

## If it makes you happy...

When Starbucks executives overextended their brand, planting what seems like a store on every block, it quickly became okay to start savaging Seattle's caffeine gods. Likewise, after centuries of "extending our brand" into a "Christian nation," it's now totally acceptable to proclaim yourself a "hater of religion" in the U.S.

It's even a badge of honor in the Christian community—former Korn guitarist Brian "Head" Welch is a perfect example. After exiting the group and committing his life to Christ, he wrote on his blog: "I'm not trying to drag anyone to church or shove religion down anyone's throat. I hate religion. I love God."

The "hate religion, love God" mantra sounds so much like something Jesus said that many assume he did—like the way people attribute Ben Franklin's famous quote "God helps those who help themselves" to the Bible. Most Americans feel fine about describing themselves as spiritual—in fact, if you're not a spiritual person, you don't meet the Oprah standard for normalcy in today's culture. But you won't find a similar reception if you call yourself religious—it's getting much harder to find anyone who would describe themselves that way anyway.

So it's no surprise that researchers at the University of British Columbia have discovered that kids who have strong "personal and communal aspects of spirituality" (meaning in life, and strong interpersonal relationships) are much more likely to be happy, but kids who adhere to "religious practices" don't get the same "happiness bump." The same study reports that while religion positively correlates with kids who are well-adjusted and well-behaved, those descriptors "are not the same...as happiness."

If you ascribe to "diabolical intent"—that we have an enemy whose mission is to "kill, steal, and destroy" (John 10:10), then you could hardly miss the intentionality behind the slow movement away from the *uncomfortably specific* "religion" in favor of the *comfortably vague* "spirituality." How do you remove the specificity of God from the Christian equation? Well, one great way to do it is replace the best aspects of religion—the lifestyle and practice of devotion to Christ—with a lifestyle focused on meaning and rich relationships. Presto! A chocolate chip cookie without the chocolate chips.

Now, I'm no fan of dead religious practices—neither was Jesus. But not all religion is dead. If religion is simply a road map for a relationship with Christ,

it's a good thing. I have a friend who's recently committed her life to Christ. She's passionate,

curious, thoughtful, and eager to grow. But every time she hangs out with my wife and me, she's asking us how she can deepen her relationship with Jesus. She sees what we have, and wants to know how to get there. And we always end up sharing religious practices with her. Why? Because we're pharisees? I don't think so—these practices have helped us find a more direct path to intimacy with Jesus.

Just like marriage counseling helps you develop intimacy with your spouse, or a financial planner helps you maximize your financial resources, religious practices like Bible reading, prayer, worship, study, and service can propel us toward Jesus. Or not, depending on whether these practices morph into superstitious traditions or willful agents of control in our lives.

In Matthew 6 Jesus skewers the dark side of religious practices. In verse 5 he says: "And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men." And in verse 16 he says: "When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting."

Jesus supported the religious practices of prayer and fasting—but he condemned the hypocritical expression of those practices. And if my adult friend's hunger for a road map to her relationship with Jesus is crucial for her growth, I'd say it's even *more crucial* for today's teenagers, who are constantly hearing the "spiritual but not religious" mantra.

Prior to sin entering the picture, humans knew how to deepen their relationships—with God and others—naturally. After the fall, no dice. All our relationships require intentionality. And intentionality is really the best religion has to offer. So savaging religion is a luxury we can't really afford. Instead, how about offering teenagers the best of religion—a specific lifestyle and set of practices that lead to intimacy with Jesus? ■