

Series: CrossRoads – When Jesus Went Over the Line

March 29, 2009

RELIGION AT THE CROSSROAD

Matthew 23

I. INTRO

- A. I can't help myself—I **love** chase scenes in movies—and I can remember when I **fell** in love with them! It was in the movie, **Bullitt**—where Steve McQueen is driving a souped up 68 Mustang—and chasing these two guys in a 440 magnum Dodge Charger. Anyone ever seen it?

-Of course, the suspense in watching a chase scene is that you **know** it's not going to end well for someone—like both cars are going to slow down and park. There's almost always some kind of a high speed collision—usually at a crossroads.

1. After a ministry of only 3 years, Jesus was at the crossroads. No one knew it at the time, but it was the crossroads of history. There would be, in fact, a high speed collision—and things would change forever. It would appear that Jesus **knew** this intersection was coming, exactly what would happen to him--and that when the dust settled, he'd be dead.

2. And the question is—why would **anyone** want Jesus dead? The image of Jesus sometimes created in our world is of this soft, loving, happy peace-loving religious teacher who was throwing kisses and telling everyone just to love each other a little more. Kinda like a first century Mister Rogers; *"It's a wonderful day in the neighborhood...!"*

-I mean, who would want to kill Mister Rogers? But when you read the actual records of what Jesus said and did and claimed—you don't see Mr. Rogers. You see a loving but powerful man who **provoked** the religious leaders of his day. When you read the text, you want to say, "Jesus—why are you antagonizing these guys? They're the **good** guys! They're on **your** team." And that's the real question, isn't it? **Were** they on His team?

3. It seems to me that only someone with a death wish would **intentionally** head into an intersection—**knowing** that there's going to be a high speed collision! And yet knowing that the religious leaders are lying in wait for him, Luke records:

Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem. (Luke 9:51b NLT)

-Jerusalem was the religious powder keg of that day. And Jesus was going there at the single most sensitive time of the religious calendar, **Passover** week—commemorating Israel's miraculous release from slavery in Egypt. And He **knew** there'd be trouble.

- B. Jesus knew that there are some things in life that will **never** change—unless you face them head on. Think about it—does cancer change if you just ignore it—and try to make it your friend? How about drug addiction? Marriage problems? Criminal behavior? This stuff **never** changes—unless there's a crossroads. Sometimes a tough, **messy** crossroads!

-And it's where Jesus' road meets the cross—that we see Jesus' incredible courage—and love. And power. How many of you would say, "I'm not an **ambulance** chaser—but I am interested in hearing about this high-speed collision between Jesus and religion?"

II. JESUS & RELIGION = OIL & WATER

- A. So, here's the story. Jesus arrives in Jerusalem—and he's hailed by this immense crowd as the Son of David; the King who comes in the name of the Lord. For the religious leaders—this was the last straw. This was **Messiah** language—and the religious leaders had already decided that the only way to stop Jesus was to kill him. -Well, the first thing Jesus does is go to the Jewish temple with a whip and drive out all the people doing business there—exchanging money, hawking kosher animals for sacrifice—basically ripping off the people who came to do business with God. It's a **very** messy scene—doves flapping, sheep bleating, money jangling and rolling on the floor.

-The problem was that the high priest got a cut of this business—and now Jesus was messing with his personal finances. And the people who ran this whole thing were furious! They ask, "Who gave you the authority to do this?!" And Jesus won't tell them. And they can't do anything—because the people **love** Jesus.

1. But Jesus doesn't stop there. Oh no! Later He goes into a kind of public **rant** against the hypocrisy of all the religious professionals.

Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, "The teachers of religious law and the Pharisees are the official interpreters of the law of Moses. So practice and obey whatever they tell you, but don't follow their example. For they don't practice what they teach.

They crush people with unbearable religious demands and never lift a finger to ease the burden. Everything they do is for show. On their arms they wear extra wide prayer boxes with Scripture verses inside, and they wear robes with extra long tassels.

And they love to sit at the head table at banquets and in the seats of honour in the synagogues. They love to receive respectful greetings as they walk in the marketplaces, and to be called 'Rabbi.'

(Matthew 23:1-7 NLT)

-Please understand; these leaders were well-respected. They knew their Bibles, they prayed, they helped people, they gave to the poor—from an outward perspective—there was nothing to fault.

-But their hearts were arrogant. They **loved** all the pomp and circumstance that surrounded their lives—and the larger than life image that made it clear to everyone how impressive they really were. And they loaded people down with rules and rituals and traditions and obligations like a bunch of pack animals. And Jesus **hated** the whole system!

2. And he didn't stop there. Jesus just keeps going. It's not pretty—so hang onto your seats:

What sorrow awaits you teachers of religious law and you Pharisees. Hypocrites! For you shut the door of the Kingdom of Heaven in people's faces. You won't go in yourselves, and you don't let others enter either. What sorrow awaits you teachers of religious law and you Pharisees. Hypocrites! For you cross land and sea to make one convert, and then you turn that person into twice the child of hell you yourselves are! (Matthew 23:13-15 NLT)

-Jesus goes on to call them *blind guides* and *blind fools*. He calls them on all loopholes they had created to lie and cheat and break promises—exploit the broken and needy—and get away with the whole thing.

They had totally missed the plot of what God is up to.

-And then Jesus gets down to the core stuff—the *heart* stuff. Listen to what he says:

What sorrow awaits you teachers of religious law and you Pharisees. Hypocrites! For you are so careful to clean the outside of the cup and the dish, but inside you are filthy—full of greed and self-indulgence! You blind Pharisee! First wash the inside of the cup and the dish, and then the outside will become clean, too. "What sorrow awaits you teachers of religious law and you Pharisees. Hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs—beautiful on the outside but filled on the inside with dead people's bones and all sorts of impurity. Outwardly you look like righteous people, but inwardly your hearts are filled with hypocrisy and lawlessness. (Matthew 23:25-28 NLT)

-Jesus closes off this chilling indictment of the most powerful religious leaders of his day by warning them that they will *not* get away with what they are doing but will experience the judgment of a God who desperately loves the people they are exploiting.

3. So, imagine how all these powerful, arrogant, religious leaders are feeling about now! They had already been plotting to kill him *before* this. What Jesus said was like throwing a match on gasoline!

-Well, shortly after this—they got their chance to nail him. Judas betrayed Jesus to the leading priests—who teamed up with the teachers of religious law to arrest Jesus and demand his execution. And everything went like clockwork! They found Jesus, hauled him in, got him convicted of blasphemy for claiming to be the Messiah—and by 9 a.m., he was hanging from the cross. By 3 p.m.—he was dead. High speed collisions almost *always* cause fatalities.

- B. Now, here's the question. Was this just an unfortunate set of circumstances? Did Jesus just get sideways with people who were trying to protect their religion—and, frankly, their jobs? Or was it bigger than that? Darker?

-Could this collision have been avoided—or was it inevitable? And what was Jesus doing? Was Jesus developing a cult—trying to sway allegiance away from the mainstream Jewish faith so He could develop his own religion that would be named after him—**Christianity**?

-**What if Jesus was actually going after *all* religion?** What if, rather than *all* religions leading to God—*none* of them actually lead to God?

1. Think about religion, for a minute. A religion is **any** reliance on systems or institutions as a conduit to God. Religions offer salvation or help through a system of rules, regulations, rituals or routines. Spirituality, in contrast, is the **relationship** a person has with ultimate reality or God—beyond the systems and institutions of religion. One of the things you hear a **lot** of today, is people saying, “I’m spiritual, but I’m not religious!” What they’re saying is, “I’ve lost faith in religion as a means of connecting with God. I think I have a better chance of doing that on my own.”
2. Now, I don’t know where you stand when it comes to religion, but don’t you think it’s significant that Jesus **never** used the word **religion** to describe His work—and what He came to accomplish? Don’t you think it’s significant that He **never** invited people to join an institution of any kind? He did invite people to join his mission—and to trust in **Him!**

-And Jesus talked about His Church. Anyone know what a **church** actually is? It’s not an institution. It’s a **gathering** of people. Period. People who come together in Jesus’ Name to worship God, encourage each other—and then go out to carry on His mission. Jesus **never** asked people to gather in his name to carry on traditional rituals and do religious things. A church is not a building. In fact, until about 300 A.D., most churches didn’t have specific buildings they met in.

-Whenever anyone says, “Well, the **church** ought to do this” or the **church** should do more of **that**” or “the **church** should really help them”—what they’re really talking about is **people**. If you say, “Well, the **church** should...” you’re actually talking about what **you** should do—**if you belong to Jesus**.

-From every thing I see of Jesus and understand from how He lived, how He loved and what He asked of us—His followers—I am convinced that He calls us to a spiritual relationship—not to be religious! And there is a massive, **massive** difference between relating to God through systems of doctrines, and special people, and rules of conduct and inherited traditions and institutional power—and relating to God directly as a Heavenly Father madly in love with you!

3. Here’s the specific problem we face. Jesus’ teaching has sometimes been codified and ritualized by **Christendom**—a religious institution that carries his Name—but has way too often lost the plot—and **missed** Jesus’ **irreligious** message.

C. It doesn't take a brain surgeon to understand why the religious leaders hated Jesus--and ganged up to organize his execution.

-Jesus' first miracle, according to the Gospel writer, John, was to turn water into wine at a wedding he attended with his mother and disciples. What I missed in this story was the fact that he used water jars used for ceremonial washing to make between 120 and 180 gallons of wine! John calls this a **sign**. So why would Jesus, for his first miracle, take something **specifically** used for religious ceremonial purposes—and make wine for a **party** in it? Doesn't that seem a little sacrilegious? **Maybe that's the POINT!** (Cavey, *The End of Religion*)

1. Bruxy Cavey from **The Meeting House**, pointed out something to me that I'd never noticed before. Jesus, in three years of ministry, literally **overrides** all five of the pillars of Judaism. The first one was the **Torah**—the Law of Moses—or the first five books of the Old Testament.

-In fact, Jesus tells everyone that he's not contradicting the Torah—but He is fulfilling it. And He says things like, "You've heard that it was said to our ancestors, 'You shall not murder...' but **I** say to you that if you are **angry** with someone you will be subject to judgment!" He puts what **He** says right alongside the 10 commandments!

-The law of Moses taught the Israelites to not eat pork, shellfish—anything non-kosher. Jesus declared all foods clean. In a religious system that was very strict about Sabbath observance, Jesus asked a man to pick up his mat on the Sabbath and go home. Can you understand **why** religious leaders would ask Jesus, "Who do **you** think you are? Show us your credentials for pulling this stuff!"

a. The second area Jesus went after were the traditions that had built up around the Torah—and been passed down to the Jewish people. These traditions created fences to keep people out of trouble with the law of Moses.

-It's almost like Jesus went out of his way to violate these traditions. For example, they had a tradition that any healing on the Sabbath was work. You could **bandage** a wound—but you couldn't put **ointment** on it—because then the wound would be working to heal. It's like Jesus **went out of his way** to heal people on the Sabbath! Jesus compared their traditions to washing the outside of a bowl—and leaving the inside encrusted with rotting, moldy food.

-In this final address to the religious leaders that we read, Jesus talked about how they loaded people down like pack animals with all this religious junk. He **hated** this stuff. Know why? Cause it had **nothing to do with a relationship with God!**

b. And Jesus went after **tribalism**. If you'll remember, in the Old Testament—to be part of God's people meant, typically, to be born a

Jew. If you **weren't**, well, you had to make yourself Jewish—which, for men, meant going through the ritual of circumcision.

-In the culture Jesus was born into, Gentiles, Greeks, Samaritans--**anyone** outside the Jewish race—was an outsider to God. Israel had been called to be a light to the Gentiles—but that never actually happened.

-Jesus openly accepted Gentiles, Samaritans, tax collectors, prostitutes—**anyone** who would come. In fact, Jesus said that these very people would enter the Kingdom before the super-religious people who knew the Bible and kept all the rules. Can you imagine how insulting that was?

- c. But Jesus wasn't done. Not yet. He also went after the Temple system. Understand--the Temple was at the very center of worship and forgiveness and connection with God in the nation of Israel. The **only** way for anyone to find forgiveness and cleansing was to come to God—through the temple, through the priests, and through the sacrificial system. The focus of God's very presence on earth was in the Holy of Holies—heavily guarded—at the center of the temple.

-So imagine Jesus, at the beginning of his ministry, offering a paralyzed guy forgiveness on the spot—**without sacrifice?** He bypassed the

temple, the priests, the law—**everything!** The religious leaders were **scandalized!** That's why they said, in essence, "Who do you think you are? **God?**"

2. Now, think about all this for a minute. Jesus shows up out of nowhere. His miracles and his teaching were his only credentials. Without notice and without permission, he sets aside the ceremonial law Moses had given, all the accumulated traditions (we think **worship wars** are bad!). He broadens "God's People" to include everyone who will follow **Him**; and he takes forgiveness out of the temple and out of the hands of the priests—and clearly puts **Himself** at the center of everything!

-He calls people to put their faith in **Him**. To **believe** in Him—and trust Him as the Good Shepherd. He claimed to be One with the Father and caps the whole thing off by saying,

"...Unless you believe that I AM who I claim to be, you will die in your sins." (John 8:24 NLT)

-So, let's be real **clear** about what's going on here. Jesus spent three years of ministry replacing **religion** with **Himself**. Because He came, as God's Son, and gave His life on a cross—**He** was the Way to the Father, **He** was the Truth; **He** was the One who could give life. Jesus **totally** bypassed religion!

3. Now. Does it make sense why just **months** into His ministry, the religious authorities began plotting to kill Jesus? If He was telling the truth—and they didn't think He was—the teachings of the Pharisees and Religious experts were wrong, the temple was unnecessary—and the Jewish people as **the** people of God was a thing of the past.

-Think about it from a **job security** point of view? Suddenly, job security for the temple personnel was an issue. I mean, has anyone ever noticed that people get a little edgy when their jobs, their reputations, and their money—everything that defines them and brings security and admiration—get cancelled?

We've had 2000 years to get used to Jesus. But when someone comes and dynamites—not just a religious system, but **all** religion—it's quite predictable that they're gonna die at the intersection!

III. RELIGION IN THE WITNESS STAND

- A. Are any of you familiar with Richard Dawkins? Richard Dawkins is an outspoken British scientist who has gone after religion with a vengeance. In his book, **The Devil's Chaplain**, he makes this comment:

My last vestige of "hands off religion" respect disappeared in the smoke and choking dust of September 11th 2001, followed by the "National Day of Prayer," when prelates and pastors did their tremulous Martin Luther King impersonations and urged people of mutually incompatible faiths to hold hands, united in homage to the very force that caused the problem in the first place.
Richard Dawkins

-Dawkins is what I would call a **fervent** atheist who, in his books, including his most recent one entitled **The God Delusion**, blames most of the mess in the world on religion.

He's not alone. A guy by the name of Richard Hitchens has written a book entitled, **God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything.**

1. How many of you grew up in what you would consider **very religious homes**—pretty much went to church every Sunday and were raised with religious traditions?

-How many of you were raised pretty much **without** religion being a regular part of your life?

-How many of you, whatever your background, at one point **found yourself really turned off by organized religion**—pretty much of any kind?

-I was raised in a very **religious** home, if you want to call it that. We were in church at **least** 3 times a week. Keeping the 10 commandments, in our home, was never questioned. Even the Sabbath—which had been officially moved to **Sunday**—presumably by Jesus--was off limits for activity of any kind. The only

sin that was acceptable on the **Sabbath** was gluttony. We'd stuff ourselves at Sunday dinner—then sit around like slugs until it was time for the Sunday Evening Service.

-Hearing Richard Dawkins and Richard Hitchens talk so venomously about religion raises the hair on the back of my neck. I **bleed** little crosses! And yet—if I were to be **totally** honest, I would have to admit that Jesus came to do away with religion. And I would **also** have to concede that religion, in general, has done more to smear God's Name—and His goodness—than Madelyn Murray O'Hair, Richard Dawkins, Richard Hitchens, Marx, and Nietzsche all put together.

-Know why I say that? Because, if **religion** had won the day—Jesus would still be dead and buried under the mountains—and we'd still be trying to find ways to get on God's good side.

2. Have you ever looked at the trail of blood and gore that religion has left in our world? I have—and I can **totally** understand why someone would talk about **How Religion Poisons Everything**. The details of the conflict between Hinduism and Islam in India in 2002 are like a horror flick. The details of babies skewered, young women stripped and raped, pregnant women ripped open are **way** too graphic to recount. 1000 people died.

-Read the stories of the Aztecs and Mayas—and how they worshipped by bashing people's brains in and eating their bodies. Read about grieving widows in India throwing themselves on the funeral pyres of their dead husbands. Read about the ongoing bloodbath between Protestants and Catholics in Ireland.

-But don't stop there. The history of **Christendom**—the institutionalization of Jesus and His teachings has sometimes been a sickening and bloody tale. Read about the Crusades—and how warriors **bragged** about the wading through blood and stacking bodies. Read about the Inquisition—how Christendom tortured people they declared to be heretics. Read about the witch-hunts—where it's likely that 200,000 women were drowned, burned or beheaded. Gore Vidal wrote,
More people have been killed in the name of Jesus Christ than any other name in the history of the world. – Gore Vidal

-How did that happen when Jesus was dedicated to radical non-violence? How can this **possibly** fit with a leader who taught his people to **love** their enemies—and do good to those who make life hard?

-I'll tell you what happened. This is what **always** happens when what was intended to be a loving relationship with God degrades into a religion—a maze of rules and regulations and institutions. And when **religion** gets political power—watch out! It's ugly. Somehow, when hatred and judging and

slandering—even cruelty—are done in the name of religion—religious people think they're okay. And God **hates** this stuff!

- B. You'd never recognize how bloodthirsty religious people will get—and how low they will stoop—if you didn't read the end of Jesus' story. They are absolutely **filled** with hatred. And hatred always leads to killing of some sort, whether it's stomping on a person's soul—or their reputation—or shedding their blood.

1. What blows my mind as I read about Jesus' last days is how his miracles—the most astounding acts in history—didn't even **faze** the religious leaders. They claimed that when he multiplied bread, cast out demons, healed devastating diseases—He was doing it with Satanic power.

-Jesus most astounding miracle, raising Lazarus—who had been dead and buried **four days**—was done right in the back yard of the whole religious community. A **lot** of people believed! Guess how religious leaders at the **highest level** in Jerusalem responded? They tried to figure out **how** to re-kill him!

-So, they nail Jesus to a cross and watch him die—and Jesus is raised. The guards at the tomb saw the whole thing. Guess what the religious leaders did? You'd think they'd be saying, "Oops! Maybe we killed someone we **shouldn't** have!" No! They paid the guards to cover it up and lie!

2. The reason, of course, is that they had **way** too much at stake. They were **way** too invested in religion to ever let go of the power, prestige and money it brought them.

-Near the end of Jesus' story, it looks like religion won—and Jesus lost. That all His warnings to these leaders not only fell on deaf ears—but came back to haunt Jesus when they were punching him, ripping the flesh off his back, spitting on him, driving nails through his hands—and making fun of him when he died. Yep! It **looked** like religion had won. But it didn't. It couldn't. It **won't!**

- C. And that became clear the day Jesus died. At Ground Zero in the Jewish Temple was the Holy of Holies—the single most restricted, most holy spot on the planet. The **only** one allowed in there was the High Priest—and he only went in there once a year. When he did, the other priests had him wear a robe with bells on the bottom so they could hear him moving—and tied a rope around his leg so they could drag him out if he did something wrong and God killed him.

-Separating that **Most Holy Place** from everything else was a massive, thick veil. Josephus, a Jewish historian in Jesus' day, describes it as being 4 inches thick—that two horses pulling in the opposite direction couldn't pull it apart. The records of Jesus' death say that the moment Jesus died, this veil was ripped in half—top to bottom.

1. And **that's** what Jesus did to religion. There's no curtain, no rituals, no special people, no ceremonies between us and God. Only Jesus. See, the deal is that what Jesus had in mind was infinitely better than religion. Religion is dominated by the smart people; the good people; the intellectuals. The people who **really** know their Bibles and all the hidden meanings that less knowledgeable people don't see. The people who are best at religion are the philosophers; the mystics; the people who are really good with smoke and candles and holy liquids.

-And Jesus flipped the whole thing. He choose ordinary people—the **anybodies** of the world—to lead His movement. Suddenly, there's no hierarchy of special people—you know, the really **really** close and the moderately close. The **clergy**—and the **laity**. There are no ladders to climb, no mazes to run through—and no special places we have to go to so that we can meet God.

-**Anybody** is accepted—if they will come. **Anybody** is forgiven—if they will just ask. **Anybody** becomes a temple of God—if they will cooperate. And **anybody** can be called holy, a saint, a minister, a priest, and a child of God. Anyone can talk to God anytime. Anyone can understand the Bible. Anyone can become a difference maker.

-Jesus offers grace—something religion knows nothing about. Instead of us working our way into God's acceptance through some treadmill of regulations and rituals—God accepts us just as we are and **frees** us to follow Him. With a single guideline on how to live. **Love**. Love God with all you've got. And love your **neighbor...as yourself**. Jesus taught, "When in doubt—**love**—and you'll invariably get it right."

2. So now—I have to choose, and you have to choose what will be your path to life. Jesus—or religion. If it's **religion**, then feel free to climb on the treadmill. But you'll have to figure out if the **how-to** systems of the world can do what they promise, whether it's the Ten Commandments, the Eightfold Path, or the Five Pillars or the Four Noble Truths.

-But understand, **no one** will every tell you when you've done enough, given enough, worked enough, believed enough, or studied enough. If that's your choice—I hope it works for you, because it's not what Jesus taught.

Forgiveness, hope, life, and love is spelled **D-O-N-E**—not **D-O**. Jesus knew we'd **never** be perfect—so He died to **make** us perfect through His sacrifice.

3. If, however, you're looking for a relationship with God; if you're looking—and longing for spirituality—and not more religion; and if you're looking for forgiveness and freedom, well, then you want Jesus.

IV. CLOSING THOUGHTS

- A. I read the first few pages of Richard Hitchen's book, **God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything**. I was not at all surprised to find out that he had been disillusioned by religion—in a religious school.

It never ceases to amaze me how religion tarnishes God's reputation in the world. And some of you have been hurt by religion. Maybe even broken by it. It's shamed you—and it's made God seem small and petty.

- B. If that's true—let me close with Jesus' words of healing:
"Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly." (Matthew 11:28-30 Msg)