

Religion: Good and Bad
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Religion can be either good or bad. When practiced correctly, it provides us with a way to live our lives in accordance with God's will. But there are times, when the practice of religion can become an obstacle to living a good life. For example, when religion becomes merely a matter of rules and regulations, it is no longer helpful to our lives. Or when religion is reduced to nothing more than customs and practices, it becomes a hindrance to our relationship with God.

This debate over religion is at the heart of the controversy that we have just heard between Jesus and the religious leaders. The scribes and the Pharisees were religious people who practiced their religion with meticulous devotion. But in addition to the commandments of God, they developed their own customs and traditions to insure that they would live religiously good lives. What they did was good. But at certain moments, some of them gave more attention to their customs and traditions than they did to the commandments of God.

For example, when they observed that Jesus' disciples did not purify themselves before eating their meals, they criticized Jesus and his disciples for not following the traditions of the elders. In response to their criticism, Jesus reminds the religious leaders that God's commandment is more important than human tradition. People are defiled by those things that proceed from their heart rather than by eating without ritually purifying themselves.

Although this controversy may seem strange to us today, it makes an important point: a right relationship with God proceeds from the heart. Consequently, external religious practices cannot relate us to God if they do not proceed from our heart.

All of us are religious; otherwise we would not be here. Our Catholic faith is distinguished by a multitude of external religious practices. We genuflect before the tabernacle. We bless ourselves before and after prayer. We recite particular prayers every day. We celebrate mass and the sacraments. All of this is good. But

if we do not perform these religious practices from our heart, they will become empty and vain. If these religious practices are not an outward expression of an inward faith and trust in God, they are of no avail. If these religious practices become merely formal and routine, they will no longer give us life.

The purpose of our faith is to bring us to the fullness of life. *The purpose of our faith* is to bring us into a close and abiding relationship with God. *The purpose of our faith* is to change and transform us so that we will become a new creation in Christ. *This is why* Moses tells us to observe the commandments of God and we will live. *This is why* the Psalmist says that the one who does justice will live in the presence of the Lord. *This is why* Saint James exhorts us to be doers of the word and not merely hearers of the word.

In a few moments we will receive the Eucharist, the Bread of Life. In doing so, we will receive Christ, and Christ will receive us. As we receive this Bread of Life, we ask for the grace to practice a religion that is pure and undefiled before God because it proceeds from our heart.