

They Met Jesus:
Losing My Religion

The elders will probably start church discipline proceedings against me for saying this but I have to agree with a statement made that noted American philosopher, Larry Flint. Larry Flint is best known, of course, as the publisher of Hustler magazine.

In an article (not in Hustler, it's not on my reading list) Flint said, "Religion has caused more harm than any other idea since the beginning of time. There's nothing good I can say about it. People use it as a crutch."

I'd have to say "amen" to that. Religion, in the strictest sense of the word, is absolutely destructive. Now I know that people give different definitions to the word "religion" but etymologically "religion" comes from the Latin word *ligare*, which means "to bind" (English: ligament) and the prefix *re* which means "again."

So literally religion means "to bind again" and it comes from the concept of restoring the break between God and humanity.

We sense that something is wrong between our creator and us. We figure that if we do something for Him, if we please Him in some way, we can make it right again. So down through the ages people have created religions.

Unfortunately, as Karl Marx wrote, "Religion is the opium of the people." Religion makes us think we're OK with God because of what we do. Like opium, it lulls us into a false sense of security. It keeps us from seeing that it's God who's the savior, not us.

I believe that God wants us to lose that kind of religion from our lives. Not faith. Not commitment to scripture. Not obedience to God, but man-made religious ideas that put us at the center and make God a means to an end rather than the end itself.

This is the fifth week of a series we're calling "They Met Jesus." The gospels are filled with accounts of Jesus addressing crowds as well as smaller groups of people. But nestled in between those group meetings the gospels also detail some individual encounters. These are times when Jesus focused in on one individual at a time.

We've been centering this study on some of those individuals and the dialogue that went on between them and Jesus. Today we want to look at a unique situation in which a man born blind gains his sight and in the process loses his religion.

Open Bibles to John 9 page 1052

I. Religion Introduces False Beliefs Into God's Truth

Read verses 1 & 2

Isn't this interesting? The guy was born blind but the disciples ask who sinned, this man or his parents? Why would they ask that? Well, they asked that because Jewish people in the first century were caught up in the Jewish religion.

When God established His people the Jews, He didn't inaugurate a new religion. He reestablished a faith system with Himself at the center.

Adam and Eve disobeyed God and brought on themselves the wages of sin which is death. God killed an animal and clothed them to show that only He could cover their sin. All they could do is believe.

Later God chose Abraham and promised to bless the world through Him. *And he believed in the LORD, and He accounted it to him for righteousness.* (Genesis 15:6) God did the work of forgiveness based on Abraham's faith.

Abraham's descendants were to be a kingdom of priests. Even when God gave Israel His laws He reminded them, *Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the children of Israel: "You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to Myself."* (Exodus 19:4 & 5)

God was saying I'm your deliverer. Trust me. He said, *For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.* (Isaiah 43:3)

I am the LORD your God ever since the land of Egypt, and you shall know no God but Me; For there is no Savior besides Me. (Hosea 3:14)

That was the very opposite of religion. But God's people couldn't understand the beauty of faith alone. They thought that the way to God was to keep His commandments and they turned Judaism into a works system of religion.

Religion is never about grace. Religion is never about God forgiving because He

provides the payment for sin. Religion is about earning our way to God through our own goodness. So the first century Jews carried religion to it's logical end and assumed that anything bad in life had to come directly from a person's sin.

If you were rich, you must be righteous. If you were healthy, you must be a good person. If you were poor, you obviously were living in rebellion. If you were sick you must have sinned.

So the disciples ask the question, *Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?*”

Religion brings such confusion that the Rabbis even thought that it was possible to sin in the womb. If your parents were good people but you were born with a birth defect (and suffering came from sin) then you must have sinned in the womb!

I. Religion Introduces False Beliefs Into God's Truth

II. Religion Can't Solve Our Spiritual Dilemma

The miracles of Jesus were never random or haphazard. They were always specific and personal.

God predicted through Isaiah that when Israel's Messiah came *the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped. Then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the dumb sing. For waters shall burst forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert.* (Isaiah 35:5 & 6)

Jesus' miracles were designed to help people who were suffering, but more than that they were designed to authenticate His messiahship (which is why He didn't heal everybody.)

Interestingly, the miracle that Jesus did more than any other was to give sight to the blind. I believe there's a reason for that. Blindness is the most accurate picture of where we are spiritually without God.

And in this case not only was this guy blind, but he was a beggar. He had nothing of his own. He was completely and totally dependant. What a picture of us. Spiritually needy and helpless with absolutely no ability to fix our problem.

Here's why we don't need religion, we need a savior.

Read verses 3 – 7

Here's the answer to their question. This man's not blind because of some specific sin. He's blind so that God might be glorified. He's blind because when Jesus opens his eyes it will be evident to any honest seeker that Jesus is Lord.

You might be thinking, "Wow. Isn't that unfair? Isn't that harsh? This guy had to live in blindness and poverty for years just so God can be exalted. Just so Jesus might be identified as Messiah?"

Here's how I look at that. If I had my choice I'd rather be a physically blind, grubby beggar, living on the side of the road, relying on handouts, who received new life from Jesus than to be rich and healthy and have my prosperity blind me from my need of God's grace and end up in hell.

I don't have all the answers to why we suffer in this life but I do know this: whatever is for God's glory in us, will ultimately bring God's blessing to us.

Here's the point of what's going on. Here's the spiritual lesson.

Jesus healed a man who had been blind from birth. This guy didn't need to have the prescription of his glasses changed anymore than reforming your life could get you to heaven. He didn't need his vision corrected any more than education could make a person right with God. Even eye drops couldn't help him see any more than the externals of religion could give anyone eternal life. He needed a miracle from God.

Religion can't solve our spiritual dilemma.

I. Religion Introduces False Beliefs Into God's Truth

II. Religion Can't Solve Our Spiritual Dilemma

III. Religion Accentuates The Minor Issues And Misses The Major Ones

Read verse 13

The Pharisees were thought to be THE spiritual authorities in Israel so the people who saw the miracle bring the man to them.

In the chapter just before this one Jesus told these religious leaders that they were of their father the devil, the God was His Father, that they should love Him because God

sent Him, and the real clincher, that He was the I Am, a title reserved for Jehovah God Himself.

Chapter 8 closes with them attempting to stone Jesus for blasphemy.

Now there's a man standing in front of them who had been healed of blindness at the hand of Jesus. It's pretty hard to argue with an obvious miracle that only the Messiah could perform so they all fall to their knees in repentance and faith and become Jesus' disciples. Not.

Read verses 13-22

Follow this. God had commanded Israel to keep the 7th day as a day of rest. From sundown Friday till Sundown Saturday is the Sabbath. Here's what God said, *The seventh day is the Sabbath of the LORD your God.*

In it you shall do no work. For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it. (Exodus 20:10 & 11)

Now God didn't rest because He was tired after all the hard work of creation. He rested because He was finished. And ultimately the Sabbath was to point to the rest they had in God who is the Savior.

But religion exalts the symbol and misses the meaning. The Jews got all caught up in trying to define work instead of glorying in the rest that they had in God.

The Rabbis eventually came up with a list of 39 prohibited actions on Shabbat. The list included sowing, reaping, plowing, baking, starting a fire, extinguishing a fire, writing 2 letters, erasing 2 letters, tying, untying, and hitting with a hammer.

All of these tasks were prohibited, as well as any task that operates by the same principle or has the same purpose. In addition, the rabbis prohibited handling any implement that was intended to perform one of the above purposes (for example, a hammer, a pencil or a match) unless the tool is needed for a permitted purpose (using a hammer to crack nuts when nothing else is available) or needs to be moved to do something permitted (moving a pencil that is sitting on a prayer book), or in certain other limited circumstances. Judaism 101

This is the downside to laws. The interpretation of a law can get pretty complicated. Especially when you have to interpret the interpretations. And what happens is the nuances of the law become the focus.

So here's the evaluation of Jesus by some of the Pharisees: *This Man is not from God, because He does not keep the Sabbath.*

How did Jesus break the Sabbath command? *He spat on the ground and made clay with the saliva; and He anointed the eyes of the blind man with the clay.*

Religion loves rules. Religion elevates the rules and forgets their purpose. Religion concentrates on the letter of the law and completely misses the spirit.

Here's a blind man who can now see and instead of celebrating, the Pharisees are trying to discredit what happened in his life.

Read verse 17

Here's the irony of religion. The supposed theological experts are asking an untaught, blind beggar for his theological opinion of Jesus. John sarcastically still calls him "the blind man."

The Pharisees who considered themselves far removed from blindness were asking a blind man for his take on things! Under any other circumstances they wouldn't have even talked to a guy like this, let alone quiz him on his theological opinions.

But the man who had met Jesus and had his eyes opened had an answer. It was probably the highest assessment he could make of a man of God so he says, "He's a prophet." He's probably thinking, "Duh. Who else could have done this?" He was putting Jesus in the highest place he knew but they were so blinded by religion they couldn't even see the obvious.

We need to be so careful we don't get caught up in the same trap. The Pharisees thought they were standing for truth. They thought they were serving God.

I hear people say, "That guy wore a ball cap to church. How offensive. He needs to be straightened out. The elders need to deal with him. That girl got a tattoo. What's with these kids today? They claim to be Christian. That music is worldly. God isn't honored

unless we're playing an organ and singing "The Old Rugged Cross."

No wonder other people look at Christianity and think we're a bunch of legalists. Sometimes we are.

God forbid that we would see an external and miss the person.

The Pharisees keep pushing here. Now they want Mom and Dad to evaluate theologically! Look at their answer.

Read verses 20-23

The Pharisees were backed into a corner by their own religious presuppositions. They couldn't deny a miracle had taken place. The guy was looking right at them. So what did they do?

They tried to separate the miracle from the one who did the miracle and threaten anyone who confessed Jesus as the Christ.

Say "Jesus is Messiah" and you would be barred from the synagogue. You might wonder what's the big deal with that but remember; to the Jewish people the synagogue was their contact point with God.

Judaism had a priesthood. You didn't go to God directly, you went to the priest who communicated with God for you. So, to be put out of the synagogue was the equivalent of being banished from a relationship with God.

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II. Religion Can't Solve Our Spiritual Dilemma

III. Religion Accentuates The Minor Issues And Misses The Major Ones

IV. Religion Exalts Tradition At The Expense Of Spiritual Reality

First they say this probably isn't even the same guy. Then when it's established that the man who could now see was actually the man who was born blind look what they say...

Read verse 24

This man was once blind but now he could see. He met Jesus face-to-face and he knew what Jesus had done for him. Notice, now John calls him "the man who was blind."

But religion says, “My mind’s made up, don’t confuse me with the facts.” All this is happening publicly so Jesus’ critics want the man to say, “Yes I’m healed but it wasn’t Jesus. He’s a sinful man so obviously it was God who healed me.”

In Greek you can shift around word order for emphasis and in verse 24 the “we know” is emphatic. It’s like they’re saying, “We’re the learned ones. We have the training. We’re the holy Jewish leaders so we know best and if you’re smart you’ll agree with us.”

Now just try to put yourself in the place of the man. He’s been a nobody all of his life. There was no provision in Jewish society to help the disabled. In fact, remember the disciples question about who sinned? This man had lived all of his life under the false stigma of the curse of God. Now he can see because of a Jewish rabbi who was preaching the kingdom of God.

Suddenly he’s put on the spot. Do you agree with the learned teachers who are revered by the people and the experts in religion or do you side with the One who just miraculously gave you your sight?

Read verse 25 *a He answered and said, “Whether He is a sinner or not I do not know.*

I can’t get all theoretical here. I can’t get caught up with hypotheticals like you teachers. All I can do is stick to the facts.

One thing I know: that though I was blind, now I see.”

And when they kept on bugging him he came up with one of my all time favorite biblical responses...

Read verse 27

They were steaming. You could probably see the smoke coming out of their ears. So look where they go. They go where religion so often goes, to tradition.

Read verse 28-29

They couldn’t discredit the miracle; it happened. They couldn’t separate the miracle

from Jesus; it was obvious to everyone that Jesus was responsible for the man's sight.

So they said in effect, "We don't know how this happened or what part this Jesus had in it, but we do know that God has spoken to us through Moses and that's all we need to know, so bug out. We're comfortable with our traditions and we don't appreciate you rocking the boat."

Traditions have closed more hearts to the good news of the gospel than anything else.

One denomination says this, "There may be, there is in fact, there must be of necessity, certain revealed truths apart from those contained in the Bible. Holy scripture is not the only source of revelation made by God to His church. Side by side with scripture there is tradition."

Why would they say that? Because what they teach about salvation and eternal life flatly contradicts the clear teachings of Jesus in the Bible. If you're going to contradict the Bible you have to have some system of authority other than revealed truth so they go to tradition and multitudes of well meaning, sincere, religious people have followed them into confusion.

Flip back to chapter 8 for a moment. Read verses 32 & 33

God did work through Abraham. God made promises to Abraham. The Jews were the descendants of Abraham. All that was true.

What wasn't true was their belief that because they were descendants of Abraham they didn't need a savior. When Jesus came to set them free they reverted back to their traditions and ignored the clear predictions of the coming Messiah.

Jesus had some pointed things to say about substituting tradition for truth. In Matthew 15 He said to the Phisees, *Why do you also transgress the commandment of God because of your tradition?* (Matthew 15:3) and *You have made the commandment of God of no effect by your tradition.* (Matthew 15:6)

Religion Exalts Tradition At The Expense Of Spiritual Reality

And even though we claim that the Bible is our only source of authority we can fall for confusing traditions too.

Think about this...Everytime we call this building “the church” (which we probably all do at times) or “the Lord’s house” we’re bowing to tradition. This is the meeting place but it’s not the church. The Bible says believers are the church.

Why is that important? Because we can begin to think that we go to church on Sunday and then leave the church Monday through Saturday. We can begin see our worship as one day a week instead of every day. We can begin to see this as the place we practice our faith but forget that we’re the Lord’s house. If our body is the Lord’s house then God’s with us 24/7 365. That not only effects how we live, it impacts our awareness of His presence.

Every time we call this room “the sanctuary” we’ve used misleading traditions to shape our view. This isn’t the sanctuary. The Bible says, *Do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own?* (I Corinthians 6:19) So a believer’s body is the true sanctuary.

What’s the practical application of that biblical truth that we’d miss if we thought this room was the sanctuary? The next verse in I Corinthians 6...

For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God’s. (I Corinthians 6:20)

Religion can be so dangerous. It can lull us to sleep until we totally miss God’s truth.

The Pharisees never did get it. In fact, at the end of chapter 9 they throw the man out of the Synagogue. But when they did Jesus quickly sought him out.

Isn’t that just like God? Religion casts out but God seeks us out. Look what Jesus asks him...

Back to chapter 9 Read 35b-39

Jesus came into the world to open the eyes of all who were open to truth and blind the eyes of all who were closed to truth. In the end the Pharisees became more confirmed in their religion, but the blind man lost his religion. He traded it in for something so much more valuable. He lost his religion and found a relationship with the living God.

Which group do you fit in today?

In the next chapter Jesus says these words to those who are open to truth; *I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd gives His life for the sheep.* (John 10:11)

The reason that Jesus could open the eyes of the blind, call Himself the Son of God, and accept worship is because He was God in the flesh. The evidence is overwhelming.

But the reason He could give forgiveness and life is because our creator gave His life as savior on a cruel cross to pay the price sin demanded.

The chapter concludes with solemn words...

Read verses 40

I'm sure they had expected Jesus to say, "Yes you are." But instead He says no.

Read verse 41

If you were really blind you'd have an excuse but since you still believe your religious traditions, since you say you see truth, then you're guilty. You're condemned for not believing the truth.

Have you had your eyes opened? Have you seen that man-made religion and tradition distort the truth of salvation but that Jesus Christ personifies the truth that God truly is our savior.

Have you received sight and life from the Lord of Life?