

The Rich Young Man: Religious or righteous?

Text: Matthew 19:16-29; Mark 10:17-30; Luke 18:18-30

By Bob Young

The question is not new: “Am I interested in being religious or righteous?” When I hear the phrase, my mind goes to the story of the rich young ruler. Here is a young man who recognized Jesus, desired to follow Jesus, was a reasonably good fellow measured by his practice of Judaism, and seemed a good prospect to become a follower of Jesus. He was a religious man. He was apparently meticulous in keeping the letter of the law. Jesus said he lacked one thing—to sell his possessions and give them to the poor. The Bible says that he went away sorrowful, apparently unable to do that one thing. Why? Was he interested in being religious or righteous? What is the value of being religious but not righteous? Righteousness always wins over religiosity. Did not Jesus say he came to call people to righteousness, and that the righteous do not need a physician? The rich young man made the wrong choice. His life illustrates that religious rightness is different than righteousness. His life demonstrates that being religious is not sufficient. In a day when churches are filled with folks who are apparently satisfied with being religious and have little concern for being righteous, what can we learn?

What does it mean to be religious? For some people, being religious means nothing more than being spiritually aware. In this sense, one can be religious without going to church. Being religious may mean participating in religious activities. Some would say that those who attend church a couple of times a year are religious. One can be religious without going to church regularly. Of greater concern is that one can be religious without being righteous. Many church-goers, regardless of their level of involvement, do not connect religious activities with righteous living. Some who go to church live for the Devil.

Every Christian must ask: Am I more interested in being religious than in being righteous? Why would someone choose religion over righteousness? The text helps us answer the question. The young man came to Jesus with this question: “What can I do to guarantee my spot in eternal life?” Note that this is a religious question and not a righteousness question. He does not ask about righteousness, but about religion. He is apparently motivated by selfishness. Jesus gave him the short list to which he replied, “Done that!” He was among the religious elite. The disciples were probably glad to see his interest in following Jesus. When you get right down to it, religion is pretty easy...a rule or two here, regular attendance, at least do what is expected, some minimal level of involvement.

Jesus takes the question to a different level as he answers the young man. “All you lack is a clear statement of your commitment to be righteous, with proper priorities, compassionate heart which desires to share, and social justice.” When you put it like that, no wonder the Bible says the young man went away sorrowful. The disciples asked, “Who can be saved?” Their real question is, “Can we be saved?” Can you be saved?

There is a vast difference between being religious and being righteous. What is the difference? Jesus would at least list motivation, attitude, commitment, and willingness to pay the price. What would you say is the difference between being religious and being righteous? Do you want to be religious, or righteous? Are you religious, or are you righteous?