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EVIL RELIGION

Luke 22:1-6

By

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Luke Lesson 98

Evil Religion Luke 22:1-6

Religion is one of the greatest forces for evil in this world. Satan has probably done more to damage genuine Christianity through religion than through blatant wickedness or any other evil. In fact, the greatest crime in history came about when Satan used a very religious man to betray the Son of God into the hands of other religious men who murdered Him.

Our text introduces the events that directly led to the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. Judas Iscariot went to the Jewish religious leaders and struck a bargain to betray Jesus into their hands. The religious leaders' problem was that Jesus was popular with the crowds. If they arrested Him publicly, it could start a riot that would backfire on them. They were considering waiting until the crowds dispersed after the festival (Mark 14:2). But when Judas came to them, it suddenly opened up new possibilities. If he could hand Jesus over to them in a private setting, they could achieve their goal and yet avoid a riot. If the people raised any objections, the leaders could blame Judas. It seemed like the opportunity they had been waiting for.

Little did those leaders know that their sinister plot, including the change of timing, perfectly fulfilled the eternal counsel of God, who had ordained that His Passover Lamb would be slain precisely at the time of the Jewish Passover celebration. They were responsible for their terrible sin, and yet they inadvertently carried out God's plan for the salvation of the world! John Calvin commented,

And it is of great importance for us to hold, that Christ was not unexpectedly dragged to death by the violence of his enemies, but was led to it by the providence of God; for our confidence in the propitiation is founded on the conviction that he was offered to God as that sacrifice which God had appointed from the beginning. And therefore he determined that his Son should be sacrificed on the very day of *the passover*, that the ancient figure might give place to the only sacrifice of

eternal redemption (*Calvin's Commentaries* [Baker], "Harmony of the Gospels," 3:186, italics his).

The spiritual lesson for us from these verses is:

Since it is possible to be religious and yet to be in league with Satan, we must guard against evil religion.

1. Satan uses religion more than any other tool to keep men in his domain of darkness.

"Satan entered into Judas" (22:3). Behind the scenes of world and personal events lurks an evil spirit, the devil, who is working for his own ends in opposition to God. If he can pawn off counterfeit religions that keep people from knowing the true God, he can hold them in spiritual darkness. They think that they are right with God, but in reality, they are not.

All of the world's major religions (except biblical Christianity) invariably promote the idea that man can save himself through some form of good works or human effort. Inherent in such an approach to salvation are several fatally flawed notions. God's absolute holiness must be pulled down to a level where we can approach Him by our own good deeds. Thus the character of God is blasphemed. Man's sinfulness must be played down and his goodness built up to the point that we can do something to save ourselves. If we aren't dead in our sins, alienated from God to the degree that we can do nothing to remedy the situation, then we don't need a perfect substitute to atone for our sins. We don't need Christ to save us; we just need to try the best we can. So you can see why Satan loves religion. It makes the cross unnecessary and it feeds the pride of sinful man. But we must go a step further:

2. People can even profess and belong to true religion and yet be in league with Satan.

The chief priests and scribes believed in the true God of the Bible, who revealed Himself to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Judas was not just a follower of Jesus, but also one of the twelve. And yet they all were in league with Satan in plotting for Jesus' death.

Even so, there are many who profess to be Christians, but they are in harmony with Satan, not with Jesus Christ. The Crusades were ostensibly under the banner of Christianity, but there

was nothing Christian about them. Satan still uses them to malign true Christianity. The Inquisition and the persecution carried on under the reign of Bloody Mary in England were done in the name of Christ, and yet these events and the people responsible for them were hideously evil. The Protestant-Catholic terrorism in Northern Ireland is not Christian in any sense of the word, and yet the world perceives of it as Christian versus Christian.

Looking at the Jewish religious leaders and Judas, we can see a number of dangers for all who hold to belief in the one true God:

- Religious profession is not enough.

The chief priests and scribes professed to know and fear the one true God. They professed to believe in the Scriptures. Judas professed to be a follower of Christ. And yet they killed the sinless Savior. Anyone can make a profession of faith, but in and of itself, such a profession is not enough to guard us from evil religion.

- Religious knowledge is not enough.

The chief priests and scribes knew the Hebrew Bible better than any of us do. They studied it for years in the original language. They could cite lengthy passages by memory. But in spite of their impressive learning, they missed Christ. Their knowledge filled them with pride, when it should have humbled them before God. Spiritual knowledge is good if it brings us to the true knowledge of God and of ourselves, which always results in humility. But if it puffs us up with all that we know, it will bring us to ruin.

- Religious position is not enough.

These men were the religious leaders of the nation. They had spiritual oversight of more than a million Jews. But they crucified the Savior. Judas was one of the twelve apostles, hand-picked by Jesus Christ. Yet he betrayed the Savior of the world for a small bag of silver. You can be the pastor of a large church or the head of a large denomination and yet be in league with Satan.

- Religious ritual is not enough.

These men were about to celebrate the Passover and Feast of Unleavened Bread. But at the same time, they were going to murder an innocent man, their Messiah, no less! The Passover pictured

God's salvation as seen in the Exodus. The Feast of Unleavened Bread that immediately followed pictured removing sin from our lives. If they had taken to heart the message of Passover, how could they have been plotting murder at the same time? It is easy to go through religious rituals and miss the message behind the ritual. Mafia members can go to the Mass and go home and arrange the murder of a rival. Church members can partake of communion and go home and verbally abuse their mates or children. Ritual is not enough.

- Religious service is not enough.

The chief priests and scribes had devoted their lives to religious duties. Judas had served Christ for three years in as close a capacity as possible. He had gone out with the other disciples, preaching and healing the sick in Jesus' name. But all the religious service in the world is worthless if we betray Jesus.

- Religious affiliation is not enough.

The chief priests and scribes were affiliated with the cream of religious leaders in Judaism. Judas was a member of the twelve. He was personally acquainted with Peter, James, and John, not to mention, Jesus. He could tell you inside stories about these great men. You would think that some of it would have rubbed off on him. But you can know godly men and run in godly circles and yet not be godly yourself.

- Religious experience is not enough.

Judas witnessed the many miracles Christ performed. He had seen Jesus heal the sick and raise the dead. He had watched Jesus feed the 5,000 and walk on the water. He had seen Jesus hold large crowds spellbound with His teaching. But all of his spiritual experiences did not keep Judas from betraying Jesus. Even so, people today report all sorts of interesting and amazing spiritual experiences. They speak in tongues, laugh uncontrollably, bark like dogs, roar like lions, get slain in the Spirit, and lay prostrate on the floor. They go forward at evangelistic crusades and feel a warm glow come over them. But ask Judas. He will tell you that you can have amazing religious experiences and still betray the Savior. Religious experience is inadequate by itself.

If it is possible to profess to be a Christian and to do all of these other things, and yet to be in league with Satan, how can we guard against such evil religion in ourselves?

3. At the core of evil religion are the lack of genuine conversion, the rejection of Jesus as Lord, and the promotion of selfish desires under the guise of religious commitment.

A. Evil religion lacks genuine conversion.

Many different theories have been suggested as to why Judas would do such a thing as betray Jesus. But at the root of whatever motivated Judas was this key factor: He was *not a converted man*. This is the key difference between Judas and Peter. Peter failed miserably, denying Jesus at His moment of greatest need, humanly speaking. Both men felt badly after their failures. But the difference was, Peter was truly converted; Judas was not.

We need to understand that true conversion is not a matter of making a decision to follow Christ. A decision cannot save anyone. True conversion has nothing to do with anything that we can do. Rather, conversion is a matter of God imparting spiritual life to a person who is dead in his trespasses and sins (Eph. 2:1-5; John 1:12-13). Without God imparting life to our dead hearts, we cannot and will not believe in Christ or make a commitment to follow Him (John 6:44, 65; Luke 10:22; Rom. 8:7-8). As James 1:18 puts it, "In the exercise of His will He brought us forth by the word of truth, so that we might be, as it were, the first fruits among His creatures."

True conversion, then, is not something that people can will or believe into existence. True conversion is the mighty power of God through the gospel and it necessarily changes our hearts. Whereas before we were self-willed, now we submit to God. Before we were proud of our goodness; now we are humbled by our sin. Before we shrugged off or justified our sin; now we confess and mourn over our sin. Before we didn't really care about knowing God; now it is our one desire and quest. When God saves you, He changes your heart. False religion lacks true conversion.

B. Evil religion rejects Jesus Christ as Lord.

By distinguishing this point from the previous one, I am not suggesting that we first get saved and then add lordship sometime

later, as a second step. A truly converted person bows before the lordship of Jesus Christ and seeks to bring every aspect of his life under Christ's lordship. But I separate this point to emphasize something that many who profess Christ as Savior do not realize, namely, that they have never dethroned self and enthroned Christ as Lord. They came to Christ in hopes that He could do something for them. Maybe they hoped He would fix their marriage or straighten out a rebellious child. Perhaps they hoped that He would make them happy. But their problems have only grown worse. They are disappointed with Christ. He hasn't given them what they had hoped for. They are in danger of turning to false gods for help.

Such people may not be converted at all, because they are only using Christ to fulfill self, not denying self to follow Christ (Luke 9:23). Self is still in control. If Jesus will cooperate and give what self wants, they will follow Jesus. If not, they will turn to whatever makes self happy. This is merely evil religion, using religion to get what you want out of life.

I am speculating a bit, but I think I'm not far off the mark in suggesting that Judas was following Jesus for what he thought Jesus could provide for him, but he had not submitted to Christ as Lord. If Jesus is the Messiah and can set up His kingdom and get rid of Rome, Judas was on board. Besides, as one of the twelve, he should get a top assignment in the new kingdom. But when Judas saw Jesus heading toward the cross, he was horrified. This wasn't the kind of Messiah he had envisioned. He hadn't signed on to face persecution and perhaps martyrdom. He wanted prestige, power, and material comfort. He was using Jesus for his own ends. When Jesus didn't "work," he was willing to betray Him for 30 pieces of silver.

Each of us needs to ask ourselves, "Am I following Christ for what I can get out of Him?" That's the religion of Judas. Or, have I submitted to Jesus as Lord, no matter what the cost? That is true Christianity.

- C. Evil religion promotes selfish desires under the guise of religious commitment.

The Jewish leaders and Judas were religious men, but their religion was a thin veneer over selfish desires and a means to fulfilling those desires. There were three areas of selfish desires these men shared in common:

- The desire for money and material things.

We have already seen that the Pharisees were lovers of money (16:14). The fact that Judas received money for betraying Jesus confirms what John 12:6 states, that Judas was a thief who pilfered out of the disciples' money box. Evil religion does not kill greed. But God always confronts our greed. Covetousness is one of the Ten Commandments. Greed is often linked with idolatry and sexual immorality (Eph. 5:3, 5; Col. 3:5). If you are not consistently confronting your greed, you need to re-examine your faith.

To betray the Son of God for money seems despicable beyond imagination. And yet, isn't that what millions do? They profess to be Christians, but their lives are consumed with the pursuit of material things. They cling to their things and are deeply offended if anyone suggests that they give away their things for the cause of Christ. They will even cheat or lie or compromise their morals and their testimony so that they can get ahead. They are betraying Jesus for money, just as Judas did.

- The desire for prestige and recognition.

The Jewish leaders wanted the prestige that came from being a religious leader in Israel. They loved the respectful greetings and the chief seats in the synagogue (20:46). They were overly concerned about what people thought of them (22:2, 6). They feared the multitude, but they did not fear God.

I am inferring this, since Scripture does not directly say, but I think that Judas also may have liked the prestige that came from being in the inner circle with Jesus during the time of His popularity. Many in the crowd would whisper, "He's one of the twelve." It made Judas feel good to be so important. But now that Jesus' popularity was in question, Judas wanted to get on the good side of the religious leaders. By leading them to Jesus, he could assure himself of recognition with the rulers after Jesus was out of the way.

We all need to judge our own hearts. We can serve in the church for the recognition and prestige that it brings, rather than out of love for Jesus Christ.

- The desire for power and influence.

Evil religion involves men a contest for power. If you can work your way to the top, you'll gain power and influence. So you play religious politics. You network with those who have influence. You cater to the rich and famous. You use guile and manipulation to get ahead in the religious world. The Jewish religious leaders played such political games. Jesus threatened their power base. He challenged their greed and corruption. He exposed their selfish motives. But rather than yielding to Him, they decided to get rid of Him. And, Judas was using his inside information for his own ends. He should have judged his evil desire for power and influence.

When I first came to this church, I went out to lunch with the man who was then the regional director for the Southwest Conservative Baptist Association. During our conversation, he said, "You've got to build your power base in the church." I didn't reply, but I thought, "I'm sorry, but I'm not into building power bases or playing church politics." We should walk in integrity before God and not be using people to build our power base.

We've seen that Satan uses evil religion to keep people in his domain of darkness. They can even profess true religion, yet be in league with Satan. At the core of evil religion are a lack of genuine conversion, the rejection of Christ as Lord, and the promotion of selfish desires under the guise of religious commitment.

4. Evil religion brings initial happiness and gain, but final ruin.

Verse 5 sends a chill down my spine: "And they were glad, and agreed to give him money." How can anyone be glad about the prospect of killing the Son of God? How could Judas be glad about striking such a deal? I can see the chief priest going home that night, and his wife said, "You seem unusually happy. What's going on?" And he said, "It looks like we're finally going to get rid of that troublemaker, Jesus! What a relief!" And Judas walked away with that bag of silver under his coat, smiling as he thought of

the things he could buy. But their happiness was short-lived. Their doom is eternal!

The things that make you glad reveal your heart. If hearing that you just won the Reader's Digest Sweepstakes makes you leap for joy, but hearing that the gospel has just penetrated a previously unreached people group makes you say, "Ho hum," your heart is not right before God. The things that make God rejoice should make us rejoice. The things that make God grieve, namely sin, should make us grieve.

Conclusion

In light of how Satan uses religion for his evil purposes, it is shocking when evangelical Christian leaders, such as Billy Graham, endorse religious men who clearly deny the gospel. For example, Graham spoke well of the late Norman Vincent Peale, who said on a 1984 Phil Donahue show, "It's not necessary to be born again. You have your way to God; I have mine. I found eternal peace in a Shinto shrine... I've been to Shinto shrines, and God is everywhere." Even Donahue was shocked. He responded, "But you're a Christian minister; you're supposed to tell me that Christ is the way and the truth and the life, aren't you?" Peale replied, "Christ is one of the ways. God is everywhere" ("The Berean Call," 10/97, citing *The Christian News*, 5/12/97, p. 11).

Graham has also endorsed Robert Schuller who denies the gospel. He endorses Pope John Paul II as "the greatest religious leader of the modern world, and one of the greatest moral and spiritual leaders of this century" (on David Frost, 5/30/97). He even said, "I think Islam is misunderstood, too, because Mohammed has a great respect for Jesus, and he called Jesus the greatest of the prophets except himself. And I think that we're closer to Islam than we really think we are" (*ibid.*).

My purpose is not to slam Billy Graham, although he needs someone to confront him. My purpose is to illustrate my main point, that since it is possible to be religious and yet be in league with Satan, we must guard ourselves against evil religion. At best Graham is extremely undiscerning. At worst, people who hear him say things like that will be kept from true salvation.

I hope that none of you are deceived. Avoid evil religion. Do not endorse it. Do not join with it. Make sure that your heart is right before God. Are you trusting in Christ alone for salvation? Are you judging your sin on the heart level? Are you seeking to please God and walk before Him? If you are, you will avoid the danger of betraying the Son of God for a bag of silver.

Discussion Questions

1. Discuss the ways that Satan uses religion to keep people in his domain of darkness.
2. Why is it important to emphasize that salvation is a matter of God's mighty power, not the result of a human decision?
3. Is it wrong in presenting the gospel to tell people of all that Christ can do for them? Why/why not?
4. Greed was one factor in Judas' fall. How can we detect greed in ourselves and fight against it?

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