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CEDARCREEKCHURCH

Looking Ahead - 4.21.2024 - Losing My Religion

April 21, 2024

Have you ever felt crushed by what you believed were religious demands? Have you ever made such demands of others, maybe even without realizing it?

The Pharisees in the time of Jesus thought they were being well-intentioned, but they were actually way off base, so Jesus instructed them very directly in Matthew 23:1-33. And since we, too, can be prone to falling into this same trap, those words are just as thought-provoking for us today.

Ultimately each of the points invite us into humility—the humility that Jesus offers us.

Matthew 23:11-12

¹¹ “The greatest among you must be a servant. ¹² But those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

This week, ask God to open your eyes to what he wants you to be honest about in terms of how you treat others. Set aside any distractions and take a few slow, deep breaths. Ask the Lord to help you identify where you’ve mistakenly asked more of people than Jesus, acknowledge this error, and then rest into the easy, light yoke he offers.

Finally, consider recording your responses in a journal, whether digital or hard copy. It's a great way to be able to look back on the adventure God has you on.

Prayer:

Lord, I confess that I am prone to make following you more burdensome than you intend, both for myself and for others. Today, help me to remember that no one, including myself, can measure up to the holy perfection you demand, but you love me so much and desire a relationship with me, so you made a way through your perfect Son, Jesus. Thank you for this gift! Help me to live out the peace and joy you offer and be a light for your love to others.

Series Theme Verse:

Romans 6:14

Sin is no longer your master, for you no longer live under the requirements of the law. Instead, you live under the freedom of God's grace.

Discussion Questions:

Icebreaker: What was your favorite restaurant as a kid and why?

Why might people have the impression that life with Jesus is burdensome?

Read Matthew 23:11-12. How does this contrast with the behaviors of the Pharisees as recounted in verses 13-33?

Have you ever felt like you had to measure up to God's standard? Explain.

Read Matthew 11:29-30. How do these verses encourage you? What is one area that you need to be honest about where you are?

This post was written by Kelly Pagel, Director of the LivingItOut.

Honest People, Stand Up! - Losing My Religion

April 22, 2024

All those who want to be honest about themselves, raise your hands.

Wait! Nobody? Shocker!

Personally, I find it much easier to be honest about others. Being honest about myself might require some work—especially if I don't want to be a hypocrite, saying I'm one thing but being another.

The “hypocrisy thing” was one of my biggest struggles when I was deciding to commit my life to Jesus. People **knew** me. They knew what I was: an adulterer, a blasphemer, a liar, a drinker, and a cheat.

How could I be that one day and the next day, after committing my life to Jesus, be someone else? I was afraid I couldn't measure up, and I was right. But I soon found that Jesus would do it for me. He changed my life.

Jesus didn't have a bunch of rules for me to follow. He offered me his love and wanted me to walk with him through life, choosing him over the things I had previously chased and thought would make me happy.

Matthew 23:1-3

¹ Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, ² "The teachers of religious law and the Pharisees are the official interpreters of the law of Moses. ³ So practice and obey whatever they tell you, but don't follow their example. For they don't practice what they teach.

Without mincing words, Jesus illustrates all the ways the Pharisees and scribes were using God's law to keep people from experiencing the love of the Father. They had made God into a cruel, merciless nitpicker, instead of a loving Father who longed to wrap them in his arms and comfort them. Jesus could not tolerate these lies about God, and he came down hard on those who told them. God desires relationship, not rule keeping.

Relationships are hard. You have to show up and be who you say you are to develop a relationship. Good relationships are cultivated through love, trust, honesty, and care. It's much more difficult than simply checking a box.

Being a bit lazy myself, I sometimes wish checking boxes would do the trick, but it is the relationship that Jesus is after. I promise you he is worth the effort, because, as Tara Leigh Cobble says in *The Bible Recap*, "he's where the joy is!"

Bottom Line: ***You can lose your religion by being honest about you.***

Questions:

Do you have a relationship with Jesus, or are you just trying to do good stuff so he'll like you?

Next Steps:

Developing a loving relationship with Jesus usually requires a community of believers to walk with you. Try joining a Group or serving team. As you grow those relationships, they will help you to be honest about yourself, finding the places in your life Jesus wants to heal.

Prayer:

Heavenly Father, thank you for your infinite patience with me as I try to figure out how to be in relationship with you. I think I often make it more difficult than it needs to be, but you know my heart. Help me to remember that you do not think as the world thinks, and I don't need to do anything to make you love me. Help me to remember that you loved me first, not because of who I am, but because of who you are. Grant me honest introspection as each day I deny myself, take up my cross, and follow you.

Series Theme Verse:**Romans 6:14**

Sin is no longer your master, for you no longer live under the requirements of the law. Instead, you live under the freedom of God's grace.

This post was written by Lauri White, a regular contributor to the LivingItOut.

Is it Good to be Religious? - Losing My Religion

April 23, 2024

Do you think it's good to be religious?

I did until listening to our current series, *Losing My Religion*. This past weekend, Andy continued teaching on the *Seven Sorrows* found in Matthew 23. Today we'll unpack Sorrow #3 found in Matthew 23:16-22.

Matthew 23:16-17

¹⁶ "Blind guides! What sorrow awaits you! For you say that it means nothing to swear 'by God's Temple,' but that it is binding to swear 'by the gold in the Temple.' ¹⁷ Blind fools! Which is more important—the gold or the Temple that makes the gold sacred?"

In these verses, Jesus referred to blind guides and blind fools, but who was he actually referring to? Jesus was most likely alluding to the scribes and Pharisees. However, at the beginning and the end of Matthew 23, he referred to them directly, so why did he choose to use these terms instead? It leads me

to believe he's purposely referring to anyone who says or acts according to these idiotic practices. Following these rules has nothing to do with following God.

The scribes and Pharisees would also swear on material things but failed to see where these things got their value.

Matthew 23:18-19

¹⁸ *“And you say that to swear ‘by the altar’ is not binding, but to swear ‘by the gifts on the altar’ is binding. ¹⁹ How blind! For which is more important—the gift on the altar or the altar that makes the gift sacred?”*

The Pharisees' concern with wealth revealed their priorities. They had completely failed to know or recognize God. They were consumed with swearing on gold, which gets its value from the Temple; on sacrificial gifts, which get their value from the altar; and on heaven, which gets its value from God who lives there. Because they were so disconnected from God, their oaths were empty.

Are you trying to measure up to what religious people think?

Realize that no one measures up! Trust the fact that Jesus died for our sins, and he measured up for all who follow him. After this realization, see if your inner thoughts change to those of peace and happiness. Know that *you can lose your religion by being honest about you.*

Questions:

What is your priority? Are you more concerned with status and things or dwelling in God's presence?

After listening to the teachings in this series, do you think it's good to be religious?

Next Steps:

Take time this week to do some introspection. Look at your behavior. Where are you trying to measure up?

Prayer:

Dear Abba Father, I am humbled by your many blessings that you grant to me and the grace you offer me every day. Thank you for sending your Son who measured up and died so I can measure up as well. Help me to seize

opportunities to tell others about the life-changing adventure that I am on and how it has changed my life. In Jesus' name, amen.

Series Theme Verse:

Romans 6:14

Sin is no longer your master, for you no longer live under the requirements of the law. Instead, you live under the freedom of God's grace.

This post was written by Jenn Macke, a regular contributor of the LivingItOut Devotional.

A Clean Cup - Losing My Religion

April 24, 2024

Appearances can be very deceiving. Have you ever seen a shiny coffee tumbler that looked clean and assumed it was filled with wonderful, perfect-temperature coffee, only to take off the top and find it full of moldy grossness?

I think that is what Jesus referred to when he was talking to the Pharisees about the inside needing to be cleaned before the outside. What looks perfect and good on the outside may be rotten on the inside.

Matthew 23:25-26 NIV

²⁵ "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. ²⁶ Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean."

There have been times in my life when I didn't want others to know that I was terrified on the inside, so I did my best to appear confident on the outside. In fact, I am about to take a huge step in my life—one I take very seriously. I will soon become the spiritual leader of my family by taking the step of marriage.

Christ calls us to love our wives like he loved the church. This is the greatest responsibility a man could ever take on. I don't want to pour out my love and service to my wife and family from a "moldy cup." There will definitely be times when I won't know what to do. I can try to hide from it and fake my way through, but who will that help?

I know there aren't enough tickets in the world to earn my place with God—that only comes from his grace and what Jesus did for me. Being anything but honest and true to who God says I am would make me a hypocrite, just like the Pharisees.

I think we all need to be reminded that Jesus didn't walk alone, and neither should we. Like Jesus, we should surround ourselves with people who we can be honest with, who are willing and able to help guide us, especially those who have been in similar situations.

I don't want to act my way through teaching my family how to navigate a God-centered life. I want my cup to be clean inside and out, and I want that for you too.

Questions:

Have you ever felt like you weren't being honest with yourself? Do you belong to a supportive group of people with whom you can be honest and ask for help? Do you know where to go for spiritual help?

Next Steps:

Keep attending weekend services at CedarCreek. Invite others as your first act of serving them, so they can get to know Jesus and have a relationship with him. If you don't have the support you need, consider getting connected at CedarCreek through GrowthTrack and joining a Group.

Prayer:

Dear God, all good things come from you. You've shown me this time and time again, and I know that you will never fail me. Thank you for all you have already given me, and for what I am about to receive. When I put you above all else, I cannot go wrong. I know I can never earn my place with you and cherish the gift of life you have given to me. Thank you for it all. In Jesus' name, amen.

Series Theme Verse:

Romans 6:14

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This post was written by Casey Stengel, a regular contributor to the LivingItOut.

A Humble Comparison - Losing My Religion

April 25, 2024

In the movie *Purple Rain*, "The Kid" simultaneously runs from "the sins of the father" while using his abusive father's musical talents as a benchmark to compare his own. What makes the protagonist better is that he attempts not to abuse his own love interest while creating masterful music. However, there is a common theme amongst The Kid's peers—no one understands his music.

During a rare bonding moment, The Kid asks his father to show him some beautiful music he has composed over the years. The response is, "No, man. I don't write them down. I don't have to. That's the big difference between you and me." That declaration destroys The Kid. Feeling musically inferior to his father, he also falters in his efforts to break the abuse cycle in his own relationship. The Kid could no longer measure up.

Comparing our performance to others is a human flaw that traces back to biblical times. The Pharisees and religious teachers boldly pointed out why they were better than the rest, even when history showed previous men with the same level of religious "importance" weren't. Sometimes, people don't see they are equally flawed as their adversaries until they are humbled.

Matthew 23:31-33

³¹ "But in saying that, you testify against yourselves that you are indeed the descendants of those who murdered the prophets. ³² Go ahead and finish what your ancestors started. ³³ Snakes! Sons of vipers! How will you escape the judgment of hell?"

Religious leaders of the time thought they had figured out how to be better than their ancestors, who persecuted (and rejected) prophets, but Jesus told a different truth. No one can measure up by changing their behavior alone. He wasn't only speaking to those religious leaders. Jesus shared a reality that would fall on all future generations: None of us are better than anyone else. We'll lie, betray, and even deny. Even if we think our good is good enough, eventually, we will be humbled.

In *Purple Rain*, The Kid finally realizes he is comparing himself to something that only exists in a lie, and this realization changes everything. The same is

true for us. Life becomes exhausting when we try to measure up and compare ourselves to others.

Maybe it's time to put away your measuring stick, humble yourself, and invite Jesus to be Lord of your life.

Questions:

How can you humble yourself? Are you tired of comparing your performance to others?

Next Steps:

Stop rejecting truth by studying your Bible. You can do this by diving deeper into weekend messages and joining a Bible study Group.

Prayer:

Lord, I've tried too many times to live life alone or compare my successes and failures to others. I pray to understand the lessons that have presented themselves along the way. I humbly ask for your help and for the courage to accept the help of those you place in my path. Amen.

Series Theme Verse:

Romans 6:14

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This post was written by Jaron Camp, a regular contributor to the LivingItOut.

We are Perfect Imperfections - Losing My Religion

April 26, 2024

After several years of taking piano lessons, my piano teacher had decided that she wanted to give me a new challenge—competing in piano competitions. I wasn't sure how I felt about it. Although I loved to play the piano for fun, I

never thought about doing anything competitive with it. Doubts flooded my mind: *What if I messed up? What if the judge thought I wasn't good enough?*

Even though I didn't say the words out loud, my piano teacher could see the fear and doubt inside me. I will never forget her words, "Look at this opportunity as improving your technique." She embraced *reframing your mindset* before it became popular.

This reminds me of our relationship with Jesus. As human beings, we inevitably fall short, make mistakes, wrestle with doubts and fears, and have weaknesses. Despite our imperfections, Jesus embraces us in his arms, carries us through our difficulties, and offers unconditional love.

Unfortunately, we don't always feel Jesus' presence during our challenges. But it's a great time for us to remember this classic poem:

"Footprints in the Sand" by Mary Stevenson

... "You promised me, Lord, that if I followed you, you would walk with me always. But I have noticed that during the most trying periods of my life there have only been one set of footprints in the sand. Why, when I needed you most, you have not been there for me?"

The Lord replied, "The times when you have seen only one set of footprints, is when I carried you."

We do not need to adhere to strict religious laws and practices to receive Christ's love and guidance. He does not condemn us for our flaws. Knowing this brings a sense of relief, lifting the burdens from our shoulders.

Matthew 11:29-30

²⁹ Take my yoke and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.

Jesus can use these imperfections for his glory. He can turn our mess into a message and use our shortcomings to connect with and assist others who are going through similar difficulties, drawing them closer to him. Through our flaws, Jesus molds us into better versions of ourselves, nurturing growth and fostering a deeper relationship with him.

Questions:

What are you afraid of?

What mistakes, fears, or doubts in your life could you use as a testimony to others to draw them closer to Christ?

Do you have an impossible measuring stick for yourself? For others?

Next Steps:

Each day find some time to journal about the ups and downs of your life. Where did you see Jesus in those more trying times?

If you need to feel God's presence in your life: text MORE to 419-419-0707 to join the 30-day devotion to Experience God More.

Prayer:

Dear God, thank you for loving me unconditionally despite my shortcomings. Knowing I can always turn to you without being condemned brings me comfort. When I feel ashamed and try to do life on my own, draw me closer to you. Amen.

Series Theme Verse

Romans 6:14

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This post was written by Connie Disbro, a regular contributor to the LivingItOut.

Reflections - 4.27.2024 - Losing My Religion

April 27, 2024

This past week, we looked at Jesus' response to the Pharisees' demands on the people (Matthew 23:1-33). Although Jesus is speaking to the Pharisees in this passage, it is an opportunity to reflect on the ways we have placed more burden on others than God places on us.

Did you resonate with one of the "woes"? This passage provides an opportunity for us to humble ourselves and lose our religion by getting honest with God about where we struggle.

Just as the religious leaders of the day, we too fall short. No one actually measures up. This is the invitation from Jesus—Jesus measured up for us, and all we need to do is place our faith in him and follow his lead.

Today, I invite you to carve out a few quiet moments to reread the verses that really spoke to you this week. Reread the passages in Matthew 23:1-33. Also consider reading Matthew 11:29-30 to contrast this approach to that of the Pharisees.

Then look back on any notes you may have captured over the past few days and reflect on the actions you took this week.

Prayer:

Father, I am not capable of measuring up. I will always fall short. But Jesus measured up for me. Today, help me trust in you, abide with Christ, and walk with the Holy Spirit rather than trying to do life on my own. In Jesus' name, amen.

Series Theme Verse:

Romans 6:14

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This post was written by Kelly Pagel, Director of the LivingItOut.