

“FAITH CONQUORS RELIGION”

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That handsome fella on the screen there is an actor named Ryan Reynolds. I'm a big fan of Ryan and his movies. He's known for being quick witted, the ability to grow a magnificent beard, and that perfect face he possesses. Fun fact- he and I share a birthday. Some people even say we look alike. But that's not what I want to talk about today. Instead I want to talk about something he said.

“Religion poisons everything good in this world.” – Ryan Reynolds

When I saw this I was disappointed. It got under my skin. And then I started to think about it and I came to an unexpected conclusion.....I kind of agree with Ryan. The world is full of religions. It's got Islam, Hinduism, buddhism, Mormonism, Jehova's Witness-ism, and the list goes on. Many think that they're all the same, and fundamentally they really are. They all put forth some type of moral standard that must be met, or a list of “do's” and “do nots” in order to earn entrance into Heaven, or whatever positive version of the afterlife their faith teaches. Really, even most atheists are unknowingly religious. Despite their rejection of God they still adhere to some type of moral code, usually their own personal one, in order to achieve “goodness.” Even if you ask your average agnostic outside of organized religion, who goes to Heaven and who goes to Hell, you'll likely get the same answer. Human wisdom and world religions tell us that good people go to Heaven and bad people go to Hell.

Because of this, religion inevitably results in one of two epidemics we see in the world.... fear or pride.

You see, to the introspective, self-critical person religion places them in bondage. The good they do is poisoned by the fact they are motivated by fear and self-preservation. They constantly evaluate themselves to see if they are being good enough. They live in constant fear that they aren't. Because of their uncertainty, they have no peace about what comes after this life. That fear imprisons them and leads to anxiety and depression. Do you see any of this in the world today?

For the more confident and less introspective person religion becomes a means of puffing themselves up with pride. The good they do is poisoned by selfish motives rather than selflessness. They look at their performance and conclude that they are better than others. They become self-righteous, they probably proclaim themselves to be compassionate and loving, and they are likely filled with entitlement because of their belief that they “deserve it.” And pride can be very subtle as well. Simply believing, “you’re not going to Hell because you’re not that bad” is pride. Do you see any of this in the world today?

Our culture is seeing the rise in an ideology that I would consider to be another religion. Humanism. Humanism is primarily secular, but it has crept into organized religion as well. It has some really nice sounding mantras like, “you’re perfect just the way you are,” or “do whatever makes you happy.” It’s popularity no doubt partially stems from the growing cultural rejection of objective truth and morality, but also I personally believe it’s growth can probably be attributed to a response to the fear and pride problem that organized world religions created. It attracts people who are tired of living in fear, and it appeals to people who are sick of the self-righteous, religious types looking down on them. It promises escape from the problems of organized religion, but produces the same results.

Secular humanism denies the existence of God and teaches that individuals have the final say in what is moral and what is immoral. It promotes the ultimate form of pride, which is viewing one’s self as god.

As I said before, Humanism has also crept into some sects of organized religion. This form of humanism acknowledges God rather than making humans god, but it employs a clever twist on a beautiful truth. That beautiful truth is that God loves everyone. Humanism teaches that the fact God loves you means you’re “perfect just the way you are.” In other words, it tells people they are worthy of God’s love because they are beautiful and perfect and good. It falsely teaches that God loves our flaws and our sin because they’re a part of us. The truth is that God loves us in spite of our flaws and our sin. He loves us so much that He hates our sin because our sin separates us from him. Humanism in the church, takes the beauty of God’s unconditional love and uses it to teach that we humans don’t need a savior from sin because God loves our sin too. It teaches pride because it teaches that we are worthy of Heaven without a savior.

So you see Ryan isn’t wrong. The religions of the world have poisoned a lot.

As I thought about these things something occurred to me. I could see a common thread running through the center of all these religions. They all lacked something critical. Though they disagree on who God is, what is good, and what one needs to do to earn entry into

Heaven. They all teach that you can save yourself or that you don't need saving. They all lack a Savior.

It's a pretty clever tactic that Satan has employed. He's developed a smorgasbord of nice looking lies that all take aim right at the human ego and draw people's eyes away from Jesus and towards themselves. It results in exactly what he wants. Fear or pride.

Then something else occurred to me. Christianity is the PERFECT remedy for all of the problems world religion and humanism have created.

The truth of the Gospel solves fear.

Ephesians 2:8 ~For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God:

- Salvation is a free gift. It comes by faith, not by our performance or work. It is the gift of God. Gifts are free to the receiver and cost the giver. Salvation is free to us because Jesus paid for it. You don't have to evaluate your own performance to see if you'll make it to Heaven because salvation is not of yourself. If you're honestly evaluating whether or not your life is good enough to get you into Heaven then the answer is always that it's not. Stop looking at what YOU'VE done or what YOU'RE doing. Your salvation rides on the back of your faith in Jesus and the work He did for you, and God has already approved it. Trust in Him and His work, not yours. This fact should provide all of us, but especially the introspective believer with peace and rest.

The truth of the Gospel should solve the problem of pride.

Ephesians 2:9 ~Not of works, lest any man should boast.

Titus 3:5 ~ Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost;

- We get to go to Heaven because of faith in Jesus. Not because of our work but because of faith in Him and His finished work. Not because of our performance, or because we sinned less than others, but because He paid our sin debt for us. We are recipients of His Love, and His Mercy, and His Grace. We don't get to boast. We have no reason to be filled with pride. Jesus didn't save us because we deserved it more than someone else. We don't deserve it and we can't earn it. He gets all the glory and He deserves all the glory.

Up to this point the first thing I want you to recognize is that the Gospel is the answer not only to the problems of fear and pride, but to all of sin and death as well. In Romans 1:16 the Bible says the “Gospel of Christ is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes....” And in Romans chapter 10 we’re told that “faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.” That means we have a strong responsibility to share the message because people need to hear it!

The second thing I want you to recognize is the clear contrast between Christianity and the religions of the world. Christianity is different. Every world religion is about building a ladder up to God. The Truth of Christianity is that God came down to meet us on our level. Worldly religion teaches that you must save yourself. Christianity teaches that you can’t save yourself, but that God loves you so much He sent Jesus, God the Son, to save you. Every other religion teaches that you have to deserve salvation or that you don’t need salvation. Christianity teaches us that we don’t deserve it and can’t earn it, but that God offers to save us anyway. Worldly religion teaches that you better obey if you want God to love you. Christianity teaches us that we should obey because God does love us and wants what is best for our lives. Every other religion demands a “have to” life....a life that must meet a certain standard of self-righteousness. Christianity allows for a “thank you” life....a life with the freedom to serve God out of gratitude rather than out of fear or pride.

And so my hope is that, being able to recognize that clear contrast, we’ll be better equipped to avoid the snares that come with religion by instead sharing the freedom that comes by GRACE. Because if or when we get the gospel message wrong we twist Christianity into the same thing that every other world religion is. And when we twist Christianity into the same thing as they are we get the same results. Fear and pride.

So if you find yourself struggling with fear or pride I’d encourage you to stop looking to yourself to determine whether or not you deserve to get into Heaven. You don’t. You haven’t earned it and you won’t. If you’ve believed in Jesus as your savior then instead look to Him, His finished work, and His amazing grace, and trust His promises because he promised eternal life and you can take His word to the bank. If you have yet to believe then I’d invite you to turn your eyes toward Jesus and make the choice to trust Him alone for salvation from Hell and for eternal life. And if you do that, then I’d encourage you to follow and serve Him out of love and gratitude for what He’s done for you. Not to be saved. Not to stay saved. But because now that you’re not motivated by fear or pride you’re free to follow Him out of love and gratitude.