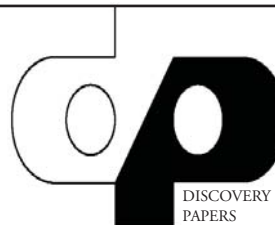


WHAT IS WRONG WITH RELIGION?

SERIES: WEEPING IN WORSHIP



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Paul Taylor
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In the movie *The Godfather*, Michael Corleone aspires to the position of Godfather, the supreme head of the mafia organization. One particular scene shows him standing as godfather at the baptism of his nephew. The priest chants in Latin as he sprinkles water on the infant's head. But interspersed with the scene of the baptism, we see Michael's hired assassins brutally murder the leaders of five other rival families. We hear the priest ask Michael a series of questions: "Do you believe in Jesus Christ?" "Do you renounce Satan?" "Do you renounce all of Satan's ways?" Each time we hear Michael reply "Yes," we see Michael's men execute another of the targets.

This scene is a powerful, disturbing ending to a powerful, disturbing film, and it bears witness to a powerful, disturbing truth: religion, a profession of faith and commitment to God, can coexist with evil, murderous actions. Two things that should be incompatible aren't. We want religion to stop bad things and make people nice to each other. So it's disturbing to realize that religion doesn't make things better.

In fact, our culture would tell you that, not only does religion *not* make anything better, it is actually the *source* of many of the world's problems. Wars, genocide, inequalities—religion seems to cause a lot of these things. So religion itself must be evil. If we could just escape religion entirely as a global community, then things would work out much better.

Today we're looking at the question, "What is wrong with religion?" Something within us is aware that there is some truth to what people in our culture claim about religion. You just can't look at world history and contemporary politics and ignore the fact that religion seems to cause a lot of problems. So what is wrong with religion? And what does that mean for us? After all, we participate in a form of religious ceremony here every Sunday—are we part of the problem? Is there a difference between religion and what we do here?

This message is a kind of parallel to last week's message. Last week we dealt with the theological issue of sin, and we asked the question, "What is wrong with me?" The answer that we came to is that our hearts are inclined to turn away from God. We have a terminal disease in which our hearts are predisposed to reject God's initiation in our lives. But deep down we have some awareness that God is there. Each of us knows that God is real on some fundamental level, but we don't really want anything to do with him. One solution is to ignore him, to claim that he doesn't exist. But there is another solution, a way to manage the fact that God exists without actually having

to address the reality that your heart is turned against him. Religion makes that possible.

Today we are looking at Jeremiah 7:1-15 to find out what is wrong with religion. This particular passage in Jeremiah is known as Jeremiah's temple sermon, and it consists, essentially, of three oracles that Jeremiah gave to the people of Jerusalem warning them about religion. The oracles build in intensity as we move through them. But they are introduced by a bit of context first. Verses 1-2:

This is the word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD: "Stand at the gate of the LORD's house and there proclaim this message: 'Hear the word of the LORD, all you people of Judah who come through these gates to worship the LORD.'

Remember that Jeremiah's ministry started during the reign of King Josiah, who helped to reform the nation of Israel and get them back into the habit of worshipping YHWH. Well, this sermon occurs during the reign of the next king, who couldn't care less about YHWH. But the people had gotten back into the rhythm of worship, which included these huge festivals three times a year. And during these festivals, people would come to Jerusalem to worship in the temple. This sermon of Jeremiah's probably occurred during one of those festivals. It was common for a priest to stand at the gate of the temple as people came in and ask them to consider their spiritual state before entering into worship (Psalm 15, 24). And this is basically what Jeremiah was doing. He stood at the gates as throngs of people came into the temple to worship. But Jeremiah's message wasn't just about encouraging the Israelites to reflect. His message was harsh and accusatory. We'll see that he was indicting them as they came into worship, not just inviting them to check their spiritual state.

Religion gets us what we want

The first oracle starts out as a warning to the people. Jeremiah criticizes them, but indicates that they still have the opportunity to change their ways. Verses 3-7:

This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: Reform your ways and your actions, and I will let you live in this place. Do not trust in deceptive words and say, "This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD!" If you really change your ways and your actions and deal with each other justly, if you do not oppress the alien, the fatherless or the widow and do not shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not follow other gods to your own harm, then I will

let you live in this place, in the land I gave your forefathers for ever and ever.

This passage begins with a hopeful note. God is giving His people a chance to change. You'll find this at times in Jeremiah, especially in the earlier passages. God seems to hold out the possibility that if His people change, he will let them stay in Jerusalem. But he says that they have to change the way that they are acting. And he points out a disparity. He says there is a conflict between the way they are acting and their religious practice.

What's wrong with their religious practice? At the core of it, God says that they are trusting in deceptive words. Remember back to last week when we talked about the nature of sin. In Jeremiah 17, God criticized Judah's heart because it trusted in man rather than in God. Well, here, we see that Judah is trusting in words - deceptive words instead of trusting in God. The phrase here is *davar-sheker*. Literally, "words of deceit." Remember how significant the word of YHWH is in this book? The *davar-adonai*? The phrase that appears once in every 20 verses all throughout this book? Well, this is what sinful people do. They are meant to trust in God and to find God through His word, the *davar-adonai*. But we look for cheap alternatives. For something easier. So the people of Israel trusted in deceptive words. Instead of *davar-adonai*, they trusted in *davar-sheker*. Instead of the Word of the Lord, they wanted the words of deceit.

And what are the words they are trusting in? Well, they are chanting about the temple. This is likely some kind of hymn used in worship. So here are all of these Israelites, coming in from all parts of Judah to participate in this grand assembly, and they are singing about the temple. They are so happy to be able to go to the temple; they are so excited for this feast. And they feel close to God because they're here. They are in the right place, they are doing the right things, they are saying the right words. And that makes them feel good. Because it means they can forget about what is true of their hearts. This word of deceit told them that God would protect them from harm if they just said the right words and did the right things.

When I was growing up, I was a Boy Scout. And so we would camp a lot. And one of the things you do when you're camping is stand around the campfire. But campfires have smoke and it's always getting into your eyes. And there were all of these folk legends about how you could keep the smoke from getting in your eyes. My favorite was that you'd just have to say the phrase "I hate dirty rabbits." If you said those words, you wouldn't get smoke in your eyes. "I hate dirty rabbits."

Well, that's what the Israelites were doing. They thought if they just said the right words, they'd be safe from harm. "This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD." They thought as long as they were religious, God would take care of them. So here's the first thing we notice that is wrong with religion: *people become religious to get what they want*.

Do you realize that this is why ancient people wor-

shipped idols? You see, most of the pagan religious rituals had to do with getting something that you wanted. So there were ceremonies associated with the Asherah pole that were supposed to help you to conceive if you were trying to get pregnant. There were ceremonies associated with farming so that you could do certain things to try to convince the gods to give you a good harvest. There were ceremonies you could perform that were supposed to give you success in military conflict. There were ceremonies you could perform that were supposed to keep you healthy. And so worshiping idols for the ancient Israelites had to do with getting what they wanted. If their God didn't let them get pregnant or have a good crop or win a battle, then they just tried another god to see if that one would get them what they wanted. Instead of trusting that their God might know what he was doing, they were obsessed with getting what they wanted. So they tried worshipping other gods. They used religion to get what they wanted.

So the question comes to us then. We are here this morning celebrating a religious ceremony. It starts at a certain time, ends at a certain time (unless I'm preaching, in which case it ends ten minutes after a certain time), and has certain elements in it. But why are we here? Jeremiah criticizes the Israelites because they were coming to worship in the temple of Jerusalem for the same reason that they worshiped idols. They wanted something out of it. Why are you here? What do we want from religion?

Well, I think if we're honest - I think if I'm honest - what I really want from religion is that things go well. That my life be easy. I want to be happy. I want to avoid pain. I want to be fulfilled in my job. I don't want to fight with my wife. I want my kids to obey me. I want my friends to like me. I want them to be there when I want them to be there and not be there when I don't want them to be there. I just want things to go well. And somewhere deep inside, some part of me thinks that if I do this religious thing, then things will go well. My life will be easier. And yet, as we've talked about for Jeremiah and as we'll see in more detail later, that's not really how it works. Having a real relationship with God doesn't necessarily mean things will go well. That's one of the main themes of this book. God was about to destroy Jerusalem. God was about to do the unthinkable. But he was in it. He was there.

Religion gets us what we want, but a real relationship with God does something deeper. Our God is not a vending machine, dispensing easy lives for worship. He is personal. He relates to us. In love and in discipline with gentleness and wisdom.

Let's move on now and look at the second oracle. What else does God have to say to these people? The second oracle gets a little bit more critical of these people. It starts and ends with a Hebrew word that is kind of difficult to translate. The NIV translates it "look" and that's a decent translation. Older translations use "behold." The point is to get your attention. "Watch out! Look at this!"

Religion hides our hearts

Verses 8-11:

But look, you are trusting in deceptive words that are worthless. “Will you steal and murder, commit adultery and perjury, burn incense to Baal and follow other gods you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house, which bears my Name, and say, “We are safe”— safe to do all these detestable things? Has this house, which bears my Name, become a den of robbers to you? But I have been watching! declares the LORD.

Once again this passage uses the same phrase. Instead of the word of YHWH, they are putting their trust in the word of deceit. They are believing something that isn't true. That religion keeps them safe. Verse 9 is a clear reference to the Ten Commandments, mentioning six of them explicitly, saying that these people violate the very basis of the relationship that God established with His people. These were the ground rules. This was like the marriage vow between God and His people. Moses read the Ten Commandments and what did they say? In Deuteronomy 5:27, after hearing the reading of the Ten Commandments, the people responded, “We will listen and obey.” They said “I do.”

And yet, here God calls them out because they aren't keeping those vows. These people violate the basic agreement of their relationship with God and then come into the temple and say “we are safe.” The temple is compared to a safe-house where criminals can gather to hide and plan their next crime in safety. So these Israelites are in the temple, going through the motions of their relationship with God, but only so that they can go out into the world and do whatever they want. And God is furious that this hypocrisy, this mockery of their relationship, happens in the place that bears His name. They dare to come into His dwelling place and claim safety. One commentator said it's like a husband finding out that his wife was unfaithful to him and had the affair in their bed. That would just add insult to injury.

And so from this criticism, we can see the second thing that is wrong with religion: *we use religion to hide our hearts from God.* We think that being religious, that coming into the temple, that participating in these ceremonies protects us from having a real relationship with God. It allows us to do whatever we want - to act in complete contradiction to that relationship, but to hide the fact that our hearts are turned away from him. Religion allows our hearts to turn away from God, while our actions fake a relationship. But this passage in Jeremiah reminds us that God is watching. He sees our hearts, whether we try to hide them or not. He sees what we do outside these walls. He sees who we really are. And that can be a terrifying thought. Sometimes a fake relationship sounds a lot nicer.

And we know about fake relationships in our culture. In fact, you might say we're obsessed with them. The biggest hit TV show on TLC right now is called *Jon and Kate Plus Eight*. Rachel recently started watching it, so that means I've seen a few episodes too. It's about a family with 8 kids:

a pair of twins and a set of sextuplets. And this show always features interviews of Jon and Kate, sitting there talking to the camera about their family life. And they seem to be a happily married couple. But then recently news came out that Jon might be having an affair. And everybody is in an uproar.

And in hearing about this, I've been reading about the reality show couples curse. It seems that every time a married couple creates a reality show featuring their relationship they end up breaking up, usually because of an affair. And the irony here is just too much. You create a reality show about your relationship. But then one of you starts to have an affair and your “real relationship” becomes a fake relationship, broadcast on TV for everyone to see. And the whole world is fascinated. Why? Because we know about fake relationships. We see them everywhere, and we're terrified by them because we know how easy—and how devastating—it can be to fake a relationship.

What Jeremiah criticizes these people for is actually a common thing. Jesus picks up one of his phrases when he comes into the temple of Jerusalem. 600 years after this was written, Jesus walks into the temple and sees the money changes and the souvenir stands and the people making a profit from religion. And he throws out. He tells them, “My house is supposed to be called a house of prayer. But you've turned it into a den of robbers.” You're using religion just like they were in Jeremiah's day.

Well, what about us? Do we do that? Do we at this church use religion at times to protect ourselves from God? You know, studying the Bible is a funny thing. It is possible to study the Bible as the spoken revelation of a personal eternal God that reaches out in relationship to me. And it's possible to meet God through Bible study, to encounter him in a personal way and actually relate to him. I've had times where I've studied the Bible and met God through it. But what's funny is that it's also possible to study the Bible as a way to avoid God. To study the Bible as an alternative to actually having to relate to God. From actually having to deal with the messiness of relationship. With the confusion of not knowing what God is doing. With the ups and downs that Jeremiah experiences. It's possible to study the Bible so that you have answers *about* God instead of having a relationship *with* God. I've been there too. And around here, we like to study the Bible. How do we study the Bible? Do we study it so that our hearts may be changed? Do we need to learn more or be changed by the things we've already learned. Does our religion protect us from God? Or pave the way for us to encounter him?

Religion makes us better

The final oracle in this passage has to do with the city of Shiloh. This was one of Israel's old centers of worship. It was about 20 miles north of Jerusalem. And it had been the site of the tabernacle for almost 400 years. The Ark of the Covenant, the symbol of God's presence, had rested there. Shiloh was like the precursor to the temple at

Jerusalem. So let's look at Jeremiah 7:12-14 and see what God says about this place.

Go now to the place in Shiloh where I first made a dwelling for my Name, and see what I did to it because of the wickedness of my people Israel. While you were doing all these things, declares the LORD, I spoke to you again and again, but you did not listen; I called you, but you did not answer. Therefore, what I did to Shiloh I will now do to the house that bears my Name, the temple you trust in, the place I gave to you and your fathers.

So Shiloh was the old site that commemorated God's presence to His people. But it was a part of the Northern territory of Israel. And remember that the Northern tribe of Israel had been wiped out by the Assyrians about 100 years earlier than this scene. Shiloh itself had been destroyed by the Philistines even earlier than that. And so what God does here is to draw a comparison between Shiloh, where the tabernacle used to dwell and Jerusalem where the temple now dwells. And his point is simple, if I didn't spare Shiloh because I had my dwelling there, what makes you think I will spare Jerusalem because my temple is there?

But remember that Shiloh was part of the Northern tribes. The people in Jerusalem thought they were better than the tribes to the North. They had always thought of themselves as the real Israel anyway, because their king was from the line of David. They would have thought, "Well, sure the Northern tribes were destroyed and carried off into exile, and sure Shiloh was destroyed. But they were the Northern tribes. We're Judah. We're the real Israelites. God would never hurt us. And we have the real temple."

So as think about religion, we can see that one more problem with religion. *Religion makes us better.* We think that we are better than someone else. Religion establishes some sort of hierarchy of achievement. You can be a fleshly Christian, you can be a mature Christian, you can be a nominal Christian, you can be a born-again Christian, you can be a Christian who is "on fire for Jesus," you can be a Christian who is "struggling with your faith," you can be a "Sunday morning Christian," or you can be a Christian who is "really involved in leadership." And so there are all these comparisons that you can make when you are religious. I've been surprised at people's reaction to finding out that I'm a pastor. I thought that in this area of the country there wasn't much respect for pastors. But I've been amazed that for the most part when people find out I'm a pastor, they are impressed. And I can see by their reaction that they automatically think I'm a good person. Religion makes me better. If they only knew the truth...

For the people in Jerusalem, they were comparing themselves to the northern tribes and thought that their religion was much more right than those people. So whatever happened to them would never happen to us. But a relationship with God is much harder to compare across different people. Relationships are dynamic. They are dif-

ferent. They go through seasons of intimacy and distance. They grow and change and deepen, but it's an organic thing. There's no scale. There's no method of comparing friendships or marriages. Relationships are dynamic and unique. But they also share something in common. As we relate to God, we are all relating to the same God. And so God points out that they aren't any better than anyone else. If Shiloh was destroyed because they were being wicked, then Jerusalem will be destroyed for the same reason.

We talked about this a lot as we studied the book of Galatians last year, but there is something within us that just thrives on comparison. Something that desperately wants to know how I stack up against you. That something is an effect of sin. It's an effect of a heart that is inclined to turn away from God rather than toward him. Of a heart that is inclined to trust in man. But when you trust in man, if you're a man yourself, you have to start playing this game of comparison. It's inevitable. So religion actually allows us a way to encourage that type of sin in our lives. Religion makes us better.

Religion disappoints

But God says that he is going to treat the people of Jerusalem just like the people of the North. There is no favoritism with God. And in the epilogue to these oracles, we get the final conclusion. Verse 15 reads:

I will thrust you from my presence, just as I did all your brothers, the people of Ephraim.

So not only will the temple in Jerusalem be destroyed just like Shiloh was destroyed, but the people of Judah will be sent into exile, just like the people from the northern tribes were sent into exile 100 years earlier.

God realizes that these people are trusting in religion. He realizes that these people are using religion to get what they want. He realizes that they are using religion to protect themselves from a relationship with himself. He realizes that they are using religion to compare themselves to others. And so he takes it away from them. He takes their religion away. He destroys their temple. He sends them out of their land. He doesn't take away their relationship with them. In fact, he promises that it is going to change and deepen and grow into something totally new. But he takes away their religion.

And so here we see our last observation about religion: ultimately, *religion disappoints*. God has a history of taking away the things that keep us from him. If we're using something to protect ourselves from him, he just might take that away. And when that happens, it hurts. Something we have been relying on and trusting in and using for our benefit is gone. And we feel the lack of it in our lives. But God is working through that lack to invite us to know him deeper. He is working through our disappointment to show us what we really want. What our hearts really crave. We don't really want what we think we want. We don't really want to protect ourselves from him. We don't really want to settle for feeling OK about ourselves

because we are better than the person next to us. We want to be connected to him. We want to be loved and forgiven and accepted. We're just scared that it can't be true. We'll see more of this theme next week.

The reason that religion disappoints is that it just doesn't deliver. It was never meant to. If you think that religion is going to get you what you want, whether it is economic success or fertility or good health, then you are going to be disappointed. If you think that religion will protect you from God, then you are going to realize that it can't. At some point in your life, you will have to face God. And protecting yourself from him, allowing your heart to stay turned away from him, is just going to disappoint you in the end. It's not really what you want.

Now, most of us live our lives in an effort to reduce disappointment. You've heard the suggestion, "Keep your expectations low so you won't be disappointed." But most of us have lived long enough to know that we can't avoid disappointment. It is a regular part of life. The great job that doesn't turn out to be as great as you thought it would be, the perfect marriage that turns out to require some painful work, parents who don't treat you the way you want them to, children who don't make the decisions you'd hoped they would have made. Our lives on this earth will always include disappointment. But it should be encouraging to know that God works through it. That he uses disappointment to help us see him. And if it's religion that you are using to keep yourself safe from God, know that you will be disappointed. And that disappointment is God's gift to you so that you have the chance to see him.

Conclusion

So this is what is wrong with religion. Religion is about trying to get what you want. It's about going through the motions with your spouse while your real life is lived with your lover in a hotel room. It's about doing the things you think God wants you to do so that you never have to actually look at him. It's about feeling better about yourself than other people. And it's about being disappointed because all of those things leave you empty.

That's what we see from this passage. We see people who are living two lives. They are worshipping God when it is convenient, but they are spitting in His face when they think he isn't looking. They are like Michael Corleone, baptizing his nephew in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost, claiming to renounce Satan and all his ways while guns throughout the city are murdering his enemies to carry out his bidding.

And so this morning we are left with an invitation. There are many things wrong with religion. But this worship

gathering this morning is a religious ceremony. You could be coming here to be religious. Or you could be coming here to encounter the living God. The God that freed His people from Egypt. The God that established a covenant with them. The God that stayed faithful to Israel while they cheated on him in the back room. The God that took away Jerusalem and the temple and the land from His people because they thought it kept them safe. The God that sent His Son to establish a new relationship with His people that couldn't be broken. The God that wants you to know him.

What's wrong with religion is that it can become a way for us to manage this inconvenient God whom our hearts are turned against. Don't let that be true of you. Don't manage God, don't try to get what you want, don't fool yourself into thinking that he doesn't really know what's going on, don't use this to feel better about yourself. Engage with God and allow him to turn your heart towards him. Talk to him. Worship him. Ask him to be a regular part of your day. That's your invitation today. Not to religion. But to God.