

Luke 20:41-47
Christless Religion
3/21/21

In this section of scripture, Jesus has been questioned and grilled by lawyers and religious authorities. This is Holy Week, so He is headed to the cross on Friday.

At the passover time, which this was, they would offer a lamb as a sacrifice for sins. But according to Exodus 12:15, it had to be a lamb without defect. You had to examine the animal that would be sacrificed first to make sure it was worthy.

And this week leading up to the cross, where Jesus would be offered as the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, the final sacrifice for sin, He is being examined by the priests, the scribes, the Pharisees, the Sadducees, all of the religious authorities. And his wisdom and his answers to their questions are shutting their mouths, they are left with nothing left to say, there are no defects to be found in Him or His words.

And now in Luke 20:41, Jesus is going to go head to head with the scribes. The scribes were the experts in the Bible. They were called scribes because a big part of their role was to meticulously copy, by hand, the scriptures, so they could be perfectly preserved and passed down. Obviously, copying the Bible by hand helps you get to know the book very well, so they became experts in the law. Ezra in the OT was a scribe, and Ezra 7:6 calls him “a teacher well-versed in the law of Moses.”

So these are the Bible guys, the guys that God has used to preserve his word, they spend their days reading and copying and teaching the inspired word of God. Jesus acknowledges elsewhere that their role and position is legitimate (He says they sit on Moses’s seat in Matthew 23:2.) They have legitimate, God-given authority.

But even though they are spending their days with their noses in the Bible, they are missing what the Bible is all about.

Jesus, having been answering their questions, turns the tables by asking the scribes a question. And in this interaction with the scribes you see some of the perils of the religious life, some perils that we are not immune to. It's very easy to have a very active religious life, but for it to be without Christ altogether.

Luke 20:41 But he said to them, "How can they say that the Christ is David's son? 42 For David himself says in the Book of Psalms, "'The Lord said to my Lord, Sit at my right hand, 43 until I make your enemies your footstool.' 44 David thus calls him Lord, so how is he his son?"

So Jesus here quotes from Psalm 110. It was a Psalm of David, long considered by the Jewish community to be a Psalm that predicts the coming Savior, the coming Messiah.

In that Psalm, written in about 1044 BC, David sings this:

Psalm 110 "1 The LORD says to my Lord: "Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool." 2 The LORD sends forth from Zion your mighty scepter. Rule in the midst of your enemies! 3 Your people will offer themselves freely on the day of your power, in holy garments; from the womb of the morning, the dew of your youth will be yours. 4 The LORD has sworn and will not change his mind, "You are a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek." 5 The Lord is at your right hand; he will shatter kings on the day of his wrath. 6 He will execute judgment among the nations, filling them with corpses; he will shatter chiefs over the wide earth. 7 He will drink from the brook by the way; therefore he will lift up his head.

So in this Psalm you have the Lord conquering His enemies (verse 1), ruling from Zion (verse 2), making His people holy (verse 3), serving as a priest forever (verse 4), bringing justice (verses 5 and 6). So the Jewish people would sing this song, longing for the king to be sent from God to rule.

They knew this song was about the Messiah.

But they expected that the Messiah would be only a human ruler, a good king like David.

So they sang about the coming Savior, but in their mind that Savior would be human only, a great human king. And Jesus says, "Look closer, you're missing something."

And Jesus asks, "If He's only a human ruler, why does David call Him 'Lord'?"

In their day, ancestors were considered to be the superiors to their descendants. You honored your mother and father, and that applied to the generations. The farther you went up your lineage, the more honor your ancestors got.

But David called the Savior, that everybody knew would come from his lineage, “Lord.”

That seems to reverse things. It seems that David, especially an honored king like David, would be called Lord by His descendants. You’d think the Messiah, a son of David, someone from David’s line, who was going to restore the dignity and reign of Israel, would revere David. But David reveres Him.

He calls Him, “My Lord.” That would have been unheard of in a Jewish family line.

So this Messiah must have some serious authority. He’s actually above David. This Messiah would not only be a man, but God Himself, coming not just to perpetuate the religious and governmental system in Israel, but to supersede it.

So this means that Jesus, who is being examined and passing their tests, who comes from David’s line according to the genealogy in Luke 3, is not only a Messiah who will come and fix their system. He is the Messiah who will come and rule over the system and bring a whole new system. He will be the new wine that requires new wineskins to contain it (as Luke 5:36-39 says).

Jesus comes and tells the Bible guys that they’re missing something really important in the Bible.

Jesus doesn’t criticize the fact that they’re in the Bible all day. He doesn’t say, “You guys are so into your bibles and theology that you’re missing the big thing God is doing in me.”

Jesus actually says, “Look closer.” Jesus is even more meticulous than they are, pointing out an individual word in an individual Psalm. Their problem is not too much Bible, but too little.

Every word in the Bible matters, every word was breathed out by God. It isn’t just the ideas that are inspired or the general message that is inspired, but Jesus treated it like every word matters. Jesus said this about how important every word is in Matthew 5:18:

Matthew 5:18 “For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished.”

Every stroke of the pen is preserved by God, every word matters.

This idea is called verbal, plenary inspiration. Verbal meaning every word was inspired, or breathed out by God. Plenary meaning “all of it.” Every word in the whole of the original manuscripts of the Bible was breathed out by God, every word matters.

Some would say that the Bible’s main ideas are inspired by God, but there are lots of errors in it. Some would say that the authors were inspired individuals, but they wrote fallible words on the page. Jesus treated the Bible like every word on the page was inspired by God. God used those human authors, and their knowledge and experience and personality comes through in the text, but every word was breathed out by God.

There was a lot to criticize in the Bible scholars in the New Testament, and Jesus criticized them here and in a lot of other passages. And there’s a lot to criticize in Bible scholars in our day. But let’s be careful that we’re not criticizing bible scholarship, diligent study, attention to detail in the Bible, lots of time spent in the word. Jesus called them to a better look at the bible, not less of a look at the bible.

And our approach to Bible study is that we don’t just skim, we aren’t ignoring details, we are spending a lifetime learning the nuances and connections of the word of God that we are incredibly privileged to have.

But it is possible to be learners of the Bible who miss what the Bible is all about. Which is a peril of religion. Despite being in the Bible, despite being in church, despite teaching and leading in ministry, we can miss the message of the Bible, which is the message of Jesus.

There are a number of ways we can do this. We can study the Bible by scouring it for relevant and inspirational quotes, as if it existed to be a collection of inspirational sayings for our instagram posts. We can only pay attention to what the Bible says when it says exactly what we want it to say. We can conform the Bible into the mold of our culture so that everything we emphasize in there is something our culture emphasizes anyways, like sentimentality, positivity, and triviality.

We can ignore enough of the Bible so that it will tell us what we wanted to hear already or believed already. We can turn the good news of the gospel into the good advice of moralism and only emphasize the rules and laws of the Bible. We can make our faith what Christian Smith called “moralistic therapeutic deism.” So we don’t notice what the Bible says about God, but we notice some of the standards and laws, and add enough of the comforts to make it a book that exists for our therapy.

We can have our noses in the Bible but still miss the one the Bible is all about in Jesus.¹

So Jesus shows them what they’re missing, the true authority of the Messiah.

And then He continues to call them out for their Christless religion, some call-outs that might be well-directed toward us as well:

45 And in the hearing of all the people he said to his disciples, 46 "Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and love greetings in the marketplaces and the best seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at feasts, 47 who devour widows' houses and for a pretense make long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation."

Jesus calls out sin. And Jesus is the same yesterday, today, and forever. So we can expect that He will also call out our sin. He calls us out as His Spirit convicts us. He calls us out as we read the word and sense our failure. He calls us out through a brother or sister in Christ who sits us down and points out a sin or failing. He calls us out when we get caught or exposed.

But the good news is that He is merciful, and when Jesus calls us out, whether it is by conviction, or word, or exposure, or a friend, He is doing it as the good physician who diagnoses so He can heal.

So Jesus says these hard words to the religious leaders. And for any of us in ministry or in any kind of Christian leadership, these words have to land hard. Because some of these benefits of religion that these religious leaders were receiving are the same benefits we receive. And who doesn’t like those things?

Who doesn’t like going out in public and being recognized by “fans” of our teaching

¹ For more on this, I recommend Michael Horton’s excellent book, [Christless Christianity](#).

ministry? People watch our videos online and recognize us when we go places. When we officiate weddings, they put us at the tables with important people.

In the broader society these benefits seem to be going away (most of my neighbors think it's crazy that I'm a pastor and that fact makes me a little suspicious to them.) But they're still there, especially among the believing community. And it would be easy enough to love the benefits of religious leadership without loving Jesus or the power of His gospel in lives. This is a real peril of ministry, to love the platform more than the people, and more than the Savior. To be content to be thought of as someone who loves Jesus than to actually love him. To live off of the greetings and the recognition, having long since left behind a love for the word and the Lord.

But this isn't only a warning to pastors. The temptation toward religious hypocrisy is a universal one, anyone in church runs the risk of becoming one of these people, and Jesus had his strongest rebukes for religious hypocrites. This was shocking to the people who observed Jesus's ministry.

There were a number of people in society that everyone else treated like the worst sinners: the tax-collectors, the prostitutes, and the adulterers. But Jesus, again and again, shows grace and mercy to them. He offers forgiveness and mercy to tax collectors like Zaccheus, to the woman at the well who had been married five times, to the woman caught in adultery.

But Jesus's harshest rebukes are reserved for the religious hypocrites. Those who honored God with their lips while their hearts were far from Him (Matthew 15:8). Jesus gets in the face of hypocritical *church people* far more than anyone else, and even says here that they will "receive the greater condemnation."

It wouldn't be saying it too strongly to say that Jesus says here that there is a special place in hell for religious hypocrites.

And that kind of life of religious hypocrisy is a real temptation for church people.

Because there are things to love about religion even when we no longer love the Lord. Religion can be a tool to control others. It can give us a circle of friends and a place of belonging and acceptance. And those can be the things that keep us going in religion as opposed to a vital walk with Christ and love for the Lord.

We can love the way religion looks. We can be just like the scribes who love to say righteous-sounding things, but who do it to virtue signal, and who say things so that everybody knows how really biblical we are, or how truly conservative we are, or how woke we are. The attention is on me.

We can love to be thought of as knowledgeable and wise. We can love the way it makes us feel to be teaching about Jesus, without loving Jesus at all.

C.S. Lewis wrote about this in The Great Divorce, (my favorite of his works).

It's a fictional story, and in it there's a bus that is full of the souls of people who have just died. And it drops them off on a plain between heaven and hell. And everybody on that plain is a ghost who is either becoming more solid as he moves toward heaven, or less solid as he moves toward hell, they're all transforming as they go.

And one of those people is an artist on the plain. And he loves to look at great landscapes so that he can paint them. He used to love the scenes, and he used to love to paint to tell about the light and the beauty. But now he loves to paint for painting's sake and for recognition and praise from people.

And the spirit who is a guide there says to him, *"That was not how you began. Light itself was your first love: you loved paint only as a means of telling about light."*

"Oh, that's ages ago," said the Ghost. "One grows out of that. Of course, you haven't seen my later works. One becomes more and more interested in paint for its own sake."

"One does, indeed. I also have had to recover from that. It was all a snare..."

And here's the snare the guide is talking about:

Every poet and musician and artist, but for Grace, is drawn away from love of the thing he tells, to love of the telling till, down in Deep Hell, they cannot be interested in God at all but only in what they say about Him. For it doesn't stop at being interested in paint, you know. They sink lower-become interested in their own personalities and then in nothing but their own reputations."

It's so easy for church people to start with a genuine love of God and his word, to change into people who love to be thought of as those who love God and his word. Who love to

be people who know lots of things about God and his word. Who love the benefits of being the people who are so involved in church, who are so ready with a Bible verse, who are so good at drawing near to God with our lips while our hearts are far from him.

I'm sure many of these scribes had started out well. They loved God and His word. They experienced its power. But then they started experiencing the other benefits that came from the use of its power in teaching. They became admired. They got fans. They loved to speak about God, not because of a love for God, but because of a love for all the other good things that flow your way when you speak.

They were no longer interested in God, but only in what they say about Him. What soon mattered most to them was their own reputations, not the Lord.

And this is a life we have to be so careful of.

You'll see it so often in the angry rhetoric of Christians online. Where we love to tell what we think, we love to tell people off, we love to be right. But we don't love the Lord.

And I've watched videos and read posts made by so many people that I actually agree with, but the tone is so mocking and angry and not-broken-hearted for the deceived people they are speaking to, that it's hard to believe this is done out of love for the Lord.

And sometimes we think that as long as what we say is true, it doesn't matter how it's said or the motive behind it. We told 'em what they needed to hear.

And scripture does say we need to speak truth to build up the body of Christ, to strengthen people, to keep people from being tossed to and fro by every wave of teaching and to stop each other from hopping on every bandwagon, to keep people from being deceived. There are people in the church who are supposed to speak hard truths to do that.

Ephesians 4:14-16 “14 so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. 15 Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, 16 from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.”

We are called to speak the truth. But we are called to speak the truth in love in a way that builds up, that grows people in Christ-likeness, that connects people and fosters unity. We need to look at the motive behind our truth-telling, because while it is right to speak hard truths, it isn't all we're called to.

We're called to not do it like the scribes, who do it for pretense and attention. We're called to speak truth in love that builds people.

It could just be that we love to win an argument. (Who doesn't love that?) And if knowing our bibles and our political views and being able to argue for our stances becomes more thrilling to us than knowing our Lord, then we are in danger.

And for the scribes, it seems real corruption grew in their hearts. And it wasn't just an individual scribe, this was a problem that was endemic to the community of scribes. And so often when our sin is self-centered, we get blinded to it, and we live in an echo-chamber of people who are doing the same things or all ignoring the same sins.

It doesn't take that many people cheering us on to convince us we're doing it right, it doesn't take that many people using the same angry rhetoric and mocking tone that we're using to convince us there's no problem with that.

And we need the grace of the call-out by Jesus.

Jesus said they had that outward appearance of true religion, but they were devouring widows' houses.

These scribes were full-time vocational ministers, they earned their living from their work, which was also a God-ordained arrangement. But they learned they could profit even more by devouring widow's houses.

What this probably means is that they were paid on a patronage system, where wealthy supporters paid them directly. And they learned that they could manipulate widows into giving to them. And the widows had only what their husbands had left them, they weren't working and able to replenish what they had. But the scribes could get them to donate it.

And it shows how bad things have gotten when, in the name of serving God, you are making a widow destitute, and you're OK with it.

And isn't that just what Lewis said? *"They sink lower-become interested in their own personalities and then in nothing but their own reputations"*

When your religion becomes all about you and your image, that self-centeredness dehumanizes other people. Nobody matters but me.

This is a reason that so often really horrible crimes are committed by people who seem committed to Christian doctrine. The religious mind can either be the best or the worst thing. When it's centered on Christ, it overflows in love for people. When Christ is removed and it is centered on self, it becomes a devouring force.

If we worship God, we will honor his image in others. If we worship self, we will care only and increasingly for self and treat others as means to our end. You saw it this week with the shooter in Atlanta at the spa - here's a guy who claimed to believe in Christian doctrine, but he was willing to destroy the image of God in those women. And whether his motive was his own addiction that saw women, not as image-bearers of God, but as temptations to be eliminated, or whether it was racially motivated and he was following so many in our history in an unnoticed racism that sees Asian americans not as people made in God's image, but somehow a threat, who knows. But either way, what mattered was him. And he said he loved God.

We've seen in recent months some prominent Christian leaders get exposed for hypocrisy. Carl Lentz from Hillsong, the apologist Ravi Zacharias. And it would be easy to assume that this is a new phenomenon, where admired religious figures turn out to have been living double lives and having a hidden side where they do even worse things than many of the people they minister to. But this phenomenon is as old as religion. This has happened through the ages. We're warned in the scriptures to be careful to persevere and to guard against hard hearts.

Hebrews 3:7-13 **"7 Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says, "Today, if you hear his voice, 8 do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, on the day of testing in the wilderness, 9 where your fathers put me to the test and saw my works for forty years. 10 Therefore I was provoked with that generation, and said, 'They always go astray in their heart; they have not known my ways.' 11 As I swore in my wrath, 'They shall not enter my rest.'" 12 Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. 13 But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called "today," that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.**

Sin can deceive. And we need one another to help break us out of our self-centeredness, out of our echo-chambers. To sit us down and correct us, or encourage us, or pray for us, or remind us of the truth to combat the lies of sin, whether it's the blatant kind of lies or the more subtle, hypocritical religious kind.

It's so easy to drift into self-righteous, Jesus free religion. In church.

The kind that loves knowing the Bible and knowing the rules but misses Christ.

The kind that loves to speak truth but has no concern for the heart behind it or even for the hearers.

The kind that loves attention and recognition.

And the scribes had so replaced the Lord with the self that when the Lord showed up, and when they realized they would lose some of the attention they had gotten if they accepted the Lord, they chose the attention over the Lord. The Lord was desirable when he gave them status and fame. But rejected when he didn't offer those things. Proving they loved the status and fame, but not the Lord.

We have a couple of pet rabbits. And they started out pretty indifferent to people, but I've trained them to love me and, when they're out of the cage they come hopping over to me when they hear my voice. And the reason they love me so much is that I constantly give them snacks. (Some of the things I should have googled first - turns out you're not supposed to give rabbits M&Ms.) But they love me.

But once they see that I don't have a snack in my hand, they take off. It's not that the rabbits just love me for me or want to spend time with me, they want snacks. I'm useful to them only so far as I have a snack to give them, and then they're off.

And I realize that the rabbits don't love me. They love snacks, and I'm just the means to the snacks.

And it's easy to be very into God, but just see God as the means to the snacks. He gets me recognition, money, status, acceptance, community, connections, supportive people around me.

But then, on occasion, one of the ways God is merciful is that he takes away the snacks for a time so we can see whether we loved him or loved the benefits.

And in our culture, the benefits of being a devoted Christian are going away quickly. I've talked to a number of you that were working good honest jobs but now in some corporations you don't even feel like you could have a job and hold to Christian views on gender and sexuality. So some jobs are going away.

Being known as a church-going Christian doesn't get you much credibility outside of church circles. And maybe now as you read your Bible and you read what's socially acceptable on twitter, you're realizing that Christianity no longer gets you social acceptability.

And maybe your experience with Christians or church turned sour, and now you don't feel the same sense of community, or church life has become hard.

Take that as the mercy of the Lord. He's taking away the snacks to reveal who you love, to show you your heart, and maybe even to call you out before you become a scribe or Pharisee.

Maybe He's kindly calling out our hypocrisy in our day.

And maybe you've had a bad encounter with a scribe, someone who had become full-hypocrite. Who was willing to devour in secret while being pompous and Christian in public, and you wonder how you could ever have faith that grows and thrives again.

The remedy for all of us, for the religious hypocrites and for those who have been burned by them, is the same. It's looking to the Lord.

The scribes loved to parade themselves in long robes, impressing people with their money and status.

The Lord's robes were torn and divided among those who killed him (John 19:23).

The scribes loved praise in the marketplace.

The Lord was mocked and sneered at in the marketplace.

They loved the best seats in the synagogues, but Jesus was rejected in the synagogues.

They made long prayers for pretense, but in Jesus there was nothing false.

They loved the high seats of honor at feasts, but Jesus was lifted up on a criminal's cross and gave His life for those who refused to honor Him.

And this Gospel is the remedy for hypocrites and hurting alike:

For those of us who feel the weight of our hypocrisy, the cross of Jesus, if we look closely and see what it really says, does not give us any grounds for religious boasting. It only gives us reason for humility. My sin is great, and I needed the Lord to lay aside His kingly robe to come and die to rescue me, to bear my punishment.

If I believe that, I can't be a pompous religious blowhard. I have to look at the cross and say, "I deserved that."

If we feel that as God has withdrawn the snacks we have withdrawn our loyalty, He's being gracious to reveal our need for the Savior. He's revealing we love his gifts and not Him. And we can look to the cross for our forgiveness and healing.

For those of us who have had our encounters with Christless religious people, and our faith feels like a ship that's heaving and tossing in a storm, and we don't know who we can trust anymore, look to the cross. Look to Christ.

Sermon Discussion Guide

Luke 20:41-44

Christless Religion

I. The Authority of Christ (Luke 20:41-44)

How is it significant that David called his descendant “Lord?”

Why do you suppose Jesus brings this up in this context (holy week, during tense arguments in the temple?)

II. Called out by Christ (Luke 20:45-47)

- A. Religious Hypocrisy (46)
- B. Loving the Benefits of Religion (46)
- C. The love of speaking for show (47)
- D. The love of an image (47)

What are some of the benefits of religion that are not the right motives for following Christ?

What temptations do they pose?

Can you think of a time your religion was just for show?

How can we know our own motives for the religious things we do?

III. The Remedy from Christ

How is the cross the remedy for religious hypocrites?

How is the cross the remedy for those who have been hurt by religious hypocrites?