

Sunday Morning, March 4, 2012

Enjoying Your Religion

Matthew 11:28-30

Introduction:

- ❖ **Two Distinctly Different Approaches To "Religion"**

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Hebrews 10:25

Luke 10:25-37

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Galatians 5:22, 23

Enjoying Your Religion

Matthew 11:28-30

As Jesus went throughout Judea performing his ministry, he developed what many would consider to be an unlikely enemy: conservative, devout, religious Jews.

In the message I'm presenting today, I'll be contrasting the fundamental nature of their approach to God and his will with that of Jesus.

I'm sure you've guessed that I don't intend to defend the Pharisees—but neither is it my purpose to simply bash them. The fact is, they were in many ways good, sacrificial people.

They held their ground against the floodtide of an increasingly immoral and ungodly society, and sometimes at a great personal price. They weren't good at doing second mile religion, but they went the first mile, every tortured step of the way.

But, when it came to what Jesus called the more important matters of religion, they missed the boat. They failed to represent the nature and character and purpose of God to the world, and even to their own people.

That's why they deserve our sincere compassion rather than vilification. They didn't enjoy their religion.

I'm interested in this topic because I know that we are also ever in danger of approaching what we call "religion" in a way that prevents our enjoying our commitments, to God and to one another and to the watching world. We want to be on guard against that and avoid being swept along with the changing tide of religious culture.

These men--Pharisees--were the ones you would have expected to embrace the ministry of Jesus. They were bible believers, they looked expectantly for the coming Messiah, and they were strict in their obedience to the rules and requirements of the Old Testament.

Strangely, this was the source of their conflict with Jesus. You see, He didn't keep all the rules—not in the way they thought He should.

He didn't eat the right diet, he didn't follow all the rituals, and worst of all, he didn't keep the Sabbath--at least not like they thought he should.

But Jesus was very serious about keeping the law—that is, the Law of God. The inspired writers of the NT said that Jesus lived and died and was raised obedient to the Law of Moses—and there's the rub—not the Pharisaical translation of the Law of Moses.

And that's a huge difference today—how we tweak it—how we adjust the word of God to suit our own opinions and desires.

Regarding the Pharisaical Version of the Old Covenant, over the course of years since the law was given to Moses, Jewish teachers had developed hundreds of additional rules and regulations regarding Sabbath observance.

And these rules made it virtually impossible for anyone to faithfully keep the Sabbath. For example, you could walk only a certain number of steps, you couldn't cook, you couldn't talk about business, you couldn't help people, and you couldn't heal people.

If a man fell into a ditch on the Sabbath, they couldn't pull him out—but if one of their livestock suffered the same accident, they could rescue ol' Bessie.

They even had a religious way to deny their aging parents support. They called it Corban—which means this is the Lord's money. It has already been dedicated to the temple treasury. It's sort of like saying, "I gave at the office."

Mom and dad were left to feed on the north end of the chicken flying south. They had to take an old cold tater and wait—if there was anything left.

This was the greatest source of conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees--the fact that he would heal people on the Sabbath when their law clearly stated that one was not to do any work at all on the Sabbath.

One Sabbath Jesus and his disciples were walking through the grain fields and picked and ate some of the grain. The Pharisees challenged him, accusing him of breaking the Sabbath.

Jesus responded to their criticism by saying, "**The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath.**"
(Mark 2:27)

Let me get this straight with you from the beginning. In the Old Testament, under the actual Law of Moses, a man was put to death for picking up sticks on the Sabbath.

Yet, Jesus used David feeding his hungry men with the bread meant only for the Priests to illustrate the statement that “the Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath.”

It isn't difficult for us to figure out the difference between these two examples. In some situations, he called upon a higher law, as he did in the case of the woman caught in the act of adultery.

This was not being lax on the law. He demonstrated that special circumstances alter cases—and in no way was he giving us a loophole that allowed us to sin. Jesus was serious about the law—but he was no legalist.

The Lord instructs us to “not forsake the assembly.” But if we are hurrying along the Jericho road to get to church some Sunday and see a poor man lying in his own blood, the Lord won't hold us to that “don't forsake the assembly” commitment—in fact, he'll hold us to a higher commitment.

He'll **hold us to the point Jesus was making** in that **Good Samaritan parable**. I'm not guessing—in conclusion, Jesus told the lawyer, **“Go and do like Good Sam.”**

We're not so legalistic as to misunderstand this. We even coined a phrase to cover such circumstances. We call it **“providentially hindered”**.

But I'm not sure a fishing trip applies here. Jim Williams, who worked in his yard on his day off, used to remind me that Jesus called the apostles away from fishing—and that when they backslid, they went back to it.

Before anyone jumps me after services, I guess it could, under some circumstances—like you took an unbelieving friend with you to teach him the gospel or a troubled brother to counsel while you waited for a bite. But I'm a little cautious about claiming providential hindrance.

We're not suggesting minimizing the importance of what God has clearly instructed us to do and not do. Some, in a radical move to avoid a legalistic approach to salvation, worship and service have tried to make clearly literal instructions figurative.

While the **Pharisees *added* legal rules**, we have a tendency to try to promote spiritual motivations in our relationship with God and with others by ***subtracting* his literal expectations** of us.

In either case, that's **bad math**. We're not going to do that. Surely we can **walk and chew gum at the same time**. Jesus said we **can** and **should**, in **Mathew 23:23**.

The point is **that religion and spirituality do not have to be mutually exclusive**. The Bible shows us that **we can and should be both religious and spiritual in our relationship with God**.

The fact is, as the song says, like ***"love and marriage, horse and carriage, you can't have one without the other."***

The problem with the Pharisees was that they were religious, but they weren't spiritual. And Jesus' attitude was this: when your religion gets in the way of your spiritual life, lose your religion—because you've taken the wrong approach.

I'm using the word **"religion"** to define a **certain attitude**

and practice by which we approach God. The word can refer to **either** the **instructions of God** or to the **traditions of man**.

The **traditions of man** are sometimes merely **positive circumstantial expediencies**—unless they come into conflict with God's revealed will.

Throughout history every tribe, nation, and culture has had some kind of religious life. All of them, far as I know, contain some measure of biblical truth.

Other than that, these religions may appear to be as different from one another as night and day, but they are all fundamentally the same, because they are all systems designed by men to help them reach God.

In fact, that's how you could define religion: man's attempt to reach God. In Christianity, however, it is God reaching down to man, inspiring us to reach up to him.

The message of the gospel is that God reaches down to us through His son Jesus Christ. The message of the gospel is that God is willing to do whatever it takes for us to be in a right relationship with Him.

If there are sins, He will forgive them; if there are obstacles, He'll remove them; if there is gap between God and man, He'll bridge the gap--even at the price of sending his Son to die for our sins.

God's attitude toward us is that whatever it takes for us to be right with him, he is willing to do. In fact, he's already done everything that can be done, and He is waiting for us to respond.

The message of Jesus was so radically different from the teaching of the Pharisees that one couldn't be a religious Pharisee and a faithful follower of Christ at the same time.

The two philosophies didn't mix. They're like an acid and an alkali--one rejects the other. Christianity isn't a religion--not in the sense that we use the word today.

By its very nature, this kind of religion can only lead to guilt or pride. In either case, it culminates in dissatisfaction. You invest a lot—but you don't enjoy your religion.

If you have a strict set of standards and you're one of the few who can stick to those rules, then you've got reason to be proud.

And your attitude toward more obvious sinners than yourself turns from compassion to judgmental criticism. While the tax collector praying in the temple and receiving God's forgiveness, the Pharisee was congratulating God for being teamed up with such a fine fellow as himself.

And to illustrate the point, he dragged the poor publican into his prayer, assigning the ugliest sins he could think of to this man.

The Pharisees scorned the sinner as unworthy of their company. The Bible says, however, that "when Jesus looked out on the multitudes, **he had compassion, for they were like sheep without a shepherd.**

Check Paul's attitude toward himself and others when he believed himself to be a perfect Pharisee—without peer in righteousness. Regarding the Law, he declared himself faultless.

And if you have a strict set of standards and you find yourself unable to live up to them, then you've got reason to feel guilty. Even Paul didn't live up to them perfectly. It was only comparing himself with others that made him think so.

Unfortunately many people equate Christianity with that very idea--that those who are good at it have reason to be proud and those who aren't good at it have reason to be guilty.

But Christ wants to take us beyond all of that and bring us to the point where we can make the transition between being merely religious to being truly spiritual.

He wants us to recognize that Christianity is not living out a bunch of do's and don'ts; it's living out a relationship with a Father who loves us—which causes us to obey the doctrinal and moral instructions—the do's and don'ts—out of spiritual rather than legal motivations.

Apply that to marriage. The word of God to husbands and wives is that they should love and respect and defer to the needs of one another.

That's the biblical law. It's an obligation. And the application instructions couldn't be much clearer than they are. But she won't be impressed if your vow to love and cherish is duty motivated, however it's expressed.

Keeping her well fed and clothed and protected from the elements and giving her annual presents on selected special

days won't satisfy her desire and need to be loved and cherished.

The point is that God doesn't want that kind of obedience either—in anything we do in our relationship with him. Jesus gives us a glimpse of the difference between spiritual and religious motivation in Matthew 11:28-31.

Finding Spiritually Motivated Religion

A. Come to Me

In this passage we see three things we can do to take ourselves beyond being merely religious to becoming truly spiritual. First of all, he says **Come to me.** ...

(v. 28) Come to me all who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.

Jesus taught that He is the way, and He made it clear that He is the only way. He said: ***"I am the way, the truth, and the life, and no one comes to the Father but by me."*** (John 14:6)

"I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life." (John 8:12)
"I am the bread of life." (John 6:35) ***"Whoever believes will have eternal life." (John 3:16)***

The New Testament teaches that Jesus is the focus of all creation, the very center of the universe. And He says to us "Come to me...make me the center of your life, and I will

give you rest."

Most of us understand this principle as it applies to salvation. We can all say with assurance that Jesus is the only way to the Father. Most of us are at least familiar with the verse that says:

There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved. (Acts 4:12)

We know that Jesus is the door to salvation, but we often forget that he is the door to what he called the more abundant life. We trust Jesus to save our soul but many of us are afraid to trust Him to make us happy.

We try to be happy without Him. We try to be successful without Him. We try to make our own rules and play the game our way, and as a result we end up carrying a burden too great to bear.

We all carry burdens and we all deal with challenges and problems in life. Jesus has extended the invitation to us all:
Come to me, and I will give you rest.

The problem is that some of us aren't yet able to admit that our burden is too great to bear. And some of us aren't

willing to admit that we can't make it on our own.

We're just too proud to say, "Jesus, I'm weak. I need someone who is strong." When we come to the point where we can acknowledge our need for him, we open the door to receiving his help. Maybe you should ask yourself, in what area of my life am I trying to make it without God's help?

Here's a preacher story that all of us who dare preach and teach—and all others who don't—can and should identify with and personalize. It's a little long, but worth the read.

I always wanted to be the perfect father. I studied a great deal about the subject of parenting and child-rearing, I took classes in college dealing with child development and family relationships, I studied what the Bible taught about parenting, and I was convinced that--at the very least--I was almost an authority on the subject of biblical parenting.

So, with a great deal of pride and arrogance I approached the subject, and freely gave people my advice on parenting--and this was before I had children or even was married!

I preached a sermon called The Principles of Successful Parenting. Of course, this all changed when my daughter was born.

I soon realized that "field parenting" isn't as easy as "theoretical parenting." I had to change the title of my sermon to: Some Helpful Suggestions for Moms and Dads.

And then my oldest son was born, and I learned that being a good parent isn't just difficult--it's almost impossible. The title of the sermon became Feeble Hints for Fellow Strugglers. After our youngest was born, I did away with that sermon altogether.

If we want to make the transition from being merely religious to being truly spiritual, we must get to the point where we can admit our weakness to ourselves and to God. It is then that we can respond to Jesus' invitation, "Come to Me." And when we lay those burdens at His feet, He will carry them for us. And He will give us rest.

Finding Spiritually Motivated Religion **B. Take my yoke upon you.**

The second thing Jesus says is...

(v. 29) Take my yoke upon you and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.

Jesus is referring to an agricultural method that was common in the first century. The yoke is the instrument that binds the ox to the plow.

Whenever a young ox needed to be trained he would be attached to the yoke of an older ox. The older ox would pull the yoke and the younger ox would follow in his footsteps and learn all the steps even though he wasn't actually pulling any of the load.

When Jesus says, "take my yoke upon you" he's saying "walk in my footsteps, go the way that I go, and take the paths that I take--let me carry the load and let me teach you

how to live." He reminds us that the process doesn't have to be torture: in verse 30 he says, ***"My yoke is easy and my burden is light."***

Jesus is challenging us make a commitment to discipleship. He's challenging us to make a commitment to walk the walk, to follow Him, to be like Him.

And He says that He will make it as easy as possible, though we know that following Jesus is not always going to be easy. Even through the tough times He will be pulling the yoke, he will be carrying the load. Next, Jesus says...

Finding Spiritually Motivated Religion **C. You will find rest.**

(v. 29-30) I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.

What exactly does Jesus mean by **"rest for your souls"**? The Greek word translated rest means, literally, an **intermission**. Jesus is promising us **an opportunity to receive a second wind**.

He never promises us an easy life, but he does promise us a good life. He never promises that our circumstances will

always be pleasant, but He does promise that we can experience tranquility in the midst of the storm. Listen to His words...

Peace I give you... (John 14:1) These things I have spoken unto you that in me you might have peace. (John 16:33) I have come that they might have life and that more abundantly. (John 10:10) and in this passage...(v 28) "I will give you rest."

In spite of what is happening in our lives, we can experience God's peace--even in the midst of turmoil. Unfortunately, many of us have just the opposite experience.

We live relatively easy lives, but we are so concerned with externals that we miss Christ's promise for peace. Like the minister quoted earlier who had shut out Christ from his ministry, we experience success and prosperity, but we never find rest for our souls.

Jesus' promise to you today is You will find rest for your soul. You will get the second wind that you need. You can experience the peace that you're looking for. But you can't make it happen--you can only let it happen.

The most exciting and risky play in baseball is the squeeze play. There's a runner on third, and he's not waiting to get knocked in--he just takes off for home plate as soon as the pitcher starts his windup.

The batter has to get his bat on the ball and get out of the way so the base runner can get to the plate, no matter how far outside the pitch is.

And the base runner just keeps coming, plowing into the catcher if he has to. It's the most aggressive play in baseball, and it brings the crowd to their feet to see it done right.

The bad thing is, many of us live like that all the time. Every day of our lives, every relationship, every job, every event is one squeeze play after another. We don't wait for the details to fall into place, we just push through, mowing down any obstacle in our path.

Obviously, this is not the way to experience peace. Listen to Jesus' words... "I am gentle...I am humble in heart...My yoke is easy...My burden is light."

The only way to experience rest is to surrender the reins of our lives to Christ, and follow His way. And His way is not pushy, it is gentle.

Religion without spiritual motivation can be exhausting. It can drain your energies and dump cold water on your enthusiasm. But Jesus has promised us rest.

There's a big difference between being religious and being spiritual. Being religious is trying to reach God on your own--**it's a squeeze play badly executed.**

Jesus wants you to lose your worship of religion. He wants you to trade it in on a relationship with God, so that you can experience what all religions offer but none have been able to deliver: rest...peace...joy.

On your own, you can't make it happen, but if you will put Christ at the center of your life, He'll make it happen. Let whatever good thing you do for God or anyone to whom you have made vows or commitments be the product of God's Spirit living in you. That's the only way to enjoy your religion.

If you're not a Christian, if you haven't obeyed the gospel and been baptized for the forgiveness of sin and risen to be a member of God's family, I want you to know that the instructions of God regarding salvation are not figurative.

You can't make salvation by faith merely mean belief. James said that. You can't take literal obedience out of the biblical meaning of faith.

If you desire obeying the gospel or need our help in any other way, contact us via phone, email or in person at any of our worship services.