



April 20, 2014  
Easter Sunday  
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Chapel Hill Presbyterian Church

## *Jesus vs. Religion*

### Galatians 6:11-18

In 2012, a young man named Jefferson Bethke shot a video called "Why I Hate Religion but Love Jesus." It obviously hit a nerve because in two years, it has had over 27 million hits. In the film he says, "I love Jesus, I love the Church, I love the Bible... but I hate religion." Maybe some of you feel that way. This video is harsh and provocative... and I think the Apostle Paul would agree with him!

Paul didn't have YouTube in his day. Instead, he wrote *Galatians*. It is his most radical, provocative letter. Paul preached about a rabbi named Jesus, who was actually the Son of God. He lived a perfect life, taught parables, and performed miracles. He was executed on a cross by his religious enemies and, astoundingly, raised to life three days later. Paul taught the Galatians that anyone who believed in Jesus—Jew or Gentile alike—could be forgiven of their sins and live forever with God.

But after Paul left Galatia, false teachers snuck in and began to undercut his message. They said: "Believing in Jesus is fine, but it's not enough. You cannot be a Christian unless you first become Jewish. You must eat kosher, keep the Sabbath—and for all you Gentile men—you must be circumcised! Only when you do these things—when you follow our religion—can Jesus save you."

When Paul heard these lies, he was furious, and he wrote Galatians to set things straight. He pounds out the same point over and over: our salvation is completely a gift of God's grace and not because of our good works or rule-keeping or religion. A Bible passage with the word "circumcision" appearing five times may be the weirdest Easter text you've ever heard. But when Paul writes "circumcision" what he means is "man-made religion." That will help you understand what Paul is getting at and why he's so ticked!

When you read the gospels, pretty quickly you notice a theme: Jesus reserved his harshest words for the religious people. Prostitutes, adulterers, tax collectors—even the hated Roman soldiers—Jesus treated with kindness. But it was the religious hotshots... the ones who had turned religion into a long list of dos and don'ts—of crushing, impossible rules—those were the guys Jesus went after.

He called them snakes and hypocrites. He called them white-washed tombs... pretty on the outside, dead on the inside. He made them the bad guys in his parables. Narrow-minded religious people drove Jesus crazy. He didn't hate them.

One of Jesus' radical teachings was that you should love your enemies. But Jesus did hate the religious bondage they had created and what that religion had done to his people.

But here's the irony: Jesus was very religious. He observed Jewish festivals. He ate the proper foods. He knew the scriptures backward and forward. He faithfully worshiped at the temple and in synagogue.

So which is it? Was Jesus religious, or did he hate religion? It depends on your definition of religion. If "religion" means shared spiritual convictions lived out in community in response and obedience to God's love, Jesus was the most religious man who ever lived. But if you define religion as a power structure enforcing a list of rules that define how to earn God's love... then that kind of religion, Jesus hated.

So did Paul. That's why, near the end of his letter to the Galatians, he grabs the pen out of his scribe's hand and scrawls the final words himself. It was his way of saying, "Can you hear me now! Am I writing this big enough for you to get how important this is?" I know his "circumcision" talk seems weird to us, but remember, every time you hear "circumcision" think "religion." Because Paul was writing to warn the Galatians about religious bigwigs who were trying to mislead them—who were telling the Galatians they had to be circumcised and obey a bunch of rules... rules, Paul said, that they didn't even keep themselves! The same hypocrisy Jesus faced!

Paul's bottom line was this: it is not about religion, it's not about the rules you keep, it's not about "being a good person" and earning God's love. (Which, by the way, is *the* American religion! "Try to be good!") No, it is not about what we do... it is all about what Jesus did—how he sacrificed his life to save yours, how his Spirit changes you from the inside out. Yes, you become a different person if you follow Jesus, not by trying harder or being more religious but by receiving the gift of Christ's sacrificial death on the cross. That is the only thing that can set you free.

The most important verse is 6:15: "Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is a new creation." Or put it this way: "Neither religion nor unreligion means anything; what counts is a new creation." But you might say, "I still don't get it." All right then, maybe this will help: (Song: *Let It Go*)

Anyone recognize that song? Where's it from? Yes! The Disney movie, *Frozen*. How many haven't seen *Frozen*? How many parents and grandparents have seen it, oh, at least a thousand times and have those songs burned into their brains like some sort of evil torture? *Frozen* is about a young queen Elsa who has the dangerous power to freeze everything around her. At first, she shuts herself up in a castle, wears gloves, avoids being seen because she is afraid of what she might

do. Finally, she runs away and builds an ice castle on a mountain. That's when she sings the song, *Let It Go*. It is by far the most popular song in *Frozen*—which is ironic because the song goes absolutely against the storyline of the movie—which is the most Christian message Disney has ever produced.

Elsa sings, "Don't let them in, don't let them see. Be the good girl you always have to be. Conceal, don't feel, don't let them know..." But in the end, Elsa isn't set free by hiding who she is.

So she tries embracing her dark powers. "It's time to see what I can do, to test the limits and break through. No right, no wrong, no rules for me. I'm free!" (By the way, every parent should be a little horrified that their girls have memorized that verse!) But Elsa's self-discovery doesn't set her free either, does it?

So how is she set free? By the sacrificial love of her little sister. Anna gives her life to save Elsa. And in that ultimate act of self-sacrifice, not only does Anna come back to life, Elsa is freed to use her powers in way that help her people. Elsa says with amazement, "You sacrificed yourself for me!" And Anna replies simply, "I love you!"

Paul writes to the Galatians, "Neither religion nor unreligion mean anything." Isn't that the moral of *Frozen*? As one commentator put it, Elsa seems to have two choices: rule-keeping or rebellion. Rule-keeping meant that she hid who she really was, closed herself behind doors, put up a façade, avoided relationship, put on gloves to limit the damage. But that didn't work. So she tried rebellion. She ran away, she "let it go," she decided that rules didn't apply to her anymore, that she didn't care what anyone else thought—she was going to live free... live life her own way. The irony, of course, is that she wasn't free at all, was she? Her rebellion put her into even greater isolation.

Aren't these the same two choices most of us struggle with? Rule-keeping...or rebellion? Or to paraphrase Paul... religion or unreligion? Every one of us recognizes things inside that aren't quite right—powers at work in us that we don't understand and over which we don't seem to have control. We may not admit it. We may claim that we are a good person, but every one of us has stuff hidden away—things we've done, things we think—that embarrass us. We are so glad no one knows the truth, because we would be ashamed if they did.

That is true of me. There are things I have done in my life that shame me. I wish I could undo them. I can't. And if you could peek into the darkest closet of my soul, you might not want to sit here and listen to me on an Easter morning. Anyone, pastors included, who pretend they have it all together—that there is nothing in their life, past or present, that is hypocritical or disgusting—is lying. That brokenness—that tendency to do what we know is wrong and harmful...just because we want to do it—is called Sin. Every human being fights a battle with their sinful nature.

So if you have the courage to admit, with me, that you are fighting such a battle, the question is, what do you do about it? What do you do with what Elsa describes as that “swirling storm inside?”

You can be religious. You can be a rule-keeper. You can try to be good and go to church every Sunday. You can try to control the Sin that controls you. This can appear to work for a while, but in the end it never addresses the real issue that is bubbling inside... this battle for your soul with a force that wants to destroy you. And anyway, this approach to Sin is like Elsa’s gloves—it covers it up, it hides it, but it is still there—and it’s only a matter of time before it breaks out.

You can be religious. Or you can be a rebel. You can say, “Let it go! No more rules! I am free to live anyway I want to and I don’t care what anyone says.” The problem with that is, if you indulge the darkest instincts of your soul, it doesn’t set you free. It leads you to greater shame and bondage and isolation and despair. Always!

So are these the only two choices: religion or rebellion—rules-oriented, moralistic do-goodism or pleasure-seeking moral anarchy that doesn’t care who gets hurt in the process? And where is God in these two choices? The religious person says he doesn’t need God because he can take care of it himself by being good. The rebellious person says, “To hell with God; I don’t care what he thinks!”

Religion or rebellion. Are those really our only two options? No, there is a third: Redemption! It’s the beautiful picture we see when Anna gives her life to save her sister. And is that not an image of Christ who came to redeem both the religious and the unreligious? Jesus who gave his life to save the rule-keeper who thinks he can be good enough to please God, and Jesus who gave his life to save the rebel thinks she can ignore God’s opinion on how she ought to live and that it won’t damage her.

Paul uses the phrase “New Creation.” “It is neither religion nor unreligion that means anything, but only new creation.” What does he mean by that? He means that whoever truly believes in Jesus—who receives his gift of life—becomes a new person. In that moment, God welcomes him as his own, adopts him as his child, and begins to change him from the inside out. Religion is what you do when you want to impress God. Unreligion is what you do when you want to run away from God. New Creation is what God—and only God—can do with the person surrendered to Jesus.

And may I say, we know this is real because we see it around here all the time. We see the difference that Jesus makes. In the religious person who thought she was going to earn God’s love... and in the rebel who doesn’t believe in God or care about his opinion.

Sarah was the good, religious girl. She knew how she was supposed to behave, and she spent her whole life living a lie—putting up a front, hiding behind a façade, doing everything she knew how to please people and make God happy—all the while, living in phony misery. Is that your story? Her life was transformed when she discovered that God loved her just the way she was, and she didn't have to pretend to be anything anymore. She was delivered from bondage to freedom. New creation. Only Jesus can do that.

George was the skeptic. Scientifically trained, he doubted the whole God thing. Sixteen years ago, his wife dragged him to church against his will; reluctantly, he listened. Is that your story? He came to believe the gospel was true, and I have watched as God transformed George from the cynic to a sold-out follower of Christ. He makes disciples, he is a leader of men, he teaches a class called Christianity Explored, and last year he became an elder. If you had given George a glimpse ten years ago of the man he was going to become, he would never have believed it. New creation. Only God can do that.

This is what the risen Christ does in the hearts of those who realize that neither Religion nor Unreligion means anything... that only the redemption found in Jesus can melt our frozen hearts and change our lives.

So what does this say to this crowd gathered here this morning? First, it speaks to the religious person. The one who never misses a Sunday, who keeps all the rules, who thinks they have to be good in order to earn God's love. Paul says, "No! You cannot possibly be religious enough—good enough—to make God love you." And by the way, that also goes for the person who shows up in April to have their Easter ticket punched. One woman actually bragged to me that she "never misses an Easter at Chapel Hill." If you view Easter Sunday as your annual spiritual check-up, that's just another version of trying to be religious. It won't work for you, either.

Paul also speaks to the un-Religious here today. The person who was dragged here this morning against her will. Truth is you don't believe this Easter stuff, and even if part of you wants to believe it, you would rather live your way... rather throw off the rules and be "free" as you define it. That won't work, either. I promise.

Paul says, "Neither religion nor unreligion means anything, but only New Creation." Only Jesus can redeem us. As much as I wish we had the corner on the salvation market, being a member of Chapel Hill will never save you. But we can introduce you to the one who can and if you want to join a bunch of sinners who are learning what it means to follow Jesus as he changes us from the inside out... you are welcome to come along. We aren't big on religion either, frankly. But Jesus, we love. We look at him, week by week, and say with increasing amazement, "You sacrificed yourself for me!" And he replies, every time, "Of course... I love you!"

He loves you, too! And that love is the only thing that can melt your frozen heart.

### **Sermon Questions**

- REFLECT & APPLY TOGETHER: Share your thoughts. Don't teach! Listen and reflect on God's word together; grapple with what God is calling us to do and be through this passage.

- PRAY TOGETHER: Tell the Lord one thing you are thankful for, and lay one concern before the Lord.

- DIG DEEPER

1. How do these verses summarize Paul's theme in Galatians? What do you consider to be the key verses and why?

2. What does Paul mean by "circumcision and uncircumcision?" And especially, what do you understand "New Creation" to mean? How have you been created new?