

Eight Ways to be a Bad Christian

Follow the Letter of the Law but not the Spirit.

Matthew 23:16-22

This morning I want to continue to look at our study of eight ways we can be a bad Christian. I believe this study is a call back to the true essence of our Christian faith. **We can so easily adapt the image or form of being a Christian yet lack the heart and true motivation of it.** If you look around at the Christian church you find that there are many who go through the motions, many who do religious things, many who do the expected righteous thing, and yet these things can become empty and meaningless to us personally and relationally between us and God

Jesus comes in our text this morning and challenges the religious people of the day to see their motivation and form as being empty and useless. He tells them in **Matthew 23:16-22:**

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? 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? 20 When you swear ‘by the altar,’ you are swearing by it and by everything on it. 21 And when you swear ‘by the Temple,’ you are swearing by it and by God, who lives in it. 22 And when you swear ‘by heaven,’ you are swearing by the throne of God and by God, who sits on the throne.

The example of taking an oath is used here to prove a point. Is the gold more important than the Temple (the dwelling place of God)? Is the sacrifice made on the altar more important than the altar (which represents God’s acceptance the gift)? The Pharisees missed the most important piece to their faith – God.

Religion is nothing more empty activities that lead us no where. Relationship is nothing more than connecting with God and avoiding empty activities. Although people would classify Christianity as a religion, we need to look past all the bells and whistles and see God and his wanting to be our God and his wanting to dwell and live in and with us.

Bad Christianity focuses on doing God’s work while Good Christianity focuses on being God’s work – listening to him, connecting with him, going through meaningful exercises and experiences that draw us closer to him, making adjustments to enhance greater clarity of God’s voice and leading.

Can we fall into the trap of making our Christianity about activity and form more so than a developing relationship with God? How do we fall into the trap of following the letter of the law instead of the Spirit of it? What do some of these traps look like?

The Three traps of empty Christianity:

1. Religious form supersedes experiencing God's presence

The whole premise of why the Temple was constructed was for there to be an earthly dwelling place for the presence of God. But at the time of Jesus it is clear that something was different about the Temple of his time. **John 1:14** tells us:

14 So the Word became human (flesh) and made his home among us. He was full of unfailing love and faithfulness.* And we have seen his glory, the glory of the Father's one and only Son.*

It is debated whether or not the original physical manifestation of God, that we read about in the first Temple, was still hovering over the Ark of the Covenant. In **Leviticus 16:2** tells us:

For the Ark's cover—the place of atonement—is there, and I myself am present in the cloud above the atonement cover.

In the first Jewish temple, God had graciously come down to earth to manifest himself-- he was constantly represented as dwelling between the cherubim, the two figures that stood at each end of the ark of the covenant; between whom, on the mercy seat, the lid of the ark, a cloud of glory was exhibited, which was the symbol and proof of the Divine presence. This the Jewish people called “Shekinah”, the habitation of Yahweh.

However, if God was now dwelling on earth in human form in the person of Jesus Christ was he also dwelling over the Ark of the Covenant? In fact, the term “made his home among us” has the idea of “residing just as God residing in the Tabernacle.” It is almost as if Jesus was alluding to the fact that God was no longer in the Temple, but was standing right in front of them.

Is it possible for a Church, a gathering of people, to become so busy with activity in the church or even in life, that they don't even realize that God's presence is gone?

We have to get back to the basic reality that Christianity is about Jesus Christ, his work on our behalf, and the fact that God wants to be with us, living in us. That is why Paul wrote in **1 Corinthians 3:16**:

16 Don't you realize that all of you together are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God lives in you?*

Don't neglect the dwelling place of God in you! Don't be like the Pharisees who focused on staying busy instead of the reality of the great privilege of having God's presence.

2. Priority and Value placed on objects and materialism instead of God

The Pharisees were more concerned with the property, gold and artifacts of the Temple instead of celebrating what the temple stood for. Jesus said in **Matthew 12:6**:

6 I tell you, there is one here who is even greater than the Temple!

Is it possible that we become so focused on stuff, on the building, on the physical aspects of the church and not even know that God has picked up and moved on? You also, however, hear of doctrine preached within the church that tends to focus more on materialism than on the work of Jesus. The prosperity message of many does nothing but cause a distraction from the glory and worship of our God.

In fact, I think it is safe to say that there are some who use the Good News of Jesus Christ as a stepping stool to promote doctrines that do nothing but bring benefit to themselves financially. Look at the Pharisees, they preferred the gold before the temple, and the gift before the altar simply because they were the beneficiaries. **We can have a tendency to only do things that benefit us instead of seeing everything we do as worship to our Lord and King.**

Even when you look at your own life, materialism deafens the ability to hear the voice of God. Jesus said it himself in **Matthew 16:26**:

*26 And what do you benefit if you gain the whole world but lose your own soul?**
Is anything worth more than your soul?

There's a prayer that many children have prayed to God, but as adults we may find ourselves praying a different version:

Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray my Cuisinart to keep
I pray my stocks are on the rise, And that my analyst is wise
That all the wine I sip is white, And that my hot tub's watertight
That racquetball won't get too tough, That all my sushi's fresh enough
I pray my cordless phone still works, That my career won't lose its perks
My microwave won't radiate, My condo won't depreciate
I pray my health club doesn't close, And that my money market grows
If I go broke before I wake, I pray my Volvo they won't take.

As a pastor there is always that fear of not having enough money come in on a Sunday morning to pay the bills. I have even sat in churches where the issue of giving was deemed more of a mandatory rule rather than a heart-felt opportunity of worship. Yet, over the years I have seen God provide time and time again. I am reminded of a verse that I was given at my ordination ceremony which even to this day speaks of God's faithfulness in **Luke 12:31** in the Living Bible Version:

31 He will always give you all you need from day to day if you will make the Kingdom of God your primary concern. (TLB)

If I do my part, God will do his part. My challenge is to not worry about the material things and simply rest in God's provision. Begging on TV, telling people that their

financial contributions determine the favor of God is nothing but manipulation for personal gain. In the Matthew Henry's Commentary the author writes this about our text this morning:

Corrupt church-guides make things to be sin or not sin as it serves their purposes, and lay a much greater stress on that which concerns their own gain than on that which is for God's glory and the good of souls.

Instead, let this be a place where people willingly and joyfully give to a God who has given us everything we need. The third trap of empty Christianity is:

3. Lack of respect for our relationship with God

To the Pharisee, taking an oath was nothing more than a mere game or play on words. They would rather take an oath based on the physical things rather than on their relationship with God. It would be no different than you and I making a promise based on our relationship with a rock, rather on our relationship with God. It becomes an issue of idolatry – what did they worship more? The temple and it's objects or God.

First, let me say that a majority of the time, when someone has to validate their promises by staking an oath on an object, family member, or even their relationship with God then you know they are in trouble. Watching a show like "Survivor" brings this to light a lot of times – people making promises based on their mother or fathers grave, or on their kids, only to later on stab someone in the back and vote them off the show.

We look at our society today, and you find more and more frequent that a persons "word" or promise becomes more and more empty. We are a wavering people who can't even keep our own commitments, aren't we? And yet, to make a foolish choice to take the name of God, or our relationship with God and make an oath with such a respectable and valuable thing, shows nothing but the ignorance of just how vital that relationship is.

Jesus was challenging the Pharisees to see that when they take an oath and base it on God, or God's Temple, or God's throne, it is not something to toy with. Our relationship with God is the most important thing we possess. Jesus said in **Matthew 5:34-37**:

34 But I say, do not make any vows! Do not say, 'By heaven!' because heaven is God's throne. 35 And do not say, 'By the earth!' because the earth is his footstool. And do not say, 'By Jerusalem!' for Jerusalem is the city of the great King. 36 Do not even say, 'By my head!' for you can't turn one hair white or black. 37 Just say a simple, 'Yes, I will,' or 'No, I won't.' Anything beyond this is from the evil one.

Our relationship with God is too important to base empty promises upon. In fact, don't even make those kind of statements because you might not be able to pull through. Just let your yes be yes, and your no be no. **Bad Christianity loses sight of the value of our relationship with God.**

Religion and Bad Christianity can easily go through the motions without the heart.

- It can focus on materialism, it can put more emphasis on things rather than God – in fact it can become a form of idolatry.
- It can become motivated by personal gain.
- It can easily get so wrapped up on activity and totally miss that the presence of God has moved on.
- It can lack the proper respect deserved in such an important relationship as our connection with God.

A 19th-century Danish theologian by the name of Soren Kierkegaard identified two kinds of religion -- Religion A and Religion B. The first is "faith" in name only (2 Tim. 3:5). It's the practice of attending church without genuine faith in the living Lord.

Religion B, on the other hand, is a life-transforming, destiny-changing experience. It's a definite commitment to the crucified and risen Savior, which establishes an ongoing personal relationship between a forgiven sinner and a gracious God.

This difference explains why for many years British author C.S. Lewis had such great difficulty in becoming a Christian. Religion A had blinded him to Religion B. According to his brother Warren, his conversion was "no sudden plunge into a new life, but rather a slow, steady convalescence from a deep-seated spiritual illness - an illness that had its origins in our childhood, in the dry husks of religion offered by the semi-political churchgoing of Ulster, and the similar dull emptiness of compulsory church during our school days."

Bad Christianity strips itself of any substance and meaning and becomes monotonous and empty procedures. Is that what we want for our lives? I pray that we long for the living, life changing presence of God, that fills us with a sense of grace that cannot be ignored but embraced as a life-long pursuit. Amen!