

WHEN OUR RELIGION BREAKS BAD (Matthew 26:57-68)

I never saw a single episode during its 5-season run from 2008 to 2013, but from what I know about the show, I can't in good conscience recommend it. Nevertheless, I find the story line to be captivating. It is about a mild-mannered school teacher who turns to a life of crime. The central character is a high school chemistry teacher. In the first episode of the first season, he learns that he has inoperable, terminal lung cancer.

In order to provide for his family, he uses his chemistry skills to make a huge amount of money by cooking crystal meth. It is clear that with each decision he makes, he takes himself deeper and deeper into the dark web of the criminal underworld. Eventually, this unlikely character, Walter White, becomes a drug kingpin who will kill people without remorse.

Vince Gilligan, the creator of this hugely popular TV series said one of the larger lessons of the show is, "actions have consequences." The show to which I refer was entitled, "Breaking Bad."

Walt White never woke up one morning and decided, "I am going to become a key player in the illegal drug industry." He did not turn a switch early on with the hope of becoming the worst version of himself as possible. Yet, he did turn from the light to the darkness, and the darkness not only enveloped him, it also invaded him.

With each choice to compromise what we believe is right and with each decision to do the wrong thing, we become less and less of who we once were. We become unrecognizable to those who once knew us.

It is not only possible for individuals to break bad; it is also possible for institutions and even cultures to break bad. Sixty-years ago, fifty-years ago, who would have thought our country would become what it has become, that we would embrace what we once shunned and that we would shun what we once embraced? I think I could make a very good case for the argument that the United States had broken bad. It is certainly not the America into which I was born.

Sadly, it is also possible for religion to break bad. Who would have ever thought that the Roman Catholic Pope would endorse same-sex, civil unions? Who would have thought that mainline, Protestant denominations would ordain practicing homosexuals and lesbians as ministers of the gospel?

Religion breaking bad, however, is not exactly new. It has happened repeatedly through the centuries. I find it at work in today's text—Matthew 26:57-68. It serves as a warning to you and me to carefully guard what God has entrusted to us. To that end, we are going to look at what happens when religion breaks bad.

When Our Religion Breaks Bad, We Misuse Our Power

In today's passage, Jesus stood before the Sanhedrin, the highest court in the Jewish faith. It was led by Caiaphas, the High Priest. Without a doubt, that deliberative body was

guilty of abuse of power. They knowingly ignored their own policies in order to convict Jesus of trumped up charges so that they could convict him of a capital offense.

This body of seventy-one men, led by the High Priest, was composed of the leading Pharisees and Sadducees of the day. This august body did a number of things that were contrary to their own rules that were meant to safeguard justice.

1. They conducted this trial by night.
2. The trial was held somewhere other than the officially prescribed place.
3. They convicted the accused on the basis of His own testimony.
4. The accused was not given or allowed representation.
5. No witnesses were called to speak for the accused.
6. The conviction and sentence were made the same day as the trial.
7. The sentence was carried out on a feast day.

It is abundantly clear that a miscarriage of justice was taking place. At the beginning of the trial, the court had already decided the verdict—guilty, and that the sentence—death. The only thing left to decide was what the charges would be. Look at vv. 59-60.

They finally found two people who claimed that Jesus said He was going to destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days. Jesus could have said, “I never said that,” because they were misquoting Jesus. He said in John 2:19, “Destroy the temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” He never said that He would destroy it.

Jesus chose not to respond. The trial wasn’t going as well as Caiaphas hoped. He was getting frustrated. Finally, he demanded that Jesus answer the question as to whether or not He was the Christ, the Son of God.

When Jesus says, “You have said so,” He is using a Hebrew idiom. It means, “Yes, but that is not how I would put it” or “Yes, but I don’t mean by it what you mean.” His concept of the Messiah and theirs was much different. Their view of what it means to be the Son of God was not what Jesus knew it to mean. Jesus was not a second god. He and His Father were One. Regardless, Jesus was accused of blasphemy. Now, they had a charge, and a person guilty of blasphemy could be put to death according to their law.

The only problem was that the Roman government did not allow the Jews to put a person to death, and the Roman government was not going to carry out the death penalty over some Jewish religious notion of what blasphemy means. They accused Jesus of other things, such as calling Himself a King and being a trouble maker.

This past week I called the Emmanuel Enid church office. I knew that their pastor, Wade Burleson, had written a couple of books that I don’t have, and those two books address the subject of religious people abusing their power. I told the secretary the names of the two books and asked if the church had those books in their library. She said she would get back to me. The next day, she called me back and said that the church does not have those two books in their library, but that Pastor Wade was gifting those two books to me, and they were in the church office waiting for me to pick them up.

The first book is an autobiographical account of what happened when Wade served on the board of trustees for the International Mission Board of the SBC. The title of his book is *Hardball Religion*. Wade recounted what took place when he dared to disagree and

oppose the leadership of that trustee board. These guys weren't playing softball. They were throwing 95 mph fastballs right at Wade trying to scare him to get him to back down.

Wade was my pastor before I became your pastor. He officiated the marriage between Ruth Ann and myself. I know two things about Wade. First, he is a kind, considerate, gracious person. Second, he is a man of conviction who is not going to vacillate, cave, or surrender to those who oppose what he believes to be right.

As a life-long Baptist who was licensed to gospel ministry by a Baptist church when I was 18 years-old and who has pastored five Southern Baptist churches, I have to say that I was ashamed and disgusted to read how those Baptist men acted toward Wade because he stood up for what he believed to be right. Those men misused their power. Like the men in our story, they ignored their own by-laws and policies to get their way.

It is sad to say, but some of the meanest people I have met have been Christians or at least they claimed to be Christians. They were members of churches, but if you stood in their way, if you opposed something they supported or if you supported something they opposed, they would run over you and not look back.

The second book Wade graciously gave me is entitled, *Fraudulent Authority*. The subtitle is: *Pastors Who Seek to Rule Over Others*. I have not yet had time to read that book, but I know what it's about. Like Wade, I take issue with pastors who attempt to be your conscience. I know pastors who tell the members of the church what they can wear and not wear to church. I am not your wardrobe consultant. I don't care what you wear as long as you wear something. Some pastors tell their people how they can wear their hair. That is none of my business. I'm not going to knock on your door, ask to visit your kitchen, and open your refrigerator to inspect its contents. I'm not going to follow you on Friday night to see where you go. I'm not even going to tell you what to believe.

I am going to preach the Bible and tell you what I believe. I am going to pray for you and ask the Holy Spirit to be your Teacher because Jesus promised that the Spirit would lead you into all truth.

Baptists have always believed in what is called "the priesthood of the believer." You are your own priest. That means, I am not your priest. I don't stand between you and God. You have direct access to Father through Jesus who is God. You and God can work things out. You don't need my blessing or my approval. It is okay if you and I disagree on some things.

There is a difference between uniformity and unity. A pastor or anybody else is misusing and abusing his or her power when that person insists that you believe and act just the way he or she believes and acts. We can be united without being uniform because unity is a work of the Spirit; it is not adherence to the demands of a person due to his position of power.

There is a second thing I glean from this passage:

When Our Religion Breaks Bad, We Misjudge Who Jesus Is

Who did the religious establishment believe Jesus was? He was a nuisance. He was a

threat. He was an impediment between them and their control over others. He needed to be silenced, permanently. He needed to be dealt with once and for all. He needed to be discredited and discarded. Look back at Matthew 26:3-5. The leadership of the Sanhedrin met in secret, and they plotted amongst themselves as to how to kill Jesus. That was their goal.

The Pharisees asked Jesus who He was. Are you the Christ? Are you the Son of God? They didn't believe He was, but if they could get Jesus to admit He thought that was who He was, they could accuse Him of blasphemy.

Instead of using their terminology, Jesus turned to the OT to reveal His true identity. Look at Daniel 7:13-14. Jesus claimed to be this Son of Man to whom God would give complete control and the One, true Kingdom.

Notice the "clouds of heaven" line in v. 13. The point of this verse is not that Jesus is given the Kingdom when He comes back from heaven. He was given the Kingdom when He arrived in heaven.

Some say, "The most pivotal event of history was when Jesus died on the cross. Others say, "No, the most momentous event of history was when Jesus rose from the grave." I say, "No, the most history changing event of all was when Jesus ascended back to the Father because that was when He was given the Kingdom." Do you remember what Jesus said in the last verses of Matthew just before He was carried to heaven on the clouds of the sky? Look at Matthew 28:18, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me."

At the beginning of His ministry, Satan tempted Jesus. He said, "Just bow to me, and I will give you all the kingdoms of the world."

Jesus said, "No deal." He trusted His Father, did what He said, and the end of His ministry, God gave Him all authority in heaven and on earth.

God will always give you a better deal than Satan will. You just may have to wait awhile. You will experience hardship along the way, but it will be more than worth it.

The most important knowledge in the world is the knowledge of who Jesus really is. When religion breaks bad, it gets that wrong. It may view Jesus as a means to an end. Bad religion wants to use Jesus to accomplish what it wants. Jesus doesn't want to be part of your formula for success.

Jesus is the ultimate end. It is all about Him. Do you know the real Jesus?

Listen to what C. S. Lewis wrote in his book, *Mere Christianity*? He claimed:

I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: "I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept His claim to be God." That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us

not come with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.

That means, there are only three possibilities as to who Jesus was. Jesus was either a liar, a lunatic, or the Lord. Those are the only options we have concerning who Jesus really was or is.

Some years ago, Max Lucado wrote a book entitled, *It's Not About Me*. Toward the end of the book, he reminds his reader of 2 Corinthians 5:20 which says, "We are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making an appeal through us." He went on to explain:

The ambassador has a singular aim—to represent His king. He promotes the king's agenda, protects the king's reputation, and presents the king's will. The ambassador elevates the name of the king.

May I close this book with a prayer that we do the same? May God rescue us from self-centered thinking. May we have no higher goal than to see someone think more highly of our Father, our King.

God has called you and me to be ambassadors of Jesus. If you are being an ambassador for something or someone other than Jesus, you have taken a demotion.

When Our Religion Breaks Bad, We Mistreat the Body of Christ

The Sanhedrin, that respectable body that existed to render just verdicts loses all sense of self-respect and self-restraint. They pervert justice and begin to mistreat their prisoner. Look at vv. 67-68.

Forty days after Jesus' resurrection, He ascended back to His Father, and while He is not with us physically, He is most certainly with us, among us, and even in us.

The NT teaches that Jesus is the Head, and the Church is His body in this world. There are those outside the Church who are enemies of Jesus. They seek to oppose Him by opposing His Church. They attack Jesus by attacking His Church. In our text, the body of Christ was physically mistreated, and in our world the spiritual body of Christ is being mistreated and persecuted.

Often, this mistreatment comes from religions that have broken bad. It may sound strange coming from a pastor, but I am no fan of religion. All across our world, wars have been fought, people have been killed, and suffering has been inflicted in the name of religion.

One of the most used phrases in the NT is "one another." The NT contains no less than 35 one another commands. It teaches us:

to **love** another,
to **pray** for one another,
to **forgive** one another,
to **encourage** one another,
to **greet** one another,

to **honor** one another,
to **comfort** one another,
to **live** in harmony with one another,
to **rejoice** with one another,
to **serve** one another,
and on and on.

Pastor Ray Ortlund says we need remember the *one another's* that aren't in Scripture, and we need to avoid these: **humble** one another, **scrutinize** one another, **pressure** one another, **embarrass** one another, **corner** one another, **defeat** one another, **interrupt** one another, **sacrifice** one another, **shame** one another, **judge** one another, **run** one another's lives, **confess** one another's sins, **intensify** one another's sufferings, **point out** one another's failings. Those aren't in Scripture; so, don't do them.

The health of any church is rightly gauged by how well the people of that church follow the *one another's* of the Bible and how well they avoid the *one another's* that aren't in Scripture.

If a broken bone is not healing properly, the doctor has to break the bone again and re-set it so that the bone will heal properly.

All of us are broken people, and on our own, we are not going to heal as we should. Our need is to come before the Great Physician and let Him break us so that He can truly heal us. We are all fallen creatures; we have broken badly. Let Jesus break your willfulness and your waywardness, so that He can heal you, and display you, and use you for His glory.