

## I. Introduction

A. When I was an undergrad, every year a certain professor gave a lecture explaining why he wasn't a Christian. He was an interesting man – he'd been a POW in World War II, written a novel as well as several text books in his field; I enjoyed his class, but he was an outspoken atheist and antagonistic toward people of faith and he kept referencing this upcoming lecture that he promised was going to devastate Christians.

B. I was a bit on edge the day of the lecture – not so much for myself, because by this time I'd been to enough debates and listened to enough critics of faith to know what they tended to say and I'd come to realize that there were thoughtful replies to the issues. We cannot prove Christianity in a science lab – which is the standard some demand, but you cannot prove atheism that way either. I wasn't concerned that I'd hear anything that would rock my world, but I figured his lecture would sway others, some of whom I was trying to get to place their faith in Christ.

C. As it turned out, I needn't have worried. His lecture was a bust. I left mad – because he wouldn't take any questions or allow any comments – but I was also encouraged, because he didn't really say anything to undermine Christianity. What he argued was that we were inherently religious – which is something Paul wrote about in Romans 1: we all have a sense, in our heart, that there is something more.<sup>1</sup>

D. The lecture consisted of several stories. One was about the inhabitants of an island in the South Pacific who – during WW II – had watched Allied troops clear a landing strip in the jungle and then they later saw planes land delivering supplies. They were quite taken by the “bird gods” so they cleared their own runway and waited for these gods to arrive.

E. A second story was about the way the Chinese used to bind the feet of women. He noted that once you bound someone's foot, you had to keep it bound, because it was no longer stable. The suggestion was, if you bound the minds of children with silly superstitious stories, it was very hard to unbind them later on. But if you didn't bind them to start with...

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<sup>1</sup> In Romans 1 Paul writes: For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse. For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like a mortal human being and birds and animals and reptiles.

F. This professor subscribed to the Secularization Theory which held that, as we learn more – as we become more enlightened and as society becomes more modern – religion will die.<sup>2</sup>

G. Let me offer a few quick asides here.

1. First, the Apostle Paul tells us how to undermine the Christian faith – simply undermine the resurrection. In I Cor. 15 he explains that if you do that, the whole thing implodes.<sup>3</sup> However, he notes that if Jesus did rise from the dead – given everything else Jesus had said and done – then you really had little choice but to believe.

2. Second, although the Secularization Theory was all the rage during the last part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, many academics have since jettisoned it. As it turns out, the only place religion is dying is in Europe, and increasingly that isn't true.<sup>4</sup> The world is becoming more and more religious not less.

3. Now, perhaps you heard a bit about the Pew Study that was released a couple weeks ago. The headlines suggested that Christianity was collapsing. In fact, if you read the first few paragraphs of most articles it led you to believe that Islam is rising, the Nones – that is, those who hold to no religious faith – are rising and Christianity is declining. If you actually dig into the report, the data tells a different story.

a) Yes, Islam is rising, but the growth is almost exclusively biological. It is growing because Muslims are having lots of babies.

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<sup>2</sup> Note: *Secularization* is different than *secularism* – the first does not advocate an ideology, it simply describes the process whereby religion / faith dissipate over time. The second is an ideology. For a helpful explanation of this theory – and the current state of the debate surrounding it – see Michael Horton, *The Secularization Thesis* at [www.modernreformation.org/default.php?page=articledisplay&var2=1471](http://www.modernreformation.org/default.php?page=articledisplay&var2=1471).

<sup>3</sup> I Cor. 15:14f reads: And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith.<sup>15</sup> More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead. But he did not raise him if in fact the dead are not raised.<sup>16</sup> For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either.<sup>17</sup> And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins.<sup>18</sup> Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost.<sup>19</sup> If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.

<sup>4</sup> Some prominent sociologists – such as Peter Berger – very publicly announced that they had been wrong, and though religion was dying in Europe, it did not appear to be fading anywhere else. He made this announcement back in the 80s. To it I would add two points: 1) many who deny “religion” – i.e., Christianity – hold to their secular views in religious ways and with religious zeal; and 2) though Europe has been becoming religiously barren, demographers now argue that this trend is starting to turn around. Secular people have fewer children. As a result, Europe’s population is collapsing – and as a result many Muslims are moving in. Also, the Christian families in Europe are having many more children than the secular people. For these two reasons, it appears as though Europe will be quite “religious” again soon.

b) And yes, Nominals are becoming Nones and this is not good news. This is code for saying, those who used to say, “Sure I’m a Christian. I was born in America wasn’t I?” Or, “Sure I’m a Christian, I was baptized as a child and I attend church every Easter.” Those in that camp are now increasingly likely to claim no faith. The nominals are becoming Nones and this is emptying some churches, in particular, Mainline Protestant and Roman Catholic ones. But Christianity isn’t dying. Cultural Christianity – or casual Christianity – is decreasing; but convolutional Christianity – those who reference a point where they made a decision for Christ – is growing.

H. Look, here’s the deal: God created us to worship, and we do and we will.<sup>5</sup> To be around something awesome – e.g., the Grand Canyon or to see the stars in the sky – is to be filled with awe. Other animals are not. The problem is, because we are bent, broken – because our hearts have been misaligned by sin we often worship the wrong things or we worship the right things – we worship God – but we do so in the wrong way. You

1. The Bible doesn’t say, “worship.” It says “worship God and God alone, and do so this way.”
2. We are wired to get excited about things, to exalt things, to talk about things that move us, to cheer. Go Blackhawks. We see this everywhere we look. People idolize celebrities or sports teams or food. We tell people, “you have to see this movie or eat at this restaurant.” As Paschal says, “there is a god-shaped vacuum in the heart of every person, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in God.”
3. The Bible is full of advice, correcting: who people worship and how they worship. And in the New Testament, the principle bad guys on this front are the Pharisees. They are very religious – and their claim is to worship the one true God revealed in the Old Testament – but Jesus has very little good to say about them.
4. You may have heard someone say, “Christianity is not a religion it’s a relationship.” Well, that statement was tailor-made to oppose the beliefs and practices of the Pharisees. They were religious with a capital R, but that is not the goal.

I. Today I am making a simple point: Jesus is greater than religion. He offers something far better than a moral code or a set of practices that we are supposed to keep in hopes of being good enough to please God.

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<sup>5</sup> The Bible never tells us to worship, it tells us to direct our worship to God, because He is the one who deserves it.

1. As noted earlier, this is part of the “Greater Than” series, which is based on Luke 11 and 12. Previously we noted that Jesus is greater than evil and greater than death.

II. If you have your Bibles, please turn to Luke 11:33. But before I read today’s text let me make a couple clarifying points.

A. First, there is a difference between: religion, spirituality and the Gospel. I’ll keep this simple: religion is our effort to reach up to God; spirituality is an effort to justify our lifestyle and the Gospel is the Good News that God has reached down to us.

1. Religion is our effort to reach up to God.<sup>6</sup> To appease him by the things we do, the prayers we say, sacrifices we offer, good works we perform, things we give up, money we give, whatever. Religion is our effort to earn God’s favor.

2. Spirituality – the label claimed by those who say, “I am spiritual but not religious” – is usually used to describe something that is not very organized and which seldom make any demands. When people choose their own beliefs, they generally affirm the life they have already been living and the views they already hold, with perhaps a bit more quiet thrown in.

3. The Gospel – which comes from the Greek word *evangelion*, from which we get the word *evangelism* and also *Good News* – is the message that we are saved by grace through faith. A right relationship with God – being born again, redeemed, reconciled to God, becoming a child of God – is a gift from God not something we earn. We cannot earn his favor. We are too broken and His standards are too high. Christians are not noble, hard-working good guys who pass the test; Christians are those who confess, “I am broken, I am sinful and I cannot even consistently keep my own standards let alone God’s. I need help.”

4. In the 3<sup>rd</sup> chapter of his letter to the Philippians, Paul personally illustrates this point. He says:

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<sup>6</sup> The word can be used to mean other things – for instance, it can simply be the term that describes faith in general. This is how the King James translators are using it in James 1:27 when they say: “This is pure religion that you take care of widows and orphans.” But I am using it to describe our efforts to get right with God.

a) If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the 8th day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless. But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith.

5. Paul says, I was the most religious person you ever met – I did it all. But my efforts didn't amount to anything. The way forward is through Jesus.

6. Point one: there is a difference between religion, spirituality and faith. Christianity is a relationship with God based on what He did. It is not a path we follow in order to be good enough to earn our way to Heaven.

B. Second, the classic name for the counterfeit religion that shows up in Christian churches, is Pelagianism.

1. Many, many, many people who show up at church are Pelagians not Christians. It has been that way since the very beginning because we have a hard time believing the Good News – it's too good.

2. The term Pelagianism comes from a big controversy that happened back in the fourth century when a British ascetic named Pelagius showed up in Northern Africa and challenged the message being preached by Augustine.

3. If you slept through World Civ., here are the Cliff Notes:

a) In various ways, Rome was the epicenter of political power for about 400 years, starting not long before Christ was born and lasting until the barbarians stormed the gates in 410 A.D.

b) Rome's government took various forms during the four centuries it dominated the world. It was led by various people, most of whom were named Caesar. It was massive. For two hundred years - a period called the Pax Romana – there was peace. You could spend the rest of your life reading about the Roman Empire.

c) For our purposes, I simply want to note that as Rome fell, a pious man named Pelagius, fled the city and traveled south, stopping in Hippo – part of modern day Algeria – where Augustine was leading the church. Pelagius sat under Augustine’s teaching for a while and then said, “he has it wrong.” Pelagius was bothered by the laxity he saw in the church and attacked the doctrine of original sin and of grace.

4. Being religious isn’t the only problem we have. Some people try to be really good in order to please God. Others say, “Oh, the life I live doesn’t help me earn God’s favor, then I’m going to pray a little prayer and then go do whatever I want.” This second view is also wrong.

a) James, the half-brother of Jesus, will write about this and say, “faith without works is dead.” It’s not true faith, because true faith changes us.

b) When we become a Christ follower that is supposed to set in motion a pattern of growth – which includes good works. These good works do not save us. But, they are expected.

c) The equation is not: Faith + Good Works = Salvation; but Faith = Salvation + Good Works.

5. Pelagius didn’t see the Good Works and so he complained – as well he should have. But his solution was wrong.<sup>7</sup>

C. When you reduce Christianity down to its essence, it’s not, “this I do,” but “this He did.” We are broken and cannot fix ourselves. We need to be rescued – we need a Savior.

III. OK, that was a long introduction, but I think it’s an important one. Let’s turn to the text. Luke 11.

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<sup>7</sup> Today’s version of Pelagianism is frequently referred to as Moral Therapeutic Deism, the title that was given to it by a sociologist named Christian Smith, who led a large study in which he interviewed thousands of young adults who had grown up in the church. What he and his colleagues found was that what most of these young adults affirmed was not Christianity, but a religious system that held that God has established rules for us to follow – mostly, be nice to others. If we follow these rules, things will go well for us. And other than that, God leaves us alone. Smith labeled this view, Moral Therapeutic Deism. (Moralism is the idea that God has rules for us to follow. Therapeutic suggests that if you do follow these rules things will go well for you – that is, Christianity is good advice. Good karma. And deism – as opposed to theism – describes a God who set things in motion but then backed away. The understanding is, you cannot have a relationship with this God because He’s not interested in that. The Creator set up rule but has subsequently left the building. God made the watch and wound it up, but he’s not actively involved in people’s lives. Princeton Seminary professor, Kenda Dean, called this understanding Almost Christian. But argued that it is not the faith found in the Bible or affirmed by the Creeds.

- A. We rejoin a conversation that we've been studying for the last few weeks.
- B. In last week's text, we saw that the people wanted a sign and Jesus said he wasn't going to do miracles like a carnival worker just to impress them. He suggested that they should be impressed with his power over evil and that the other sign they would receive is the "sign of Jonah" when He defeats death through his resurrection. But that would be it.
- C. In verse 33-36 he notes that they are refusing to see the obvious. He is the light of the world.
- D. We pick up in verse 37 with Jesus agreeing to hang out with the religious leaders. *When Jesus had finished speaking, a Pharisee invited him to eat with him; so he went in and reclined at the table.*
  1. If you invite Jesus, he accepts. He scandalizes the religious elite by accepting invitations from the tax collectors and prostitutes – here he surprises others by accepting an invitation from the self-righteous gas-bags he's been criticizing. And you have to think this second group threw lame dinner parties – lots of inane debates about theological issues that do not matter, long prayers in King James before the meal. It doesn't sound like fun. But Jesus went. If you invite Jesus, he accepts. He meets us wherever we are.
  2. However, as we are about to see, when you invite him you get more than you expect. To quote Lewis, He is not a tame God.
- E. V:38: *But the Pharisee was surprised when he noticed that Jesus did not first wash before the meal.*
  1. For all of you Purell-carrying germ-a-phobes, this had nothing to do fighting bacteria. It was about keeping one of the religious rules the Pharisees had tacked on to The Law found in the Old Testament.<sup>8</sup> It was all about being ceremonially clean. Jesus makes a point of not following their extra rules. And then, after they are whispering among themselves about his breach of etiquette, he comes out swinging.

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<sup>8</sup> The Old Testament had 613 laws. In an effort to be extra careful, the Pharisees added laws to make sure no one even got close to breaking one of God's laws. For instance: if the speed limit was 30, the Pharisees posted a speed limit of 20. In terms of washing, the Old Testament described (but did not command) various washings - Gen. 18:4; Judges 19:21). The Pharisees had added washings both before and after dinner (Jerusalem Talmud, tractate Berakhot 2.4). These were not about being physically clean but about being ritually (religiously) clean.

2. It doesn't say that the Pharisee who invited Jesus said anything to Jesus about washing his hands, but apparently Jesus knows that the host (and the others who are there) are surprised that He doesn't follow religious custom and wash before he ate.

F. V39: *Then the Lord said to him, “Now then, you Pharisees clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside you are full of greed and wickedness. You foolish people!*

1. In the Old Testament, a fool is someone who is blind to the things of God. The Pharisees saw themselves as the opposite of fools. Jesus tells them that they are the opposite of who they think they are. They think they are the guardians of Jewish purity; Jesus attacks them on that very point. He attacks them for thinking, God loves me because I have washed my hands just like He asked.

G. V39b: *You foolish people. Did not the one who made the outside make the inside also? But now as for what is inside you—be generous to the poor, and everything will be clean for you.*

1. The dirt you have to worry about is not on your hands it's on your heart.

H. Then we get six woes – six cries for God to bring divine justice down on them – for the hypocrisy they are displaying.

1. We are a fairly buttoned-up culture on religious matters. First century Jewish culture was more like talk-radio, especially about religion. And if you pay attention, what you'll see is that Jesus always goes after the wolves. There were three categories

- a) Sheep – that's all of us. It's not a flattering analogy. They are not very bright, easily frightened and defenseless. I doubt any high school football team is called the "Fighting Lambs." But that is what we are labeled. We are sheep.
- b) In addition to sheep there are shepherds – the ones who are supposed to protect the sheep.
- c) And then there are wolves, who often try to disguise themselves as shepherds in order to prey on the sheep.

d) Jesus teaches us to care for the poor, the oppressed, the foreigner – even to love our enemy. The only exception to this is the wolf, who we are told to run out of town. False teachers – one of the primary subsets of wolves – are to be stiff-armed. In 2 John 1, John says, when people show up saying things different than the Gospel, run them out of town. Do not invite them into your home. Do not offer them anything to eat. Love your enemy. Care for the foreigner. Take care of widows and orphans, but do not give someone who gets the Gospel wrong the time of day.

2. So, Jesus is invited to this dinner party. He does not follow protocol and then, he goes on the war path.

I. V42: *Woe to you Pharisees, because you give God a tenth of your mint, rue and all other kinds of garden herbs, but you neglect justice and the love of God.*

1. The Pharisees diligently tried to keep the law, down to ridiculous levels. If they put salt on their meat, they were counting the salt grains in order to be sure than every tenth grain was given to the temple. We mock them, but they tried! Jesus says, *You should have practiced the latter without leaving the former undone.*

2. Jesus actually affirms their zeal, but says “it isn’t enough.”

3. Please note: it’s common for people to say, “the tithe is an Old Testament concept. It’s never repeated in the New.” That’s not true. Here it is. Jesus affirms their tithe – He says, “you are right for doing this” – but he then says, but you should also love God and care for the oppressed.”

4. Years ago, when Austin was little, we were negotiating over how many more bites he had to eat before he could leave the table. I said five. He said 2. I said 5 he said 3. I said 4 and then he said 7. At which point I said, “OK, 7 it is.” When people say, “I don’t like the OT pattern of giving. I want the NT instead. I feel like saying, OK. You win. It’s a lot more than 10.

5. By the way, this is probably the appropriate time to note that our fiscal year-end is a few weeks off – the end of June. And we are a bit behind.

J. Woe number two, V43: *Woe to you Pharisees, because you love the most important seats in the synagogues and respectful greetings in the marketplaces.*

1. Jesus says, you don’t need an IQ over 140 to know that you’re spiritual theatrics are not designed to please God but to impress others. Your long prayers and public displays of piety do not win your God’s affection. You should be humble but you are riddled with pride.

K. Woe three, V44: *Woe to you, because you are like unmarked graves, which people walk over without knowing it.*

1. They were scandalized that Jesus didn't wash his hands. He now accuses them of being as vile and infectious as a dead, decaying, body. They are the exact opposite of who they think they are.<sup>9</sup>

L. V45: *One of the experts in the law* (this is now a Scribe, a lawyer). *One of the experts in the law answered him, "Teacher, when you say these things, you insult us also."*

1. So, the very people who have been adding rules on top of rules that bury people under all of these obligations, they say, "Careful Jesus, or you will hurt our feelings as well, and of course we are the good guys."<sup>10</sup>

M. *Jesus replied, V46,* "*And you experts in the law, woe to you, because you load people down with burdens they can hardly carry, and you yourselves will not lift one finger to help them.*

1. A Scribe – that is, a lawyer – said, careful, because while you are dissing them it sounds like you are dissing us, and we know that is not your intention. We are the good guys. And Jesus says, "Thanks for reminding me, because I have some things against you as well! You oppress the people – you should be helping them but you cause them great hardship with your ridiculous laws.

2. As I said, Jesus was not someone you were likely to invite twice to your social event.

N. V47: *Woe to you, because you build tombs for the prophets, and it was your ancestors who killed them. So you testify that you approve of what your ancestors did; they killed the prophets, and you build their tombs. Because of this, God in his wisdom said, 'I will send them prophets and apostles, some of whom they will kill and others they will persecute.' Therefore this generation will be held responsible for the blood of all the prophets that has been shed since the beginning of the world, from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah, who was killed between the altar and the sanctuary. Yes, I tell you, this generation will be held responsible for it all.*

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<sup>9</sup> Part of the civil law the Jews needed to follow concerned the handling of a dead body (Numbers 19; Lev. 21:1-3). If they touched a dead body they needed to clean up. Remember, one of the purposes of The Law that God gave to the Jews – via Moses on Mount Sinai – was to keep them alive and functioning so that they could give the world a Savior. Practical guidelines such as this were helpful in a ancient desert culture. But we are no longer subject to the ceremonial or civil law they followed.

<sup>10</sup> Note: Some think he is trying to rescue the Pharisees and ease the tension in the room.

O. And then, finally, V52: *Woe to you experts in the law, because you have taken away the key to knowledge.* They claim to have it. Jesus says, you not only do not have it. You are the ones who lost it. *You yourselves have not entered, and you have hindered those who were entering.*

P. In case we wonder how this all played out, Luke ends this section noting – V 53: *When Jesus went outside, the Pharisees and the teachers of the law began to oppose him fiercely and to besiege him with questions, waiting to catch him in something he might say.*

1. The words Luke uses here are hunting terms. They will lie in wait to get him. Jesus is now the prey they are after.

#### IV. So, where do we go with this?

A. We could focus on the way Jesus attacks the religion of the religious elite.

B. We could note how He will not only say things against it, He will undermine their status by operating outside their system – for instance, he will heal people outside of the Temple and violate all of their protocol. It's almost comical. Jesus would touch a leper – which you were not supposed to do, at that point you were very unclean. Only instead of saying, "Now I'm unclean and I have to go through the religious protocol with the priest, he's say, "Now you are clean. Your dirt didn't get on me, my clean got on you."

C. There is much that could be said here. Let's simply note that Jesus is not impressed with the religious efforts of people who were far more religious than you are. We cannot be religious enough to earn God's favor. It doesn't work that way.

D. What Jesus accepts is someone who realizes that they are a sinner and asks for forgiveness and places there trust in the work of Christ on the cross.

E. How do we get right with God, we accept that God is great and we are broken and we receive his freely offered gift of forgiveness.

1. Men and women, you do not have to be as good as the religious elite. In fact, even if you are, that is not enough. But the Good News is, God so loved the world that He gave his only begotten son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have ever lasting life.

F. I am going to close in prayer, and as I have done in the past, I am going to give you a chance to place your faith in Christ – to receive Jesus.

#### V. Closing Prayer