

Religious Hypocrisy

Today In Your Reading...

Jesus had several confrontations with the religious leaders of the day — the Pharisees and Sadducees. These men disliked and disapproved of Jesus' teachings and miracles for several reasons. It appeared to them that He did not respect their religious laws. He also claimed to be equal to God, which, in their eyes, was blasphemy. Of course, they didn't like it either when Jesus pointed out their **religious hypocrisy**. Since these groups played a role in the story of Christ's ministry, it is imperative that we understand who they were and what they believed.

To be a Sadducee, one had to be a priest. The name came from a priest named Zadok, meaning "righteous." The Sadducees acknowledged only the written law of Moses as binding; therefore, they strictly followed **the letter of the law**. If Moses did not teach it, then nothing else mattered. Thus, Jesus offended them when He said, "You set your hopes on Moses; but, if you had believed Moses, you would believe in Me, because Moses wrote about Me" (*John 5:45-47*).

The Pharisees, on the other hand, were made up of scribes. Their name meant "pious ones" or "separated ones." Their purpose was to keep the law of God from becoming corrupted, as it had in the past. Thus, they not only kept the letter of the law, **they added their own rules** to ensure that they would not come close to breaking the laws of Moses. Because of their super pious policies, they separated from society. They also took it upon themselves to watch for those who would not only break the law but who would dare confront or corrupt it with false teaching or "illegal" actions. Thus, the Pharisees were famous for being **hyper-legalistic**.

Therefore, the battle lines were drawn and, in our reading today, Jesus stepped over them. The issue was the purpose and meaning of the

Sabbath. "Is it legal to do good deeds on the Sabbath," Jesus asked. No one would answer Him. He knew that they would rather not be guilty of "breaking the law," even if it meant that they were doing good for someone else. Therefore, Jesus made a point to heal people on the Sabbath, which, of course, angered both groups. He pointed out their **hypocrisy**, "The Sabbath was made to benefit people. People were not made to benefit the Sabbath; and, I, the Son of Man, am the Master of the Sabbath!" (*Mark 2:27, 28*). The war was on!

Daily Reflection

Oftentimes *we follow the letter of the law and miss the spirit of the law*. We say one thing with our words and, then, betray ourselves with our actions. We strain to dot our religious "I's" and cross our "T's" but we completely miss the heart of God, the purpose and point of it all. We are so mindful of going through the religious motions that we become legalistic robots and judgmental jerks. **Legalism and judgmentalism kill love**; and *love is the heart of Christianity*.

Have you ever fallen into this trap? Explain.

Can you imagine being so concerned about following religious rules that you miss on a chance to bless someone else? The Pharisees were more concerned about their Sabbath traditions than helping a lame man! "It is illegal to carry your sleeping mat" they said (*John 5:10*), the mat that he had been confined to for 38 years!

Watch out, lest you too become so consumed with your piety that you miss ministering to the people around you!

Salt and Light

Today In Your Reading...

Jesus selected His twelve disciples — Peter, James, John, Andrew, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas, James (son of Alphaeus), Thaddeus, Simon the Zealot, and Judas Iscariot. Then, He began to teach them what it meant to be His disciples. He also shared this teaching with thousands of others in the most well-known lesson of all time — the Sermon on the Mount.

The Sermon on the Mount was not meant to be evangelistic; Jesus did not teach about salvation. Therefore, it was not meant for unbelievers. The Sermon on the Mount, which was filled with various topics, was an expression of the expectations that God had for His people. His underlying theme was **"be perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect"** (*Matthew 5:48*). The word "perfect" here does not mean sinless; that is impossible for men to accomplish on earth. Being perfect means to strive to live a life of holiness, **to do that which is right and pleasing to God.**

Living a life pleasing to God immediately separates His disciples into a category of their own. **They will be readily identifiable, because they will be different** from the world around them. That's why Jesus referred to His followers as "the salt of the earth" and "the light of the world" (*5:13-16*). Salt was used to impede the decay of meat; likewise *Christians impede the decay of sinful society*. A light, of course, is used to illumine the darkness; *God's people are His lights in a spiritually dark world.*

Too often God's people forfeit their saltiness and hide their light under a basket. Flavorless salt is worthless, only to be thrown out and trampled. Also, what good is a light if it is concealed? The challenge is clear — **we are to impact the world more than the world impacts us!** Otherwise, we're not meeting Christ's expectations.

Daily Reflection

Look back at the Sermon on the Mount. Which of Jesus' teachings stood out to you the most?

Which of Jesus' expectations do you struggle most to fulfill?

If you are serious about being a disciple of Christ, you will stand out from the crowd. In fact, you will be labeled, targeted, ostracized, and perhaps, in some ways, even persecuted. What part of Jesus' sermon, then, should be a comfort to you? Is it?

Can Christians impact the world if they look like the world? Can they speak truth, challenge sin, and share the Gospel if they do the things that the world does? **If you do not stand out, you will forfeit your opportunity to speak up.** Others will simply point out that you are no different than they are. Is that true?

The Wise Man and the Fool

October 3 — *Matthew 6:5-7:29; Luke 6:43-49*

Today In Your Reading...

We continued and finished Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, which is like drinking from a fire hydrant. Each topic that He taught could be expanded and applied for days on end. Therefore, writing one devotion to summarize them all is quite a challenge. However, I'd like to focus on Jesus' final words, which wrap up and apply the rest.

"Anyone who listens to My teaching and obeys Me is **wise**," Jesus said, "like a person who builds a house on solid rock... But anyone who hears My teaching and ignores it is **foolish**, like a person who builds a house on sand" (*Matthew 7:24-27*). Luke also recorded Jesus saying, "**Why do you call Me 'Lord,' when you won't obey Me?**" (*6:46*).

If we adhere to the teachings of Jesus, then God calls us wise; the world, however, will call us fools. If we give credence to man's ways, then the world calls us wise, but God calls us fools. Satan has built a world system that not only despises the teachings of Jesus but perverts them. *All that our Lord esteems, Satan rejects; and that which our Lord rejects, Satan esteems.* So who is right?

The proof of who is telling the truth is revealed in life's difficulties. When we are pummeled with the winds and rains of adversity, which foundation remains? Time and time again, the people of the world have proven that their values, their pursuits, and their selfish lifestyles are **shaky and unreliable**. Fear, despair, dejection, adultery and divorce, alcoholism and drug abuse, pornography, depression, and even suicide are all common place among those who build their house on the shifting sands of human whims and wisdom. On the other hand, those who build their lives on the bedrock of biblical principles may bend in the wind but they do not break! **God is their Rock and reinforcement!**

Daily Reflection

James echoes Jesus' teaching when he wrote, "Remember, it is a message to obey, not just to listen to. If you don't obey, **you are only fooling yourself**. For if you just listen and don't obey, it is like looking at your face in a mirror but doing nothing to improve your appearance. You see yourself, walk away, and forget what you look like. But, if you keep looking steadily in God's perfect law — the law that sets you free — and if you do what it says and don't forget what you heard, then **God will bless you for doing it**" (*1:22-25*).

Summarize what James is saying here.

It is not enough for you to read or hear God's Word. **You must obey it**. To read the Bible for knowledge only is like considering a driver's manual only for the pictures. **If you don't apply what it says, then your life will be one wreck after another**. To take advantage of the stability that God's Word provides requires you to build your life on its principles, to translate the words into actions. If you are unwilling to stand upon the truths of Scripture, then you will fall every time you're encountered with storms.

How are you doing with building a life on a solid foundation? Evaluate your craftsmanship. Have you been wise or foolish?

Have Faith and Rest

Today In Your Reading...

Jesus healed the servant of a Roman officer, raised a widow's son from his coffin, spoke about John the Baptist, and forgave a prostitute of her sins, among other things. In the meantime, we discovered three important truths regarding the Gospel. Let's take a look at each of these truths.

First, **the Gospel, salvation, is received by faith.** When the Roman officer asked Jesus to heal his servant without going to her, Jesus pointed out that He had not seen faith like that in all of Israel (*Matthew 8:10*). When an immoral woman washed Jesus' feet and anointed Him with perfume, He responded by telling her, "Your sins have been forgiven. Your faith has saved you. Go in peace." (*Luke 7:47-50*). *Peace with God, or right standing before Him, only comes by faith in the grace of God.* However, that faith is not something that we conjure up ourselves; it is a work of God. Salvation is not an act of human effort but comes by the grace of our Lord (*Ephesians 2:8, 9*).

Second, **though Jesus came to the Jews, salvation would be extended to the Gentiles.**

When He saw the faith of the Roman officer, He replied, "Many Gentiles will come from all over the world and sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob at the feast in the Kingdom of Heaven. But many Israelites — those for whom the Kingdom was prepared — will be cast into outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (*Matthew 8:10-13*). Paul would later expound on this phenomenon, that the hearts of the Jews would be hardened for a time, so that salvation would be extended to non-Jews (*Romans 11*).

Third, we saw again, this time from John the Baptist, that **there was confusion about the purpose of the Messiah's arrival.** John sent

his disciples to ask Jesus, "Are you the Messiah we've been waiting for, or should we keep looking for someone else?" (*Matthew 11:3*). John had preached that Jesus would come in judgment, but Jesus was going about teaching and healing. John was confused. He was not wrong about Jesus' mission, just the timing. He and many others did not understand that Jesus would come twice. In His second coming, Jesus would bring final judgment to men.

Daily Reflection

Jesus prayed, "Thank you, Father, for hiding the truth from those who think themselves so wise and clever and for revealing it to the child-like" (*Matthew 11:25*). **We cannot force our way into the Kingdom of Heaven (v.12) or earn our salvation by our own doing.** We will always fall short. *Sinful people cannot rid themselves of sin; they have need of a Savior to do it for them.*

That's why it is faith, not works, by which we receive the gracious gift of salvation. That's why Jesus said, "Come to Me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest" (*v.28-30*). Have you come to Christ by faith or have you been trying to save yourself? Are you resting in His work or your own?

Just as Christ grants you rest in regards to salvation, so does He grant you rest after salvation. *You do not have to earn His favor by doing religious activities.* Because of Christ, you will always have right standing before God. **Have faith in His great work on your behalf and rest.** His yoke is easy and His burden is light.

Good Soil

October 5 — *Luke 8:1-8; Mark 3:20-4:20; Matthew 12:22-13:9*

Day 278 — 87 Days to Go

Today In Your Reading...

Jesus discussed the sin that can never be forgiven, He prophesied His own death and resurrection, and He taught His first parable. After the Pharisees had watched Jesus exorcise demons, they claimed that He did so by the power of Satan. Once Jesus explained the absurdity of that claim, He went on to express the severity of it, because in crediting the work of the Holy Spirit to the Devil, they had committed the unforgivable sin (*Mark 3:20-30*). "Many people reject Christ out of ignorance and will be forgiven by Him, but those who witnessed His miracles firsthand and still blasphemed the Holy Spirit would not be forgiven, for they had rejected the fullest possible revelation" (John MacArthur).

Next, many people today doubt that the story of Jonah, being swallowed by a big fish and surviving, was true. However, what they fail to understand is that Jesus not only confirmed the story but linked His death and resurrection to it. "For as Jonah was in the belly of the great fish for three days and three nights, so I, the Son of Man, will be in the heart of the earth for three days and three nights" (*Matthew 12:40*).

Finally, Jesus told His first parable today, that of the farmer who scattered seed (*Mark 4:1-20*). Parables were earthly stories with heavenly meanings. Their purpose was two-fold — *to reveal and to conceal truth simultaneously*. "Parables *revealed* the sacred truth by the power of analogy and illustration. However, they *concealed* the truth from the one who did not have the key to their hidden meanings. To such a one, parables were riddles or tales; and so, our Lord could give to His disciples the deepest secrets of His kingdom, while the others heard without understanding" (Merrill Unger).

When His disciples asked Jesus why He taught in parables, He answered them, "I use these sto-

ries to conceal everything about it from outsiders" (*4:11*). In other words, those who were supposed to hear and understand did; those who weren't supposed to understand didn't.

Daily Reflection

Telling parables is a lot like the farmer scattering seeds; the seeds fall on different types of soil — the footpath, the rocks, the thorns, and the fertile ground which produces a crop. **People respond to the Gospel in different ways.** Some people will not respond at all; they are the seeds that fall on the footpath. Some people will respond, but not for long; they are the seeds that fall among the rocks. Still others will wrestle with the Gospel but will let it be crowded out by the attractions of the world; they are the seeds that land among the thorns. Finally, a few people will accept the seeds and bear fruit; they represent the good soil.

Why do you think people respond differently to the same message? Shouldn't everyone rejoice when they hear the good news of salvation?

Have you received the seeds of the Gospel?

Which soil are you? The way to tell is to ask this question, "Am I bearing any fruit?" What does your answer reveal to you?

Parables and Power

Today In Your Reading...

Jesus shared more parables and demonstrated another aspect of His divine power. His parables centered around the Kingdom of Heaven and gave us more insight into its scope, its enemy, and the reality of the coming judgment.

First, we are told of **the value of the Gospel**. Jesus shared the story of the man who found a great treasure and “a pearl of great price,” who then sold everything he had to obtain it. Though we do not earn salvation by our works, we should count everything else as trash, Paul said, in comparison to it (*Philippians 3:8*). Jesus will give everything, even His life, to provide it for us; we should sacrifice everything to follow Him.

Second, we should recognize **the Gospel’s effects on the individual**, after Christ plants the seed in his heart. “A leaf blade pushes through, then the heads of wheat are formed, and finally the grain ripens” (*Mark 4:26-29*). Over time, the Gospel should bear fruit in our lives, as we mature and grow in our spiritual walk. Progress may be slow at first, but, in time, others should see the difference the Gospel has made.

Third, Jesus foretold of **the inclusive scope of the Gospel**. Though its beginnings are small and humble, like a mustard seed, “it will grow to become one of the largest of plants, with long branches where birds can come and find shelter” (*Mark 4:30-32*). Though the Gospel first came to the Jews, it will reach and include Gentiles from every tribe and tongue.

Fourth, Jesus warned us that **the Gospel has an enemy**, who permeates every aspect of society, like yeast in flour, like weeds in the midst of wheat (*Matthew 13:24-30, 33-35*). Though the enemy will do his best to thwart the Gospel, in the end his work will be undone, as the wheat and the weeds will be separated at judgment.

In addition to Jesus’ parables, we also witnessed another aspect of His divine power. As the disciples were faced with a terrible storm on the Sea of Galilee, Jesus slept. Here we see **the humanity of Jesus**; He was tired and needed rest. But, when the disciples woke Him, He spoke and calmed the winds. Here we see **the divinity of Jesus**. Just as He had power over the human body (healing) and demonic forces (exorcisms), He, as the Creator, also had power over nature. The disciples were even more amazed than they were already.

Daily Reflection

How much do you value the Gospel? What evidence is there in your life that demonstrates proof that you value the Gospel? Have you sacrificed everything to encourage its influence?

What storms are you facing right now in your life? Are you trusting in your own ability, as the disciples did, to survive and overcome them? Or are you turning to Jesus for help, to calm “the winds and waves”?

“Why are you afraid of the storm?” Do you still not have faith in Me?”

Demons and Death

October 7 — *Mark 5:1-43; Luke 8:26-56; Matthew 8:28-9:26*

Day 280 — 85 Days to Go

Today In Your Reading...

We focused on two particular stories — the exorcism of two demon-possessed men and the healing of the daughter of Jairus, a leader in the synagogue. Sandwiched in the story of Jairus is the woman who suffered from hemorrhaging. She fought through the crowd only to touch the fringe of Jesus' robe. She believed that if she could touch Him, she would be healed. Jesus commented on her incredible faith.

The miracles of Jesus, of course, came in all shapes and sizes. We have read about many of them already. Today's passage, however, focused on His power to overcome demons and death, two forces that we cannot overcome in our own power and which cause a great deal of fear. Many people view death as the ultimate enemy, the inevitable end from which we cannot escape and behind which there is no hope. In that view, we are wrong.

While death is, indeed, the ultimate penalty for our sin, Jesus proved while He was here on earth that He **has the power over death**. He not only raised other people from the dead, but He resurrected Himself. "I am the resurrection and the life," Jesus said. "Anyone who believes in Me will live, even after dying" (*John 11:25*). *Because of Christ, we do not need to fear death.*

Another enemy that causes us to fear is the demonic world. Demons are fallen angels who joined in Satan's rebellion in heaven. They were cast down to earth, where they roam today, looking for ways to thwart the work of God, even possessing the bodies of people at times, to achieve their purposes. Followers of Christ cannot be possessed as **the Holy Spirit, who indwells us, has overcome their power**. "The Spirit who lives in you is greater than the spirit who lives in the world" (*1 John 4:4*).

While God has allowed demons to roam here for a time, **they are under His control**. Did you notice that they recognized Jesus as the "Son of the Most High God?" They also know that their time of judgment is coming. They told Jesus, "You have no right to torture us before God's appointed time! Do not send us to the Bottomless Pit" (*Luke 8:28, 31; Matthew 8:29*).

Daily Reflection

Evaluate your faith in light of the woman who touched Jesus' robe. Does your life demonstrate this level of belief in the power of God? Explain.

Summarize your view of demons and death. Does the reality of both cause you to fear or despair? Or has your faith in God's power helped you to overcome your apprehension?

Consider this — the Most High God lives inside of you and empowers you, with His Spirit, to overcome temptation, sin, demonic activity, and, yes, even spiritual death. **If God is for you, then who can be against you?**