

The Problem with Religion

I recently listened to a teaching by Joseph Prince, the prodigious pastor from Singapore, that alerted me to something I've often believed but never really put into words. That's the damage happening all over the world in the name of religion. True, if one is religious in doing his daily workout, that's good; the guy isn't lackadaisical about exercise. So in that sense *religious* is a complement.

But the example Prince highlighted in John 5 where Jesus healed the lame beggar who had spent 38 years waiting for someone to lift him to the healing pool when an angel "troubled the water.. Jesus simply commanded him to "Rise, take up your bed, and walk." He did, and immediately the man was healed.

Prince astutely pointed out that many question the part about taking up one's bed, not realizing that leaving that bed there assumes that it will be used again. But a healed person has little need for a beggar's bed on a street corner. And the Bible says, "make no provision for the flesh." because so doing hints one expects to continue with his "bed," his old problem: his sickness, his poverty, his addiction, his gluttony his gossiping etc.

So what does that have to do with religion? According to John 5: 15-17), the pharisees, ignoring the fact that the beggar had been healed, condemned Jesus for "healing on the sabbath." Just one of the hundreds of commandments the Levites added to the ten Moses brought down from Mt. Sinai. Rodney Howard Brown called them "the pharisees, the sad you sees, the couldn't sees and the wouldn't sees."

Howard-Brown, the South African evangelist made that joke during his visit here n the 90's. It was aimed at hypocrites who like to advertise their holiness. *Hypocrite* is Greek for 'actor,' and pharisees of Jesus' day wore tall head pieces,

long, ornate gowns, and countenances of sturne superiority. That calls to mind the masks and costumes of the Greek comic and tragic actors. Shakespeare in his comedy, *Twelfth Night*, drew such a one in the character, Malvolio, mocked by Sir Toby Belch: “I am sir oracle, and when I speak, let no dog bark.” That satire was aimed at the Calvinists, the holy folk of that day. They burned witches after they settled in America.

What the Levites were really after with Jesus was to convict him of breaking the law against working on the sabbath so they could destroy him. Never mind the miracle of the healing, “He broke the law and must be punished!” Some overly zealous religious types will kill people who don’t believe as they do. That’s how atrocities like 9/11 and the massacre of October 7th get justified. The murderers, blinded by religion, excuse their brutality by dedicating it to their god.

A major point Prince was trying to make was the danger of trying to make Christianity a religion, fraught with so many regulations that the priceless victory of Jesus on Calvary, which brought healing and salvation to all who believe, was just another choice among the many roads leading to god.

But if Paul and most of the other apostles and disciples are right, Jesus alone is “the way, the truth, and the life” by which all may some day come to God (John 3:16). And you get there not by your past performance, or displays of righteousness but by simply believing in Him and loving one another. For the religious, that’s way too simple. Well, some day we’ll all find out.

Gene Pinkney for the Daily News 24-10-29-