

Spiritual, Not Religious
James 1:17-27

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father, and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Have you ever heard anybody say, “I’m spiritual, but not religious!”? If you have not, I am surprised. More and more people seem to be declaring this about themselves. It is usually from people who are unchurched, but who also do not want to be described as atheists.

Usually, when people describe themselves this way, they are saying that they want nothing to do with organized religion. In the conversations I have had with people who have used this moniker to describe their belief system, the bottom line was this. “I do not want someone telling me how to live my life.” And when pushed further, “I am in charge of me, my decisions, my morality, my choices in regards to what I believe about God, worship, prayer, and stuff like that.”

While some Christians like to say this about themselves, there are more Christians who like to say, “I know what I believe about God in my heart, and nobody is going to tell me any different.”

In either of these cases, people are expressing their individuality. What they are doing is making up their own rules about what they believe about God, and what it means to be a believer. Their religion revolves around themselves, their ideas. They may not admit it, but they have made themselves God!

How would that go over at your house? The kids make the rules about what they can do, when they want to do it, and there are no consequences. They determine their own curfew, what they want to eat, whether or not to decorate the living room wall with crayons, and all sorts of things. That would not go over very well, would it?

I want to play Major League Baseball and add my own rule, as an infielder, I can throw the ball at base runners, if I hit them, they are out. If they are unconscious, they may not be replaced on the field in any capacity. They must be able to get to the dug-out themselves and tag someone in to replace them, as they do with tag-team wrestling. Could I just add that to the game?

Can you imagine someone writing a biography of Rev. Todd Jerabek and beginning it with these words, “Neil & Annette Jerabek were so glad when God blessed them with their first child, a daughter, whom they named, Todd.” What? A daughter? That’s not correct! Exactly! The author excuses it by saying, “Well, that’s how I always viewed pastor Jerabek, that’s how he made me feel about him.”

Does a feeling give someone the authority to change the truth about another individual?

When people talk about being spiritual but not religious. Or, when they try to say they know what they feel in their hearts, what are they trying to do? They are trying to make God in their own image, in their own likeness. Or maybe I should say it this way, they have made God according to what they “feel” He should be like, and what they have done is tossed aside how God has revealed Himself.

Yes, God has revealed Himself to us. God has given us some very clear statements about Himself – He says He is One God, and He describes Himself in three persons – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. I may not understand it, or even like it, but I cannot change it.

God has some expectation for all people, after all, He made us all. And if we are going to claim to be His believers, He gets to set the rules. His Word is very clear. In fact, Jesus says, “Whoever is ashamed of Me and My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will also be ashamed of him when He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels.” (Mark 8:38)

Those who He has called to be believers, He has called to be holy. What does it mean to be holy? As Jesus said, “Be ye perfect, even as your heavenly father is perfect.” (Matt. 5:28)

How much of God’s Law is up for debate? How much is God willing to compromise on? Are we allowed to pick and choose which parts we want to follow or not? Jesus answers these questions too, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” (Matt. 5:17-20)

We could get into a discussion about these things, but as we have opportunity to celebrate Nicolas’s confirmation today, I will simply address one issue that those who are spiritual but not religious claim. It is also the claim many Christians who know what God wants in their hearts. That one topic is attendance at church.

Which of these is the 3rd Commandment?

Remember the Sabbath day on Christmas and Easter, maybe Thanksgiving.

Remember the Sabbath day every couple months and your good to go.

Remember the Sabbath day when it is convenient.

Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy.

Only one is the Commandment as God gave it, Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy. The other three are versions that people have made in their own hearts and minds – and they are not God-pleasing.

In the book of Acts we learn that the early church was continually devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. (Acts 2:42)

You know, there is a reason for gathering together as we do. God **IS** holy and He **NEEDS** nothing from us. His holiness does not come from anything we do.

On the other hand, we need Him to make us holy. We gather so that God can do just that – make us holy. We need what He gives and delivers to us, the very righteousness that exceeds that of the Scribes and the Pharisees – Christ gives to us His own righteousness – His perfect, holy

righteousness. That is exactly why the letter to the Hebrews tells us: Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful; and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near. (Hebrews 10:22-25)

We gather in order to receive from God that which makes us holy. We gather so that we are made to be doers of the Word, and not hearers only. We gather so that we might look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere. The perfect law of liberty the causes us to persevere is Christ crucified. We need to be hearers who do not forget, but act. Act on what? What we have received.

We would all like to have our own definition of God, especially when it comes to what God says about our particular pet sin – that one we know in our heart that God is a bit more lenient about. ***But their sins***, the sins of those who are not here – the sins of the person sitting “over their”, I know their sins, and I know in my heart that God is not happy about that, they definitely need to repent.

You need to repent! I need to repent! And that is why you are here this morning, you are being spiritual and religious, you are having your faith fed and nourished. We are not here to do for God, but for God to do for us. We gather so that the forgiveness Christ purchased with His innocent suffering and death upon the cross might be given to us through our ears into our mouths.

Confirmands take vows, the same vows you and I took are the same vows Nicolas takes. They are vows that we ask God to help us fulfill because on our own we would not. They are vows we are eager to fulfill because we know that they are the means by which God will keep us in the true faith, steadfast and holy.

Do you intend to hear the Word of God and receive the Lord’s Supper faithfully? If so, answer, I do, by the grace of God. *Why? Because it is the means by which God will keep me holy, He will grant me forgiveness whenever I gather with my brothers and sisters in Christ to hear the Word of Christ’s forgiveness, and when I gather at the table to eat and drink of Christ’s body and blood for forgiveness and strengthening of my faith.*

Do you intend faithfully to conform all your life to the rule of the Divine Word, to be diligent in the use of the means of Grace, to walk as it becomes the Gospel of Christ, and in faith, word, and deed to remain true to the Triune God, even unto death? If so, answer, I do so intend, by the grace of God!

Why? Because only the grace of God makes me holy, that is, only the grace of God delivered in Word and Sacrament – delivered in the Gospel – can make me remain true to God, faithful and holy in thought and deed.

I am spiritual, and I am religious – I gather with you my friends, for here is where Christ builds us up together into His body, the church. You are those who, by your presence, encourage me to continue in this faith.

I rejoice in this time when we come together to receive God's gifts, it is the greatest joy of my week. Here, whether on Sunday or Wednesday, we Sabbath – we rest – we rest in Christ's work for us, which He delivers to us.

I know that only God's Spirit can work in me the will to love Him and my neighbor. It is only Christ's work in and through me that keeps me unstained from the world. This is what He has promised to do when we gather in His name to receive His gifts in Word and Sacrament.

I pray for you, all those who have confirmed the faith of their baptism and pledged themselves to continue it – Nicolas, and all of you – that Christ would keep you until He takes you home with Him for eternity. Amen.