

Series: THE BIG, HAIRY, UGLY ROOTS OF UNHAPPINESS

SUNDAY MARCH 1, 2020
THE SAD, PATHETIC PATH OF SELFIE RELIGION
Matthew 6:1-18
SPEAKER: KEN DAVIS

1. There's a very popular belief in the GTA culture. It usually gets stated like this:
All religions are basically the same and lead to God. How many of you have heard that at least once? People **say** it as if it's true. Is it? What if you applied this to **other** things? For example:
 - *All roads lead to Punxsutawney, PA—just pick one!***
 - *Dial any number and you'll reach home.***
 - *You can drink any water, no matter where you find it.***
 - *All airlines fly to Ho Chi Minh City.***
 - *All surgeries will fix heart blockages!***

- Now, I'm messing with you a little, right? Jesus taught something that messes with a **lot** of people's heads; **NO religion leads to God! That's** why Jesus came!

 - a. I'll tell you why that's true. Religion is about things **we** do to earn favor with God. That is, religion, by definition, is about a set group of beliefs and behaviors that please and satisfy God and earn you a favored place in Heaven, Nirvana, Paradise, with your ancestors, in the afterlife—whatever you want to call it.

-If you work it just right, these religious behaviors will please the powers that be—the **Divine**—and bring you good things: wealth, health, good luck, and the favor of others—in addition to a good **afterlife**. What that actually **means**, of course, is that how things go in this life and eternity for you—are up to **you!**
 - b. So, ***How many of you are up to the challenge of making yourself perfect and living a good enough life to have God high-five you as you pass from this life to the next?***

-Jesus told one of the **best living people on the planet** in his day—a religious professional—that he needed a **spiritual** rebirth if he wanted eternal life.
So—**who's right?**
 - c. Most people in our world would agree that, at the **very** least, Jesus was an **astounding** man. Think about it—in 3 years of public life—he split history and changed the way the world thinks! The evidence tells us that Jesus didn't just die, He rose from the dead. I don't think I have to make the case for how **profound** Jesus was and is.

-If Jesus was **clear** that religion in itself is the wrong way to try to get to God, then I think it's pretty risky to defy Him—what do you think? And Jesus himself addressed something even **more** dangerous; **selfie religion!**

2. Right in the middle of this powerful message we call the **Sermon on the Mount**, Jesus talks about practices most people would agree are **good** things—like giving to the poor, prayer, and fasting. His **warning** is that when we do them to impress others, we lose **any** benefit.

-Now, think about **who** is saying this. It's Jesus—whose claim to be God got Him executed. As God he would've watched people directing all kind of prayers and other spiritual practices his way since the beginning of humanity. **He would know a thing or two about that**—right? His theme is pretty clear; **SELFIE RELIGION IS A WASTE OF TIME**. Let me read it:

Watch out! Don't do your good deeds publicly, to be admired by others, for you will lose the reward from your Father in heaven. When you give to someone in need, don't do as the hypocrites do—blowing trumpets in the synagogues and streets to call attention to their acts of charity! I tell you the truth, they have received all the reward they will ever get. But when you give to someone in need, don't let your left hand know what your right hand is doing. Give your gifts in private, and your Father, who sees everything, will reward you. (Matthew 6:1-4 NLT)

- a. So, the first question is—does it please God when we do good things for others? Of course it does! Our call is to love others as we love ourselves—but it doesn't earn eternal life! And if you do it for the **wrong motives**—that is, to **be admired by others**, you've **lost the plot** AND lost any reward from God.
 - b. **I recently saw this cartoon [pic]**. This is a perfect illustration of what Jesus is saying! The only thing that's missing is **#MAKEADIFFERENCE!** Here's the thing; God has already wired us to **feel good** when we help others—even when—and **especially** when it's costly and inconvenient.
 - c. The other things Jesus mentions here **also** have a built-in reward. When you pray — that is, talk to God about your life and ask him for help—there is an inner **peace** that calms you. In fact, several years ago I read some stats about prayer—and found that over 50% of all atheists pray!
 - d. And **fasting** has benefits, too. If you've ever taken steps to **limit yourself** when it comes to food, TV, social media—**anything** really—there is a kind of a high that follows. The **down** side is that it can also make you feel like you're **superior** to others. You know, you're one day in on a diet—and pity the poor slobs stuffing themselves with double bacon cheeseburgers and pizza! **Have they no self respect?!**
 - e. Now, what Jesus says here cuts through all of the garbage of positioning yourself so people think you're spiritually mature, self-disciplined social justice warrior—**superior to most!** Jesus basis message is, **enjoy the applause—cause Heaven isn't applauding!** There is **no reward, no spiritual benefit—NOTHING from God** for all your effort!
3. That's actually just the beginning of Jesus' attack on using religion and spiritual practices to get rewarded and earn your way into Heaven. religion as a means of getting rewarded and

earning your way into God's family—and getting Him to notice how good you are—**better then most**.

-Now, the critics of religion in our culture are rampant aren't they? Richard Dawkins and the late Christopher Hitchens have been particularly vocal—and downright contemptuous!

Here's what I now know: If you track religion through the centuries, it has given them a **lot** of ammunition for what they say!

-Some of you would likely describe yourselves as **spiritual**—but not **religious**. Here's what's interesting; Jesus **never** used the word religion to describe His work and what He came to accomplish **even thought there's a perfectly good word for it in the original languages**? And He never invited people to join an institution of any kind. What He **did** ask of people—was that they **follow Him! Trust Him!**

-He **did** talk about the His Church—which, by definition, was not an institution; it was a **gathering of people!** Period. People who **gathered** in Jesus' Name to worship, learn, encourage each other—and then **scattered** to carry out 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., there **were** no church buildings!

-Whenever anyone says, "Well, the **church** ought to do this" or the **church** should do more of **that**"—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**. Jesus calls us into a **relationship**—not to join a **religion**.

-And there is a **massive** difference between having a loving relationship with God—and trying to connect with God through systems of doctrines, special people, rules of conduct, traditions and institutions. And **that's** what we see here. Jesus tells us to pray **directly** to our **Heavenly Father** and ask **Him** for bread, protection and forgiveness.

- a. Here's the specific problem we face. Jesus' teaching has sometimes been codified and ritualized by **Christendom**—a religious institution that carries his Name and puts crosses on everything—but has, in some ways **missed** Jesus' **irreligious** message.

-Now **why am I pointing that out?** It's because the bigger picture of Jesus' life tells us that He came to kill **off religion**—not start a new one. In his book, **The End of Religion, Bruxy Cavey [pic]** points out that in his three years of ministry Jesus 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 this message we've been studying, Jesus tells everyone that he's not contradicting the Torah—He's fulfilling it. And He says things like, "You've heard that it was said -- but **I** say. 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!"

- b. The second area Jesus went after were the Jewish traditions that had been created by rabbis to keep people from breaking the law of Moses.

- 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. Jesus defied this again and again! And He compared these traditions to washing the outside of a bowl—and leaving the inside encrusted with rotting, moldy food. Just before He died, Jesus accused the religious leaders of loading people down like pack animals with all these traditions. He **hated** this stuff. Know why? Cause it had **nothing to do with a relationship with God!**

- c. And Jesus went after **tribalism**. The Old Testament taught that to be one of God's people, you had to either be born a Jew—or become one. For men, this meant minor surgery—both painful and embarrassing. Gentiles, Greeks, Romans and Samaritans—were **all** outsiders!

-Jesus defied this by openly accepting Gentiles, Samaritans, tax collectors, prostitutes—**anyone** who would come. In fact, Jesus said that they 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—which was at the **very** center of worship, forgiveness, and connection with God. Before Jesus, the **only** way to find forgiveness was to come to the temple and have a priest atone for your sin through a sacrifice.

-So imagine Jesus, at the beginning of his ministry, telling a paralyzed guy he was forgiven for his sin—**without a sacrifice at the temple?** 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?**"

4. 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—along with all the accumulated traditions. Then 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 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)

- a. **Do you see it? Jesus replaced religion with Himself!**

He said that **He** came to give his life for everyone. That the Father had sent Him so that people could put their faith in Him and **not** be lost to God. He said, **I am** the way; **I am** the truth; **I am** the life—and no one comes to the Father except through me! Jesus **totally** bypassed religion!

-Now. Does it make sense why just **months** into His ministry, the religious authorities began plotting to kill Jesus? According to Jesus, the Law of Moses, the traditions, the priesthood, the temple and the sacrificial system and the Jewish people as **the** people of God had been replaced by **Him**.

- b. Can you see **why** the religious establishment who claimed to love God **hated** Jesus and had him executed? Why **very** religious people with all the outward signs of **loving** God—couldn't **stand** Him when He showed up in their city? How people who were **ritually** clean were filled with pride and self-righteousness—and **hated** people God loved; the **outsiders**?

-How could those things happen side by side? It's because Jesus and all who followed Him made it clear that to love **God** and give your life for Him—is to love **those that He loves—and give your life for them!**

- c. So, here's the bare honest truth—at least from where I stand and what I've studied. **Religion as a way of getting to Heaven and as a way of earning God's love and approval and as a way of making spiritual progress doesn't work and doesn't lead to God or happiness!** How many of you would agree?

-Religion helps people do really **good** things—and really **bad** things. But it doesn't get anyone to God. In fact, sometimes it creates a system for judging others—which is always toxic. On its own, religion creates an impossible, performance based system that exhausts people and leaves them further from a God who seems to be **unpleasable**.

-Religion may create a **fear** of God and a **respect** for Him—but not **love**—especially when He's portrayed in religion as a **Father you can never please—no matter how hard you try!** If you've ever had an experience with a parent you cannot please because you can't jump high enough, **you know how FAR from happiness it is!**

- d. Jesus message—and the message of those who carried on His mission—was: **It is impossible to be saved, forgiven, given life, spend eternity with God, and changed by doing good things. And that's exactly why God the Father sent His Son to live the life we should have lived—and die the death we should have died.** It's called **grace**. This is the entry point into **eternal life**. But it's **also** the barrier, isn't it? See, we like to think that we can perform their way into **anything**—including God's presence. It takes humility to say, "Jesus—I can't do it on my own! **I need you!**"

5. And that's why Jesus words here were offensive to the people who **thought** they were doing a pretty good job at religion—and had the admiration—awe, really, of the people standing around them. But here's the **other** thought; would it make you happy if you did this stuff your whole life — fed the hungry, helped the poor, extricated people from awful situations—and **then** found out that your **only** reward is the admiration you got from those who watched?

-Imagine being known as a person of prayer—as a person who is **so** impressive in this arena, spending hours in prayer and even writing a **book** on it—and finding out that your

prayers never made it any further than the ceiling—cause they were about drawing attention to yourself!

-Imagine fasting twice a week—and going through all kinds of other forms of self-denial—hunger, isolation, withdrawal from your iPhone—and then finding out you're your only reward is the admiration of the people who noticed you? Is there **anyone** who would be happy about this—either while they're doing it, or at the end of time?

- a. Jesus is **very** clear; God **rewards** our kindness, our generosity, our prayer, our self-denial—but it's not a **2 for 1 sale**—credit here **and** there! He says, make sure why you're doing what you do! Make sure you do it for an audience of **ONE**! Paul writes about this in his treatise on love:

If I could speak all the languages of earth and of angels, but didn't love others, I would only be a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. If I had the gift of prophecy, and if I understood all of God's secret plans and possessed all knowledge, and if I had such faith that I could move mountains, but didn't love others, I would be nothing. If I gave everything I have to the poor and even sacrificed my body, I could boast about it; but if I didn't love others, I would have gained nothing. (1 Corinthians 13:1-3 NLT)

- b. If you're giving to others, helping others, and doing great things—but, all the while, are smiling for the camera and making sure you Instagram or Snap-chat it—**does that count as love?** No! It's **good**—but it's mainly about **marketing yourself**.

-If you're praying—and you make sure everyone knows how much you pray, how long you pray, and how much you love it and how much you know about it—**then be honest—you're looking for an audience, not an answer**. Jesus says, "Your audience **is** your answer—cause you're praying to **them!**"

-Prayer, generosity and fasting are all forms of intimacy. Intimacy is an exclusive closeness with **one** that you don't share with others. For example, can you imagine someone making out with their spouse—then posting it on Instagram and talking about how **good** you are at it? **Ewww!** That would be **weird!** It's kinda sick to take something that's private and personal and use it like a prop on stage!

- c. Jesus said, "If **you're using the disciplines as a kind of selfie stick to post pics of you and God—enjoy the attention—cause that's all you get!**" The message? **Don't do good things, don't pray, don't fast or do other self-denying things to be admired by others OR earn your way to God!**
- d. The end result of doing selfie-religion is unhappiness. When people do **this stuff**, it treats God as if He's the dumbest person in the universe and doesn't see what's going on. I'm guessing that every adult in this room can tell if someone they love is doing something with you or for you to impress their friends—**right?**

-And after a few minutes, you can clue into the fact that someone is shining up to you, not because they care, but because they're hoping you can help them network, or advance their career, or get something for nothing. No one...**no one**...likes to be used. And God doesn't like to be used either. The difference is—you **can't** use Him!

6. So, let me just give a few takeaways from this passage, okay? The **first** one is that selfie-dom—**wherever** it shows up doesn't work. People likely won't say anything, but they **notice when your life, your camera, your money, your time and pretty much all you do—REVOLVES around you.** They **notice** that every picture they take has **you** in it too!

-The **second** takeaway is self-love and self-respect is a **good** thing. But let me ask **this:** How many of you think that **some** people—not you, of course, have taken the **selfie** thing a little too far? See, I was wondering, “What if we singled out someone and took as many pictures of them as we take of ourselves?” It's called **stalking**—unless you're a Grandparent!” Jesus said, “Know some of that fascination you have with your own picture? Why not give **half** of that away to others! There are a **lot** of people who need some of your love!”

-The **third** takeaway is that God **does** see and rewards us when we love others enough to actually help them; He sees and rewards the humility and respect we show for Him when we talk to him about our needs. And he **does** see and reward us when we fast—that is, **discipline** ourselves toward growth. What Jesus is pointing out is that when our love for God and others is genuine—we don't need to **include a selfie in the file.**

-We **desperately** need God's help—every moment of every day. That's why we need to turn our eyes toward heaven and say, “**I need you SO much, God—HELP!**” And He **longs** to help us, to strengthen us, to forgive us, reassure us of his love and kindness. But **it's not a photo-op!** Given how desperately we need Him, playing games with prayer is a crazy thing to do, right?

-And we **need** the discipline of fasting and other ways to train our soul to follow God not our appetites. God **sees** that and **rewards** it! But when you do a **soul-building** exercise in a **soul-destroying way**—it's a wash. It's a little like going to **The Keg** for a \$100 meal, then throwing it up in the bathroom. You're thinking, “That's **gross**, Ken!” Well, so is **showing off spiritually!**

- a. And the admiration of others doesn't bring happiness. Oh, getting **likes** does give you an adrenaline hit—but happiness goes deeper. Happiness is peace within, peace with God and peace with others. You can't be at peace with God and be a hypocrite—and **actor!**

-You can't ultimately be at peace with yourself, either. The greatest fear of most people is getting somehow exposed as a fake—a poser. And **you know the trust** about yourself; whether there's substance, or you're only pixel deep!

-And others? You can fool them for a while—that's pretty clear. But when they find out that your love and devotion is ultimately for yourself, that's the only warning most people need. Know why the religious professionals hated Jesus? It's because he pulled the curtain off of their show. **Kinda like the Wizard of Oz [pic] Pay no attention to the man behind that curtain!**

-When someone pulls down your curtain—and others know that you're a fake—a hypocrite—it makes you **angry enough to kill!** And that's exactly what they did to Jesus.

- b. The harshest reality for **anyone** trying to impress God by being religious and doing religious things is that it doesn't mean anything to him—it **doesn't work**. Actually, it's an **offense** to try and buy something that **cannot** be bought.

-A woman from our church in Pennsylvania had a twin sister who was on dialysis—dying from kidney disease. So she went into surgery and donated one of her kidneys. **Gladly**. Can you imagine her sister saying: “Wait—I’ll **pay you for it! How much are kidneys going for these days? I’ll PAY for it, for the surgery, for your time and effort and plastic surgery to make you look better in a bathing suit!**”

- c. You really can't **pay** for something like that. Religion is like trying to pay God for sending His Son to a cross for us. That's just **crazy!** He **gladly** gave His Son as an act of love because **He knew we could never, EVER earn it!** That's what grace is!

-Religion is like being on a treadmill. Have you ever noticed that there are **no** treadmills that take you to Montreal or Calgary? You can't even get to **Stouffville** on a treadmill! You do a **lot** of sweating, you spend a **lot** of time, you burn down through a **lot** of food—and you get **NOWHERE!** And on the religious good works plan, you don't even lose weight

7. There's a **better way!** God, through Jesus' sacrifice of his own life—and his resurrection—invites us to come **just as we are!** No religion. No special insight or knowledge. No fanfare or RSVPs or photoshoots. Just us. And the only prayer is, **I can't do this myself; Jesus...you did it for me. I accept.**

-And when we do, the Holy Spirit of God takes up residence inside our hearts, washes us clean, makes us new, changes the direction of our lives, gives us power, brings us **joy**—way better than the little glimpses of happiness—and **whispers** to us, “You and me? We're **together on this journey. I'm going to WALK YOU HOME!**”

-And He then says, “Who don't you go public on this; let people know who **your Daddy is!**” And that's what happened this morning—through baptism! This, friends, is way, way, **WAY—INFINITELY BETTER than the sad, pathetic path of selfie religion!** And if you say **no?** Just remember that religion **cannot** get you to God. No religion can!