

Losing Our Religion
Because of “Bad Faith”
July 23, 2017

PRE-SERVICE VIDEO

O Love That Will Not Let Me Go

Announcements – Shannon

Feature – “Dark Side” / Offering

Good morning everyone.

As Shannon said we’re in a series called *Losing Our Religion* – a look at some of the major reasons why more and more people (especially younger people) are turning away from “organized religion” and, in particular, Christianity and the church.

To this point we’ve examined what are probably the two most significant objections voiced by critics:

- That Christianity is harmful and

repressive to the world at large

- And that Christianity is anti-intellectual in general and anti-science in particular

And if you were not here either of the previous two weeks and would like to know more about those issues, you can watch, listen to or read the text of the message in the media section of our app and website.

Now, in both of those cases, we discovered that much of what critics find objectionable is not, in fact, what true Christianity teaches.

For example, in the first week, we saw that what most of us take for granted in our culture about being concerned for the welfare of people we don't even know and will probably never meet ... that sentiment, that consciousness, is rooted in Jesus' revolutionary redefinition of the word "neighbor" in the story he told of the Good Samaritan.

So ...

- Every time you give 20 bucks to a homeless guy on the street ...
- Or you contribute to a Go-Fund-Me campaign for someone a thousand miles away ...
- Or you run in a marathon to raise money so people in Africa can have clean water ...

... you're acting like a follower of Jesus even if you're *not* a follower of Jesus; even if you don't *believe* in Jesus as the Son of God and Savior of the World ... because you're following a principle that the very first Christians learned from Him and then, for centuries, propagated throughout the world ... to the overwhelming *betterment* of the world, not its harm.

Truth is ... you're a better person and this is a better place precisely *because* of Christianity, not in spite of it.

That said, however, there *is* a dark side to Christianity. And it's composed of many different elements including *us* – many of us here in this room who believe in Jesus and are trying to follow His teaching.

- We're hypocrites – we often say one thing and do another.
- We're judgmental – often critical of others who don't measure up to our standards (even though Jesus wasn't).
- We're fearful – often afraid to engage with people who are not like us (even though Jesus did).

Of course, this is precisely what you would

expect of a movement that has as one of its core tenets: “we welcome sinful people ... just as they are ... with no strings attached.”

By definition, *that* is going to be messy.

But there’s another element to the dark side of Christianity. I call it “bad faith.”

“Bad faith” is when people who are trying to follow Jesus are taught things or believe things that are distortions or exaggerations of the truth; and that teaching and that belief then causes emotional and spiritual damage.

And all of us know people who’ve experienced that; people who “lost their religion” (so to speak) because of “bad faith” in one form or another. Maybe even some of us turned away from God at some point in our lives because of “bad faith” – distortions or exaggerations of the truth.

And, this morning, I'm going to focus on a very specific type of bad faith; one that has caused a tremendous amount of emotional and spiritual pain for sincere followers of Jesus.

Why “Bad Faith” Is So Bad

And I'm going to do this for a very personal reason.

As most of you know, my mother (who is sincere follower of Jesus) has been battling lung cancer since last December. This past week, after seven (mostly) great months, she has taken a drastic turn for the worse and she is now in hospice care. According to those who know such things, she doesn't have much time left – maybe two days, maybe two weeks.

(And I want to say at this point I'm thankful to so many of you who have expressed your

support and offered prayers for her and for our family at this time).

Now, because my mom is a Christian and my dad is a Christian and my two sisters are Christians, and my wife and three adult daughters are Christians, there has been much discussion about the issue of *divine healing* in my family.

Of course, as a pastor, through the years I've had many similar discussions with sincere followers of Jesus in *this* family – North Heartland Community Church – believers in Jesus who have been, like my mom, facing some terrible disease with terrible consequences.

And if you are a Christian or you know a Christian who is facing such a situation, you know the discussion that I'm talking about.

- What about all the promises of healing in the Bible for God's children who are

suffering from illness or disease? Doesn't it say "by His stripes (referring to the beating Jesus took before the crucifixion) ... by His stripes we are healed?"

- What part does a person's faith play in what God does for them? If you don't believe, you won't receive, right? How much do you have to believe?
- And what does it mean, then, when a Christ-follower who prays for healing is not healed?

As my mom's disease has worsened, that last question has become the focal point.

As I told you several months ago in our series on prayer, when they first discovered she had cancer, they told us she would live at most two or three weeks without immediate treatment. And so we started chemo right away. And of

course, we prayed (me, my family, many of you)
... for healing ... a lot.

And the turn-around in my mother's condition was incredible, amazing and, dare I say it, *miraculous*. Just one week later she looked better than she had in years (even before she was diagnosed).

In fact, when she went to see the oncologist in that week his first reaction was, "Wow! You look great!"

And she said (and I told you this part before), "Doctor, you know why I am getting better? Because Jesus Christ is healing me."

And over the next six months, even as there were hints that things might going as well as they were at the beginning, she would still express that kind of faith. She would say something like "I'm not giving up because The Great Physician has not yet spoken."

But about a month ago, when the tests began to show the cancer returning in force and she began to feel more discomfort, that confidence turned to questioning, and then the questioning became despair.

“I put my hands on the TV like he said to do,” she said (referring to a TV preacher who I will not name). “And I’ve repented of all the years that I smoked cigarettes. I’ve repented of everything I can think of. Why is God not healing me?”

And I have to tell you that, as a son, it made me incredibly sad to see her suffer that kind of emotional and spiritual pain on top of her physical pain.

But, as a pastor ... well, let me put it like this:

When I saw my mom hit the wall last Tuesday, out of her mind with anxiety and pain, having to be checked into the ER at Liberty Hospital so

they could shoot her up with meds that would knock her out to calm her down ... and still, in the middle of all of it, she's talking about "The Great Physician" ...

I told my dad later that if I had seen that TV preacher walking down the hallway in that hospital, I would have punched him. There would have been a fistfight.

I would have lost, of course.

But at that point, I was *so* angry and frustrated at "bad faith" – the woefully poor and distorted teaching my mom and other members of my family have heard over the years ... the same teaching that a lot of you have heard as well ... the "name it and claim it" teaching that has caused many people to "lose their religion" when it doesn't work like they were promised that it would.

As I watched my mom on Tuesday afternoon, I

thought what about when the Apostle Paul knows he is about to die – unjustly, at the hands of the Romans ...”

... and he writes to Timothy?

*I have fought the good fight, I
have finished the race, I have
kept the faith.*

2 Timothy 4:7 (NIV)

Why isn't that considered to be as big of a victory – as miraculous even – as any healing is?

And what about where the Psalmist writes:

*Precious in the sight of the Lord
is the death of his faithful
servants.*

Psalms 116:15 (NIV)

And just to be clear by “faithful” it doesn't mean “never failing” because, as I said earlier, believers in and followers of Jesus are (among other things) hypocritical, judgmental and

fearful ... just like everyone else ... because we're all sinners.

But the point of that verse is this: *even people who love God and follow Jesus are going to die someday.*

And if there's no room for that in what we've been taught and in what we believe, then that what we have is "bad faith."

“Good Faith” Described

Now, let me add that I really don't think that those who teach what turns out to be "bad faith" do it *intentionally*.

Oh, I know there are a few here and there who are in it for the money and the fame (just as there are in any occupation), but I think that most "name it and claim it" preachers and teachers mean well. They believe that God is

real and active in the here and now and not just in the far and future, which is exactly what Jesus meant when he said “the Kingdom of God is at hand.”

And I agree with them!

But I think in the quest to help people experience the relevance of faith in Jesus for everyday life, *they sometimes overpromise* – or they neglect to give the complete picture of what faith really is and does, at least, as it’s described by those who followed Jesus in the very beginning.

For example, in the 11th chapter of the New Testament book of Hebrews, the writer (an unknown 1st century Christ-follower) is talking about faith, and he gives example after example of what it looked like in the life of well-known Old Testament heroes such as Moses, David, Samuel, Daniel, Rahab and others.

And he sums it their experience by saying ...

By faith these people overthrew kingdoms, ruled with justice, and received what God had promised them. They shut the mouths of lions, quenched the flames of fire, and escaped death by the edge of the sword.

Their weakness was turned to strength. They became strong in battle and put whole armies to flight. Women received their loved ones back again from death. Hebrews
11:33-35 (NLT)

Now, if you're reading that with a "name it and claim it" mindset your reaction is probably, "Well of course they did. That's what faith does. That's how it works."

However, the biblical writer doesn't stop talking about "faith" with that victorious thought.

Instead, he continues:

But others were tortured, refusing to turn from God in order to be set free. They placed their hope in a better life after the resurrection.

Some were jeered at, and their backs were cut open with whips. Others were chained in prisons. Some died by stoning, some were sawed in half, and others were killed with the sword.

Some went about wearing skins of sheep and goats, destitute and oppressed and mistreated.

They were too good for this world, wandering over deserts and mountains, hiding in caves and holes in the ground.

Hebrews 11:36-38 (NLT)

And then he says:

*All these people earned a good reputation because of their faith, yet none of them received all that God had promised.
Hebrews 11:39 (NLT)*

All of these people – both the ones who received because they believed AND the ones who *didn't* receive even though they did believe – *all* of them are to be held in high regard because *all* of them had faith in God; specifically, that He would eventually do what He promised to do even if they didn't experience it in their lifetime.

And when we understand that, and we understand that ...

Sometimes faith empowers us to stay faithful even when it doesn't "work" ...

... then we have "good faith" instead of "bad faith" because we have the complete picture and not just the sweetness and light.

Of course, a skeptic listening to all of this talk of “good faith” and “bad faith” (and my personal tale of woe) might, at this point, say something like ...

“Well, Rick, I hate to tell you but, you kind of just proved my point about Christianity. If we just didn’t have all these silly beliefs out there – like faith in divine healing – we wouldn’t have this problem. *You and your mom and your family* wouldn’t have this problem. I hate to say it, but you just gave a great example of why getting rid of Christianity would be a good thing.”

But exactly the opposite is true.

What’s really needed is not *less* Christianity; it’s *more* Christianity as it really is – and especially with respect this particular issue of divine healing – because *what God actually promises* for followers of Jesus is SO MUCH BETTER than

what many Christians have been taught or have come to believe.

And, in the time that I have left for this message, I hope to make that as clear as possible because I don't ever want to see another person who belongs to Jesus experience the questioning and despair my mom has in recent days.

And I don't think God does either.

Why We Expect "Healing"

So, let's get into it.

And let's start out by talking about why there might be an expectation that God would miraculously intervene and heal people today.

I think there are three main reasons:

- 1. The Gospels tell us that healing was a huge part of Jesus' ministry (and of the early**

church, too).

For example, in Matthew's telling of the story of Jesus we read that:

Jesus went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing all kinds of sickness and all kinds of disease among the people.

Then His fame went throughout all Syria; and they brought to Him all sick people who were afflicted with various diseases and torments, and those who were demon-possessed, epileptics, and paralytics; and He healed them.

Matthew 4:23-24 (NIV)

All-in-all, the four gospels record very specific accounts of 30 or so of those healings. Jesus was definitely a healer (and so were his first disciples), so that's one reason why believers

today might expect healing.

A second reason is ...

2. The instruction from James that followers of Jesus should ask church elders to “pray in faith” for their healing.

In the letter that James wrote (and James was the brother of Jesus and leader of the church in Jerusalem) ... we read in chapter 5:14-16 ...

Is anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise them up.

If they have sinned, they will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a

*righteous person is powerful
and effective.*

James 5:14-16 (NIV)

Sounds pretty clear doesn't it? The prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well (although that stuff about "confessing sin" sounds pretty important, too, which is why my mom was "repenting.")

One more reason a follower of Jesus might expect to be healed is ...

3. The assertion that believers *have already been healed* through Jesus' death (in fulfilment of prophecy).

And since it's already been accomplished, what we need to do is to claim in faith that blessing as our own.

This is based on the second of Peter's letters where it says in chapter 2 that ...

“He himself bore our sins” in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; “by his wounds you have been healed.”

*For “you were like sheep going astray,” but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls. 2
Peter 2:24-25 (NIV)*

And those three quoted phrases you see on the screen come from Isaiah 53 which is a prophecy of the Messiah written about 800 years before the time of Jesus.

Upon Further Review

Now, I want to make an observation about each of those reasons because I think the way they are often strung together can make a case that really isn't there; a case which winds up producing “bad faith” and brings about

emotional and spiritual pain when it doesn't "work."

Observation #1. Jesus was a healer but He didn't heal everyone.

For example, in John's recounting of the story of Jesus, one day Jesus goes to the pool of Bethesda in Jerusalem where "a great number of disabled people" were lying. Yet, he approaches only one man and asks him if he wants to be well (while neglecting all the others).

For example, Mark 1:29-39 records Jesus doing many healings one evening, but then leaving to go preach in other towns in the morning even as the disciples urge him to stay because "everyone is looking for you." Apparently word continued to spread about what he had done, so more people were coming to be healed. But he moved on anyway because the preaching was more important to Jesus than the healing.

For example, the apostle Paul had what he referred to as “a thorn in the flesh.” He prayed three times for the Lord to remove it and heal him and the answer was “no” all three times. “My grace is sufficient for you, Paul,” Jesus said. “My strength is made perfect in your weakness.”

Then, finally, there is the undeniable fact that millions of sincere Christians over 20 centuries have prayed to be healed ... and all have eventually died.

Jesus was a healer but He did not – and does not – heal everyone.

“Yeah, Rick, but maybe they just didn’t have enough faith.”

- I think Paul probably did.
- And I think the people who came to see Jesus before He left that town did,

otherwise they would not have come in the first place!

Plus, and this is the second observation I want to make:

Observation #2. The “prayer of faith” that James suggests isn’t to come from the sick person. It’s to come from the “elders” of the congregation ...

... which is why, after every service, one of our pastors (usually Kitti Homan) is down front ready to pray with people. She’ll be down front again this morning. Come on down.

Now, this doesn’t mean that we as individuals shouldn’t pray for healing. And it doesn’t mean that it’s unimportant to believe that Jesus truly can heal us.

But whenever I hear someone quote this verse, the emphasis is always on the part that says “the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person

well; the Lord will raise them up.”

What’s often overlooked, however, is that this promise seems to assume that the person who desires divine healing is part of a community of faith – a church – and under the scriptural authority of the pastors of that church.

“But, Rick, does that really matter?”

Why would James write it if it doesn’t?

Furthermore, I will tell you that over the years, I have seen the prayers I have offered *in faith ... as a pastor ...* bring about some dramatic healing in people. Not all the time. Not even most of the time. But *enough of the time* for me to notice it.

In fact, I wouldn’t doubt that my prayers over my mother *as a pastor* are part of the reason why she had such a dramatic initial response to her treatment.

In any case, the point I am making is that *all of what James writes* about healing matters ... which leads to the third observation. And this is probably the most important of all because it begins to move us to the heart of the matter, the real issue.

The “name it and claim it” school of theology (so to speak) tells us that believers have already been healed through Jesus’ death (in fulfilment of Isaiah’s prophecy), so we just need to believe it and receive it.

And I totally agree with that ... except for one thing: *the healing that Peter is talking about (and the healing that Isaiah is talking about in his prophecy) isn’t physical.*

They’re not talking about the Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth, healing individuals from cancer or MS or brain tumors or dementia or paralysis or whatever.

Observation #3. Instead, when Peter and Isaiah speak of the “stripes of Jesus” – the wounds of Jesus – they are referring to healing from sin and its deadly effect.

That’s because the *real* problem we have – the *real* condition from which we all need to be healed – isn’t some physical, mental or emotional disease. It’s the disease of *sin* because *sin* is what causes sickness, disease and eventually death.

“In the day you eat of this tree,” God told Adam, “you will surely die.”

“The wages of sin,” Paul wrote, “is death.” And “when Adam sinned, death entered the human race.”

Sin is the root cause of all sickness, disease and death. Sin is the problem.

And when you read what Isaiah wrote it becomes clear he is talking about healing from *that*.

He [Messiah] was pierced for our transgressions [individual sins] he was crushed for our iniquities [the state of being a sinner]; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and [here's the magic phrase] by his wounds we are healed.

... from *that*.

Furthermore ...

We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way [one way of defining what sin is]; and the Lord has laid on him [Messiah] the iniquity of us all. Isaiah 53:4-6 (NIV)

Or as Peter put it:

“He himself [Messiah Jesus] bore our sins” in his body on the

*cross, so that we might die to
sins and live for righteousness;
“by his wounds you have been
healed.” 2 Peter 2:24
(NIV)*

Jesus’ punishment and death is not about being healed from a specific illness or disease but from the eternally terminal condition of sin.

And we *do* have to “believe and receive” that; we *do* have to “name that and claim that” in order to be saved from our sin.

Now, at this point, I’m sure that some of you are thinking “wait a minute, Rick. Are you saying that God isn’t interested in physical, mental and emotional healing?”

Nope. That’s not what I am saying at all. God *is* interested in that kind of healing. And God *does* heal in those ways and will continue to heal in

those ways.

But there is a much bigger picture than most of us see. Or, to put it another way ...

Our understanding of *how* God heals and *from what* God heals is too narrow.

And that limited understanding leads to “bad faith” – a belief that causes spiritual and emotional damage.

Three Ways God Heals

So, let’s talk about how divine healing in the physical, emotional and mental dimension happens in the life of someone who follows Jesus.

There are three ways and they all start with the letter “M,” so this will be very easy for you to remember.

One way God heals is through ...

1. Miracles – where God supernaturally orchestrates a sudden change in a person’s body or mind (most often because of prayer) and “it” goes away ... yet only temporarily.

Why temporarily? Because, at some point, even the most faith-filled person dies.

Case in point; the multitudes that were healed by Jesus himself all died at some point. In case you haven’t noticed, those folks are not here anymore. Even the most amazing miracle of healing is only temporary.

Another way God heals is through ...

2. Medicine – where smart and gifted humans (i.e., researchers and health practitioners) bring about a change in a person’s body or mind and “it” goes away or diminishes ... yet, again, only temporarily.

Now, some would resist the idea that medicine

has anything to do with God but, as we saw last week, because we live in a rational world designed by a rational God, we humans can think and reason and discover and invent ... which means that whatever good things we discover and invent (like medicine) are, in a very real way, coming from Him.

“Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father,” James tells us. ⁱ

But the healing medicine can bring is only temporary because, at some point, even those who have received the best it can offer do pass away.

The final way God heals – and I mean that quite literally – *the final way* God heals is through what I’m going to call the ...

3. The “Massive Makeover” (and, if you’re wondering, I just made that term up because I’m a preacher and I need all my points to start with the same letter: Miracles, medicine

and the massive makeover.)

And what I mean by that term is the ultimate healing of *everything* – the whole world – when Jesus returns and what John writes in his Revelation finally comes to pass.

He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away. He who was seated on the throne said, "Behold, I am making everything new!"

Revelation 21:4-5 (NIV)

In an instant everything new ... a new heaven, a new earth ... including the physical bodies of all believers living and dead.

The Apostle Paul describes it like this in his letter to the church at Corinth:

In a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet ... the

dead [in Christ] will be raised imperishable, and we [who are still living] will be changed. For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality ...

Then the saying that is written will come true: "Death has been swallowed up in victory."

"Where, O death, is your victory?

Where, O death, is your sting?"

And parenthetically, as a reminder, Paul says:

(The sting of death is sin ...)

And then he concludes:

Thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you!

1 Corinthians 15:52-58

(NIV)

In other words, because you know the “massive makeover” is coming – do not be moved from your trust in God to do what God has promised to do even if you don’t experience his promise in this life.

Friends, the day is coming when all believers (alive or dead) are going to have a flesh and blood body that never gets sick and never dies. That’s why there will be no mourning or crying or pain. That’s the old order; the order we are under now; the order that is marred by sin and the sting of sin which is disease and death.

So, how does God heal? Through miracles and through medicine right now ... though only temporarily. But one day He will do so permanently through the massive makeover of all things.

That friends, is the big picture of healing that

leads to “good faith” instead of “bad faith.”

Getting Practical

But let’s get practical and, for me and my family, personal.

I believe my mom experienced a combination of the first two types of divine healing – miracle and medicine. She was not going to make it to Christmas, so we prayed, and there were great doctors and great medicine and she got better than she has been at any point over the past five years. It was amazing to see and experience.

But that healing was only temporary ... as it always is. The cancer she has will win ... and soon.

And yet ...

- Because of “the stripes of Jesus” ... the

wounds of Jesus ... the death of Jesus in her place ...

- And because she “believed and received” what He did for her on the cross
- Because she “named and claimed” Him as her savior ...

She *will* be healed ultimately and permanently on that day of the massive makeover; that day when he returns to make all things new ... including Doris Janelle McGinniss.

And *that* kind of healing will make the first two – which we have spent so much time agonizing over (and which we should agonize over because, as those created in the image of God, we are made to crave life) ... that kind of healing will make the first two kinds of healing she experienced – the miraculous answer to our prayers and the amazing medical people who

helped her – pale in comparison.

And when you know this and you believe this you really can stand firm in your trust of Him and nothing will move you from it.

And I hope that if you're a Christian – a believer in and follower of Jesus – that you *will* know it and *will* believe it as well. So, bottom line ...

- Pray hard for a miracle of healing.
- Get the best medicine has to offer.
- But when those fail you – and they will fail you – never forget that the greatest healing of all – the massive makeover – will be yours one day.

Now, one more thing I need to say and then I'll be finished. And this has to do with death itself

and what happens immediately afterwards to those who believe.

Unfortunately, lots of Christians think of death as the ultimate healing. But, that's not right because when healing comes, the condition of your body improves. You're able to do something you couldn't do before. But, in death, your body no longer functions *at all* which is *not* an improvement.

That's why it's important to understand it's the *resurrection* from death – the massive makeover – and not death itself that is the healing.

That may seem like splitting hairs but, practically speaking, what this means is that when believers die, our spirit goes to be with the Lord. And though it's not entirely clear what that is like, it is clear that that's is not the full and ultimate human experience (as many have been wrongly taught) because to be human *as God*

designed us requires a body. And you no longer have one.

So, our time with the Lord after we die will be like sleeping. Paul in 1 Thess 4:13 actually refers to death as “falling asleep.”

And I think of it like this: you get to have a wonderful dream and then you wake up when Jesus returns to make all things new – including you!

What a miracle! You were sick and feeling terrible, then you fell asleep to the best dream ever, then you suddenly wake up – completely and totally healed in a body that will live forever!

Communion

We have a way – 2,000 years old – to remind us that it is by Jesus’ wounds (his body and his

blood) that we are healed from sin.

Feature – “Peace” / Communion

Transition – “please stand and sing” (Richard)

Worship – “Lord I Need You”

Richard dismiss

Endnotes

ⁱ James 1:17