

**Spirituality vs. Religion<sup>4</sup> (Appeasing and Appreciating) Phil Gulley**

One of my earliest religious memories was being taught to confess my sins to the priest, which I did every Saturday night at St. Mary's Catholic Church. Father McLaughlin would be seated in the center booth, we would enter the side booths one at a time to tell the Father our misdeeds from the past week, then no matter what we confessed to, he would tell us to say three *Hail Mary's* and two *Our Father's*. Having taught us that all sin is bad in the eyes of God, he had to respond the exact same way no matter what we did. When I was in seminary, I had to take several counseling classes and the professor told us, "When people come to you wishing to confess their sin, you must refrain from saying, "Wow!"

I got the feeling that the degree of one's sin was not an issue. What mattered was appeasing God, as if God were some crazy, old man who lived down the street, and you better not make him mad or there'd be trouble. There was a guy in Danville named Ralph who'd chase kids with a lawn mower blade, he threw lawn mower blades at us, and I had this image that God was kind of like Ralph. *Do not make him mad! Keep the man happy! Don't cross him!*

We've been studying the differences between religion and spirituality. In my years of studying various religions, I've noticed several common themes no matter the religion.

One thing religions have in common is an emphasis on purity, religions tend to emphasize moral purity, which is impossible, so we're always feeling guilty because we can't measure up.

I've also noticed religions tend to believe in one true answer and grow uncomfortable when questions aren't answered with some degree of certainty.

It has also been my experience that religions tend to encourage good behavior by rewarding it, usually with some type of heavenly afterlife.

This morning I would like to talk about the different ways in which religion and spirituality orient and relate to God. Of course, this is a generalization, but I've seen it enough, both in history and in practice, to make me think it's generally accurate, and that is this: Religions believe God must be appeased, that God is angry because of our behavior, so consequently we must placate God, mollify God, keep God from exploding in anger and coming after us with a lawn mower blade. Do you remember the words of John the Baptist when he preached in the wilderness? "Even now the ax of God's judgment is poised, ready to sever the roots of the trees. Yes, every tree that does not produce good fruit will be chopped down and thrown into the fire." (Matthew 3:10) The twin themes of judgment and appeasement can be found in almost every religion. To be sure, that is not all that is found in religions, but it happens often enough for us to observe the tendency.

While religions, sooner or later, begin to talk about appeasing God, spirituality tends to focus on appreciating God. So religion orients to God through appeasement, while spirituality orients to God through appreciation.

But what does it mean to appreciate God?

I want to offer two examples of appreciation I encountered just this week. Someone phoned to see if I wanted to buy a motorcycle. I told him I wasn't interested, that I already had a motorcycle.

But the man was persistent and said, "This is a motorcycle you have to see to appreciate."

What he was saying was this, "Once you understand and perceive the value of this motorcycle, you will appreciate it."

To say that we appreciate God is to say that as we understand the true nature of God, our appreciation for God grows. There are some things, that when we get to know them better, cause us to appreciate them less. I dated a young lady once and it seemed the better she got to know me, the less she appreciated me. But spirituality says, "The more you understand the nature of God, the more appreciative of God you become." Perhaps at one time you thought God was like this mean, old man swinging an ax, ready to chop you down and throw you into the fire, but now you understand that God cares deeply for you, is one with you, and not just you, but one with everyone—loving all, tending all, caring for all. So your heightened perception of God, has caused you to appreciate God.

The second use I heard of the word *appreciate* had to do with gratitude. A man lived near a cancer center where people came every day to be treated for cancer. Not a happy place to be. So this man retired and decided that every morning he'd go to the cancer center, ask the patients what they wanted to drink, then go to the Starbucks next door and buy them a hot drink. Then he began asking the staff what they wanted to drink. He did this Monday through Friday. Turns out his father had died of cancer, so he wanted to honor the memory of his father. A TV station got wind of it and sent a reporter out to ask the patients what it meant to them. They were profoundly grateful and every day told the man how much they appreciated his kindness. This is another kind of appreciation, *the grateful recognition of kindness*.

To appreciate God means that the more we see of God, the more we appreciate God. Our appreciation is rooted in a grateful recognition of God's character and kindness. Jesus described this character and kindness perfectly in the 15th chapter of Luke, when he told the disciples of a sheep who'd wandered off, a woman who'd lost a coin, and a father whose son turned prodigal. Clarence Jordan, in his book *The Cotton Patch Gospels*, made that connection so eloquently when he wrote, "God is not a celestial prison warden jangling the keys on a bunch of lifer—God is a shepherd seeking for sheep, a woman searching for coins, a father waiting for his son."

This is why God need not be appeased, only appreciated.