

Lose Your Religion: We Became the Center
Glen - Apr 15, 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: Adam and Eve sinned by eating the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil that was in the center of the Paradise. When they ate the forbidden fruit (as we still do today), they sought to take the place of God to judge good and evil and take the center position of acting like God. That is our problem today. We are tempted to take the place that only God can take. And we are terrible judges. The real tragedy occurs because as we take this position of judge it makes it nearly impossible to love God and love like God - the very purpose for which we were created.

Main Idea: It is not out of good that love comes, but out of love that good comes.

Main Text: Gen. 2:9; 3:1-5

Supporting texts: 1 John 4:19; 1 Corinthians 13:1-3

Reflection/Discussion Questions:

1. Review from last week: God created us to be loved, to love him and to love others. Love is the center of everything! How does being religious hinder us from loving well?
2. We tend to think of religion and faith as a list of rules to keep us from trespassing and sinning. What religious or faith rule do you tend to struggle trespassing or violating and why?
3. The real temptation and sin of Adam and Eve was that they wanted to take the place of God to be able to decide what's good and bad, right and wrong. We still are tempted to take the place of God. In what area do you most struggle with this?
4. The first humans tried to take God's role as judge of good and evil. We still do that, but we are terrible judges and can never judge like God. Who (a person, a group of people) do you struggle the most with in judging others?
5. Why are the judgements of humans always flawed?

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Message:

Today we are continuing our series - *Lose Your Religion*. One of the things we notice about religion is that it tends to focus on rules and rituals we must follow to be good enough for God. In the Old Testament, the rabbis have counted 613 laws. Last week I talked about how Jesus said there was one basic rule - love. Love covers it all. My point last week was that **Love is the center of it all**. And religion tends to emphasize what we are not supposed to do. You know them...the don'ts! The no trespassing rules! So today, let's go back to the very beginning when Adam and Eve violated the very first "no trespassing" rule.

I'm not a fan of no trespassing signs. There have been a number of times when I've been running, hiking, backpacking or exploring and come up to a fence or just a sign that says "No Trespassing." I'm not going to steal anything. I'm not going to disturb anything or anyone. I just want to get from where I'm at to the other side in the fastest way possible. Okay, I'll admit I have trespassed on an occasion or two. The fact is people ignore the signs all the time, so some folks have gotten creative in trying to stop trespassers. Like this sign - **Are you bullet proof or just stupid?** Or this one - **What part of no trespassing don't you understand?** Or this one - **Life is short - don't make it shorter.** Here's one God might have used in the Garden of Eden to stop Adam and Eve from trespassing to take from the forbidden tree - **Is there life after death? - Trespass here to find out.**

God gave a no trespassing order to the first humans, Adam and Eve. They had the run of a perfect garden called the Garden of Eden, also called Paradise. It had EVERYTHING they wanted and needed. Food, scenery, amazing animals (Adam had named them), perfect weather and nothing was ever going to go wrong. And it gets better. They had unhindered access to God and his love. They were created to be loved by God in a perfect environment. They walked and talked with God. It was like heaven. But...and that's where we pick up our story.

Turn to Genesis 2:9 (pg. 2 - NIV) - ***The Lord God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground—trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.*** So there were two trees right in the very middle of the garden. One was the tree of life and the other was the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. These two trees are in the very middle of creation because the garden is controlled from the middle. The tree of life was all about God's provision. **The tree of life = Dependence on God.** This tree represents God's goodness, his love and that he will provide everything they need and want to live well. It was to remind them that their very lives depended on God! It was also a tree that represented God's desire that we have eternal life - a life where death has no power over us. The first humans were free to eat of this tree for God wanted us to live life to the full.

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Then there was the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. God warned the couple to not eat from this tree. It was off limits! If they did they would die. We often call this the forbidden tree. God tried to put up a “no trespassing” sign! They had no right trying to have access to this tree. **The tree of the knowledge of good and evil = Being judge!** The phrase “knowledge of good and evil” means the ability to judge all things. They had the ability to judge all things - both good and bad. With that knowledge they could be independent from God and be tempted to take the role of God. They were not designed for that role. They were made to love.

But the tempter lied to Eve and got her to doubt that God was telling the truth. The Devil got Eve to mistrust that God’s “no trespassing” was in fact for their good. And he tempted her by saying God was withholding the ultimate good from them. These were lies that would cost them their lives. The exact temptation is found in Genesis 3:4-5 (pg. 2 - NIV) - 4 ***“You will not certainly die,” the serpent said to the woman.*** 5 ***“For God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”*** By the way, Adam joined in the trespass - they did it together. Together, they were tempted to know all and be like God. They tried to take the place of God.

The tree was forbidden because it was the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and that ability and responsibility was only for God. God is to be the only one in the middle of creation with the task of judging all things. Only he really knows what is good or bad. God is the only one who can handle the knowledge of good and evil and then judge correctly. Humans can’t handle that knowledge and judge well. You see only God is able to judge the goodness or badness of people, situations and things. What Adam and Eve did was that they wanted to take the place of being God. We all do that still today. That is the very core and center of all our sin. Like Adam and Eve, we too have trespassed.

So we have rebelled, staged a coup, and we try to take control from the center. We are tempted over and over to take the role of God. And we are really bad at it, because we are not God. But because of centuries of sin, the whole world has been damaged by sin. We humans, who want to occupy the role of judge are flawed, limited and short on love. That’s why we are terrible at judging others or situations. We were not made to be the judge or take the role of God. But we pushed God out of the center and off the throne and apart from God we’ll fail every time.

In our honest moments we know how flawed our judgement is. A huge part of the reason our judgement is so messed up is that we judge people, situations, just about everything, as good or bad in terms how it affects me. Here’s how we judge. It is “good” if it helps me. It is “bad” if it hurts me. I’ll judge you or events by what’s best for me. I’ll even judge God. In my sinful, fallen place, I am in the end, my ultimate concern. Everytime we judge someone or something as good or bad we presume to be in a superior position to make that judgement. And one horrible result is that when we take

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the role of judge, real God-like love becomes almost an impossibility. It's easier to judge the person who annoys me than to love them. We prefer to judge rather than love.

I know what I'm saying is true. As I've prepared this message I've thought over and over - "I'm the most judgemental person I know." "I judge everything from what benefits me." It painfully true. It's true because I know me better than I know anyone else. Maybe others are worse, who knows? But I know that in my heart I judge people, behaviors and situations all the time in terms of what's good or bad by how they affect me.

And I'm a terrible judge because I don't really know what's in the hearts of others. I don't really know all the details of a circumstance. I don't know the motives of others. I'm not good enough, smart enough, wise enough and most of all, loving enough to judge well. I hate this part of me. If you can be honest, you hate that part of you too. And the worst part is this - I think of all the opportunities I've lost to love God and others.

And that's how and when religion jumps in. As judges taking the place of God, we create and embrace a moral system - a religious system. We have decided who and what is good and evil. We, on our own, try to live by the rules of religion on our way to being good. And we also know (the knowledge of good and evil) how to identify and separate ourselves from all the evil or bad people. That's religion! When we take the center, we try to make ourselves good. But what happens in religion of any kind is that we end up being MORE selfish and self-centered. In religion, it is all about us and all on us, after all, we have taken over the center of our world. So what do we do to lose our religion? What do we do to repair the damage done?

Our only hope of anything truly good is to restore God back to the center of lives. It is only when God is truly in the center, on the throne, that we have any chance of experiencing God's love and learning how to love God and love others like God. God's primary concern isn't to make us good. Yes, I said that right. You see, being and acting good is a result of God being in the center of our lives. God's will for us isn't for us to make ourselves good. It's to be filled with love and let love flow through us. Jesus fills us with the love of God which in fact makes us good and helps us do good things. But it is the love that comes first. That's what John the Apostle says; **We love because he first loved us - 1 John 4:19**. The only way we'll learn to love is to live in love first. And here's my point today: **It is not out of good that love comes, but out of love that good comes.**

Let me put it this way. When goodness becomes our focus first (our goodness or the goodness of others), that religious approach ends up being the goal and we never get much beyond that. We never really get to love by trying to be good or making others good. Rather, it is love which produces goodness. Rarely does goodness produce love. **Love creates holy people. Goodness produces religious people.**

We all know religious people who do good things, avoid lots of bad things, believe the right things. But we rarely experience God's outrageous love in and through religious

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people. We mostly get judged! That's why the apostle Paul said what he said in 1 Corinthians 13:1-3 (pg. 785 - NIV). Paul was constantly having to deal with the judgmentalism of religious people. Paul is contrasting a very religious person with a loving person. Paul writes: ***If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. 2 If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. 3 If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.*** To be able to say all the right religious things in the right way without love means you just make noise that annoys everyone. Senator Cory Booker said it so well. He said; *Don't tell me about your religion, first show it to me in how you treat other people. Before you preach to me of the passion for your faith, teach me about it through your compassion for your neighbors.* If you have a direct connection with God, know all the religious truths, hold all the right doctrines and have total faith in God to do miraculous things but don't have love - it amounts to nothing. To be so religious as to be able to sacrifice everything and be able to brag about it without love as the motive leaves you empty handed and your heart is empty. Paul is saying in the strongest way that he can that religion without love is a total miss. **It is not out of good that love comes, but out of love that good comes.** The love of God that fills us also changes us so love will flow out of us to others. Religion can't help us to love God or others. Only a loving God in us allows us to love.

When religious church people focus on good and evil the great temptation is to judge and condemn others who are not good or who do bad things. The sins religious people are loudest about are usually the ones they think they can manage pretty well themselves. But religious people inevitably become hypocrites because they pick and choose which sins to judge. They attack some sins that are rarely mentioned in the Bible while ignoring the ones talked about the most like greed, gluttony and gossip. Or they make some sins more serious than others, when in fact sin is sin. And the worst sin of all among religious people is that they have judged and failed to love.

Christians can be religious too. Here's how it might look. They try to do all the right things like go to church, give money to God, serve others. They try not to do the wrong things like cuss in public (it seems that in private it's okay!), smoke cigarettes or weed or drink too much. They believe they hold the right interpretations of the Bible and believe the right doctrines about how one is saved, who is saved, about the Holy Spirit, about miracles and how and when Jesus will return. Religious Christians engage in all the right rituals like baptism, communion, Bible reading, prayer, fasting and quiet time. Now all of these things, in and of themselves, are good and even necessary. But religious Christians do all this ultimately for themselves. And as Paul told us, they do all these good things without love. They miss the heart of Jesus. And the non-Christian world looks at the hearts empty of love and not only reject these religious people, the church, and Christianity but Jesus. And who can blame them. **It is not out of good that love comes, but out of love that good comes.**

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Jesus never called us to a new religion. He calls us to love and life. He offers an alternative to religion. The religious people came to him looking for a fight. They asked him what the rules were for a proper divorce, or the proper way to respond to the government or the right way to handle adultery or the right rules for keeping the Sabbath. He didn't get into a fight or argue theology. He offered an alternative way to look at these difficult issues. For example, once the religious people brought a woman caught in adultery to him and asked him what the religious law required. The law called for stoning. [Prop - a stone] Jesus asked; who among them had lived a perfect life to allow them to be the judge. He said; you who are without sin, cast the first stone. The religious people had to walk away. Jesus then said to the woman that he didn't condemn her and urged her to leave her life of sin. **It is not out of good that love comes, but out of love that good comes.**

It was the religious people that came to Jesus wanting his judgments regarding the right or wrong of things. Jesus tried to get them out of the judgement seat that belongs only to God and realize first that they were taking the place of God and that in fact they were guilty of the very sins they were addressing. Jesus wants to move us from judging people to become people of outrageous love. Jesus reminds us to put God back in the center and in control of our lives. Jesus keeps redirecting us from judging others to being centered on God and his love. What's so radical about Jesus is not some new religious system he introduced. What's radical about Jesus is that he invites us to become one with God. When God becomes the center of our lives, God will transform us. The love of God will change us and how we respond to life. Love doesn't need a list of religious rules or practices to follow.

So, I'm asking you to keep wrestling with this. Who's really at the center of you and your world? Do you continually go to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and sit in judgement of others? Or does God, who is wildly in love with you and whose very being is love, occupy the center position in your life? It's easy to figure out who's got the central place in your life. What flows through you? Continual judgment of others? Or does love flow through you? That comes from God who is love. Don't try to cure the symptoms of religion. Lose your religion. Replace it with Jesus.

Verbal Server cue:

Communion Intro: After communion I want you to know that we'll have an opportunity to give to our camp scholarship fund. Please give your regular giving in new boxes we've mounted at the exits in our all our rooms and in the lobby.

Communion today is a time to repent. We need to repent frequently. Repent of what? For pushing God out of the middle and taking over his role. We repent of being religious which results in being judgemental and hypocritical. In communion today we put down the rock of judgement (hold up rock). During communion we invite God to take back control of our lives and fill us with his love. We repent that we have had our way. We invite God to have his way with us. And in communion we are reminded about how

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much God loves us. PRAY.

Offering Intro:

Song: Close