

The spiritual peril of rejecting Christ

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[0:00] through verses 43 down to the end of verse 50. But I thought it would be helpful just to start with some review and just to think about where we've got to in the narrative.

If you recall a couple of weeks ago, Dan preached here in the evening. And we've come in at a time in the narrative where there's quite an extensive discourse going on between the Pharisees and Jesus.

And what we're seeing is building and mounting opposition. If you look back just to verses 22 onwards, you'll recall that the Pharisees, they were attacking Jesus.

It was a full, full-on, all-out attack on Jesus. They were accusing him of being in league with Beelzebul, which means Satan, the devil.

And this was following and healing a demon-oppressed man who was blind and mute. So here we've got this very direct, full-on building, mounting opposition from the religious establishment, the Pharisees and the scribes.

[1:30] And ultimately, it's concerning the identity of Christ.

Ultimately, it concerns who Jesus is and what his mission is.

The verses that Dan preached on a couple of weeks ago that lead on to this section that I'll be preaching on. We see the Pharisees.

They're changing their tactic now. What they've done, they're going for a more subtle approach.

They're showing something about their lack of repentance.

They're showing something about their superficiality. They're showing a false interest in Christ. You see, they're demanding a sign despite all that Christ has done.

And we see here the utter arrogance. We see here the unbelief and we see the insincerity of the Pharisees. It's a kind of feigned interest in Christ.

[2:33] They're pretending that they really want to see a miracle. But their hearts are just totally out of order. And as Dan pointed out, we have a picture of the unrepentant heart.

A false interest in Christ. This is the context that we're coming into. Now, it's interesting as well. What they were doing, they were placing conditions upon Jesus.

They were expecting him to perform a sign or perform a miracle. A bit like a performing artist or a kind of conjurer at a children's party. But Jesus, he's not going to play their game.

He's not going to provide this miracle at their request, at their behest. These scribes and Pharisees, we see the utter arrogance that they come to the Son of God.

The promised Messiah. And they're placing conditions and demands upon him. Now, we thought about a couple of weeks ago how we can put conditions on Jesus.

[3:43] How often do we, or how often do people, they come to church and they say, well, I'll give my life to Jesus if only he will do this, fill in the blank. If he will heal me, or if he'll make this church more dynamic or bigger or whatever it is.

Placing conditions on Christ. The first verses 41 and 42, they speak very clearly about the identity of Jesus. He's speaking as the long-awaited and promised Messiah.

And he says something greater than Jonah is here. Something greater than Solomon is here. This is astounding if you think of the context he's speaking into.

And he compares the religious establishment, the Pharisees and the scribes, unfavourably to the pagan Ninevites. They repented at Jonah's preaching.

And he compares them unfavourably to the Queen of Sheba, the Queen of the South, who sought Solomon on very limited information. Now this was a serious indictment of the Pharisees, a serious judgment.

[4:50] And they would have been deeply offended by these claims. They wanted more miracles, but Jesus says to them, the only sign I will give you is the sign of my death and my resurrection.

So here we see the unrepentance, the building contempt, and the rejection of the Pharisees towards Christ.

And as we come to these passages before us, I want us to consider them under two main points.

Two points I've got. Firstly, the empty religion of an evil generation.

The empty religion of an evil generation. And secondly, the identity of Jesus' true family. So my first point, the empty religion of an evil generation.

Now we come to this text, and at first glance, it's strange that Jesus is speaking of casting out demons and demon possession at this stage of the narrative.

[5:56] It seems to be in an odd, a bit of a peculiar place. And we may ask ourselves, why does Jesus speak of exorcism, casting out demons and demon possession now?

What's this about? Is he wanting to teach us mysteries about the spirit world, about angels and demons and the way unclean spirits operate in light of the miracle he performed in verse 22, if you recall, the miracle that he performed before?

Rather, what Jesus is doing, he's giving us a parable. This is a parable to show us the spiritual truth about the condition, the spiritual condition, of the Pharisees and the scribes and unbelieving Israel, which in my version says this evil generation, wicked generation in the NIV.

Remember, the Pharisees and scribes, they were the religious elite. They were the spiritual pulse beat of Israel. It would appear from verse 27 that the disciples of the Pharisees, they were attempting to cast out demons themselves.

And Jesus is challenging them by giving this parable of a, it's a failed exorcism. It's incomplete, it's superficial. Now, this speaks firstly of the spiritual condition of that generation of unbelieving Israel.

[7:24] But it also speaks to us as a warning. This parable speaks to a, this points to a deeper spiritual reality.

It speaks to the danger of religion without inward renewal. The danger of religion without true heart change.

Empty religion that is devoid of the indwelling power of Christ. As we look at verse 43, we see that this unclean spirit or evil spirit has gone out of a person and then passes through waterless places seeking rest but finds none.

Rather than getting bogged down in the details of this, and I've looked at a few commentaries and not entirely sure what the waterless places mean, but I think what this conveys is the utter miserableness, the utter restlessness and the destructiveness of Satan and demons and the need to possess and destroy.

We see this in other parts of the scriptures. You don't need to turn there, but for example, Job 1.

The Lord said to Satan, from where have you come? Satan answered the Lord and said, from going to and fro on the earth and from walking up and down on it.

[8:49] We get the sense of restlessness, roaming. In the Gospels, a story many of us are familiar with, the gathering demoniac, the unclean spirits, they leave that poor man and they beg to be sent in the pigs.

They have to inhabit. They have to dwell. They have to destroy. 1 Peter 5, 8. Be sober-minded. Be watchful. Your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion seeking someone to devour, prowling around, restless.

Now in verse 44, the unclean spirit returns to the previously inhabited house. And do you notice it says, I will return to my house.

My house. The soul is his house. And I think house here, in its first original intent, means the corporate house of Israel.

We're thinking corporately, we're thinking of a nation. But I think this can also mean an individual soul. I think we can apply this to individually as well.

[10:03] If you look at verse 45, he speaks of the state of that person. He's speaking of the empty, swept up, well-ordered religion of that generation in Israel.

The word empty is in my version. I'm not sure if it's in the NIV, but kind of conveys the religion of that time. Now he's addressing the scribes and the Pharisees that we see in verse 39.

Because you recall, he says, then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered him, saying, Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you. But he answered them, an evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign.

But he's addressing those broader than just the scribes and Pharisees, I think. It's the unbelieving, the hypocritical in Israel. Now you may ask, in what way did Israel have an unclean spirit come out of them?

How's this relevant? It doesn't quite make sense to us. Now, commentators have slightly differing views. Yet I think the old commentators are right when they speak of Israel's privileged history.

[11:20] You think of Israel, they were a people, they were set apart for God. They had amazing privileges. They were given the law at Sinai and they were the covenant people of God.

They had God's revelation unlike the nations around them. Yet they continuously broke the covenant. And when you read the Old Testament, particularly in books like Deuteronomy, you see the covenant renewal again and again and again.

They whored after other gods. Israel's often portrayed as an unfaithful wife. Although they were a people who were the apple of God's eye and they were his beloved bride, they indulged in some of the most detestable idolatry.

You can read about it in Psalm 106 and many other places, Ezekiel. They worshipped the gods of the nations around them. They were allowing Satan a foothold into their religious and their moral life.

And God judged them. He judged them very, very severely when they were exiled into Babylon. But upon their return from Babylon, there was religious reformation.

[12:43] They rebuilt the temple. They reformed their religion. And they didn't return to the idolatry that we hear of prior to their going in exile.

So in a sense, they resumed the worship of Yahweh, the God of Israel, the true and one God. And in that sense, the demon of idolatry was cast out.

Or, more accurately, we see this demon less cast out but more leaving. They managed to empty, they managed to sweep, they managed to put in order their religious practices.

and they had a form of religion but it was outward. It was superficial. It was hypocritical. It degenerated into that, certainly.

They had John the Baptist coming to preach to them a message of repentance about the coming of the Son of God. And there was a repentance of sorts but again, it was a superficial repentance in many ways.

[13:49] They focused on externals and formality. And what we see here is a religion without any true heart. There was a deadness about Israel's religion.

The level of opposition and contempt and hostility they showed towards Jesus led to their final rejection of him. And they became so hardened, didn't they?

The evil, unclean spirit coming back rejecting the Messiah. So here we have a picture of religious Israel who were focused on the externals, a cleaned up, a swept up but empty, empty religion.

Now the Pharisees and scribes they're certainly particularly in his sights because we know they were renowned for moralism, weren't we? Weren't they? They were renowned for formalism.

They added to God's law just to ensure they didn't break it. They wanted to build a fence around the law. However, they gave more emphasis to the additions and all the extra rules, all the extra statutes but they'd utterly lost the heart of biblical religion.

[15:04] They were renowned for being fastidious with externals. You read in Matthew 23, 27, Jesus pronounces woe to you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, for you are like whitewashed tombs which outwardly appear beautiful but within are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness.

In John 8, 44, Jesus says, you are of your father, the devil. And your will is to do your father's desire.

Strong words. The Puritan Thomas Manton says, Pharisees had a religion that ran upon negatives. And what he means is their religion was largely built upon what they didn't do. It was all about what they didn't do. Or if it was about what they did do, it wasn't the heart of what they should have done. true conversion, true biblical religion always involves what the old divines called mortification, putting to death. There is that aspect to biblical religion but also vivification, meaning a strengthening of being empowered by the spirit, being filled with the spirit of Christ.

[16:33] And you see in this parable the thing that's just resounding is the emptiness. It's emptiness. Now there's a kind of pride that can accompany a religion built on abstinence and not doing things.

One can change behaviour. You can be in the church and you can change outward behaviour. And you can change the more obvious outward sins, alcoholism, drug addiction, addiction to pornography, what have you.

Those things can be changed. But you can do that and you should do that but you should not do that without the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit in Christ.

Jesus is speaking of a religious morality without the true power of God. Religion without regeneration, being born again, turning over a new leaf, outward reformation, partial repentance. If you look closely at verse 44, you see an emphasis on the danger of an empty religion devoid of the power of the Spirit. The house is left empty so it's safe for these unclean spirits to return.

[17:57] They revisit and they inhabit the soul. They dwell in the soul and they bring seven other spirits with them. But you notice there's no battle. They just come back.

It's empty. It's almost like an open invite. There's no battle. There's no struggle. It's all very peaceful in a sense. It's almost as if the unclean spirit has left of its own accord.

God. There's no binding of the strong man that Jesus talks about earlier or of his goods. Friends, we need to be on guard against an empty, cleaned up religion.

We're not in the business of people coming to Calvary and cleaning themselves up. We want people to be changed inwardly by the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit.

That's what we need. That's what we want. Now that will lead to being cleaned up. A self-centered reformation is not enough. Religious life based on personal efforts, on works and moralism.

[19:08] This is a solemn warning to never settle or be satisfied with a religious reformation without true conversion and the Spirit dwelling in you.

Verse 45 says, then it goes and brings with it seven spirits. I've mentioned that. And then it says, and the last state of that person is worse than the first.

Now their refusal of Christ and the Gospel placed them in a seven-fold worse condition than if the Gospel had not been preached to them. They had no excuses.

They had the law which they added to. God sent his son to dwell among them, but they still rejected him. They will be in a far worse state at the judgment because of their ongoing obstinate rejection of Christ.

Now the number seven in scriptures kind of denotes completion, wholeness. So I think what we hear is a complete possession, a complete wickedness. self-reformation is a solemn warning against partial reformation, partial repentance, and counterfeit conversion.

[20:23] Self-reformation has a tendency to deepen unbelief. And what I mean by that, sadly we all know people, I'm sure, or many of us know people, that have attempted religion, have come to church through self-reformation.

They fall away and we meet up with them after months or years and there's a hardening. There's a deepening in their unbelief.

They've got all the persuasive arguments and that's incredibly sad. This warns us not to rest in the formal trappings of religion.

But I think there's another inference from the text. if we're not to have a partial reformation or religion, we must be fully committed to Christ.

And this really challenged me. There's no neutrality here. We must be committed. There's no room for partial deliverance.

[21:26] We need total deliverance. We need total repentance. We need total conversion. And this segues into the next section as Jesus, his contrast in this counterfeit, this false conversion of the Pharisees and the evil generation of Israel with his true family and true disciples.

So the next heading I have is the identity of Jesus' true family. Now as we come to this section, we see how Jesus responds when his family, you can picture the scene, they're seeking him out while he's still speaking.

It's a bit like my family being out there and looking through the window, banging on the door. They're worried. It's almost as if they want to perform an intervention. They're concerned. They don't want to just come and call him back for dinner that evening.

It's serious stuff. This section deals with Jesus' true family in contrast with the unbelief of the Pharisees, the scribes, and the great Israel as a whole.

But I think we learn something about the priority of the kingdom of God above and beyond even our natural family.

[22:48] We've learned that the Pharisees and the scribes, they were against Jesus, vehemently against him. But more surprisingly, his own family were against him.

Jesus' biological family, they thought he was mad. And you wonder, where did I get that from? Well, in Mark 3, 21, his family, they went out to seize him.

The word seize is very strong. They went to seize him, for they were saying he's out of his mind.

John 7, 5, not even his brothers believed in him.

His family misunderstood him. He was rejected. He was misunderstood by his own family. Now we see here something of the suffering of Christ in his life, even among his family.

Our wonderful Saviour, he experienced the loneliness, the isolation and suspicion of those that were closest to him. And we praise God that that situation changed because we read later in books like Acts, that his brother James was heading the Jerusalem Council and his family did come to believe in him after his death, resurrection and ascension.

[24:05] But as I was preparing this, it made me think of my own experience and it made me think of those of you who I know in this church who felt alienated, who felt isolated, maybe misunderstood, maybe ridiculed by your own families.

It's a reality for us, isn't it, sometimes? I think we can draw immense comfort from our Saviour's experience.

Many of us, we feel deep sadness and concern for our unbelieving family. Jesus can identify with us. when we think of Jesus bearing our sins and our sorrows, often, and I do this, I go straight to the cross, straight to the cross, and we should glory in the cross.

Him taking upon himself our sins, a great exchange. But sometimes I think it's helpful to consider him bearing our sorrows in his active obedience, in the life that he led.

And forgive me if you think I'm maybe pushing this a bit far, but I think when we think of Jesus' relationship with his family, it made me think of that sadness and that way that he can relate to us.

[25:30] Matthew 10 describes how following Jesus brings division in families, and how the enemies of Christ can be in one's own household. God. It's very sad to say, but it's true that sometimes those who can hinder our spiritual progress can be those who are closest to us.

Why were they so worried about Jesus, do you think? Why did they think that he'd lost his mind? Well, he was offending the religious establishment.

It's hard for us to envisage, but the Pharisees and the scribes, they held a lot of power. He was causing a huge amount of opposition among very powerful people that held sway in the community. He was making claims about himself that they just couldn't accept. this would have been extremely challenging for them. And as I was preparing this, it made me think people will think that we are mad if we're truly walking with Jesus.

Our families, our colleagues, our friends, and wider society in general, they may worry about us, they may increasingly see us as fringe and weird for the beliefs that we have and the views we

have, but our Lord and Saviour experienced that as well.

[27:14] It's immensely comforting. We also see here how one can be close to Jesus and intimately connected to him, but they don't know what, they don't understand what his true mission is.

You could be in Jesus' family but not understand his mission. Remarkable. Pedigree and privilege doesn't bring a true relationship with God or Christ.

How privileged were they? Jesus' commitment to prioritising the kingdom even above his family is something that's not just for him that we can look on and say, oh, okay, that's what Jesus did.

No, he expects it from us, his disciples. Mark 10, 29 says, truly I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or fathers or children or lands for my sake and for the gospel.

Luke 14, 26 says, if anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple.

[28:35] It's really important to say we need to understand Jesus is using what's called hyperbole there. He's using very extreme language to put a message across. He is not saying we need to go home and hate our families.

love our families. And it's also extremely important to say that this isn't about neglecting our commitment to love our families. The fifth commandment still stands.

It's really important. The fifth commandment stands. And we think of Christ as he honoured his mother from the cross. So we need to have a biblical balance.

But it still doesn't take away the power of this and what this is saying. In verse 49, Jesus states that his true mothers and brothers are those who do the will of God.

So Jesus' true family do the will of God. So here he's speaking of his disciples, obviously, but I think more broadly he's speaking about us, his church. We see again a sharp contrast with the Pharisees and the scribes.

[29:40] They thought they were doing the will of God with their strict adherence to outward rules. But what does he mean here by the will of God? That's something that we hear and what does it actually mean?

Well, I think he's certainly speaking of the revealed will of God as we see in the scriptures, in the commands, rather than God's providential or secret will. God's will is explicated in his perfect law, the commandments.

In Matthew 22, 37, Jesus summarises summarises the two tables of the law as loving God with all your heart, soul and mind, and loving your neighbour as yourself.

Now we know that no one can fulfil that. No one can fulfil that perfectly. So he cannot mean that we are his family by fulfilling the law of God.

rather he means that we do the will of God out of a heart that flows for love for Christ, in union with Christ. We do it evangelically, if you like, out of our union with him, our love with him.

[30:54] The will of God is repentance of our sins and faith in Christ.

Again, we see the contrast with the previous section where the evil generation, they deny him in unbelief.

But this is the obedience of a faith that rests and trusts in Christ and his gospel for everlasting life. John 6, 40 says, For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life.

And I will raise him up on the last day. Very different to what was said before about this evil generation, that it just gets worse and worse. But we will be raised up on the last day.

So I think here there's something of union with Christ. There's something about being adopted into his family. John Murray, he says there's basically two ways that you are in a human family, that you come into a human family.

You're either born into a human family or you're adopted into a family. But in God's spiritual family, we have both. We're born again into his family, we have regeneration and we are adopted with all the privileges that that entails.

[32:19] the end of verse 50 describes the tenderness and the care in Christ accepting us into his family.

There's a lovely sense of intimacy. intimacy. For whoever does live my father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother, is my brother, my sister, my mother.

There's a real sense of intimacy. There's a sense of relationship and it's profoundly deep. He accepts us, the weak, the needy, the lowly.

We haven't got it all together, have we? But we're in his family. We can call Christ our older brother as well as our saviour.

Well, for those of us who are in Christ's family, we really need to draw on this comfort. It's a wonderful comfort.

[33:26] We really need to draw on the joy and assurance that that brings for us. And if there's anyone here who doesn't know Christ, if you're not in this family, I would invite you to come and be a part of this family.

And you may ask, what do I need to do? Well, repent of your sins. Put your trust and faith in Christ. You don't get into this family by works. There is work once you're in the family.

As there is in all families, there's duties, there's responsibilities, there's exertion, there's energy. It's not always happy. But once you're in this family and you've been around a while, you will realise that you love him because he first loved you.

Amen. Amen. Let's pray.