

"Sick Religion"

Intro Timeline

Intro Map

Religion.....Religion is either one of life's greatest blessings, or it is one of the sickest things we do. Have you thought about that before? You can use the name of God to get people to do some pretty horrible things or it can be the most wonderful of things.

Religion can be wonderful. I assume that because you are in church today you agree with that. Religion can be fulfilling, it can be instructive, it can be inspiring. Religion has driven so much of human progress. It can be one of life's greatest blessings. Ranks right up there with motherhood, the American flag, and apple pie.

But let me tell you that religion is also one of the sickest things we do. Religion is often sick. It hurts. It damages. It destroys. It deceives. It misleads. It deals in death rather than in life. It steals time, it mangles lives, it distorts values, it warps minds. It gets sick. Unhealthy, diseased, noxious, ...it is sick.

Do you remember the Heaven's Gate group? IMAGE 1 How could thirty-nine otherwise intelligent, well-educated, privileged people decide to shroud themselves in purple and eat poison pudding on the basis of some notion of a UFO hiding behind the Hale-Bopp comet? Utterly astounding! We say, "They must have been sick. They were all sick." Well, I ask you to go a little deeper. Probe a little farther. Is it possible that the sickness was not so much theirs, each and every person, individually, but the sickness was in their religion? In their belief system? Religion gets sick, and sick religions make sick people. Sick religion infects otherwise reasonable people. Maybe it wasn't thirty-nine sick individuals so much as it was one sick religion.

Years ago, we watched in horror as government agents and the Branch Davidian IMAGE 2 cult waged a pitched battle. David Koresh and his band of followers died, as did a number of federal agents, all in the name of a cause that most of us could not begin to understand. And very likely what happened there had its horrible origins in the bombing of the federal building in Oklahoma City. Well, we thought the Branch Davidians were sick, too. It was glib and even fun to mispronounce the name of the Texas city where it all took place: not Waco, but Wacko. But it would be too easy just to write off the Branch Davidians as sick individuals. It would be too easy to write of the Heaven's Gate group as sick persons. There is a sickness in religion itself.

Then there was Jim Jones and the People's Temple in Jonestown, IMAGE 3 Guyana. The mass murder and suicide of 918 followers of which 304 were children....all by drinking Kool Aid laced with cyanide. They weren't sick people....they were manipulated people by a sick man and a sick religion.

ISIL, the Crusades, The Holocaust, all sick religions doing sick things in the name of God.

Religion is either one of life's greatest blessings; or it is one of the sickest things we do.

Jeremiah stood outside the gate of a grand temple in Jerusalem one fine Lord's day some twenty-six hundred years ago. There Jeremiah spoke of the sickness of religion. To the people of Judah, who were arriving that day to do their religious thing and get their spiritual jollies, this troublesome man spoke very distasteful words. Imagine, a fellow who calls himself God's preacher, has the audacity to stand right there in the Temple gate and accost all these respectable people and tell them that what they are doing is sick, sick, sick! Did they want to hear him? Do you want to hear him? Are you sure?

Jeremiah 7:1–2 (ESV) 1 The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord: 2 "Stand in the gate of the Lord's house, and proclaim there this word, and say, Hear the word of the Lord, all you men of Judah who enter these gates to worship the Lord.

Chapter 7 takes us to a new time. A great deal has happened. We are told that God sent Jeremiah to the Gate of the Lord's House...The Temple.

The activities of Jeremiah 7 centered around the Temple of the Lord. Now remember for 250 years no one cared about the Temple at least from the Jewish perspective. They rarely went there, there was no need to.. they were not following the feasts....they were not honoring the Sabbath...they were no longer studying the Law for reasons that will soon be apparent....and they had replaced the God of Israel with other gods like Baal. They had forsaken God. Most stopped pretending and just quit coming. Eventually what they called the Temple of the Lord was a temple to Baal. Full of prostitutes, pagan images and disgusting acts.

But there was a time...during Jeremiah's life...where the Temple seemed to come alive again. It was very early in Jeremiah's life. It lasted for a brief time....and for that reason, we know the context of Jeremiah 7.

So when God tells Jeremiah to go to the temple and "Hear the word of the Lord, all you men of Judah who enter these gates to worship the Lord." We can narrow down the timing very quickly. For most of Jeremiah's life, no one entered the temple to worship God.

But if you remember there were several kings who reigned during Jeremiah's time. Remember the J's and the first one was the best? His name was Josiah.

Let me teach a bit about Josiah so that we can put some context into Jeremiah 7.

Josiah had a wicked grandfather and a wicked father. They had both been kings and were primarily responsible for the reason that the temple hadn't been touched in over 250 years. Josiah's father was Amon and his grandfather was Manasseh.

2 Kings 21:19–23 (ESV) 23 And the servants of Amon conspired against him and put the king to death in his house.24 But the people of the land struck down all those who had conspired against King Amon, and the people of the land made Josiah his son king in his place

Easy right? King Manasseh was bad...His son Amon was bad...and now King Josiah enters the scene. What is unique about Josiah?

2 Chronicles 34:2–3 (ESV) 2 And he did what was right in the eyes of the Lord, and walked in the ways of David his father; and he did not turn aside to the right hand or to the left. 3 For in the eighth year of his reign, while he was yet a boy, he began to seek the God of David his father, and in the twelfth year he began to purge Judah and Jerusalem of the high places, the Asherim, and the carved and the metal images.

So Josiah became King at age 8. In the eighth year, age 16, he began to seek the God of David his father...In the twelfth year (age 20) he begins to tear down the pagan sites of Baal and removing and destroying carved images. In the thirteenth year, age 21, we are told in Jeremiah 1 that God called Jeremiah to become a prophet.

So Jeremiah was about three years younger than King Josiah. They ministered together during the same time frame. Josiah was king for 31 years and died fighting in Migiddo at age 39. So these two men shared very similar circumstances. They both followed God. They both listened to the warning God gave them through His judgement of Israel, the Northern Kingdom. They both did everything God placed on their heart to do. They both loved the Lord when almost no one else did. And here is the kicker....they both knew that it was too late. That God had already declared His judgment on Judah, the destructive lion had left the den, and Judah, the temple, the city, the people, would be destroyed through God's righteous judgment.

When King Josiah began to learn about David, he began to understand the significance of the Temple of the Lord. We just studied its importance. And he wanted to bring life back to the temple.

Nothing had been done to it for more than 250 years. The project was funded by a public collection. Doorkeepers at the temple collected from the people as they passed through. Hilkiah, the high priest, supervised and coordinated the collection and restoration with Shaphan, the king's chancellor and scribe. Carpenters, builders, and masons stirred about the temple precincts. The air was filled with the encouraging sounds of progress and reconstruction.

Ok hold on. Josiah has been king for 18 years. His heart was toward God. He was raising money to restore and rebuild the Temple of Worship for God. The people are contributing to the building....it is going to be magnificent...they are giving money...time...and sounds of construction fill the days. The same people who have been worshiping with whores up on the hillside....who were sacrificing their children to Baal in the valleys....who had turned so far from God that He had given up on them. Those people...were contributing to restoring the Temple. They hadn't repented. They were still doing all these things and trying to live as though God hadn't noticed. In many ways they contributed to the Temple as a guilt offering so they could keep doing the things they had been doing.

We know from the first six chapters that almost none of them were actually following God. They were obeying the King and trying to pretend as though they were worshiping his God. Something else to note. The temple of the Lord is that in name only. God's presence is not there and there is nothing about this place that Honors God. The Temple of the Lord has become a cesspool of pagan worship. So when people came to "Worship the Lord" it was not our Lord that they were worshiping. When they gave to the temple of the Lord it was not to our God that they were giving. They were in their hearts funding Baal..in a place...that used to be a place where the Lord dwelt with His people.

This is all going on....mind you...while the Babylonians are on their way to bring God's judgment.

Hilkiah had rolled up his sleeves and was digging through musty relics when he made an amazing discovery. Imagine his smudged but excited face when he shouted to Shaphan over the noise and hurried toward him with the treasure in his arms...He had hit the jackpot....what do you think He found? The Ark? The Golden Lampstand? The Table of Presence? I mean you can find a lot of valuable things digging around in the temple relic area.

2 Kings 22:8–10 (ESV) 8 And Hilkiah the high priest said to Shaphan the secretary, "I have found the Book of the Law in the house of the Lord." And Hilkiah gave the book to Shaphan, and he read it. ...10 Then Shaphan the secretary told the king, "Hilkiah the priest has given me a book." And Shaphan read it before the king.

How far away were the people in Judea during the time of Jeremiah and Josiah? The not only ignored the Word of the Lord....THEY DIDN'T EVEN HAVE A COPY OF IT" and it looks like they didn't really recognize what it was. The Priest has given me a book....a book..... This also suggests that they were down to...let's see...zero copies...with only one original.

2 Kings 22:11–13 (ESV) 11 When the king heard the words of the Book of the Law, he tore his clothes. 12 And the king commanded Hilkiah the priest,13 "Go, inquire of the Lord for me, and for the people, and for all Judah, concerning the words of this book that has been found. For great is the wrath of the Lord that is kindled against us, because our fathers have not obeyed the words of this book, to do according to all that is written concerning us."

Notice that Josiah's first response is conviction, confession, and sorrow. He is ready to receive the Word of God because His heart has been searching for the things of God. He immediately tore his clothes in anguish and repentance. To everyone else this was just an old story in an old relic place but to Josiah it was the revealed truth of God that demanded a response. Josiah, tells them to go inquire of the Lord...go to a prophet...find out what this means. Am I reading this correctly?

2 Kings 22:14 (ESV) 14 So Hilkiah the priest,went to Huldah the prophetess, the wife of Shallum the son of Tikvah, son of Harhas, keeper of the wardrobe (now she lived in Jerusalem in the Second Quarter), and they talked with her.

Interesting that God did not send them to Jeremiah. Also interesting that there were several active prophets during this time who spoke for God and this one is a woman.

2 Kings 22:15–17 (ESV) 15 And she said to them, "Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: 'Tell the man who sent you to me, 16 Thus says the Lord, Behold, I will bring disaster upon this place and upon its inhabitants, all the words of the book that the king of Judah has read. 17 Because they have forsaken me and have made offerings to other gods, that they might provoke me to anger with all the work of their hands, therefore my wrath will be kindled against this place, and it will not be quenched.

2 Kings 22:18–20 (ESV) 18 But to the king of Judah, who sent you to inquire of the Lord, thus shall you say to him, Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: Regarding the words that you have heard, 19 because your heart was penitent, and you humbled yourself before the Lord, when you heard how I spoke against this place and against its inhabitants, that they should become a desolation and a curse, and you have torn your clothes and wept before me, I also have heard you, declares the Lord. 20 Therefore, behold, I will gather you to your fathers, and you shall be gathered to your grave in peace, and your eyes shall not see all the disaster that I will bring upon this place.' " And they brought back word to the king.

Josiah's heart for God saves him from the wrath that is to come. But he learns.....it is to come. If you were Josiah...what would you do? God tells him it is too late....the die has been cast...the judgement time is near. Everything you are building will be destroyed and given to the Babylonians. But you Josiah....you are going to be ok. You don't even have to watch it. Your salvation is secure...I will take you home before it gets too bad.

What would you do if you were him? God tells him...you are saved. Because of your faith in me, your brokenness, your confession and repentance....you will be saved from the judgment to come. But the judgment is coming and everything you know will be destroyed. A small number will be exiled and will be saved as a remnant, but you will not have to live long enough to see it. I will spare you. How would you respond if you were Josiah?

Be careful how you answer....because you are him. Your salvation is secure. God has promised you a place at home. You too will miss the wrath of God to come. Everything you build will be given to others when you die. What are you to do?

Josiah focuses all of his resources, his influences, sacrifices everything he has, in order to try to reach the Remnant. He could have just sat around secure in his safety....but remember he had a heart for the things of God.

If you believe that you are saved and all you care about is yourself....you better check your heart. You may have embraced a sick religion. If you have God's heart in you, you can't help but do all you can do to save those facing judgment. You can't help but love, care about and try to help others. So let's look at what Josiah does.

2 Kings 23:1-3 (ESV) 1 Then the king sent, and all the elders of Judah and Jerusalem were gathered to him. 2 And the king went up to the house of the Lord, and with him all the men of Judah and all the inhabitants of Jerusalem and the priests and the prophets, all the people, both small and great. And he read in their hearing all the words of the Book of the Covenant that had been found in the house of the Lord. 3 And the king stood by the pillar and made a covenant before the Lord, to walk after the Lord and to keep his commandments and his testimonies and his statutes with all his heart and all his soul, to perform the words of this covenant that were written in this book. And all the people joined in the covenant.

Josiah pressed forward and called a great convocation of people, priests, and prophets. Jeremiah must have stood in that crowd, feasting his tired eyes on the picture of his king, standing by a pillar of the temple, praying to the Lord and making a personal covenant to serve Him.

It had been years since Jerusalem had experienced this kind of leadership. What a moment in the history of any people to see their leader making a public commitment to the Lord. Moved by this sight, the people entered into this new covenant themselves. A surge of hope must have entered the heart of Jeremiah. Perhaps all was not lost.

Notice this..."and all the people joined in the covenant" Great! Revival right? Last second piercing of the heart from the rediscovery of God's Word and the people have responded. Could this get any better? Think about what is going on....the temple is being restored....the King is leading the people back to God...they are promising to follow Josiah as he follows God. They aren't repenting...they aren't turning back to God...they are trying to cash in on what He is doing.

These words mean that the rest of the people agreed without any hesitation to abide by the provisions of the agreement just as the king had done. The expression in Hebrew is literally "all the people stood in the covenant."

We agree to let Josiah do the things He is promising to do. They are not agreeing to actually do them.

Josiah directs them to clean house....

In the days that followed, Josiah determined that the temple would not only be repaired, but it would be purged of the filth and false Gods that had taken residence in its precincts.

All the vessels defiled and used for worship to Baal are taken out and burned.

All the Priests who worshiped and burned incense to Baal are deposed.

Oh and the cult of male prostitutes who lived in the Temple of the Lord....are kicked out and their houses destroyed.

Ok Time Out. Male Cult Prostitutes IN the House of the Lord. Hangings for the Asherah- the goddess of sexuality....Think about that in the context of the Tabernacle Series we just competed.

And the woven hangings of the sexual goddess are removed as well...

He rounded up all the priests throughout all of Judah, removed them, and tore down the high places where they worshiped.

He tore down the places where children were sacrificed to Molech in the Valley of Hinnom. Josiah continues by commanding the people to keep the Passover as commanded in the Book of the Covenant. It started in his 18th year.

No one had kept the Passover since the days of the Judges. During all the days of the King of Israel or the King of Judah...no Passover.

He then went throughout all the houses of Judah and removed all the household gods and idols.

He ran out the psychics and those who claimed to speak to the dead.

2 Kings 23:25 (ESV) 25 Before him there was no king like him, who turned to the Lord with all his heart and with all his soul and with all his might, according to all the Law of Moses, nor did any like him arise after him.

Josiah is the MAN! As a leader he did exactly what God had directed them to do. He did everything he could do in his powers to get people to turn back to God. He cleansed and purged all of Judah. His heart was pure. We are told that he turned to the Lord with all of his heart...all of his soul and all of his power. All according to the Law.

Watching this, the people of Jerusalem were impressed with a great admiration for Josiah but never with his repentant spirit. He went ahead with his righteous reforms even though Huldah had said they would not be successful, that it was already too late; the people were not going to change their hearts.

There is no doubt that Josiah is pleasing God. But being a godly leader doesn't guarantee godly followers. Remember that Josiah did all of this....all the cleansing....all the purging...restoring the Passover...restoring the Word....tearing down pagan altars....all of it....AFTER God told him it was too late. So the next words should not surprise us....

2 Kings 23:26–27 (ESV) 26 Still the Lord did not turn from the burning of his great wrath, by which his anger was kindled against Judah, because of all the provocations with which Manasseh had provoked him. 27 And the Lord said, "I will remove Judah also out of my sight, as I have removed Israel, and I will cast off this city that I have chosen, Jerusalem, and the house of which I said, My name shall be there."

The problem here is that while Josiah was having a spiritual revival and restoration, the people were not. Oh they looked pretty good. They encouraged Josiah...they even helped fund the rebuild....they came to the temple and pretended to follow his God.....but they had not given up their heart for the things that he destroyed. It is in that setting....much like the church today...and much like our church today...that God sent Jeremiah to speak.....So with that background lets go back to the message God wants delivered at the gates...in the front lobby of the Temple.

So imagine. You are a Judean. Your King has fallen in love with the one true God. You...not so much. You will support the King...he is passionate, energetic and inspires people. But he is asking to much. He has gone too far. You are doing some bad things. Some really bad things. But everyone is coming to the temple. It is being restored and you believe the blessings of God are being poured out on Judea because of the faith of Josiah. So you go to the temple and pretend.

As you enter the Temple Gates....a lone man is standing there...He claims to be a prophet but he must be blind. He keeps telling us that we are doomed....He has been all over the place with the same dull repetitive message....We have broken the covenant with God, worshiped other Gods, and now will be destroyed.

Day after day he says it...Day after day nothing happens. In fact, look around. God is blessing us. The temple is being restored, the Law has been found, the feasts are starting again....We have God on our side now. It is pretty obvious. We are Southern Judah...God must bless us.

Read Jeremiah 7:1-28.

Don't trust in these deceptive words "The Temple of the Lord, the Temple of the Lord, the Temple of the Lord" No matter how many times you say it....No matter how much you try to make it true by saying it....This is no temple that holds my presence. I am no fool, God tells them. I know my Temple. I know my dwelling place. This is a place of filth. How dare you keep calling it the Temple of the Lord as if you know me, or think that somehow you are safe here.

How dare you come into this place covered with the stench, filth and grime from the places you have been and the things you have done with other gods....and stand before me in this house, which you call by my name, and say "We are delivered" only to go on doing this abominations. No regret, no repentance, no conviction, no shame....proudly standing here....declaring yourself clean and using my name to do it.

My dwelling place used to be in Shiloh...go look at it. Look at what I did to it because of those in the north who did exactly what you are doing.

I spoke to you..you did not listen. I called to you...you did not answer. You call this house by my name.....disgusting...you place your trust in this place...as if coming here will save you from me. I gave this place to your fathers but you....you have no business here....I will cast you out of my sight and destroy this place.

Jeremiah....don't you dare.....don't you dare pray for these people. Don't cry....Don't intercede for them....I will not hear them. My judgement is final. They have rejected me....I am rejecting them. I have rejected and forsaken this generation. Don't you dare pray for them.

Ok....God has made it clear....Over and over...not only what He is doing but why He is doing it. In fact it is hard to read Jeremiah because it just seems like God has Jeremiah repeat the same message over and over.....There is just one problem that I don't want us to avoid.....Why? Why does God deliver this message over and over to these people? Well actually....why does He deliver it at all?

Remember the die has been cast...the judgement is done...Babylon will destroy Judah...Yet God keeps sending a message through Jeremiah that just blasts them.

Why bother? Don't you wonder about that? God sent Jeremiah over and over again....to speak to a people.....who He had already condemned. He tells Jeremiah to tell them a message that is not true for them. They stand condemned....God has passed His judgment....Babylon is on the way...Jerusalem is to be destroyed. There is no turning back. It is all as good as done. Listen to the message Jeremiah delivers to dead men walking

Jeremiah 7:1–2 (ESV) 1 The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord: 2 "Stand in the gate of the Lord's house, and proclaim there this word,

Then skipping down the end of this message....

Jeremiah 7:27 (ESV) 27 "So you shall speak all these words to them, but they will not listen to you. You shall call to them, but they will not answer you.

Jeremiah...they will ignore you...but say things like this.

Jeremiah 7:3 (ESV) 3 Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Amend your ways and your deeds, and I will let you dwell in this place.

Jeremiah 7:5–7 (ESV) 5 "For if you truly amend your ways and your deeds, if you truly execute justice one with another, 6 if you do not oppress the sojourner, the fatherless, or the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own harm, 7 then I will let you dwell in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your fathers forever.

God has already passed judgement on them, but it seems as though He is still calling them to repent.

Is God lying to them? Is He filling them with false hope? Josiah did everything God wanted him to do and it didn't help anyone. He had already been promised protection and God's security.

Jeremiah had to be wondering...why do I keep preaching a message of judgment to people who have already been judged? If they are truly doomed....aren't we just wasting time?

The message was clear. The door of time on repentance had closed. God's patience had been exhausted and the time of judgment had arrived. Some would be in the remnant but most are doomed.

It seems kind of cruel really....taunting people on their way to judgment and death....unless...well....unless....

The message wasn't for them.

What if....these condemned people...who lived thousands of years ago in Judea...were just the backdrop....and example...and Jeremiah was actually speaking to us?

God knew...that every generation would tend to ignore Him and follow after other false gods.

Maybe God wasn't shouting at them in judgment...maybe He is shouting at us...trying to get our attention. We read Jeremiah and it is the same message, same explanation, and same warning over and over....yet we still haven't followed it.

Jeremiah's message from God is not really for them....it is for us. Jeremiah is speaking through generations to a people not yet born who would face the same challenges that crippled the Judeans in his time. His message is for us.

Times are very similar for us today. We know God's judgement is coming. We know that the time of grace that we live under is coming to an end. There is a day soon when it will be too late for us too. But until then, God through Jeremiah tells us, this is what you must do.

We too...call this place...the House of our Lord. But in many ways we have brought our filth from the world into the house of God and pretend somehow that God doesn't notice as we declare ourselves clean.

God is using Jeremiah...to speak to us...about the cost of sick religion. Warning us about the sickness...It is too late to warn those who lived with Jeremiah....to late to warn those who have previously read these scriptures....nope...this message...for us...for now....God is warning us about sick religion.

In this message through Jeremiah, God is showing us that there are three symptoms of religion sickness. First, religion is sick when it is a system only. Second, religion is sick when it is salvation only. Third, religion is sick when it is self only. System-only, salvation-only, and self-only.

1) System Only Religion

First, religion is sick when it is system-only. When folks are more committed to a system than they are to the God whom that system is intended to serve, you have a sick religion. Sick religion creates a delivery system and then asks you to worship the delivery system instead of the living God.

Jeremiah stood at the Temple gate and mocked the people. He poked ridicule at them. "Do not trust in these deceptive words, 'This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord.'" Jeremiah saw that they had rooted their entire faith on being in the right institution, and working within the right system. They just knew that Jerusalem would not fall to the enemy, because it had the Temple of the Lord, the Temple of the Lord, the Temple of the Lord. Never mind that the northern Kingdom, Israel, had fallen. Those folks up there in the north, they didn't have the Temple. And God is going to protect the Temple. We down south here, in Judah, we've got it made. We've got the Temple of the Lord. Their faith was in their building not their God.

But Jeremiah punched holes in that sick confidence game. Jeremiah said, "Go to [the Lord's] place that was in Shiloh, where I made my name dwell at first, and see what I did to it for the wickedness of my people Israel." People of Judah, you may have the Jerusalem Temple, but there was one up north at Shiloh, too, and I let that be destroyed. What makes you think you are any better? What makes you think that God is committed to any one institution, any one delivery system? What makes you think, Sarasota, that your church, your system, will never be judged? It is a sick religion if we think that it's all delivery system and nothing else.

A sick religion that is all about the process is Scientology. In that religion, you literally must buy into the system. Each level supposedly drawing you closer to your salvation. The entire system must be followed exactly and most in the leadership are there to enforce the rules of this system. Absolute obedience is enforced at will.

Process only tendencies can infiltrate the church of Jesus too.

I remember one year, when our son was very small, we gave him a birthday present. At that young age, he didn't even know what a birthday was, much less a birthday present. It turned out that he was more interested in the brightly colored paper and ribbons than he was in the toy inside. Sometimes people get more interested in the wrappings of religion than in what it's really all about. People get more caught up in the paraphernalia of church than they do in the Lord of the church. They are enamored with the shiny wrappings and miss that the content is empty.

Let me just pick out one aspect of this: leadership. Leadership is a part of the delivery system. But certain leaders capture unquestioning loyalty from their followers. Jim Jones, Sun Myung Moon, David Koresh, and Marshall Applewhite, all of them demanded absolute loyalty from their followers. The sickness of the system showed up in the idea that there was only one person, or a small team of persons, who knew the truth. Sick religion is built around an insecure, power-hungry leader, and it lifts him up to the place which only God should have.

Should you ever find a Christian pastor who becomes demanding, who sees their way as the only way; should you ever be subjected to a preacher who tries to tell you the he or she has been given enlightened truth or new Revelations...or that the focus moves to them instead of Jesus....should that ever happen to you, run from that leader! Distance from them. Those who held on to Scripture before us.....stood up to priests and popes, kings and bishops, and insisted that no church would stand between them and God, nor any system take them over. They were going to know God for themselves. There is nothing more priceless than your own personal freedom under God; no leader, no system, should ever take the place of God Himself.

More symptoms of a System Only Sick Church....If you'd rather talk about church policy than Christ, yours is a sick religion. If you'd rather speak about how good the preacher is than about how good Jesus is, yours is a sick religion. If you'd rather get high on the entertaining music, the smell of the candles, and the look of the stained glass than getting gathered up in the Holy Spirit, yours is indeed a sick religion. If you think your denomination, bible version, or worship style is more important than the One you worship....yours is a sick religion.

System only Sick Churches focus on doing things the way they have always been done....their traditions get in the way of their mission. How things are done is more important than why they are done or even getting them done. Process more important than impact. System only churches have written and unwritten signs everywhere about how things must be done. In these churches, people have already mapped out their turf, how things should be, and guard most tightly their position and influence above that of Christ's. They are not servants of Christ they are slaves to their processes. They speak of the traditions of their church as if they were the gospel. The Laws of Man....replace the Laws of God. They try to own what they perceive is their area of the church instead of realizing they are just blessed to be there.

Hear the prophet Jeremiah, "Do not trust in these deceptive words, 'The Temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord.'" Religion is sick when it is a system only.

2) Salvation Only Religion

Second, religion is sick when it is salvation-only. Religion is sick when it is so focused on our own salvation that we think it's all about a one-way trip to heaven and nothing more.

Religion is uncommonly sick when it narrows its scope down to one and only one thing -- will I go to heaven when I die? -- and then separates itself from real, gutsy, here-and-now life issues. A sick religion focused only on Salvation brings to mind the Jehovah's Witnesses. The entire focus is making sure you are in those who get to heaven.

Jeremiah thundered to the people of Jerusalem, "Here you are, trusting in deceptive words to no avail. Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, "We are safe?" -- only to go on doing all these abominations?"

When people focus only of whether or not they are safe...whether or not they are saved...they are in a sick religion. And of course this too creeps too often into the Church of Jesus.

Salvation only churches celebrate baptism as the end result rather than the beginning of a life long journey. These vulnerable new believers are left to fend for themselves. That is the mark of a sick religion....to be satisfied only with being safe, without helping people prepare for everyday life issues. Sickness is getting our one-way ticket to heaven and nothing else matters. These safe focused religions fail to mature anyone into true disciples. They are like a nursery where no one ever grows up and leaves. As a result, they don't understand the traits of disciples of Christ...like sacrifice, surrender, humility and selfless service. Instead, Salvation only religions teach people that they can do whatever we want because they have walked that aisle and we got baptized. We can live like hell on Saturday because we're going to church on Sunday to be reminded that we're on the highway to heaven.

Sick religion wants to put salvation over here and life over there. Sick religion wants to deal with some spiritual abstraction called salvation, "We are safe"; but we never really fully understand what we have been saved from.

Salvation only churches water down messages, try to avoid being offensive to sinners, try to entertain people so they feel better about God and seem to apologize for God. If you listen carefully, they often seem to teach as if God has an anger issue...an overblown response to sin...as if He is over reacting and too sensitive. They seem to go around trying to clean up the word as if He has made some mistakes in revealing Himself to mankind. They avoid words like sin, hell and damnation. Skip over brokenness and repentance....and go right to saying a prayer. They focus on happiness, prosperity, and relief of guilt. Your feelings are more important than your salvation. God is the one with the sin problem...not you.

3) Self Only Religion

And third, sick religion is self-only. System-only, salvation-only, self-only. Sick religion is incurably selfish. It pays attention only to what feels good for me. Sick religion is all about me, me, me, and not about others. Sick religion cares only for itself and does not focus on things like justice and mercy. Sick religion is self-only. The New Age movement is a prime example. You worship you. You define your truth. You do what is best for you. Others don't matter. You serve you first.....you deserve it.....others can take care of themselves.

The prophet Jeremiah was at the peak of his eloquence when he cried out to Jerusalem, to those who swarmed the gates of the Temple, anxious to parade there, "If you truly amend your ways and your doings, if you truly act justly with one another, if you do not oppress the alien, the orphan and the widow or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own hurt, then I will dwell with you in this place." If you truly act justly .. if you do not oppress ... then I will dwell with you in this place.

Sadly this too has crept into the Church of Jesus. The sickest symptom you will ever find in religion is its lack of love for other people. The sickest symptom you will ever discover in a church is its failure to take its faith into the public square and to work for justice and to cultivate mercy and to develop compassion. The sickest of churches are those that just make people feel warm fuzzies, but never challenge them to witness, never push them to mission, never insist on justice. They are self-only churches, and they are sick!

What do we do? We focus only on the "don'ts". We say you are a good Christian if you don't drink, smoke, chew, or go with girls who do! We say you're a good Christian if you say your prayers, give your tithes, and show up regularly at worship. We say you are a good Christian if you smile sweetly, speak softly, and sing the soaring songs of Zion. All well and good! But we have forgotten that this is a public faith! We have forgotten that there is a world out there that needs us! We have forgotten that what the Lord requires of us is to do justice and to love mercy, and then to walk humbly with our God! Sick religion is centered on the self, only, and it ignores the needs of others.

Religion is at its very sickest if it is all about me. Religion is at its very sickest when it is about being good and not about doing good. Religion is at its very sickest if it's just piety without action, words without deeds, no love, no justice, no mercy. Just Me and my needs.

Me only churches treat God's House as a place that serves themselves rather than Him. A place where they look for what they want and can get... rather than what they have and can give. Me only Churches are full of backbiting, gossip, and turf issues because everyone only cares about themselves, their importance, and their needs. These churches lack humility, gratitude and other heart issues critical for pleasing God.

Sick Religions: System Only.....Salvation Only...and Self Only. Every church has some of each of these. Including ours. Thankfully though....our focus is not on religion at all. True followers of Jesus discard religion for a relationship.

You see, the real issue is not religion. The real issue is knowing God. The real issue is not what church you're in or who your pastor is or what ritual you go through. The real issues is Jesus Christ, and Him crucified, and where you stand with Him.

Thankfully God did not send us a system...He sent us a person, Jesus Christ. Someone that we can know ourselves. No system delivers Him to you...He is one you must get to know on your own.

Thankfully God did not just send us an answer for salvation. He sent us a person, Jesus Christ, who touches every aspect, idea and moment of our lives. He is not just the answer to our salvation, He is the answer to every human struggle in every moment of human existence. He is the way....but He is also the truth and the life.

Thankfully God did not just send us a self improvement program....He sent us a person, Jesus Christ, whose love is too great for one person. Whose love encompasses not just us but all of humanity. His arms embrace our needs while at the same time meeting all the needs of all others.

So when we stand in this Temple of the Lord.....and stand before God....and claim that we have been delivered. Let's make sure that we have not been misled by deceptive words. Let's make sure our faith is based on more than some religion. Let's make sure everything is about Jesus and nothing is about us. Let's pray.