

Life's Big Questions (Week 2): Will Religion or irreligion Help With Life's Big Questions?

Key Concept:

Help you avoid the pitfalls of religion and irreligion

Bible Study:

Read Mark 5-8

Recap

Last week we asked, "Is there a God?" If so, how do we relate to he, she, or it? We looked at the evidence in Mark's biography of the life of Jesus - evidence suggesting Jesus is in fact God, such as His teaching, healings, power over nature, and ability to forgive sins. In short, Mark's gospel is crystal clear on this point: Jesus was God.

Introduction

As we move through life, we search for answers to big questions. What is the good life and how do we live it? How do we find meaning and purpose in life? What is success and how do I achieve it? Many Americans look for answers to life's big questions in religious systems, while others find religious systems unconvincing and look for answers to these same questions in irreligious beliefs and irreligious communities. In today's training session, we'll consider the pitfalls associated with both the religious approach and the irreligious approach to answering life's big questions.

In the book of Mark, we meet two groups of people (the religious and the irreligious) who are not convinced by Jesus. For our purposes, we'll define religious people as rule keepers and irreligious people as rule breakers.

Both end up saying to Jesus, in their own way, “Thanks, but no thanks. We really don’t need you or what you are offering.”

Religious Approach To Life: Rule Keepers

Let’s begin by thinking about a religious approach to life’s big questions. Religious people look for answers in religious communities. They are **rule keepers**. Religious people who look for answers in Buddhist religious communities keep rules laid out in the Noble Eightfold path leading to liberation from the painful cycle of rebirth. Religious people who look for answers in Hindu religious communities are looking to become one with God and set free from the cycle of rebirth and death by following the rules set forth along the four paths of liberation. Religious people who look for answers to life’s big questions in Islamic religious communities follow the rules set forth by Allah in the Quran to persuade him to offer them admittance into Paradise following the great day of Judgment.

In the book of Mark, we meet another group of religious people operating inside of the Jewish religious tradition known as the Pharisees, scribes, and teachers of the law. Not only were they rule followers, but they actually formed many of the rules themselves. Interestingly enough, as you read Mark, you’ll find that these are the very people Jesus clashes with most frequently and, in most cases, most harshly.

Religious Thinking: Us/Them Mentality

Why? Why was Jesus so abrasive in his dealings with the very people most in the 1st century world would have considered to be the “good guys”? One reason was because the religious people (pharisees, scribes, and teachers of the law) carried an us/them mentality that Jesus found both offensive and inconsistent with His view of the world. The Pharisees came off as if they had it all together, unlike those people over there—those “sinners.”

For example, in Mark 2:13-17, we meet the Pharisees. In many cases, the Pharisees would be the functional equivalent of a middle class person, an elder or leader in a modern day church. They were respectable, moral people that were thought to be the best the town had to offer. Some were teachers of the law (Mark 2:16) and others simply took the teaching that came from the teachers of the law and developed a list of do's and don'ts that became known as the "tradition of the elders" (Mark 7:3).

These rules weren't God's rules, but man's rules. They were designed with good intentions to help men follow God's rules, but in many cases they had the opposite effect, creating shame, guilt, condemnation, and self-righteousness. For example, God commands us to "honor the Sabbath." Religious people, like the Pharisees, then developed a suitcase full of rules to help people unpack what God meant when he commanded us to honor the Sabbath, making it virtually impossible for anyone to keep. Anyone not following their list of rules was frowned upon deeply and could face significant consequences.

Jesus sides with "them": the tax collectors

A religious community developed around this system of rule adherence, developing an us/them mentality. Naturally, the Pharisees, scribes, and teachers of the law saw themselves as the self-appointed "good guys," and everyone else, well, they were "sinners," the prostitutes, and the tax collectors. Tax collectors were seen as the lowest of the low to the religious guys, mainly because they viewed them as traitors and swindlers. Not only had they gone over to the dark side by siding with the occupying enemy of Rome to collect their taxes, but they also were now gouging the Jewish people with exorbitant fees on top of the Roman tax rate to become wealthy. Therefore, in the mind of the Pharisees, the tax collectors were the moral dregs of society, the bottom of the barrel.

Jesus, however, moves towards, not away from, tax collectors. Much to the chagrin of the religious leaders, Jesus goes to Levi, a tax collector, and

calls him to be one of His disciples, and even worse, heads to his house for a party with all the other tax collectors and “sinners.” This is a bad move, if you think like a religious person.

Why does Jesus choose to spend time with prostitutes, tax collectors, and people viewed as “sinners” by the religious establishment? Because they were the people who knew that they needed Jesus. Jesus says **Mark 2:17**, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.” Therefore, the qualification for Jesus isn’t, “Are you good enough?” Rather, the qualification is, “Are you honest about yourself? Can you admit you aren’t what you need to be? That you keep keep the rules and have fallen woefully short of God’s standard for life?” Jesus came for people who know they are broken and need to be made whole. The Pharisees missed this because they thought they already had their act together.

Religious Behavior: Lip Service

Jesus already highlighted the dangers of religious thinking and the way it arrogantly creates an us/them mentality; now he wants to put red blinking warning signs around religious behavior that leads to warm lips and cold hearts. We’ve all been around people with warm lips, who talk a great game about God. In reality, however, their heart is ice-box cold toward God. It’s all a show. They may have their hands lifted high during praise and worship, but it’s empty praise. It’s all lip service.

In **Mark 7:1-23**, the Pharisees and teachers of the law show us what lip service looks like. In Mark 7:3, Mark points out that the religious leaders have developed a tradition of the elders (remember, this is their list, not God’s list), and their list of rules included a certain way to wash your hands, even down to rules for washing dishware. Anyone not washing properly was considered unclean or defiled, at least to the religious guys.

The disciples of Jesus didn't follow the Pharisees rules for washing and the Pharisees didn't like it one bit, so they questioned Jesus about it and he lit into them: "Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites...These people honor me with their **lips**, but their **hearts are far from me**" (verse 6). In essence, Jesus says, "You're a bunch of hypocrites. You pay lip service to God, but your hearts are far from God. You follow all the rules, but your heart is a million miles from Him. It is all empty ritual with you. All form, no substance. You may have the external appearance of being a good person and everyone may think you are a good person, but your heart is totally disconnected from God."

Jesus didn't want His disciples to miss the point of this encounter with the Pharisees, so he pulled them aside and said, "What comes out of a man is what makes him defiled. For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and make a man defiled" (Mark 7:20-23). The problem, according to Jesus, is the heart and what comes out of it. The problem isn't hanging around with the wrong crowd or not washing your hands or dishes properly, which is how religious people think. Sin isn't caught like a cold. No, sin is a symptom of a diseased heart, a disease we all have.

Jesus leveled the playing field of humanity and the religious people of his day found it offensive. The world, as he saw it, isn't divided between good people and bad people; it is divided between people who knew they are sick and people who pretend they aren't sick.

Jesus' message is every bit as offensive In the modern world, where everyone likes to think of themselves as fundamentally good people (much like the Pharisees). "We may do bad things, but we're good people," we tell ourselves, as we overlook or try to delete from our brains our misdeeds and things we should have done. Jesus elevates the conversation. He's not so much interested in how we view ourselves; he's interested in how

God views us. God's verdict is in and "all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God" (Rms. 3:23). All. Not some. All. God's metric isn't good versus bad; it's perfect (God) vs. imperfect (man).

We're all in the same boat, the boat of humanity. If this offends you, then you are religious. Religious people say things like, "I just don't think it is fair for God to allow a really bad person who has killed lots of people into heaven as long as he asks for forgiveness at the end of his life?"

Underneath this line of pervasive religious thinking is the assumption that the guy who has killed other people is fundamentally a bad person. He is undeserving of heaven; good people, on the other hand, deserve heaven. There are good people in the world and there are bad people. God likes good people and lets them into heaven; he's not fond of bad people and they go to hell. This is the narrative for religious people and you hear it all the time in the modern world.

Solzhenitsyn's Challenge

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, writing in the 20th century, debunks the modern narrative of religious people. Solzhenitsyn served in the Soviet Army and was highly decorated. Then, he began to doubt the moral underpinnings of the regime. He was imprisoned in Russia for writing derogatory remarks about the Stalinist regime and he served in a labor camp for 11 years where he was beaten, interrogated, and nearly killed. During his imprisonment, Dr. Boris Kornfeld treated him inside the camp. The two became friends, and Dr. Kornfeld confided in him one night that he had just become a Christian.

The next morning Solzhenitsyn woke up and his friend had been beaten to death with a mallet. Listen to his reflections, "I lay there a long time in that recovery room from which Kornfeld had gone forth to his death, and all alone during sleepless nights I pondered with astonishment my own life and the turns it had taken. Gradually it was disclosed to me that the **line separating good and evil** passes not through states, nor between

classes, nor between political parties either, but **right through every human heart**, and through all human hearts.”¹

When Solzhenitsyn witnessed the evil perpetrated against innocent people like Kornfeld, he knew evil wasn't limited to a nation or political party or class of people—it was found in every human heart—in Russians, Germans, Americans and beyond, despite the propaganda spilling forth. We know this intuitively as well. It's why we find it so difficult at times to do the right thing. It's why relationships can so easily be torn asunder. It's why we see so much hurt and pain the world.

In one word, it's sin and it's in every one of us. Last week, in our discussion of sin, we defined sin as building your life around anything other than God. The religious leaders in Mark centered their life around being good. And their goodness was the very thing keeping them from God because it was leading them to feel morally superior, puffing themselves up with pride and causing them to look down on everyone else, much like those in the Stalin regime looked down on other inferior nation states and people. Jesus wouldn't have it.

A Thought Experiment

Lest we think too highly of ourselves like the religious leaders, here is a thought experiment designed to display the severity of the diseased heart we each have. Imagine for a moment the room around you is a public art gallery, filled with murals of your life. Every day you have ever lived is on the walls, with every single thing you have ever done. Every. Single. Day. Every. Single. Thing.

Now I'm sure there would be lots to celebrate on those walls: loving relationships, real achievements, acts of kindness, moments of generosity and selflessness, perhaps a flourishing career. But there would also be untold numbers of things we'd want to keep out of the public gaze. Which

¹ *Finding God: A* John M. Mulder, Erdmans, Grand Rapids, MI pg. 313.

bit of the wall would you most want to cover up? Which day? Maybe it's something nobody knows – not even your closest friend or your spouse.

Most of you are cringing at the thought of all your actions being displayed in the gallery of your life, but for the moralists among us who are still feeling pretty solid, let's ratchet up the challenge one notch. In addition to the actions of your life, we're about to add all the motivations behind the actions. The whole world will see all the good things we did for all the wrong reasons. To be fair, we've no doubt had lots of good and true motivations to help and love and serve others, but we all know how dark our motivations can be at times.

Just in case you aren't uncomfortable yet, we're going to bring in the ultimate humility factor. Let's throw on the wall all your thoughts as well. You know, the ones that you would never verbalize because you would lose your job, be divorced, and be vilified by everyone you know. Things that pop into your brain and you think, "What is wrong with me? Why am I thinking like this?"

If all of my life was on the walls, it would be a nightmare. I wouldn't be able to stay in the room, I'd be so ashamed, even though there are lots of good things up there. Could you – if you're being honest? If you get this, then you will do as Jesus does and simply refuse to villainize anyone or any group. If you are a Democrat, then you won't villainize the Republicans, and if you are a Republican, then you won't villainize the Democrats. If you are a homosexual, you won't villainize heterosexuals; if you are a heterosexual, you won't villainize homosexuals. If you are a conservative, you won't villainize liberals; if you are a liberal, then you won't villainize conservatives.

Why? Because you realize that the problem of evil isn't isolated to a particular subset of the human race. You know it has infected the whole of the human race, including you. The line between good and evil runs right

through every human heart, yours included. And that leads to humility, not pride.

Irreligious Approach to Life: Rule Breakers

Let's consider the alternative approach to life. Whereas religious people like to keep the rules, Irreligious people like to break the rules. An irreligious person says, "No one is going to tell me how to live. I'm the king of my castle and I call the shots."

An Irreligious Case Study: King Herod, Herodias, and Her Daughter

An illustrative case study of an irreligion can be seen with King Herod, Herodias, and her daughter in **Mark 6:14-29**. King Herod enjoyed living the way he wanted to live, as did the woman that he was sleeping with named Herodias. Herodias was formerly married to her halfuncle, Herod Phillip, and she was also King Herod's niece. Yet, she divorced her half-uncle Phillip for an adulterous, incestuous relationship and John the Baptist called him out for breaking God's rules. King Herod, Herodias, and her daughter wouldn't have it. Who was John the Baptist to tell them how to live? This is how irreligious people act. "Your religion may work for you, but don't try to shove it on me." Irreligious people don't like talk of truth, especially absolute truth, nor are they fond of being called to repent (i.e. turn from their sin and turn to God in faith to change). When they are confronted with their sin, they just get angry.

The film *Invictus* illustrates a modern mantra of irreligious people. Morgan Freeman repeats several times the refrain from the poem entitled *Invictus*: "I am the master of my fate, the captain of my soul." Herodias and Herod would have loved this motto! It is up to me to determine what is right and wrong. I am the master of my fate; I am the captain of my soul.

In the 21st century, we have two types of irreligious people:

Unconsciously Irreligious: Hedonists

Hedonists (or pleasure seekers) are often unconsciously irreligious. They typically haven't put a great deal of thought into their religious or philosophical views. In fact, they quote the oft repeated mantra, 'There are only two subjects that are off limits in life: politics and religion.'

Musically, hedonists love the lyrics of Dave Matthews as he croons, "Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die." Who knows what tomorrow will bring? Carpe Diem. Squeeze every last drop of fun and joy out of life because tomorrow you may be rotting six feet under with the worms.

For hedonists, feelings function as true north. If it feels good, do it. Have sex with whoever you want to whenever you want to, whether they are married or not. Eat what you want when you want and drink what you want when you want. You'll find hedonists in any club or bar on planet earth, with techno blaring and a bottle raised.

Consciously Irreligious: Philosophical Skeptics

Whereas hedonists typically haven't put much thought into their religious and philosophical underpinnings, philosophical skeptics have often placed a tremendous amount of thought into their religious and philosophical views. They are, typically, much more intellectually sophisticated. They either hold an atheistic or agnostic viewpoint based on their study and convictions. They don't believe in a higher power who has created the world and endowed it with a set of rules or norms by which we must follow. They are the master of their fate and the captain of their soul. We have numerous examples of this—Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris just to name a few. Jesus challenges both groups--the hedonists and the philosophical skeptics--to a different way to view the world, which we'll explore in the weeks to come!

Discussion Questions:

1. Define a religious person and an irreligious person

2. Was your home growing up more religious or irreligious?

3. Describe how both religion and irreligion have impacted your journey.

4. How did the thought experiment impact you?

5. Read Mark 2: 13-17. Discuss the one qualification for Jesus.

6. Read Mark 7: 1-23. What is the point of the story?

7. How does Solzhenitsyn capture the point of Mark 7: 1-23?

8. Read Mark 6: 14-29. Discuss Herod's irreligion.