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HOW TO RESPOND TO GOD'S WORD

Luke 11:29-36

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Luke Lesson 56

How to Respond to God's Word Luke 11:29-36

As a philosophy major in college, one of the major fallacies that I often observed among philosophers was the assumption that all we need is enough evidence plus human reason in order to arrive at the truth. When it came to the existence of God, most philosophy professors delighted to show us students that we simply did not have enough evidence to prove it and we never could have such evidence. Thus at best we could be logical agnostics or we could abandon logic and take a leap of faith. But we could not be reasonable believers in God because there is insufficient evidence.

The problem with the assumption that evidence and reason are sufficient to arrive at the truth is that it ignores the need for God's revelation to inform human reason and it ignores the inability of fallen human reason to grasp divine revelation. Because of sin, the human intellect is blinded to the light of God's revelation in Christ and the gospel (2 Cor. 4:4). Just as a blind man can look at the sun and not see a thing, so fallen people lack the capacity of understanding and apprehending spiritual truth in and of themselves (1 Cor. 2:14). Thus a fallen sinner can look at all the evidence and logic in the world and yet not grasp the truth of the gospel unless God opens his eyes and grants him repentance and faith to turn from his sin and believe in Christ.

It is important to keep this in mind when we are presenting the gospel to unbelievers. Our Lord Jesus makes this clear in His confrontation with the Jewish leaders who accused Him of casting out demons by the power of Satan and who demanded that He perform some miraculous sign to authenticate His claims (11:15-16). In 11:17-26, Jesus responded to their accusation of casting out demons by the power of Satan. In our text (11:29-36), He deals with their demand to perform some spectacular sign. He is further underscoring His response to the comment of the woman in the crowd (11:28), "On the contrary, blessed are those who hear the word of God, and observe it." Jesus is showing us how we should respond to God's Word of truth:

We must respond to God's Word in repentance and obedient faith or we will face eternal judgment.

Verse 29 makes it obvious that Jesus had not had the opportunity to attend a modern course on how to reach the unchurched by making your message user friendly! Clearly, He had not heard of the methods of "How to Win Friends and Influence People." As the crowds were increasing, Jesus opened His sermon by saying, "This generation is a wicked generation." Then He proceeded to warn them about the judgment to come. That's not how you keep the numbers increasing!

Any preacher who wants to build his church knows that you've got to make people feel good about themselves. An article in a local magazine on a growing Flagstaff church asked, "And just why do people keep coming to the Such-and-Such Church? Pastor So-and-So believes it's the upbeat, animated atmosphere inside. 'I think I bring excitement to the Gospel,' he says. 'People are tired of hearing about the sin in their life; they need to hear about the joy that is out there as well.'" I don't deny that we need to hear about the joy that Christ gives, but there is no joy if we try to come to God without confronting our sin. Jesus shows us that there is a wrong way to respond to God and His Word:

1. The wrong way to respond to God's Word is to demand a sign from Him.

The Jews were demanding a sign from Jesus to test Him (11:16), but Jesus confronted them with their wickedness in seeking for a sign (11:29). Christ, who knows the hearts of all men (11:17), knew that a hundred miraculous signs would not be sufficient for these scoffers. They had just seen Him cast the demon out of a man who could not speak so that he became able to speak (11:14). They had seen Him raise the paralytic (5:17-26), heal the man with the withered hand (6:6-11), and do many other miracles, but none of these signs had brought them to believe in Him.

What was their sin in seeking for a sign? Their sin was their rebellious, unrepentant hearts. They were curious to see Jesus perform miracles, but they were not contrite about their sins. They wanted to watch a good show, but they would have been quick to explain away any signs that Jesus performed because they were not

willing to follow Him. In other words, their problem was not a lack of evidence. Their problem was a lack of repentance. Thus Jesus tells them that no sign will be given to them except the sign of Jonah.

There are two main interpretations of what Jesus means by the sign of Jonah in this context. One view is that the sign of Jonah refers to Jonah's preaching of repentance. Jonah went to Ninevah and preached a message of impending judgment and the Ninevites repented. The allusion to the Queen of Sheba backs this view, in that she heard of Solomon and his wisdom and she responded favorably by traveling to Jerusalem to learn from him. The common factor between Solomon and Jonah was that they presented God's message. The common factor between the Queen of Sheba and the Ninevites was that they responded favorably to the message. Thus Jesus' preaching of impending judgment unless there is repentance is the sign of Jonah in this view (Darrell Bock, *Luke* [Baker], 2:1095-1097 argues for this view).

Others see the sign of Jonah as the resurrection of Jesus, as the parallel in Matthew 12:39-42 makes clear. There are several things in favor of this view. First, a sign was a miracle and it is difficult to see how preaching can properly be called a sign. Second, Jesus does not speak of Jonah's or His *words* as a sign, but rather of Jonah and Himself as signs. The *men*, not their words, are the signs. Third, Jesus uses the future tense to say that He *will be* a sign to this generation. This looks ahead to His resurrection (Leon Morris, *Luke* [IVP/Eerdmans], pp. 200-201 argues for this view).

The parallel with Jonah is that the prophet was a man who, in effect, had "died" and had spent three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish. When he went and preached to Ninevah, the man himself was a testimony of God's awful judgment against sin, but also of God's mercy and power to deliver sinners from death. Jonah had sinned by disobeying God's initial command to go to Ninevah and he had paid the penalty of that sin by being swallowed by the great fish. But when he repented, God had mercy on him. Thus Jonah was a sign to the Ninevites of God's severe judgment on sinners, but also of His mercy and power to save those who repent. (Note, by the way, that Jesus assumed the truthfulness of the story of Jonah!)

In the same way, Jesus' death on the cross showed God's awful wrath against sin, as Jesus was pierced through for our transgressions (Isa. 53:5). But His resurrection from the dead three days later showed God's power over sin and death and His mercy toward every sinner who will trust in Jesus. Thus Jesus' death and resurrection was the ultimate sign that proves that He is God's chosen Messiah, the one who would save His people from their sins (Matt. 1:21).

The point is, because we all are like sheep who have gone astray, who each have turned to his own way, we cannot come to the holy God and demand that He jump through our hoops to meet our demands for proof. Our need is not for more proof; our need is for repentance. God has given us all the evidence we need in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. We can only come to Him on His terms through the way He has provided, through the Lamb of God who died for our sins and was raised for our justification.

2. The right way to respond to God's Word is to repent and trust in the person and work of Christ.

Jesus' words spell out several implications of this:

- A. Allow God's Word to confront your sin.

"As the crowds were increasing," Jesus began to say, "You're all wonderful people. God loves you and so do I." That's *not* what He said! Jesus wasn't into giving strokes to everyone to build their self-esteem. Centuries before the false prophets won a large following by saying, "Peace, peace," when there was no true peace (Jer. 6:14; 8:11). God said that they healed the brokenness of His people superficially. Any preaching that does not confront sin is false preaching. God doesn't heal by giving lots of hugs to make sinners feel better about themselves. He heals by confronting and cutting out the cancer of sin that is slowly but surely destroying people. So Jesus began by saying, "This generation is a wicked generation."

We tend to view success in the ministry by numbers. If a church is growing, if thousands are flocking to it, then the pastor becomes a model for church growth. He writes books on how he did it and he puts on seminars where thousands of unsuccessful pastors come to hear how they can do what he did. The sad thing

is, at very few of these seminars do the pastors hear that they need to preach against sin, to preach the holiness of God, to preach about the awfulness of the coming judgment. What they're hearing is that they need to preach for only 15 or 20 minutes at the most, and use lots of stories, because people don't want to hear stuffy doctrinal sermons. Don't say anything to confront sin, because these people get beat up in the rough world all week long. What they want and need when they come to church is some good feelings and uplifting stories that will inspire hope for the next week.

As a result, people in American churches are starving for a word from God. Just before the apostle Paul was martyred, he wrote to his successor in the ministry, Timothy, and gave him one of the most solemn charges in all of Scripture:

I solemnly charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by His appearing and His kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires; and will turn away their ears from the truth, and will turn aside to myths. But you, be sober in all things, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry (2 Tim. 4:1-4).

Biblical preaching always reprovcs, rebukes, and exhorts. It does not tickle your ears and go along with your own desires. So when you hear the Word preached or when you read the Word, allow it to confront your sin. God only wounds in order to heal. When Scripture confronts you, don't dodge it. By owning up to sin and turning from it, you will grow to be more like Jesus.

B. Seek God's wisdom and truth no matter what the cost.

This is the lesson we should learn from the Queen of Sheba ("the South"), who went to great trouble, effort, expense, and time to travel from southern Arabia to learn God's wisdom through King Solomon. Jesus' point was that the men of His day had the very Son of God preaching God's wisdom in their very midst, and yet they ignored Him, whereas this pagan woman was willing to

travel hundreds of miles through harsh terrain to seek out someone not nearly as great.

We must ask ourselves, "Will the Queen of Sheba rise up and condemn us in the day of judgment?" We have the completed canon of God's Holy Word in our own language. Men like Wycliffe and Tyndale suffered much persecution and Tyndale gave his life so that we could have the Bible in English. There are still many people groups around the world who do not have even one book of the Bible in their own language. Do we read the Word? Do we meditate on it daily? Can we truly say with the psalmist, "The law of Your mouth is better to me than thousands of gold and silver pieces" (Ps. 119:72)?

I read of a man in Kansas City who was severely injured in an explosion. His face was badly disfigured, and he lost his eyesight as well as both hands. He had just become a Christian when the accident happened, and one of his greatest disappointments was that he could no longer read the Bible. Then he heard about a lady in England who read braille with her lips. Hoping to do the same, he sent for some books of the Bible in braille. But he discovered that the nerve endings in his lips had been too badly damaged to distinguish the characters. One day, as he brought one of the braille pages to his lips, his tongue happened to touch a few of the raised characters and he could feel them. In a flash he thought, "I can read the Bible using my tongue." At the time this incident was reported, the man had read completely through his Bible four times using his tongue! (in Donald Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines of the Christian Life* [NavPress], pp. 30-31). So what's your excuse for not reading your Bible regularly?

C. Turn from your sin and obey God no matter how radical the change.

This is the lesson of Jonah and the Ninevites. Jonah despised the Assyrians, whose capital was Ninevah. They were a brutal, godless people, devoted to the destruction of Israel. But God told Jonah to go and preach to them. After his three-day submarine ride, the disobedient prophet repented and went to Ninevah. Just as he feared, though, the Ninevites repented and God withheld His judgment from them. Even the king of Ninevah put on sackcloth and publicly repented of his sin! It was one of the most astounding

revivals in history! It shows us that no matter how wicked and worldly the sinner, if he hears the message of God's impending judgment and yet of His great mercy in Jesus Christ, and comes in genuine faith to Christ, he will be transformed. The gospel is the power of God to salvation to everyone who believes, whether it be the raw pagan or the religious do-gooder (Rom. 1:16).

This means that there is hope in Jesus Christ for the worst of sinners. No matter how terrible your past, if you will repent of your sin and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ as the one who bore your penalty on the cross, God will transform your life from the inside out. The men of Ninevah are a testimony of what God's grace can do with any sinner who will repent and believe the gospel.

D. Respond obediently to the light that you have been given and you will receive more light.

This is the main thrust of the parable that Jesus goes on to give (11:33-36). Jesus' teaching is the lamp set on the lampstand. He was displaying God's truth openly for all to see (11:33). If a person's spiritual eye is clear, he can see the truth that Jesus proclaims. But, if a person's heart is darkened by sin, the light does no good. No amount of light helps a blind man (11:34). Thus, the warning, "Watch out that the light in you may not be darkness." Respond obediently to the light that you've been given through Jesus and you will receive more light. Ignore or reject the light that you've been given, and it will be taken away and you'll be left in total darkness. But if you respond obediently to the light Jesus gives, your entire life will be lit up and you will be a light unto others (11:36).

Thus great privilege is also great responsibility. It is a great privilege to hear God's Word preached and to read the Word. But that privilege also means that we are responsible to obey what we hear and read in the Word. If we respond obediently, our lives will be illumined by God so that we will know how to live in a manner pleasing to Him. Also, He will use our lives to shine on others who are lost in the darkness of sin. But, if we disregard the Word, even the light we have received will become darkness.

E. Disregard the light you have been given and you will face eternal judgment.

It is plain from our text that Jesus believed in a coming judgment where all the living and dead will be present. The Queen of Sheba and her retinue will be there. The people of Ninevah will be there. The men of Jesus' day will be there. You and I and everyone we know will be there. God, the righteous judge, will judge every person based on the light they received and their response to it. As Paul argues in Romans 1 and 2, God has made Himself evident to all people through creation and through conscience, but men "did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened" (Rom. 1:21). All people have violated both the law of God and their own consciences and thus stand justly condemned before God (Rom. 2:12-16). Any darkness in our lives is not God's fault. It is due to our own sinfulness and our stubborn refusal to obey God's Word. Thus all people need a Savior from the coming judgment. Thank God, He has provided that Savior!

F. Our faith must be in Jesus Christ who is God's only way of salvation.

Jesus is the lamp on the lampstand, set there for all to see. He and His teaching is the "something greater" than Solomon or Jonah. His death and resurrection from the dead is the sign we need to confirm that He is God's chosen one, God's Savior. As Paul argues (1 Cor. 15:12-19), the entire Christian faith rests on the reality of Christ's resurrection from the dead. If we don't see Him and flee to Him for refuge from God's wrath, the problem is with our darkened eyes, not with His shining light. We must cry out to God for eyes to see the light of Jesus Christ, who offered up Himself as the perfect sacrifice for sinners. "There is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men, by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12).

Conclusion

Several years ago, a man and his wife started attending the church I pastored in California. She was a believer, but he was not. After a few months, the wife needed surgery, and so I went to the hospital to sit with the husband while she was being operated on. After we had chatted about general things for a while, I said, "Bruce, you've been coming to the church for quite a while. I'd be interested to know whether you have yet put your trust in Christ as

Savior or not." He replied, "No, I still have some unanswered questions."

I said, "Well, what are they? Maybe I can shed some light on them." He said, "I have a lot of them." I said, "Well, we've got lots of time right now. What are the main ones?" He still hesitated, so I said, "How about if you give me a list of your questions. If I can give reasonable answers to them, then will you become a Christian?" He said, "If I've been hearing you correctly, if I trust in Christ then I have to yield my whole life to Him and do what He says. Is that right?" I said, "You got it!" He said, "I'm not ready to do that yet." Thankfully, a few months later he made that commitment to Christ and I baptized him.

The issue isn't that you need more evidence. The issue is that you need repentance. You need to acknowledge that you have sinned against the holy God and that your good works could never pay for your sins. You need a Savior. You need to recognize that Jesus Christ is that Savior. He offered Himself on the cross to pay the price you deserve. If you will turn from your sin and trust in Christ as your sin-bearer, you will be flooded with light from God. You will be able to say, "I once was blind, but now I see!"

Discussion Questions

1. Is it ever legitimate to provide more evidence for someone who is questioning Christianity? If so, when?
2. How would you respond to someone who said, "If I just saw a miracle with my own eyes, I'd believe"?
3. Why wasn't Jesus more "diplomatic" (11:29)? How confrontational should we be in our witness (see Col. 4:5-6).
4. If people without Christ are spiritually blind, is it wrong to appeal to them to "see" (by believing)? Why/why not?

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