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RELIGION VERSUS REALITY

Luke 13:10-17

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Luke Lesson 64

Religion Versus Reality Luke 13:10-17

One of the most effective tools that Satan has used to keep people away from a relationship with the living God is dead religion. When our Lord was on this earth, His main battles were not with raw pagans. His main conflicts were with the religious crowd. Down through the centuries, Satan, the master counterfeiter, has smuggled religious people into churches in order to keep the others from a genuine, heart-transforming experience with God.

Perhaps the best description of dead religion came from our Lord when He confronted the Pharisees by saying (Mark 7:6-9),

“Rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, ‘This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far away from Me. But in vain do they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the precepts of men’ [Isa. 29:13]. Neglecting the commandment of God, you hold to the tradition of men.” He was also saying to them, “You nicely set aside the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition.”

Luke has been showing the mounting division between Jesus and the Jewish religious leaders. Jesus is resolutely heading toward Jerusalem and the cross (9:51). In spite of His warnings to the leaders and the people that they can read the weather, but they're missing the signs of the times, they continue to oppose Him. He has just warned them that if they do not bear fruit soon, the owner of the vineyard will cut them down. Luke does not identify the current incident as to time or place, but he puts it here to show that in spite of continuing opposition from the religious leaders, God is powerfully at work through Jesus in establishing and extending His kingdom. The two parables that follow (13:18-21) underscore the same point.

Luke has repeatedly emphasized Jesus' teaching ministry (4:16-21, 31-32, 43; 5:17; 6:6, 17-49; 8:1; 9:11). Here, again, we find Jesus teaching. It must have been wonderful to listen to Jesus expound the Word of God! But even though Jesus was the most

gifted Teacher who has ever spoken, those with hardened hearts resisted His message. Even though Jesus backed up His message by mighty works of power, the religious leaders were growing in their opposition to Him. This is the last time in Luke that Jesus is reported to have spoken in a synagogue. The window of opportunity is closing. But for those who are the objects of His grace, such as this hunchbacked woman in the synagogue, the power of real contact with the Savior transforms their lives.

Note how Jesus took the initiative in this healing. The woman exhibited no faith. She did not appeal to Him. She probably could not even look up at Him, since she was bent over with her face toward the ground. But Jesus noticed her need and did everything necessary to heal her. G. Campbell Morgan (*The Gospel of Luke* [Revell], p. 163) points out that Jesus saw her and then adds, "If there is a man or a woman in any assembly of human beings, more in need than any other, that is the man or the woman that Jesus is after." That is true here today. Perhaps, like this woman, you have been coming to church for years in some spiritually bent-over condition. Perhaps people have ignored your need or have been helpless to do anything about it. But Jesus sees you and He wants the power of His Word to touch and heal your soul today. That power transforms you when you make real contact with the living Lord.

We should avoid dead religion and
pursue reality with the living Lord.

This passage reveals seven contrasts between dead religion and reality with the living Lord:

1. Dead religion is marked by bondage to Satan, but reality with the Lord frees people from long-term problems.

It was a fairly normal day at the synagogue as the worshipers filed in. The men sat on one side, the women and children on the other. Perhaps a bit late, because she could not move very quickly, this bent-over woman shuffled into her regular spot in the back. People were used to her—she had been coming there for years. But it was difficult to talk with her. It took great effort for her to turn her head up enough to look at anyone's face. Usually, she just looked down at the ground.

Probably the woman was a sincere believer in the Lord. Jesus calls her a daughter of Abraham. He later calls Zaccheus a son of Abraham after he believes (19:9). There is no indication that her problem was directly related to any sin. If so, surely Jesus would have given a word of rebuke or correction, but He gives none. The woman's decided faith is probably indicated by the fact of her presence. Think of the many excuses that she could have come up with to stay away! Her youthful beauty was now disfigured by her hunched back, so she probably was self-conscious about how she looked. She probably experienced constant pain, which distracted her from concentrating on the service. It was difficult to walk the distance to the synagogue. She couldn't look up toward the front to see what was going on. But in spite of these and many other potential excuses, she was there to worship God.

Most people looked at her and assumed that she had a physical problem, but Jesus perceived that her sickness was due to an evil spirit. Certainly not all and perhaps not many physical illnesses are caused by evil spirits but, clearly, some are. While demons cannot possess believers, they can afflict us in various ways. Paul attributed his thorn in the flesh to a messenger of Satan that was sent by God to keep him humble (2 Cor. 12:7). In his case, it was not God's will to remove the source of affliction, so that Paul was forced through his weakness to depend on God's strength. In other cases, such as here, it is His will to heal, but not until the problem had gone on for 18 long years. We don't know why God waited that long. Perhaps it was simply that He would be all the more glorified in her cure (John 9:3; 11:4).

But in spite of all her years of going to the synagogue, this woman was in bondage to this debilitating illness that Jesus ascribes to Satan. As such, she is a picture of the millions who attend religious services every week for years, but they live in spiritual bondage to sin and to the prince of darkness. They are often sincere people, but they are bent over under the load of sin and guilt. The religious system tolerates their bondage and perhaps even shrugs it off as accepted. But it can't deliver them from it. What they need is what this woman experienced, a personal encounter with the living Lord Jesus Christ. This leads to the second contrast between dead religion and reality with the living Lord:

2. Dead religion is impotent for lasting change, but reality with the Lord is powerful.

What religion had not been able to do over 18 years and was not even attempting to do, Jesus did in an instant. He saw her, He spoke to her, He laid His hands on her, and she was instantly freed from this terrible affliction. She stood upright for the first time in 18 years. The difference that day for this woman was that she didn't just go to a religious service. She had personal contact with the living Lord. Meeting Him personally freed her from bondage to the enemy of her soul and instantly cured a body that probably had severe spinal deformity. The length of the illness was no problem for Jesus. It just brought greater glory to the power of God in releasing her from her problem.

It would be wrong to conclude that the moment you meet Jesus Christ all your problems will instantly and miraculously disappear. Some people do experience dramatic deliverance from long-term problems, such as alcohol or drug addiction at the moment of salvation. Others struggle against such problems for years after conversion. It would be wrong to imply that such people are not truly converted because they still struggle. God simply has different lessons to teach them or a different purpose in His dealings with them.

But even though salvation does not always bring instant deliverance from long-term problems, it *always* results in an instantaneous, dramatic change of heart that comes from nothing less than the supernatural power of God. Conversion means that the formerly dead sinner receives new life from God. God changes his heart of stone into a heart of flesh that is warm toward the things of God. The formerly blind sinner's eyes are opened so that he now can see spiritual truth. The formerly captive sinner is loosed from his chains and set free so that he now can have power over the sin that held him in bondage. All of these biblical metaphors for conversion teach us that it is not merely a human decision to turn over a new leaf. Conversion requires the life-giving power of God in raising the sinner from the dead.

Before he was converted, John Wesley was an intensely religious young man. Following in his father's footsteps, he was ordained as a priest in the Anglican Church. Along with some of his

friends, such as George Whitefield, Wesley met with the Holy Club at Oxford to promote religion. These men met regularly for prayer, the study of the Greek New Testament, self-examination, and accountability to do works of charity. They sought to practice high moral standards. Wesley went as a missionary to the Indians and colonists in Georgia. But when he returned to England, he lamented, "I went to America to convert the Indians; but, oh, who shall convert me?"

During his crossing of the Atlantic, Wesley had been on board with a bunch of German Moravians who had a genuine faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. During a storm at sea, Wesley was gripped by fear for his life, but these people were singing praises to God. When he got back to England, he started attending their meetings. On May 24, 1738, as Wesley listened to a brother read from the preface of Martin Luther's commentary on Romans, he felt his heart "strangely warmed." From then on, Wesley declared, he had only "one point of view—to promote so far as I am able vital, practical religion; and by the grace of God to beget, preserve, and increase the life of God in the souls of men" (*A Skevington Wood, The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church* [Zondervan], ed. by J. D. Douglas, p. 1034). Wesley's phrase, "the life of God in the souls of men," is the difference between dead religion and the power of reality with the Lord Jesus Christ.

3. Dead religion lacks compassion for hurting people, but reality with the Lord results in compassion.

The leader of the synagogue probably hadn't noticed when this stooped-over woman had hobbled in that day. After all, she was a woman, and the Jews only tolerated women in religious matters. She probably was poor, so she wasn't a big contributor to the synagogue coffers. He didn't care about the fact that this poor woman had just been healed from 18 years of a terrible affliction. What bothered him was that it had been done on the Sabbath! So he stands up and scolds the whole crowd, including the woman, for coming on the Sabbath to get healed! Tenderhearted he was not!

By way of contrast, our Lord was full of compassion for those who hurt, especially for those who were being neglected or abused by the religious leaders. He saw the multitudes and "felt compassion for them, because they were distressed and downcast like

sheep without a shepherd" (Matt. 9:36). While the men of Jesus' day had a low view of women that led them to shut them out from spiritual matters, Jesus always had time to spend with women, to teach them the things of God and to show concern for their problems. Even though this woman was stooped over and perhaps hidden by the taller people in the crowd, Jesus saw her and took the time to call her over and deliver her from this illness.

If we have reality with the Savior, we will be growing in seeing people through His eyes of compassion. Although Jesus concentrated His time on the twelve, He always had time for those who needed His tender touch. The disciples thought that children were wasting the Master's time, but He rebuked the disciples and welcomed the children into His arms. The disciples were baffled that He would take the time to talk with the Samaritan woman at the well, but Jesus knew that she needed the living water He had to offer. While sometimes due to human limitations or other commitments we must say no to the demands of needy people, we should never do so callously. We should grow in compassion as we walk with our compassionate Lord.

4. Dead religion is joyless and angry, but reality with the Lord is full of joy.

Here this poor woman has this dramatic healing and all this synagogue official can do is get angry and lecture everyone on the proper time to come for healing! Incredible! But we've all met people just like him.

I once performed a wedding at a church in San Bernardino, because the bride and groom were afraid that if they held the wedding at our church in the mountains, guests might not be able to come because of snow. The church required that their pastor stand up front with me and have a part in the ceremony. Before the ceremony, he invited me into his office. He lit up a Marlboro and I noticed an overflowing ashtray on his desk. I also noticed a fairly recent certificate of graduation from a seminary on the wall and so I asked, "Did you go into the ministry as a second career?" He said, "Yes, I did it so that I could live with myself." I didn't say anything, but I thought, "What a reason to be in the ministry!"

During the ceremony, as I was giving the message, a girl near the front stood up and flashed a snapshot. Nothing had been said to the congregation about not taking pictures, but this minister interrupted me. “Just a minute!” he snapped. Pointing directly at the girl, he snarled, “Pictures are not allowed! This is worship and we don’t allow pictures during worship!” I don’t remember how I recovered from that one, but it was a classic example of joyless, angry, dead religion breaking through at a time when there should have been great joy.

Sadly, many Christian homes are marked more by rules and by anger than by heartfelt joy in the Lord. I’m not suggesting that there should not be any rules or that they should not be enforced. But I am saying that if we have reality in Christ, the atmosphere in our homes should be thick with joy and not with anger. Anger is a deed of the flesh, but joy is a fruit of the Holy Spirit (Gal. 5:20, 22).

5. Dead religion is hypocritical, but reality with the Lord is truthful and genuine.

Jesus calls not only the synagogue official, but also everyone who was in agreement with him, hypocrites. The official was a hypocrite because he didn’t have the integrity to address Jesus directly, but he scolded Jesus by scolding the crowd. Also, he pretended to be concerned about people—they could come and get cured on other days—but he wasn’t concerned about people at all. He was just concerned that someone had violated his rules. He was like a store owner I read about who became so obsessed with keeping his store neat that he locked the doors during much of the day to keep out customers because they were messing up his shelves! He had forgotten why he was in business.

The Bible teaches a proper use of the Lord’s Day. We should set aside one day in seven to worship God and to rest from our normal work. But to come up with intricate rules of what you can and cannot do to observe the Sabbath leads to hypocrisy. People end up focused on the rules and neglecting the point, which is to meet with God and His people and to rest from the regular routine.

In contrast to the hypocrisy of dead religion, Jesus always was truthful and genuine. If people were hypocrites, Jesus called them hypocrites to their faces. He wasn’t manipulative. He didn’t go

behind people's backs to share "prayer concerns." I once had to confront a man in a group setting for his unbiblical behavior. In the prayer time at the end of the meeting, he piously prayed, "Lord, I forgive my brother for his unloving and judgmental spirit toward me." I told him afterwards, "You didn't need to forgive me because I didn't wrong you." He was just being a hypocrite.

6. Dead religion promotes the wrong priorities, but reality with the Lord keeps the right priorities.

The religious leaders valued their rules over relationships and, as Jesus pointed out, they even valued their animals over people. On the Sabbath, they felt free to untie their ox or donkey and lead them to water, but they didn't want Jesus to heal this woman who had been bound by Satan all these years. It was not only in Jesus' day, by the way, that people valued their animals more than they value people. I have encountered people who allow their dogs to come at me with their teeth bared, but when I defend myself, they get angry at me for threatening to harm their dogs!

Dead religion always has mixed up priorities. It glories when people keep the rules, even if their hearts are far from God. It is happy with outward conformity, even though relationships are shattered. It boasts in numbers, even if there is open sin in the camp. But reality with the Lord focuses on developing and maintaining a heart of love for God and for others.

7. Dead religion brings glory to men, but reality with the Lord brings glory to Him.

Dead religion glories in outward, fleshly conformity. As Paul said with regard to the Judaizers, "They desire to have you circumcised, that they may boast in your flesh" (Gal. 6:13). When this woman experienced Jesus' healing touch, she glorified God (Luke 13:13). The goal of Jesus' ministry was to deliver people from Satan's power so that God would be glorified. Those who think that they are saved by their good works glory in themselves. Those who have truly been saved know that it was totally by God's grace, and so they give Him all the glory. As Matthew Henry observes, "When crooked souls are made straight, they will show it by their glorifying God" (*Matthew Henry's Commentary* [Scripture Truth Book Company], 5:724). Or, as the psalmist exults, "How blessed is the

one whom You choose, and bring near to You, to dwell in Your courts. We will be satisfied with the goodness of Your house, Your holy temple" (Ps. 65:4). People feel comfortable with dead religion because it does not confront the flesh; instead, it feeds the flesh. But Jesus always confronts our sinful pride and selfishness. The goal of the one who has met Jesus is to glorify God.

Conclusion

Luke concludes this story by noting that Jesus' opponents were being humiliated, but the multitude was rejoicing over all the glorious things being done by Him (13:17). As we saw before, Jesus and His teaching draw a line that divides. This miracle isn't recorded here so that we can come to church, sit and say, "That's interesting," and go home the same way we were. It's here to make us ask ourselves, "Which side am I on? Am I just going through the motions of dead religion, or do I have reality with the living Lord Jesus Christ?"

Think through these seven contrasts:

(1) Dead religion is marked by bondage to Satan, but reality with the Lord frees people from long-term problems.

(2) Dead religion is impotent for lasting change, but reality with the Lord is powerful.

(3) Dead religion lacks compassion for hurting people, but reality with the Lord results in compassion.

(4) Dead religion is joyless and angry, but reality with the Lord is full of joy.

(5) Dead religion is hypocritical, but reality with the Lord is truthful and genuine.

(6) Dead religion promotes the wrong priorities, but reality with the Lord keeps the right priorities.

(7) Dead religion brings glory to men, but reality with the Lord brings glory to Him.

Ask yourself honestly, "Which marks my life: Dead religion or reality with the living Lord?" If you lack reality, your need, like that of this woman, is to make personal contact with Jesus Himself. He alone has the power to release you from dead religion so that you can walk in the joy of new life with Him.

Discussion Questions

1. Dead religion seems to keep creeping back into our lives. How can we spot it and fight it?
2. How can we know if a problem is due to demonic activity? How can we know if it is God's will to deliver us instantly?
3. Why are so many Christian homes marked by anger rather than by joy? How can we turn this around?
4. Since hypocrisy is so subtle, how can we be on guard against it in our own lives?

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