

Series - Unhindered

Get Unburdened from the Demands of Religion

Matthew 23:4; Matthew 11:28-29; Hebrews 12:1-3; Gal. 2 & 3

Introduction: turn with me to Hebrews 12:1-3,

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, 2 fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. 3 Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.” (NIV) PRAY

These verses challenge us to throw off all the extra weight; everything that hinders us as we run the race of life. We saw last week that anxiety is dead weight. But there is another kind of weight that disguises itself as something good, but it is burdensome and deadly. My message today, as we continue our vision sermon series, **Unhindered**, is for you to: **Get Unburdened from the Demands of Religion.**

Let's begin with a question and see how many will guess the right answer. What is the largest "religious group" in the United States today? It is a tricky question, because the largest religious group in America and the fastest growing are those who are called 'nones.' These are Americans who are religiously unaffiliated. They have no formal religious identity at all.

When I say religion, I'm talking about a system that emphasizes rules, rituals, and regulations to earn God's favor.

Pinpointing precisely how many religions there are in the world today is next to impossible, although some estimate the number exceeds four thousand. Most of those faiths are contained within the five religious' groups: Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism.

Here are names of just a handful of Christian churches:

Anglican/Episcopal, Assembly of God, Baptist [all kinds of flavors], Primitive Baptist, Calvary Chapel, Lutheran, Nazarene, Methodist, Presbyterian, Roman Catholic, Pentecostal Holiness, Church of God, Church of God of Prophecy, Church of God in Christ, Seventh Day Adventists, Mormons, Russian Orthodox, Greek Orthodox, Christian Missionary Alliance, Salvation Army, Wesleyan, Evangelical Free, AME Zion, Amish, Mennonite, Vinyard Churches.

Religion can briefly be defined as a specific belief system about God or gods expressed through a code of conduct, ethics, forms of worship, and rituals. Religion includes social, ethical, and ceremonial elements combined with the belief in an unseen world and often a deity.

In broad terms, the role of religion is to help people understand the reasons and purpose for their existence in the world, answer questions about the origins of life, explain the afterlife and spiritual realm, define the nature of deity, clarify if God exists, who He is, and how humans can relate to Him.

Some people say it doesn't matter which religion you practice, just pick one, because they all lead to the same place. We're just taking different paths.

The message of religion is always to try harder, and to do better. One young man talked about the religious experience he'd had while growing up. He said, "Every time I went to church, the message I heard was, **'Thanks for playing. Try again next week. '**"

Maybe you feel like that sometimes. You're trying hard enough to be good enough, but you can't quite measure up.

Occasionally you will hear someone say, "He or she lost her religion." Maybe you have said, "I came close to losing my religion." I may surprise you by what I am about to say, but **the best thing that could ever happen to you is for you to lose your religion.** The simple truth of the matter is that nobody has ever gone to heaven because they were religious.

STORY: A Sunday school teacher asked the children in his class, "If I sold my house and my car, had a big garage sale and gave all my money to the Church, would I get into heaven?" "No!" the children shouted. The teacher then asked, "If I cleaned the Church every day, mowed the yard and kept everything neat and clean, would I get into heaven?" Again, the children shouted "No!" The teacher asked, "How then can I get into heaven? One little boy in the back of the room shouted out, "You got to be dead!"

Illustration: There is an occurrence that happens often with prisoners who are incarcerated for a long time. They have difficulty adjusting to life on the outside when they are released. They get so accustomed to the way things are behind bars that living free can feel overwhelming to them. They are set free, but they don't know how to live free. The word for this is **institutionalization**.

There's a scene in the movie *The Shawshank Redemption* that defines it perfectly. Most of the movie takes place within the walls of a prison. Red, played by Morgan Freeman, explains to the other inmates this idea of being institutionalized:

"I am telling you; these walls are funny. First you hate them; then you get used to them. Enough time passes and you get so you depend on 'em. It doesn't mean you like 'em. It doesn't even mean you want 'em. But you get used to 'em, and then enough time passes, and you depend on 'em."

As Red shows in the movie, some will be tempted to commit some petty crime just to violate probation and get sent back inside those walls, where life is neatly defined, and decisions are cut and dried.

First-century Christians experienced something like that. Jesus had come to set them free from the weight of religion and the burden of the law. They were free to run the race without the chains of religion holding them back, but they had a hard time living free from religion.

For instance, in Matthew 23, a group of religious leaders listens to Jesus teach. These leaders are the most spiritual people around. They know the Scriptures

better than anyone. But Jesus says of them, ***"They crush people with unbearable religious demands and never lift a finger to ease the burden"*** (Matt. 23:4 NLT).

Religion does that. It crushes people under the weight of trying hard enough to be good enough. Good works alone never brought anyone closer to God. '

But the readers of the book of Hebrews had a difficult time throwing off the weight of long held tradition. So much of Hebrews is about reconciling the Jesus who wrote the law with the Jesus who fulfills it.

The law did one thing: it showed the futility of our trying to please God. Think of it this way. The pole vault has been an Olympic event since 1896. The records keep getting broken all the time. To date, the highest pole vault by a male is 20 feet 3.3 inches, achieved by Armand Duplantis of Sweden in 2020.

Think of that bar as the law. All of us have been told or we have come to believe that we must clear the bar. Nobody else has beat the record, until Christ cleared it; then He assigns his achievement, and His full reward to us.

A major theme of Hebrews is the superiority of Christ. In other words, Jesus is better. Fix your eyes on Jesus because Jesus is better. The words translated as ***"better"*** and ***"superior"*** show up fifteen times in the book of Hebrews. The original readers would have mostly been first-generation Jewish Christians. So, the message that "Jesus is better" was a message to encourage them.

Jesus is better than the law. Jesus is better than traditions. Jesus is better than the prophets of old. When you get to chapter 3 the case is made that "Jesus is better than Moses," which would have been offensive to many Jews, because you didn't mess with the name of Moses. He was the ultimate prophet.

But Hebrews makes it clear that Moses was a servant and Jesus is the master. The list keeps going: Jesus is better than the angels. Jesus is better than the high priests. Jesus is better than the old covenant. Jesus is better than the

sacrificial system. **Don't trade freedom in Christ for the weight of religion. Jesus is better than religion.**

Choosing to strain under the weight of the law rather than running free with Jesus was a challenge for many of the New Testament churches.

Many of the believers became confused and slide back to the old religious ways, because it was all they'd really known.

Religion is attractive because it offers a set standard to measure yourself by. There is something very appealing about a system that lets you measure how good you are. The religious leaders Jesus was speaking of in Matthew 23 were partly made of a group called the Pharisees. They'd developed an exhaustive list of rules, dos and don'ts that exceeded what was taught in the Hebrew law.

If God gave one commandment, they'd come up with numerous ways to make sure it was fully obeyed. Each rule was another weight. ***For instance,***

God said to honor the Sabbath day by keeping it as a holy day of rest. But the Pharisees had amassed 613 commandments in the Scriptures; 248 were “positive” (“do this, do that”), and 365 were “negative” (“don’t do this, don’t do that”). For them, “a don’t a day” kept the devil away!

1. A person could only walk seven-tenths of one mile on the Sabbath.
2. If you got off your donkey, you weren't allowed to take off your saddle.
3. If a hen laid an egg on the Sabbath, you were not allowed to eat the egg, because the hen had worked on the Sabbath. But these same regulations permitted an egg laid on the Sabbath to be sold to a Gentile.
4. It was also counted as Sabbath breaking to look in a mirror or light a candle, but their rules allowed a Gentile to be hired to light a candle or a fire.

The point was, the religious leaders made a well-established way to feel better about themselves and more judgmental of others.

Sadly, those traditions carry on because it's not a Hebrew thing; it's a human thing. ***For instance,*** The Bible teaches that we should dress modestly. But did

you grow up in a church where ladies couldn't wear pants; dresses had to extend below the knees? There were rules about length of hair, wearing jewelry, couldn't go to movies, couldn't swim on Sunday, etc. Religion gives us a feeling of superiority, hey "look at me."

So, what do Pharisees today say?

A word of caution: As you read them, don't think about who these phrases remind you of as much as you think about how they reflect your attitude.

1. "If he knew the Bible as well as I did, his life would be better."

2. "I follow the rules."

Following the rules doesn't keep you in the love of God any more than it got you into the love of God.

3. "You shouldn't hang around people like that."

Of course, Jesus said and did the opposite. Jesus paid a price for eating with publicans and sinners.

4. "God listens to my prayers."

When prayer becomes a predictable formula that manipulates or controls God, you can be pretty sure you're no longer praying.

5. "Sure I have a few issues, but that's between me and God."

And if you keep it between you and God, people will never be able to relate to you. Perfect on the outside and flawed on the inside—that's the accusation Jesus levied against the Pharisees.

When people on the outside look at pretend-to-be-perfect Christians, it does three things:

It alienates them.

**It makes them think you're fake ... because even they know we're all broken.
It suggests God can't help them.**

A religious leader is found doing this in Luke 11. Jesus is eating at the home of a Pharisee, and we're told that Jesus didn't wash his hands before the meal.

That was one of the many laws the religious leaders had come up with, just like your mother, right?

When the religious leader notices, he basically says to Jesus, "The Lord has told us to wash our hands." Jesus goes on to basically accuse the religious leaders of being bullies who use religion to promote themselves and control people.

In religious circles, people have what amounts to invisible religious merit badges. They try to show it nonchalantly. "Here's my never been drunk badge." "Here's my technically never had sex before marriage badge." "Here's my evangelism badge." "Here's my consistent quiet time badge." "Here's my perfect family badge."

Of course, we can't brag about these badges, or we might be asked to give back our "humility badge." Instead, we try to work our accomplishments casually into our conversations.

The Pharisees turned holiness into a religious weightlifting competition, and people were getting crushed.

Jesus came to take the weight of religion off us. The law of sin and death can no longer hold us down. I love the way The Message paraphrases the words of Jesus in Matthew 11:28-30.

"Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly." (Matt. 11:28-30)

We know from practical experience that religion can be a very dangerous thing. For example, in one of the most populated countries in the world 10,000 people a day starve to death. Even though there is plenty of meat to eat, their religion forbids them from eating it.

Religion can destroy a country. The problem in the Middle East today is it is literally torn in half by strife and revolution due to differing religious beliefs.

But the saddest thing of all about religion is that it cannot do the very thing that people believe that it can do, namely, take a person to heaven and keep them from hell.

Here are some differences between a religious person and a saved person.

A religious man talks about church. A saved man talks about Jesus.

A religious man keeps his eye on the budget, a saved man keeps his eye on baptisms.

A religious man endures worship. A saved man enjoys worship.

A religious man can't wait for the service to end. A saved man can't wait for the service to begin.

A religious man thinks the bible is boring. A saved man is bored without the bible.

When a man gets married, he doesn't get a married religion. He gets a wife. When a man gets saved, he doesn't get the Christian religion. He gets Jesus.

STORY: A man was driving on a dark, lonely country road had a tire blow out. As he was figuring out how to change the tire without any light a farmer in a truck pulled up and using his truck's headlights changed the man's tire. The grateful motorist offered him \$20.00 but the farmer refused. When the driver insisted the farmer replied, "Look I feel really good about helping you out, if I took your money, you would be buying that feeling back from me and quite frankly, I would rather have that feeling than the \$20.00. Religion lacks love.

There are four things that tend to happen to you when you try to live burdened by the demands of religion.

1. You'll grow frustrated.

There's nothing more frustrating than trying to do something you can't do. Imagine being taken out to the pole vault bar when you were a kid.

Somebody would say, "See that bar up there? The world record is more than twenty feet. Nobody has ever topped that. You need to get over that bar or you've failed."

Then the coach leaves you to it. He can't help you because he can't make it either. Your whole life would be built around attempting to do something nobody can do.

This is what makes religion so frustrating. It bases life on impossible standards, makes you feel guilty for missing them, and leaves you powerless to do anything about it.

2. You'll feel exhausted.

It's not just frustrating; it's tiring to try harder and harder only to feel like you can never make it.

3. You'll fake it because you can't make it.

To admit that every single person in the world is an utter failure would be unthinkable. So, there's an unspoken agreement to pretend. That's how religion works. I'll put on a good show, and people will look at me or scroll through my social media and think I'm doing pretty good. Since religion puts the emphasis on what others think, then as long as I can keep up the performance, I'm good. But pretending to be someone you're not becomes exhausting.

4. You'll end up conceited or defeated.

When it's about trying harder, it will always lead to comparisons. We will look around at other people and compare ourselves, feeling either pride or failure. When we compare **down** and feel conceited; when we compare **up** and feel defeated.

Either way, it's just a matter of time until we become discouraged and quit or prideful and fall. Both outcomes keep us from running the race that God has marked out for us.

One of the ways Jesus sets us free from the weight of religion is by setting us free from FOWOT, or the ***fear of what other people think.***

In Matthew 23, just after Jesus says that the religious leaders crush people with the unbearable weight of religious demands, he says of them in verse 5, ***"Everything they do is done for people to see."***

The weight of what other people think is one that religious people tend to carry everywhere they go. If you grew up under the weight of religion, you know how much emphasis is put on the outside.

Jesus tells the religious leaders in Matthew 23 that they may look good on the outside, and everyone may be impressed, but on the inside is a rotting corpse.

Let me give you a few indicators that you might be living with the fear of what others think (FOWOT):

You go along with what someone else wants but secretly resent it.

You change your opinion based on what everyone else thinks.

You are afraid of being seen as different after voicing an idea.

You have a difficult time saying no.

You are critical of others.

Understanding how God thinks of us sets us free from FOWOT. Once we see ourselves through His eyes, we become much less concerned with how we look in the eyes of others.

The good news of the gospel is that Jesus makes us clean. Not only does he take away our sin, but he gives us His righteousness so that we stand before God without blemish or defect.

Maybe you grew up being taught that God would love you more if you did something or if you didn't do something.

The truth is God doesn't love you more if you've never been addicted to drugs or if you've never slept around or if you've never had an abortion.

On the other hand, God doesn't love you more because you dress modestly or because you give generously; He doesn't love you more because you scored the most points on the team, or because you sing on the worship team, or because you're a gifted teacher.

When you begin to understand His love and acceptance for while you were a sinner, which is all of us, just so you know, it releases you from fearing what other people think.

Once we settle in our minds that we aren't living to impress others or for the applause of this world, we're free to run.

The Galatians were a church group who went back to the impossible system of religious law. There were false teachers who came into the church and began to elevate religious rules and rituals, and many of the Christians were willing to carry that weight again.

In Galatians 2, Paul tries to remind the believers that Jesus has freed them from that burden. Here's how The Message paraphrases the end of that chapter: ***"I tried keeping rules and working my head off to please God, and it didn't work. So, I quit being a "law man" so that I could be God's man. Christ's life showed me how and enabled me to do it. I identified myself completely with him. Indeed, I have been crucified with Christ. My ego is no longer central. It is no longer important that I appear righteous before you or have your good opinion, and I am no longer driven to impress God. Christ lives in me. The life you see me living is not "mine," but it is lived by faith in***

the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I am not going to go back on that." (Gal.2:19-21, The Message)

When we go to God for his gracious approval and loving acceptance, we'll find the greatest freedom ever. You find real freedom and rest and joy when you quit worrying about others' acceptance and just rest in God's.

Conclusion: If you are trying to do enough, give enough, be enough, to get God's approval, you will never be good enough for God.

"Clearly no one who relies on the law is justified before God, because 'the righteous will live by faith.'" (Galatians 3:11, NIV)

The one thing that every person that has ever lived or ever will live needs to get to God, to be right with God, and to have a relationship with God is to be justified.

Today's big take away - Religion (the law) is not a BRIDGE to God, it is a BARRIER to God.

It is not the way you get to God; it is a wall that separates you from God. The wall is a bridge that will not bear the weight of your sin, because it is your sin and my sin that breaks the law and destroys the bridge.

The law was given not to show us how good we can be, but how sinful we are. The law ***illuminates*** our sins, but it can't ***eliminate*** them. It tells us what a godly life looks like and then it shows us how ungodly we are. God's law cannot make you innocent. It can only prove you are guilty.

The law is perfect, and we are not. Only a perfect person could ever have a relationship with a perfect God and the only way we can ever be perfect is to achieve perfection, but we can't do that. But this same law now refers us to one who is perfect and who can remove our curse and that is Jesus.

"Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: 'cursed is everyone who is hung on a pole.'" (Galatians 3:13, NIV)

The word **“redeemed”** is a legal term that refers to how a slave's freedom would be bought by another person. The only remedy for our faults, our failures, our foul ups, our mistakes, our mess ups is redemption, not religion, not rules, not regulations, not restrictions, not righteousness, but redemption.

Because Jesus kept the law, He can remove the curse of the law by taking our punishment for breaking the law. The law was given to show us two things:

1) we are not perfect, and we can't keep the law.

2) we need a savior who is perfect who kept the law.

Since lawbreakers and law breaking must be punished, Jesus took our punishment for us. Jesus took the curse *for us* so he could take the curse *from us*. That is why the one thing that we must have to be free from sin, shame, grief, and guilt is not found in religion, rule keeping, regulations or righteousness. It is found in redemption at the cross of Jesus Christ.

You will never be right with God until you lay down the law and lose your religion.

Paul comes to his climatic statement when he reminds us that the law tells us to achieve, but the Lord tells us to receive.

"He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the spirit." (Galatians 3:14, NIV)

God only accepts us one way. It has nothing to do with our performance, our position, popularity, our rituals, or rule-keeping. It is not a matter of what we do for him; it is a matter of simply accepting by faith what He has done for us.

Even in the Old Testament people weren't saved by keeping the law. They understood they couldn't keep the law perfectly. That is why they had a system of sacrifice. That is why untold millions of gallons of blood were shed sacrificing lambs, because it was a picture of redemption. A price had to be paid for sin.

The people, by faith, trusted that God would take that sacrifice until the ultimate sacrifice was made through Jesus Christ.

The law always pointed to grace, not goodness. It always pointed to faith, not fulfilment and that is why there is always going to be only two choices when it comes to having a relationship with God.

- Your goodness or God's grace.

- Your religion or His redemption.

Are you trying to do all you can for God or are you trusting in all God has done for you. From one end of the bible to the other, the primary message is this - the lawmaker became the law-keeper and died for you and me: the lawbreakers.

When you finally understand that, lay down the law, lose your religion, Get Unburdened from the Demands of Religion, and you will find everything you need at the cross of Jesus Christ.