



The Fruit of the Gospel is Transformed Lives

Main Verse:

"In the same way, the gospel is bearing fruit and growing throughout the whole world—just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and truly understood God's grace."
(Colossians 1:6)

Main Point:

Many people believe we do good things for people because of our religion. But religion is just a set of beliefs formulated by humanity to explain their worship of a superhuman controlling power.

So, religion, in and of itself, is powerless to bring about any change in our lives.

From Amos to Jesus' story of the Good Samaritan, and Paul's letter to the believers at Colossae, we learn that only the Gospel of Jesus Christ has the power to transform our lives.

Intro |

When people come into our office to receive emergency relief support, I almost always offer to pray for them.

While it is normal for people to gladly accept the offer (after all, they think, what harm can a little old prayer do?), some quickly reply,

"Well, OK. But, I'm not religious!"

At which, I often like to respond, "Oh that's good, I'm not religious either!"

You'd be right in assuming a startled look usually surfaces on their face!

Religion really has a bad name in Australian society.

That is why many people, even if they do have a faith, checked that they were "spiritual, but not religious" in the census.

One person who checked that box was Jonathon Murphy. Although he was raised Catholic, he had developed his own eclectic mish mash of beliefs. He said,

*'As a yoga practitioner my spiritual practice is how I live my life—how I'm treating others, family, how I live my life towards the planet and being responsible for my actions. At the end of the day, self-reflecting and simply trying to be the best human being I can be. No religion can do that, we all have to reform ourselves.'*¹

¹ <https://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/religionandethicsreport/spiritual-but-not-religious-what-the-census-wont-say/7699694/>

Is he right?

Is that what religion is all about? – us reforming ourselves so we become the best version of ourselves we can be?

Many people believe so.

Religion is usually defined as a set of beliefs about formulated by humanity to explain their worship of a superhuman controlling power.

By that definition, religion originates from humanity – its humanity's efforts to understand and explain their beliefs about god.

So, if that definition is correct, Christianity can never be placed in a box labelled 'religion'!

Because, as Paul explained to the Galatians,

"I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel I preached is not of human origin. I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ. (Galatians 1:11)

So, we should not be discouraged when we learn that Australians are not too fond of religion.

Because as strange as it may be ... neither should we be!

In fact all of today's passages show that even God himself is not very fond of 'religion'.

It seems strange to our ears, doesn't it?

But, as we dive into what God had to say to his people in Amos day,

to what the Psalmist was praying,

to why Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan,

to what Paul was writing about to the believers at Colossae

– they all have the same theme:

Religion that originates from humanity's efforts to find god, may have a form of godliness but it is powerless to change the human heart. Human religion will never bear the fruit of righteousness and justice rooted in Christ's reign.

Point 1 | God's message through Amos was clear: Israel's prosperity made them indifferent to the needs of the poor and marginalised. God had come to despise their pretentious worship of him. Repentance was needed.

Let's start with God's message to his people, spoken through the prophet Amos.

The year is about 750 BC. God's people were divided into the north and the south regions. While King Uzziah reigned in the Southern region of Judah, King Jeroboam II was the northern kingdom of Israel.

At the time, Israel was very prosperous, and its leaders were very wealthy.

King Jeroboam had won lots of battles and acquired new territories for Israel. So he was regarded by the people as a successful military leader.

But! In the eyes of the prophets, he was one of the worst kings.

So, once again God, in His compassion, sent a prophet to warn the people of the judgement to come if they did not repent.

And who did God choose? An insignificant shepherd, who lived in a tiny town just south of Jerusalem, named Amos.

Despite not regarding himself as a professional prophet (???), Amos responded to God's call and left his small orchard of fig trees, to trek up north to Bethel.

Now Bethel was an important city and was known as the national centre of worship (7:13).

And boy did this non-descript shepherd have a confrontational message – and he wasn't backward in declaring it.

After specifically addressing all the surrounding nations, warning them of God's coming judgement, Amos focussed his lens on Israel, where Jeroboam II was King.

Amos accused Israel's leaders of no longer knowing how to do right, saying they made themselves rich through violence and robbery (3:10).

The rich, even the women, were indulging in wine and gluttony, all the while mistreating and abusing the poor and needy (4:1).

But what really made God angry was their religious arrogance.

While Israel faithfully attended their religious gatherings, giving offerings and sacrifices, they did so while neglecting the poor and ignoring injustices that was rampant in their communities (see 3:4, 6:8, 12).

In fact, Amos tells them, their ceremonies were pretentious, which made God actually hate their worship because it was totally disconnected from how they treated people (5:22).

What we learn from God's message through Amos is that our worship of God must spring forth from a real relationship with God. Only then will worship have the power to transform how we relate with others, especially the poor and vulnerable.

Well, boy did the King and his priests not like this nobody shepherd, from 'who-knows where', telling them that their worship meant nothing to God.

When the priest of Bethel, Amaziah, heard what Amos had to say, he told him, "Go home and don't bother us with your visions and prophecies." (7:12-13)

Through Amos, God had identified the poison that was killing Israel: affluence had led to apathy, which led to indifference toward the needs of others – so much so they had forgotten about how to live rightly before God (3:10).

So, what was God's plea to his people? "Come back to me and live" (5:4,6,14)

Before moving into the Gospel passage, it is worth noting that our Psalm today, number 82, makes the same plea for justice to reign on earth. It is a song declaring God's rulership over the unjust judges of the world.

Point 2 | The parable of the good Samaritan is a confrontation to the religious establishment tell them true worship of God must be expressed in upholding justice toward the poor and vulnerable.

When we turn to the Gospel reading, we find that Jesus was confronted by the same religious hypocrisy that Amos faced.

Israel's religious leaders still had not learnt from the judgement they had experienced years earlier.

They were still captive to a religion that had the appearance of piety, with pretentious ceremony, but it kept them enslaved to rule-keeping, where they puffed themselves up with self-righteousness, making them indifferent to the plight of the poor and weak - and none of this had the power to change them on the inside (John 8:34).

Israel had once again degenerated into a human religion without any genuine knowledge and relationship with God.

That was the context which led Jesus to tell the story of the good Samaritan.

Once again, the story centres on how God's love for us, prompts our love for him, and this love should govern how we treat others, especially the poor, weak and vulnerable.

There is one incident that clearly shows how Jesus viewed the religion developed by the Pharisees.

Do you remember when Jesus was hungry, he saw a fig tree in the distance that although it had plenty of leaves, it wasn't bearing any fruit.

In disappointment, Jesus cursed the tree and it withered from the roots (Mark 11:12-25). This little incident is a prophetic parable in which Jesus' was saying that Israel had become spiritually barren, they weren't producing any fruit.

They had the form of religion but there was no power to transform their hearts.

They knew the right words to say, but their hearts were far from God.

The Apostle Paul faced this problem again and again in the churches that he birthed. In fact, he told Timothy, his minister-in-training,

"But mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days. People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God—having a form of godliness but denying its power." (2 Timothy 1:1-5)

That is what religion is – it may have a form of godliness, but has no power to change the inner person.

So, what does have the power to change the inner person?

Point 3 | In Colossians Paul writes the good news of God's grace has the power to transform lives, bringing God's love to execute justice and righteousness in the earth.

We learn the answer in Paul's letter to the believers at Colossae.

In his opening remarks, Paul writes,

"This same Good News that came to you is going out all over the world. It is bearing fruit everywhere by changing lives, just as it changed your lives from the day you first heard and understood the truth about God's wonderful grace."(Colossians 1:6)

The good news of God's wonderful grace, given through Jesus Christ, and the gift of the Spirit of God into our heart, is where the power lies.

The fruit of the Gospel is the transformation that occurs in our lives.

It is the story of how God is changing us, bringing forth the fruit of the Spirit and God's character – and this is what transforms how we relate with others.

The way we live the good news of what Jesus is doing in our life is how we bring God's justice and righteousness into our neighbourhood.

Application |

So, although Mr Murphy the yoga practitioner, believes he can reform himself through self-reflection and self-discipline ...

The truth is it will require a work of God's Spirit for him to see that all he has done is created his own form of religion – one which does not have the power to change his inner turmoil.

And that is why I don't place my trust in religion.

The power at work in our lives is not religion.

It is NOT us trying to be the best version of ourselves we can be.

It is God's wonderful gift of grace, through Jesus Christ, that bears fruit in our lives – transforming us day by day, minute by minute, so we may be ministers of justice and righteousness in our community.