

The Twelve | Enrolled in the School of Jesus (B)

True Discipleship and Bad Religion

Luke 11.37ff

February 2, 2020 (Groundhog Day)

Now when He had spoken, a Pharisee asked Him to have lunch with him; and He went in, and reclined at the table. 38 When the Pharisee saw it, he was surprised that He had not first ceremonially washed before the meal. 39 But the Lord said to him, "Now you Pharisees clean the outside of the cup and of the platter; but inside of you, you are full of robbery and wickedness. 40 "You foolish ones, did not He who made the outside make the inside also? 41 "But give that which is within as charity, and then all things are clean for you.

42 "But woe to you Pharisees! For you pay tithe of mint and rue and every kind of garden herb, and yet disregard justice and the love of God; but these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others. 43 "Woe to you Pharisees! For you love the chief seats in the synagogues and the respectful greetings in the market places. 44 "Woe to you! For you are like concealed tombs, and the people who walk over them are unaware of it."

45 One of the lawyers said to Him in reply, "Teacher, when You say this, You insult us too." 46 But He said, "Woe to you lawyers as well! For you weigh men down with burdens hard to bear, while you yourselves will not even touch the burdens with one of your fingers. 47" Woe to you! For you build the tombs of the prophets, and it was your fathers who killed them. 48 "So you are witnesses and approve the deeds of your fathers; because it was they who killed them, and you build their tombs. 49 "For this reason also the wisdom of God said, 'I will send to them prophets and apostles, and some of them they will kill and some they will persecute, 50 so that the blood of all the prophets, shed since the foundation of the world, may be charged against this generation, 51 from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah, who was killed between the altar and the house of God; yes, I tell you, it shall be charged against this generation.' 52 "Woe to you lawyers! For you have taken away the key of knowledge; you yourselves did not enter, and you hindered those who were entering."

53 When He left there, the scribes and the Pharisees began to be very hostile and to question Him closely on many subjects, 54 plotting against Him to catch Him in something He might say.

We're looking at the four Gospels... and specifically at the way Jesus Christ trained His twelve disciples.

This occasion seems to be a real opportunity for Jesus and the twelve disciples to get some traction and gain some real credibility for their little start-up movement. After Jesus has spoken to the crowds, He gets invited to a kind of ministerial association lunch. And again, the impressionable young disciples may be excited that their un-credentialed Teacher is finally getting some recognition for His brilliance.

But it appears that Jesus sort of blows the opportunity right off the bat because He's uncouth and crude, ignores basic decorum for how a minister should conduct himself in polite company!

And THIS becomes an opportunity for Jesus Christ to demonstrate the difference between being in HIS school and belonging to a standard form of religion.

It turns out that Jesus is surprisingly critical of typical religion... and where we might EXPECT Jesus to be most at home and comfortable among His peers, other rabbis and clergymen, instead He's remarkably disparaging and disapproving. The food gets cold and the conversation gets HOT and Jesus does all the talking.

We...in our own day are concerned: young people are apparently leaving organized religion. We're witnessing the rise of the "nones" – the 2020 census will tell us more exactly how many young people indicate as their religious affiliation "NONE". There's been a slow decline but suddenly, the drop is sharper. Millennials are apparently "skipping church and not going back". There are other opinions (Ross Douthat, "The Overstated Collapse of American Christianity: Three reasons the narrative of rapid secularization is incomplete" New York Times, Oct 29, 2019) But most people are agreed and people in organized religions of ALL STRIPES are concerned... And WHAT does Jesus Christ think?

What might this episode tell us and HOW might it equip us to move ahead... to help your own siblings or children or grandchildren or neighbors? Why are people leaving organized religion? There are a variety of reasons some of which Jesus Christ Himself confronts in this passage – reasons to leave!

So let's look at:

- 1) Why people leave organized religion and where do they go instead?
- 2) Why is Jesus apparently clueless?
- 3) What might a church look like that took this difference seriously?

The immediate issue is pretty simple – Jesus doesn't wash His hands before lunch. Somehow the host indicated surprise (body language?) and without a word from the host, Jesus Christ goes on the offensive?

He pronounces a series of "woes" – at least six ways He finds their organized religion revolting. First, it's focused on externals with an absence of inner reality. They wash their hands ceremonially (in a way NOT taught in the Hebrew Scriptures) but inside their lives – their hearts and motives and desires – are greedy and malicious... They wash the outside of the cup but the inside is filthy... BUT they look good (and THAT'S the most important thing!) Externals and appearance with no inner reality!

In a similar way they major on the minors. They have lost track of the Big Idea. They tithe (i.e. give ten percent) of everything – they even measure their garden herbs and carefully put aside one leaf for every ten... And all the while, the great sweeping themes of justice and God’s love THEY DISREGARD.

Fixated on minutiae they miss the Main Thing.

Third, they live in this carefully constructed respect-culture where a person’s worth is determined by the number of greetings he gets. You have to sort of curate your image. “But”, says Jesus, “your people-pleasing only makes you spiritually toxic because you teach people that public opinion is what matters.”

Fourth, you burden people with a lot of spiritual and moral requirements and then you offer them NO HELP. It’s the worst kind of authoritarian peer-pressure and fear led by control-freaks and bullies!

Then Jesus confronts their glossed over sense of nostalgia; they look back on the history of their nation and they fancy themselves as allies of the prophets as if, “WE would’ve stood up for these messengers of God when they were opposed by society.” But Jesus says, “You’re only deceiving and flattering yourselves – your forefathers didn’t want God’s Word... AND NEITHER DO YOU! Because God’s Word is speaking right now at your ministerial lunch and you hate ME! Your fathers were guilty but you are far more culpable!”

And then finally He says, “You guys put the cookies on the top shelf! You make spiritual concepts hard to reach so people will be impressed with you! You’ve taken away the key of knowledge – you don’t enter in and you make it hard for others to understand!”

Now – why are people today leaving organized religion? Well there are a lot of reasons and it’s hard to find ONE cause in this trend.

But it does seem that if we asked people – they might very well say, “Well I’m against religion...” and at least SOME of the reasons they might offer would be the very things Jesus Christ ALSO opposed!

Some people who are NOT affiliating (again, not everyone has the same story) have been in religious communities/churches that put all the emphasis on appearance with no inner reality/power/conviction.

Others have seen minor issues become WAY too important while the broad recurring themes of the Bible (justice and the love of God) are forgotten.

People-pleasing, clergy abuse and authoritarianism, nostalgia that's really only self-congratulatory and a baptizing of the past that glosses over the bad; religious teachers using big words and concepts to keep the dumb sheep...IN THE DARK (but impressed)!

All these grievances modern people have with organized religion and MORE... and yet... as we've said, to withdraw from community or withdraw from ancient creeds and practices and traditions because you'll be better served by joining a club or a yoga class or concocting your own spiritual blend – this will NOT safeguard you against these very offences!

You'll still be judged...on the basis of your appearance on the basis of how you curate your image on FB or InstaGram... Experts and celebrities will dazzle you with ideas and concepts you don't really get - as Ada Calhoun said in this interview – the pressure is still ON: “are you a good parent? Are you good at work? Are you - you know, is your house nice? Are you in shape? Are you recycling? Like, it's every single factor in life you have to excel at. And I think that level of pressure is unsustainable.”

You know: it's like working remotely (working from home) is great – but the downside is, you never leave work! Your home has now become your workplace and there's no escape... AND so, our flight from organized religion has turned everything into religion where we're constantly judged and can never really measure up.

And THIS is why Jesus Christ, at that Ministerial Association Luncheon couldn't let it go! He had to pass that wash-bowl when it came to Him. I can imagine Him saying, “What? Wash my hands? Oh, no thanks – I'm good.” It's like He's clueless!

And then whether it was a raised eyebrow or a snarky whisper – He notes the surprise. “Huh?! I can't believe He doesn't ... know that He's supposed to wash His hands as the elders taught and instead He left His hands UNCLEAN and ATE with those hands!”

And we wonder... WHY did Jesus Christ do that? Why couldn't He just “go with it”? When in Rome... Be all things to all men... Just try to fit in; cause no offence!

The old English Puritan Thomas Watson wrote that ZEAL is a mixture of love and anger. And Jesus comes in ZEAL – loving like a lamb and angry like a lion.

He feels for these lost religious professionals. He'll say that they're MORE lost than the traitor tax collectors and the prostitutes (Mat 21.31). When He says, “WOE!” six times, He speaks from a broken heart. “I feel for you and I fear for you if you do not repent.”

He loves them (Mk 10.21) and in love mixed with anger, He takes out the spiritual defibrillator and He OFFENDS THEM in order to shock their hearts into a healthy rhythm. “Teacher” (says the

lawyer, the Bible scholar in v. 45) “Teacher, You insult US too! We’re not prostitutes and weirdoes or even those religious-progressive types... WE’RE LIKE YOU – we’re YOUR kind!”

And Jesus goes on to INSULT the man hard – turns up the voltage and blasts him – Jesus is an equal-opportunity insulter. He’s fierce like a lion... but He’s also like a lamb. He knew exactly what was in store for Him at that lunch...and He accepted their invitation anyway; He wants to receive the Prodigal AND He wants to receive the Older Brother types back into the Father’s House of Joy.

The story ends with the Older Brother types seething in anger... “When He left there, the scribes and the Pharisees began to be very hostile and to question Him closely on many subjects, plotting against Him to catch Him in something He might say.”

The word “catch” is a hunting word. They would hunt this Lion and they’d eventually be so hostile to Him that they’d slaughter Him like a Lamb. And He sits there... with those dirty Hands.

Those Hands.

He’s got the whole world in His Hands. He will have those Hands... pinned to a beam and those dirty Hands will make clean all the people of God through all the ages – hookers and holy-men... bishops and bums – older brother self righteous types and sexy sensational sinners... everyone who finds it all too good to be true but believes anyway – those dirty Hands are pierced for you to give you relief from guilt and judgment. If you just despair of your own righteousness and receive.

A church that takes this difference seriously – is a church that sees – religion/morality can kill you as fast as prostitution or gambling. In some sense religion is even MORE dangerous because the religious person is lulled by appearances and may come to think that he is good and better than others.

I know there are people in our community who want nothing to do with the real Jesus Christ but I also suspect that there are some – young millenials and old boomers (and people in between) who THINK it’s all the same... All religion is fixated on appearances and multiplying your burdens and clergymen with big words and dark agendas and... ya know... God, have mercy on us and save us from that religion.

But there is one great alternative – God entered in and got His Hands dirty – love as fierce as a Lion and as tender as a Lamb.

Those Dirty Hands were pierced for sinners: religious, respectable sinners (who look good) and others who know they can never measure up (can’t even look the part). May this be a church that knows Jesus Christ, the Lion and the Lamb and holds Him out to a word desperately in need of relief.