

One Dot of the Law

Luke 16:14-18 | April 19, 2020 | Bryce Beale

There is no doubt that miracles—instances where God contradicts his usual, natural order to perform something startling—are just that, startling.

Had you accompanied Jesus on his long trek toward Jerusalem, you too would have wondered at the way he split bread into unlimited loaves. If you had been out on the boat with his few friends when he caused them to catch more fish than they had ever caught, you too would have fallen to your knees and wondered at this Son of God.

But you were not there.

So, is your life destined to be much less interesting than theirs? God no doubt continues to work against the natural order, confounding doctors, when he pleases—but for you and me, we must admit, we see less of this activity than we read of in the gospels and in Acts.

For you, I say this morning, the word of God has good news. And it is this: you do not have all the miracles of Jesus' day, but that is because God has prepared something better for you. A miracle in the observable world is great—the turning of the Nile to blood is astounding. But, you remember, Pharaoh's magicians could copy it.

Many natural miracles we can imitate today with our technology.

But there is one miracle which towers above the rest, so rich, so complex, so thorough in its profundity that no mortal has ever copied it, nor ever can. And this is the miracle which God has prepared for us, the miracle in which we live, the miracle which repeats its daily before our eyes.

This is the miracle of the changing heart.

We can today by our technology make men and women live longer; we can make them taller or shorter, thicker or thinner; we can alter their minds, even duplicate their DNA. But who can make them good?

That is the miracle which astounds us the most, the one most needed by mankind and the one with by far the most potential to benefit the world.

Every social ill could be cured by this one miracle, were it to expand in its influence. If I merely multiplied money and cast it against the problems we face, that money would quickly dry up and the problems reappear. But if politicians became people of integrity, addicts became people of self-control, if men respected and honored women, companies never cheated, leaders never hated, what sort of world would we inhabit?

We do not expect this miracle to fully overtake our world as we now know it, so that our world becomes paradise—no, paradise will appear only when Jesus does, and claims this earth as his.

Yet even now that coming kingdom has broken into the world. It is, Jesus says, at hand, and near us.¹ People are pressing their way into it with joy. Hearts are changing from bad to good. No, not everywhere in the world—but here, in the church, among God’s people.

This is the miracle we witness and experience, and there is none greater.

You will see as much in our text for today, beginning in Luke 16:14:

LUKE 16:14-18

I must remind you briefly where we find ourselves as we come to this text. At the start of Luke 15, many wicked people, tax collectors and prostitutes, had come to Jesus to hear him teach—and Jesus received them. So the religious leaders of that day grumbled and said, “This man receives sinners and eats with them.”

Jesus then spent all of chapter 15 answering the religious leaders’ objection against him. He gave three parables about something being lost and then found, and what joy that causes—how much more is God glad when a lost sinner is found?

Now in chapter 16, although Jesus’ speech is interrupted with “He also said to the disciples,” it seems we are in the same setting.

¹ Mark 1:15; Luke 10:9; etc.

The Pharisees are still watching Jesus, listening to him, and criticizing him—and he is still responding to them.

Jesus just taught us in the passage from last week not to love money. Instead, we should invest it now by giving it away, so that we may have a heavenly reception and reward.

But the Pharisees love money and so hate Jesus' reproof. They grumble again, and Jesus again defends himself. That is where we find ourselves now.

Now, what amazes me about this small text for today is how much is contained in how few words. Honestly, true and false religion are exposed by only several lines of text. At first it may feel that very different subjects are discussed by Jesus, one after the other, with no connection between them. But that is not true. Jesus is wisely exposing his enemies, the religious leaders. He knows what is in their hearts and what is in the heart of every false believer in the world, including those who listen now to these words.

This morning then we have two goals: first, to hear how Jesus exposes false religion, in the Pharisees but more importantly in ourselves. And secondly, to see by contrast what he considers true religion to be. Eternity itself is at stake in these few lines—let us then give them careful attention.

What Christianity is not

First then, let us consider from this text what Christianity is not. There are endless opinions of what Christianity is and is not, but here we have it from the mouth of its very founder, Christ. What sort of religion does he say is false, rather than true?

Not hypocrisy

And the first answer to that question which Jesus provides is, "Religion is false if it is hypocritical religion." See verses 14 and 15 again:

The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all these things, and they ridiculed him. And he said to them, "You are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts. For what is exalted among men is an abomination in the sight of God."²

² ESV.

The highest fault of the Pharisees was not that they loved money. After all, how many of those tax collectors who came and were received by Jesus did not also love money? The love of money is a grave sin—but it is not the worst. So when Jesus sees his foes all in a tussle because he struck a blow at this pet sin of theirs, this love of money, he responds not by driving his weapon deeper into the heart of that sin. No, he moves past their love of money to the deeper issue.

“You,” he says, “are those who justify yourselves before men.”

Which means what? That though they loved money, and had many other inward evils, they pretended they did not. They acted in front of others as if they were holy in their conduct and in their hearts. They loved money, but in front of others they did not act like they loved money. I’m sure they acted as if they loved the others, loved the poor sheep of the house of Israel.

But they did not. They loved money. They loved power, they loved themselves, they loved all sorts of sins and self-gratifications and it was all that they could do to cover up these evils in a white-washed exterior, so those that looked up to them would not know. They justified themselves before others, even though they were not really just.

We call this hypocrisy.

Now no doubt every one of us has some sins that others do not know about; we do not go about broadcasting every one of our faults to the general public. Yet there is a point—and you and I know it, even if we cannot define it—at which our outer and inner lives are so different, that we are hypocrites. There comes a point at which we must labor long to conceal from the eyes of others those sins which, in private, preoccupy us most of the time. This is hypocrisy, this is the attitude of the Pharisees, and Jesus has made as clear as possible that this is not an attitude that fits within true Christianity.

Think how much damage has been done by those who wish to be called Christians, but who secretly have never severed their ties with sin. The heart has not miraculously changed from bad to good, but only from one obvious sort of bad to another more subtle and secretive sort of bad. They are in among the feasters at the feast, but they have no wedding clothes.

Teachers and preachers are under stricter judgment in this regard, for our influence for good or ill is great. How much damage has been done to the name of Christ by those who so long proclaimed him, yet all the while were, in secret, harboring horrible sins? Perhaps you, like I, have sat under the teaching of a man who, while he preached was cheating on his wife. He preached righteousness and lived unrighteousness. He justified himself in our eyes and made us to believe he led a godly life, but he did not.

I know of one pastor who sometimes prayed in the hearing of his elders, “Lord, if any of us would dishonor you publicly by being unfaithful to our wives, please take away lives before we have the opportunity.”

Perhaps you have a bad taste in your mouth for Christianity and the church because you have seen so many Christians proclaim Christ and yet live like pagans. I tell you now, and here is God’s word to authorize the statement: that is not Christianity. That is the behavior of one who follows the Pharisees, but not of one who follows Christ. God is pleased to justify sinners, to make them righteous through the blood of his Son—but he will not compete with you for the role of justifying. Either you try to justify yourself, or he will justify you. You cannot have it both ways.

For, as Jesus says in verse 15, “God knows your hearts.” No one else may—they may all be fooled. But God knows. And he is not at all impressed by the façade you use to trick others, “For what is exalted among men is an abomination in the sight of God.”

So the first answer to what Christianity is not is found here: it is not hypocrisy.

Not lawlessness

But there is another answer in our text. It appears in the next two verses, 16 and 17:

The Law and the Prophets were until John; since then the good news of the kingdom of God is preached, and everyone forces his way into it. But it is easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for one dot of the Law to become void.

You may at first wonder where these verses came from, and why they are here. How do they relate to each other, and to what has come before them?

In brief, they are yet another answer to the objection of the Pharisees. Jesus welcomed sinners and gave them free access into the kingdom of God that he proclaimed. But these were sinners! Is the kingdom a place of wickedness, of lawlessness, full of harlots and evil men doing evil? The law God gave to Israel through Moses set very high moral standards—were those now to be cast away? That is the objection.

And here Jesus answers that objection. Something has certainly changed from the time of the Old Testament, he explains: “The Law and the Prophets [that is, the Old Testament] were until John [the Baptist]; since then the good news of the kingdom of God is preached, and everyone [including many prostitutes and tax collectors] forces his way into it.”

That God would send his anointed King, who would rule over a kingdom, was announced many times in the Old Testament, but once John the Baptist came proclaiming that kingdom the wait was over. The Old Testament promises were to be fulfilled.

But still, the Pharisees’ objection must be answered: when the Old Testament is fulfilled in Jesus, does that mean all the moral requirements of the law disappear? Can Christians live however they please, so long as they have prayed their prayer and asked forgiveness?

Here is Jesus’ answer: “But it is easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for one dot of the Law to become void.”

Yes, there is a change from old to new, with John as the bridge between the two, but that is not a change from good, moral requirements to no requirements, or from good lives to bad lives. Surely the kingdom itself must be better and more righteous than the shadows which predicted it.

Not one dot of the Law can become void.

But we cannot take this to mean there is no difference at all between the Old Testament world and the New, for Jesus has just said there is a difference. What can it mean that the Law is not void, even though so much has changed from the Old Testament to the New?

Perhaps the parallel that Jesus gives in Matthew 5 can help us here: “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.”

The Pharisees think that Jesus, by welcoming sinners, is saying that his kingdom has a lower moral standard than the law of Moses, that it sets that law and all its moral guidelines aside. But Jesus replies that he is not setting the law aside but fulfilling it. Jesus is not less concerned with the moral lives of his followers than Moses was with the lives of the Israelites—Jesus cares more about our conduct than Moses did. But whereas one could keep the Old Testament laws as a hypocrite, outwardly conforming without a change of heart (like the Pharisees), Jesus would not allow such hypocrisy in his kingdom. Jesus fulfills the law in part by requiring of his followers the heart that God desired in giving his commands in the first place.

Any moral principle therefore found in the law of Moses continues to have value for we who believe, because those principles show us what God likes and does not like, even if our circumstances have changed from those of Israel and so some of the details do not apply to us.

You can see this heightening of morality in verse 18 of our text: “Everyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and he who marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery.”

Deuteronomy 24, in the Law, said that if a man divorced his wife and sent her away, and she married another but then left that man, the first husband could not marry her again. The Jews leading up to Jesus’ day had wrestled with how to understand this—one school of thought was strict on divorce, disallowing it in most cases. But another allowed it even for trivial reasons, quoting Deuteronomy 24 in their defense.

The Pharisees probably had no problem divorcing their wives if they displeased them, or if they found someone else they preferred. And of course they could defend their actions by using Deuteronomy 24. And yet, how far from the spirit of the command they wandered! The comment about divorce that they appealed to in that text was a mere concession—it merely says that if such a thing were to happen in a broken world like ours, and the woman went out and remarried and then afterward was single again, the first husband could not go remarry her. So the passage in fact was written to prevent people from treating marriage lightly—that was the spirit, the attitude in the heart of God who gave it. Yet hypocrites took that passage, ignored the spirit, and misused the letter.

Jesus therefore says as it were, “If that’s how you think of the Law, then no, we do not have that Law in my kingdom. But we do have the fulfillment of all the law’s intention, the morality God intended for his followers. The kingdom is not less moral than Israel was called to be, but more.”

This is the second thing that Christianity is not: it is not lawless. The fancy term for this is antinomian—against the law. We who believe are not wild, lawless persons who do whatever we please. Those sinners who like us came to Jesus, afterward repented and their lives were reformed. They like us did not reach moral perfection in their lives, but the miracle of inward change took place and kept taking place their whole lives.

Christians are moral people. We have integrity, and next year we will have more integrity than we do now. We abhor deceit. We do not go along with the world in its loose principles and would rather be wronged than wrong anyone else. We suffer injustices well and treat others with respect. We do not cheat on our taxes, do not beat our wives, do not grumble and complain, but hold fast the word of God in the darkness, shining like stars in the night.

We do not consider the morality set before us in Scripture to be our salvation. We are saved by the moral goodness of Jesus and that alone. But once saved, we have the law of Christ. We love to have our lives more and more conformed to his. We see the beauty of holiness, the nobility of righteous suffering and sacrifice and self-control.

And wherever we fall short of these demands, we repent again and again take up our happy pursuit of them.

Christianity is not hypocrisy, and neither is it open lawlessness.

What Christianity is

Well then, if it is not these things, what is Christianity? What is true religion? Jesus does not answer that in our text, but I think we can infer it from his statements.

Even just from that one example of morality he gives in verse 18: “Everyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and he who marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery.”

If that is the negative, let us state it positively and find the spirit in this command. Why is divorce forbidden for all Christians except,

as Matthew's gospel states, for cases of immorality or, as Paul tells the Corinthians, in cases of abandonment? Why do we who believe not seek out divorce when marriage gets tough? Why do we not go looking for others whom we think might please us better than our own spouse now?

Because we who believe have been changed. We do not stay married just so others might think well of us—that is what the hypocrites might do. No, we are faithful to our one spouse because we have been changed so that we genuinely, from the heart, desire to please God and bless others.

We do spend much of our time aware of all the badness that yet remains in us, but I must say this to you who believe: God has made you good! Not in all ways, but at your core and therefore in many ways. This is what Christianity is, what the kingdom consists of: not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.³

Jesus came into the world to save sinners, but he never meant to keep them sinners. His goal has all along been to purify for himself a people for his own possession, zealous for good deeds. He saves us right where we are, filth and all; but then afterward he washes us with pure water.

Brothers and sisters, we are free! We can, unlike any others, be truly good. We can see in ourselves a reform of our evil habits, a cleansing of our characters, true and lasting growth toward similarity to our Savior. We are freed from the horrible double life of hypocrisy and all the misery of lawlessness. We are free to be righteous.

We are free to leave behind us all that is exalted among mankind, and to press ourselves happily into the good and pure kingdom of God.

³ Rom. 14:17.