

Living in the Bible belt is dangerous. It is dangerous because there is so much Christian garb. Things can look good on the outside. Squeaky clean. Moral even. Which makes it so dangerous. Over 50 years ago, Presbyterian minister Donald Grey Barnhouse speculated that if Satan took over Philly, this is what it would look like: all of the bars would be closed, pornography banished, and pristine streets would be filled with tidy pedestrians who smiled at each other. There would be no swearing. The children would say, "Yes sir" and "No ma'am" and the churches would be full every Sunday . . . *where Christ is not preached*.<sup>1</sup> As the puritan Thomas Watson put it, "The devil baits his hook with religion." There is a very real danger that we be moral people, spiritual people but be Christless.

Who were the people Jesus was against in the gospels? The religious people. The Bible belt people. That's why it is so important to think of not just two types of people: the wicked and righteous, pagans and Christians. There are 3 types: the wicked, the righteous and the Christless religious. The Pharisees. Remember the two ways in the SOTM: good tree/bad tree, false prophet/true prophet, Sayers/doers, house on the rock/house on the sand. Two ways, right? No, he is talking to religious people not pagans. **6:1, 6, 16.** / This morning we are in Matt 12 (p. 767), where we will see yet more confrontations with the Pharisees. Let's consider 4 marks of true religion.

**I. True Religion is Inside Out 33-37** – Jesus now goes to the root issue. They are at root wicked. Radically – at the root – sinful. They are bad trees so they are producing bad fruit. Jesus has already taught on this once in the gospel of Matthew **7:16-20**. You see, a person's true nature is seen in how they act. Nature determines action. Just as the taste of the water reveals the state of the spring. Apart from Christ, we didn't sin and become sinners. We are sinners so we sin. The type of tree determines the type of fruit.

And our heart determines what comes out of our mouths. Out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks. What is in your heart determines what you say. The lips speak what the heart is full of. Have you ever said anything hurtful to someone you love? Only me? I am glad be in the company of such "holier than thou." Pharisees. We all have, and our tendency is to say I didn't mean it. I just said it out of anger or whatever. No, Jesus says you *did* mean it. What came out of your mouth actually comes from the heart. We should not say, I am sorry I didn't mean it, but rather I am so sorry. I said those hurtful words and my intention was to hurt you with them. I meant them and that is wicked and unloving and I need your forgiveness and God's forgiveness. Out of the heart the mouth speaks.

This is important. Jesus will hit it again in **15:18-19**. Remember, God is after our hearts. The heart is the control center of the human person, including the mind, will, and emotions. It is our person as a whole. Notice how Jesus just moves from heart to treasure in 34-35. Our heart is our treasure and our treasure is our heart. Good hearts produce good and evil produces evil. What do these people need? What do all people need? They need to become new trees! But how do we do that? We can't! We can't give ourselves new hearts! So we sing, "Thy power and thine alone can change the leopard's spots and melt the heart of stone."

Jer 13:23: "Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard his spots? Then also you can do good who are accustomed to do evil." Thou must save and thou alone.

They need to be converted, to be born again, made new. And keep in mind, these are the religion people. These are the rule keepers. These are the ones that look clean on the outside. **23:25-28**. They kept the rules on the outside. They looked moralistic but were bad trees inside. Rigid external religion will not save. That's why Jesus told Nicodemus, *the* teacher of Israel, that unless one is born again, he cannot enter the kingdom of

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<sup>1</sup> *Christless*, 15.

God. We need new birth. We need heart change. **5:20**. He is not saying we must be more morally rigorous than them. Don't think that is possible. He is saying we need a heart R, not just external. We need new hearts.

Notice the importance that Jesus gives to our words. Wicked words reveal that they are bad trees. On judgment day, we'll give an account for every careless word we have spoken. Words matter. We all know that. On the playground, we can sing "sticks and stones can break my bones but words can never hurt me" and we all know that song is full of lies. Words can hurt deeply. Words can pierce long after the lips that uttered them have been buried in the ground.

Followers of Jesus are to be careful with our words. Prov 18:21: "Death and life are in the power of the tongue." **Jam 3:3-12**. Col 4:6: "Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt." Ps 141:3: "Set a guard, O LORD, over my mouth; keep watch over the door of my lips!"

**II. True Religions Sees Jesus for Who He is 38** - Jesus had just put them in their place in the previous verses. You may think they'd reconsider their stance but they hate Jesus so they remain unmoved in their unbelief. Rather than trusting, they ask for yet another sign, but they had seen plenty of signs! What more could they possibly want? **11:4-5**. They wanted something they could use against him.

Here we see the amazing power of unbelief. There was more than enough evidence, but they didn't really want more evidence. They *don't want* to be convinced. Rom 1: "For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools" (19-22). They know the truth but rather than submit to it they seek to suppress it. Such is the nature of bad trees, of unbelief.

**39-42** – Earlier Jesus called them a brood of vipers and now he calls them evil and adulterous (Deut 32:5). Adulterous here is referring to spiritual adultery. They have betrayed their God, they have broken the covenant, though he was their husband. They will receive no sign except for the sign of Jonah, which is the resurrection from the dead. Jonah's rescue was a sign to Nineveh that his message was true. So will Jesus' be. God authorizes the messenger by deliverance from death.

Just for the record, Jesus believed in the historicity of Jonah so your liberal profs who make fun of such things are actually pouring contempt on the Son of God himself when they dismiss the historicity of Jonah. Even Jonah and the fish. So much so that he warns that the men of Nineveh will rise up and condemn unbelievers at the judgment. He clearly takes Jonah literally. It wouldn't make sense otherwise. As one author put it, "And yet we are to suppose him to say that imaginary person who at the imaginary preaching of an imaginary prophet repented in imagination, shall rise up in that day and condemn the actual impenitence of those his actual hearers?"<sup>2</sup> So much "scholarship" attacks the integrity of the OT. The documentary hypothesis is alive and well here in Abilene, TX. Moses didn't write the Pentateuch, Isaiah was written by two or three different men, on and on. If they are right, Jesus was monumentally mistaken in believing all this. I submit that Jesus knew Jewish history better than German theological liberals whose ideas are all the rage in the states at colleges that have a low view of God's Word. Jesus always treats biblical history as a record of facts. I submit that as followers of Christ, we follow Christ and adopt his view of the Scriptures **5:17-19**. No one has a higher

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<sup>2</sup> DeYoung, 104.

view of the Word of God than the Son of God. He upholds it, he fulfills it and endorses the whole of it. Jesus said (John 10:35) "Scripture cannot be broken."

Jesus rebukes them. He says they are worse than the Ninevites and indeed will be condemned by the Ninevites. Remember that Ninevites were the enemy of Israel, which is one of the reasons why Jonah didn't want to go! Jesus has already compared Israel to pagan cities before. **11:20-24** (10:15). They had seen so much yet remained in their unbelief.

What is the key difference between Jerusalem and these other places? Faith and repentance. Note well it is not moral superiority. These pagan cities were a moral shipwreck. The difference is that one group sees Jesus as who he is and the other is offended by him. Jerusalem dismisses Jesus as demonic but these pagan cities see Jesus for who he is. He is greater than the temple **12:6**, greater Sabbath **12:8**, greater than Jonah, and greater King Solomon. Jesus is the true PPK. He speaks the truth of God for our good, he makes atonement for sinners and he intercedes as great high priest, and his kingly rule is good and wise.

**III. True Religion is characterized by repentance 43-45** – This is another warning for "this generation." He will issue the same warning in ch. 23. They were hard-hearted and rejected their Messiah. They had seen Jesus and heard his teaching yet remained in their sin. They heard and saw their Messiah but did not repent. That's what Jesus seems to mean here. Demons were associated with watery regions. They were apparently not comfortable in a desert but in a human host. I think what Jesus is saying is that once a person is cleaned out, the void must be filled by something lest they end up worse than they were before. They need to be filled by the Spirit of God. Rather than repenting, after being exposed to truth, they return back to the world.

2 Pet 2:20-22: "For if, after they have escaped the defilements of the world through the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and overcome, the last state has become worse for them than the first. For it would have been better for them never to have known the way of righteousness than after knowing it to turn back from the holy commandment delivered to them. What the true proverb says has happened to them: "The dog returns to its own vomit, and the sow, after washing herself, returns to wallow in the mire."

True religion turns from sin to God. That's what repentance means. It is a turn from self and a return to God as the center of all of life. Total surrender to Christ. A continuing, radical reorientation of our lives toward Jesus. A reorientation. Put him at the center. Turning from sin and selfishness and to God and godliness. Self is evicted from the center of life and Jesus takes its place on the throne.

**IV. True Religion is Church-Centered - 46-50** – Yet more jolting words from King Jesus. He is teaching and his family sends someone for him. It is worth noting that Mary had other kids, Scripture doesn't teach her perpetual virginity. So, his family sends for him and he replies, "Who is my mother and my brothers?" And he looks out at his disciples: "these are my mother and brothers." Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my mother and brother and sister. Jesus radically redefines family for his people. **10:34-37**. We must reestablish our priorities.

As a side note, there is a solemn warning here for any who would mock Christians, which is becoming the norm. They don't realize what they are doing. They are mocking the very family of Jesus, the near relatives of the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Saul Saul, why do you persecute *me*?

We must come to see that first and foremost, our family is the blood-bought body of Christ, the local church. The people around you right now. *This* is our family. How do families operate? Well, they don't bail at the first sign of difficulty or over petty disagreements. They work through things. Now, there are times to leave a church. When you have an issue, pray about it, study the issue from Scripture. But meet with the leadership early on to see if we can help and bring clarity. The absolute worst way to leave a local church is to make up your mind, then inform the leadership. Examine your motives. Is it conflict, disappointment, doctrine? Do everything you can to reconcile any broken relationships. And if you end up leaving, refuse to gossip, slander, or vent. That causes division and God hates division in the local church. Instead, seek to bless and pray for the congregation.

A family works through conflict and communicates well. How else does a family operate? Joe Hellerman is a scholar who has focused his work on the concept of family in the 1<sup>st</sup> C. He writes this, "The world in which Jesus and His followers lived was a distinctly strong-group culture in which the health of the group – not the needs of the individual – received first priority. And the most important group for persons in the ancient world was the family. It is hardly accidental that the New Testament writers chose the concept of family as the central social metaphor to describe the kind of interpersonal relationships that were to characterize those early Christian communities."

From his study, he draws three principles: 1. In the world of the NT, the group took priority over the individual. 2. In the world of the NT, a person's most important group was his blood family. 3. In the NT world, the closest family bond was not the bond of marriage, but the bond of siblings. So what Jesus says here is all the more significant! We put the family of Jesus over ourselves. Our family is no longer primarily blood, but faith in Jesus. And our siblings are closest family and the main way the Bible describes the local church is brothers, siblings, brothers and sisters! Jesus demands a radical change of loyalties. Hellerman writes, "The first followers of Jesus conceived of loyalty to God primarily in terms of loyalty to God's group. To be committed to God was to be committed to His family."<sup>3</sup> This is why we push local church membership. It is the only way to be a faithful NT Christian. Our next class is 1/29.

Hellerman shows there are four themes emerging from the use of family terminology:

1. Affective Solidarity: There is an emotional bond with one another.
2. Family Unity: There is interpersonal harmony and absent of discord among one another.
3. Material Solidarity: There is sharing of resources within the family.
4. Family Loyalty: There is undivided commitment to the family.<sup>4</sup>

How different is this from modern Christianity? Modern Christianity is driven by consumerism. I am here to consume religious goods for me. Me myself and I. My wants, needs, preferences. I didn't like the worship experience. Friend, we come here to worship God – not cater to human preferences. / The Christian life is the church life. These disciples of Jesus are our first family. The church is not a building, it is not an institutional organization with a mortgage but a living organism on mission together. It's a family.

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<sup>3</sup> Hellerman 112.

<sup>4</sup> Joseph H. Hellerman, *When the Church was a Family* (Nashville: B&H, 2009), 78-79.

Families love one another. They give of self for the good of one another. They don't come to consume but to contribute. Families of faith pray for one another. Families desire to help one another and the greatest help is helping one another follow Jesus. Discipleship.

What do these verses tell us about Jesus? That he teaches with authority. That he wants whole-hearted devotion. That he trusts the Bible. That he said he'd rise from the dead and he did. That he redefines family around him. / What do these verses tell us about ourselves? That we must be changed from the inside out and God must do it. We must be born again. That our words matter. That our lives should consist of repentance. That we must prioritize our faith family, the local church, over all other relationships. This is true religion: change from the inside out, seeing Christ as all, repentance, and a commitment to his body, the church. May God give us grace to this end, for our joy and his glory.