... that has some truth to it, too, if you think of religion as being hypocritical. If it is a rejection of the hypocrisy often that some so-called Christians demonstrate, then yes, we should be critical of religion as a concept; but I also think we need to say something positive about that. That in a sense we have to be religious if we are, certainly, Christians because that simply means we are practicing what we believe; we are doing something about our faith.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes; you know, John Calvin once said that there is the seed of religion in everyone's heart, and that means that that seed of religion is demonstrated in various practices that people share; so, it is not surprising to me that Christians – serious Christians – practice religious habits like everybody else.

DAVE BAST

Yes, I remember an old book years ago... maybe you remember this: How to be a Christian without being religious.

BOB HEERSPINK

Oh, yes.

DAVE BAST

I think I would want to title this program maybe: You cannot be a Christian without being religious in the right sense – in the proper sense. After all, you mentioned Calvin; what did he call his great Magnum Opus: *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*.

BOB HEERSPINK

Right; you know, to me, Dave, the Christian religion is a relationship – it is a religion that at the heart is relationship with God, and it is also rooted in another, you could say, re-word, and that is: Revelation. You know, we have revelation from God; we are in a relationship with Christ; but we also still engage in religious practices.

DAVE BAST

Yes; religion is what we do about that; how we live it out. Here is another word that has gotten a bad rap lately: Piety, or pious; would you want to be described as pious?

BOB HEERSPINK

That is a slam for most people. If they use that word of people, they say: They are so pious. It is really a dig.

DAVE BAST

But, in a good sense, piety is something else we ought to covet because piety really means adopting a right relationship toward those who are above you – those who are in authority. You know, the fifth commandment: Honor your father and your mother. The Heidelberg Catechism says that means everybody in authority; a legitimate government; and supremely, God himself. Ultimately our piety is how we relate to the God who is over us.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, you know, Dave, we have been studying the Sermon on the Mount in the last several programs, and it is interesting that in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus really addresses issues of piety; he addresses issues of spiritual habits; and that is what we are going to talk about today; and it is interesting how Jesus really sets the tone by challenging us in ways in which our religious habits can get off track. Let me just read one verse from Matthew 6:

¹“Beware,” says Jesus, “of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.”

DAVE BAST

Yes, he starts out with a negative principle: Here is how *not* to be religious. Don’t practice your piety before the public in order to be seen by them because then your Father in heaven will not reward you. I think he implies there plainly: 1) That there is a right and wrong way of practicing our religion or piety, and: 2) That there is a reward for doing it the right way from our Father in heaven – from God; but: 3) There is a tremendous temptation to do it the *wrong* way, and to become hypocrites in so doing.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes, I think that is another word that is often misunderstood in today’s conversation. You know, often people will say: Oh, Christians are all hypocrites; and what they mean by that is, they are not perfect. You know, we talk about...

DAVE BAST

Not living up to our ideals, yes.

BOB HEERSPINK

Right; and I would...

DAVE BAST

But who does?

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes; I don’t really see that as hypocrisy. Hypocrisy is really coming and saying: Okay, this is how I project myself to you; but down deep, I am really something different. I am not being honest with you. You know, I have talked to people who will basically project this notion that I am really such a spiritual person, and then you discover that they are playing games with their money, they are dishonest with their spouse, and you say: Wow, what a front! What a fraud!

DAVE BAST

Yes; that is hypocrisy; right, exactly.

BOB HEERSPINK

That really is hypocrisy; and I think that is what Jesus is getting at when it comes to spiritual practices.

DAVE BAST

Why are you doing what you are doing when you are being religious? There is the issue. Are you doing it because you are playing a role for an audience, because you want the applause, the plaudits that might come, at least from church folk, for this kind of behavior? Are you doing it to make yourself feel good about yourself because you are such a generous person – you are such a godly person? Or are you doing it for God, and strictly for God – for his glory?

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, and we really have to look, I think, at some examples that Jesus gives because he gets very practical and he lays out, actually, three examples of how we can take seriously this call to get hypocrisy behind us and practice our faith before God in a serious way. Let me read those verses:

²“So whenever you give alms,” says Jesus, “do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that you may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward; ³but when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing; ⁴so that your alms may be done in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. ⁵Whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners so that they

may be seen by others. Truly I tell you that they have received their reward. ⁶But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will reward you... ¹⁶and whenever you fast, do not look dismal like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward; ¹⁷but when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face so that your fasting may be seen, not by others, but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”

DAVE BAST

Well, I want to dig into those examples, but first let's take a quick break, and then we will come back and really explore what Jesus is saying here.

Segment 2

DAVE BAST

Welcome back to *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast, along with Bob Heerspink; and Bob, right before the break you read that wonderful passage from Matthew 6, where Jesus talks about how *not* to be religious, and how to practice your religion, and he uses three examples. He says: Whenever you give alms, don't do this but do that. Whenever you pray, not this way but that way; and whenever you fast, here is how you don't do it and here is how you do it. What is interesting, first of all, is that he assumes that his followers will be doing all of those three things – three great, fundamental religious acts: Charitable giving, prayer – personal prayer – and fasting.

BOB HEERSPINK

Which really gets us outside of the box of most of us. You know, most of us when we don't eat much we diet, but we are not fasting.

DAVE BAST

Yes, we are not fasting; so that is another whole program, I think; the spiritual disciplines; but let's just look at this: Spiritual but not religious? Not for followers of Jesus. That is not an option because he is very much assuming that we are going to practice our faith in these very specific and tangible ways; but, there is a wrong way and a right way to do all of those things.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, you know, on the one hand, Dave, sometimes people will say: Oh, if I don't feel like engaging in prayer, or if I don't feel like giving I don't have to do it. Jesus really says there are certain disciplines, there are certain habits that we have to cultivate; and we do those things out of the will, just not out of our feelings; and I think that is important to recognize.

DAVE BAST

So in each case, he starts with the wrong way to do it, and it is always the same thing that he is hitting at. It is always the issue of hypocrisy – it is always the issue of the audience: For whom are you doing this? Are you doing it for show? Are you doing it for... So, when you give alms, don't sound a trumpet before you the way the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets: Don't blow your own horn, we might say.

BOB HEERSPINK

And literally, it has been suggested, that happened; that the biggest donors were brought forward at the synagogues, possibly even with the trumpets blowing; so this was a very public act of exalting those who were the big givers in the synagogues.

DAVE BAST

Kind of like the way we put names on the wall of a new building by level of donation.

BOB HEERSPINK

It can be; how public do you go with your giving, and why are you giving? Are you giving just to have the name out there? To stand before people and have them celebrate you, or again, do you recognize that the real audience in giving is God?

DAVE BAST

Jesus also suggests here, I think, the danger of even thinking too much about ourselves when we are doing this. You know, a lot of people give because it makes them feel good; and Jesus here says: The way you ought to do this is don't even let your right hand know what your left hand is doing. It is almost like you should keep this from yourself. Don't think too much about it because if you really are giving out of a love for God and for the glory of God, there will be a kind of thoughtlessness about it. I mean, you will make the gift and then you will just sort of move on.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes; there is a kind of giving where we give to the community, and we really get back. I mean, we give a gift to the college or university that our grandkids attend, and we know that our family is going to get something out of it; or we give a gift for the community, and there is this new public building that really enhances our overall quality of life; but Jesus is saying even though that giving may be okay, get past that to a giving that simply focuses on God.

DAVE BAST

I think it is pretty complicated. We are complicated beings and we do things for a variety of motives; and probably none of us ever does something purely out of love for God and the reward that God promises, because Jesus does unblushingly promise... He says: Your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you; so are we doing it so that God... You know, are we doing for love of reward?

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, you know, Jesus really says you are going to get a reward. You can get the reward from the community, and you can have people celebrate you or you can get the reward from your heavenly Father.

DAVE BAST

Right, and...

BOB HEERSPINK

There is a reward.

DAVE BAST

You are only going to get one or the other, basically, he says. If you are playing it for applause, then you will get that, but that will be all you will get. If you are willing to defer to the reward that God promises, well, that is another matter.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, and then Jesus goes on and talks about prayer. You know, he goes from giving to prayer. It is the same thing: How public are your devotions? Now, there seems to be a tradition, actually, Dave, in the First Century where people actually did their private devotions publicly. You know, they would go out into the street and it was like quiet time, but quiet time for all to see. To me that is what Jesus is condemning. I don't think he is saying we cannot have public prayer and worship, for example.

DAVE BAST

Yes, right.

BOB HEERSPINK

That is something different.

DAVE BAST

There is a verse earlier in the Sermon on the Mount, where he says: 5:16[paraphrased] Let your works so shine before people that they give glory to your Father in heaven. And in a sense, maybe some of our good works – some of our great gifts – are intended to be that, as sort of an encouragement to others to give themselves, or to praise God; so, yes; we are not trying to be simplistic about this. It is not that you can never... that every donation has to be anonymous or that prayer can only be done in secret – in private. Again, Jesus is getting at the issue of motive.

BOB HEERSPINK

But you know, I think even of public prayer when people are asked to join in a prayer circle or they are asked to give a prayer publicly during a worship service. You know, so often I find, at least for myself, I am thinking about what I am going to say. I ask the question: How do people respond to that? Did that prayer really flow? Did it make sense? Was it fluent enough? You know, I think Jesus is saying: Even with public prayer, get off that. The real issue is the God to whom you pray. It is not what other people *think* of your prayer that matters.

DAVE BAST

I think here is a good practical test for any of us... for any good work that we might do, whether it is an act of service; whether it is a generous donation; whether it is piety: Leading in worship, leading in prayer. Do you feel the need to get credit? Are you miffed when your name is overlooked? Do you want to blow your own horn or draw attention to it some way so that you are certain that people know what you did; or are you willing to say: You know, I did this for my Father. He sees what is done in secret, and that is enough for me; to know that the Lord knows what I have done. If you are really bent out of shape about not getting enough credit, then I think you need to listen to what Jesus says again. You might have a problem with inner motivation.

BOB HEERSPINK

Because all these things are meant, Dave, not just to bring honor to God, but they really shape us. They grow us in spiritual maturity; and I think Jesus is saying...

DAVE BAST

I like that, yes.

BOB HEERSPINK

If you are just focused on what other people are thinking, you are not going to get anywhere in your spiritual life. You know, that maturity just is not going to happen because you are stuck in some adolescent phase of spiritual development, where you are just looking around, thinking: What are other people saying about me?

DAVE BAST

Yes; the idea that these acts shape us... I really like that thought because, you know, how do you become a generous person? Answer: By giving; not by trying to make yourself somehow *feel* generous. You just give, and as you give, you discover you have become generous. How do you become a deeply spiritual, prayerful person? By praying, by fasting. You just do it and you discover that it is in the practice of the act that you become the thing.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes; someone has said: You can think your way into a new way of acting, but you can act your way into a new way of thinking; and I think Jesus is saying: Get down to what you do and the habits you develop, because they are going to be critical in developing your entire Christian life.

DAVE BAST

Well, there is one more phrase I want to look at in this whole section from Matthew 6, and it is one that I love to think about, too: The God who sees what is done in secret; your Father will reward you. So, I want to explore that when we come back.

Segment 3

BOB HEERSPINK

Welcome back to our *Groundwork* conversation. Dave, just before the break we were talking about the way in which the focus of our attention in our spiritual disciplines needs to be on the audience. You know, who really are we playing to? Are we playing to the crowd or are we concerned about God?

DAVE BAST

And Jesus says: Don't worry about whether anyone knows about your giving or your prayer or your fasting. You can be content to do this sort of privately – secretly – because your Father in heaven sees everything that is done in secret.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes, the notion that God is really omniscient, that when we are in that prayer closet and we are praying to him, when we place that gift in the offering plate, when we fast – we haven't talked too much about that – that will be another program sometime – but you know, these are things God sees, and that is really what matters.

DAVE BAST

It makes me think of the great story from the book of Genesis of Hagar, Abraham's concubine who went out into the desert with her young son, Ishmael; sort of rejected from the camp; and she thought she was about to die, and suddenly an angel appeared to her and showed her where there was a well, and she said: This is the God who sees – the God who has seen me and seen my problem has saved my life. So that is a wonderful biblical theme.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, I think it is such an encouragement because, you know, we all have the need to be noticed. I mean, every little kid even growing up, walking on the fence...

DAVE BAST

Look at me! Look at me!

BOB HEERSPINK

Look at me, Daddy! Look at me, Daddy! And you know, we have become adults and we still have this desire: Look at me!

DAVE BAST

Somehow, there is that hunger in us – that need.

BOB HEERSPINK

And Jesus says: As you grow in your faith, you can set aside that need to have the world look at you because the one who really matters is focused on you, and that is your Lord.

DAVE BAST

Let me tell you a story about the single most impressive donor I have ever met – a donor to the ministry. I got a call once from our representative out in the Great Plains, and he said: I want you to meet someone. I want to come and take you to meet this man. I happened to stop by and just made his acquaintance. It was a man

who gave us, oh, every once in a while \$15.00 or \$20.00. His name was Emil. He lived in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, and when we went to find his address it was down this kind of narrow, unpaved street; and when we got there we couldn't believe anyone was living in this old, ramshackle, run-down house trailer. We knocked on the door; Emil came to the door, welcomed us in. There was one chair that didn't have a back to it. He sat on the bed; we sort of sat around. The ceiling was caving in; and he was a single man; never married; he lived off a little bit of money that he had managed to save as a farm laborer – a day laborer – who hired himself out; but on his kitchen table he showed us this stack of receipts and thank-yous from various ministries: Billy Graham, and World Vision and a number of them; and every month he sent this little check in as he was able; and one month our guy went back to visit Emil and found a padlock on the trailer and discovered from the neighbors that Emil had passed away a couple of weeks before; and a few months after that, we received a check from his estate for \$15,000.00.

BOB HEERSPINK

Incredible, yes.

DAVE BAST

Yes, it just blew me away; and I thought: Nobody ever knew who he was; didn't even know him; nobody knew what he did. We only discovered it because we kind of went there; but I can just imagine the welcome he received from the Lord: Well done, good and faithful servant.

BOB HEERSPINK

All the people who greeted him, saying: Your giving, your faithfulness has blessed me.

DAVE BAST

This is a great man! This is a great man! And the world would have passed right by and just thought: What a bum!

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes, yes; and to think that God is in heaven, and God would say: Take a look at Emil. He is doing it right here. The kind of lifestyle that Jesus invites us to was being practiced by Emil.

DAVE BAST

And I love that idea that nothing that we do for God – that we truly do for God – no matter how small, is ever lost because he sees it and he knows it. You remember Jesus' words: Even a cup of cold water that is given in my name will have its reward. You know, we don't have to worry. All we have to do is go out and be faithful and practice our religion in the name of Jesus.

BOB HEERSPINK

There are people who look to the future – their own future – and they say: What big things can I do for God? And the truth is, it is being faithful day by day; it is bringing the widow's mite; it is offering a cup of cold water; these are things Jesus says your Father is just focused in on.

DAVE BAST

Yes; I think of Mother Teresa's line, you know. She said... Her characteristic statement was: Do something beautiful for Jesus today. Not do something *great* for Jesus today; do something beautiful for Jesus today.

BOB HEERSPINK

We want to thank you for joining our *Groundwork* conversation today; and don't forget it is listeners like you asking questions and participating that keep our topics relevant for your life. So tell us what you are thinking about what you are hearing and suggest topics or passages that you would like to hear on future *Groundwork* programs. Visit us at groundworkonline.com and join the conversation.

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