



June 23, 2019

OPEN

What are the rituals in your spiritual journey? Today we are going to think about how we might come to rely on rituals in a way that is not healthy or helpful to our walk with Jesus.

Ritualism is the attempt to deal with our sin by the observance of religious rites and ceremony. In [Isaiah 1:10-20](#) God gave a very harsh rebuke for the meaningless ritualism of the people of Judah.

- **Some rituals are scriptural** - Some ceremonies have been given to us by God, such as baptism and communion.
- **Some rituals are institutional** - These are crafted by organized religion and may be inspired by the Bible but are really man-made.
- **Some rituals are practical** - They emerge from some experience of need or even convenience, such as the time we begin our worship service.
- **Some rituals are subtle** - These might not have the appearance of rituals but they are ways we subtly begin to rely upon some religious practice.

Regardless of the kind of ritual, in each case the danger is that we will come to depend upon it. This is *performance based spirituality*. So we could say that ritualism is not the presence or a ritual so much as the dependence the particular ceremony or observance for our standing with God. For one person, a ritual can be a rich and productive way of loving God. Another person might perform the same ritual in a detached, dutiful way. The answer is not just removing ritual but a changer of the heart.

DIG

What is the cost of ritualism?

In the simplest of terms, the cost of living in ritualism is alienation from God. Of course, this is very ironic, because the one who relies upon ritual is lured into a lie that they are increasing their connectivity to God!

Note in Isaiah 1:10-15 the description of how the Israelites (specifically Judah) were acting ritualistically. Sacrifices, offerings, assemblies, and prayer were given by God but were corrupted by the lifestyle of the people. Ritualism has three characteristics.

- Ceremonies which are a mechanical repetition of religious activity
- Corporate gatherings which are void of meaning and purpose
- Seeking God through prayer that is inconsistent with a sinful lifestyle

God was not pleased – He called them “Sodom and Gomorrah”! (see verses 9-10) Tragically, there was a huge gap between their ceremonial observances and their character. In Isaiah 1:2-4 we find a description of the rebellion and disobedience of the people of Judah. And that is the danger of ritualism. It creates a veneer of virtue over sinful living. Dallas Willard writes,

...there is something about the Christian that works like the bar code. Some ritual, some belief, or some association with a group affects God the way the bar code affects the scanner. Perhaps there has occurred a moment of mental assent to a creed, or an association entered into with a church. God “scans” it, and forgiveness floods forth. An appropriate amount of righteousness is shifted from Christ’s account to our account in the bank of heaven, and all our debts are paid....For some Christian groups the “account” has to be appropriately serviced to keep the debts paid up, because we really are not perfect. (*Divine Conspiracy*, 37)

How is ritualism corrected?

God calls ritualists to reasoning and reckoning – see verses 16-20. He invites all pseudo-worshippers to three vital steps to deal with the sin of duplicity.

- *Recognize the sin of hiding behind a veil of ritualist activity*
- *Repent of rebellion against God and putting on a ritualistic image*
- *Return to relating to God personally, not by ritualistic performance*

REFLECT

1. We need to be freed from ritualism

Ritualism brings bondage. First Century Christians from a Jewish background were under the thinking that certain rites and rituals were essential for their Christian life – including dietary laws. But in Romans 14:17-18 we read, “For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, because anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and receives human approval.”

2. We need to be re-focused on true worship

Ritualism provides us with a pseudo worship experience. But in Hebrews 12:28-29 we are taught, “Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire.”

Martin Luther proclaimed, “Whoever preaches [Christ] rightly, preaches the **Gospel of pure joy.**” Do we preach a Gospel of pressure to perform many, meaningless activities? Or do we preach a Gospel of freedom and joy?