

Religion and the Gospel

Luke 11:37 – 12:3; January 27, 2013

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The message of Luke is that God's mission is fulfilled through Jesus who came to bring salvation to all people (Lk. 19:10). The message of the gospel is simple:

- **Gospel** (good news and bad news)
 - Bad news: you can never be holy or good enough to be saved or accepted by God.
 - Good news: God saves sinners through the life, death, and resurrection of Christ.
 - There is no one this gospel can't reach: Jews, Greeks (including Samaritans), male, female, rich, poor, sick, healthy.

Within all of these people, there are **two equal and opposite enemies to the gospel**:

- **Irreligion** (we can also call this antinomianism or relativism)
 - The irreligious reject God's commands and create their own set of values to live by. Truth is relative and they determine for themselves what is right and wrong.
 - Examples are the prostitutes, the tax collectors, the demon-possessed.
- **Religion** (we can also call this legalism or moralism)
 - Religion says that we have to live a good life in order to be accepted by God (Buddhist, Muslim, Hindu, nominal Christian, Catholic).
 - Examples are the religious leaders (Pharisees, Scribes).
- **Which of these two enemies of the gospel more easily respond to Jesus?**
 - Answer: the irreligious. The religious leaders are the ones that had him crucified.
 - This is scary. The majority of the religious folks rejected Jesus. It is so hard to move from religion to the gospel. In fact, I would agree with Martin Luther's assessment that religion is the default mode of the human heart.
 - The reason you need to listen today is because this passage is one of Jesus' strongest rebukes in all of the Gospels and it's directed straight to the religious leaders of the day.
 - The irreligious aren't off the hook: I agree with Tim Keller when he says, "The truth is that even seemingly irreligious people are actually religious" (*Center Church*, fn. 2, 72). He says "Even irreligious people earn their acceptability and sense of worth by living up to their set of values" (*Center Church*, 64).

The point: it is possible to be remarkably religious and yet be eternally damned.

Setting the Stage - Read Luke 11:37-38

- Jesus was invited to have a meal with a Pharisee and other religious leaders are present (11:45).
- According to their traditions, Pharisees would not eat unless they had washed their hands properly (cf. Mark 7:3-4). This explains the astonishment at Jesus' failure to wash himself. In response, Jesus launches into one of his strongest rebukes in all of the Gospels. As we evaluate Jesus' rebuke to them, we are going to see four reasons why the gospel is better than religion.

I. Religion Ignores the Heart; the Gospel Cleanses the Heart (11:37-44).

A. Religion Ignores the Heart (39-40)

- The Pharisees paid great attention to being clean externally (they gave to the poor - Matt. 6:2, prayed in the synagogues and in the streets - Matt. 6:5, and even fasted - Matt. 6:16) but ignored being clean internally where they were full of greed and wickedness (they robbed widows - Luke 20:45-47 and took oaths to avoid paying vows - Matthew 23:16-22).

- Summary from Matthew 15:7-9: “You hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy of you, when he said: ‘This people honors me with their lips, but their **heart** is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.’”
- The point: Doing good deeds alone without addressing your heart is as worthless as cleaning the outside of a cup and leaving the inside dirty. Your heart is dirty so you should pay just as much attention to being clean internally.
 - “The **heart** is deceitful above all things...” (Jeremiah 17:9; see also Prov. 22:15; Rom. 2:5).
 - Apologetical Sidebar: “I’m really not that bad. I’m not a sinner.”
 - Don’t be like the Pharisees who saw themselves as immune to this rebuke.
 - Everyone stands in need of God and the gospel, whether you realize it or not.
 - Will you pray Psalm 139:23-24 today? “Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!”

B. The Gospel Cleanses Your Heart (41-44).

- How do they get clean hearts? They do this by giving generously of their hearts to God.
 - Contra NIV: “But now as for what is inside you—be generous to the poor, and everything will be clean for you.” Jesus isn’t saying, “Give to the poor and you’ll be clean.”
- How does the gospel cleanse your heart?
 - “For if the blood of goats and bulls, and the sprinkling of defiled persons with the ashes of a heifer, sanctify for the purification of the flesh, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, **purify** our conscience from dead works to serve the living God” (Hebrews 9:13-14).
 - “Indeed, under the law almost everything is purified with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins” (Hebrews 9:22; see also 10:19-22; Tit. 2:11-14; Ezek. 36:26-27).
 - **Admit your need to God**
 - **Ask God to forgive you** (the picture of “give” is one of repentance; turn from your sin).
 - **Trust in Jesus alone to rescue you** (believe in the finished work of Christ).
 - **Follow Jesus, the King of your life, in faith from this day forward** (submit)
- What kind of heart does the gospel produce?
 - **An authentic heart (42).**
 - The Pharisees elevated certain practices and omitted others closely connected to the heart of God (justice and love). This is blatant hypocrisy (see Zech. 7:8-10; Mic. 6:8; Col. 2:12-13).
 - One of the greatest apologetics today is authenticity because many view Christians as hypocrites (leader, parents, co-workers, students).
 - **A humble heart (43).**
 - The Pharisees had a constant desire for honor and attention. Religion leads to arrogance and pride. The gospel destroys pride and leads to lives of great humility (see 1 Pet. 5:5-6).
 - **A life-giving heart (44).**
 - What’s the problem with people unknowingly walking over unmarked graves? If a Jew touched a grave they would become unclean (Num. 19:16). The tragedy of this image is that the Pharisees are compared to “unmarked graves” which means their followers don’t even realize that they are being led to death.
 - The Pharisees, advocates of purity, ironically are leaders of spiritual uncleanness leading their followers to death.
 - The gospel changes our hearts so that we lead people to the path of life, not death.
- **Do not walk away today without addressing your heart?**

II. Religion Adds Burdens; the Gospel Removes Burdens (11:45-46).

A. Religion Adds Burdens.

- Lawyers (also called scribes) interpret the law and aid the Pharisees in their study of tradition. Jesus' attack had implications for them as well. They added "burdens" on people, namely, religious duties in addition to the law. These burdens in effect drove people away from God.
- These "burdens" are problems because: 1) they are hard to keep, 2) the lawyers are unwilling to help people carry them and 3) the lawyers are unwilling to do them themselves.
- Trying to affect moralistic change through religion is like trying to bend a piece of metal without the softening effect of heat. All it does is snap back to its former position or at worse it breaks. He says, "Many people, after years of being crushed under moralistic behaviorism, abandon their faith altogether, complaining that they are exhausted and 'can't keep up'" (Keller, *Center Church*, 67).
- Every other religion adds burdens as an attempt to reach the goal of existence:
 - **Hindu:** follow the way of meditation, way of works, way of knowledge, and way of devotion and you'll reach *Moksha* (the goal of existence).
 - **Islam:** keep the 5 Pillars (Confession, Prayer – 5 times a day, Almsgiving, Fast during Ramadan from sunrise to sunset, Pilgrimage to Mecca).
 - **Buddhism:** follow the Noble Eightfold Path (right views, right aspiration, right speech, right conduct, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right contemplation).

B. The Gospel Removes Your Burdens.

- The message of Christianity is NOT do this and God will accept you. The message is, Christ has done everything for you, come to him and find rest.
- "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." (Matthew 11:28-30 ESV)
- "The gospel...reminds me that my righteous standing with God always holds firm regardless of my performance, because my standing is based solely on the work of Jesus and not mine...I never have to do a moment's labor to gain or maintain my justified status before God. Freed from the burden of such a task, I now can put my energies into enjoying God, pursuing holiness, and ministering God's amazing grace to others" (*A Gospel Primer*, Milton Vincent, 20).

III. Religion Rejects Scripture; the Gospel is the Key to Scripture (11:47-54).

A. Religion Rejects Scripture

- Who are the prophets that got killed? (see 11:50-51).
 - Jesus uses the term "prophets" broadly to "refer to anyone who testifies to God's way of righteousness" (Bock, 1122). Abel (Genesis 4) to Zechariah (2 Chron. 24:20-25).
- Who are their fathers that killed the prophets?
 - He's referring to Israel, most of whom continually rejected the message of the prophets.
- Why did their fathers kill the prophets?
 - They killed and persecuted them because they rejected their message.
 - "You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered," (Acts 7:51-52 ESV)

- They are guilty and will be guilty of murder and persecution
 - They “build the tombs” and “consent to the deeds of your fathers.”
 - Jesus charges them with partnership in the murder of God’s prophets.
 - The point: “Jesus is essentially saying that the current generation is finishing the job the previous ones started” (Bock, 1120).
 - They are not done with their killing or persecution (read 11:49; 53-54).
 - “Wisdom of God” = “God in his wisdom said...”
 - Looking forward, these Pharisees will kill Jesus, and then kill Stephen along with persecuting many more (see Acts: Peter, John, James, the church at large, Paul)
 - God’s plan marches forward despite this type of reaction.
- The consequence of rejecting God’s prophets is judgment
 - Why are they being held accountable for the blood of prophets in the past?
 - Since all the prophets [Able to Zechariah] pointed to this time, namely, the coming up the Messiah, then their rejection of Christ is in fact a rejection of the whole line of prophets.

B. The Gospel is the Key to Scripture

- “And he said to them, ‘O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the **prophets** have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?’ And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself”(Luke 24:25-27; see also John 5:39-46).
- “Then he said to them, ‘These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.’ Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and said to them, ‘Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem’” (Luke 24:44-47).
- This judgment could be specifically the destruction of the temple, which happens in A. D. 70 along with the future judgment still to come at the end.
- Their lives not only end in destruction if they don’t repent, so will their followers.

IV. Religion Leads to Fear, the Gospel Grants Assurance (12:1-3).

- Jesus cautions his disciples against the “leaven” of the Pharisees which can spread and corrupt others. They should constantly watch out for hypocrisy in their own hearts (see also 1 Cor. 5:6-7).
- What’s the motivation? God is omniscient (all-knowing) and omnipresent (always present everywhere) and he sees everything we say and do (action and speech).
 - In the end, every secret inside your heart will be revealed. Every secret thing that you’ve tried to cover up, that you’ve tried to hide, that you’ve done in the darkness of your own private room.

A. Religion Leads to Fear

- When I am living up to my standards, I feel confident but when I am not living up to my standards I feel insecure, inadequate, and like a failure. This eventually leads to fear at standing before God.

B. The Gospel Grants Assurance

- In Christ I am simultaneously sinful and yet accepted in Christ. I am so bad that he had to die for me and I am so loved that he was glad to die for me. This leads me to deeper humility and confidence at the same time.
- On my worst days, the gospel reminds me of God’s unrelenting grace toward me.
- On my best days, the gospel reminds me to trust solely in Christ’s righteousness and not my own.

Conclusion:

The tone of this text has been pretty intense but let me assure you that my goal is not judgment or condemnation. The outcome of your life doesn't have to be like the majority of the Pharisees. In fact, there's one Pharisee who embraced the message of Jesus and responded this way:

"I thank him who has given me strength, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he judged me faithful, appointing me to his service, though formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost." (1 Timothy 1:12-15 ESV)