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UNSTUCK: FROM BAD RELIGION Michael B. Beough
John 2:13-22 March 15, 2009
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We're talking about getting our lives unstuck. One of the things Jesus came to get us unstuck from is bad religion. In fact, you can read the entire Bible as a critique of misguided religion and misapplied religion, religion gone bad.

Our theme verse for this series is Malachi 3:10b. "See if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing." Bad religion is one thing that keeps the windows of heaven shut. It keeps us from experiencing the overflowing blessings from God.

When I was growing up, window frames used to be made of wood. If you wanted to keep a window shut, say for security reasons or because you no have air conditioning and want to keep the cool in, you might drive nails into the frame. Bad religion is like driving nails into the window frame of our souls.

You know what I mean if you have ever had an experience with bad religion. There are lots of people out there who believe in God but don't want to have anything to do with religion because of a bad experience. They don't want to have anything to do with the church.

Lisa has loaned me a book I am reading called "They Like Jesus But Not the Church." The "They" are young adults ages 18 through 30. They are a missing generation in the church, noticeable by their absence. They like the Jesus they think they know but have no use for what they call "organized religion." I discovered there is a movement among some of these to call themselves "followers of Jesus" instead of Christians. "Christian" sounds too much like religion to them. If they really knew Jesus, of course, they would realize that he didn't come to get rid of religion. He came to get rid of bad religion.

In John 2:13-22, we find Jesus taking on religion gone bad. We call this story the cleansing of the temple. In it, we see some characteristics of bad religion.

Bad religion almost always leads us to believe that there is something we have to do to appease an angry God. Did any of you grow up hearing that or thinking that?

Here's the thing that really angered Jesus. When he went to the temple in Jerusalem during the Feast of the Passover, he didn't see much evidence of the God of grace he knew as his Father in heaven. When he walked into the temple, he saw people bustling around buying animals for

sacrifices. They were buying cows, or sheep, or doves depending on what they could afford. He saw people who had bought into the notion that God needed to be appeased with the slaughter of animals. Buy an animal, let the priest kill it, and go on your way. Your duty to God has been done. Perhaps God will bless you with a good year.

The sight made Jesus angry. He had this peculiar idea that if religion doesn't help us connect with the God of grace who loves us unconditionally and who enables a living faith, then religion has gone bad. If religion keeps us in fear of God, then who needs it?

Jesus made a whip, drove out the animals, and turned over the tables of the money changers. He accused the priests of turning God's house into a marketplace. It was like throwing down the gauntlet. It was a demonstration of what he came to do. He came to liberate us from religion gone bad.

Bad religion also tends toward complexity. Over the past several years, I have grown more and more sure of this. Maybe it is my age. Some things simply aren't as important as they once seemed to be. For example, when I was in my late thirties, I thought the sign of a good church was one that had a clear organizational structure and operated like a tightly run corporation. There was a clear chain of command, and nothing was left to chance. The church I served at the time loved it. Talk about "organized religion"!

Several years after I left that church, members were still talking about the great organization I had put in place. They weren't talking about changed lives or deeper relationships with God because of my ministry. I was known as the organization guy. And it saddened me. What they didn't know was that while I was organizing the heck out of them, I was thinking of leaving the ministry. I was at a spiritual low point in my life. I was completely empty spiritually.

When Jesus cleared the temple, he threw out the complexity that had grown up around simple faith. The case can be made that Jesus came to simplify our relationship with God. It was the same issue raised by the prophets in the Old Testament. They kept asking, "What is true religion?" What does God really want from us? The prophet Micah gave a delicious answer, so simple. In Micah 6:8, he says, "What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God?" Jesus simplified it by saying there are only two commandments: Love God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself. It is simple. Go and make disciples. Ask your Father in heaven whatever you need. Love your enemies. Feed the hungry.

Finally, bad religion focuses on dead traditions and customs.

Can you see where this is going? When religious traditions and customs become the main thing, then religion has gone bad. Killing cows and sheep and doves in the temple didn't seem to be changing people's lives. It didn't seem to be making much difference. It actually seemed to cloud their relationship with God.

Let me give you an example of how this happens. When I was a boy in Sunday School, you could earn a badge for perfect attendance. I always envied Bill. He had a string of perfect attendance medals. The only problem was that Bill was anything but your model Christian. Growing into his teen years, he became a bad kid, into crime, in trouble with the law. We all clapped for Bill when he got another perfect attendance medal. But religion was like a vaccination that didn't take. Looked good on the outside but made no difference on the inside. The church perpetuated the idea that just by showing up you were a good person and in right relationship with God.

Jesus wants to throw these things out of our lives, the traditions and customs that actually cloud our relationship with God. Think of them in terms of rituals or habits or religious practices that do nothing to move us or anyone else closer to God.

If you want to know where you are on the bad religion scale, here is an acid test. If your church could change something in its traditions and customs that would open the windows of heaven for many others, would you be willing to change it? Do you think God would want you to change it?

The good news this morning is that Jesus came to clean house, to clear the way for living a simple and powerful life in relationship with the living God. To get rid of bad religion.

Here is what it all boils down to. In verses 18-22, the Jews in the temple want to know what right Jesus has for making such a mess of their traditions and customs. It is the question of authority. Who is the boss of your life?

Jesus answers somewhat vaguely. "Destroy this temple, and in three days, I will raise it up." The Jews think he is talking about the structure of the temple that had been in the making for 46 years. They laughed at him. What we know is that Jesus was talking about his own body, his death and resurrection. The time was coming, he was telling them, when all authority in heaven and on earth would belong to him. In other words, the time is coming when you will have a clear choice about your life.

Folks, this is our message. You can keep on with dead traditions and customs that may feel comfortable but that leave you a long way from the white hot passion that comes with knowing the living God. Or you can throw to the wind everything you have ever known and believed and follow the risen Lord to eternity and back.

If your faith has grown cold, it could be because you have let other things cloud your relationship with God. Perhaps your religion has become more about traditions and customs that have become empty rituals, habits without meaning.

If you seem far away from the white hot passion that God wants to grow in us, then cast yourself upon Jesus. Ask Christ to cleanse your house today. Don't let anyone distract you from the main thing. Don't fall into the trap of traditions and customs that nail the windows shut. It is all about him. It is all about kneeling before God in the name of his Son and giving him your life and your all. Then he will empower you with a simple faith that enables you to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God.