

Deep Change (Week 2) - Religion, for Better and Worse
Yesterday's Sermon - In 10 Bullet Points or Less



- 1) Chapter 1 of our Lenten book talks about two differing approaches to the Christian life: the traditional (or checklist) approach, which leads to minimal personal change and impact, and the transformative approach, which leads to much personal change and impact.
- 2) The late Dallas Willard described something similar: he argued that the real crisis in the American church is not a crisis of attendance, leadership, or relevance, but discipleship. We have come to think that one can be a Christian without being a disciple - student, apprentice, practitioner - of Jesus, which would have made no sense in Jesus' own day.
- 3) This broad topic - of the ways we as human beings minimize what religion is or should be - was a favorite topic within Jesus' own teaching. During yesterday's sermon, we dropped down on two places in Jesus' last, most explosive critique of religion at its worst in Matthew 23.
- 4) First, in Matt. 23.23-24, Jesus put religious leaders on blast for caring too much about small, inconsequential things (like tithing their garden spices) and caring too little about the weightier emphases of scripture (like mercy, faith, and justice).
- 5) Jesus is merely echoing a criticism repeated time and again by the O.T. prophets - God does not care about our religious rituals and practices, even those mandated in scripture itself, if we deprioritize what's most important to Him (see Hosea 6.6 and Isaiah 1.11ff., for example).
- 6) The upshot to us is that we ought to help each other care most about what matters most, and flex on the rest. Otherwise, we become yet another embodiment of Fredrich Nietzsche's well-known barb about religion and its tendency toward triviality: "Pettiness is like an infection: it creeps and hides, and seems to be nowhere, until the body is decayed and withered by it."
- 7) In the next set of verses in Matthew 23 (vs. 25-28), Jesus compares religion at its worst to cleaning the outside of the cup and leaving the inside filthy, and to a whitewashed sarcophagus (stone coffin) that looks pretty but is full of death.
- 8) Jesus' critique goes beyond focusing on externals inside of internals. What He's really driving at is that religion at its worst leads us to spend our lives in a kind of exhausting game of pretend, in which we'd rather look good, right, and whole than be good, right, and whole. Religion at its best, as Jesus conceives of it here and elsewhere (like Matthew 7.16-18), is inner renewal that then flows outward to others.
- 9) Richard Rohr would summarize what Jesus is driving at this way: "Religion is one of the safest places on to hide from God." (Or, as Harper Lee put it in her famous novel To Kill a Mockingbird, "Sometimes the Bible in the hands of one man is worse than the whiskey bottle in the hands of another.")
- 10) The famous German pastor from the 20th-century Dietrich Bonhoeffer would say it succinctly: "The call to discipleship is the call to be changed." Anything less is religion "conspiring in its own diminishment," says renowned Quaker author Parker Palmer.

Dig In More This Week

Though you've got a new chapter to read this week, here are a few ways you can dig into the sermon topic more too:

- It's worth reading all of Jesus' serious critique of religion gone wrong in Matthew 23.1-36 (click [here](#) to check it out). As you read it, make a list of contrasts: what's Jesus saying about religion at its worst, and then conversely, at its best?

- The opening to Isaiah 1 is worth checking out too (click [here](#) to read). This is an extended critique of the empty religious practices of God's people, in large part because they've chosen to ignore what matters most to God.

- A prayer for the week, one to help you and us practice religion at its best, not its worst, as Jesus' disciples:

"God, I come as a seeker, sometimes unsure of what I seek. I come as a follower of Christ, sometimes not fully understanding the One I follow. And I come to be changed, though it frightens me and I often resist Your transformation more than I embrace it. Holy One, remind me of Your unconditional love, and meet me where I am today. I believe in what You want to do in my life and our world; help my unbelief, amen." (adapted from Rev. Joanna Harader - Spacious Faith)

- Fascinated by the concept of discipleship that is at the heart of being a Christian? Check out these two short articles, the first of which is by the late Dallas Willard mentioned in the sermon: [Who is Our Teacher?](#) and [The Jesus Way of Life](#)

- Two thoughtful pieces on religion at its worst or when it goes wrong, including Christianity: [When Religion Goes Bad](#) and [When Religion Becomes a Bad Thing](#)