

I don't know about you but I cringe when someone describes me as "religious."

Don't hang that albatross around my neck!

One of the most common misconceptions about Jesus is that He is just another religious leader along the lines of Buddha, Mohammed and others. Nothing could be farther from the truth than that.

What we call "religion" is our attempt to earn God's favor through some moral code or set of rituals or things of that nature. The problem with that should be obvious . Isaiah 64:6 tells us that

"...all our righteousness are as filthy rags" Please forgive the crudity of what I am about to tell you, but a literal translation of "filthy rags" is referring to a bloody menstrual cloth. That's how God sees our human religious efforts. He is totally disgusted by them.

Instead of giving us some method to dig ourselves out of our sin, Jesus took the punishment for us. Rather than showing us a pattern for working our way to to God, which is impossible, Jesus was God reaching out to us. Ephesians 2:9 talks about how our salvation is a gift from God, not a reward for our good works. If it was something we could gain through good deeds or religious devotion, it would be something we could boast about, claiming the glory for ourselves.

We see this vividly in a conversation Jesus has with a very respected Jewish leader named Nakdimon or Nicodemus.

He comes to Jesus under the cover of night and we don't know what initially motivated him to come to Jesus in this manner.

Jesus wastes no time, telling this respected, educated devout man that unless he is born again, he will never see the Kingdom of God.

And again, I can't emphasize this strongly enough. Jesus wasn't saying this to your common, everyday "sinner." He was challenging one of the religious elite that, in spite of his piety he was still a lost man. He needed this new birth just as much as anyone else. In fact, when he asks Jesus what He means, Jesus chides him for being a religious leader yet not understanding this.

Jesus goes on to draw a distinction between natural birth, or "born of water," and spiritual rebirth. Born of water refers to when our mother's water breaks and we are born physically. But even then, although we are physically alive, the Bible says in Ephesians 2:2 that we are dead spiritually. How can that be? It goes back to our first parents, Adam and Eve.

Have you ever wondered what it felt like in the moments right after Adam and Eve first disobeyed God? Only moments before they had lived in perfect fellowship with the Creator of the universe, now there was a chill in the air that wasn't there before. While they were still physically alive, they had become spiritually dead. And what did they do? They hide from God. Some people ask how a loving God could create a hell, but as you see, Spirituality dead people avoid God's presence and He simply gives them what they want.

But from there, this condition of spiritual death is passed down to all of us, as you can read about in Psalm 51:5, as well as in the fifth chapter of Romans. And that

condition reveals itself through our sin, our missing the mark of God's ideal, our disobedience to His commands. In the words of Romans 3:23 "... all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God"

I'll give you an example: Have you ever told a lie in all your life? Sure, who hasn't? So then, how many lies do you have to tell to make you a liar? Only one, and Revelation 21:8 says that liars will have their place in the lake of fire. So if we have to base it on our own good works, we are dead out of the gate!

It goes much further than that, though. God doesn't judge us based only on our actions, but He also judges our thoughts and our intentions. Maybe you have never physically cheated on your spouse or with someone else's, but Jesus said in **Matthew 5:28** that if you even entertain a lustful thought, you have already committed adultery in your heart. Maybe you have never killed anyone, but have you ever hated anyone? 1 John 3:15: " Whosoever hateth his brother is a murderer: and ye know that no murderer hath eternal life.

How much " religion" does it take to undo all this mess? How much do you have to pray and fast? How much money do you have to give away? How many pilgrimages do you have to make to bring something dead to life? It takes something supernatural and miraculous to do that. You need a new heart, a new nature, which is what being born again is. Jesus took the punishment we deserved and paid the penalty for us. When we turn away from our sin and trust in Jesus and

what He has done for us, He makes us new creations. Our sins are forgiven and we are welcomed into God's family. Talk about an extreme makeover!

Friends, this is the great equalizer. I am no better than anyone else. I am no less in need of God's grace than anyone else. Jesus saved me in spite of myself and He can save you too! This is the most important decision you will ever make. You are not guaranteed tomorrow or even your next breath so please don't waste this opportunity. Don't complain because God only provided one way of salvation. Just be thankful that He did provide one! And friends, He is more than enough!