

Why is Religion So Awful Sometimes?

[Hosea 6:4-10](#)

Hosea, Day 15

What shall I do with you, O Ephraim?
What shall I do with you, O Judah?
Your love is like a morning cloud,
like the dew that goes early away.
Therefore I have hewn them by the prophets;
I have slain them by the words of my mouth,
and my judgment goes forth as the light.
For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice,
the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.

But like Adam they transgressed the covenant;
there they dealt faithlessly with me.
Gilead is a city of evildoers,
tracked with blood.
As robbers lie in wait for a man,
so the priests band together;
they murder on the way to Shechem;
they commit villainy.
In the house of Israel I have seen a horrible thing;
Ephraim's whoredom is there; Israel is defiled.

- Hosea 6:4-10, ESV

Blaise Pascal famously said, "Men never do evil so completely and cheerfully as when they do it from religious conviction." Yet Pascal was a deeply devout Christian man. I'm a pastor and a student of history, and I have to agree with Pascal. Religion has been and often still is a toxic force for much evil in the world. Edgar Allan Poe was not a devout Christian, and he said, "All religion, my friend, is simply evolved out of fraud, fear, greed, imagination, and poetry." I would simply insert the term man-made before religion and agree with what Poe says.

James 1:2 says, "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world." So, not all religion is bad. Certainly, we can look at the world and see much good being done in the name of the Lord: hospitals, schools, adoption agencies, foster care programs, homeless shelters, food pantries, shelters for abused women, crisis pregnancy centers, and more are all being run by people in the name of the Lord.

So, what makes the difference? Well, here in Hosea 6, we get some insight from the Lord's perspective on toxic religion and what God desires instead. Here in these verses, we see that corrupt and vile religion is fickle, formalist, and financially driven.

I. Religion is awful when it is fickle:

Your love is like a morning cloud,
like the dew that goes early away. (v. 4)

God's people would return to Him at times and pledge their loyalty to Him, only to turn away at the slightest provocation and temptation. How often do we turn aside from our loyal love to the Lord for some small, petty temptation?

2. Religion is awful when it is formalist:

*For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice,
the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings. (v. 6)*

God's people thought that, as long as they were going through the formal motions of their religion, they would be accepted by God. But God desires steadfast love and the knowledge of God much more than sacrifices and burnt offerings. God isn't impressed with ritual. He wants our hearts. He isn't impressed when we check all the religion boxes; He wants us to know and love Him.

3. Religion is awful when it's financially motivated:

*As robbers lie in wait for a man,
so the priests band together;
they murder on the way to Shechem;
they commit villainy. (v. 9)*

The priests are here compared with a band of robbers. They valued profit more than human lives. Can church leaders today be driven by what increases attendance or boosts giving instead of what is actually faithful to God's covenant, what is loving to God and His people?

When we think deeply about these three realities, we will see that they rear their ugly heads again and again among God's people. The outward forms of our sin may change, but the heart of the matter remains the same. The Lord is calling us to know Him, love Him, and be loyal to His covenant and His kingdom. How are we responding to His call?