

***“Conversations with an Atheist. When Religion Goes Bad”***

Today we're continuing this series we started last week. It's called "Conversation with an Atheist" and it's meant to be a dialogue with the questions, and accusations that contemporary atheists are leveling at religion. Authors like Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens and others are on a crusade. They are saying that religion is a delusion, that religion is restricting scientific discovery, medicine, and slowing human progress. They are also saying that religion is degrading, that it causes suffering, that it is ultimately dangerous to humanity. All of these contemporary atheists point out that you don't see atheists flying planes into buildings, or blowing up innocent bystanders, or burning down clinics.

So what we're doing in this series is having a conversation. We're listening to the concerns that contemporary atheists are leveling at Christianity, and we're giving an intelligent, thoughtful, faithful, loving response.

Last week we looked at the questions of God and science—can you be a follower of Christ and appreciate scientific discovery? This week, when religion goes bad. What do I mean? So many people are turned off by faith because of what they see the faithful doing, or not doing. Atheists are quick to point out Christians and pastors who say they believe one thing and do something completely the opposite. Atheists are quick to point out the abuses, the oppression have been done in the name of religion. Many people wonder if the world might not be a better place without religion.

I want to start by saying that contemporary atheists have some valid criticisms about religion. And people of faith often wrestle with the questions and issues they raise. I have wrestled with these same issues. Issues of when religion has gone bad, been hypocritical, caused harm.

Let's look at a few ways that religion might go bad. The first is how religion is sometimes used to oppress people, or maintain a status quo that keeps certain people in power and pushes other people down. The caste system of Hinduism in India. The lowest caste does the jobs nobody else wants to do, and they're supposed to simply accept their place as a way to work out their bad Karma. It wasn't until recently that that view has begun to change in India.

Theirs the oppression of women in many Muslim countries, where women can't drive or they can't vote. All in the name of the Koran.

In North America we've experienced similar things in the Christian faith. In the 1860's we were at civil war as some Christians interpreted the scriptures to say that God had made it part of his eternal plan that people should be slaves of other people because of something that happened between Noah and Ham in a story in the Old Testament. Ham was later interpreted to be African.

Until 1920 women couldn't vote in our country. Why? Because of the view of the role of women in our society that was shaped by the Christian faith and certain interpretation of the Bible. Women are still not allowed to become pastors or leaders in the church in Catholic, and many conservative Christian churches. Because Paul wrote in the first century that women are to keep silent in the church. Religion goes bad when it is used to oppress people.

Another way that religion goes bad is when it is used to abuse people. People who are weak, or people who are gullible. All of us can think of something we heard about or read about where people of religion, especially pastors or religious leaders, have taken advantage of others, sexually or financially.

It's true, there have been some bad apples. But at the same time we need to understand that there are 586,000 clergy in the United States. And the number of people who do these terrible things is very, very small. But of course every time one does we read about it in the newspaper (and we should) because this is taking advantage of people in the name of God and it should make us sick.

These are tragic ways that religion goes bad, but I'm pretty sure that it's not the scandals, or past oppress that make most people react against Christianity. I think that most non-religious people react most harshly because of the Christians they encounter on a regular basis. Christians and pastors that don't present a Christianity that looks like Jesus. Instead they convey a Christianity that's narrow-minded, sometimes ignorant, sometimes mean-spirited, and judgmental.

I heard a group of pollsters speak last year. They found that when non-religious people are asked to describe Christians, far and away the first way they describe Christians is as being anti-gay. That is the first thing that comes to mind in non-religious people about Christ-followers. We're anti-gay. That grieves me. Of all the

things that Jesus stood for. Of all the things he did and calls his followers to do, that's what we are known for? How tragic, how sad.

The biggest turn off to Christianity for non-believers comes from Christians themselves. The hypocrisy, the judgmentalism, the lack of love and compassion. Most people who become atheists don't do it because they've carefully weighed the arguments and found that science has more to say about reality than religion does. Most of the time, people decide to become atheists as a response to how they've seen Christians act.

For some people in your life, you are the only Bible they will ever get the chance to read. You are the only witness to Christ that they will know; you are the only representative to Christ, the only picture of what it means to be a Christian. So when people look at you, what do they see? Are they drawn to the Christ you represent? Or are they repelled by him?

Let's shift gears. Yes, there have been abuses and misuses of religion throughout the centuries, and there are many Christians, many pastors, who are hypocritical. But even with all that in mind, the good that Christianity brings is far, far more than any harm it's done. Steven Weinberg's, another contemporary atheist, wrote that good people will do good things, and bad people will do bad things, but for good people to do bad things, this takes religion. I can understand what he's saying. In order to move people to fly airplanes into buildings, and kill thousands of innocent people, that required religion and the promises of certain things, a certain way of looking at God.

But is that really how it works? Is it only religion that can move good people to do bad things? Science itself says no. In 1963 the Milgram experiments were done. I studied this in college psychology classes. They were done at Yale University as way to try and understand how German citizens, good people, could have participated in the Holocaust. They found that good people would give an electric shock to another person, if they were told by a scientist, the authority figure in the room, to do it. They would increase the jolt, even when the person would cry out in pain; even when they thought it was wrong.

Part of what that shows is that it's not really about religion as it is about authority figures telling people what they must do. That authority figure could be a president, it could be a general, it could be a teacher, a father or a mother, or it could be a scientist or a pastor.

Hitler's scientists did atrocious, unthinkable things, experimenting on human beings. But that doesn't mean that I think all scientists are bad. Does it take religion for good people to do bad things? No! Weinberg is simply wrong. We can't reject religion because certain people have done bad things in the name of religion.

Dawkins and the others do raise some valid concerns about when religion goes bad, but let's do the Paul Harvey thing and look at the rest of story. What is the other side of this coin? Christianity as I understand it is very different than what Dawkins and Harris talk about in their books. Yes there are hypocrites within the Christian faith. In fact every person who calls themselves a Christian is a hypocrite. I am a hypocrite. I stand up here every week and I tell you how we ought to live our lives, and the reality is that I never fully live up to that. The Christian Gospel is a moral vision that we all lean into. We spend our whole lives trying to get there. In Christianity we call this the process of sanctification. So we see where we're supposed to be, but we're not there yet. And we never quite arrive, but hopefully we get closer and closer to that moral vision. And as long as we don't fully meet that moral vision we will always be hypocrites! We say we believe one thing and yet we do something else.

But listen, even atheists and agnostics are hypocrites! If you call yourself an agnostic or atheist and you don't live up to what you say is right, what you say you believe, you're a hypocrite. We all struggle with this. I struggle with this.

But let's look at the rest of the story. Let's think about what the moral vision is that we draw from scripture. Dawkins and Harris are very critical of the strange stuff in the Old Testament, and we'll talk about that in a couple of weeks. But those strange passages aren't at the heart of our moral vision as followers of Christ. Our moral vision is based in the words of the prophet Micah where he writes, **"What is good? And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God"** (Micah 6:8, NIV). That's what we give our lives to. That's the Christian moral vision. Or when we read the words of Jesus when he tells us that we're not just to love our friends and our neighbors. He said, **"Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you"** (Matthew 5:44, NIV). He tells us that when somebody hits us, we turn the other cheek.

He tells us to be forgiving--that it's an essential part of who we are. When he tells us to let our yes be yes and our no be no—our word should be our bond. When he says that we're not to focus on taking the splinter out of

somebody else's eye, but work on getting the log out of our own eye. These things convict me and challenge me and give me a moral vision.

When Jesus said that on the last day he would come and judge our lives on whether we fed the hungry, and clothed the naked, and visited the sick and in prison. That is a moral vision that grabs my heart and pulls me forward.

When the apostle Paul writes, "**Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others**" (Philippians 2:3-4, NIV). That is a compelling moral vision. When Paul tells us in Ephesians, "**I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received**" (Ephesians 4:1, NIV). That's an every day, 24/7 calling. That's our moral vision.

So the Christian moral vision is something that's very profound, and in the end it's about love. That is the defining characteristic of the Christian faith. John writes that if you do not have love for others, you do not know God (1 Jn 4:8). Paul defines what this love looks like, "**Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres**" (1 Corinthians 13:4-7, NIV). He says that we can do all kinds of great things, but if we don't have love, it's all nothing. That is the defining mark of the Christian faith—or at least it should be.

So when we think about what Christianity is supposed to look like, we may not find examples who are fully living up to that, but it at least paints a picture for us to work toward. And Jesus ultimately defines this by laying down his life; by showing us what love really looks like.

In my life, I'm not there yet, but that's my goal, that is my desire. Every day I wake up and I say, "God help me to walk with you. Help me to be the person you would have me be. Help me to live for you and honor you today." And then every night I have look back on my day and say, "I'm sorry, Lord, for the places that I blew it. Please forgive me, help me to do better tomorrow." And that's not about guilt. It's about knowing what the vision is and striving toward that. Some days are better than others. It's that moral vision that compels Christians in how they live their lives.

Dawkins and Harris say that Christians ultimately do everything they do out of self-interest. They say that Christians are more narcissistic than non-believers, more self-absorbed, than atheists. Atheists like to point out that people become Christians out of fear of hell. It's about saving their own bacon, which is pretty self-serving and narcissistic. They say Christians continue in faith because they want God's blessings, they want to go to heaven, which is also pretty self-serving. Christians do good things to get into God's good graces. "I do this for you so you do this for me." When Harris and Dawkins say that, they've misunderstood the Gospel. But I think a lot of Christians misunderstand it too. Way too many Christians think, "If we do enough good stuff, God will love us more and bless us."

But the Christian Gospel says just the opposite. It says, "God **already** loves you more than you can imagine or believe. And God has already done everything necessary for your salvation, for you to go to heaven. It's all already there and it's offered to you as a free gift. All you have to do is receive that gift. You don't have to work for it. You don't have to earn it. You don't have to make God love you by doing good things. God already loves you." You don't have to live the rest of your life frantically working to get God to love you, the rest of your life is spent loving in response to a love you have already received—living differently **because** you know God loves you. There's a world of difference between Dawkins' understanding of the Gospel and the real Gospel.

The truth is that a lot of people start their faith journey trying to get something out of God. "I'll follow you if you do this for me. I'll come to church so that you'll bless me. I'll give to get something in return." Listen if that's where you are, the hard word is this: it's time to grow up! Maturing in the faith is about realizing it's not about me. I've already received everything, so now I am free to live my life for others the way God loves them, living sacrificially for others not to get something in return, but simply because it is right.

Dawkins and Harris say it's time to do away with religion. The world would be a better place without out. I say, "Really?" I've said before the test of a church, if it's really doing what it's supposed to be doing is this: If suddenly it were gone, would anybody notice, would anybody miss it? That's Dawkins desire. That's Harris' desire. Would anybody miss Saint Paul's? And I'm not just talking those who call this their church home. Would this city miss us if we were gone? Would anybody care? I think so. I think about the many people we help with food, and clothing, and counseling, and hope. I think about those who are struggling with addiction that we help in many way. I think about those who are trying to keep their families together. I think about the work we do with Turn Around

Ranch, and Salvation Army, and the Red Cross, and through our own Homebound Services, and The Salvage Yard. I think about the people we sheltered during the ice storm.

Would this city really be better if we were gone? There are people from this congregation that are serving in every social service agency in this city, volunteering their time to help the hungry, the poor, the elderly, children, the sick, people with AIDS. I think about the village we sponsor in Nicaragua where we are providing food daily, and weekly doctor visits and medicines, schools, teachers and school supplies, safe drinking water, jobs, and microloans, and hope. And yet Dawkins would have us do away with religion, do away with all of that?

Would all these things be happening, if it weren't for people who encounter the living Lord Jesus Christ, and give their lives to him, and begin to live their lives for others because of that claim of Christ on their lives? People who give their time and their skills, and their money, not to win God's favor, but because simply they've experience his love and want to pass that along. And we're just one of a couple of hundred churches in this area.

I've seen over and over again how people started coming here and their marriages were saved. People become better mothers, better fathers. They chose to follow Christ and live with integrity and they become better employers, and better employees, because it wasn't just about them, and making money, and climbing the ladder. People have come here and over time began asking themselves, "How can I live my life so that I make a difference?" You would like these people better as a result of their faith.

All the beds put out for the homeless people in this city tonight, and every night, are put out by Christian organizations. All the hospitals in Joplin and the surrounding areas were started by Churches and Christians who gave their time and money because they believed that people needed decent healthcare. Did you know that the public schools in Missouri and Kansas were formed by churches and pastors? These schools started in church basements and homes of Christians, because they believed that children needed an education that was free! Mr. Dawkins, Mr. Harris, you would do away with all of this? Do away with religion? Sweep away all the things that are done by people who feel that compelling moral vision of Jesus that leads them to live their lives sacrificially. Religion does so much good that we don't even know about, if we tried to erase that, you wouldn't like this planet very much.

The moral vision of the New Testament says that God is with the poor, the hurting, the oppressed, the grieving through you and through me. When people who have encountered that love of God respond and say, "Lord here are my hands, here is my voice, here is my life, show me what I might do for you. Use me to minister to people whether they're in the cubicle next to me at work, or in Nicaragua or somewhere else. I care, I want to help." That's what we're about as Christ followers, demonstrating that kind love. That's how the world has changed.

If atheists and agnostics were to see Christians like that, who are living authentic Christian lives like that, a life of love and genuineness, sincerity, free from condemnation and judgment, not talking god-talk that nobody understands, but people who are there when there is a need. If people who are struggling with atheism or agnosticism saw that, they would say, "I think I'm interested in what you have to say, I'll open the door a little bit. I don't believe in your God yet, but I sure believe in what you do, and I'd like to follow along with you."

If you're an agnostic, or an atheist, come join us as we serve, as help the hurting of our city, our world. Many agnostics and atheists still want to make a difference in the world. If that's you, come join us. You don't have to believe in our God yet to say you want to help. Then look and see if you don't see the difference God makes in people's lives.

So we've learned that Christians are hypocrites. That they have misused and abused people in the name of religion, some of the bad apples. We've done some bad things in the name of religion, and we repent of those things. And we've also heard the compelling moral vision of the New Testament and its call on our lives to be the hands and voice of God. So what are you going to do? What do you need to repent of in how people have seen you live out the moral vision that Jesus gives you? What can you do to determine to be different, be a light that shines in the darkness, so that the people who are around you are drawn to that Christ, and not repelled from him? How can you live so that an atheist, or an agnostic seeing your life would say, "Man, I want what they have." That's what I leave you with today. And for today that is the good news. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

*I thank Rev. Adam Hamilton, Senior Pastor of the United Methodist Church of the Resurrection, for his resources for this message series.*