

True Religion

Luke 13:10-17 | Feb. 9, 2020 | Bryce Beale

This world's composed of two religions: true, and false.

False religion is and must be the most popular of the two, for it is within the range of our natural abilities. You and I can do false religion without having to ask for help. We could be good Buddhists, or successful Hindus or Muslims, or respected, empty Christians by the mere force of our wills.

But true religion is impossible. You and I, ever since Adam, do not come equipped for the tasks of true religion. We must be lifted by a supernatural power if we are to rise to its level; we must enter into the way of true religion through Christ, or we cannot enter in at all.

You see, false religion asks of us no real change. False religion encounters us, looks around the storage room of our hearts, and says, "Yes, there's enough in here to get by with." It takes the desires, the idols, the errors we already possess aplenty, and simply dresses them up in suits and ties and dresses, ready for Sunday morning.

When false religion finds, for example, a young woman who frequents the party scene in order to get the attention from men that she craves, it says, "No problem, I can work with this." On the outside, we see the young woman give up partying and begin attending church. It appears she has been converted to Christ—but she has not. Her desire for approval remains exactly what it was, only now she seeks that approval not in parties but in church. She works hard to look as Christian as she can, since the Christianer she looks, the more positive attention she receives from other Christians.

This is false religion, and it comes naturally to us all.

But true religion is something altogether different from this. Yes, it may look the same on the outside, but what it appears to be on the outside it truly is on the inside. Another young woman who craved the gaze of men has also given up the party scene, and she has also begun to attend church. But her religion is true; Christ has entered in and not merely rearranged desires, but killed old ones and given entirely new ones.

Both of these young women must say they come to church to find Christ, to serve their neighbor, to take in the word of God and to grow. But only true religion can mean it. Under the necktie of true religion is just the sort of heart you thought you'd find there, one that is what it claims to be.

True and false religion resemble each other in very many ways and run parallel in most cases—but they differ in this one great way: true religion is on the inside what it appears to be on the outside, while false is not. True religion is composed of new and holy desires; false, of old desires dressed up to look as if they were new.

And at key points, these two parallel religions will diverge, they will show their true colors.

That is precisely what occurs in today's text in Luke. We have two key figures in our passage: Jesus, and the ruler of a synagogue. Both are very religious. The lives of both are parallel at many points, no doubt. Both are in a synagogue on the Sabbath for worship. But in one there is true religion, and in the other, false.

LUKE 13:10-17

We have heard for many weeks now the sharp rebukes and warnings of the Savior against those who were Jews in name only, who claimed faith in Jehovah but betrayed that claim by their lives. God's judgment is right at the door, and all possessors of a false religion must repent or face it. This has been Jesus' message.

And now we see the message played out in an event. True and false religion are set before us in two persons, so that we might see them clearly. What Jesus has been teaching he now shows, as good teachers do.

We will follow the passage as it presents itself—first, in the man who represents true religion. We must by any means possible take hold of this sort of religion, or there is no hope for us. And secondly, we will witness false religion in a human form, as a synagogue ruler. We are all by nature this ruler of the synagogue, but we must by God's grace become something other than him if we are really to live.

Here are, in the end, the only two religions in the world. Let us see the one that we must have and be, and become aware of the one that we must certainly avoid.

True religion

First then, let us see true religion in the person of our Savior, Jesus Christ, who occupies the first place in this passage.

See him again in verses 10-13:

Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath. And behold, there was a woman who had had a disabling spirit for eighteen years. She was bent over and could not fully straighten herself. When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said to her, “Woman, you are freed from your disability.” And he laid his hands on her, and immediately she was made straight, and she glorified God.¹

James, the Lord’s brother, made clear in his letter that one of the easiest ways to distinguish true from false religion is to set before them both a person in need. Let both see human suffering, and note how they respond. Bring out the sword like Solomon of old, and test the two claimant mothers by threatening the child, by summoning their compassion. The one who cries out to spare the child is the mother.

And in our case here, the one who cares about the sufferer is the true Christian—actually, in this one case, the true Christ!

So suffering appears in the synagogue, verse 11: “And behold, there was a woman who had had a disabling spirit for eighteen years. She was bent over and could not fully straighten herself.”

We know of course that not every sickness or malady is caused by demonic influence, but we should not be surprised to find that deformity can be one symptom of a demon’s work. The devil and his minions come to steal, kill, and destroy. In the case of this woman, a demon had somehow worked to torment her body—and this the demon had been doing now for nearly two decades! Jesus in verse 16 speaks of this woman as one “whom Satan bound for eighteen years.”

¹ ESV.

Any here who have been shackled down by long illness know that it can feel like you are in a prison. You have lost a degree of freedom; you are constrained, held tight by sickness. Jesus came to liberate prisoners, and this he will do for us all when he returns. But in the synagogue on this day, he wished to give us a foretaste of the kingdom that is coming—and of its king.

Verse 12: “When Jesus saw her.” And I suppose that is the first mark of true religion in this passage. He notices the woman and her suffering. False professors of religion may have seen her too—but not in the way Jesus saw her. It is possible, as the apostle John admits, to have the world’s goods and see a brother in need, but then to close your heart against that brother. But Jesus sees this woman with an open heart toward her. You can tell in a person’s eye sometimes what you may not discover in their words—there is a kind of eye that furrows in compassion for the suffering. Such an eye Jesus has for this woman.

“When Jesus saw her,” it continues, “he called her over and said to her, ‘Woman, you are freed from your disability.’” This statement is enough to accomplish the deed. Jesus’ Father would have honored this statement and called into existence what formerly was not: the woman’s health. But Jesus knows he represents true religion, and he wants this event to serve for our instruction. So he does something unnecessary for this woman, but necessary for us lookers on.

“And he laid his hands on her, and immediately she was made straight.”

It is a sad sign of our own evil age that the phrase, “to lay a hand on a woman,” means to mistreat her. Here the absolute opposite is happening. Jesus lays his hands on this woman to show her that he cares. Jesus has no interest in her physical appearance, the way that others do. She is bent over, and has been for eighteen years. Unless she was bent from a very young age, she is probably past the years of her prime. But her beauty, her usefulness to him, her reputation—Jesus does not care about these things. He cares about her.

That is a mark of true religion.

You and I can, by means of common grace, or that grace that God gives to all people, do kind things for others without Christ. Christians are not the only ones opening hospitals or ministering

to the poor. But outside of Christ, we can never do this from pure compassion. Outside of Christ, we have only our old desires—these may dress up as good deeds, and perhaps God even gives the grace to grant us a genuinely compassionate deed when we are yet dead in our sins. But still the driving force will and must always be an old desire dressed up as new.

For until you can love someone for God's sake only, you cannot truly and fully love them. If God is not the final motive, then you must be. So you may come to the help of a beautiful woman, or you may offer your assistance to be noticed by others, or in an attempt to earn heaven, or some other ultimately you-focused motive.

But tell me—what kickback does Jesus get in our passage for his act of compassion? He gets persecution, as we will see. He gets no money. And because he is indifferent to money, to personal benefit of any sort, he can actually care about *her*. Not her as his servant, not her as a beautiful woman, not her as a rung in the social ladder. Her, as an image bearer of God. Her, as a “daughter of Abraham,” a member of God's beloved nation of the Jews. Her just as she was born, on no other basis than that she was born.

And Jesus can count as his reward that one thing he most craves, which she does give him after he heals her: “she glorified God.” The end of this passage says that “all the people rejoiced at all the glorious things that were done by him.” That was wage enough for him. He brought joy to people, and glory to God. This is true religion, these are the ends that true religion honestly seeks.

But these are not ends we naturally seek! Christ and Christ alone sought these things from his birth, as the second and better Adam. But we are born under the first, and our desire is to do the will of our forefather. We cannot love others purely, unless we are reborn to be like Christ. When he dies upon the cross not long after this event, it was not only to take away our evil hearts, but to give us his good one.

Jesus acts as though he really cares about this woman, and beneath the surface, he does. The way he acts is the direct descendant of the way he is. And if we embrace Christ as our Savior, the same will progressively be true of us. It is the only way to enter into the true religion, through Christ the door. We must have his heart by faith in him, and when we do, we will really care about others.

False religion

That then is true religion set before our eyes, that we might be lured toward it. But if its beauty is not enough to draw us, perhaps the ugliness of its opposite will drive us into its lap. Its opposite is our default: false religion. And in our text it is represented on that day by the layman whom the elders chose to oversee the building and the readings of the synagogue. He is called the ruler of the synagogue, and he appears in our text beginning in verse 14:

But the ruler of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath, said to the people, "There are six days in which work ought to be done. Come on those days and be healed, and not on the Sabbath day."

Notice first of all that what this ruler says has the appearance of true religion. God himself had commanded the Jews in Exodus 20, "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work."

God said not to work on the Sabbath, but on the other six days; Jesus seems to be breaking this command by healing. The ruler of the synagogue on the other hand wants to obey God.

Except that, he doesn't. How do I know? One blast of Jesus' light is enough to expose his heart, and the hearts of all like him.

Verse 15: "Then the Lord answered him, 'You hypocrites!'" What is a hypocrite? A hypocrite is a wearer of a mask, one who works to appear on the outside different from what one is on the inside. This ruler of the synagogue, and all members of a false religion, try to look like a true religion on the outside. They intentionally present themselves as earnest to obey God. They excuse or defend all their behaviors by religious words, often by words found in the Bible itself.

But if you push aside their Sunday morning best and see the heart beneath, you will find all our old, natural desires, and not new ones. This man honors God with his lips, but his heart is far from him.

Jesus' reply teases this out:

Does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger and lead it away to water it? And

ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen years, be loosed from this bond on the Sabbath day?

This ruler of the synagogue had no problem untying an animal and leading it to water on the Sabbath. He clearly did not think all action was prohibited on the Sabbath, for this was an action he was willing to do. So why his opposition in the present case, with the healing of this woman. This ruler would untie a donkey, why should he object when Jesus unties this woman from her bond?

The problem is one of motive.

The man may have been using the letter of the law, but he did not care about its spirit, because he did not care about the God behind the law. For God who gave this command clearly shows his will when he reiterates it in Deuteronomy 5. For after again commanding rest on the Sabbath, God adds this explanation: “that your male servant and your female servant may rest as well as you.”²

The Sabbath was made for man, to give him rest. It was, among other things, an act of compassion on God’s part. We are not under the letter of the Sabbath law today, but because we love the one who gave the Sabbath we are eager to apply the principle of rest in our lives. If our motive is good, when we come to Scripture we will always seek not only the letter of what is said, but the spirit of the one who said it.

That is not the motive this ruler of the synagogue had.

Although Jesus does not comment on just what his motive might have been for condemning the healing, he may suggest it with one word. “Does not each of you,” he said, “on the Sabbath untie *his* ox or donkey?”

For the ruler of the synagogue, what made his donkey worthier of compassion than this woman was that the donkey was *his* donkey. It brought him benefit. It was in his interests to keep the donkey alive, even if that meant watering it on a Sabbath. But this woman offered him no benefit sick or well, so he preferred her sick. For at least when she was sick, Jesus was not receiving so much attention—these are the thoughts we guess are in his head

² V. 14.

somewhere. This is possibly envy at play, as it often was with the religious of Jesus' day. Her healing had not helped the ruler at all, it had only brought glory to God and attention to Jesus. So the ruler objects.

This is a man who cares about others only because he loves himself.

That is the way we all naturally love. That is false religion, and anyone can do it without God's help, without rebirth, without Christ. Any young man can love a young woman because he finds her attractive, and any young woman can love a young man because she likes his attention. Any husband can love his wife when she is sweet and does his laundry, and any wife can love her husband when he is well paid and well respected, and always knows how best to lead her and does so.

That is boring, common religion, false religion which is within the reach of every human upon the planet. That kind of love does not result in people glorifying God and rejoicing.

But you know what kind of love does? The wife whose husband does not know the Lord, who is a Nabal, a fool and worthless person, in Old Testament terms—but the wife who loves and serves *that* man for Christ's sake. That wife may win her husband without a word. At the least, she will bring glory to God, for she displays a true religion unlike anything else the world knows.

How many of you here, who now know the Lord, were first compelled to consider his words seriously by the unconditional love you felt from some Christian or Christians? Didn't that sort of love stand out to you? At first you probably thought the Christian was buttering you up to sell you something, maybe was part of a pyramid scheme and so was just greasing the wheels before they made their plug.

But time went on, and no plug. They didn't seem interested in your money, or in anything you could provide them. But they did seem very interested in you. How strange!

That is the sort of love the world knows it should have. You see this in our text, for when Jesus calls out the possessors of false religion for caring about their animals more than about this woman, it says in verse 17 that "all his adversaries were put to shame." The world knows it should love unconditionally.

The world knows it, for one, because that is the very sort of love the world craves for itself. None of us were created to function well on earned love; we need love that cannot be earned, but that is given freely. The world wants this sort of love, but the world cannot produce it. No technology, no pill, no professor and no professional can by their labors produce this sort of genuine care for others.

Only Christ can.

Just think for a moment about where we find ourselves right now. We have come together as a gathering of believers in this place. Any gathering of people has the potential to explode in unpleasant ways. Ever since Adam, that has been our default. When my selfish desires come in contact with yours, eventually there will be friction.

But when I look out at you, I see something different, something unnatural. You love each other. You really care about each other. How do I know this? For one, it is really hard for me as a pastor to be the first one to visit you in the hospital. By the time I arrive, others have already been there—others will probably be there when I arrive, and others will probably come after I leave. If you have need, it is already met; if you need meals, they are already coming. It is not because you all have nothing else to be doing; it is because you genuinely care about each other.

Again, it is very hard for me as a pastor to be the first one to greet you when you visit this church. When I do finally speak with someone new, they almost always tell me who they have met already, and how friendly they were, and how they are getting coffee together this week.

I'm not sure why you are still paying me, since you are doing all the work!

Brothers and sisters, this is true religion. Some of us are not easy to love—and you love us too. You love us for Christ's sake.

And therefore I join with this daughter of Abraham in our text, and I glorify God for the glorious work he has worked in you. May true religion ever prosper here.