

Free to Follow: Rediscovering Jesus Beyond Religion

Part 5: What If Religion Isn't the Way to God?

John 4:1-26

Summary: When religion leaves you feeling empty, Jesus offers something real, personal, and life-giving.

Main Ideas:

Many of us have been taught to treat faith like a vending machine.

Religion, as most of us have experienced it, is empty and lifeless.

Religion divides us into who is in and who is out.

Jesus breaks down the cultural, racial, and religious walls we use to keep each other away.

Religion creates shame. Jesus replaces it with dignity.

Jesus doesn't run from our mess... he offers to clean it.

Religion tells us that if we just find the right formula, we'll finally reach God.

Jesus replaces religion with himself.

We can't reach God through religion because he has already reached us through Jesus.

Religion says earn it. Jesus says enjoy it.

Religion says perform. Jesus says come home.

Invitation:

Each morning this week...

- Remind yourself: I am seen, loved, and enjoyed.
- Ask yourself: Who around me needs to be seen, loved, and enjoyed?

Discussion Questions:

1. What part of the message or story stood out to you the most? Why do you think that is?
2. In what ways have you been influenced by religion that told you who was "in" and who was "out"?
3. Read John 4:21-24. What do you think it means to worship "in spirit and in truth"? What might that look like in your everyday life?
4. What is one specific step you want to take this week to stop performing and start simply enjoying Jesus?
5. How can your group pray with you this week?

Transcript:

ME: How much I've enjoyed getting to know everyone.

- Kaleb is blessed to have such encouraging people
- Who actually pay attention!
- You're not just welcoming, but you engage not just with me but with what we've been talking about.

Going to be in good hands with my friend Glen Hossler

- Wise, loving, genuine.

Today, finishing up series Free to Follow: Rediscovering Jesus Beyond Religion

- For 4 weeks now, we've been pulling back the curtain, removing the extra stuff religion has added to following Jesus.

So needed b/c... Many of us have been taught to treat faith like a vending machine.

WE: We were sold a system: insert effort, receive blessing.

But what happens when you press the buttons... and life doesn't deliver?

We're told if we drop in our money... Say our prayers, rituals, practice self-discipline, give money...

Then God will give *us* what we want... a happy life, health, wealth, and good relationships.

- Now, nothing wrong with doing those things.

BUT... have you ever had this happen?

You put your money in the vending machine and press the buttons... and nothing happens.

- You wait... But no snack falls down.

Maybe you push the buttons harder.

- Shake/smack the side a little.
- Try to reach up and under
- Maybe even put more money in.

But still nothing.

It's frustrating, right?

- You did all the right things.
- But you have nothing to show for all of your effort.

And that's what religion can feel like.

You show up, say the right words, go through the checklist

- Hoping God sees you and gives you what you want.

But after a while, you're still thirsty. Still tired. Still waiting.

- Your life seems just as messed up as everyone else's... if not worse

It's not just exhausting... It's empty.

Some of us have been afraid to say this out loud... so I'll do it for you.

- Religion, as most of us have experienced it, is empty and lifeless.

But today we're going to see there's a better way.

This isn't just the end of our series... It's the beginning of something new for you if you're ready.

- You don't need more religion. You need something real, and that's what Jesus came to offer.

Jesus replaced religion with something infinitely better.

- Something that brings true life.

Jesus' best friend, John wrote an account of a time Jesus met someone dealing with the realities of empty religion.

- Someone stuck in a routine that left her dry and exhausted.

She was going through the motions of religion handed down to her... but her life was still a mess.

- Still empty. Still alone.
- The vending machine just wasn't delivering anymore

But in one conversation... Jesus changed everything for her.

GOD: When we pick up the story... Things are getting a little heated with the religious leaders, so Jesus decides to lay low for a bit.

John 4:3-4 NLT *So he left Judea and returned to Galilee. He had to go through Samaria on the way.*

Now right away, we have to point out something significant that is easy to miss... John says Jesus "had to go through Samaria."

Technically... He didn't.

- Most Jews, traveling that way, purposely chose a different route to go around Samaria

Jews and Samaritans avoided and even hated each other.

- Divided by religious beliefs and ethnic tensions.

Religion divides us into who is in and who is out.

- Both thought the way *they* worshipped was the right way...
- Samaritans' Mt. Gerazim was the correct place to worship
- Jews temple in Jerusalem
- Jews even destroyed the Samaritans' temple

So Jesus "had to" go through Samaria...not b/c it was the only way to get to where he was going, but b/c walls needed to be smashed and someone needed to be seen.

- Someone whose need went beyond what her religion could provide.

So as they are traveling, Jesus and his disciples stop for lunch.

The disciples go to a nearby town to get food... and Jesus rests at a well.

- After a little while, a woman comes to get water.
- And Jesus asks for a drink.

John 4:9 NLT *The woman was surprised, for Jews refuse to have anything to do with Samaritans. She said to Jesus, "You are a Jew, and I am a Samaritan woman. Why are you asking me for a drink?"*

You can almost hear the bitterness/anger/hurt in her voice. Why are *YOU* asking *ME* for a drink?

Jews weren't even supposed to drink from the same cups as unclean Samaritans.

- They were taught from a young age, the only thing worse than a tax-collector was a Samaritan...
- Only thing lower than a Samaritan was a Samaritan woman.
- Jewish men didn't speak to women... especially not a Samaritan woman.
- Jesus did more to elevate the status of women than any religion ever has.

The woman lived in a world where religion was based on who was in and who was out...

Jesus breaks down the cultural, racial, and religious walls we use to keep each other away.

But he's not just there to talk... he's there to change a life.

John 4:10-12 NLT *Jesus replied, "If you only knew the gift God has for you and who you are speaking to, you would ask me, and I would give you living water." "But sir, you don't have a rope or a bucket," she said, "and this well is very deep. Where would you get this living water? And besides, do you think you're greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us this well? How can you offer better water than he and his sons and his animals enjoyed?"*

The phrase living water usually used to describe fresh bubbling spring water

Woman- Who do you think you are? I'm good, weirdo.

John 4:13-15 NLT *Jesus replied, "Anyone who drinks this water will soon become thirsty again. But those who drink the water I give will never be thirsty again. It becomes a fresh, bubbling spring within them, giving them eternal life." "Please, sir," the woman said, "give me this water! Then I'll never be thirsty again, and I won't have to come here to get water."*

Jesus says, I'm not talking about what you think I am... this is more... this is better.

- Talking about full, real life.

The woman had been coming to the well day after day, getting the same old water that didn't satisfy or last.

Just like religion... doing the same thing over and over but never being fully satisfied, never finding what we really need.

We've all chased things to feel full... success, relationships, religion, control.

- We always end up back where we started: thirsty.
- Jesus knew that. And he offered something better.

He uses the woman's need for water to reveal a deeper thirst...

In offering her "living water," Jesus invited her to experience life beyond surface satisfaction.

- An internal overflow.
- A continual well of love, meaning, and connection.
- Eternal life- starting now and lasting forever
- Knowing and enjoying God every day

So the woman says, "Eternal life? Yeah, give me that water!"

She's starting to understand that maybe he's talking about something other than actual water.

Then... Jesus gets to her true need and the true failure of her religion...

He tells her... Go and get your husband.

- She says she doesn't have one.

Jesus tells her... you're right. You've had 5, and the man you're with now isn't your husband.

Which explains why she is at the well at that time...

- All the other women of the town would get their water in the morning when it was cool, socialize, laugh...
- And here she is... alone. In the heat. At noon.

B/c of how her life has shaped out, she is ostracized, judged.

- Trying to do the same thing over and over and getting the same results.
- The same hurts. The same failures.

This isn't just about scandal. It's about survival.

- Whether through death, divorce, or disgrace... she had become someone to avoid.
- Religion says: Avoid people like her.
- Jesus says: That's exactly who I came for."

Religion creates shame. Jesus replaces it with dignity.

What's beautiful here is how calm Jesus is about it.

- There's no rant, no lecture, no "clean yourself up."

She came to the well expecting silence. Or shame.

Instead, she found someone who spoke to her and gave her dignity.

- Jesus doesn't walk away. He leans in.
- And gently says, "You've been drinking from dry wells. Let me offer you something better."

Jesus doesn't want us stuck in the same cycle.

- He wants to help us identify the patterns that no longer serve us and gently invite us into something different... something filled with life and purpose.
- Jesus doesn't run from our mess... he offers to clean it.

But the woman needs a minute to catch up...

John 4:19-20 NLT "Sir," the woman said, "you must be a prophet. So tell me, why is it that you Jews insist that Jerusalem is the only place of worship, while we Samaritans claim it is here at Mount Gerizim, where our ancestors worshiped?"

Woman: Uh this is awkward... Let's change the subject...

- So obviously you're from God... tell me what's the right way to reach him?
- Our way or the Jewish way?... Which religion is right?
- Which rituals, motions, hoops, places are correct?

- Religion tells us that if we just find the right formula, we'll finally reach God.

Jesus doesn't just correct that idea... he shatters it.

- Like throwing a rock straight through the vending machine window.

John 4:21-24 *Jesus replied, "Believe me, dear woman, the time is coming when it will no longer matter whether you worship the Father on this mountain or in Jerusalem. You Samaritans know very little about the one you worship, while we Jews know all about him, for salvation comes through the Jews. But the time is coming—indeed it's here now—when true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth. The Father is looking for those who will worship him that way. For God is Spirit, so those who worship him must worship in spirit and in truth."*

The woman tries to change the subject and start a debate over where the right place of worship is.

- But Jesus doesn't take the bait.
- He gently says, "This isn't about places. It's about presence."

See, for centuries, religion told people where and how to approach God.

- It had become more about locations, rituals, and doing things "right" than actually knowing and loving God.
- But Jesus shuts down the debate with one beautiful sentence: It's not about where, it's about truth. It's not about ritual, it's about spirit.
- It's about connecting with God from the inside... authentically, honestly, and fully.

Religion has served its purpose... but now the real thing is here.

Jesus replaces religion with himself.

You will worship in Spirit: Meaning from within.

- Not inherited, not imitated, but alive and real... personal.
- An actual connection w/ God... relationship

You will worship in Truth: Not just facts about God... but the truth of who Jesus is... and who you really are in him.

- God is not a distant deity in need of constant groveling and bribing
- But a loving Father running to us with open arms and never giving up love.

God isn't looking for people who know a bunch of impressive verses or who always follow the right rules.

- He is looking for people who've dropped the act.
- People who come as they are... open, honest, and hungry for more.

After a lifetime of trying to earn God's attention/approval

- After being rejected over and over...

The woman doesn't know what to make of this.

- Her whole world is shaking... everything she thought God expected of her is falling apart.
- And in one breath... Jesus gives her everything she's been waiting for.

John 4:25 *The woman said, "I know the Messiah is coming—the one who is called Christ. When he comes, he will explain everything to us." Then Jesus told her, I AM the Messiah!"*

Think about it...

- The first person Jesus clearly revealed his identity to wasn't a priest, prophet, or powerful leader.
- It was this nameless, rejected woman who had almost given up on being seen.

After all the rejection, pain, and confusion... in that moment, she is the most important person on earth.

- God himself purposely and personally sought her out... and gave her his full, undivided attention.
- Why? B/c that's who he is!
- He knew she was ready and needed him.

We can't reach God through religion because he has already reached us through Jesus.

No checklist. No contract. No cleanup speech.

- Just presence. Just a person. Just love
- "You've been looking for WHAT you need. But the PERSON you need has just found you."

John 4:28-30 *The woman left her water jar beside the well [love the eyewitness detail] and ran back to the village, telling everyone, "Come and see a man who told me everything I ever did! Could he possibly be the Messiah?" So the people came streaming from the village to see him.*

She came to the well to get water... and she left her jar b/c she found something even better.

- She has found the true living water and can't wait to share it with anyone who will listen.

That's what happens when someone finally encounters Jesus...

- Not religion, not rules, not shame... but Jesus.

There's a big difference between believing in something and trusting someone.

- She didn't leave with theology.
- She left with Jesus.
- And that was enough to change everything.

Following Jesus is less about understanding every detail and more about saying, "If you're him... then I'm in."

YOU: Maybe you've tried religion.

- Pushed what you thought were all the right buttons, but still feel empty. It still seems pointless.
- You still feel unseen. Even rejected by others or even by God.

Listen... you are who Jesus came for.

- He has purposely and personally sought you out.
- He hasn't just accidentally wandered by...
- You didn't show up here by accident.
- He had to come to you.

And right now, he is offering you what you've been needing all along.

Not a program. Not rules. Not a better way of doing religion.

He is offering himself.

- A relationship where you can be confident you are known, loved, and enjoyed.

If you're ready to stop going through the motions and routine of a religion that never provides what it promises...

If you're ready to drop the mask and the performance...

Just tell him...

- Jesus, I'm tired. I'm thirsty. I just want you.
- I choose to trust you and follow you only.
- Make me yours now and forever.

And if you have accepted that life, either today or 50 years ago...

Here's my invitation:

Each morning this week...

- Remind yourself: I am seen, loved, and enjoyed.
- Ask yourself: Who around me needs to be seen, loved, and enjoyed?

WE: Listen, No matter where you are in your story...

- No matter what you've done, doubted, feared, or hoped...

Here's the truth Jesus showed us again and again:

- You're free to be real
- You're invited to be loved.
- You're not too late to be found.

Jesus didn't come to create better rule-followers.

- He came for wanderers.
- For skeptics.
- For the burned-out and bitter.
- For the curious and cautious.
- For you.

You don't need to promise him perfection.

- You just need to take the next step.
- And then the next.

If you've forgotten everything else in this series, but remember just one thing...

Let it be this...

- Jesus proved...Grace is inexhaustible. Love is undefeated. You are not disqualified.

Religion says earn it. Jesus says enjoy it.

Religion says perform. Jesus says come home.

You're seen. You're loved.

You're free to follow.