

True Religion

Matthew 23:27-39

Overview:

The opposite of true religion is false religion, and we are all guilty of play-acting about ours. The problem is, we are not fooling ourselves. True religion is abandoning all of the false pretenses of work righteousness, self-righteousness, and instead recognize that it is only through God that we have the hope of eternal life. The renewal of true religion happens when we confess that the religion of our goodness is false and when we know that we are lost sheep who have been found by the Shepherd.

Lesson:

We have a God who receives us and communes with us. He does not leave us in our sins but changes our heart with His love so that we see hope in eternal life.

Message:

Today's passage is the end of a stinging rebuke from Jesus to the Pharisees. It is only the final section of a much longer, and no less forceful passage.

Let's go back two verses from today's reading and you'll see what I mean:

“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean.

Just like the verses after, and even before this one, we hear Jesus rebuking the Pharisees for their empty, false religious practices. They are so focused on the outside: what others think of them and how self-righteous they believe their stance is before God that they never turn inward to recognize how broken and distant they are from Him.

Jesus uses the words “cup” and “dish” but as I reflect on this passage all I can think about is Tupperware. Jesus tells me in this passage that I keep my Tupperware clean on the outside but inside it is dirty **and** even tightly covered to hide the filth and seal the smell of my own sinfulness.

I'm not the only one carrying it around – we all are. Each one of us carries a container to store our own greed and self-indulgence that we collect throughout the year and we keep it tightly sealed, so nothing leaks out. And it doesn't matter your belief, your background, or your actions – you carry around the same two things that I carry around and tonight I'd like to look at each of them.

The first is rotting food. It sounds unpleasant but that's partially the point. Because we know it's rotting, sometimes we don't even want to open it!

For some it's the food of false religious beliefs. The belief of financial blessings and physical well-being that can be realized only after building a strong enough faith in God.

For others, the food is simply a false belief that God doesn't exist, and this life is all that here is.

For others, it is the same food as the Pharisees: works that lead to a self-righteous standing before God. A belief that it is by their works that they earn a right into heaven.

And the list can go on but at the core of each and every example is a poison that we create ourselves:

- When we place ourselves equal to God and take our own paths, we have created it.
- When we place ourselves above God and ask him to grant us favors, we have created it.
- When we replace God with other gods in our lives, we have created it.

And this poison destroys everything it touches. Every decision we make, our relationship with God, everything. The fruits of the works that we do for others, that we place in our container, immediately become contaminated and rot.

And once it rots, it must be discarded because there is nothing salvageable. In fact, it is even dangerous to carry it around because the person runs the risk of completely corrupting and destroying his faith. As Christ says in the sermon on the mount as recorded in Matthew 5:

¹³“You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot.

Here, Jesus instructs us that we must discard anything that turns us away from Him or risk losing our saltiness – our faith.

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The second category is the smell. This is the heavy heart of disbelief in God's love, belief that we are not good enough to stand before Him, that we are not good enough to be loved by him and never will be. This is what Jesus talks about in his sermon:

³“Blessed are the poor in spirit,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

⁴Blessed are those who mourn,
for they will be comforted.

⁵ Blessed are the meek,
for they will inherit the earth.

⁶ Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,
for they will be filled.

Christ tells us that these people are blessed – not because he wants them in this condition but because they *are* in this condition. It is in this broken condition that Jesus works. It is in this condition that Jesus heals and pulls them close, that they find salvation and blessings.

These are the people that have already discarded the food of self-righteousness – have completely emptied themselves but just can't believe that Christ's sacrifice and God's grace will ever be enough to cover their sins. They are afraid to even approach God for fear of rejection so they scrub their containers with guilt and a heavy heart in hopes of removing the smell because they believe that if they can just get it out God will accept them. And so, they scrub and scrub... and scrub. But nothing they do will work.

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I said before, everyone carries around their Tupperware container – and although you can't look inside others you can always tell which category they are mostly carrying around by how tightly they seal it.

If it is rotten food the top is barely set. It may even be off for display. They may walk around showing off how rotten their food is, how self-righteously rotten it is, all while believing how gloriously beautiful it looks and tastes. They may boast of their works and standings before God and above you. They may ask: "For how can you be even close to me if you won't even remove the top of your container? Clearly you have no right to stand in the presence of God the Most High." This was the standing of the Pharisees.

But then there are those that carry their containers around with the top very tightly affixed so no smell can escape. They may hide their containers out of embarrassment, and even though they tell themselves that the cover is on tight, they still imagine that some of the stink might still escape, and so they hide it – just to be sure.

It is this group of people that concerns God more – not **just** because they are so broken inside but because they are so susceptible to the first group of people. The self-righteous people seek out the meek and humble and offer fake religious solutions that don't ever require the person to even open the top. Instead, they sell ways that the broken can carry around their containers, add into them, and cover any smell. These promises destroy the faith of the meek and disconnect them from God.

This is what Jesus was so furious about in today's reading. It wasn't enough that the Pharisees were showing off their rotten food to the Jews! No! They were teaching these crushed souls that happiness and heaven could only be found in the works that they performed and the laws that

they kept. They were promising righteousness through obedience to these leaders instead of through the forgiveness of Christ.

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We are in the middle of our Lenten season and it is a time where we, as a church, together pull off the cover of our Tupperware and look inside. We discard the rotten food that we find: self-righteousness, works, and false religious beliefs. But more than that, we remind each other that there is nothing that we can do about the smell. We can't wash it clean through any work or deed. All we can do is turn to Christ. For it is only through His death and resurrection – **the spilling of His blood**, that our containers are truly emptied and washed clean.

During this time of Lent we pray for ourselves but also for each other. We pray for the Holy Spirit to work in our lives – to help us empty ourselves, to humble ourselves before God, and to prepare for the washing from Jesus.

We remind each other that Easter is just around the corner and that it will be a time of celebration – celebration that our containers are free of the food, free of the smell, and as clean on the inside as on the outside because of Him – and only Him.

This is the renewal that we are called into during Lent. This is the renewal of true religion and it happens when we confess that the religion of our goodness is false. We have a God who receives us and communes with us. He does not leave us in our sins, but washes our hearts clean with His love, so that we are able to say, “There is hope for others – look at what God has done and is still doing with someone like me!”

And, this is the renewal of true religion: that we remember how much we have been helped by Christ and begin looking for others to help. It is service rendered not out of fear or obligation, but service rendered out of thankfulness. Or, to say it another way, we do what we do because we love Jesus. To be loved by Father, Son, and Spirit and to love Him in return – and to love other people as an offshoot of that relationship – goes beyond mere religion. It is the life we're all looking for, and it is here for you, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Please pray with me.

As recorded in the letter of John:

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned...”

Lord, I hear these words and I place them on my heart. But, as the days go by and as the responsibilities of life consume me, these words fade away and I begin to question your love. I don't mean to, but I do. I begin to wonder if you would really love me after knowing my past. I begin to wonder if you would love me after knowing my thoughts. I begin to wonder if you would love me, period because sometimes I can't even love myself.

Lord, tonight I cry out to you in my emptiness. I ask that you take my container from me and clean it – for I cannot do it by myself. I ask that you comfort me and make your presence known because I feel far from you.

Lord, in this Lenten Season, remind me how much you love me. Remind me that your love is so overwhelming that I will never comprehend it. Remind me that you came to Earth, lived a perfect life, and died for me – not because I was good enough but because I was so bad, I couldn't have done it myself.

And Lord, in this Lenten Season, help me remember how much I love you. Help me remember to praise and thank you for all that you have done for me.

In your name we pray. Amen.