

JOHNS CREEK UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

Built to Last: Practicing What We Preach

Matthew 7:24-25 and 1st Corinthians 13

Sunday, November 6, 2022

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Would the world be a better place without religion and the church? An atheist friend of mine thinks so. I was having a discussion with him and he tried to make the argument that religion has done more harm than good in the world.

He is not alone. Richard Dawkins, in his book *The God Delusion*, writes that the world would be a better place without religion. In the book he tries to make a case for why religion should be abolished.

To Dawkins and many other atheists today religion has caused great suffering and war throughout history. And for many of them their personal experience of Christians is not very positive. To them Christians are mean, judgmental, hypocritical, narrow minded and self-righteous. So, when someone asks why they are not Christians, many atheists think, "Why in my right mind would I want to join a bunch mean, narrow minded people who try to make others miserable?"

Most of the atheists I know or I have met did not decide to be atheists because of some philosophical or theological reason. They didn't just sit and ruminate one day and say, "You know, I really don't believe in God." Most of them decided to become atheists because of their personal experience of Christians.

I remember when I was in college I went to someone's house for a pool party. I remember it being pretty tame by college standards. The parents of the home were there! I remember the dad of the house being a really funny guy. We made jokes and laughed and carried on.

Later in the evening we were sitting by the pool and the father asked me what my major was. I told him it was religion. He laughed and said, "Yeah right." I said, "No, I'm serious. It is religion." He asked, "Why religion?" I told him I planned on being a preacher. He said, "A what? You don't seem like any preacher I know (I took that as a compliment). You laugh and joke a carry on and have fun."

Before I left the party, he said something to me I will never forget: "I'm in my 50's and you are the first

Christian I've ever met who didn't make me want to walk in the opposite direction."

I don't tell you that story because I'm the hero because believe me I've got a lot a work to do. I'm not always the hero in my stories! God is working overtime on me. I tell you that story because that man at the party is not alone. There are people everywhere who feel the same way and they have never had a positive experience of Christians in their entire lives.

Shane Claiborne is a radical Christian author who boldly writes how Christians have got it wrong. He reminds us that Christianity over the last few decades has become less and less fascinating. He says that we have given atheists less and less to disbelieve in. Christianity, he says, looks less and less like Jesus.

Claiborne is right. A recent study showed that the top three perceptions of Christians are 1) Self-righteous 2) Judgmental 3) Hypocritical. When most of the world thinks of Christians they don't think of Jesus, love, sacrifice or even discipline. They think of people who are judgmental and hypocritical. Think about that for a moment. It makes sense why many people feel the way they do about religion.

Those of you who are Christians, I want you to know that for many people at work, in your neighborhood and community you are the only Christian they know. So, let me ask, "When people are around us, what do they think of? What impression do we make?"

Given all of this, a good question is, "Would the world be a better place without religion?" Some people think so. Atheists do. They point to how Christians used the Bible back in the 1800's to support slavery. They point to the Crusades and how countless lives were slaughtered in the name of Christianity. They talk about how the Bible has been used and is still used by some Christians to oppress women. Many atheists talk about the many scandals in the church like the issue of pedophilia in

the Roman Catholic Church and the abuse of power and money by clergy in all denominations. And many atheists point to many wars throughout history that had at their center some religious conflict.

Would the world be a better place without religion? Should all religion be abolished? My answer is a resounding no.

When you hear about a corrupt doctor who is selling pain killers to addicts, do you immediately think that the medical profession should be abolished and that you should stop seeing your doctor?

When you hear about horrible experiments that scientists did on people back in the 1950's and 60's with LSD and radioactive material, does that mean the study of science should be abolished and you will never trust a scientist again?

When you hear about corruption within law enforcement and the scandals that have occurred among police officers, does that mean you should stop calling the police when you are in trouble?

No! So then why should religion be abolished just because many Christians do not always live up to the example of Jesus?

I've got news for all of us. If you are a Christian, raise your hand. Those of you who are not Christians, the people who just raised their hand are all hypocrites.

I'm the biggest hypocrite in the church. I get up every week and preach messages from God's word but I don't always live up to the person God wants me to be. I want to be a Christian who always thinks good and pure thoughts. I want to be a Christian who is always loving, never irritable or mean. I want to be a Christian who always does what God wants me to do. I want to be a Christian who never sins. But I'm not him yet. I'm far from him. I work at being him. I pray at being him. But I'm not him yet.

And here is the truth: No one, Christian or not, religious or not, always lives up to what he or she believes to be right 100 percent of the time. No one. All human beings are hypocrites.

What is interesting is that the Christian faith assumes that human beings fall short. Many people who talk disparagingly about hypocrites in the church don't realize that the Bible teaches that all human beings have fallen short of the glory of God. The Bible teaches that people are imperfect and they need a Savior – enter Jesus Christ, who does for us what we

could never do for ourselves. Through him we are set free from the weight of our sins and mistakes and we are given the power to be the people who God wants us to be.

It is like the old saying, "The church is a hospital for sinners, not a museum for saints." Wesley called our process of growth sanctification. It is a daily process. Sometimes we get it right and sometimes we mess up royally. But, with God's grace and power, we continue to grow into the likeness of Christ.

I think the biggest reason why so many atheists and agnostics hate religion so much, especially Christianity, is because they often misunderstand the Christian faith. Now sometimes that is the fault of Christians who misrepresent the gospel. So many people think that Christianity is about getting God to love you so you can get into heaven – that if you do enough good things – go to enough Bible studies – serve the poor – attend worship regularly, God will say, "He makes the cut. I love him. He's in!"

No, that is not the gospel and many Christians make the mistake of thinking that it is. Atheists recognize it and say, "See, you are just selfish. You are just doing all this stuff so you can go to heaven. You don't care about other people."

The gospel is misunderstood. The gospel is God already loves you. You are God's child. When you receive that love and realize there is nothing you can do to make God love you more or less, you are inspired to live a life of love in the world. And you don't do it so you can get on God's good side. You are already on God's good side. You do it because you are so enthralled by God's love for you that you want to share it with the world! That's what it means to be a Christian! That is Christianity! God's love for us and sharing that love with others is the rock upon which our faith and church is built. You'd think we would learn this lesson by now.

Jesus taught this over and over again. Following him is about one thing and doing one thing only: Love – receiving love and "doing" love. How can we miss this? Let's start with Micah, **"What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God."** (Micah 6:8).

Then Jesus came along and he preached the best sermon in history, The Sermon on the Mount. He said in Matthew 5:43-44: **"You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbor and hate your**

enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you."

Of course, the apostle Paul would write in 1st Corinthians 13: 4-7, **"Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; 6 it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things."**

Ultimately Jesus showed us what true love is by dying for us on a cross. He showed us that true love is sacrificial love that puts others first. Love is doing something for others that they can't do for themselves. That's love. Christianity is all about love. And Christians believe that the love of God revealed in Jesus lived out in the world will heal and transform this world.

Get rid of religion? Get rid of the Christian faith? The love of Christ is what changes people and transforms the world! Do you know that the majority of the social services in Atlanta are faith based? Do you know that most of the hospitals were started and are supported by the church? Do you know that a huge percentage of colleges and universities were started by Christian Churches? Do you know that Harvard, Princeton and Yale were originally started by the church to train ministers for the ministry? Do you know that most of the famous speeches given by Martin Luther King, Jr. were given in churches? Dr. King was an ordained minister. Do you know that the civil rights movement was started and sustained by the church?

What about right here in our own backyard? I have my own private list of comments people have made how our church has made a difference to their lives. Whenever I need to be inspired I look at the list. Saved marriages, reconciled relationships, people transformed by God's love, hope given to the depressed and discouraged, kids inspired and formed by the gospel, suicide avoided. On and on it goes!

When you turn in your pledge card (you knew I would get to it at some point) you are saying, "I want to invest in people having those experiences through the ministries of our church." When you give and pledge you are increasing our church's capacity to share God's love in the community and world. When we don't give and pledge we are limiting our church's ability to love. When you strip everything down, this is what it comes down to. When you remove all the trappings of church, stewardship campaigns, and pledge cards, investing in the church's ability to love others with the love God is what it is all about.

Sometimes we need to remove all the extra stuff we put on our faith and church life and get down to what really matters. Have you ever seen the movie *The Incredibles*? It's about a family of superheroes who try to save the world from total destruction. In Bob Goff's book "Love Does," he writes about the superhero dad in the movie. He is an insurance claims adjuster, but he really wants to use his superhero powers, so he begins drawing pictures of the super hero suits he wants to wear. Of course, all the suits he thinks of include capes.

Well, the dad has a friend named Edna who makes super hero suits and she keeps telling him that he needs to lose the cape. She tells him how in the end capes cause big problems for super heroes. They get caught on things like a jet engine or worse and cause big issues. Edna says in the movie, "No capes!" You get a lot more stuff done if you lose the cape. Bob Goff thinks Jesus agrees and so do I!

You know what I think will draw the world to Christ and leave a good taste in people's mouths about religion? If Christians would lose the cape. So many of us who follow Christ do it with a cape representing something – a cape to be noticed by others so they will think we are so good – a cape representing something we are against or some judgment we have for certain people – a cape symbolizing what denomination we are part of or our views on a political issue or how we interpret the Bible. Soon we become known by our capes and not by Jesus.

The problem is if we go around serving Jesus with capes, they eventually get snagged on something – our pride, other people's feelings, people's perceptions of those who follow God. Our capes get in the way.

Goff reminds us that Jesus never wore a cape. Jesus hardly ever talked to anyone about what he had done, the way he loved people. He just did it. And all that mattered to him was that God knew it. When we lose the cape, we don't get confused about what our purpose is, which is to love. We don't forget that it is God who is making things happen. All our energy is channeled into doing great things for God and loving the world like crazy.

Let's lose the cape as Christians and just go out and love in the name of Jesus. If we do, people won't say

this world would be a better place without religion; they will say this world will not survive without the love of Jesus. When we serve Jesus without a cape people will want to know more about Jesus.

WEEKLY DEVOTION

Built to Last: Practicing What We Preach

Monday – Read 1st Corinthians 13:1-3. What precedes this famous chapter on love is Paul’s explanation of the many gifts within the body of Christ. He likens them to a body with many parts; each of them plays a critical role. One of them is not more important than the other. To drive the point home, Paul reminds the Corinthian church that gifts mean nothing if they are divorced from love. Pay attention to the gifts Paul mentions in the first few verses: speaking in tongues, preaching, discernment, faith, generosity, and sacrifice. Yet, Paul writes that if these things are done without love for God and people, they are useless. They don’t mean anything. What if you saw your pledge and giving to the church as acts of love? Would that change your perspective on the importance of your gifts?

Tuesday – Read 1st Corinthians 13:4-7. Love means different things to different people. The word is thrown around rather casually in our culture. But what is the love Paul is referring to? It is Christian love – agape. Agape is self-giving love, an unconditional love – a love that works in the best interest of others regardless of how we may feel about them. Of course, Paul chooses to define this love through action words. What does this love look like? It is patient. It is kind. It is selfless. It is humble. It is forgiving. It rejoices in the truth. It always protects, trusts, hopes, and perseveres. Today, read verses 4-7 and replace the words “love” and “it” with your name.

Wednesday – Read 1st Corinthians 13:8-10. In these verses Paul describes the eternal nature of love. In fact, Paul implies that God’s love and our love for one another are the only things that last. All of our gifts are simply vehicles of love. The moment our gifts become more important than the love they are meant to express we cease to be faithful. This is another reason why being generous with our financial gifts is so important. It puts money in proper perspective. Money is a vehicle, a tool to be used for greater things.

Thursday – Read 1st Corinthians 13:11-12. These two verses are interesting. Paul has just been describing the importance of Christian love. Then in verse 11 he seems to take a detour as he tells us about when he put away childish things. But is it really a detour? I believe Paul is expressing the wisdom he has gained. When he was young, he thought so many things were important. As he has gotten older, he has learned that the only thing that matters is love – God’s love for him, his love for God, and his love for others. I have discovered that generous givers have learned the same lesson. Their giving is an expression of the gratitude they have God and his love.

Friday – Read 1st Corinthians 13:13. If you are looking for a simple way to remember what Christianity is all about, look no further than verse 13 – Faith in Christ, hope for the healing of our world, and love for one another. Of course, Paul is quick to remind us that love is still the most important of the three. How does your living and giving reflect faith, hope and love?