

#185 “A Form of Godliness”

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The great battle for truth is not between atheists and theists. I once thought that if we could just help people to believe in God then coming to faith in Christ wouldn't be that far off. But the reality is that, though the battle against atheism is worth fighting, the real and intense battle is the call to faith in Jesus Christ. I say this because of a phrase locked away in 2 Timothy 3. Paul gives an extensive list about the characteristics of people living in the last days, ranging from being lovers of self and money to being disobedient to parents and hating good. The list goes on and on describing accurately the day and age in which we live, an age of depravity, wickedness, and moral license to a greater extent than we have ever seen before. But this is what Paul said we can expect as things go from bad to worse. The phrase that stands out in the passage is the following: “holding to a form of godliness, although they have denied its power.” It does not say that in the last days naturalism and atheism will triumph. Actually, it says just the opposite. It says that people will be deeply spiritual and religious, believing in a form of godliness, yet denying its power. In other words, atheism will not be the main deterrent of belief in Jesus Christ as God. It will be man's own concoctions of a religion and spirituality that favors his self-interest and fails to acknowledge the truths concerning the God of the Bible even though He has expressly revealed Himself in the created order and in His Word (Romans 1:18-20, Psalm 19:1-2). Since man is made for the one true God, given that God has set eternity in his heart (Ecclesiastes 3:11), he is prone not so much to denying His existence as he is to defining God on his own terms. The world has many false religions, cults, and many who profess to believe in the God of the Bible but who deny Him all the while by their lifestyle and deeds. Many know of God, which is not surprising, given that even the demons believe in God and shudder (James 2:19). But despite their manmade form of godliness, too many people deny the true power of God because they deny God for Who He really is, preferring only to have a god that they can control. In other words, they want the power, and the only power they will have is what Satan gives them. Of course, he will only lead them to their own eternal demise and misery. God's power is the only ultimate power, and only those who know and love Jesus Christ have access to this power. This is a power for an enduring faith, an effective witness, an eternal hope, and an unending love. These are things that those who merely profess to know God without truly possessing Him in their hearts cannot know or experience. They are of the false way, the wide road to destruction. Only those who take the narrow road truly know the power of God.

This “form of godliness” concept is really quite fascinating in a sad way because of how prevalent it is. I used to think that there was a sort of spiritual safe haven among those who claimed to believe the Bible and love God. Yet there are so many who just love to debate and talk about theology, yet they do not know and love God. There are many who deny the inerrancy of the Bible, though they claim to operate a theological seminary. There are many who serve on church elder boards, yet they treat their families with disrespect. There are many who lead Christian ministries, yet they commit immorality or thievery all the while. While it is possible for true believers to slip up, too often it is the

case that these who have a sketchy testimony hold only to a form of godliness rather than to God Himself. There are many wolves in sheep's clothing; our Savior told us it would be so (Matthew 7:15). Thus, we are called to be shrewd as serpents and innocent as doves (Matthew 10:16). We are to maintain a godly lifestyle which will give us a buffer from those who wish to lead us astray, and we are to think with discernment, not believing that the church walls, seminary walls, or Christian bookstore walls keep out pretenders. The form of godliness is a widespread disease, for the evil one disguises himself as an angel of light (2 Corinthians 11:14). He enjoys the false religious system, and he will eventually try to set himself up as god in the person of the antichrist. The antichrist will not be an atheist, but he will be a false god with a false prophet and many followers (Revelation 13:4, 8, 14). Many take the road of religious forms without the real Jesus. Let us beware lest we inadvertently join their cause.

Paul continues in 2 Timothy 3 by saying that those who have only a "form of godliness" are "always learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth" (v. 7). They have lots of "scholars" and "theologians" that they like to quote, and they have lots to say. Yet their words are devoid of truth because they are not of the truth. These who keep learning and yet miss the truth "also oppose the truth, men of depraved mind, rejected in regard to the faith" (v. 8). This is a stunning indictment, but it is consistent throughout God's Word. God says that those who practice the truth will come to the Light (John 3:21). He does not say that those who learn a lot of theology and practice religious traditions will come to the Light. Those who know the truth, love the truth, and obey the truth will prove themselves as having faith that has been wrought in God. They are those who are sheep and not goats (Matthew 25:32), wheat and not chaff (Matthew 3:12).

Just because a person is religious, pious, or learned does not make him or her a true believer. God wants our hearts near to His (Isaiah 29:13), and without this we have only an empty form of religious gibberish, vanity, nonsense, and waste. Let us not be noisy gongs and clanging symbols (1 Corinthians 13:1), talking a good talk without walking a walk of real faith and true love grounded in Christ. With Him as our foundation, we can truly build something worthwhile and eternally valuable. Without Him, well, let's just say that there will be a lot of religious people in hell.