



Webs Not Walls

Week 2: A Shift in Understanding

Brian Mattson - 08/23/2026

Last Sunday, instead of a regular sermon, we had a short panel discussion with three people from our congregation—Cristy Baldwin, Bethany Lemmon, and Scott Sturm. All of them had different faith backgrounds, different journeys, and are at different stages of life. We chatted for a few minutes about the ways they've rethought and reshaped their faith in meaningful ways. Ways that involved questions, doubts, and a little disgust. Not any sort of repulsiveness of God, but rather of the actions from fellow Christians, or perhaps the Church at large.

I've heard countless stories of people questioning God or a life of faith because of the words and actions of the people in the pews. Things that were said or promoted felt more like judgment and shame, rather than what we read about the things Jesus said and did. Maybe it wasn't necessarily overt or out in the open from the pulpit, but there was underlying current that basically said: *if you don't agree with us, you can't be one of us*. Basically, here's where we are on the issues, the doctrine, the interpretation, and if you can't see it the same way, find somewhere else to follow Jesus. So a lot of people do just that. They walk away. Some completely. Pete Enns, a scholar and theologian, recounts a similar experience in his book, *Curveball*.

The primary value of the [community] I was a part of for many years was its claim to hold to orthodox beliefs about God. And

since orthodoxy was the primary value of that community, treating others harshly for failing to be orthodox was not only tolerated but valued because doing so was in the service of protecting orthodoxy. During those years, I would come to see some friends leave that community and others leave the faith entirely; what kick-started that process was the community's harsh, unyielding, unmerciful, unjust treatment of them. As for myself, after I left, it did not take long for me to experience a great distance from God, to the point that I seriously doubted God's existence for some time.

- Pete Enns

I don't necessarily think people in the church are trying to be mean or unmerciful. I think it rather comes from a place of anxiety, fear, and maybe even protecting orthodoxy. I'm not totally sure that was Jesus' most important teaching, but maybe I missed that. Either way, many times it comes across as those adjectives Pete Enns used.

I've had my own experience with people in the church. Even some of my former colleagues from years ago. I don't recall being treated unmercifully or unjustly, but I definitely remember the feelings. My opinions and beliefs varied from others—my understandings of God and the cosmos were too wide, and my interpretations of God's mercy were too broad—and the differences between our beliefs meant to them that I just didn't take the Bible or my faith seriously. Some of my views were a little too radical, which I found astonishing from these people who follow Jesus, and regularly called him the most radical person of all time. My faith was already shifting in that stage of life, but the feeling that something was off started long before that.

Like many of you, I was raised in the church. We were pretty regular attenders, even if we did complain about it to my parents. I was mostly upset that I had to miss the first 15 minutes of the X-Men cartoon because we got home at 10:45am most Sundays. What a bummer! I learned the Bible stories

about the heroes of the faith—Noah, Abraham, and David—when I was little. We learned about the Ten Commandments and Moses and Joshua. We were told “be like them” by our Sunday School teachers. *Okay*, we thought. Most of it was basically do the right thing and God won’t be mad and you’ll go to heaven. At least that was my general recollection. I assumed I was on the right track. I very much doubted I would ever consider murder outside of my siblings, or stealing, or making graven images, whatever those were. Honoring my parents was a work in progress, but surely mercy and forgiveness were baked into this whole faith thing.

As I got older and joined the youth group, there were bigger questions and more complicated issues. Relationships were trickier and honoring my parents was harder. Still, I tried to do the right thing most of the time. Somewhere subconsciously was the implication that if I did the right thing, God would approve of me. I didn’t party. I didn’t cuss. I followed the rules. These were the things we were supposed to do to be considered good little Christians, and that’s what God wanted. We held to the morals given to us by our parents and teachers so we could feel good about ourselves. Obedience to God was paramount, and when you obey it can feel like you are passing the test.

This was the norm for decades of Christian education. The author of the book, *Woven*, we are using as a resource writes this about a landmark 2009 study on religion and faith:

“One of the key findings was that the faith of many Americans can be summarized with a three-word term: moralistic therapeutic deism. Their faith was moralistic—religion is meant to make me feel better. And it was deistic—God is basically far away, but might make an appearance now and then when I need help.”

- Meredith Miller

You may have never used that term, but I bet a lot of you resonate with that sentiment. Is that how God and faith were presented to you as a child, or maybe even as an adult? The idea that following the rules is what matters, staying true to orthodoxy the goal. It would seem, in a deeper dive about the point Jesus was making, that the things he tasked us with were more about knowing God and trusting God. Obedience was part of the whole thing, sure, but trust comes first. That's how it normally works in all of our relationships. Meredith Miller says this about kids, but it could be true for teens, adults, or even people new to the faith:

When it comes to our kids, we have to be clear: It's backward to ask a child to obey a God they do not know.

- Meredith Miller

If we stepped out of our religious box and used this as an example in the real world, we would call that naivete. *I read this thing on the internet and did everything it told me to.* We don't do that in our day to day lives. Well, not more than once anyway. We follow the recommendations from people we trust, people we have a relationship with.

The cracks of this kind of faith—moralistic therapeutic deism—started showing themselves in my early 20s. I remember coming back from college one weekend and hanging out with a bunch of my old church friends. It was a fun time, but a feeling kept welling up inside me and my thoughts were racing. They were a little more flexible with the “rules” I was used to. And just to be clear, this was not a *them* problem. It was a *me* problem.

I was judging them based on *my* morals and expectations. I created a box of what Christians were supposed to look, act, and sound like, and these people didn't stay inside. But there is no orthodoxy in how God loves people. God loves us all. Grace is more generous than orthodoxy. I kept feeling like I was being a better Christian than them, so why didn't I feel more sure about how God felt about me?

Assurance is a tough task in a life of faith. We love to feel sure of ourselves—our actions, thoughts, decisions... eternity. I, and probably many of you, wrestled with what exactly assurance is supposed to look and feel like. It doesn't boil down to checking some boxes, saying magic words, and drawing inside the lines. It's not a list of don't-dos. Rather, I believe, it's rooted more in identity and relationship. But to attain that kind of assurance, for me, things needed to bend and break.

It was a long process, maybe a decade, where my reading, listening, watching, and learning expanded my perspective. Surprisingly, some of it was fueled by astrophysicist Neil deGrasse Tyson, and the show *Cosmos: A Spacetime Odyssey*. As odd as that sounds, I had to rethink my understanding of creation to have a better grasp on how big and incomprehensible God is. And in the vastness of God, the bewildering paradox of an infinite universe, I didn't end up planting my feet on wobbly ground. Instead, I found a closeness in a relationship grounded in love. That's what brought a faraway God close to me. In the unknown of life, I found security in what I could know, or rather do.

Unsurprisingly, around this time, I was also challenged and renewed by scripture. I read a short passage where Jesus is confronted with a challenge, a trap. I wasn't astonished by its complexity, but rather its simplicity. By this point in his ministry, he had arrived in Jerusalem and was being regularly probed and questioned by religious authorities. The Pharisees tried to trip him up, but Jesus overcame their traps. Then the Sadducees tried with much the same effect. Again, the Pharisees and their lawyers—who were concerned with meticulously following the Torah laws, creating rules and regulations on daily life—attempted to best Jesus.

When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, an expert in the law, asked him a question to test him. "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" He said to him, " 'You shall love the

Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.”

- Matthew 22:34-40

I’m sure I’d heard this section of scripture before, but something clicked inside. It was almost as if Jesus was saying to me what he was trying to imply to the law makers of his day. A life of faith is not about obedience and rule following. It’s not about what you don’t do, it’s about what you are doing. Love isn’t defined by rules. Instead it’s marked by rule-breaking. Mercy, compassion, and justice. These things—some of the defining characteristics of God—are made more abundant when we actually put them into practice.

This is what was so radical about Jesus. The religious elites in that time had created more lists and rules about what not to do. So Jesus went around breaking those rules. In Matthew 8, he broke purity laws by touching and healing unclean men and women who came to him in need, offering compassion instead of condemnation. In John 7, he stepped in front of angry leaders who were ready to persecute a woman found in adultery, and rather showed mercy. In John 5, he healed a man on the sabbath extending freedom instead of bondage, proclaiming, “My Father is still working, and I also am working.”

Jesus was showing the people of his time and us today that faith is not a bunch of rules to follow, it’s an embodiment of love in action. Loving God and neighbors *is* following the rules. The apostle Paul continues this exact idea in his letters:

Owe no one anything, except to love one another, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.

- Romans 13:8

The conundrum we face when we read about Jesus and hear words like this from Paul, is trying to understand how many of us ended up with a faith that was more concerned with following the rules rather than being curious about God's love. Somehow we boiled the Bible down to a rule book. Here's Meredith Miller again:

"We end up using the Bible as if it were a morality-producing manual, instead of the story that reveals who God is... teaching kids to *be* good rather than helping get to know the God who *is* good."

- Meredith Miller

Because we believe, at the very core of Christianity, that God is good. That God loves us and showed us what that looks like through Jesus. It's to be our defining characteristic. Not our purity, conformity, or obedience. No, it's our faithfulness to fulfilling Jesus' greatest commandment—personifying God's love. And by doing just that—loving God and one another—we have assurance. Jesus colored outside the lines, but we are often afraid to follow. Fear is a great motivator... but love is the great liberator, unleashing torrents of God's love, justice, mercy, and compassion. And by doing these things, we will naturally refrain from that list of don't-dos.

Our spiritual community is made up of so many people with so many stories. We've all come to experience God differently, which is a good thing. Our individuality in understanding God's love and our role in extending it into the world is much more important than finding common ground in our compliance to the "rules" or doctrine. Pete Enns explains it this way:

"What binds a spiritual community together isn't (or at least shouldn't be) homogeny of race, ethnicity, economic status, or geography. It's not even the beliefs and traditions that distinguish that community from theirs—and it is certainly not the personal fallout of the knock-down-drag-out fights that happen over

orthodoxy. As I see it, what binds a spiritual community together is love, because God is love, and love in community is how we experience God in our day-to-day lives.”

- Pete Enns

Our goal, as a community, is not to create good little boys and girls who follow our understanding of the rules, so to speak. It's to give life to the love we see in Jesus. And if the faith you were handed as a kid or adult was more akin to moral therapeutic deism, consider this series permission to explore God's love more intimately. See how embracing those attributes about God we all cherish—love, justice, mercy—are how we truly fulfill the law. Our faithfulness and trust in those characteristics of God are much more important than obedience.

Give yourself some grace though. My paradigm shift from an obedience-based faith to a trust-based faith took time. Maybe even a decade. But the journey is worth it. The work is hard, but look around, other people are here to do it with you. And if the amount of head nods I saw last week as our panel recounted their own faith journeys, many of you are ready to build and share a faith that is resilient, open, and flexible, rather than one that is rigid, unmoving, and exclusionary.