

MBC – 2/28/2021 – Pastor Doug Thompson
“Reformation or Relationship?”
 Matthew 12:43–50

We will return to our study of 2 Timothy next Lord’s Day, but this morning I want us to see what our Jesus said about how we have a relationship with Him. Really, He is answering the question, “Who will go to heaven?” And His answer is not what most people would think. So turn with me to—

- Matthew 12:43–50 ⁴³“When the unclean spirit has gone out of a person, it passes through waterless places seeking rest, but finds none. ⁴⁴Then it says, ‘I will return to my house from which I came.’ And when it comes, it finds the house empty, swept, and put in order. ⁴⁵Then it goes and brings with it seven other spirits more evil than itself, and they enter and dwell there, and the last state of that person is worse than the first. So also will it be with this evil generation.”
- ⁴⁶While he was still speaking to the people, behold, his mother and his brothers stood outside, asking to speak to him. ⁴⁸But he replied to the man who told him, “Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?” ⁴⁹And stretching out his hand toward his disciples, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! ⁵⁰For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.”

Prayer

Intro: ***Who is going to heaven?***

You all know what a word-association test is: I give you a word, and you’re supposed to say the very first word that pops into your mind—

I say "apple," you say "*sauce.*"
 I say "chair," you say "*sit.*"
 I say "prison," you say "*criminals.*"
 I say "politicians" you say "*criminals.*"

But if you stop and really think about it – you still say, “criminals.” Now let me ask a question, and without pondering theologically, or wondering what the Pastor wants you to say, answer this question in your mind—

"Will heaven be full of good people, or bad people?" What was your first thought?

Most of us would respond "Good people." Heaven will be full of good people. God is good. The devil is bad. Heaven is good. Hell is bad. Good people go to heaven. Bad people go to hell. Simple.

But that’s wrong. As a matter of fact, it’s backwards. Only bad people will go to heaven, and good people will not be allowed in. And Jesus Himself is the One who said this.

- MAT 21:23 And when He had come into the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to Him as He was teaching. . ." So Jesus was talking to the most religious people, the clergy, the pastors, those who kept the law of Moses. Good people or bad people? But look at what He said to them in v.31—
- "Truly I say to you that the tax-gatherers and harlots will get into the kingdom of God before

you."

Tax-gatherers--who made their living by extortion, and harlots who made theirs from fornication! Good people or bad people? But who did Jesus say was going to heaven?

- My friends, the real question this morning is, do you see yourself as a good person, or a bad person, before God? Do you think to yourself, "All in all, I think I'm a pretty good person. I always help people in need . . . I'm not a criminal . . . and hey, I'm in church this morning – or watching anyway."

If that's what you truly think in your heart of hearts – you are in spiritual peril this morning. And I'm not playing word games here. If that's the way you see yourself, then you more like the Pharisee in that parable that Erroll read earlier, than that poor, despised tax-collector. And who did Jesus say went away justified before God? The sinner, not the saint.

The very heart of the Gospel – the Good News is what Paul said in Romans 4:5, that *God justifies the ungodly*. Now with that in mind look again with me at this very unusual story.

I. The danger of moral reformation.

Jesus is giving a parable here. A parable is a story told for the purpose of making a point and the point is this: *moral reformation without spiritual transformation is deadly*. Jesus wasn't giving a course on demonology here. But we do learn some interesting things about these fallen angels—

- They desire to inhabit human beings, maybe because they can work more evil through human bodies. But they also can possess *animal* bodies: In Matt.8, Jesus cast thousands of demons out of a man and into a herd of swine, which they immediately destroyed. And yes, we call that, deviled ham.
- And Jesus is also saying that some demons are worse than other demons (v.45). From 2 Peter and Jude I believe we learn that some demons were involved in such gross sexual perversion with humans that they are kept locked up until the Day of Judgment.

Now in this parable, this person did something that caused the demon to leave. The implication is that there had been some sort of superficial moral reformation: the person had a religious spasm and got clean and sober – for awhile. So the demon left – but it came back (Notice in v.44 he called it "*my house!*" And he didn't have to break in to get back in!) But now, it looked like the Merry Maids had been there. The house was completely clean, swept, shelves were organized – but it was *empty*. Now this is important: *it was clean*, but *empty*, unoccupied. So this demon goes and gets 7 more demons worse than himself and all 8 move in. Now, this poor person is in worse shape than ever – it's like a demon frat-house in his body!

A. The parable applied to "this generation."

And Jesus says, "So also it will be with this generation." He's talking about the Pharisees here. They were classic *moralists* – they are like the self-righteous older brother in Jesus' story of the prodigal son. He was so offended that his father would take back his sinful younger brother. And Jesus put them in his story of that self-righteous Pharisee praying in the temple, looking down on that loser tax collector. They were so self-righteous and self-sufficient that Jesus had no relevance to them. They didn't see themselves as sin-

ners – so they had no need of a Savior. But it was all a sham. It was all *external* for the sake of the praise of men. Jesus said this—

- Matthew 23:25–28 ²⁵“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. ²⁶You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and the plate, that the outside also may be clean. ²⁷“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people’s bones and all uncleanness. ²⁸So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.

Clean, but empty, right? Some of these scribes and Pharisees might have even been baptized by John down at the Jordan river – a baptism of repentance – and maybe they really tried to live more holy lives, but it didn’t last because they were empty inside. Hollow. Unoccupied.

Worse than before.

- ⁴⁵Then it goes and brings with it seven other spirits more evil than itself, and they enter and dwell there, and the last state of that person is worse than the first.

Think about the history of the Jews: God delivered His people from slavery in Egypt, and brought them into the Promised Land under Joshua. This was a time of great hope and promise, but do you remember what happened? They never drove out all of the pagan Canaanites as God told them to – they did a little house-cleaning, but they didn’t finish the job. So just as God said, they succumbed to the idolatries of the nations around them: they became worse than the Canaanites had been!

God eventually punished them with the captivity of the north in 722 B.C. and the south (Judah) in 586. Now they never again returned to *idolatry*, but they replaced pagan idolatry with legalism and self-righteousness.

- And this is how the Pharisees began: They were a movement like the *Puritans*, they were zealous for God and for keeping the minutiae of the Law for the honor of God and Israel. They were *reformers* – but they weren’t so concerned about reforming people’s minds and hearts as their *external morality*.

So by the time of Jesus, most of the Pharisees were hypocritical moralists. Clean, but empty. Outwardly they were fastidious in their lawkeeping, but inwardly they were full of dead men’s bones. Spiritually, they were far worse than they were before when they were offering up their children to Molech – “that’s impossible” – no, when their long-awaited Messiah came, they called Him the devil and had Him murdered!

- Think about what Jesus said to the Pharisees: “Truly, I say to you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes go into the kingdom of God before you.” Why is that? Because those people knew they needed a Savior. But not the self-righteous religionists. They hated Jesus because He wouldn’t acknowledge how good they were. Think about it, it wasn’t tax-collectors and prostitutes who put Jesus to death, it was their pastors and teachers! They were *worse*. It’s a biblical principal that more light means more accountability, so these keepers of the Law were under much stricter judgment than the people they judged. To follow Jesus’ parable: if a prostitute had one demon, a Pharisee had eight!

It’s so ironic! They had accused Jesus of being controlled by Satan, and He says, “No, actually, *you* are!”

B. The parable applied to us.

It's just as true for us as it was for the people Jesus was speaking to: *Moral reformation without spiritual transformation is deadly.* Let me explain—

If you try to become a *better* person apart from trusting in Jesus Christ and depending on the power of the Holy Spirit, you will actually become a *worse* person than you were before because you will become more self-sufficient and self-righteous, which means less need for Jesus. And it also means less love for Jesus.

- Morality reverses the Gospel order: morality says, “Be good, do better, and then God will love you.” The Gospel says: “God demonstrates His own love toward us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.” And when we trust in Jesus, God gives us His righteousness – His morality in place of our immorality!

We just sang it: *“No list of sins I have not done, No list of virtues I pursue, No list of those I am not like, Can earn myself a place with You. O God, be merciful to me— I am a sinner through and through! My only hope of righteousness Is not in me, but only You.”*

Beloved, Jesus is our righteousness before God. *Trying to be good enough to please God – is taking the place of Christ! (repeat)*

- And I'll tell you, this is why some people come to church! And I hope I'm not describing you, but please listen, because I've seen it: Someone shows up, serious, curious. But it's not to worship God, it's part of a 'self-improvement' program. Often it starts with a life crisis, a marriage crisis – so they make up their mind to change: they're going to quit certain sins, start going to church, get clean and sober, be a better husband, wife, or parent – all good stuff. But apart from trusting Christ, it's just moral reformation, which is just trading one sin for another: You've traded the sin of drunkenness for the sin of pride over not being a drunk! And God hates one as much as the other.

And any changes will be external and short-lived, because you're operating in the power of your own flesh instead of the power of the Holy Spirit. And you will end up with 8 demons instead of one!

You see, you're not getting to the heart of the problem which isn't on the outside, but on the inside: you might be clean, but you are empty without Jesus Christ. Just like the person whose house was *unoccupied*, your heart needs to be *occupied* by the Lord Jesus Christ who created you to love and serve Him, and bring glory to Him.

Now maybe you're thinking: “Are you talking to Christians or non-Christians here?” Yes.

All of us have a Jesus-shaped hole inside, and we won't have peace until He fills it. And Jesus doesn't come to live in people who think they are good people, trying to be better all the time. He only comes to those who are helpless, hopeless, spiritually bankrupt; broken over their sins, who cry out, *“Oh God, be merciful to me, the sinner!”*

- Read the Gospels and you see that these are the people Jesus invites to come to Him: those who are weak and heavy laden, distressed and downcast like sheep without a shepherd, naked, hungry and thirsty; like little needy dependent, orphaned children; spiritually crippled, blind, deaf,

and full of leprosy. Sinners, poor and needy, bruised and broken by the Fall – these are the ones to whom He says, “Come to Me, and I will heal you, cleanse you, forgive you, feed you on manna from heaven and give you living water. I will and clothe you with My own righteousness and make you My child!”

The problem with morality is that you can become so self-satisfied with your progress that you won’t come to Jesus like that – do you see that? *As long as you pride yourself on your own goodness, you will never come to Jesus for His.*

Paul was a man who took great pride in his goodness as a Pharisee – he was just like that Pharisee standing, praying in the Temple. But when Jesus saved him, he trashed his own righteousness so that he might treasure Jesus’ righteousness—

- Philippians 3:7–9 ⁷But whatever gain I had (all of his law-keeping and morality), I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. ⁸Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish (dung) in order that I may gain Christ ⁹and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith—
- I have prayed this week that God would open our eyes to see any shred of self-righteousness we are still clinging to. It’s so hard for us to see that in ourselves, isn’t it? I mean, we’re sitting in church! (Or watching from home!) But I hope that all of us mean it this morning when we sing: “My only hope of righteousness, is not in me, but only You.”

Well, I want you to notice how v.46 begins: “*While he was still speaking to the people.*” I.e., Matthew wants to make sure we connect what Jesus has just said with what is about to happen next. And this is the connection: moral reformation does not equal salvation. We don’t need to be better people, we need a relationship with God which comes through faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. That’s what Jesus is getting at here—

II. The power of relationship.

- ⁴⁶While he was still speaking to the people, behold, his mother and his brothers stood outside, asking to speak to him. ⁴⁸But he replied to the man who told him, “Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?” ⁴⁹And stretching out his hand toward his disciples, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! ⁵⁰For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.”

Jesus is sitting, teaching, and His disciples are gathered around Him, sitting. His family is standing *outside* of this crowd – but Matthew means for us to understand that they are *spiritually* outside too. They are still undecided about Jesus. Jesus is their son, their brother, but He isn’t yet their Lord.

- By the way, Mk.6.3 tells us that Jesus had 4 brothers: James, Joses, Judas, and Simon, and at least two sisters. All younger, of course!

We have to give them the benefit of the doubt here: they love Jesus and they are trying to rescue Him. They know the religious leaders want to kill Jesus for the stuff He’s been saying about them, and they’re even beginning to wonder if there’s something wrong with Him. Mark includes this—

- Mark 3:20–21 ²⁰Then he went home, and the crowd gathered again, so that they could not even eat. ²¹And when his family heard it, they went out to seize him, for they were saying, “He is out of his mind.”

That’s what they thought about Jesus! So they sent someone to tell Jesus that they were looking for Him. They needed to get Him home.

- ⁴⁸But he replied to the man who told him, “Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?”

Now this sounds cold, like Jesus is writing off His own mother and brothers. He wasn’t. He loved His family, He perfectly honored His father and mother. The Scriptures tell us that He submitted to His parents when He was a child, and the last thing He did on the cross was to make sure His mother, Mary, would be taken care of by John. But He is using this question as an opportunity to teach a lesson—

- “And stretching out his hand toward his disciples, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers!”

He’s saying, “Do you see these men and women here, sitting at My feet, hearing My Words? This is My true family, My forever family.”

Jesus’ disciples came *before* His own family. His heavenly family came before His earthly family, and the same is true for all Christians. Yes you love your family, the Scriptures command this. You never stop loving them, but your love and loyalty to Jesus and your brothers and sisters in Christ comes first.

- It’s a lot like when a young couple get married. God’s Word says they are to leave and cleave: (it doesn’t say that have to go clear to Canada!) They still love and honor their families. They don’t cut those ties, but they begin a *new family unit*, and that new family relationship takes priority over the old. When you come to know Jesus Christ, you immediately become part of His forever family – His Bride, His church – and that new family comes before your earthly family.

And Jesus promised that sometimes this would result in conflict and even division in our natural families, didn’t He?—

- Matthew 10:34–37 ³⁴“Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. ³⁵For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. ³⁶And a person’s enemies will be those of his own household. ³⁷Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.

We never write off our families or disown them, but there will be times when they will write us off, and disown us because we follow Christ. Some of you have experienced that. Stephen and Arpita Williams over in India see this happen often in their church. When I was there I heard many people tell how their families had disowned them when they came to Christ. And Jesus is experiencing some of that here, isn’t He? His own family thought He was nutty. At this point they were closer to the Pharisees than they were to Jesus’ disciples!

But Jesus points to His *disciples* and says, “This is my true family – I have a personal, spiritual, and eternal relationship with these people.” What an amazing blessing it is to be part of the church of Jesus Christ! Even if following Him costs you some members of your family, Jesus promises you more—

- Mark 10:29–30 ²⁹Jesus said, “Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, ³⁰who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life.

I have spiritual moms and dads and brothers and sisters all around the world – closer than my own flesh and blood. And we will be together for the rest of eternity! And one of the greatest blessings you can ever have is to know that members of your earthly family are also members of your heavenly family!

- And that makes me think of what I heard at a funeral service I did on Friday afternoon for the mom of someone in our community. The poor family was grieving over losing their mom and grieving that some of them had been estranged from her or each other – but now here they were gathered together, and one by one they came up and shared their sorrows and they all said, “I know we are all going to be together again some day.”
- And of course I didn’t come out and say it, but I thought: “That’s will only happen if *you* know Christ, and *she* knew Christ!” And then I was able to share the Gospel and tell them how to get to heaven.

But I want you to see what Jesus is saying here when we put both of these passages together: “You will never have a relationship with God by offering up your good works, by trying your best to be religious. You won’t get to heaven by who you know or who you are related to or what family you were born into. I will tell you who is going to heaven. I will tell you whose sins will be forgiven. I will tell you who is My true, forever family.”

And who are they? How do you get to be a part of Jesus’ family?—

- ⁵⁰For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.”

What is the will of His Father? Well it certainly isn’t the self-reformation of the Pharisees. Think about it: Jesus just called His disciples His true family, which meant that they were doing the will of His Father. And what were they doing? Sitting at His feet, listening to Him, and believing in Him! That’s the will of His Father: “This is My Beloved Son, listen to Him!”

- John 6:40 ⁴⁰For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.”
- John 6:28–29 ²⁸Then they said to him, “What must we do, to be doing the works of God?” ²⁹Jesus answered them, “This is the “work” of God, that you *believe* in him whom he has sent.”

Believe in Jesus – put all of your trust and hope in Jesus, for this life and the next, and you become part of His family. And everyone in His family is wearing that glorious robe of His own righteousness!

Believing in Jesus is not just believing that He existed. Believing means trusting Him and what His Word says about Him—

- Believing in Jesus means believing that God the Father sent Him to this earth as a real human being who is also eternal God. Believing that He was born of a Virgin, because that’s what the Scriptures say. Believing that He performed mighty miracles, taught as no man ever taught, lived a sinless life, then died on the cross to take on Himself the punishment of all who would believe

in Him – and then He rose, bodily from the grave and ascended to the right hand of His Father as Lord of heaven and earth.

- Believing in Jesus means repenting of your sins, and also repenting of all of your self-righteousness to trust completely in Him, and His righteousness. And let me add that if you don't obey Jesus, you don't really believe Him.

Do you believe in Jesus Christ, whom the Father sent? If God were to ask you, "Why should I let you into My heaven?" What would you say? I pray that God has opened some eyes this morning to see that you can't trust in your good works, and also trust in Jesus. It's one or the other: The only right answer is, "My own *best* works are still worthy of hell, but I trust in Jesus *alone* and *His* righteousness for my salvation. Because I trust in Him, I know that you will look on *Him* and pardon me!"

And who does Jesus invite to become a part of His forever family? *Whoever*. Just like Jn3.16: "*whoever* believes in Him will not perish but have everlasting life." *Only* those who believe in Jesus Christ will have everlasting life, but *anyone* and *everyone* who believes will have everlasting life. There are no exclusions to the invitation. No one has to stay outside when Jesus invites "whoever" to come inside and be a part of the family of God.

* * *

Martin Luther tried everything under the sun to improve himself to be worthy of God. And it all failed. But God showed him a righteousness completely outside of himself – the righteousness of Jesus Himself, which comes to those who trust in Him—

'You, my Lord Jesus, are my Righteousness; I am Your sin. You have taken from me what is mine and have given me what is Yours. You have become what You were not and made me to be what I was not.'

Then he said: Beware of your ceaseless striving after a righteousness so great that you no longer appear as a sinner in your own eyes, and do not want to be a sinner. For Christ dwells only in sinners."