

I Believe in God, but...
I Don't Like Organized Religion
Hebrews 10:19-25
April 28, 2019

Welcome and Intro to the series...

Over the next few weeks we are taking some time to talk about stuff that gets talked about outside of these walls, but seldom do we have these same discussions inside the walls of a church. We are going to address what people mean when they say "I believe in God, but..." The stats are huge, 80% of Americans believe in God. Most of us like the idea of something greater than ourselves and something vast and mysterious. Even among those who say they don't believe in God – almost half say they believe in a higher power. (Pew and Barna). So, people like, maybe even love God, but there are lots of things people either don't understand about God or don't like about the people who claim to know and love God. So, we're going to talk about what it's like to believe in God but, still have questions. One, so we can address the issues and two, so that you know what to say when someone makes one of these statements to you at a party while you're holding a glass of something and chatting.

So, let me read for you a statement: *"Organized religion is a sham and a crutch for weak-minded people who need strength in numbers. It tells people to go out and stick their noses in other people's business. I live by the golden rule: Treat others as you'd want them to treat you. (Matthew 7:12) The Religious Right wants to tell people how to live."* Who made this statement, none other than Jesse Ventura. An article in The Observer from April 8, 2018 by Robyn Near says this:

"I will agree with one thing — most modern religions are a sham. Religions are man-made and were created by men to control and bring order to other men. I don't doubt that many religions were started with a firm belief that good would come of it. Martin Luther, after all, split from the Holy Roman Church because he saw the corruption of both the men who controlled the Church and the corruption of the Word of God.

In turn, others saw flaws in Martin Luther's beliefs, and up sprang the Puritans, the Presbyterians, the Methodists, the Quakers, and more. One of my main arguments with organized religion is each one believes that they are the ONE true religion. Many religions believe that their way to salvation is the only way and all others fall short. Here's my question: who died and made them God? The human race is particularly short-sighted when it comes to a belief in God. If it is true that *"God created man in his own image; male and female he created them,"* (Genesis 1:27) and if it is also true that *"all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,"* (Romans 3:23) and *"For God so loved the world..."* (John 3:16) then what makes us (Christians) so sure WE are the only ones going to Heaven? Or in the case of the Koran: *"Surely Allah ever watches over you."* And *"Allah, who is in the heavens and whatever is in the earth; woe to the unbelievers on account of the severe chastisement."* Etc. etc. Each religion claims ownership of God. Isn't it God who claims ownership of man? The most accepting people I know either don't practice religion at all, belong to non-traditional religions, or are, in fact, atheists.

Religion is complicated. Who is right? Who is wrong? Is anyone wrong? Is anyone right?

I believe in a deity, I'm just not sure how or what it is. I believe there is more than this life on Earth. I believe in angels who watch over us. I do not believe God gives a hoot who wins the World Series, or that Janie gets a horse for her birthday. I believe in the power of positive vibes, or prayers if you like, from groups of people for a particular cause. I don't believe the answers we ask for are always given. I believe in love, forgiveness, and kindness. Shalom."

Over the past few months, I've (Pastor Dave's) been involved in helping the churches in the city of Harrisburg navigate through a very difficult and challenging time. There were ten churches in the Harrisburg city area that were asked to consider merging together into a combined and intensive effort to reach the city of Harrisburg. This was designed as an effort to do something different since everyone of the 10 churches had experienced massive decline and most were struggling to stay alive. One of the churches, Grace UMC in Penbrook closed its doors and merged with Trinity in Penbrook. Of the remaining churches, two voted to merge and the other seven voted to keep going. I (Pastor Dave) sat in on multiple conversations and let me just say this...church people can be ugly!

After one especially heated meeting a member of the mayor's office who specializes in urban development came to me and said, "This is why I don't attend a church. Every person here is selfish and self-centered and can only think about what they want. The only thing I hear is that they don't want their church to close...they don't care about the others or anything else for that matter." I of course went on to invite this person to CrossPoint Church because I think we're an awesome group of people. But, you see, at the heart of the problem, people believe certain things about organized religion and we, as believers, tend to prove them right. The Church, with a capital C, has been shooting itself in the foot for as long as it's existed. We can be our own worst enemies when it comes to helping others find Jesus and fall in love

with His Church, again – capital C. Everyone of us in this room is affected by a culture that is increasingly disinterested in organized religion. We have friends who don't want to hear about our faith or our church. We have family members who have drifted away from a life of being "raised" in the church. Some of us have spouses who have no interest in attending a church service or hanging out with "church people."

We have friends who don't want to hear about our faith.

The 2018 data that was put together by Ryan Burge, a researcher at Eastern Illinois University, found evangelicals make up 22.5 percent of the population, a small drop of 1.5 percentage points from 2016—a decline within the study's margin of error. The "Nones" – those who claim no religious affiliation, continued their 25-year climb to reach 23.1 percent—the highest ever for the religiously unaffiliated and the most of any other religious group in the nation. For the first time, as far as we know, those who – when asked about their religious connection – check the box that says none, there are more of them than there are of us. There is a problem. Do you see it? You don't have to go very far. It's all around us. People are saying no to a structured, orthodox faith that they have seen and experienced as ineffective and irrelevant to their lives.

So, there are people who say things like, I believe in God, but not organized religion. And at the heart of the problem is the fact that we have institutionalized our faith. We've given it structure and rules that we believed were important and necessary but, generation after generation has drifted farther from the Church and now, we are looking at a statistic that says those who have drifted make up more than those who have not. So, let's be raw and real for a moment. It's our fault. We need to repent for the things we did in the past and we need to repent for the things we did not do.

The Church needs to repent for the past and current failures of the Church.

We – the Church - thought that if we just keep doing what we've done, what worked for us, that the next generation will come along with us and keep the faith alive. Instead, the next generation ask some really hard questions of the Church and the Church didn't have great answers. They asked questions like...why did you let that happen? Why did it seem like you looked the other way when that was going on? And when things didn't seem to line up...they left. We need to repent for the things that have happened among the priests in the Roman Catholic Church. We need to repent of the things that have happened with t.v. evangelists. We need to repent for the wrong things that happened during the crusades and during World War II. There are so many things we could be doing. We could be offering hope in a world where drug overdoses are killing 10's of thousands. We could fight for the unborn. We could eliminate world hunger.

So, let's stop for a moment this morning and have a moment of silence for all of the things that the Church has done to turn people off.

[Pause]

But wait, there's more...listen to this...

¹⁹ And so, dear brothers and sisters, we can boldly enter heaven's Most Holy Place because of the blood of Jesus. ²⁰ By his death, Jesus opened a new and life-giving way through the curtain into the Most Holy Place.

Let's move into a new and life-giving way, together. Jesus has given us new access to the Father in heaven so that we could bring some change to the world. We have a savior who made a way for people to have a relationship with God and to live with God for all eternity. Let's celebrate the things we've been doing. The people of God have opened hospitals, led the way for adoptions, started orphanages around the world, gave food to the hungry, clothed the naked, visited the sick and imprisoned, built nursing homes for those who could no longer stay in their own homes, supported life, wrote music, opened child care centers, built schools, sheltered the homeless, fed the hungry, worked with people who are marginalized to give them a better life, fought for laws, fought for our country, developed child sponsorships, went behind the lines and underground, started radio stations, built colleges and universities, fought to end slavery, championed for women's rights, and led the charge for equality, and the list goes on.

While there are some who look at the church for its faults, **we need to continue to do the right things that bring a change to the world we live in**. Look at this passage in Hebrews again with me...

²³ Let us hold tightly without wavering to the hope we affirm, for God can be trusted to keep his promise. ²⁴ Let us think of ways to motivate one another to acts of love and good works. ²⁵ And let us not neglect our meeting together, as some people do, but encourage one another, especially now that the day of his return is drawing near.

We are better together and capable of doing great things for God if we continue to meet together. To write off all of the good because of our human failures means that we jeopardize so much. Its time we encourage people to join together as the Church as God's vehicle for good in the world and start making a difference instead of turning a generation away. If we let the current need for change to stall out the church and send it into a nose dive under our watch I believe we are looking at a next generation who will end up even farther from God and a world in a disastrous place.

There are things the church does in the world that no one else does. **First, we fight against what is wrong and for what is right.** The church in the world receives its guidance and direction from the heart of God, which is for those who are the neglected, the lost, the last, the homeless, the hungry, the abandoned, the lonely, and so many more. And while there are other organizations who do some of these things...there is no other group in the world that cares for people like the Church does and like the Church is called to do. We are called by God to be the hands and feet of our Lord in the world we live in. We, as the Church (not the building) are to be active in helping people meet Jesus and experience His love. We are asked by Jesus to show Him to the world by how we love each other and how we love those who Jesus loves.

Second and closely related to the first, **we bring light into a dark world.** There is evil in the world that is seen as darkness and the work of those who are followers of Jesus is to shine the light of Jesus into the darkness. We are to call out the dark things of the world and to shine so brightly that the darkness doesn't have a chance to exist. Why be a part of a church, because we are actively striving to eliminate darkness?

Third, we are to be a witness to the existence of God. We are to live in the world in such a way that people can believe that God must be real. Our witness in the world should be so positive, so compelling, so irresistible that people want to know more about the God we serve. As believers who are living our lives along side of everyone else we are called to be the ambassadors of God and to be those who make much of our God.

One of questions we ask when we are doing our mission work in Sierra Leone is this...what do we do that one else can do? There are non-governmental organizations and non-profit's that are in Sierra Leone. The need is great and there are many who are answering the need. But, as a church, while we could just do great things that help people like drilling wells and building schools...we ask, what can we do that no one else can do. The answer, we bring eternal hope to every life we encounter. We offer a savior who loves us so much that he would give his life for us so that we can be with God for ever.

May we, as a church, stay focused on the One thing we get to do...to bring Jesus to a lost and fallen world. Let us do that today and everyday in such a way that people want to be a part of who we are and what we do. Let's go and invite people to be a part of that...Amen!