

My brothers and sisters in Christ, let us pray. Lord, may the words of my mouth and meditation of all of our hearts always be acceptable in your sight, our strength and our redeemer, Amen.

We have a problem in America, with folks who are Spiritual but not religious. It's like saying that because I have a soccer ball I know how to play soccer. I don't. Or for the older crowd, if I own a deck of cards and I know how to play bridge (I never did master Blackwood bidding and I always bid one trick too many and many tricks too few). Now I love the companionship of a card party and night out or a scrum on the soccer field (oh, right, that's rugby). OK, but I know the basic rules of bridge, or soccer. I'm willing to try, and yet I'm unwilling to ever improve or practice at it. And every year I'm one year older and the odds of my improving seem to slip with each January 1. Aging gracefully hurts. But wait....

Let's take those habits forward into our church sphere. What if we are spiritual but not religious? What happens to our Spirits if we don't practice? And what are we supposed to do to practice? What are the rules of faithfulness? Do know about Blackwood bidding?

We own a Bible. But do we use it, or even know how? It gets mighty muddled mighty quickly, doesn't it, when we fall out of practice and become spiritual but not religious. We can also get pretty confused pretty quickly about what is holy good ways of living and what is the world's ways of dividing our hearts and community into a "who deserves it" framework and away from Jesus and God's messages of love, compassion, mercy and justice.

Don't believe me? OK, let's have a little fun and take a pop quiz. Five questions of whether it's in the Bible or it's not in the Bible. Ready?

1. "If you're good, my children, you'll live forever."  
Is it in the Bible? No, but Grand Funk Railroad made it a hit in the 1971 song "I Can Feel Him".
2. "Above all, maintain constant love for one another, for love covers a multitude of sins".  
Yes, 1 Peter 4:8.
3. "Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it". Yup, Proverbs 4:23.
4. "God helps those who help themselves." No, but it sounds biblical, huh? It's Ben Franklin.

5. "He that can have patience can have what he will." Nope. Ben Franklin again.
6. "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you". Is it in the Bible? Luke 6:31, yes.

All this stuff sounds soooooo wise and wonderful. But we have to remember, if it doesn't have love at its heart, it's probably not Biblical, however well it may describe the human condition. That's part of the problem with being spiritual but not religious.

We can buy into things that seem to make sense for our lives but which, doing them for any length of time, might leave us longing for more. I think I heard this when I was in my California life and in my 20s, and was at a company party where were talking about whether or not we needed religion. It was at a party and we were laughing about our church experiences and he said to me, "I'm an atheist. But I miss God". What did that mean?

He missed the joy. He missed the peace of heart. He missed the love. He missed the sense of belonging beyond his own self and self-interest. He missed the connection to the world and its contents and creation.

At the time we laughed and moved the conversation to another place. But my 50-year old self would reach out a hand on his shoulder and invite him to try again, to come to church, and find out the difference between being spiritual and being religious.

The lost sheep are all around us. We encounter folks who want more from life but lash out on facebook when things go wrong, and boast about their latest great things with selfies on Snapchat. And there's big-time currency in doing that, it's called "Confirmation bias". We want folks to affirm what we're saying about what's happening to us in order to feel better about our lives, even if it is self-inflicted injury or doing unto others stuff we would never say in real life but somehow feel safe saying online. We want the world to feel safe again. But we won't get there by trying to create a bubble in which we withdraw from the world. And we can't buy another copy of "Chicken Soup for the....[fill in the blank]" or look at pithy sayings on refrigerator magnets to sustain us day to day. We need a fresh start sometimes to our day and Spirit. So maybe starting again means stopping and letting go. Maybe it means remembering what God promises.

God gives us purpose because God lives with us in relationship and promises to always be with us and never leave us. But what are other the promises of God? What does the Bible say? Don't worry this isn't another quiz.

But let's think about these. Talk about them with your friends and family. And let's begin to apply them as we move through this fall's "Love Your Neighbor, no Exceptions" focus.

1. Hope depends solely on God and God's faithful freedom. Not our ideologies, deep biases, projects, wants. Only God, who won't quit us no matter what.
2. It is unthinkable God would create a world marked by injustice, brutality, alienation, or violence. But there are plenty of examples, and that's boo on us for not paying attention to God's intentions of love for the world so lovingly created and for us to steward.
3. God's promises don't depend on optimism of the moment; they promise the future despite the present circumstance, and put our trust in that hope.
4. God promises more than supposed generic religion of thoughts and prayers with a heaven of "souls" in

some unspeakably happy future heaven but present hell on earth. **Our God promises common concern for the good of all in the community**, including disinherited, brokenhearted and poor as having security and viability **right here, right now, in this holy place with these holy people. This TCC Kingdom.**

5. God fulfills promises both directly and indirectly in human agency, calling us to love one another as we would love ourselves and act accordingly. In love.
6. God promises hope and faith are for those things not yet seen. Our world doesn't look like the Kingdom. But neither did it to Moses under Pharaoh, or Jesus under the Romans, or Samuel under the Philistines. But as those empires passed, so too shall despotic leaders of our time pass; they shall not stand and a new day, if we hold fast, can come to pass. We are, after all, the 99%, the sheep currently in the flock.
7. Hope in God's promises is a resolve to live in God's future **as if it is already here**. We don't exclude folks based on their race, religion, nationality, disability, or sexual orientation or identification. But we do refuse to be part of politics or religion that does. God's promises of hope are dangerous and

inconvenient and are a hard road to bear. But God doesn't say it'll be easy. God DOES say I'll be with you always. And so we commit to enact generosity and forbearance for the world to come, not the world that is.

8. A world out of sync is despairing and exhausting. God's promises of hope require us to lean on each other for strength. And so we choose to be emancipated to the alternative promise of God to live in long-term relationship with each other, not alienation. We refuse to reduce our neighbors to less than being one of us, a brother or sister in Christ. Our lived and alive hope is a refusal of resignation because we know about God's new start. That's called the Resurrection, by the way. God's promise of hope is our ground and basis for courage, freedom and joy, not a present world of imagined or governing by fear. Perfect love casts out fear.

So we've again arrived, haven't we friends... "Pastor Maaark....where are you going with all of this??" Let's remember where we started. We need to focus our faith and remember that a lot of times we need to be more

than just “spiritual but not religious”. We need to remember and practice God’s promises and what they mean for our lives. To talk to each other about our lives and not blame God, but thank God for what we have each day. The promises that are to come, but that are also right here, right now, among us, in this place.

And then let the Holy Spirit do its work.

So being a church-going Christian is tough. The world does not understand us being so religious and spiritual. There are a lot of bad things we are told about churches. But we are not told about the good stuff, good news just doesn’t sell papers. Somehow, despite what we tell ourselves, we would rather read about fear than hope.

Now, the #1 problem in the US and UK today is social isolation. It’s a problem because most folks think that texting and face-booking substitutes for relationships. But a pithy one-liner is no substitute for voice contact. The world needs us more than ever, the world needs our relationship voice and hope and promises of God to take not a nuanced view of the future, but a realized view of here and now. We have what it takes to fix this in Townsend. It takes us inviting more people into what we



know—not Benjamin Franklin’s pithy sayings, but God’s love. God’s promises. God’s present as we experience it.

I’ll leave you with these final thoughts. I’d like us to challenge ourselves to do something by next week when we start our sermon series. Invite someone who you know who was here and drifted away back to Church. Or someone you know who hasn’t been here, but it seems life’s always swimming upstream and still losing ground against the current. We know when we connect to God our lives improve; we need to tell others. And do it now.

Why would we not want that for the lost sheep of Townsend? Or if we cannot do this, are we indeed the ones who are too spiritual, disbelieving the promises, and maybe we indeed are the sheep in need of saving? The choice is ours, each day, in how we live our lives.

Thanks be to God, Amen.