

Lose Your Religion: Church - Reverse the Curse
Glen - May 6, 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 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: The church has a reputation as being judgmental and hypocritical. We are viewed as seeing ourselves as "better than thou." Forever, religious people have both judged and avoided the prostitutes, bums, addicts, homosexuals, the rude, the unclean, the drunk, the poor and the list goes on. It was these people that Jesus had a reputation for hanging out with! It is time to lose our religion that fosters hate, judgement and hypocrisy and replace it with the love of Jesus. It is time to admit that we have failed to love as Jesus loves. It's time to declare that we have not been the church Jesus intended us to be. It's time to reverse the curse of having pushed God aside and taking his role as judge. It is time repent of our sinful religious attitudes and approaches and replace them with love.

Main Idea: Love alone reverses the curse.

Main Text: John 13:34-34

Supporting texts: Genesis 3:14-24

Reflection/Discussion Questions:

1. We are sinners and we live in the curse of spiritual death that started with Adam and Eve. How would you describe how the curse is in effect today? What does spiritual death include and how do you experience it?
2. When Adam and Eve sinned they reacted in some key ways; They were ashamed, they hid themselves, and when they found out about their sin, they deflected and blamed each other, God and the circumstance. These are effects of the curse. Try to identify and describe how you are affected in these areas today:
 - a. Shame - What do you feel shame about and why?
 - b. Hiding - What do you hide and from whom?
 - c. Deflecting and blaming - In what areas do you struggle to take responsibility regarding your sin?
3. Respond to Glen's main point - Love alone reverses the curse. How does loving like Jesus reverse the curse? What does it mean to love like Jesus? How will you apply this personally? Who will you love like Jesus? How?

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Main Idea: Love alone reverses the curse.

Message:

Today we are finishing our five week series called *Lose Your Religion*. Let me review this series by using the main points of each message. We started this series by remembering that - **Love is the center of it all**. God is love. We were made to be loved and to love. Jesus says all the religious rules and rituals can be accomplished in love.

Religion is about trying to be good and inevitably causes us to judge the goodness of others. Religion gets it backwards and actually interferes with our ability to be loved and to love. So in the second week I suggested that: **It is not out of good that love comes, but out of love that good comes**. Then Roger took it further in week three and challenged us: **Do not judge...period!** And last week I showed that we ended up creating religion because we bought the lies of the evil one and we don't trust that God is good enough and that we need more than God offers. So my challenge was: **Lose your religion because God is enough**.

In this series we've been focusing where and how our religious tendencies began - in the Garden of Eden. We are going to pick up the story today in **Genesis 3:14-24 (pp 2-3 - NIV)**. We pick up the story after Adam and Eve ate from the one forbidden tree - the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. It was in that moment that they lost their innocence. With that knowledge, they could no longer simply trust and obey God. They pushed God aside and tried to be the judge of all things good and evil.

The consequences came quickly. What follows is what I call it the curse and what happens when they pushed God aside and took the role of judge. They disobeyed and they realized they were naked and felt shame. This is the first time humans felt shame, something God never wanted them to experience. The shame wasn't that their private parts were exposed, it was that their sin and pride were exposed. Now that they are able to judge, their greatest fear is also our greatest fear - being judged by God. So they hid, trying to hide their shame, their guilt and failure. For the first time Adam and Eve experienced a fear of God. Then they attempted to deflect their responsibility and started the blame game. Adam blamed God for giving him Eve - "You put her here! She tempted me." Then Eve blamed the serpent who tempted her.

This story from Genesis 3 is ancient. It is true. And it is as contemporary as can be. We do and experience the same things Adam and Eve did. We feel shame for our shortcomings. We try to hide our failures, weaknesses, brokenness and sin from God and others. We don't want to be exposed. With everyone now being judges, we learn to hide our failures and weaknesses and become actors. We put on a show for the other religious judges that we are "good." Then when we are found out and exposed, we find ways to deflect our personal responsibility and blame God, others or our circumstances. We all experience the ongoing curse!

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And religion, which on the surface is supposed to reverse the curse in fact perpetuates the curse. Religion becomes a tool we use to make ourselves look good and we use it to judge others. Here's how religion works. I will follow as many of the rules and rituals I can and I'll believe the right things to look good and look better than most. I'll be able to hide the ugly stuff inside me by my religious efforts! This is exactly what Jesus exposed in the religious leaders of his day. On your own, read **Matthew chapter 23**. Here you'll find Jesus' harshest words and they are fired directly at religious types. Why? In this chapter he is exposing what religion is. **Religion: the hypocrisy of hiding our sin while judging others sin.** That alone is why we need to lose our religion!

Things were now bad in the Garden. God had to banish Adam and Eve from this perfect paradise, not because he hated them! As fallen judges who tried to be God, God couldn't let humans eat from the other tree in the middle; the tree of life and live forever and be ugly judges forever devoid of godly love and wisdom. There's a subtle mercy here. God, in his wisdom and love, couldn't let you and I have an endless experience of living in the curse - the consequences of life separated from him. He didn't want them or us to experience the endless curse: endless spiritual emptiness, endless self-centeredness, and endless suffering.

So, since Adam and Eve, death is now in play in all aspects of life. We are and we live in a fallen, broken, sinful world. We live in the curse. Yes, we experience the daily curse of spiritual death. By "death" we mean everything is broken, deteriorating and dying.

But all that didn't change God's character. He didn't stop being God because of our sin. God is love. He will forever be love. In fact we often miss how God expressed his love even in the tragedy that happened in the Garden. Look at **Genesis 3:21 (pg. 3 - NIV) - *The Lord God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them.*** They sinned and they were naked and exposed. But God covered their nakedness. God sacrificed and shed the blood of an animal to cover their shame.

Today, religion, which uses the knowledge of good and evil to judge, declares that you and I should be ashamed. But God says: "I'll cover you." God allowed the blood of his Son to be shed to cover the nakedness of our sin! Jesus took on our sin. He took on our curse! We are saved from the curse of our sin. We are fully forgiven. Jesus is our covering! When God looks at us he first sees Jesus who covers us.

Religion can't reverse the curse! It only highlights it. So here's my point today - **Love alone reverses the curse.** God's love, expressed through Jesus, can and does reverse the curse. No, he doesn't remove all immediate consequences of our sin. You hit someone, you go to jail. Adam and Eve had to face the consequences. We still face consequences of our bad decisions. But we don't do it alone. We are forgiven. We don't have to hide from God who is the source of life and love and guidance through the curse of this broken world.

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So God has dealt with our sin - past, present and future. We are saved from eternal death. But what I don't want us to miss is that God also saved us for a purpose in this life. We follow Jesus not just for forgiveness and eternal life, but to become like Jesus. If Jesus and his love are the only hope of reversing the curse, then we are to be Jesus in this world. We are to love like Jesus.

This is where I started this series 4 weeks ago. God saved us to be and love like Jesus. And that's the heart of Jesus' "new" command found in **John 13:34-34 (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."** We have a new command - love one another. How? Like Jesus loves us. Why? To show the love of Jesus in action to draw others to Jesus!

That's why Jesus created the church. Church is not a building or an organization. Church is you and I. With Jesus being the center of our lives, we can start to reverse the curse. Here's how. First, we are to be a people and a place where we no longer have to hide the shame and ugly stuff inside. We don't have to hide our shame from God. We don't have to hide our sin from each other. We don't come to church to put on our church face and hide our failures, weaknesses and ugliness. We don't play religious games to look good or better than others. Second, we are the ones who carry the one and only cure for the curse of sin. Love! When we love others like Jesus loves us - shame disappears as folks discover they are loved, valued and treasured by God. Love is about the worth of the person. Every person is infinitely valuable and worthy to God. We love others because God deeply loves us and all people.

That's why we need to lose our religion. Being religious makes it impossible to love. In religion we hide our shortcomings and judge others. We think we are better than others. We think we know better! Being religious we can't help but be tempted to think: "I'm glad I'm not like you!" Religious people, for thousands of years, have judged and avoided prostitutes, bums, addicts, homosexuals, the rude, the unclean, the drunk, the poor and the list goes on.

Pantano, we must lose our religion. We must not perpetuate the curse. We must reverse the curse. **Love alone reverses the curse.** So we must lose our religion and stop hiding, blaming and judging and replace it all with love of God. As God's church, we are now called to continue the work of Jesus to reverse the curse through love! With Jesus, we are the hope for this world.

When others encounter the church - you and I, who do they meet? Do they encounter Jesus or religious types? When people visit this church, do they meet Jesus or religion? When others engage us what is the overwhelming thing they experience - the love of Jesus or religious judgement, religious truth, religious rules and religious hypocrisy?

So, **Love alone reverses the curse.** It is the church that is now to reverse the curse of being separated from God's love. We are to turn from judgement to love. We are to

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bring God's love to people living in the effects of the curse. It is not our job to judge others. We are not God and we cannot accurately judge a person, convict a person of doing or being wrong or fixing them. The late Billy Graham correctly said: **"It is the Holy Spirit's job to convict, God's job to judge and my job to love."** We reverse the curse by losing our religious urges to judge others and replace judgement with love - loving others like Jesus. So we have one task - to love as God loves. That's Jesus' new commandment. That's the great commandment. That's our mission: **Loving people to Jesus, launching passionate people to make a difference!**

Another way to look at this is to ask: what reputation do you have? Jesus had a reputation! He had a reputation among the religious people! His reputation was that he hung out with people the religious folks had judged and labeled as sinners, drunkards, gluttons and prostitutes (See Matthew 11:19). The religious people had determined who was okay and welcomed and who were "in" and could be a part of their religious community. They also labeled those who were not okay, not welcomed and had to stay "outside" their group. Jesus didn't accept their inside/outside boundaries. **Religion rejects people. Love invites people.** Let's not reject the people that Jesus wants to hang out with. Let's not reject the people Jesus wants us to love! Love welcomes people to know and experience God's unconditional love. Love doesn't welcome what isn't true or good, but welcomes people who will always be short of all that's true and good.

But loving like Jesus challenges us to the core. It challenges me. A few years back I was invited to witness a play. It was being performed in a gay bar. I knew a number of the young people who were in the play and would be there for the event. My wife and I prayerfully decided to attend. I was sure that if Jesus had been invited, he would go. It was challenging because the message was not one that I agreed with or could support. The environment was not one I was comfortable with. But I didn't go to support or affirm the message of the play or the lifestyle of the bar scene. I went to show my love to the people in the play and their friends who were there to watch. When we walked in the young people we knew were shocked. They knew about our faith and that I'm a pastor. But each person expressed gratitude that we would walk into their world and hang out with them. I had to put away the religious judgement and simply love these folks.

Now, maybe you are still stuck on the fact that I went into a gay bar. My point isn't that you should go to any kind of bar. This isn't about what's religiously appropriate. It's about the heart and the motive of my heart. The fact is, my being there opened doors over the years to have a number of spiritual conversations with these same young adults. Was I comfortable there seeing all that I saw? No, I wasn't. But love isn't about being comfortable. Real love, the way Jesus loves, is seldom easy. It is often messy.

I also don't want you to hear me as telling that story to suggest we just need to embrace tolerance. Our culture values tolerance. But for Jesus love goes way beyond just tolerating people. Tolerance falls way short of love. God doesn't just tolerate you and

Lose Your Religion: Church - Reverse the Curse
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me! If God just tolerates me then I'm not really worthy to God and I'm not really loved. Love goes way beyond toleration to seeking what's best for me. It sacrifices for me. It listens to me. It speaks the truth. It deeply cares. Tolerance is easy. Love is really hard work.

When we started this series four weeks ago, I said the church is viewed as being religious. The church in general has a reputation as being judgmental and hypocritical. The church has perpetuated the curse that started in the Garden of Eden. Folks, the time has come for us to reverse this view and **Love alone reverses the curse.** It is time to lose our religion of hate, judgement and hypocrisy. It is time to confess that we've been better at religion than love. It's time to admit that we have failed to love as Jesus loves. It's time to declare that we have not been the church Jesus intended us to be.

I want to lead us in a time of guided confession.

God, we confess to you that we have found it much easier to judge rather than love.

We confess that we have declared the truth far too often without love.

We confess that we have hidden our sins and shame in order to look better than we are.

We confess that we have struggled to fully embrace your love and grace.

We confess we have allowed ourselves to be consumed by our concerns and worries and neglected those who most need your love.

We confess that we have not loved like Jesus loves us.

And with this confession God, we repent. We repent of our judgemental thoughts and words. We repent of our hypocrisy. We repent of our religion.

I'm going to pause here to let you personally confess and repent. Be as specific as you can with God right where you are seated, regarding your own struggle with religion.

[pause] I'm going to close our prayer time. Would you please stand with me. I'll pray and then we are going to sing a song that can be our commitment.

So God, help us let the love of Jesus fill us so it will flow through us to others.

Help us to be your true church - your people who love like Jesus loves.

Help us to be a people full of grace where folks no longer have to hide their brokenness and sin.

Help us to break down the walls that separate us from others and others from God.

Here and now God help us welcome all.

Here and now God, let your grace flow free.

May your kingdom of love come...here and now.

Song: Here and Now.