

Jesus!
“The Danger of Religion without Reality”
Luke 11:37-54

Take a first look.

I. **Karl Rahner was an influential Catholic theologian who died in 1984.** He was quoted in a Christian magazine over two decades ago with an observation that is far too true. “The number one cause of atheism is Christians. Those who proclaim God with their mouths and deny Him with their lifestyles is what an unbelieving world finds simply unbelievable.”¹

II. What Rahner claims is that a *supposed religion* without the corresponding *spiritual reality* is dangerous and defeating, both for the person who practices it and for those looking in vain for the real thing.

III. **The great 19th- and early 20th-century preacher G. Campbell Morgan stated something like this in regard to the Church:** “The Church of God apart from the Person of Christ is a useless structure. However ornate it may be in its organization, however perfect in all its arrangements, however rich and increased with goods, if the Church is not revealing the Person, lifting Him to the height where all men can see Him, then the Church becomes an impertinence and a sham, a blasphemy and a fraud, and the sooner the world is rid of it, the better.”²

It is the reality of Jesus Christ that we need, that the Church must demonstrate, and that the watching world must see. Unless it does, we are lost and so are those who might seek Him from us.

Jesus confronted the evidence of religion without reality in the Judaism of the first century. Let’s learn from His rebuke of them so that we will not make the same error and bring the same judgment upon us.

Take a closer look at Luke 11:37-54.

I. RELIGION WITHOUT REALITY IS PERILOUS BECAUSE IT FOCUSES ON WHAT IS SEEN, NOT ON THE HEART.

1. *Jesus pronounced a woe upon the Pharisees for being so careful with the outside but being full of “greed and wickedness” on the inside.* See vv. 37-41. It was the Pharisee’s surprise that Jesus did not first wash before the meal in his home brought this foray of six woes. Jesus was more pointed and caustic against religious hypocrisy than against any other thing. The reason is simple: the hypocrite is simply acting, often with a convincing performance to be sure, but simply acting nevertheless. Jesus confronted these men with the obvious truth: they had the outside of their lives as clean and tidy as one would like, but they had not addressed the more sinister evil lurking in their hearts, “greed and wickedness” Jesus called it.

A—Is there anything in our hearts today that needs the cleansing work of God’s Spirit? Anything that we are covering up behind religious appearance or even busyness for the Church?

I—Remember the letters to the seven churches in the book of Revelation? The very first church addressed by our Lord Jesus was the church in Ephesus. It was a busy, well-organized, doctrinally sound congregation. It was founded by the Apostle Paul. He spent several years there overall. It was also in danger of having its lamp put out by the Lord—meaning that it would cease to exist. Why? Because, in the words of our Lord to that Church, “You have forsaken your first love.” All the doctrinal accuracy, all the people who were organized in the well-oiled machine of the church’s program, amounted to nothing. Jesus called upon the church in these words: “Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do

¹ Karl Rahner, quoted in *The Wittenburg Door* (June/July 1988). *Christianity Today*, Vol. 34, no. 8.

² G. Campbell Morgan in *Giant Steps*. *Christianity Today*, Vol. 40, no. 6.

the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place” (Revelation 2:4-5, NIV).

Without this kind of “first love,” according to Paul, we are nothing but a big noise that amounts to zero in spiritual effect (see (in 1 Corinthians 13:1ff.).

2. *Jesus pronounced a woe upon them because they gave such attention to the minor details of the law but missed the major things.* See v. 42. They were careful to give a tenth of their herbs, but they neglected “justice and the love of God.” Jesus wasn’t finding fault for what they did; He was calling them on the carpet for what they did not do. They kept the simple and less demanding details of the law. They tithed. But they willfully “neglected” the matters that mean much more, fairness in human relations and the love of God.

A—How deceptively easy it is to get into a routine of church-going, even serving in some role in the church, but at the same time allowing sinful attitudes to remain in our hearts—things like love-stifling gossip, backbiting criticism, even outright hatred. We may even justify our sinful attitudes based on the perceived hurts of the past.

I—James is characteristically direct and pointed in his little letter to Christians scattered all over the place. In his section about godly versus ungodly speech, he says this (**James 3:9-12**, FJV): ⁹ *By this member we are blessing the Lord and Father and by this we are cursing the people who have come into being according to the likeness of God;* ¹⁰ *out of the same mouth are coming a blessing and a curse! These things ought not to be this way, my brothers.* ¹¹ *The spring does not pour out of the same opening the sweet and the bitter, does it?* ¹² *My brothers, a fig tree is not able to produce olives nor a grapevine figs, are they? Nor is a salty spring able to produce sweet water.”*

James is challenging us to be people of *integrity*, people who are not fig trees by appearance who bring forth the fruit of grapevines, fresh-water springs by label who actually bring forth salt water. He is saying that our speech should match our profession of faith.

Philip Yancey notes that such a lack of unity among Christians is a lack of *grace*. It is destructive in every way. Every criticism that we bring against each other, either face to face, or worse, behind each other’s backs, is another brick in the wall that keeps others from seeing Christ clearly among us. “Mark Twain used to say,” writes Yancey, “he put a dog and cat in a cage together as an experiment, to see if they could get along. They did, so he put in a bird, pig, and goat. They, too, got along fine after a few adjustments. Then he put in a Baptist, Presbyterian, and Catholic; soon there was not a living thing left.”³

Twain was being funny, but the reality behind the humor is nothing to laugh at, is it? “Justice and the love of God,” expressed primarily toward God’s people, must be first. The other things should not be left undone, either.

3. *Jesus pronounced a woe upon the Pharisees because they sought notoriety in the synagogues and on the streets.* See v. 43. They really liked the people recognizing them by their distinctive dress and obvious piety, at least outward piety. This was perilous because it became a substitute for the reality of the heart before God.

A—Are we known primarily as church-goers, the simply religious, or as people in whom the grace and love and truth of God are at work?

I—In the same book from which I already drew, Philip Yancey quotes a Jewish intellectual named Anthony Hecht, who was both enticed toward and repelled from Jesus Christ because of Christians. “Over the years I not only grew to know it [my faith] better but became increasingly acquainted with the convictions of my Christian neighbors. Many of these were good people whom I admire, and from whom I learned goodness itself, among other things. And there was much in Christian doctrine that seemed appealing as well. But few things struck me with more force than the profound and unappeasable hostility

³ Philip Yancey, *What’s So Amazing About Grace?* p. 33.

of Protestants and Catholics toward one another.”⁴

Woe also to us when simply being recognized as Christians is enough. We should be known as those in whom the *love* and *grace* and *truth* of God is powerful and transforming. This will not guarantee a good reputation, but it will guarantee that our character will come close to matching our confession of faith. This leads us right into our next major observation from this incident.

II. RELIGION WITHOUT REALITY IS PERILOUS BECAUSE IT HARMS OTHERS.

1. *Jesus compared the Pharisees to “unmarked graves” which people “walk over without knowing it.”* See v. 44. This is an image of emptiness and death under a surface that hides it. People walk right over these “unmarked graves” and don’t even know what death and decay lies under their feet.

A—Our question should be, “What is right under the surface of our lives?” Is it life waiting to break forth, or is it death waiting to cast an awful stench when the surface is disturbed?

I—What are we “Bible-believing, evangelical Christians” known for? It isn’t life based on grace, according again to Philip Yancey’s experience. He recounts how he began asking a specific question of strangers wherever he went, to seatmates on airplanes, for example. “When I say the words “evangelical Christian” what comes to mind?” he asks. He relates, “In reply, mostly I hear political descriptions: of strident pro-life activists, or gay-rights opponents, or proposals for censoring the Internet. I hear references to the Moral Majority, an organization disbanded years ago. Not once—not once—have I heard a description redolent of grace. Apparently,” Yancey concludes, “that is not the aroma Christians give off in the world.”⁵

2. *Jesus pronounced a woe on the teachers of the law also because they did so little to truly help the people, yet their teachings laid burdens on them they could hardly carry.* See vv. 45-46. This is the essence of the evil of legalism. Every new requirement we add to the way of Christ that is not already included in the New Testament (and the Old Testament understood through the lens of Christ), is one more burden that weighs people down. The experts in the Jewish law of Jesus’ time were skilled at this. They had built a hedge around the Old Testament law of more fine-tuned regulations. They reasoned that if a person kept all the minutia they had added to God’s regulations for living, then that person would be sure to keep God’s law, too. What happened, however, was that the burden of the law just got heavier without relief.

A—Could we be tempted to a similar sort of legalism today? Do we extend the way of life in Christ as an updated list of “Do’s and Don’t’s”? This could make a person feel even more hopeless than before they are presented with the claims of Jesus Christ.

I—Remember the story, recounted in Acts 15, of the early church struggling with the nature of God’s salvation in Christ? They wrestled with what it was that God really required of people before they could be sure of their salvation. During that great first Council of the Church, meeting in Jerusalem, the Apostle Peter stood up and said something we must never forget: **Acts 15:7-12 (NIV):** *After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them: “Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe. ⁸ God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. ⁹ He made no distinction between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. ¹⁰ Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear? ¹¹ No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are.”* Did you catch it? “A yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear.” It is the yoke of legalism. Sadly, it is the yoke of what Philip Yancey calls “ungrace.”

⁴ Philip Yancey, *What’s So Amazing About Grace?* p. 33.

⁵ Philip Yancey, *What’s So Amazing About Grace?*, p. 31, his emphasis.

3. *Jesus pronounced a woe on His generation because they stood in a long tradition of failure to respond to God's message through His prophets.* See vv. 47-51. They honored the prophets by building the tombs where they were buried, but it was their very ancestors who killed them! They would not accept the challenges brought by those God sent to His people to turn from mere formalism and be changed.

I—Remember the stirring words of Micah, the Old Covenant prophet. The Lord reminded the people through the prophet Micah how He had done so much for them all through their history to “teach [them] about [His] faithfulness” (6:5, NLT). Yet, they refused to listen.

Then Micah asks the pertinent question, what should we do about it? Here is the question and the answer he gave (**Micah 6:6-8, NLT**): “What can we bring to the LORD to make up for what we’ve done? Should we bow before God with offerings of yearling calves? Should we offer him thousands of rams and tens of thousands of rivers of olive oil? Would that please the LORD? Should we sacrifice our firstborn children to pay for the sins of our souls? Would that make him glad?

“No, O people, the LORD has already told you what is good, and this is what he requires: to do what is right, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.”

4. *Jesus pronounced a woe upon the “experts in the law” because they kept true knowledge from those who followed their teachings.* See vv. 52-53. Those who followed their teachings missed the key to it all in all the details of commands they were taught to obey. They missed grace and mercy and a humble walk with God, as Micah described the life of faith.

III. RELIGION WITHOUT REALITY IS PERILOUS BECAUSE IT CAN KEEP PEOPLE FROM JESUS CHRIST. Vv. 52-54

1. *Rather than receiving Jesus’ corrective teachings, these religious leaders plotted to undo Him.* Here their legalism turned hostile.

2. *This was the turning point that ultimately led to Jesus’ crucifixion.* From this day forward, Jesus was the enemy. Their hostility turned more and more hateful until it led to Golgatha, the place of the skull.

A—Is our practice of the faith drawing others to Christ or keeping them away from Him?

Is our legalism, our spirit of perfectionism and criticism keeping us from a genuine transformation by Christ Himself?

I—I mentioned Mark Twain already in this message. Do you know that one of the reasons that Samuel Clemens (whose pseudonym was Mark Twain) rejected the church for much of his life, despite his own wife’s earnest pleadings, was because the double lives of Christians stood in his way? This is no excuse, of course, for his not believing in Christ. But what might have been different had he encountered a majority of Christians in whom the Spirit of God was expressing genuine heartfelt ethics and grace and a powerful experience and expression of the love of God? We can’t know the answer to that question, since it is one of those “What if?” questions.

Take it home (applications).

I. Will we allow Christ to do His transforming work in our hearts?

II. Will we resist a spirit of legalism that puts more stock in outward things than on things of the heart? How can we do this more effectively?

III. We must examine our own hearts and spiritual practices to be sure that they are based on what God has revealed in Christ and on His love and truth than on mere *religion*.