

Don't Have a Worthless Religion

by Jim Cymbala

A true religion is one that is proved by good works and treats others with kindness and compassion.

Duration: 32:01

Scripture: Isaiah 58:8, Matthew 6:33, Matthew 7:21, Matthew 7:24-27, Matthew 25:31-46

Topics: "Lent"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher emphasizes the importance of reaching out and helping others. He uses the analogy of being like a well-watered garden, emphasizing that when we give and bless others, our own lives become enriched. The preacher encourages the congregation to be generous with their resources, reminding them that their acts of kindness will be rewarded in heaven. He also highlights the need for kindness in a world that can often be cruel, urging the listeners to stand out by being kind and treating others with respect.

Transcript

I want to talk about things that look good but they become worthless. Bible warns us about stuff like that. To introduce it, I'd like to tell you something that happened to me.

Let's see, Levi had to be one year old, so this would be eight years ago. I was up in my study and I was visited by a gentleman who has since gone to be with the Lord from Texas. And he was involved in collecting old Bibles.

In fact, he was the driving force behind the new museum down in DC of the Bible that people have been taking tours. I think it's, I hear it's really interesting and great. So he was up in my office.

He was a jeweler. He was this, that. He was one of those guys all over the place.

And he had a ring on his finger, the hugest diamond I ever saw in my life, with little baguettes. Is that what they're called, baguettes? They're called baguettes? Yeah. So it was all like that.

And it was just big and flashing. And when he would lift his hand to make a point, it dazzled all of us. And before he left, I showed him a picture of my then new grandson from Ethiopia, adopted by my daughter, Sue, and my son-in-law, Brian.

He said, that's a handsome boy. And I said, yeah, we're so thankful for God sending him into our family. He would call me preacher or doctor.

I had no idea why he called me that. I told him I wasn't practicing anymore anyway. But he said, so listen, preacher, great seeing you.

I gave him a hug. And he said, tell me if I can ever help you or your grandson. So I said, yeah, well, as a joke, I said, why don't you give me that ring? You know, because it was so huge, as a joke.

And he went, you want this ring, preacher? And I went, no, I'm only joking. He said, no, I'll give you this ring right now. I said, no, I'm only joking.

He said, no, I love you. I appreciate you. You've helped me.

And he took this thing off and put it in my hand and walked to the elevator and left. And the people around me were going wild. They were high-fiving, running all over the fifth floor.

And they were saying, Levi, he can go to law school, regular school, every kind of school. Because what you have there is amazing. The thing was so gaudy and big.

So I held it there. And they started talking among themselves. What do you think it's worth? You know, they started throwing numbers around, \$100,000, \$50,000, this, that, the other.

I said, I don't know. I have no sense of it. But I locked it away somewhere.

And then that week, our then-CFO came to me and said, you know, you shouldn't really keep that here in the church. Let me take it and have it appraised. So I said, yeah, you want to do that, do it.

So he took it. But I noticed one thing about the ring. Even though it was big and gaudy and all of that, it was very light.

You know what I'm saying? Why are you laughing? Was that funny? So I gave it to him. And he came back, you know, like two days later. And he said, I went down to the jewelry district in the city.

And he said, is that what you think? He said, the ring appraises at \$169. That's all fake. That's all fake glitter, fake bling.

Fake whatever. So I kept the ring. I still have it.

Should I bring it in next week? And I'll pass it among all of you. You could just toss it around the church. But it was an eye-opener to me that something, I'm telling you, this was ginormous bling.

This was huge. And it was worthless. So that's okay.

You can get through that. God will provide. But when the most essential things are found to be not real, that really causes you to stop and ponder.

And the Bible talks about when our religion, our faith, our service, our Christianity, our profession can, without us even knowing it, become worthless. So the Bible is full of warnings like this. I'm not being negative.

I have to preach the whole counsel of God to you. That's my job. And one of the warnings is make sure that in all of your doing and serving and singing and all of that, it doesn't end up in God's sight as being appraised as, no, it's not \$10 million.

It's not \$10,000. It's \$169. Not even that.

So look up at this wake-up call that the prophet Isaiah gave the people in Israel. The Lord says to Isaiah, shout with the voice of a trumpet blast. Shout aloud.

Don't be timid. Tell my people Israel of their sins, Isaiah 58. Yet they act so pious.

They come to the temple every day. Wow. And seem delighted to learn all about me.

They're into study. They act like a righteous nation. They would never abandon the laws of its God.

They asked me to take action on their behalf. They pray, pretending they want to be near me, devotional. We have fasted.

Not only that, they're fasting. We have fasted before you, they say. Why aren't you impressed? We have been very hard on ourselves and you don't even notice it.

I will tell you why I respond. It's because you are fasting to please yourself. Even while you fast, you keep on oppressing your workers.

What good is fasting when you keep on fighting with one another, quarreling? This kind of fasting will never get you anywhere with me. You humble yourselves by going through the motions of penance. Bowing your heads like reeds bending in the wind.

You dress in burlap and you cover yourselves with ashes. Is that what you call fasting? Do you really think this will please the Lord? No, this is the kind of fasting I want. Free those who are wrongly imprisoned.

Lighten the burden of those who work for you. Let the oppressed go free and remove the chains that bind people. Share your food with the hungry and give shelter to the homeless.

Give clothes to those who need them and do not hide from relatives. Wow. Do not hide from your relatives who need your help.

That hit a nerve. Remove the heavy yoke of oppression. Stop pointing your finger and spreading vicious rumor.

So now we find out that here was a nation, the nation of Israel in the time of Isaiah, who to the outward eye, these folks were religious. Everything God required in the law in terms of temple worship, they went to temple. They'd be like Orthodox to go to synagogue regularly now.

The Hasidim in Borough Park and on Eastern Parkway. Punctilious into every detail in their service of God. Sacrifices, prayers, devotion, study.

On top of that, they're even fasting a spiritual practice to get spiritual clarity in your mind to pray and grow deeper in God, denying the body so that the spiritual side can gain ascendance. They were doing all of that. And they were saying to God, why don't you see this? Doesn't this impress you? I mean, it would be like us saying today, look, I go to church not only on Sunday, I'm in the Tuesday and I'm in a ministry.

I do this and I do that. And I sing in the choir and I go to Bible studies and I do all of these things. And how could my religion be worthless? No, God says that the sign of a proper vertical relationship with God is always proved by how we relate horizontally to people.

The biggest deception in spiritual living is to think you're close to God and pleasing to God because of your vertical practices with God. Prayer, reading the word, going to church, so on and so forth. And forgetting that the true sign that that's real is how you treat horizontal, how you treat your fellow creation, how you treat your brother and sister in Christ, how you treat the stranger who might run across your path, how you treat that relative who's in need.

That's the true sign. And they had lost that. They were all vertical, but it was obviously empty because while they were fasting, they were ripping people off.

They weren't paying their workers a fair wage. They were gossiping using a vicious tongue, pointing their finger, that chapter says. Stop pointing the finger.

You judge everyone, you criticize everyone, and then you go to the temple and offer sacrifices. You think that means anything to me? You destroy other people who I love with your tongue and then you go to church and think that it's just gonna be fine. And you don't help people.

You're so occupied with yourself, so self-consumed, so self-absorbed that when people come across your path that need help, help's gonna mean time, help's gonna need sometimes money, going out of the way. No, you have no time for that. In fact, sometimes you don't do it because you say, sorry, can't help you, gotta get to temple.

Oh, that's just fine, God says. That's not what I have in mind for you. That can't please me.

Here's the real fast, here's the real devotion, here's the real drawing near to me that I wanna see from you. Help people, be kind. We live in a cruel world.

You know, I was thinking of that verse about God says that we should shine like stars in the night and if we ever wanted to stand out in this culture right now, you wanna know how to stand out? Just be kind because there ain't no kindness out there. Just turn on political TV, read the newspapers, just see how everybody acts. If you don't agree with me, you're a demon.

You don't agree with me, you're my enemy. You're not even a human if you disagree with me because I'm the center of the universe. How dare you disagree with my position or whatever it is and then come into religion too.

Fussing, fighting, pointing of the finger, accusing people. It's so sad when Christians get involved in that and even pastors. Just harsh political talk, just harsh.

Fussing, fighting, condemning, pointing the finger and then lifting our hands up to God when God loves the person we pointed the finger at. Don't you know that? God loves them just as much as he loves us. Come on, can we say amen to that? Sometimes people will say to me, no, but you don't know.

I said, I know the Bible. I might not know your opinion, but I know the Bible and the Bible says that makes religion worthless and as I kind of bring this to summation, this must go together. These two things, pointing the finger, vicious tongue, talking about people behind their back, obviously, along with forgetting

the needs, insensitivity to people.

No compassion, but religion, but no compassion because James, our half brother of our Lord, says in book of James, look, James one, if you claim to be religious, but don't control your tongue, you are fooling yourself and your religion is what? Wait a minute, worthless? Yeah, worthless. Pure and genuine religion in the sight of God, the father means caring for orphans and widows in the distress and refusing to let the world corrupt you. Read that again with me here.

Listen, if you claim to be religious, serving God, having a faith in Christ, but don't control your tongue, you're fooling yourself and your religion is worthless. You obviously don't understand anything if you talk evil about her and God loves her and as much as he loves me and then I destroy her with my tongue when she's not around and then when I see her, I shake her hand and go, hi, Madeline, how are you doing? Everything good? Obviously, we've lost all sense of spiritual reality. We're in like a fantasy world.

We're hurting the one that God loves and then telling God we love him. So these two things go together with James. He says pure religion and undefiled real religion is to control your mouth and number two, watch out for the orphans and the widows.

Who are orphans and widows? Oh, they're part of God's chosen people. Didn't you know that? Did you know that God has three chosen people? Old Testament, it was the Jewish people and the New Testament is chosen people are the church made up of Jew and Gentile but he has another chosen people, it seems in Old and New Testament and that's anybody who's under the gun and hurting. Orphans, what are they? Vulnerable.

What are widows? Vulnerable. Back in that society, you became a widow. All the predator men would be coming towards you.

So who's gonna watch out for them? Who's gonna watch out for the one with severe ADD? Who's gonna be the one to watch out for a person living in the shelter? Oh no, I don't have time. I gotta go to church. See, there you go.

Every day, we don't have to start a new society. We don't have to try to replace the government and all their good social programs that they do have. What we can do is be open and saying, God put a guard on my mouth so I don't hurt anyone that you love because you know when you talk bad about someone like if I ever heard any of you that you talk and really hurt verbally one of my children, my two daughters, my son or one of my grandchildren or Levi.

Oh, if you talk bad about Levi. I'm coming for you. I don't care.

I'll lose my sanctification over that. Only joking. I have to learn to be patient with that too.

We all have to. But don't you get it? It'd be very hard for me to open up to you when I hear you're eviscerating verbally my people I love. And that's the way God is.

What? You just hurt someone I sent my son to die for? I gave my son for that person and you're saying what about them? And who made you the judge of them? Isn't enough that I'm gonna judge you in the end? Shouldn't you just be paying attention to your own life? Don't you have enough trouble just checking yourself out? You gotta check everybody else out. And number two, I presented people to you that need a helping hand. Why would you not have time for them? Why can't you help them? Why can't you have the

spirit that I have? When you were down and out, didn't I help you? Just what the choir sang.

He made a way. Can't we help make a way for someone else? Do I get a witness here? In other words, that becomes really hypocritical when we're talking about God made a way for me, God made a way for me and now someone else needs my help and I have no time for that. I have no time for that.

So the Lord warned, don't have a worthless religion. Don't have a worthless religion. Let your faith be proved by your good works.

We're justified by faith alone, not by works. But real faith always produces works. The stronger the faith, the more people are being careful about how they talk.

It seems in the Bible is teaching us and also how we treat the down and outers. I don't wanna go into the whole story, but you know, by that time that homeless guy came in, my friend David Ruffin, smelling from urine, feces, the street and sweat, glazed eyes. And I was tired at the end of a three or four service day in the other building, it was Easter.

And he wanted to talk to me and nobody else was available and he's not supposed to give money to people like that. We have a protocol. But he smelled so bad and I was tired.

I took some money out of my back pocket and he pushed it down and he said, I don't want your money. I want this Jesus you were talking about. And the Lord made real to me that day.

I'm not speaking for any other preacher or pastor. This is my calling. You see that smell, Jim? That's what I called you to.

You don't wanna embrace that smell. I have no use for you. I'll put you on the shelf.

Because the whole world smells like that to me. And I still sent my son. So how can we look away and turn away? Some churches have target groups and they want nice millennial age, well-dressed people who make good money.

A friend of mine just tried to join a church in another state and they were asking, we want your financial projections for next year and we wanna see your W-2 because we wanna know how much you should be given because we will check. I wouldn't care if this building was filled with 3,500 homeless people, whoever God wants to send in. Are you with me? Come on.

We're gonna love everybody God sends in. Let me close with the promise now or one little story. Notice how important this must be.

If Jesus would take all this, put this in the Bible and so many verses, Matthew taken up by this story. Look, Matthew. But when the son of man comes, Jesus said in his glory and all the angels with him, Jesus said, then he will sit upon his glorious throne and all the nations will be gathered in his presence, Matthew 25.

And he will separate the people as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will place the sheep at his right and the goats at his left. Then the king will say to those on his right, come you who are blessed by my father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the creation of the world.

For I was hungry and you fed me. I was thirsty and you gave me a drink. I was a stranger.

You invited me into your home. That's a simple thing. I was naked and you gave me clothing.

I was sick and you cared for me. I was in prison and you visited me. Then these righteous ones will reply, Lord, when did we ever see you hungry and feed you or thirsty and give you something to drink or a stranger and show you hospitality or naked and give you clothing? When did we ever see you sick or in prison and visit you? And the king will say, I tell you the truth.

When you did it to one of the least of these, my brothers and sisters, you were doing it to me. You were doing it to me. You were doing it to me.

When you do a glass of water to a person who's in need, anything you do to help someone, buy someone coffee at the diner, do whatever God lays on your heart. I'm not trying to get a social program developed here. I'm trying to say our hearts are going to be open to people if God is really flowing through us.

How many say amen? Then the king will turn to those on the left and say away with you, you cursed ones into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his demons. Hey, I'm not making this stuff up. This is in the Bible.

For I was hungry and you didn't feed me. I was thirsty. You didn't give me a drink.

I was a stranger and you didn't invite me in your home. I was naked and you didn't give me clothing. I was sick and in prison and you didn't visit me.

Then they will reply, Lord, when did we ever see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison and not help you? And he will answer, I tell you the truth. This is Jesus talking. When you refuse to help the least of these, my brothers and sisters, you were refusing to help me and they will go away into eternal punishment.

But the righteous will go into eternal life. You know, I want to say publicly to you three and everyone in your ministry. Well done.

Well done. Every piece of furniture you ever pick up, every piece, if you hand a doily to someone or a little table, nightstand, you'll have your reward. Because the things that the world makes a big thing about, God often calls an abomination.

But the things that the world counts as insignificant, those are the things that are being marked for us in heaven. And we're not going to lose our reward. We're not going to lose our reward.

So I want to say this though, as a disclaimer, you visitors, this is just me talking to my congregation, but I know I'm speaking on behalf of our pastors too. I find you as I travel around and around the world, around the country, and then I watch you here. I think we have some of the, most of the kindest people in the whole world.

That's the truth. I commend you. I admire you.

I watch kindnesses from you that challenge me. I find out about things that people do. I get letters, emails.

Do you know this has happened 20 times? Pastor, I visited your church for the first time. Those are the kindest people I've ever met. How did you get them so kind? What do you teach on kindness? No, I don't.

God makes them kind. Because when God's love is in you, you're kind. Love is patient.

Love is kind. You meet an unkind person. They don't know God very well.

God makes us kind. And I find in you, just saying, you really are kind. This choir, I watch them interact with each other.

They're kind. They root for each other. I get emails saying, you know, I came to your church and I was struggling looking at a subway map in Manhattan and someone went, said, can I help you? And I said, I'm trying to find the Brooklyn Tabernacle.

They said, oh, that's where I'm going. Come on, I'll take you there. And they rode with me.

And then they sat with me. And then they hugged me. And then they took me back to the subway so I wouldn't get lost.

And I'm just writing you. You'll never see me again. I only visited once.

But where in the world? That person was an angel or something. No, it wasn't an angel. It was just a kind Christian.

The littlest things are the things that affect people. So once I had a man visit me, a well-known, well-known, well-known Bible teacher, author, call me and said, could you say hello to this couple? They were in my church once, many years ago. And they've been deacons and elders in a Southern state their whole lives and serve the Lord.

Would you just say hello to them? So I said, fine. So I brought them up to my office at the end of the service. It's no big thing to say hello to someone, show some kindness.

So they were both fidgety in my office, weren't making eye contact. This has happened a thousand times. God is listening to me.

A thousand times have I got this lesson given to me, which I want to encourage you with. So they're sitting there. And I said, hi, how you doing? Fine.

Did you enjoy the meeting? Yeah, it was very special. And then the wife just started like to cry a little bit. And I thought this is weird because we haven't talked about anything dramatic here.

And I said to the husband, so everything's fine. He said, no, listen, I want to just tell you something. I'm from a certain state, certain denomination, small little town.

He said, I think it was an older man. He said, you got to know that this was the first time I ever worshiped with people of color. Where do you live? I mean, my goodness.

And you know, the way you sing is different. And the way the choir was lifting their hands, that's all like new to us and all that. But I want to tell you when the greeting time came and then after the service, people we didn't know were walking up to us and hugging us.

We didn't even know them. No, in my church, no one's hugged me for 20 years. And here were total strangers hugging me.

So boy, your sermon was okay. But the real lesson we got today was, oh my, God is love. So every little thing we do, and you know what? You don't have to look.

You don't have to go like in a big program. Just live in New York. You're going to run into somebody.

Will we not? Or God will remind you, close your mouth. I got an amen on the first. I didn't get an amen on the second.

But just close your mouth. It's pleasing to me that you don't talk. It's pleasing me that you help that person.

And look, last verse. Look at the reward for those who will not be finger pointing and not be talking changa and not be ignoring people. Look at Isaiah again.

Then your salvation will come like the dawn and your wounds will quickly heal. Your godliness will lead you forward and the glory of the Lord will protect you from behind. Then when you call, the Lord will answer.

Yes, I am here. He will quickly reply. Feed the hungry and help those in trouble.

Then your light will shine out from the darkness and the darkness around you will be as bright as noon. The Lord will guide you continually, giving you water when you are dry and restoring your strength. You will be like a well-watered garden, like an ever-flowing spring.

You know why some of us are so dried up and we're just so gnarly and dried up and just that? It's because we're not reaching and loving and stretching and letting that water that's in us go out. So we become dry and desiccated and gnarly and all bound up in ourselves. Instead of just going out, going out, blessing, helping, just, no, my mom, I just thinking, she came to see me play once in college.

Someone drove her up to Rhode Island. We were having a big game against UConn. She came to the game and when I was in college, it goes back to high school, I don't wanna go into the story, but the name, no one ever pronounced my name right.

No one said Simbala, they only said Simbala. So I was known every time I scored or my name was introduced at the beginning of the game, Jimmy Simbala, Jimmy Simbala. My mother came, she said to the head ushers there in the arena, I wanna see my son, he's on the team.

Who's your son? Jim Simbala. They went, no, nobody is on the team named Jim Simbala. She said, no, no, I know he's on the team.

He's the captain of the team. They're like, no, ma'am, you got it wrong. It's Jimmy Simbala, it's not Jim Simbala.

She said, trust me, you got it wrong. I got it right, I'm the mother. Well, anyway, she went, while she was there, she stayed over and we went the next day to a church that was just starting.

The name of the pastor was Pastor Testa Seca. He was pioneering in a hard place right outside Kingston, Rhode Island. He was pioneering a church, he and his wife.

And they rented American Legion Hall. They rented it and in the back they lived, hard scrabble, didn't have any money. I would give them free tickets for the games.

That was their biggest event of the winter was coming to all the home games that we played. My mother went and saw them, walked in the church, this little hall. There was 12 people in the meeting, 11 people with my mom and I. And she went back in the kitchen.

She never said a word to me. And then as she left, and this was back when money was worth something. And she just said goodbye, hugged the wife, handed her \$500, she had never met her.

She knew her for a half hour, handed her \$500, walked out. Never said a word to me, never told me. And later after she left, they came to me and said, wow, your mom is the bomb.

And I said, why, what happened? Oh, she was so sweet and she gave us 500. We can all be looking to do something for somebody, can't we? Don't be so tight, give up your money. You'll be storing it up in heaven.

How many wanna have some riches in heaven? I mean, something that the Lord is saying, well done, let's pray. So Lord, we've heard your word today. Help us to have bowels of mercy.

Help us not to have worthless religion, but real religion, a real Christianity, where we not only pray and read your word and come to church and sing, but that you work in us and through us and out from us, blessing to others who are in need. And Lord, we don't have to look far to find someone in need. Not just financial, emotional, mental, physical need.

Help us to show your heart to the world by touching those around us in the name of Jesus. Help us to treat each other with respect. Not just when we see each other, but when we're not in front of each other, that we would guard each other's reputation, that we would honor each other's name, that we would be careful not to talk badly about someone that you love so dearly.

This will not be good for us should we practice that. So help us to be an encouragement in tongue and in truth, in deed. Save us from fake religion, running around, jumping, singing, emotional for an hour or so, and then back to selfish, self-centered living.

Make us one, Lord. Make us one, Lord. Break down any racial barrier that's in this building, economic barrier, age barrier.

Let all the barriers come down. For this shall people know you're my disciples, that you love one another. And now, Lord, let your blessing and your face shine upon us all day long.

Help us even now to minister through encouragement and an embrace, a handshake. Help us to help someone, we pray right now in Jesus' name. And everyone said, God bless you.

The Lord be with you. God bless you.

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