

The Ins and Outs of Religion

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[0 : 00] I invite you to look at Luke chapter 11, starting at verse 29. That's on page 69 in your Bibles in front of you.

And as you're looking at that passage, and as I prepared on it this week, a story that was in the London Times I thought was relevant.

It's a story of a professional soccer player, a well-known soccer player, Newcastle United. He opened his front door on returning home recently, and he immediately phoned the police. His house had been ransacked, and he was sure that some things had been stolen, belongings were strewn all over his house. The thieves had apparently taken several items, including his checkbook, he said.

A short time later, he called the police to apologize, because he hadn't been burgled at all, he explained. The house was just very, very untidy.

[1 : 08] Now, that's an embarrassing thing to happen, and when you're a professional soccer player in England, it makes front-page headline news. And what had happened is that he'd become so accustomed to the mess around him that he really couldn't see the incredible untidiness of his house until he was able to look at it with new eyes, you know, of coming back after a road trip and being able to see objectively what is going on in his home.

And I think that this is true of the souls of the crowd who are listening to Jesus in the passage today. Their souls are in a big mess, and they don't realize it.

They become accustomed to it because they think things are going pretty well, and they're living a religious life. Yet, they are like a desperately sick patient who really sees no need for a doctor.

And as the crowds get larger, Jesus, in his love for them, reveals this to him. What he does in chapter 11 is, with different eyes, with new eyes, the eyes of God, he makes a diagnosis.

He shows them the state of their souls. And he says in verse 29, this is an evil generation. It's not the popular way to start out a teaching.

[2 : 35] But he tells them this. Yours is an evil generation. And in his love, what he is doing is he's revealing their hearts. It's a grim diagnosis.

And he is chastising the crowd by revealing their heart towards God. And what he tells them is that the reason that they are evil is because they are looking for a sign.

The way they put it is they ask for a sign that will prove that he is truly from God, that he is Jesus the Messiah come down from heaven. And asking for this, they are actually rejecting everything that Jesus did.

Everything that he revealed about himself. So, they reject the preaching with power and authority that he has brought.

They reject his healing people of every disease. They reject his raising people from the dead and casting out demons. They even reject God speaking audibly to Jesus at his baptism.

[3 : 42] You are my beloved son. With you I am well pleased. So, the looking for a sign is actually an excuse for unbelief. They don't want to entrust themselves to Jesus.

They would not or they couldn't see their belief that their need for God to save them spiritually through belief in Jesus and obeying his word was what they actually needed above anything else.

And I think that we can understand this reluctance to admit the need for a savior. Because we live in a society that says we are all born in very good shape. And that religion of any kind is an option among many to actualize the goodness that is within us.

Imagine the response of the crowd if Jesus were to say down at the art gallery today at a big huge gathering, you are an evil generation. Well, probably there would be amazement, but also rejection, because it goes against cherished beliefs in our city.

We look pretty good on the outside. We can get along for the most part. And we can be good to each other. We know how to give good gifts to our children, as Jesus said.

[4 : 58] But Jesus, here in chapter 11, is looking much deeper. He is looking into people's hearts and minds, and there is spiritual darkness. All of us are capable of inflicting great pain on one another, of taking advantage of each other, of thinking bad thoughts, and far worse against one another.

And at the root of all of this, that is common with all of us, is a rebellion against God as ruler. The idea that Jesus, that God, would be Lord.

There is a rebellion against the truth of a living God who has the rightful claim over our lives. And this belief that one could be righteous without God saving them, that was the dominant belief of the crowd that's listening to Jesus.

And it starts with the religious leaders who take it to an extreme. That's why Jesus spends so much time on 42, verse 42 and following, speaking specifically to them.

But Jesus tells them that none are righteous despite appearances. The grim diagnosis is that they are infected by evil that's often very subtle.

[6 : 11] But the wonderful thing about this passage is that Jesus doesn't leave the Pharisees, he doesn't leave the lawyers, he doesn't leave the crowd in their sin.

He is the doctor who loves them. And he pursues them. And what he does here is he gives them a two-part treatment for this spiritual sickness, for the sin that is in their hearts.

And the first part of that treatment is he teaches them that there is a deep need for repentance on the part of everyone in the crowd. And that this is a gift that God gives.

That's why Jesus said in verse 29 at the end that the only sign that he will give them is the sign of Jonah. It's interesting to say, the sign of Jonah.

And Jonah became a sign to the Ninevites that God was a living God who spoke to them. Ninevites had no idea about who the living God was. Didn't know anything about the people of God.

[7 : 15] And yet, God comes to them in Jonah and says they need to repent. They need to reorient their lives around him. And Jesus goes on to give two examples of true repentance.

He talks in verse 31 of the Queen of the South. And the Queen of the South was the Queen of Sheba who had heard about the extraordinary wisdom of Solomon. And she couldn't believe it. How could this be? And so she comes to test him with hard questions all the way from Ethiopia up to Jerusalem. And when she comes, she recognizes the wisdom of God.

And she repents. And she says, Blessed be the Lord your God who has delighted in you and set you on the throne of Israel. Because the Lord loved Israel forever, he has made you king. You may execute justice and righteousness.

She gives herself to the Lord as the living Lord. And she believes in him. And the other example of repentance is the people of Nineveh.

[8 : 20] Even though God's word to them through Jonah contradicts everything that they are about, contradicts their city, contradicts their way of life and their thinking, they humbly hear that message.

And they keep it. That is repentance. They receive life through it. And these examples would have really gone to the heart of the people listening because they knew that the Queen and the Ninevites were Gentile and pagan.

And yet they did a complete U-turn in their thinking. They entrusted themselves to the living God, to his wisdom, and to his word. And of course, the crowd listening to Jesus has not done that.

They have not repented. And Jesus is telling them that they are as spiritually lost as the Ninevites before Jonah. And as the Queen of Sheba was far away from God before she'd heard about Solomon.

That is how far away they are from God. It's a devastating diagnosis to a people who assume that they are God's chosen ones. What it does is it shatters their self-righteousness.

[9 : 31] And it takes away their spiritual entitlement. And it says that the only hope that they have is a humble repentance. That's the first part of their treatment.

Now that message is not for the crowd only. It is a message for each of us as well. In that baptism, it was great for us to see this baptism this morning because it is a sign of our Christian life.

It's a sign of the gospel of Jesus. One of the commitments that God calls us to is that question that says, you know, will you persevere in resisting evil? And whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord.

And of course, the answer is, I will with God's help. I will live this life of repentance. And that's a question that assumes that we still struggle with evil in our hearts.

even though we belong to God the Father. We have to rely on God for the gift of repentance. It's absolutely essential for our spiritual health. It is the way that we continually come back to Him.

[10 : 40] It's the way that He brings us continually into this living fellowship with Him. That's why after we confessed our sins this morning, we asked God to grant us that gift.

The gift of true repentance and His Holy Spirit through Jesus Christ. We need the grace of Jesus and His righteousness for real repentance. And it is an ongoing part of our Christian life.

It's at the center of our life. And that brings us to the second part of the spiritual treatment that every person needs. Not only does Jesus, by the power of the Holy Spirit, call us to repent from the evil, from the sin in our hearts, it calls us to repent to someone.

It calls us to repent to Jesus Christ. And that's why, if you look at the end of verse 31, Jesus says, something greater than Solomon is here.

And then in verse 32, He says, behold, something greater than Jonah is here. And of course, that something greater is Jesus and His Word.

[11 : 50] that is what is here. He is perfectly bringing God's wisdom. He is perfectly speaking God's Word. He is the fulfillment of all that God said and did in human history.

He is the fulfillment of God's saving work. And so repenting to Jesus means that we believe in His authority to save us from evil.

That He will guide us to the place of spiritual safety and fill our sinful hearts with the light of His truth and goodness. You know, I realized one of the reasons that you run into difficulty when you try to tell people that we're actually not born good.

I was talking to a guy I've gotten to know in our neighborhood recently, and he was talking about difficulty in his family life that he was experiencing. It's one of the hazards of people in the neighborhood knowing that you're a minister.

And he said to me, he said, you know, I believe everybody is good and I can't understand why we can't just get together and figure this thing out. And I said, well, you know, I don't believe actually that we are good.

[12 : 57] None of us are. And it was sort of a conversation stopper. And I said, and I said, what has to happen is that we have been corrupted in some way and something has to happen for us.

We need help. And you realize at that moment that you have to start talking about Jesus Christ. You have to talk about someone who can do for ourselves what we cannot accomplish in our own efforts.

And that's why in verse 33 it says, no one after lighting a lamp puts it in a cellar or under a bushel but on a stand that those who enter may see the light.

You know, it's saying that Jesus and his word is not meant to be hidden or ignored. In fact, it is meant to guide you into his ways. The light of Jesus is the solution to the evil that is in our hearts. It is meant to illuminate our lives, to reveal what is really happening in you and the world around you. It reveals to us the loving, saving work of God for the world.

[14 : 09] And Jesus says, you know, you can't be spiritually neutral about me. Look at verse 34. It says, your eye is the lamp of your body. When your eye is sound, your whole body is full of light.

But when it is not sound, your body is full of darkness. Therefore, be careful lest the light in you be darkness. It's saying that when you are attentive to Jesus and his word, he fills you with his truth.

But if you ignore him, the eyes of your heart are closed to him and they are unsound, darkness actually remains in us. There is not one way, there is not a middle ground there.

There is either darkness without Christ or there is light and forgiveness and healing with him inside of us. And that's why Jesus says in verse 35, take great care about what is in you.

Make sure you don't call what is darkness light. Now the great blessing is that as you repent to Jesus, as you look to him for your salvation and guidance and truth, you will reflect his truth and his goodness in your life.

[15 : 20] You know, the gospel of Jesus is so powerful that it actually transforms us. It changes us from the inside out and we are able to worship God in spirit and in truth.

And that blesses the world around us. It gives them the light of the gospel. Now I want to close this sermon by looking at the Pharisees and the lawyers because they are an important, they are a gift for us.

They are people who are very religious. They are people who think that they know God. They believe they know God. And they are the ones who are most resistant to Jesus being that savior. They are the ones that refuse to repent even though they are the leaders of God's people. And that's why Jesus so strongly reveals their sin and calls them to repentance.

Look at verse 38. This is a very, very important verse, believe it or not. In that verse 38, the Pharisees are astonished to see that Jesus did not first wash before dinner.

[16:31] And I got to tell you, we are teaching our three and six year old boys to wash their hands before meals. And I'm a bit worried that they're going to get hold of this passage and misunderstand what that verse is saying.

Because this is talking about the ceremonial washing that removes any spiritual uncleanness from being in contact with a sinful world. And Jesus is saying something very, very profound and powerful in not washing.

He is saying that he himself cleans people of sin. The ceremony of washing with water does not do it. Jesus himself comes to cleanse people inside their soul by the forgiveness of their sins as they repent and turn to him.

And this is the great need of the Pharisees. That's the statement he's making by not washing his hands. The Pharisees had developed a religion that made their lives appear sinless and good on the outside in order to deny and cope with the sin that is inside.

And they honestly believed it. And Jesus breaks through that. He tells them, you know, you cleanse the outside of cups and dishes. You tithe down to the very little plants that you cook with.

[17:54] You strive for recognition of your holy life to show other people how much better you are in your life than them. to be admired in the marketplaces. But Jesus said in this series of woes which are an expression of pain and grief that the outside of these people do not match the inside which is what hypocrisy is.

True worship of God is when the inside of us matches what is outside as well. And so he says look inside of yourself. You are full of extortion and wickedness.

You neglect justice and the love of God is the way he puts it. And in fact you are like unmarked graves that cause people to become unclean because they walk on them without knowing it.

So without knowing it people are becoming unclean by following the examples of the Pharisees.

Well, if these things are true and Jesus says they are then they need a savior.

They need cleansing on the inside. And Jesus tells them you know you are fools. He uses very strong language because he who makes the outside who is God himself makes the inside also and he sees us for who we are.

[19:13] This is a hard message and there are two ways the Pharisees and lawyers can go and the one way that the Bible says they go is that they are angry.

In verse 45 the lawyers who explain God's word said you know you reproach us also in saying these things. That's on the next page. And Jesus backs right off doesn't he?

No, he says in verse 45 46 woe to you also for you load men and burdens that are hard to bear and you yourselves do not touch the burdens with one of your fingers.

Jesus is telling them that you are putting burdens and hindering people from access to God. from knowing the grace and truth of God. That's the key of knowledge who is Jesus himself.

And now you are seeking to do what your ancestor did. You are seeking to kill those who bring the word of God. And that is what they are going to seek to do at the end of this passage. In verse 53, 54 they lie in wait hoping to catch him at something that he might say.

[20:21] It is the opposite of the repentance. It is actually the sin that is within them coming out and being revealed for all of its awfulness. And I want to close by saying that these things that the Pharisees exhibit are not something that are far away from us.

Actually they bring home our need for repentance as well. Because if you are coming to church week by week, you are doing things that are about the service of God.

God and all of those things that we do in our Christian life can actually mask the sin that is within us. We can actually neglect the life of repentance that God calls us to by seeing the ministry that we are about as an end in and of itself.

There is a strong call for us to take the life of repentance seriously instead. So that when we take communion, we need to realize that it is an act of repentance, of turning to Jesus who died for us as a sacrifice for our sin.

When we participate in the liturgy of the service, we actually do repent in real ways as we say those words of confession. When we give money, we are joyfully giving of ourselves to God because he has given us everything in Jesus Christ.

[21 : 46] When we read the Bible daily, we are brought into fellowship with God and calls us to know him as our Savior, the one who saves us from our sins. And in our prayers, we speak to the one who has called us out of darkness into his glorious light.

And so as we leave this passage, God is calling us to be right before our God, to allow him to mend our souls, to cleanse us from all unrighteousness, and to lead us into the light of his truth.

And as our souls and minds are being healed, and we receive this goodness that only Jesus our Savior can give, our actions will follow, and we will be a light to the world around us and to those who are with us in our church, that we will help one another in this glorious life of repentance, which is leading us with Jesus into heaven.

Amen. Please kneel for prayer. Amen. I called to the Lord out of my distress, and he answered me, and didst hear my voice.

For thou didst cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas, and the flood was round about me. All thy waves and thy billows passed over me, yet thou didst bring up my life from the pits, O Lord my God.

[23 : 19] When my soul fainted within me, I remembered the Lord, and my prayer came to thee, into thy holy temple. Those who pay regard to vain idols forsake their true loyalty, but I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to thee what I have vowed I will pay.

deliverance belongs to the Lord. Our Heavenly Father, with Jonah, and with us, Lord, in your mercy, so long as we have eyes to see and ears to hear, may we humbly recall your graciousness, knowing that all good things are your gift and mercy, and that all we have and all we are belongs to you.

For we who behold these present days, grant us eyes to wonder and tongues to praise. O Lord Jesus Christ, who didst take little children into thy arms and bless them, bless, we beseech thee, Hannah and her family, grant that they may grow in thy fear and love, give unto them day by day thy strength and guidance, so that they may continue in thy love and service unto their lives' end.

Lord, in your mercy. Most merciful Lord Jesus, we remember before you today those who do not know you, those who have lost faith, those who no longer pray themselves, and those who fear to trust.

Light them home, we pray, and help us be bright with no part dark along the way. Be mindful, too, O Lord, of thy people bowed before thee, and of those who are absent through rage, sickness, or infirmity.

[25 : 04] Care for the infants, guide the young, support the aged, encourage the faint-hearted, collect the scattered, and bring the wandering to thy fold.

Travel with the voyagers, defend the widows, shield the orphans, deliver the captives, heal the sick, suckle all who are in tribulation, necessity, or distress.

Remember for good all those that love us, and those that hate us, and those that have desired us unworthy as we are to pray for them. And those whom we have forgotten, do thou, O Lord, remember, for thou art the healer, the helper of the helpless, the savior of the lost, the refuge of the wanderer, the healer of the sick.

thou who knowest each man's need, and hast heard his prayer, grant him to each according to thy merciful loving kindness, and thy eternal love. Pour down upon us all the riches of thy grace, so that redeemed in soul and body, and steadfast in faith, we may ever praise thy wonderful and holy name.

Lord, in your mercy. Amen. We pray this morning for those who walk with and near us, and we pray particularly for Paul, Carl, Gail, Rowena, Betty, Ben, Nancy, and Mehran.

[26 : 39] And in a brief silence, we bring to you, Lord Jesus, what hides in our own hearts, and the cares we have for ourselves and for others who need your comforting. Lord, in your mercy.

Finally, Lord, we join our thanksgiving with the psalmists. Long may he live. May gold of Sheba, the queen of the south be given to him. May prayer be made for him continually, and blessings invoke for him all the day.

May there be abundance of grain in the land. On the tops of the mountains may it wave. May its fruit be like Lebanon, and may men blossom forth from the cities like the grass of the field.

May his name endure forever, his fame continue as long as the sun. May men bless themselves by him, and all nations call him blessed. Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, who alone does wondrous things.

Blessed be his glorious name forever. May his glory fill the whole earth. Amen and Amen. Amen.