

Monday Morning Rewind – January 26, 2009

Good morning! On Sabbath we asked the question, “Why are more and more people considering religion as part of the problem instead of part of the solution?” When people on the streets are asked what words come to mind when they hear the word, “Christian,” words like “judgmental, hypocritical, self-righteous, pushy, dangerous, irrelevant, and obnoxious” dominate their responses. How is it that a message of love and hope is perceived by the masses to be a message of hate and condemnation?

We concluded that at least part of the reason is because too many believers have embraced religion without ever really embracing Christ. “Religion” is trying to reach God, find God, please God through our own efforts. Religions reach up toward God. Christianity, however, is God reaching down to man. Religion is all about what you do for God; Christianity is all about responding to what God has already done for you. And it is that response to God’s grace that makes all the difference. A faith that matters is one that goes beyond religion to relationship with God.

Jesus said, “...unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.” (Matt. 5:20) These words must have hit the people hearing them like a grenade. The Pharisees were the most “religious” people on earth. How could they ever be better rule-keepers, or better disciplined than them?

Jesus wanted them to know that it’s not about rules, it’s about relationship. The only righteousness that counts is His. And the only way to get it is by faith in Him alone. Why is this important? If you don’t understand what being a Christian means, you’ll be a mean Christian and never know God or experience the abundant life Christ died to give us.

Religion is a hollow and, as this war-torn planet can testify, dangerous substitute for true Christianity. Let’s rewind to some of the key ways religion ruins everything.

Religion ruins everything when it focuses on externals instead of internals. (See 1 Sam. 16:7; Matt. 15:19, 20.) Religious people are more concerned with how they look to others than how they appear to God. They want to look pious and self-sacrificing so there is an overemphasis on what they eat, wear, do, etc. But Jesus wasn’t looking for an outward show of conformity. He wanted true change from the inside out. True righteousness emanates from the heart where the real trouble of pride, lust, and selfishness are rooted.

Religion ruins everything when it sacrifices righteousness in favor of rightness. Religious people have to be right at all costs and will fight anyone who disagrees with them. It doesn’t matter whether the conflict is with a church member or not. Their attitude is summarized by this anonymous poem:

*Believe as I believe, no more, no less;
That I am right, and no one else, confess;
Feel as I feel, think only as I think;
Eat what I eat, and drink but what I drink;
Look as I look, do always as I do;
And then, and only then, I’ll fellowship with you.” (Anonymous)*

But it’s important to remember “No one ever converted to Christianity because they lost the argument.” –Phillip Yancy, *Rumors of Another World*

Religion ruins everything because it substitutes tradition for transformation, rules for relationships, and the letter of the law for the spirit of the law. The only religion that is worth anything—the faith that really matters—is a faith that changes you into His likeness. But when your faith doesn’t change you, you simply change your faith to accommodate your unchanged heart. To avoid true change, we lower the bar of God’s righteousness to a level we can reach. And sadly, that level all too often turns out to be the level of the externally-focused, rules-righteousness of the Pharisees. Anne Lamott hit the target when she said, “You can tell you’ve created God in your own image when it turns out that God hates all the same people you do.”

Religious people never die (to self); they just keep nailing others to the cross. Some of the meanest, unforgiving and condemning people on earth are religious folk. They seem happiest when they are pointing out flaws in other people. But we are unqualified to judge because only God can see the heart and assess the motives. We don’t know enough. Besides, this is like the inmates running the asylum. We can’t judge because we are among the judged.

Rewind to Rom. 14:10-13: "For we will all stand before God's judgment seat. It is written: " 'As surely as I live,' says the Lord, 'every knee will bow before me; every tongue will confess to God.' "So then, each of us will give an account of himself to God. Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother's way."

We ALL stand *before* God's judgment seat—which means you aren't presiding *in* it. True Christians don't nail others to the cross because they recognize that their own sins are nailed there. And it is this realization—the awareness of my own sinfulness—that helps me hold my tongue of criticism against others.

If religion is all we have to offer the world, then we shouldn't be surprised if nobody wants it. We shouldn't want it either. We're continually trying to tell the world what a life-changing power for good the Gospel is, while offering nothing more than a burden of rules, creeds, and rituals in a context of condemnation and judgment. No wonder Ghandi said, "Everybody in the world understands what Jesus was teaching, except for Christians."

As you start your week today, remember that Jesus wants to give us so much more than religion—He wants to give us a relationship with Himself. (See John 14:23.) Jesus came to give us "life to the full" (John 10:10), which is life as God intended and as He Himself lives it.

"His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires." (2 Peter 1:3, 4)

Did you see that? Jesus invites us to participate "in the divine nature." He's inviting us to take on godliness! This is what will change the world; and this is what will change us.

The world doesn't need more religion—as Richard Dawkins, John Lennon, and so many others have said—but it sure needs more of Christ. And you and I are Christ's envoys to the world. (See 2 Cor. 5:20.)

Imagine... what our marriages would be like if we'd let Christ love our spouses through us.

Imagine... what would happen if we let Christ forgive others through us.

Imagine... how the world around us would change if we let Christ heal and serve through us.

Imagine no religion... only Christ alive, loving, and saving through grateful and graceful followers who follow in His steps. No one would ever have to say, "Lord, save us from your followers" again. Begin the revolution now. Let the true Gospel of grace flow through you to others today. –Pastor Randy

p.s. Join us Wednesday night at 7:00 PM to continue the conversation on this week's topic of religion vs. Christianity. Next Sabbath's topic: "CSI: The Grave (What happens after death?)" Tell a friend.