

What's the Point? Luke 11:27 – 54

In His public ministry, Jesus encountered a wide range of people. Most of them were already religious; most of them would identify themselves as people who worshipped the God of Israel. Why did Jesus interact mostly with religious Jewish people? Because those are the ones who showed up to His various public events. Even the ones who came for the healing, whether for themselves or for someone about whom they cared, they would not have shown up at all if they did not care about the God of Israel or have some confidence that Jesus could help a health problem with which they or a loved one was afflicted.

Yet, the vast majority of these self-professed religious people had missed the point. In each of the scenes in the latter half of Luke 11, let's see how the attitudes displayed in them are disturbingly similar to how we think a lot of the time. Instead of ridiculing them, let's see ourselves. And, just as importantly, instead of condemning ourselves and feeling bad about ourselves, let's focus on the change in spiritual prescription that Jesus recommends for His audience, and, because we are so similar, to begin seeing the point of this relationship with God.

The first scene, in Luke 11:27 – 28, a well-meaning woman attempts to say something nice about Jesus and, by extension, about His mother.

And it happened, as He spoke these things, that a certain woman from the crowd raised her voice and said to Him, "Blessed is the womb that bore You, and the breasts which nursed You!" But He said, "More than that, blessed are those who hear the word of God and keep it!"

First, a bit of vocabulary. Two very different Greek words have both been translated "blessed." The verb, the past tense of "bless," means to say something good about someone else. The Greek word is where, in English, we get our word, "eulogy." The other Greek word, a noun, the one used here, describes the mental and emotional state of a person, "above the cares of this life." We all know that the world is a mess. Some people stress over it all the time and are anxious and frazzled. Others seem to be able to rise above those concerns and be focused on something better. This woman, in her attempt to say, "Your mother must be really proud of You," revealed her focus in life, to be proud of your kids. Now, that's not a bad thing, to be proud of your kids, but Jesus, without insulting the woman, reveals that there is something even bigger, "One may be absolutely above the cares of this life by understanding the logic of God (the Word) and using that as the foundation for making the decisions of life." Focusing on producing kids of whom you can be proud has one facet you cannot control. You can teach them the best ideas; you can be there for them; you can model optimum behavior. But the kids need to choose the direction they are going to go. You can increase the probabilities of success through good parenting, but there are no guarantees. Jesus' method, however, does come with a guarantee. God is consistent and integrated and 100% good. He will keep up His end. So, acting on the readily available wisdom of God is guaranteed to result in being above the cares of this life.

Don't a lot of people miss that? Even the religious ones? By setting our sights too low, even when the objective is good, like raising faithful kids, we lose the guarantee. God's method is the guaranteed platform for all of life, from family to livelihood to relationships outside of family. Not everything will go perfectly; that's not the guarantee, but we will have peace and joy as we negotiate a path through this broken world.

The second scene here in this second half of Luke 11, verses 29 – 32, is about recognizing the wisdom of God and not trying to manipulate God.

And while the crowds were thickly gathered together, He began to say, “This is an evil generation. It seeks a sign, and no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah. For as Jonah became a sign to the Ninevites, so also the Son of Man will be to this generation. The queen of the South will rise up in the judgment with the men of this generation and condemn them, for she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon; and indeed a greater than Solomon is here. The men of Nineveh will rise up in the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and indeed a greater than Jonah is here.

Although not in this paragraph, the gospels record several occasions when some in the audience wanted Jesus to produce a sign that He was actually from God and not just a slick talker. Obviously, Jesus performed a huge number of signs, but not specifically as signs. He healed thousands. He fulfilled the predictions of the prophets about how the Messiah would act. Like when John the Baptist sent some of his disciples to ask Jesus if He was the One, or if they should look for someone else (Luke 7: 18 – 35). Jesus quoted Isaiah 35:5 – 6 as His response, “Go and tell John the things you have seen and heard: that the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have the gospel preached to them.” What the audience here missed was that Jesus had already given them signs in what He was doing already. In some of those other places about signs, Jesus does include that there would be one big sign in the resurrection.

The audience wanted to manipulate God by demanding a sign that was to their liking, instead of accepting the signs they already had. People today do the same. Many have rejected Christianity because the miracle they demanded did not happen on their timetable. But before we condemn them too soundly, let’s learn from an age-old mistake. First, we cannot assume that we are in control. Many people are disappointed in the results they get from faith, or they find themselves unwilling to act on God’s promises instead of their own wish list, or they assume that God did not respond rather than investigating if they really understood what that promise was about.

Jesus used the Ninevites’ response to Jonah, and the response of the Queen of Sheba to the reports of the wisdom Solomon, as His examples of those who responded to the evidence at hand without asking for an additional sign of my choosing. God has provided more than sufficient evidence that He is who He says He is, and that His Word has been accurately transmitted to us. Asking for additional evidence is just manipulation.

Think about the Ninevites. Jonah shows up. There must have been something about him that made him remarkable because, after all, anyone can claim to be a prophet of the God of Israel – and Jonah was more than 750 miles from home. Perhaps there were after-effects of being inside a big fish for three days. Perhaps Jonah’s message had more information than what little we have recorded in the book of Jonah. Whatever Jonah did that convinced them that his message was real, they repented. The Assyrians, Ninevah was the capital of Assyria, were known as particularly vicious and cruel, conquering and deporting whole countries as a method of maintaining control over a far-flung and rapidly expanding empire. They changed their world view as a result of hearing what Jonah had to say. The Ninevites could have killed him, or just ignored him, but instead they changed.

The Queen of Sheba (1 Kings 10), who lived somewhere on the east coast of Africa, more than a thousand miles away, embarked on a dangerous and arduous journey just to hear the wisdom of Solomon for herself. She could have sent representatives. She could have just let the report go by because a visit was too unrealistic to attempt.

But, Jesus held them up as those who acted on evidence for which they did not ask. Neither the Ninevites nor the Queen of Sheba demanded further proof.

The same contrast exists in our time. There are those who react to the mountain of evidence that God has already provided. Others want to manipulate God into doing it the way that they imagine will satisfy them, although it never seems to. One demand for more proof just leads to another demand for more proof. The physical evidence is in museums around the world. Hundreds of people have written extensively about that evidence. All we need to do is look. This evidence is straightforward and easily understood, not complex and confusing as the naysayers imagine and use as an excuse to not even start to investigate.

Jesus offered an illustration of how straightforward the ways of God are, in the next paragraph, 33 – 36.

"No one, when he has lit a lamp, puts it in a secret place or under a basket, but on a lampstand, that those who come in may see the light. The lamp of the body is the eye. Therefore, when your eye is good, your whole body also is full of light. But when your eye is bad, your body also is full of darkness. Therefore, take heed that the light which is in you is not darkness. If then your whole body is full of light, having no part dark, the whole body will be full of light, as when the bright shining of a lamp gives you light."

Jesus wove together two ideas in this saying. We could put God in that first verse; God would not hide His evidence, but would put it where everyone would see it. This evidence, this light, will illuminate all those with good eyes, so be sure your eyes are open and clear. Those who want to see the light will see it clearly. Those who do not, will be filled with darkness.

I have discussed Christianity with many who think of it as just a collection of nice sayings, or an attempt by some to control others, or fairy tales that are not suited to people in our advanced technological and scientific society. The problem with their claims about Christianity is that they repeat the dismissive conclusions of others without having researched the subject themselves. They have retreated to the unsubstantiated conclusion that their impressions, having done no research, are accurate, and that no further investigation is warranted. We need to ask, "You do know, don't you, that no historical or geographical errors have ever been substantiated in the Bible, and there are tens of thousands of fragments of ancient writings that make the Bible the best attested historical document of all time by a very wide margin. The evidence for the accuracy of the Bible is overwhelming." Usually, this is a shock to them. Some actually want to hear more.

Moving on to the next scene, in every age are those who have a preconceived notion about what religion should be, about how we should try to connect with God. Here's the example Luke recorded from Jesus' experience (37 – 45):

And as He spoke, a certain Pharisee asked Him to dine with him. So He went in and sat down to eat. When the Pharisee saw it, he marveled that He had not first washed before dinner. Then the Lord said to him, "Now you Pharisees make the outside of the cup and dish clean, but your inward part is full of greed and wickedness. Foolish ones! Did not He who made the outside

make the inside also? But rather, give alms of what is inside; then indeed all things are clean to you. But woe to you, Pharisees! For you tithe mint and rue and all manner of herbs, and pass by justice and the love of God. These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone. Woe to you Pharisees! For you love the best seats in the synagogues and greetings in the marketplaces. Woe to you! For you are like graves which are not seen, and the men who walk over them are not aware of them.”

Asking a celebrity, Jesus, despite the fact that He was poor, was a social coup for the wealthy. Remember, the middle class did not exist. There were those who lived hand-to-mouth, and those who had many servants. The wealthy delighted in inviting their wealthy friends to a banquet, and having someone like Jesus in attendance to make it an enviable social event.

This event was hosted by a Pharisee, the conservative party, those who really tried to keep all the laws in the Law of Moses. The problem was that the Pharisees focused so much on exactly how to do everything that they missed the point of the particular Law they were trying to follow exactly. The next paragraph will switch to the Sadducees, the liberal party, those who specialized in finding ways around the Laws, the loophole lookers.

The reference to washing was not a hygiene question but a ceremonial one. The concept is not in the Law of Moses, but rather a ritual that the Pharisees had invented to illustrate their purity. The hygiene part was handled separately. All of the ritual purification stations in homes and at the Temple always had places to wash off the dirt (including full bathtubs at the uncleanliness stations at the Temple, call the miqvah). And we can be sure that this is not a question of legal uncleanness because the uncleanness statutes involved waiting until evening to rejoin the group.

Jesus used the question about the ritual washings of the Pharisees as a springboard to a discussion of being consistent. While the outward signs of purity invented by the Pharisees may make a point, they failed to follow up with cleaning up the inside, the very thing that the ritual washing was supposed to illustrate. Jesus went on to mention the Pharisees' strict adherence to tithing 10% of every gain, including the herbs in their gardens, but totally missed the point of tithing: (1) sharing with the widows, orphans, strangers, and schoolteachers, (2) donating to the local storehouse as a hedge against famine or siege, and (3) saving up to be able to afford to make the three required trips to the Temple each year. (No, tithes were not given to a central organization to be dispensed by the leadership. Rather, each one decided where his tithe would be most effective.) To the Pharisees, the objective was to fastidiously give of all they gained, but totally forgot why.

To the Pharisees, success was realized when you were promoted to the better seats in the synagogue (most had to stand), and success was achieved when people greeted you as “Rabbi.”

Jesus ended by taking one of their rules to its logical extreme, showing how ridiculous it was. The Law said that touching a dead body made one unclean. The Pharisees reasoned that, since the body was in a tomb, the tomb must also be unclean where the body touched the stone walls or tables on the inside. Continuing the same logic, the outside of the tombs also must be unclean, because the inside touches the outside. Jesus did not continue the logic, but by their reasoning, everything is unclean and we did not even know it. In their fanatical push to exactly meet every Law, they both missed the point and came to totally illogical conclusions.

Over the last 2000 years, the church has not done much better. Time and again, various groups have established rituals to ensure that their members met the letter of the New Testament, but missed the point. I will leave it to you to think of the rituals that you have seen that just did

not make any sense. But identifying the ridiculousness of the past is not the point, either. Rather, we need to be forewarned that this shift of focus is very easy to encounter. So, instead, we need to focus on the principles, not the practices, and to know what our practices are supposed to illustrate so that we are reminded of the important stuff like sharing and justice and loving God. Rather than establishing rules for baptism, let's review the ten symbols built into it. Instead of establishing when to have the Lord's Supper and who may participate, let's review the fifteen symbols built into it.

And, finally, the Sadducees who were present realized that Jesus' condemnation of the Pharisees fell on them, too. Jesus switched from the Pharisees' problem of adherence to details rather than principles, to the Sadducees' problem of finding convenient loopholes produced by self-centeredness instead of seeing the big picture.

Then one of the lawyers answered and said to Him, "Teacher, by saying these things You reproach us also." And He said, "Woe to you also, lawyers! For you load men with burdens hard to bear, and you yourselves do not touch the burdens with one of your fingers. Woe to you! For you build the tombs of the prophets, and your fathers killed them. In fact, you bear witness that you approve the deeds of your fathers; for they indeed killed them, and you build their tombs. Therefore the wisdom of God also said, 'I will send them prophets and apostles, and some of them they will kill and persecute,' that the blood of all the prophets which was shed from the foundation of the world may be required of this generation, from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah who perished between the altar and the temple. Yes, I say to you, it shall be required of this generation. Woe to you lawyers! For you have taken away the key of knowledge. You did not enter in yourselves, and those who were entering in you hindered." And as He said these things to them, the scribes and the Pharisees began to assail Him vehemently, and to cross-examine Him about many things, lying in wait for Him, to catch Him in something He might say.

In Jesus' day, the wealthy had comfortable seats, while the poor stood or leaned against a pillar or wall. Dressing up for church is not a new thing. The same was the practice in the synagogues in Jesus' day. The poor were not really welcomed, only tolerated. The well-educated could hold forth on complex theories that rapidly confused the less educated, causing the poor to believe that they were not smart enough to understand, when, in reality, what was being taught was just plain illogical. These leaders of Judaism did not even see the illogic of celebrating their own history rather than mourning it. The history of Israel as recorded in the Old Testament is filled with accounts of times when the Israelites complained, turned to idols, killed God's messengers, and refused to listen. They built monuments to the very prophets that their ancestors had murdered without recognizing that they were honoring the murderers rather than mourning the failures.

Note that the targets of Jesus' teaching did not respond with logic or Scripture or discussion, but anger. That has not changed either.

Most good, honest, church-going people have been trained to not expect logic, although Jesus majored in it. Most have not come to expect a reasoned discussion of differences, only division and anger. Therefore, few search the Scriptures for the simple conclusions and the very logical and simple answers. The keys to knowledge continue to be obscured by what we honor as theology.

This all sounds very dismal. What can we do to unravel this obscuring of truth by high-sounding theories that no one can follow, or this divisiveness and anger? We don't want to be

like them. But the more important question is how to free the lowly from their feeling of helplessness because what they are being taught isn't making sense. We need to reduce the gospel to its fundamental points that do make sense: faith and love, mutual trust and selflessness. But what about the arguments between the various groups? Those arguments are not important. They are just bad theories pitted against angry reactions. Both sides have missed the point.

Instead, introduce people to the proof and logic of God, that the Scriptures are provably true. Introduce people to the promises of God. Are we willing to give up a system that doesn't work anyway and just talk about what God promised? Introduce people to selflessness. Unfortunately, Christianity has been selling the gospel with a self-centered message for many centuries, selling people on what God can do for them. Then, church leaders wonder why people never get a handle on selflessness – because they were attracted using self-centeredness.

God's terminal objective is a big family that will last. He knows that exactly two characteristics are necessary for that family to survive for the long haul: faith and love, mutual trust and selflessness. The world was created as an incubator for faith, to nurture that mutual trust. God recognized the obvious, that we were going to mess this up, and that we had no means of pulling back the ripples caused by each one of our bad choices. So, before creation, He set in motion the plan to come to earth and pay off justice for us, so that, at the end, we could be judged by our mutual trust, not by our performance.