

# The Place of Sincerity in Religion

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What place should sincerity play in religion? There are basically three positions from which to choose in answering this question:

1. Many people believe sincerity is the most essential element in religion. This is indicated by the familiar statement, "It makes no difference what you believe as long as you're sincere."
2. To some people sincerity is viewed as completely unnecessary, as evidenced by their hypocritical lives. Such people make little or no attempt to "practice what they preach."
3. Still others hold to the view that sincerity in religion is necessary to please God, but that God requires more than sincerity alone.

What does the Bible say about the place of sincerity in God's plan?

It is beyond dispute that hypocrisy is intolerable to God. *Hypocrisy* literally means to put on a mask and pretend to be what or who we really are not. Jesus openly condemned those who practice their religion merely to be seen and praised by men, and He said that the praises of men would be their only reward (Mat. 6:1-18). Jesus harshly rebuked those who fail to practice what they preach, those who display outward piety while being inwardly corrupt, calling them a bunch of snakes (Mat. 23:4-5, 25-28, 33). Jesus condemned hypocrites to Hell (Mat. 24:51). Paul (1 Tim. 4:1-2), Peter (1 Pet. 2:1) and John (1 John 3:18) all rebuked hypocrisy. None who believe the Bible can doubt the absolute necessity of one's being sincere in convictions and behavior if one wishes to please God. There is none more harmful to the cause of Truth and righteousness than the person who professes on Sunday what he is unwilling to practice Monday through Saturday.

Unfortunately, many reason that if sincerity is so important to God, it is therefore all that is important to Him. What are we to make of the cliché, "It doesn't matter what you believe, as long as you're sincere"? Is it a proverbial truth or is it a popular lie? Whatever it is, it indicates a great degree of tolerance and broadmindedness, both of which are greatly admired by most people of our times. If sincerity is all that matters in religion, then it should likewise apply to other disciplines. One may sincerely believe that Abraham Lincoln was our first president, but it does not change this glaring historical error into historical truth. One's own dear mother, though she be the saintliest woman who ever lived, cannot make five the sum of two plus two, regardless of how strongly she may believe it. For centuries men sincerely believed that the sun

revolved around the earth, but the sincerity of their belief did not change this erroneous assumption into scientific fact.

If sincerity alone were sufficient to please God, then Jesus need never have come to earth, much less, died on the cross. The world was full of religion when He came and surely many of those devotees were sincere in their beliefs. Does not the fact that Jesus came to save sincere religious people teach us that more than sincerity is required to please God?

No man was ever more sincere than Saul of Tarsus. When first introduced in Scripture he is trying to destroy the church in Jerusalem (Acts 7-8). He journeyed to Damascus to do the same thing (Acts 9:1-2). Later, after becoming a Christian, he wrote that he did these terrible things in absolute sincerity, honestly believing that he was serving God (Acts 23:1; 26:9). However, he also describes himself in those days as “a blasphemer, a persecutor, an injurious person” and “the chief of sinners” (1 Tim. 1:13, 15). Surely none would argue that had he died while persecuting God’s people, it would have made no difference to God – because he did it sincerely believing he was right.

The story of Cornelius sheds further light on the place of sincerity in religion (Acts 10-11). He was a man of unquestionable sincerity: devoted, God-fearing, generous, and prayerful (Acts 10:2). God told this very sincere religious man to send for Peter who would tell him what to do to be saved (Acts 11:13-14). If sincerity in religion is the most important thing to God, then Saul and Cornelius were both just as pleasing to God before they heard and obeyed the Gospel as they were afterward. Likewise, if their unquestionable sincerity was insufficient to cause God to overlook their errors and sins, our sincerity will not cancel our errors and sins in the eyes of God. Jesus makes it very plain that we will be judged finally, not merely on how sincerely we tried to serve God, but whether we respected His will enough to obey Him sincerely (Mat. 7:21-23). God cannot tolerate insincere service, but He has never accepted men in their errors and sins because they were sincere in them. Man’s only hope before God is in sincere obedience to the saving Gospel of Christ (Rom. 6:17-18; 1:16).

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