

“When Rituals Replace Relationships”

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The essence of the Christian life is the relationship His people have with Him. There is nothing else comparable to or capable of replacing this. No amount of form, asceticism, indulgence, discipline, method, structure, program, or religion can replace the centerpiece of the Christian faith which is a relationship between God and His people.

This relationship is secured by God in the offering up of His Son for the sins of His people. The relationship begins in God and is sustained by God. Unfortunately, all we seem to do is clutter the relationship with nonessentials. Everything created and all biblical revelation points us to Him. Somehow in the journey we deviate and find detours that lead us from God by stopping us short of enjoying Him, and we end up existing in the shadow-lands of God’s person and work.

I cannot speak for everyone, so I will not attempt to. What I will do is speak what I know and experience. I have a propensity to replace the best with the good and the good will always be the enemy of the best. Bible reading, prayer, church attendance, singing, reading, and fellowship (to name just a few) are all good things, but none of them were ever meant to be ends in themselves. Such things, if noted incorrectly, will become ends, and in so doing, take us away *from* God and will not draw us *to* God. Is it not simply amazing how something that is good can become the enemy of the best? When any of our disciplines become duties, then its time to take a break and evaluate why we do what we do.

- If my Bible reading is not about Him, then something is lacking.
- If my prayers are not about Him, then something is lacking.
- If my church attendance is not about Him, then something is lacking.
- If my singing is not about Him, then something is lacking.
- If my reading is not about Him, then something is lacking.
- If my fellowship is not about Him, then something is lacking.

The list is endless. We can include work, parenting, hobbies, and recreation, the “hard calls,” my spouse, my extended family, you name it, and it can be in the list. If somehow I do not see Christ in the shadow, if I do not savor Him in the ritual, the form, then something is lacking. Please hear me out. I am not saying that we will always “feel” like this communion is sweet and delectable, but my relationship with Him takes priority over everything else. He is in my work, my marriage, my socializing, my reading, my recreation, my relaxation. You name it and He is there. Regardless as to how I feel, I affirm this basic truth, “The essence of the Christian life is the relationship His people have with Him.”

So what happens? Relationships are hard work. It is easier to prescribe than to describe. *Doing* is always easier than *done*. There is nothing you have to do. In all of my talk: Bible reading, prayer, church attendance, singing, reading, fellowship, etc.,

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there is an evil that drives us to “do.” In none of these “things” are we to compare or compete. Should you “do” these things? Sure, but not because you have to, only because you can. I personally am enriched in my journey with God by those things noted, but the creation of God and His revelation is far larger than my frail and anemic listing.

God is bigger than my bible reading, my prayer life, my church attendance, my singing, my reading, and my fellowship. God is the substance of which all these things are but meager (and I mean meager) shadows. Every time I embrace God in my moments, He is worshipped and our relationship is enriched.

As gross as this may appear as I type these thoughts, I am eating a piece of ham wrapped in a slice of Swiss cheese . . . no bread . . . slightly “stinky,” but actually quite good. I am savoring this meal, and in the savoring I believe God is better than the shadow. If this “stinky” piece of cheese with ham is good, how much better must God be? Over the last several days I have been able to enjoy significant bonfires. Some are while I am alone, others with my wife, and still others with my children and parents. All of it, each moment, is savored and God is worshipped in the shadows. What a waste of the shadow if I do not see the substance. I abuse the shadow when I simply stop at the shadow.

The problem in Mark 2:23-28 was a replacing of a relationship with a ritual. The Sabbath was good, but Jesus is better. He is the substance of which the Sabbath is but a shadow. He is our eternal rest, both now and forever. The Holy Spirit is calling out to us today. His desire is for us to see Christ in creation and in revelation. It is as we see Christ in our “form, asceticism, indulgence, discipline, method, structure, program, or religion” that He is savored and worshipped. May none of these “things” rob you of His joy. May you find His joy in all these “things.”