

My computer screen flickered for a moment, and then the video my friend from Indiana sent me started to play. An ordinary guy was sitting in front of his computer screen—he looked at me and said: “I got an email the other day which said...*Jesus loves you.*”

Ordinary guy thought “that’s nice,” but then he read the rest of the email, which said... “*If you don’t start doing what Jesus says you’re going to burn in hell forever.*”

Ordinary guy pondered... “So, this love Jesus has for me is conditional. I can understand that. Love has conditions attached. That’s the way I understand love. When we got married I loved my wife [picture of gorgeous young woman posing by a swimming pool]. But then she gained some weight [picture of the same woman, older, having gained a lot of weight, eating snacks while watching television] so I stopped loving her. Now we’re divorced. I know. I’m shallow. But somehow I thought Jesus would be different.

Ordinary guy wrote back to this Christian... “If Jesus loves me, why does he want to send me to hell?”

He got this reply... “*He doesn’t want to, but if you don’t accept him he has to.*”

Bewildered, ordinary guy took his eyes off his computer screen and stared into space, wrestling with his dilemma: “I’m confused. Doesn’t Jesus make the rules? Surely if he doesn’t want to do something he doesn’t have to.”

The world of Christendom at large misrepresents Jesus, because it has been overcome by religion. Ordinary guy doesn’t realize it, but the problem is not Jesus—it’s religion! The problem is that many believe religion is the answer, when religion is actually the problem.

*Why is religion the problem?*

- Religion defines God as upset and angry, looking for ways to punish us—a God whom we must appease and please by our efforts. Yes, God loves us, says religion, but the divine love it proclaims is conditional.
- Religion is the almost universally accepted notion that human performance gains a higher standing with God.
- Religion consists of programs and practices that promise the reward of heaven in return for our good deeds and the punishment of hell in return for our failures.

- Religion is dispensed by professionals who prescribe potions and programs which they say will fix and cure us.
- Religion insists that the degree to which God will love us is up to us.

It is true that religion can also be defined as an ordered, systematic way of understanding and following God. According to the Bible there is such a thing as pure religion (James 1:27) but that passage also means that there is such a thing as impure religion. Sadly, much of what passes for religion within modern Christendom is far from the pure, unadulterated grace of God.

The religion that thrives within Christendom reduces Jesus to a behavior-modification program, sin-management that replaces God's grace with human performance. Christ-less religion is something that one does, for the purpose of keeping God's punishment at bay. Legalistic religion begins with the premise that God's blessings are achieved through a diligent program of performing prescribed practices.

Oppressive religion makes a spiritual diagnosis, offers medications and remedies, with the promise of spiritual healing and recovery provided its regimen is carefully (religiously) maintained and observed. When God's grace is ripped out of Christianity, grace-less religion is left, with all of its protocols and prescriptions.

As I write, the Gulf of Mexico is awash in a huge oil slick, the Deepwater Horizon disaster, reported to be the largest offshore spill in U.S. history. This catastrophe started when an unexpected methane gas bubble burst from the well and exploded on a drilling rig. Grace-less religion is similar—volatile, toxic gas billows out of religious institutions in the form of mandates, dogma and fundamentalist *fatwas*, wreaking havoc and destruction.

Like oil spills, religion leaves an ugly residue in its wake—sticky, tarry gunk that you can't seem to get rid of. Christ-less religion contaminates the very souls of those who expect it to cleanse and heal. Those who have long-term relationships with religion find it nearly impossible to escape its grimy clutches.

If you've heard that Jesus loves you, but he's going to condemn you to hell if you don't accept him (because he has to)—I have good news for you. *In the chapters that*

*follow we will contrast the purity of God's grace with the corruption of institutionalized, Christ-less religion.* We'll examine what Jesus has to say about religion, especially in Matthew 23.

We'll discover that Jesus reserved his most caustic invective for religious practices and teachings which beguile and enslave. He is the Lord our Shepherd, and in that role he denounces the addictive pills, potions, programs and procedures prescribed by religious professionals.

Jesus was rejected by established religion because he refused to align himself with it. In our first chapter we'll study the parable of the Good Samaritan, and how Jesus cast himself in a role that was and is despised and rejected by religion.

We'll carefully study what Jesus has to say about the kingdom of religion, and by comparison, what he has to say about the kingdom of heaven. Signature passages from Matthew 23 will introduce many of our chapters, and we'll see that Jesus uses words like *woe*, *hypocrites*, *blind*, *greed*, *self-indulgent*, *unclean*, *desolate*, *hell* and *snakes* to describe the religious industry, its professionals and the consequences it brings into the lives of those it "serves."

Of course, Jesus doesn't just bash religion without offering an answer. We will see that Jesus invites us to a live bold, passionate life of freedom—a new and transformed life he lives within us. By God's grace, we can be cleansed from the religious globs of tar that stick to our souls like oil spills pollute the physical environment.

The cleansing agent whereby our hearts and souls can be purified of all filth, whether physical or religious, is called grace. What is grace? It's compassion. Gratitude. Generosity. Faith. Humility. Surrender. Service.

Grace cannot be acquired on the basis of a *quid-pro-quo* transaction—grace can only be received, as a gift. Grace cannot be purchased. Grace cannot be found through endless study and knowledge of the Bible. Grace can't be cloned. Religion can't replicate grace, though it does its best to provide clever counterfeits.

Living by God's grace, compared to institutionalized religion, is like coloring outside the lines. Christendom has done its best to package relationship with God in spiritual

paint-by-the-numbers exercises, but God's grace provides freedom in Christ—freedom from religion.

God's grace and his love are intertwined—joined at the hip. You can't have one without the other. God *is* love. He doesn't just *have* love—love is what God *is*.

God's grace delivers and expresses his love. God's grace, like his love, has no limits or boundaries. Grace defies logic and even offends our sense of fair play. The implications of grace are staggering—scandalous—outrageous.

Christ-less religion has erected its institutions, cathedrals, mosques, synagogues, temples and churches. Christ-less religion has its treasured icons of rituals, customs and ceremonies. But out of the ocean of God's love, wave after wave of his grace relentlessly erodes the un-grace of religion. The never-ending waves of God's grace will eventually cover the shifting sands of the kingdom of religion as the waters cover the sea.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a 20th century Christian martyr who was killed by the Nazis because of his faith in Christ, said that "Jesus calls men, not to a new religion, but to life!"

Billions of people in our world today are spiritually dead thanks to poisonous, lethal religion. The good news is that Jesus did not start another religion. Jesus did not come to make bad people better. He came to make spiritually dead people live!