

The Danger of being on Team Religion

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[0 : 00] Let us pray one more time. Heavenly Father, as we come before you, help us to be humble and teachable. Give us a willingness to take in your word, to hear what it says, to soften our hearts, and by your spirit to make changes where you prompt us to.

Let us not be people who take what you say lightly, but people who rejoice much in your grace. All this we pray in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Religion is bad. Religion is dangerous. Religion causes more harm than good. I wonder if you've heard statements like that before?

And to be honest, you can see why people would say such things. After all, isn't religion behind the Middle East conflict and all those Molotov cocktails thrown at all those KK Marts recently?

Unreligious people, the ones who often end up being child abusers and sexual predators, who pretend to be good and cover up what is bad.

[1 : 11] What good is religion that says, peace be with you, but launches war? What good is religion that preaches and promises good things, but seems to do and perpetuate bad things?

Well, if those are some of your thoughts today, you know what? Jesus wholeheartedly agrees with you. If that is what religion is, Jesus has nothing but harsh words for religious people.

In particular, he hates two forms of religion. One form is what we will call the sign seekers. Notice in verse 29 of our passage today, that Jesus calls such people a wicked generation.

So clearly Jesus is very negative about them. And the other form that Jesus hates is what we will call the legal nitpickers. If you glance down at verses 50 and 51 with me, you notice that the language of this generation reappears.

And Jesus is clear what he thinks about this generation in verse 47. Woe to them! They are not to be praised! And so Jesus is also very negative about them.

[2 : 37] So if that is the case, I'm sure you don't want to be on team religion, whether that is the sign seeker kind, or the legal nitpicker kind.

But here's the thing. It's actually easy for team Jesus people to become team religion people without even realizing it.

Conversely, it is easy for team religion people to fool themselves into thinking they're on team Jesus. That's the danger. So how can we avoid that?

Well, the best way is to know what sign seekers and legal nitpickers are like. And so today Jesus will help us to get to know them.

And as we do, we can then examine ourselves to check that we have not become team religion members. So firstly, let's consider the sign seekers.

[3 : 39] Remember the wider context. The last time we were in Luke, two weeks ago, what did Jesus do? He drove a demon from a mute man.

But two skeptical groups emerged from the watching crowd. Neither of them denied that a miracle had taken place, but the first group said, Jesus' power must be satanic.

And so Jesus had to address their nonsensical objections. He replied, He replied, Is what you say logical? If Satan's agenda is to destroy, and my agenda is to restore, why would Satan want to sabotage himself?

No. If you are for Satan, you are against Jesus. And vice versa. So that's the first group.

But there's also a second group. And we learned in 11 verse 16 that they asked for a sign from heaven. Now, are signs a bad thing?

[4 : 49] Not necessarily. But it is one thing for God to proactively give a sign to reassure his people, like he did with Moses.

It is quite another for people to request a sign to test Jesus. But that's what these sign seekers do, according to 11 verse 16.

Now, remember, they've already watched Jesus calm the storm, heal lepers and paralytics, cast out the demon, even bring the dead back to life.

So they don't really need another sign. So, why do sign seekers ask for more? Is it because they actually want more of Jesus?

The reality, sadly, is the opposite. It's really because they want to avoid him. Sign seekers such as this tell the Lord, if you make this person meet me at such and such a place, at such and such a time, or have that person say such and such a thing, on such and such a day, then maybe I'll believe you.

[6 : 10] Oh, you didn't, ah? Too bad, then. Guess I won't listen to you, then. What to do, ma, God? You didn't prove yourself to me. You didn't give me sign, ma.

And so their demand for more proof is simply their way of deferring their need to obey Jesus. Have you met such people? They say to Jesus, prove you are good, prove you are loving, prove you are powerful, then maybe I'll come onto your side.

But the threshold keeps changing, and the terms are never satisfied. So how does Jesus respond to sign seekers?

That's where our passage begins today. I'm not going to play your game, he says. You are not getting any sign, verse 29, except one.

The sign of Jonah. So of course we immediately ask, what is this sign of Jonah? And what's so significant about it? Well, look carefully, first of all, at what Jesus is saying.

[7 : 23] He is not referring to some sign Jonah brings. Rather, he is saying, Jonah himself is the sign. So let's recall who Jonah is.

Jonah was the prophet whom God called to go and preach to the Ninevites. Nineveh was a great city, but also well known for its brutality and violence, its evil and oppression.

And Jonah was to warn them of impending judgment so that they might repent. And that is what Luke wants to focus on.

Now, at this point, he's identifying Jonah with his preaching ministry. We see that confirmed in verse 32, where Jesus now more explicitly refers to the preaching of Jonah.

And now Jesus takes this one step further. He says, verse 30, just as Jonah was a sign to the Ninevites, so also will the Son of Man, that's him, be to this generation.

[8 : 39] Just as Jonah preached this message of judgment and repentance to them, I too bring a similar message for you. That is the only sign you will get and the only sign you will need.

So take care how you listen. After all, look at Jonah's preaching. His ministry to the Ninevites involved no signs and wonders, and yet, Jesus says, look at how they responded to God's word. They could have said, show us some miracle. Show us that the God you claim to represent is as great as you say. Or they could have said, look, you are not one of us.

You are from an enemy nation, no less. Why bother listening to you? But, verse 32, Jesus says, they heard the word and that was enough.

they believed, they put on sackcloth, they repented. And if that is how they responded to God's word back then, without the need for further signs, what about you guys?

[10 : 03] Because, guys, right now, you are in the presence of someone greater than Jonah. And if the word was enough for the people of Nineveh, it's not my word enough for you.

It's not my preaching enough for you. It is not even like you had no signs. But if someone greater than Jonah is here, shouldn't that be even more reason for you to respond like the Ninevites?

You see, Jesus says, here is the choice before us. How do we know that we are not team religion people? The surprising answer is if we respond like the Ninevites.

If we confess, like they did, that we are a wicked generation, that's actually a good thing. And the good news is, if we do, then God will surely also respond in the same way he did to the Ninevites.

When they repented, he relented. Because they were genuinely sorry, God showed them mercy. And that's the good news of grace.

[11 : 31] grace. But what if we continually reject God's word? What if we reject what he said way back in Luke 9.22, that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life?

What if we laugh at such a gospel? Then, Jesus says, verse 32, on the last day, the men of Nineveh, who are Gentiles, who do not have the same level of access to the scriptures that you do, will rise in judgment against you and condemn you.

After all, remember from two weeks ago what team Jesus members are like? If you've forgotten, look back at verse 28 with me. They hear the word of God and obey it.

If you are on team Jesus, you gladly submit to God's word. And amazingly, the Ninevites, though they were evil, did exactly that.

God's God. But if you are a team religion person of the sign seeker variety, you will keep refusing God's word.

[13:06] And you show yourselves to be worse than the Ninevites. And if the Ninevite example doesn't resonate with you, Jesus brings in a second analogy, the queen of the south.

That's referring to the queen of Sheba. Now, if you are not familiar with her story, let me just read some bits from 1 Kings chapter 10 and see if you can begin to work out why exactly Jesus brings her up.

So here is 1 Kings 10 verse 1. When the queen of Sheba heard about the fame of Solomon and his relationship to the Lord, she came to test Solomon with hard questions.

Hmm. Doesn't that sound familiar? Doesn't that sound like the very people Jesus is talking to at this very moment? So, is the queen just the Old Testament version of the sign seeker?

Well, let's find out. In 1 Kings 10 verse 3, we see that Solomon answered all her questions. Nothing was too hard for the king to explain to her.

[14:21] So, Solomon passes the test. But how does the queen respond? Does she come up with yet another test? Yet another demand for proof?

More sign seeking? Well, look at verse 4. When the queen of Sheba saw all the wisdom of Solomon and the palace he had built, the food on his table, the seating of his officials, the attending servants in their robes, his cup bearers, and the burnt offerings he made at the temple of the Lord, she was overwhelmed.

And then let's just jump down to verses 9 and 10. She says, praise be to the Lord your God, who has delighted in you and placed you on the throne of Israel.

Because of the Lord's eternal love for Israel, he has made you king to maintain justice and righteousness. Verse 10, she gave the king 120 talents of gold, large quantities of spices, and precious stones.

Basically, the queen says, this is amazing. Glory be to God. And let me just give all I can to bless his king.

[15:39] She responds rightly. And Jesus now says, back in 11 verse 31, look, the queen of the south will rise at the judgment with the people of this generation and condemn them.

Why? For she came from the ends of the earth to listen to Solomon's wisdom, and now something greater than Solomon is here.

In other words, Jesus says, look, this gentle queen was skeptical, just like you guys. She wanted to test, just like you guys.

In fact, unlike you guys, she had to travel a great distance just to encounter this king. Whereas, you guys, you can see me perform miracles all the time pretty easily.

I'm right here. and unlike you guys, once King Solomon has proven himself, the queen does the right thing.

[16:53] She submits and honors the king. But what about you guys? The king greater than Solomon is here, and he has proven himself already over and over and over again to you.

But will you submit an honor? Or are you intent on remaining a sign seeker? If you do, the queen herself will condemn you on the last day.

Because Jesus says you have all the signs you need. In fact, you have more than she did, but you don't want to listen. you see, here's the scary thing.

Like these Jews, you can grow up with amazing privileges. You might have faithful Sunday school teachers who taught you. You might have listened to a pulpit where the gospel was preached regularly.

You might have Christian friends come often alongside you to give you Christian counsel. but it is possible to have all of that and still miss Jesus.

[18 : 14] Because it is not Jesus you actually want. Perhaps you simply want the miracles of healing. Perhaps you want the gold dust and the fireballs and the other signs that look astounding. And perhaps God might even have shown you something like that. But if our attitude is, well, God, you've got to do better than that, instead of falling at his feet in awe and worship, we might be a sign seeker.

Now, of course, we could disguise this attitude. We can say something like, well, some people are content with the simple exposition and application of scripture, but I'm not content with that. We should have more. Or we say, ayah, always the same message about judgment and sin and how Jesus has come to die in your place for that very judgment and sin.

That's kindergarten stuff. I want more. But Jesus says, no, no, no.

[19 : 33] If you are longing for more dramatic, spectacular stuff, but you are shutting your ears and your hearts to the word of God and the gospel of God, then it is not me you actually want.

You might look more spiritual, but you are really on team religion, not team Jesus. For the essence of team religion is to consistently refuse God's word, no matter how fascinated they are by spiritual phenomena.

And you have your own agenda, not Jesus' agenda. And if that is you, the Ninevites and the Queen of Sheba will look at you and say, what in the world are you doing?

Snap out of it before it's too late. Because sign seekers on team religion will be condemned. So that's the sign seekers.

But maybe you say, I'm confident that is not me. So no worries, looks like I'm not on team religion. But what about the other group, the legal nitpickers?

[21 : 01] What are they like? We need to consider them as well. So that brings us down to verse 37. When Jesus had finished speaking, a Pharisee invited him to eat with him, so he went in and reclined at the table.

It's probably lunchtime, so this Pharisee said, come lah Jesus, let's go makan at my home. Whether he is sincerely extending hospitality, or he is also another guy looking to test Jesus, we're not sure, but in any case, Jesus accepts.

But it's not long before he ruffles the feathers of this Pharisee, verse 38. But this Pharisee was surprised when he noticed that Jesus did not first wash before the meal.

The issue at hand is not personal cleanliness, but religious cleanliness. The Pharisees loved to do ceremonial washing to show that they were ritually clean before the Lord.

These rituals were not part of Old Testament law, but part of their Jewish tradition. But now here comes Jesus, someone known to associate with Gentiles and sick people.

[22 : 21] And so that means he of all people better get ritually clean, according to the Pharisee's laws, since he's always in contact with all these unclean folk.

But nope, he just heads straight for the table, oops, and this Pharisee clearly, visibly disapproves. So how does Jesus respond? He gets straight to the point. Here's your fundamental problem, he says. You care more about the outside than the inside.

And that's why, verse 39, you Pharisees clean the outside of the cup and dish. But who cares, verse 39 again, if inside you are full of greed and wickedness?

Who cares if you look nice on the outside, but you're rubbish inside? When I worked for another church, I had a colleague who had a nice coffee cup on his desk.

[23 : 33] But sometimes he would forget to empty it and the cup would stay there for a few days before he or someone else discovered it. Once, one of our other colleagues stumbled upon his nice looking cup, but to her horror, upon looking inside, she was sure she saw something growing in it.

You can imagine the speech that she gave to my friend about how the insides of cups need washing as well. And that is what Jesus is getting at.

You see, Jesus really hates religion where the inside doesn't match the outside. And yet, so often, that is exactly how we are tempted to live.

we are tempted simply to work hard at looking good in the eyes of others while not bothering with the inner spiritual condition of our lives.

Why? Maybe because we know our fellow human beings can't see our inside. Take greed, for instance.

[24 : 52] To my fellow human being, and even to myself, I might not look greedy since my house is not filled with purchases from Shopee, or I'm not working 24-7 for more money.

But they cannot see that my heart might still long excessively for more of something that I don't have. They cannot see that I'm not willing to sacrifice my regular cup of coffee or bubble tea to free up more money for generosity.

Though I look humble, I'm still greedy. And that's what the Pharisees are like, Jesus says. That's why they are a wicked generation.

But here's the thing. Jesus says, so are we. When we talk about the importance of praying, but we never pray, or we speak politely to others, but are secretly cursing them on the inside.

That is team religion behavior, and Jesus hates it. And if we think we can hide our ungodly hearts by a godly exterior, we are fools, verse 40.

[26 : 20] After all, God made both the inside you and the outside you. And he can see both. And so if that is us, Jesus challenges us to change cause.

And so he says in verse 41 on the screen, give as alms those things that are within. Now that is how the ESV translates it, which is almost word for word what it says in the Greek.

And it's a bit of a puzzling phrase. What does it mean? The NIV 2011 takes Jesus as saying, be generous to the poor.

But perhaps it is better to understand Jesus to be saying, give what is inside of us to God in the same way we like to give to the poor.

Consider our heart in the same way we tend to consider our giving. Pay as much attention to our inside as to our outside.

[27 : 33] for as one commentator puts it, when we begin giving careful attention to the issues of our heart and bringing it before God, clearness is the result.

heart of heart but because the Pharisees cared more about the outside than the inside, it led them to care about the less important things.

Verse 42. Woe to you Pharisees because you give God a tenth of your mint, rue, and all the other kinds of garden herbs, but you neglect justice and the love of God.

You should have practiced the latter without leaving the former undone. On the face of it, the Pharisees did look generous. They even tithe from their gardens.

But once again, they missed the point. In the Old Testament, the practice of tithing was established precisely because it was one way to show love for God by providing for those who are working at the temple.

[28 : 44] And love for neighbour as a way of helping the widow, the foreigner, and the fatherless. But legal nitpickers on team religion worried only about the calculations, not the intention.

As long as the 10% was met, it didn't bother them if the vulnerable were starving or being oppressed. And we can fall into the same trap.

Perhaps we get upset when there's a couple of foul words said on TV, but we turn a blind eye to the casual racist rhetoric and discriminatory behaviour in our own communities.

We care about the less important things. And because these Pharisees cared about the outside, not the inside.

Verse 43, they cared about their status before man, not God. Woe to you Pharisees because you love the most important seats in the synagogues and respectful greetings in the marketplaces.

[29 : 59] Here is another telling sign that we might be on team religion. We become fixated with how people perceive us. We chase their acceptance and honour.

But here's the irony. Because of the gospel, God already fully accepts and honours us and has even seated us in the heavenly realms already.

That is better than the best synagogue seats. So why go for team religion. Because sometimes we lose sight of what we have in Christ and we care more about the outside than the inside.

And woe to us when that happens. But here is another characteristic of legal nitpickers. They become a hindrance to others.

They become a hindrance to others. Verse 44. Woe to you because you are like unmarked graves which people walk over without knowing it.

[31 : 15] Now if you were a Jew back then and you came into contact with a grave you defiled yourself for seven days. But here is the irony. Jesus says their attempts to maintain external and behavioral purity have made them impure.

they become like these graves defiling those who come into contact with them. They have become a contaminant. How so?

Well, come with me to verse 46. 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.

you see if we only stress the externals and engage in hypercritical fault finding behavior sorry fault finding when people don't live up to our external rules when we never ever show anyone the grace of the gospel which can actually change someone's heart we end up crushing people and I think that is why Jesus gets so angry because he loves people he can't bear the thought of them carrying burdens they don't need to carry but the scary thing is we can do that so easily whenever we present Christianity as a way to win

God's approval through our moral performance we are crushing people or when we as a church become too obsessed with getting everyone outwardly conformed to a set of rules so that we can appear morally respectable we are crushing people we might even cause people to eventually reject Christ without them ever truly understanding the gospel of grace in the first place and that is a tragedy because the Christian faith is really the good news that Christ has gone to the grave to cleanse us and to lift our burdens of sin and shame in him we are free and team religion people mess up that message by imposing all sorts of extra biblical requirements things and that is why we need to go back to

[34 : 08] Jesus and his word not because it is a rule book to whip us into shape although it does have rules and instructions but because it is a redemption book that tells us what Jesus has done he has rescued and redeemed and renewed us and that is why legal nitpickers are so deadly because here is one last characteristic of them they take away God's word look at what Jesus accuses the teachers of the law in verses 47 to 48 Jesus says on the face of it you honour the prophets you build monuments for them but hey remember how your ancestors treated them they murdered them they made sure God's word couldn't go out well isn't that what you

Pharisees and teachers of the law have been doing Jesus asked you have been adding all these extra laws such that no one knows what God's word really says you have been ignoring what God's word prioritizes and you have suppressed the main message of God's word the message of Jesus and his grace by your teaching and if you continue the pattern of your ancestors in silencing God's word Jesus says you too are as guilty as your ancestors you are just as guilty as those responsible for the death of Abel the first person in the Bible to die of murder and Zechariah the last person in the Old Testament to die similarly sure while not every generation might literally kill a prophet every generation who refuses

God's word who disregards it and takes it away are more or less doing the same thing why because verse 52 whenever anyone takes away God's word they are taking away the key to knowledge of entry into God's kingdom they are taking away the gospel and the possibility of salvation woe to such people and so we come back full circle do you remember what the sign seekers are like they are obsessed with the externals signs and wonders and consistently refuse God's word and what are legal need pickers like they are the same they are also obsessed with the externals ritual washing and so on and consistently disregard

God's word this is the essence of team religion so today Jesus wants us against team religions two forms the sign seekers and the legal nitpickers people but what should team Jesus people do instead how can they offset team religion well this brings us to this mini parable that Jesus mentions in verses 33 to 36 and here is the main point team Jesus are light bearers that's what we are the basic principle is in verse 33 so imagine a blackout not hard to do in Sarawak and what do you do you light a candle or you grab a torch or you use your smartphone anything to get a light going but once you get that light going the last thing you will do is to cover it no you will make sure that the light is in a place where it will be seen far and wide and

Jesus is light and we want to hold him up such that he would be seen far and wide but we know that it's not easy so how can we achieve that and that is where verses 34 to 36 come in Jesus now switches to a related but different metaphor he compares the eye to a lamb for the body and the basic idea is when this eye lamb is healthy it radiates light into your body so your body is full of light but if it isn't healthy all anyone will ever see is darkness and actually that word unhealthy in verse 34 is exactly the same word in the Greek as wicked as in this wicked generation and so here is Jesus basic point ensure that your eye lamb is healthy so that you will be a light bearer your body will be full of light but how do you ensure that the context tells us

[39 : 44] Jesus gives us this mini parable straight after telling us that the only sign we really need is the sign of Jonah it is his message his gospel his word that's what keeps our eye lamb healthy so

that we can keep bearing the light of God and so Jesus is really saying see to it that we are taking in his teaching see to it that we are taking in the written word of God which points us to the living word of God for when we take in the gospel through the word we are really allowing Jesus to shine his light into every area of our life and when that happens we will be full of light but when we don't we end up being part of a wicked generation so see to it

Jesus says you don't turn to mere signs or man made laws turn to Jesus in his word and you will be light I know you heard me say this many times but notice that this is the emphasis of Jesus not just my emphasis but before we leave today's passage Jesus also warns us not to be surprised the truth is not everyone wants to be a light bearer that's the point of verses 53 and 54 there will be those who stubbornly want to remain on team religion there will be those who stubbornly want to insist they are right and Jesus is wrong and to challenge him every step of the way there will be those who will never want to repent and that is the truth so don't be surprised and don't be discouraged should your attempts to show

Jesus to others in word and action sometimes be met with a negative response that is the world team Jesus lives in what Jesus said two weeks ago is true whoever is not for me is against me if you are on team religion you are against team Jesus but Jesus says to us today just make sure that you yourself don't switch sides without even realizing it team team religion is just too dangerous so stay with Jesus and you won't be in darkness let us respond by coming to the Lord now in prayer father father sometimes your word is challenging sometimes your word is not easy to hear but father we pray that indeed we would be like the

Ninevites we would be like the queen of Sheba we would be like the disciples of Jesus who did respond rightly who wanted to turn away from things that were not of Jesus and turn to Jesus himself so Lord we pray that we would do that today father we know Lord that our outside and our inside sometimes doesn't match and father we thank you so much that the Lord Jesus has covered that gap for us but father now we pray that as those who bear his name we do want to live as those whose insights do match their outsides that we don't just want to be religious people but we want to be truly transformed by Christ in every way so we ask by your Holy Spirit that you work in us day by day week by week year by year we pray all this in the name of Jesus Christ Amen