

Lose Your Religion: Love is the Center
Glen - Apr 8, 2018

Series Big Idea: Religion is responsible for wars and hate, bigotry and exclusion. It is known for being superstitious, hypocritical, judgmental and more. But even worse, it misses God and who he really is and what he is all about. Religion is man's attempt to be good by following rules and rituals. Then we are tempted to use our right beliefs and right actions to judge others as to whether they are in the "right" place. Religion actually causes us to judge rather than love. Religion steers us away from the the heart of God who is love. Only Jesus can change our heart and move us from rules, arrogance and judgment to love and relationship. Jesus didn't come to found a religion. He came to free us from religion, to love like God.

Message Big Idea: God is love. And God gives love to all - the perfect, never ending, all forgiving kind of love. And that love came to us in Jesus. Jesus came to bring us into a deep connection with Love - to be loved, to be with Love and to be so filled with love that it pours out of us. In the end love is the core and center of everything. All of creation was designed to live in love and give and receive love. Outrageous love is what the church is to be about and known for.

Main Idea: Love is the center of it all.

Main Text: John 13:34-35

Supporting texts: 1 John 4:8

Reflection/Discussion Questions:

1. What comes to your mind when you hear the word "religion"? How do you understand or how would you define "religion"?
2. Share one good and one bad experience you had with religion. If you didn't have a bad experience, share one you heard or knew someone else had.
3. Respond to this idea: Jesus didn't come to found a religion but to free us from religion. Do you agree or disagree, and why?
4. Jesus said he gave us a "new" commandment in John 13:34-35. What is "new" about this commandment? What does that mean in terms of how we love? In what ways do you need to love differently or better based on this "new" command?
5. Here are some of the questions to ask yourself. Share as many responses as you can:
 - Is my love conduit wide open? If not, why not?
 - Why am I choosing to deny YOU what I've been freely given?
 - Do I love all people freely?
 - I'm struggling to love ____? Because...?
 - Is religion part of the reason why I struggle to love like Jesus?
 - What aspect of religion hinders me from loving like Jesus?
 - And here's the critical question - Am I doing the "new" commandment? Am I loving others like Jesus loved me?

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Message:

We had an amazing Easter celebration last week. We had well over 5000 people at our Saturday New Life Celebration. To all of you who volunteered and donated all the stuff we gave away - thank you. We can't do these things without you. Easter Sunday we had 5,605 people attending. That's 874 more than last year. We served 32,000 pancakes and 400 pounds of sausage! But the best part was that 90 people were baptized. 90 folks are beginning a new start with the living Jesus. Someone captured this picture on Easter morning [Girl before the cross pic]. The picture says it all.

Maybe you were here on Easter Sunday and decided to come back - welcome! I'm so glad you are here, because today I'm going to kick off one of the most important teaching series I think I've ever done. We are starting a series called "*Lose Your Religion.*" This series is for anyone who is tired or even scared of religion, but yet yearns to connect with the living God. This series is for you who have experienced the burden of religious rules and the guilt and shame that come as we fail to keep the rules, but who really want a relationship with God.

What I'm going to share over the next few weeks is really at the heart of who I am. But more importantly, this is about the heart of who God is and what God is all about. It is my intent to look honestly at what's wrong about the church and Christianity practiced as religion and rediscover who God is and what he originally designed the church to be.

I believe God wants you to lose your religion and replace it with a relationship with Jesus that moves us past religious behavior to recapture what God is all about...love. So here's the point I want to make today and throughout this series. **Love is the center of it all.** By "all" I mean all. God is all about love and our relationship with him is all about love. All that we are to do is to be motivated by love. As we'll see, Jesus says love covers it all.

But let's be real and honest. The church is not known as a place of outrageous love. [pause] Too many people have been judged by religious people. I could tell you hours of painful stories of people being judged in the church and by church people. If you are new and you've had one of those experiences, thank you for taking a risk again. While I can't promise you that our church is perfect, I can tell you that many of us are trying to throw off the ugliness of religion to follow Jesus and actually live like Jesus. I want to invite you to a faith that is not about rules and guilt but about a freeing relationship with Jesus that teaches us how to love rather than judge.

And the church through the centuries, and even of late in our own country, has been known more for its hate than its love. It's easy to condemn the Crusades that happened so long ago. But in my lifetime far too many churches practiced racial segregation. And in my lifetime too many churches have taken political and social stands that sounded more like hateful denouncements of people.

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And too often, the church has been known more for its hypocrisy than its authentic love. Real love expresses itself in action and too many churches prefer to sit safely in a building than to reach out and engage its community in love and service.

Most churches struggle with loving all people. And don't misunderstand me. That doesn't mean the church, or you and I as individuals, have to agree with all people. That's crazy and impossible and not even biblical. But to really love all people, like we believe Jesus commands, is far too rare. And let me again say upfront, so I'm not misunderstood, true faith is about being like Jesus. And Jesus embraces BOTH love and truth. It is not an either or. Jesus and his true followers don't settle for a soft anything goes love. It is truth and love together. But we are not like Jesus when we deliver a harsh truth without compassion. What I've observed is that the church has found it easier to embrace and focus on the truth but struggled and even failed to love people. Next week I'll show you why I think that is true. Today, our focus will be on the foundation of love that we'll build on in the weeks to come. If you have to miss a Sunday teaching, be sure to catch up and watch it online. I think it is that important.

As we start, remember that when I talk about the church, we are talking about people. You and I are the church. This isn't about fixing an organization. It is about you and me figuring out how to faithfully follow Jesus.

We'll never get to real faith, a relationship with God, until we get this - **Love is the center of it all**. That's not just my opinion. It is what the Bible tells us. Everything starts with God. The very core essential nature of God is this: **God is love (1 John 4:8)**. That is the most basic and best description of God. Everything about God is this - love.

And our God, who at the core or center is love, created humans whom he could love. His desire was that we love him and love each other. That's why Jesus said the greatest commandments are what? **Love God and love your neighbor**. Love God with your whole being AND love your neighbor as yourself. Those two commandments are not shocking in themselves, but then Jesus said if we love like that, we've covered everything in the Bible. Here are his very words: "*All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.*"

Love is greater than religion. That's why Jesus in fact wants us to lose our religion and replace it with love. Jesus really meant what he said - love replaces all the Old Testament laws and rituals. In one sense, we could just stop here with these two foundational spiritual truths: 1) God is love. He's the center of it all; and 2) Jesus says everything is about love - loving God and others. **Love is the center of it all**. But there's more, so let's keep going deeper.

So Jesus told us what the greatest commandments are, what I just talked about. But he also said something very interesting. He also tells us that he's got a "new" commandment for us. He gave this "new" commandment during his last moments with his disciples before he is arrested and killed. He then tells them Judas will betray him.

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That means not only is Jesus in danger, but each of them will be in danger too. Then he tells them he is going away and they cannot come with him. Whoa! The mood is now very somber. Both fear and anger are in the room. It was a very emotionally raw moment. In fact it was probably as low as the group had ever been.

Now, it is in this emotionally raw moment that Jesus says, I've got a new commandment. Jesus' exact words are found in John 13:34-35 (pg. 736 - NIV) - *34 "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. 35 By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."* And then Jesus tells them that Peter, one of the key leaders of the disciples, will deny him. The message of a new commandment is going to get lost in all the depressing things happening. To be honest if I had been in that upper room with Jesus I would have thought in my head and maybe even have said, "You have got to be kidding. Really? Right now you want to give us a new commandment after you told of us of betrayal, denial and your departure?" It seems like the timing could have been better.

But Jesus knew exactly what he was doing. He knew how raw they were. And he knew they would face even more challenges. He knew that their greatest need was what every human being cries out for - love and belonging. With betrayal, denial, his departure and persecution coming, Jesus wanted to remind them of what matters most. They need each other. They must love each other well.

But Jesus said it was a "new" commandment. Well, it actually was not totally new - remember the Great Commandment? So how was it new for them? Here's how it was "new." It was new in that the standard was new. HOW they were to love was new. Jesus said they were to love each other "As I have loved you." Jesus came as God to be God in a human body. If God is love, then Jesus who is God is love who came in a human body. Here's the spiritual logic: **God = love. Jesus = God. Jesus = love.** The love Jesus showed them and us is a God's perfect love - the kind of love we need.

Love is our most basic need. This is true for all of us. This is what I need. We all need to be loved by God. That love allows us to belong to God as his own children. And, we all need to belong to a group or tribe where we are loved and belong. This is to be the very definition of the church - people loving each other like Jesus. When we, the church, do that, others will notice and want to be a part of that kind of a group. We will never thrive without love and belonging.

That's why we regularly teach about and invite people to begin a life giving relationship with God - to experience love and belonging as a child of God. That's why I teach over and over why it is vital to belong to a small group where you are known, can be loved and belong. It is so important to connect with others that today, after service, we'll have some actual life groups you can join. People will be available in the outdoor courtyard. Take a few minutes to find out how to get connected where you can be known, loved, belong and love others.

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Love is the center of it all. And that forms the mission of our church - Pantano: **Loving people to Jesus, launching passionate people to make a difference.** We are all about loving people. We want to love as Jesus loves so people experience Jesus. We want to launch loving people into our community to love and serve in order to make a difference. That's our purpose. Our calling. Our mission!

But... we are not really good at loving. Yes, we might love those that are like us, or easy to love and who we enjoy loving. But we struggle to love like Jesus - the new command he gave us. We struggle to love all, even our enemies or those we disagree with. If God is love and God is in us, then what blocks love from pouring out of us? Why do we struggle to be a conduit for love? Why don't we open the valve more to let more love flow through us? There are honestly several reasons. One is our human selfishness. Another is fear. We can't love well when we are afraid. There are others too. But the one we'll focus on in this series is this - religion. Religion ends up acting like a closed valve on love.

Religion is like this valve. We, the church, the people who follow Jesus are like this pipe. We are connected to God who is love and that love is like water that flows freely into us - it is to fill us. We are loved - fully and completely! We are grateful for God's love shown us in Jesus. But God's love, like the water in a pipe, is not to stay in us. What happens when water gets stuck in a pipe for a long time? It goes bad. Love is the purest when it flows through us and out of us to others.

But religion is one the main things, like this valve, that shuts off the flow of love. Religious people often want to love, but religion ends up working like a closed valve. Religion tends to focus on the right things we are to do and believe. We get so focused on doing and believing the right things that we end up feeling a need to make sure others are doing and believing the right things and we forget to love people. As a pastor I constantly have religious people who want to get into arguments about what is right doctrine and what they believe is true. But they do so without an ounce of love. Remember, Jesus was always a balance of truth and love. Religion focuses on obeying the right rules and rituals and having the right doctrines and the practices. They want to do and believe these because religious people think that their "rightness" will make them good to earn and keep God's love. But being right often causes pride. Pride struggles to love. The consistent result is that being right is more important than loving people. Religion makes me focus on me, then compare myself to others and that makes it hard to love others.

But here's the rock bottom truth. God's love was never to be earned. God's love is given, not earned. The Bible is so clear on that! And further, we can't make ourselves good. The Bible is clear on that too! And as we'll see over the next few weeks, the more we focus on being good the more we are tempted to become judges of others. We judge others by our religious rules, rituals and beliefs to determine if they are good or not and whether they are in or out. And thus religion stops the flow of love.

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So let's identify what this religion looks like for many of us here who go to church. For many of us it shows up in things like this. We tend to be religious when we are sure we are right and most everybody else is wrong. We might think that because we sacrifice our time, service and money we are closer to God. As good people we read our Bibles, go to church - that is the "right" church. Good people say the right prayers with the approved words and have the right doctrines, which are in fact debated by lots of godly people. And then religious people focus on the good they do and highlight how others don't do those good things. Now, don't get me wrong. All these things, in and of themselves, can be good. But they don't earn us God's grace, mercy or love. And they hinder us from really understanding God's unconditional love and giving away God's unconditional love.

We need to remember that **Love is the center of it all**. This is not a soft love that holds no convictions. It is not a wimpy love that doesn't speak the truth, because often speaking the truth is the most loving thing to do. The love we let flow through us is a love that loves the way Jesus loves. Jesus was truth, who spoke truth and loved perfectly. Jesus' love always sought the very best for the other person.

Maybe you've been struggling with too much religion in you. Maybe you know you are just going through the religious ropes and have missed a real loving relationship with Jesus. Maybe you long for a loving relationship with Jesus. Maybe you can be honest with yourself and you know that you have a closed valve that keeps God's love from just pouring through you. I'm inviting you to wrestle with this as we continue to explore in this series. Right now ask God to reveal what's in your heart. I'm inviting you into a season of spiritual wrestling - which is normal, good and needed. My prayer for you is that you are filled with God's love. And I pray that you'll allow it to pour out of you. Remember what Jesus said: ***"A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.*** Let's PRAY.

The most critical path to moving past religion to relationship with God is to allow God's love to fill us. The starting place is to focus on embracing and enjoying the love of God. Love will not flow from the valve until we are filled with love. We are going to sing a song called The Reckless Love of God. There are some who struggle with the title because the word "reckless" is usually thought of as rash, careless, thoughtless, hasty or foolish. But God's love is reckless in that he didn't care or count the cost of love for himself. Here's the chorus:

Oh, the overwhelming, never-ending, reckless love of God
Oh, it chases me down, fights 'til I'm found, leaves the ninety-nine
I couldn't earn it, and I don't deserve it, still, You give Yourself away
Oh, the overwhelming, never-ending, reckless love of God
He loves us so much he sacrificed his only Son for us. Let's stand and sing.

Song: Reckless Love