

Religion vs Relationship

'At a local interfaith clergy gathering, a Roman Catholic priest and a [Messianic] rabbi are deep in conversation. "So", says the rabbi, "what are the promotion possibilities for a priest in the Roman Catholic Church?" The priest glances around the room and says, "Well, as it happens I am being considered for the position of vicar general. This would be a significant step up. It would mean that I help the bishop in the governance of the diocese". "Yes", said the rabbi, "and then what?" "Well, I suppose if Rome is pleased with me, I might, if I am fortunate, become a bishop", said the priest. "Yes", said the rabbi, "and then what?" "Gosh", said the priest, "this is some way out, but I suppose if I work really hard, then I might become an archbishop". "Yes", said the rabbi, "and then what?" "Well", the priest mused for a moment, "but the next step is very rare. It is conceivable that I might end up being a cardinal". "Yes", said the rabbi, "and then what?" The priest is taken aback. He shakes his head. And finally, he says, "Well, this is almost unthinkable, but if I am in the right place at the right time, I might just be the one who gets elected Pope, but ..." His voice quivers at the very thought of it. "Yes", said the rabbi, "and then what?" "Good grief!" The priest raises his voice in astonishment. "I mean, what do you expect me to become,

GOD?” “Well” said the rabbi, “One of our boys made it!””

Yes, well, that priest seemed somewhat satisfied with himself that he was being considered as vicar general. A step up, indeed. At least in the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church. Whether it was a step up in the Kingdom of God is a whole other story! Note the priest’s comment that if he “work[ed] really hard”, he might could become an archbishop. I wonder what he really meant by “work really hard”. Sounds religious, doesn’t it. Many decades ago, being “religious” mostly meant being devout and spiritual. Nowadays, and in ancient times as well, its other meaning entailed being “religious” about ritual. Meaning, everything that our Lord Jesus was castigating the religious leaders of His day of. His particular ire was directed squarely at the Pharisees and the scribes, who essentially were the staff that served the Pharisees and other “religious” leaders.

In Matthew 23, the Lord dressed down the Pharisees and scribes. They wore extra-large, conspicuous phylacteries, purposely lengthening their tzitzit fringes making them look super holy. Our Lord wore these as well, but His were not ostentatious. It was these that the woman suffering from years of internal bleeding reached out and touched and was healed. And then there was their tithing. Sounding trumpets to announce their latest offerings granted some measure of admiration from others, but, with the Lord repeatedly identifying them as “hypocrites”, God was not impressed. For they were not doing any of these reli-

gious things for God's approval, but rather to look good in the eyes of the people. Their self-value lie in other's affirmation. Misplaced, misguided and mistaken though it was.

For what does God actually require of us? Not religion. Not religious ritual. But relationship. For when we're in genuine relationship with God, then it's with hearts overflowing with gratitude and praise to Him that we throw ourselves into any and everything that pleases Him and draws us ever closer to Him. And if that truly is the standard, then it appears that precious few Christians today actually *know* the Lord and walk with Him daily. Is it not too often the case that many Christians, even those in high-profile positions, are more concerned with how they look before others than with what the Lord thinks of them?

Too many Christians in the public eye are modern-day Pharisees. Tooting their own horns, ambitious for ever-higher positions, they often fall to self deception. Blind to their own shortcomings and biases, they end up fixated on the actual and perceived wrongs of other Christian leaders. I have seen perhaps more judgementalism within the Body of Christ than in the world at large. It's so easy, devilishly tempting, to cut other ministries down, find some doctrinal faults or supposedly unBiblical practices, so we can put others down and elevate ourselves. At least in our own minds. This, frankly, is sin full. And, folks, we can't afford to keep doing it these days. The times are getting short, and if ever the Church needs to come together in unity, it is now.

How can it be that some Christians, Andrew Torba of the social media platform Gab in point, practically excuse the atrocities of Hamas and essentially claim that today's Jews are oppressing the whole rest of the world? Why so much confusion and division among Christians? How can so many be so deceived, hoodwinked by demons? We need vaccinations against pride and booster shots of humility. When we think we can live our lives without the constant input and guidance of Holy Spirit, is just to repeat the sin of Adam and Eve.

For we were never made to be autonomous creatures. We're never complete unless Holy Spirit fills the God-shaped vacuum in our souls. The devil's lie is that we don't need Him, or anyone or anything. Total lie. So when God is pushed out, we naturally crave for completeness in our spirits. While we don't consciously realize it, the devil assigns demons to happily hitchhike on our souls, and then, while we think we're doing the driving, actually, they're taking us on a dead-end road, sometimes merry, but mostly woe and misery, anguish and fear, terminating with eternal death and unending destruction in hell. What pitiable creatures most humans are. Like nearly all those Jewish kings of old, we take the easy way. We don't think. We don't look. We eagerly consume what the evil in the world dishes out, believe it, think we're being good, living admirable and respectable lives. No. We're just adding to our own misery and making the lives of those around just that much worse. Going to hell in a hand bas-

ket aptly describes most people in today's world.

This lie of autonomy is straight from the machinations of the devil. Starting with Eve in Eden. Prior to this, neither she nor Adam had even conceived of living independent of God. We were never designed to exist that way. Any and all attempts to live without God are not only utter failures, but abjectly miserable shortened lives resulting in everlasting damnation. God, sorrowfully grants us what we, in our prideful ignorance, demand—autonomy from Him, to exercise His powers for our own devious desires, which, because of pride, necessarily always destroys other creatures which, for whatever reasons, at any moment, cease to serve our always nefarious purposes. Even in our so-called tender moments, when echoes of Father's love rise up from darkened corners of our soul, corrupted from our continuous pride and self-exaltation, they are love at its blackest, most perverse and evil. Exactly as the Lord described, twice as fit for hell, a hell of our own making, and like a perfect designer's blueprints, we'll exactly match and fit in with our demonic, hellish surroundings.

This is what awaits all who refuse to consider they might be wrong; who eagerly drink up the devil's lies the world is constantly serving up all around. This is also why we must pray for the lost—most especially our own families. For who else holds highest responsibility for our own flesh and blood? Regardless of how long it takes, our prayers matter. Not a single one of them is ever lost or unheard in heaven. The biggest problem is the lack of

them! Far too many of us lack the faith to believe the truth, the Father's promises, of what we have seen the Son of God do on this earth, before and now. Instead we look at the world's shiny, glossy baubles, get distracted by some entertaining thing, and that other pleasurable titillation. And off track we go, hooked and reeled in by the devil's beautifully-packaged lures and allures.

The time is drawing short. Perhaps Iran's current proxy war with Israel will conflagrate into a third world war. Is this not a clear warning that the time is shorter than ever? What does it take for God to get our attention? Who bothers to read the Bible regularly, let alone Revelation which tells us exactly what to expect and when? God is poised to unleash upon America and Israel and from them the greatest revival ever in the world. Once this revival completes, the horrible, most-deserving terrible end of this eon will then commence, as God's judgement, mostly executed by the devil himself for his own contrary reasons, is wrought upon all God haters, including ironically, the devil and all rebellious angels and demons. Then shall be the end; earth and heaven washed clean, with no trace of the horrors of the old fallen world, restored to the perfection of the Garden of Eden worldwide, as the brand, spanking new Jerusalem descends from Heaven. God-made Jerusalem, and we get to live there!! Maybe not all the time, for we'll frolic in all the earth and the universe, with our "vacation" homes in the Holy City, where dwells the Creator of all the universe's very presence, the source of all truth and life and love.

