

Overcoming the religion trap!

Breakthrough Christianity:

John 5:35-47

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I like to tell Hittite jokes. Since the Hittites are an extinct race from Bible times, I figure the chances are slim I'll offend any of them. I frequently tell the one about the Hittite who bought a brand new corvette. It was flaming red and shiny chrome. Your eyes hurt from it without sunglasses. The Hittite flashed down the road and snaked in and out of traffic. He cut off a semi truck at least three times. That was too much for the driver. The burly driver flagged the Hittite down and bawled him out. He took some chalk and drew a circle around the Hittite and said, "Don't step out of that circle until I'm done talking to you." The Hittite smiled. That irked the trucker to the extent that he kicked out a head lamp on the corvette. When he saw the Hittite laughing, he pulled out his talisman and knifed the leather seats into shreds. The Hittite doubled over in laughter, so the trucker took out a sludge hammer and smashed the windshield. The Hittite was now on his knees laughing. The trucker revved up his 18 wheeler and drove it right over the corvette. He pancaked the car. When he got out of the truck, he found the Hittite lying on the ground, laughing and beating the pavement in amusement. "I don't get it. What's so funny?" asked the trucker. The Hittite exclaimed, "I've spent more time standing outside your chalked circle than in it!" The absurdity of that response is the joke. We find it difficult to believe that anyone could be so out of touch. Yet, the Bible testifies to people, who we would expect to be in touch, being absurdly out of touch.

That was the case with religious leaders in John chapter 5. Today's Scripture reveals part of Jesus' response in an angry exchange between Jesus and religious leaders in Jerusalem. It was a holy holiday and also the Jewish Sabbath. Jesus came to Jerusalem to worship because of the holiday. When he entered the city in the first verses of John, chapter five, he went through a gate that was like a hospital door. The pool of Bethesda was nearby and crowds of sick, blind, lame and paralyzed people rested in the shade of canopies near the water. They believed that an angel would stir up the pool occasionally, and the first person in the water would be healed. The belief, and perhaps some experience, fired people's hearts with hope. It also bred competition. One man had been sick 38 years. He repeatedly had tried to enter the pool first, but never made it. As Jesus picked his way through the crowd, he became aware of the man. Some of you might ask, "Wouldn't Jesus heal everyone in such a hospital?" It appears that Jesus healed only one person out of that needy crowd. If Jesus had healed even one more person there, wouldn't that have drawn attention to Jesus? However, no one knew who healed the sick man including the sick man. Only later did he learn Jesus' name. Multiple healings would have caused a stir, but what actually caused the stir was not the man's healing. Instead, when he walked away from the hospital carrying his mattress as Jesus had instructed him, the religious leaders objected because he was carrying his bed, working, on the Sabbath. The leaders didn't rejoice in a healing; they fumed over broken tradition. When later Jesus was identified, the angry exchange began.

The Jewish leaders accused Jesus of sin, but Jesus explained that he was following his father: *"My Father never stops working, so why should I?"* (John 5:17). Jesus said:

The Son can do nothing by himself. He does only what he sees the Father doing. Whatever the Father does, the Son also does. (John 5:19)

The exchange became angrier because these folks, like the Hittite with the corvette, focused on what is absurd. They focused on rules and not on the one behind the rules. They

bought into religious thinking, which concerns itself with religious actions. It focuses on prayer, meditation, good deeds, and ethics. Jesus never focused on that. He never called us to focus on prayer. He did not call us to focus on Bible reading. He did not call us to focus on meditation, doing good or being ethical. He called us to focus on our heavenly Father.

Even as the Hittite focused on the circle rather than the corvette, the leaders did the same. They focused on Sabbath rules rather than God's handiwork of healing. It never dawned on them that God was signaling something to them. The religious focused on their traditions that were familiar and too comfortable for them to question. Their hope was not in God, but in those traditions. The traditions became an idol replacing God. Their religion became a trap.

The effect of the religion trap was powerful. It left the people *deaf*. Jesus told them that God was sending them a message through the words Jesus spoke and through the wonders he performed (John 5:36). God was speaking to them in Jesus' teaching and healing, but they weren't hearing. Jesus said:

You have never heard (God's) voice nor seen his form, nor does his word dwell in you, for you do not believe the one he sent. (John 5:37-38, NIV)

Jesus was saying, "If you were actually acquainted with God, you'd recognize his voice and his hand at work." However, since you don't know him, you reject what he says to you, does for you and who he sends to you.

I've watched that happen. I've seen people transformed, filled with passion, their hearts radically changed. They are still imperfect. Discretion is not an instantaneous gift, and many healthy behaviors must be learned. Nevertheless, the people have caught fire. Then I watch church people respond. The passion and boldness make them uncomfortable. They don't realize that God is speaking to them through the dramatic changes they witness. They actually pull away. The same occurs with healing. An individual is healed through prayer from a physical

ailment, and rather than seeing it as a sign of God's loving work among them, religious people dismiss it as cultic. Jesus said these folks are deaf. Thus, they *reject* the one God sends to them.

Do you realize that is the story of Israel? There wasn't a prophet of God that was ever received. Every time God spoke to bring change, his heralds and ambassadors were rejected. Even Moses was opposed by all, even those closest to him, his brother and sister. The religion trap leaves you deaf to God's word, blind to God's hand and hostile to God's messengers. Therefore you miss the grace, the healing, and the amazing love God wants you to experience

Jesus fingered a third problem. Religious people trust in a *substitute*. Jesus said:

You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life. (John 5:39-40, NIV)

Jesus' opponents studied their Hebrew Bible diligently. They treasured it. However, they thought life was in its rules. They did not understand that life was not in the rules but it in the person it testified about. The Bible pointed to a Savior; they thought their Bible was the Savior. Today, I hear that same misunderstanding. Ask yourself, "Are you confident that you will be received in heaven when you die?" If your answer is "I don't know" or "No," then realize that God doesn't want you guessing. St. John wrote, "I have written these things so that you will know you have eternal life" (1 John 5:13). God wants you confident and joyful. If your answer is "Yes, I'm confident," then ask yourself why? If the first word that comes to your mind is "I," "I think this, I believe that, I try to, I was baptized, I do this," then you may have embraced a substitute like these religious leaders. They thought life was in their strict adherence to the rules they rooted in Scripture. *Like them, you may trust your strict observance of your religious traditions.* However, life depends only upon your response to the Savior that God has sent you, Jesus Christ.

Fourth, Jesus noted a *deficit*. He said:

I know that you do not have the love of God in your hearts. (John 5:42)

If the religious leaders had that love, they would have celebrated the sick man's healing. They would have asked Jesus how it happened. They would have praised God for the man's health. Instead, they pulled away from the healed and put down the healer.

The saddest thing was that the healing was given to bless them all. Instead, it became a curse. God had not expected them to just accept what Jesus did without any preparation. God had prepared the way by giving testimony to Jesus' ministry in the very Bible they treasured. Somehow, their taste of religion was like an immunization. When you are immunized, you are injected with the real disease in such weak form that you don't contract it. You actually build up a resistance. What these religious leaders had learned of the faith was so watered with human tradition that it was too weak to effectively infect them. Instead, it built up a resistance so that they were immune to the real thing. Could that be true for you?

There is only one way to overcome the religion trap. John the Baptist showed the way. He called people to humble themselves in repentance and open their hearts to the new work God was doing. God has always resisted the proud, and he has always given grace to the humble. Are you ready to humble yourselves, let go of the familiar and comfortable, and seek Christ's new work in your life?

Where have you put your faith? Where is your confidence? Is it in what you've done: your Bible reading, your prayer, your church attendance and your ethical behavior? Or is your confidence in what Christ has done for you on the cross, is doing in you through his Spirit and will do for you as he promised? That's the gospel, and that's what makes us witnesses. We're witnesses to what we receive, not what we achieve. Are you ready to receive?