

Study Aids
Discussion items
For “What’s the Message?” Lessons

Lesson 96 – The People’s Religion

What follows are excerpts from chapter four of The World Christ Knew, by Anthony Deane.

. . . the religion taught by the prophets was the kind of religion which the simple Galilean folk felt that they needed. To be honest and upright, to live as in God’s sight and trying always to do His will – that was the ideal which touched the conscience, one which the plain man could constantly try to attain. How different it was from legalism, with its complicated technical code, its almost innumerable regulations for the Sabbath, its insistence that to break any of its requirements was a sin against God! True, the written law as supplied by the Scriptures was comparatively simple; it might not always be easy to observe, yet at least the Jew could know whether he was obeying it. But in our Lord’s time the “Tradition” of the scribes not merely vastly elaborated, but was held superior to the written code. What ordinary man could know how rabbinic authority had decided what he must do or abstain from doing in regard to a thousand disputable points?

. . . Yet it would be a mistake to assume that the prophetic type of religion had ceased to have any influence in our Lord’s days. True, legalism and legalism alone, had become the official religion of the Palestinian Jews. Yet the prophetic books were read in the synagogue services and spoke their clear message, however the rabbis might expound them to uphold their own views. . . . But the strongest factor of all in reviving the prophetic type of religion was the mission of John the Baptist. After an interval of more than four centuries a mysterious figure, clothed like Elijah, appeared in the desert, and taught as the prophets of old had done. The religion he preached seemed wholly unlike that upheld by the Pharisees. It called for repentance, it awoke conscience, it stirred a sense of sin, it swept away the idea that all must be well in God’s sight with those who belonged to His chosen race . . .

No wonder that multitudes of people with starved souls answered this call, hung on John’s words, welcomed his teaching, and were baptized by him as a sign of their repentance. So, though without any approval from the accredited religious leaders, the prophetic strain of teaching was revived. When a still more wonderful new teacher, Jesus of Nazareth, began His ministry, the question would be widely asked: “On which side is He? Does He support the official religion and the Law, or is He of the prophetic school, like John?” On the one hand, He spoke on subjects, such as prayer and fasting and Sabbath-observance, which were themes permitted to rabbis alone; yet on the other hand what He said, with its call to repentance and announcement of the kingdom of God, was closely in line with the prophetic message of John.

Our Lord was careful to answer this question. He upheld both the Law and the prophetic teaching; He planned to fill both with new significance. “Think not that I have come to destroy, but to fulfill.” He was no opponent of the Law, but only of the rabbinic legalism, “the tradition of men” which perverted the true meaning and purpose of the Law. He himself would reinterpret and amplify it, but in ways wholly different from those of the rabbis.

Does the above help you to see the subtle ways Satan works through the heresy of legalism? Does it help you to recognize the ways in which present-day traditions reach out to entice you into behavior which actually is contrary to what God has ordained? Is there any statement above which has particularly touched you?