

Hasn't religion done more harm than good?

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Preacher: Nick Louw

[0 : 00] Well, a recent survey conducted in the UK found that more than half of those who live in the UK believe that religion does more harm to society than it does good.

Now, this is a shocking statistic. And it's shocking that people believe that if you consider all the good that has been done over the last few centuries, which have been motivated by religion. I mean, every century you can see examples of how people motivated by religion, whatever religion it is, have done great good for society.

And so it seems strange that so many people today believe that religion does, in fact, more harm. This negative view of religion, and it's actually a very common view, increasingly common in many modern countries.

But in a way, you can understand why people think that today, can't you? Because, of course, the type of religious actions that make headlines are not the schools and the orphanages and the hospitals and the acts of charity, but the acts of terrorism and the evils that are done in the name of religion.

And because of that, the world is becoming increasingly of the opinion that, you know what, we're just all better off without religion. Let's close the mosques and the shuls and the churches. We'd all just get along so much better if we didn't have religion.

[1 : 18] I wonder maybe if that's a thought that you share or someone you know shares. It's a very common idea, and so we do need to talk about it. We need to address it, and we need to ask the question, does religion as a whole, and Christianity in particular, end up doing more bad than good for our society at the end of the day?

Because we can't deny that religion has caused a lot of conflict over the centuries. Christianity included, not only national armed conflicts, but also conflicts within families.

And maybe your family is one that's experienced conflict because of Christianity. Even conflict not only in families, but within individuals. Feelings of guilt and obligation which result from a person's faith.

And so there's many aspects in which religion and Christianity in particular can be said to cause conflict. And so I'm going to look at this issue in those three categories that I've just mentioned. How religion supposedly leads to conflict first in society, second in families, and thirdly in ourselves as individuals. And so let's have a look.

[2 : 29] Firstly, in societies. Now I don't disagree that religion in general has been the cause of much conflict in history. You can't deny that.

Often violent conflict. I mean, think of the Crusades. Think of the Spanish Inquisition. Think of conflict in Northern Ireland. The World Trade Center attacks.

ISIS in the Middle East today. The list goes on and on. All these atrocities that are linked strongly with religious beliefs. But now why is this?

Why would someone's religious beliefs cause them to do so much harm, which has been done over the centuries? Especially considering that the main messages of much of the religions involved is supposed to be one of peace and love and harmony.

So why in that case does religion cause people to perform acts like those up behind me? Well, let me tell you why I think religion causes so much harm.

[3 : 33] And for that, we first need to understand what religion really is. You see, religion is a system of beliefs which at its core is about being in some way righteous.

A religion gives you a set of requirements necessary to be made right with your God. That, essentially, if you boil it down, is what all religions are about. But because of the different opinions that are out there of how to be made right, you'll end up with all these different groups like we have

today.

Each thinking that they are right and everyone else is wrong. Each thinking that they're right with the Creator. And nobody else is. And now what do you think that'll result in? Well, it'll cause people to feel superior to everyone else, won't they?

Not in their group. So they'll always, by definition, because they believe they are right and no one else is, they'll look down on everyone else. And the problem is, of course, when everybody thinks that, when everybody thinks their group is in the right, they'll all be wanting to impose that superiority on everyone else.

And they'll feel justified in doing so. And it'll justify any form of violence. And that's the problem. And that's why religion causes so much harm.

[4 : 53] Because of this superiority complex that people who subscribe to religion get. You know, Jesus himself predicted exactly that. That people would commit all forms of violent acts because they feel they have the right to do so.

Listen to what he says in John 16, verse 2. He says, The time is coming when anyone who kills you will think that they're offering a service to God. And we don't have to look far to see how that prophecy has been fulfilled in our world today.

And so, yes, religion, because it makes people feel justified in what they're doing, religion will by nature result in all forms of harm and conflict. But here's the thing.

Jesus does not call his followers to subscribe to a religion. Jesus does not call us to a religion. If you listen carefully to what Jesus says, if you read carefully what he says, you'll find, in a way, he actually calls people to the very opposite.

He calls people to un-religion, if you like. Think about it. While religion is a set of requirements to be right with God, resulting in a feeling of superiority, trusting Jesus is actually admitting that we can't make the requirements to be right with God, resulting in humility rather than superiority.

[6 : 19] You see, it's completely opposite to religion. And that's why many Christians are adamant, and rightly so, that trusting Jesus is not a religion, just like John opened the service with.

He explained to us that religion and what we come to do here are two very different things. Trusting Jesus is not a religion in the sense that people understand.

So it doesn't have the same results as religion does. And we see this illustrated in a brilliant parable that Jesus gave, that John read for us just before I came to preach.

And it's from Luke 18. Do have your Bibles open there. And read along with me as I read from verse 9. Listen to what Jesus' point is in this parable.

I'll read it again. Because it's that important that we get the point here. To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable.

[7 : 16] Two men went up to the temple to pray. One a Pharisee, and the other a tax collector.

Now, a tax collector, in that day, you've got to understand, it wasn't just a member of the revenue service.

Tax collectors were looked down upon as the most sinful, corrupt people. Because often they were. They collected tax for the Romans from their own countrymen, and nobody liked them.

And they often just took a large cut for themselves. And so they were really considered the most sinful, the most low-down, opposite of the Pharisee. So you've got two people here, complete opposites, on opposite side of the religious spectrum, if you like.

And look what happens from verse 11. The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed, God, I thank you that I am not like other people, robbers, evildoers, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.

I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get. But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven. But he beat his breast and he said, God, have mercy on me, a sinner.

[8 : 22] I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.

Now the reason I wanted to read this parable is because really this, in a way, is the heart of what Jesus came to tell us, came to earth to tell each of us. Because who ended up justified before God in this story?

Not the religious man who thinks that he has God's favor because of what he's done, but the unreligious man who knows he doesn't deserve God's favor, but he needs God's mercy.

And so he humbled himself. And that was what Jesus came to call each of us to do. Not to be religious. You know, people think that Christianity is a religion, the same as every other religion.

And unfortunately, they often think that because in many churches and places, that's what Christianity has become. A set of requirements that you need to do to be made right with God. [9 : 25] Come to church. Sing the songs. Read your Bible. Pray. You know, all these different requirements. And oh, we do these, then we're right with God. And you see, like all other religions, that's no different to any other religion out there.

It's ways to build your righteousness, to get up to God and feel superior then to those who are below you. By nature, you will. If you think that you're building up your righteousness, you will always look down on people who don't do the things you do.

Just like this Pharisee in the parable. That's exactly. He looked down at the tax collector. Oh, he doesn't do all the things that I do. And so he assumed he would be right with God. And this Pharisee, you see, he represents religion in our world.

And he represents, sadly, a lot of those who call themselves Christians as well. But true Christianity, true Christianity, following Jesus is the complete opposite.

It's unreligion. It's true Christianity is the tax collector. It's realizing that you can't get up to God. And it's trusting him to come down to us, which he did in his son, Jesus Christ.

[10 : 30] It's trusting Jesus to do what you can't do, to be friends with God again because of God's mercy alone. And let me tell you, mercy, mercy and trusting in mercy, that is the biggest antidote to feelings of superiority.

Mercy is the biggest antidote to the conflict that comes from feeling one is above another. You know, if you've truly received undeserved mercy, which is the experience of all true Christians, then you can't possibly feel superior to someone else.

Any more than a beggar who gets a handout feels superior to another beggar. Speaking on that, actually, I saw a very interesting video the other day. You may have seen it. It's been going around social media.

But it was called a social experiment. And this is what happened in the video. A very well-dressed man approached a number of people in a shopping mall, in a food court, in fact, eating their takeaways.

And he said, excuse me, I'm hungry. Would you mind sharing some of that food with me? Now, you can imagine the result. All right? To a person, everyone he approached said, no, sorry, I can't help you.

[11 : 46] And just looked the other way. Which you would expect in a food court in a modern shopping mall. But then, interestingly, the scene changed to a street. To a homeless man.

And a stranger comes and gives this homeless man a free takeout meal. And, of course, obviously he's very thankful this is just out of the blue. He's done nothing to do to deserve it. He was just sitting on the street.

And they do this with a few homeless people. And then the person who gives the meal goes away. And then, after a while, the same well-dressed man from the mall who was there approaches these homeless people and asks each of them the same question.

He says, I'm hungry. Would you mind sharing some of your food with me? You know what happened? To a person, each of them shared their food with him. Those who knew that they didn't earn their food were willing to share it because they knew they were no more deserving than the next guy.

But those who did earn it, those who paid for their food, didn't share it because they felt they deserved it more than this guy. And, you know, it works.

[12 : 50] The same principle works exactly the same with religion. Religion teaches that because of what you've done, you've earned God's favor. And so you'll always feel superior to the people around you who haven't.

But Jesus teaches that God's favor is given freely, undeservedly, irrespective of what you've done. Not through earning it, but through accepting it as a gift when you trust in Jesus.

And that changes everything. And, you know, you get two types of Christians in this world. You get the religious Christians. And then you get the real Christians.

And which one are you, I wonder? Do you believe that you've earned God's favor through your Christian activity, like the Pharisee? Or do you believe that you're a sinner who has absolutely no chance of earning favor with God and desperately needs his mercy like the tax collector?

Which one are you? Well, you know how you know which one you are? Well, it's what you think about people who are not Christians. How do you consider them?

[13 : 56] What do you think about them? Do you see yourself as better than them in any way? Well, if you do, then you've missed the whole point of the gospel. A true Christian, as Spurgeon so eloquently put it, is merely one beggar showing another beggar where to find bread.

A true Christian never thinks themselves superior to anyone outside of their group, but only wants to share the undeserved mercy that they've received. And so, yes, religion has caused much conflict and hurt in history, and it still does today.

Atrocities have been committed, even by those who call themselves Christians. But you know what? They are not true Christians. They are religious Christians. And so, because they're religious Christians, they will feel superior over others and look down on others.

But you know, Jesus has some very harsh words for religious Christians that we all need to hear as a warning this morning. Listen to Matthew 7, 21 to 23. He says this, Imagine Jesus saying that to these good, respectable religious Christians.

These people are very religious, but their religion doesn't save them. True Christianity is not religion. It's a life-changing experience of undeserved grace that humbles us so much every day to serve God and to serve others, whether or not they're Christians.

[15 : 47] Which type of Christian are you? Which are you, the tax collector or the Pharisee? That's a question we must all ask ourselves before this day that Jesus is talking about. Now, there's a second area of conflict.

We've spoken about conflict between countries and armed conflicts and violence that happens in the name of religion. But secondly, another area of conflict is in families.

I think this is a bit closer to home for each of us. More families have been torn apart through faith in Jesus than I think any other religious system. In other religions, typically everyone in the family subscribes to the same religion because that's how they were brought up.

And because most religion is more cultural than anything else, most religions are bound to a particular culture. And if you are in that culture, then typically you will be brought up in that religion. If you grow up in India, it'll probably be Hinduism. If you grow up in China or Japan, it'll probably be Buddhism or Confucianism. If you grow up in Syria, it'll probably be Islam.

[16 : 50] If you grow up in Italy or Spain, it'll probably be Roman Catholicism. But you see, trusting Christ is different.

Trusting Christ has this amazing ability to cross cultural and national boundaries. And many families in every culture find themselves in conflict around the gospel, no matter where it is in the world.

But you know what? That's exactly what Jesus said would happen. Listen carefully to Matthew 10, 34 to 36. He says this, and these are some shocking words.

Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. This is Jesus talking. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to turn a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law.

A man's enemies will be the members of his own household. Again, another very shockingly accurate prediction of Jesus when we look around in our world today.

[17 : 56] But now we've got to understand what he's saying. He's not saying that he deliberately wants that to happen. We see that from very many other teachings he gave. That families are split over the gospel.

He doesn't want that to happen, but he says that's what inevitably will happen as a result of the gospel message. And there's nothing that can be done about it. He says inevitably people in the same family will turn against each other.

That's what he's saying here. But why is that? Why would members of the same family brought up together turn against each other? Well, because this is why.

Because the gospel being the message of complete unreligion, the gospel undermines the religious fabric of a family. You know, we've seen that the gospel of Jesus, this undeserved acceptance through trusting in him, we've seen that it's effectively unreligion.

But almost every family has a religious fabric. An underlying basic belief system at their foundation that the parents have passed down to their children.

[19 : 01] Even not explicitly, often just subconsciously. They've passed their belief system down to the children. And now maybe you're an atheist listening to this and you're saying, no, no, we don't

do that. But actually you pass your atheism down to your children as well.

Every parent will pass whatever they believe down to their children, whether they like it or not. And so every family has this underlying what I call religious fabric, belief system.

And so if the gospel undermines religion, it will by nature offend whatever that family's default belief system is, their religious fabric. And that's why you've got countless stories of people accepting Christ being rejected by their families, their brothers and sisters and mothers and fathers, their Muslim or Hindu or Jewish families.

And often being disowned and never being able to return. And often being threatened with death if they do. You know why? It's because the gospel offends them. The gospel offends people.

And it's not that they don't want this person in their family. It's that they don't want the message of the gospel in their family. Because it's so offensive to religion. But you know, it doesn't only offend religious people.

[20 : 10] You know, I said earlier it applies to an atheist or skeptical family as well. By nature, the gospel offends every human being who thinks that they deserve something. Every human who is unwilling to admit that they've sinned against God and must be judged for their sin.

Because that's what the gospel says. Make no mistake. That's why Jesus had to die for sins. Because we couldn't pay for it ourselves. And because sin deserves punishment.

You know, often people want to have this view of Jesus or a faith system that follows Jesus but denies the truth of sin and judgment. But you know, Jesus, there's no point to Jesus coming to die on the cross if it wasn't to save us from the punishment for sins which each of us have to stand before God and answer for.

And so the gospel that has this message within it that says that you are a sinner and you have sinned against God and you need to be judged for it. That is offensive. Nobody wants to hear that. That is offensive to every self-righteous human being. And so it will inevitably cause conflict in families between those who believe it and those who don't. But Jesus tells us to expect this.

[21 : 22] It is in the nature of the gospel message. It is part and parcel of the gospel message. It will cause conflict. Because it offends. As we share the gospel with people we love, Jesus tells us it will cause conflict.

But he also tells us not to try and hide it because of that, just for the sake of peace. Because it's too important for that. That's why Jesus says it will cause conflict.

Because his followers won't keep quiet about it. Because it is so important. Yes, Jesus calls us to be peacemakers as far as we're able. But that doesn't mean hiding the gospel because the gospel is the one thing that matters more than peaceful relationships.

The gospel matters more than peaceful relationships. But how could it? Surely we should strive for peace above all else in our family. Well, you know, whenever I'm tempted to do that, and I am often tempted to hide the gospel from someone just in order not to rock the boat because I know it will offend them.

You know what I do? I remember for a second the reality of judgment to come. And I picture that person standing before God one day being held account for how they've used the life that God has given them.

[22 : 40] And I picture them turning to me and saying, why didn't you warn me? You know, why did you keep it quiet? Why didn't you warn me this was going to happen? Do you want your loved one or friend to say that one day to you when they stand before God?

You see, the gospel is too important not to share. Because, well, because of that. Because it's too important not to share. We need to warn people.

But that will cause conflict. And we've got to expect that, even within families. And that's what Jesus said would happen. Finally, though, what about the conflict that religion causes in people themselves, in individuals?

Sigmund Freud and other famous psychologists believe that almost all psychological problems are through a suppression of guilt.

And they say that religion only makes this worse by giving people standards that if they fall short of result in more and more guilt. And that's why Freud and many psychologists hate the concept of religion.

[23 : 48] And they work to help people get over the guilt feelings they may have. But the weird thing is, their techniques for guilt suppression hardly ever work.

And the Bible tells us why. The Bible tells us that guilt is real. It's not just a psychological anomaly. Guilt is based on a human's innate knowledge of right and wrong.

And that they've done wrong. That they've not lived according to their creator's wishes. And that's what the Bible calls our conscience. The Bible says the law of God is written on our hearts.

And we know we've broken it. Each of us, deep down inside. We might try to suppress that knowledge. But we know. And that guilt will eventually come to the surface.

And religion isn't what causes that guilt. You know, religion may bring it to light more. But human religion, in fact, came about all over the world for the very purpose of trying to suppress that guilt.

[24 : 50] By giving people rules to follow and saying, well, if you keep these few rules, then you'll be right with God. And you don't have to feel guilty anymore. Religion is in the business of trying to take away this guilt that we all have, knowing that we've sinned against God.

But no matter what religion or psychology can do, people can't shake their conscience. You can't get rid of it. You can suppress it. The Bible says you can sear your conscience.

You can seal it so that it doesn't talk to you that much. But you can't get rid of it. The conscience, the voice in the back of your mind that keeps telling you you've broken God's laws. But that's, of course, how religion makes its money.

Roman Catholic priests, their job is to let people offload all of their sins and then say some incantations to appease their conscience. You know, priests are just the religious version of psychiatrists, really.

And that's why at this church, I'm not called a priest. I'm not a priest. I'm not your intermediary between you and God. No, Jesus is.

[25 : 56] Not me. And we need Jesus. You need Jesus. You don't need a priest. Because let me tell you, guilt is real. The conscience is real.

Right and wrong is real. And we've all done wrong whether we like it or not. And no amount of psychology or religion can truly cleanse a guilty conscience. There is only one thing in the world that can cleanse your guilty conscience.

And it's not through belonging to some religious group. And it's not through saying certain words. And it's not through doing certain things. And it's not through going to priests. The only thing that can cleanse your guilty conscience is the blood of Jesus that he shed on the cross to pay for sins. To pay for your sins and for my sins. That's the only thing that will work. And so Hebrews tells us this. Talking about religion, listen to what it says.

Day after day, every priest stands and performs his religious duties. Again and again, he offers the same sacrifices which can never take away sins. But when the priest, when this priest, Jesus, has offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God.

[27 : 10] And then it says, Therefore, since we have confidence to enter the most holy place by the blood of Jesus, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience.

And I wonder if you can do that. I wonder if you can draw near to God with a sincere heart, having your heart cleansed from a guilty conscience.

I wonder if you've truly come to Christ and put your trust in him and laid yourself at his mercy as your savior and your king. Or I wonder if you're still just a religious Christian. See, there's only one true solution for a guilty conscience.

For that internal conflict that we all feel, that guilt that we try to suppress. The only way to find real peace and be sure that you can stand right with God is not through religion, but it's through putting your faith in what Jesus did on your behalf to pay for your sins against God.

Have you done that yet? Do you know where you stand with God? Because Jesus came so that you can. It's through the unreligion of not trying to do more things, but admitting that there's nothing you can do and falling fully upon the mercy of Jesus.

[28 : 35] That is the only thing that will free you from the real conflict in our world, which is a conflict, the conflict between you and your creator. Only Jesus can settle that conflict.

And so in closing, does religion cause more harm to society? Of course it does. But Jesus doesn't call us to religion. Jesus doesn't call us to think that we're in some way more deserving than unbelievers.

He calls us to humbly admit that we are no better than anyone else and that we don't deserve salvation, but we trust in what he did for us, not in what we do.

And then he calls us not to keep that to ourselves, but to share that message of undeserved mercy with others, even if it rocks the boat, because it matters that much.

Let's pray that God will help us to do that. Heavenly Father, we often feel that we want to keep Jesus and the gospel quiet, that we don't want to share with others, because we know it will offend them.

[29 : 50] Help us this morning, Lord, to realize how important it is, because help us to realize that what Jesus has done to take our sins away, to make peace between us and you, Father God.

And we do pray, Lord, that as we take this message out into the world, help us not to feel that we are in any way better than those around us, but help us, Lord, to humbly show others what we've discovered about Jesus, so that they too can come and find peace with you and the hope of eternal life to come.

And we do pray, go with us this week and help us to follow you. In Jesus' name, Amen.