

Dangers of External Religious Actions

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This short article was written by Dr. Ernest L. Martin in July 1981.

Many people today look for outward signs to identify the true Church and the real people of God. This is one of the most dangerous ways to try to determine who are real Christians. Such a procedure can be a clever way to deceive people into believing that an organization or individuals are righteous.

How well I remember using this criterion of identification for about twenty years of my life. I came across many fine Christian people who observed the seventh day Sabbath, the Mosaic holydays, and kept a good number of Old Testament ceremonies, and these outward observances seemed to show who the true people of God were. Surely, one might say, if a person tithes faithfully to his or her church, attends all religious functions, honors, and supports its ecclesiastical leaders, and shows an external decency in personal and family life, this is certain proof of true Christianity in action — especially if the outward ceremonies are biblical.

While such performance of these religious and moral principles is commendable, they in themselves are hardly evidences that a person is a true child of God. It is possible to show all these functions in one's life and the heart be desperately wicked as the prophet says:

"The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it? I YHWH search the heart, I try the reins, even to give every man according to his ways, and according to the fruit of his doings."

• *Jeremiah 17:9–10*

If one is doing them for personal gain, to impress men, to have control over others, or to deceptively make others think one is righteous (when one is not), this is a wrong use of the ceremonies. Many have done this throughout history. An example of such deception was given by King David. He talked of a close personal acquaintance of his with whom he,

"... took sweet counsel together, and walked unto the house of God in company."

• *Psalms 55:14*

but David finally found out that person was a great deceiver — an enemy in disguise.

"The words of his mouth were smoother than butter, but war was in his heart: his words were softer than oil, yet were they drawn swords."

• *Psalms 55:21*

To all intents and purposes this close "friend" of David appeared righteous and faithful. It even looked like he honored God because he and David attended sacred ceremonies in the House of God together. On the outside this man must have looked good — but he was not.

Since David was a type of Christ in many ways, the account of this deceiver in Psalm 55 may

well reflect the actions of Judas Iscariot at the time of our Lord. For the whole period of Christ's earthly ministry, Judas appeared so good on the surface. He was a genuine apostle of Christ (and not some self-appointed "apostle" like those of Revelation 2:2, **"and you have tried [tested] them which say they are apostles, and are not, and have found them liars"**).

Judas was so trusted that he was selected to be treasurer of Christ and the twelve. He was able to perform miracles in the name of Christ; to have power over demons; to heal the sick; and to gain the respect of the other apostles. Indeed, he possessed all the outward signs of an apostle — even at the last moment kissing Christ as an assurance of his "friendship," yet Christ was able to see him as an adversary, a devil,

"Jesus answered them, 'Have not I chosen you twelve, and one of you is a devil?' He spoke of Judas Iscariot the son of Simon: for he it was that should betray him, being one of the twelve."

• John 6:70–71

And like David's "friend and confidant," the man putting on a good show became Christ's enemy — the one responsible for crucifying Him.

These historical references from the Old and New Testaments show that the external performances of "religious people" are not the true means of determining who is a real child of God. Just because church leaders or their laity observe Sabbaths (or Sundays) and other ceremonies, it is no proper guide whatever that their hearts are right with God. The Bible commands its readers to **"try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world"** (1 John 4:1).

All False Prophets look good on the surface. Those of Israel preached the Sabbath, holydays, the Mosaic ceremonies, and claimed to be the representatives of God's true "Church" on earth. Had they not done this, no one would have believed them. Should it seem odd that False Prophets would do the same thing today? The only way they can make headway with the generality of people is to look righteous — to put on sheep's clothing and to appear as the divine representatives of Christ. In the Christian world today, no False Prophet could make it to first base without saying he was specially selected by Christ to do his job. The only way, however, to see if anyone is within the bounds of Christian ethics and doctrinal practice is to judge him by the sole standard, whether the person has the fruits of God's Holy Spirit,

"But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance: against such there is no law."

• Galatians 5:22–23

That's it! All the external signs can be performed easily by the Antichrist, and even Satan. It is time to be careful! Read these other related articles on the ASK website:

["The Curse of Church Government"](#) ["The Folly of Tradition"](#) ["The Deceptions of Satan the Devil"](#)

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