

So Close, Yet So Far Away:
Marks of an Almost Christian & Those Who Teach Them
 Luke 16:14-18

Introduction:

The most dangerous forms of false hope and false teaching are those that contain a certain percentage of truth, with the more actual truth thrown in, the better. This is the situation we find with Jesus interacting with the Pharisees: they were not only lost, but were leading others astray (Matt. 23:15). Jesus taught parables on God saving the lost, on disciples loving God more than money, and will move to the story of the rich man and Lazarus, a story of men who died and realized the truth on the other side. In between, we have this section that at first glance is hard to understand and maybe even harder to apply, but we realize the weightiness of its message.

Why do we preach the way we do?

- **No apologies or disclaimers, but reasons and explanations**
- **We want God to speak** - for Scripture to inform our minds and hearts, to see Jesus with new eyes, to be convicted of sin, to repent when shown it, for the Spirit to work, for grace to be given to us
- **We will not avoid hard texts, since all of Scripture is useful for all of life** - One of my favorite commentaries (I won't say which one) skipped this section that we will preach on today. Now I have no idea why, but the same thought crossed my mind, since this is not only difficult to understand, but also hard to see how we apply it
- **Remember the gospel** - This is how we change. We are changed in our thinking, our heart, and thusly our actions. The start of all of this is in our thinking, connecting our mind with God's word, so that it will inform our affections and heart, **exposing us, the real us**, forcing us to examine the areas of life that need to change. This is no mere moralism, trying to get us to act better or do more. It is real change that changes everything else.

Tragedy is when we are so close to salvation, yet so far away. Next week we will look at what a positive response to salvation, and this morning we'll look at those who taught a religion that got one close to the kingdom, but infinitely far away.

A Driving Motive of Greed (14a)

*The Pharisees, who were **lovers** of money...*

We ended last week with the soul searching statement of Jesus that we cannot **love** nor **serve** two different masters. We will serve one and hate the other. Its interesting how He framed this discussion of money, since following Jesus means a transfer of loyalty and Lordship. Jesus is king and has claim as Lord over us, since we are slaves of His, slaves of righteousness (Rom. 6:18, 22). When we follow Jesus, it is like signing a **non-compete**, that it is no longer a decision who or what we are going to follow, we have made up our mind. The motive behind loving money is **greed**, which is the desire to possess **more than we need**, to keep back from helping others, and becomes a god-like source of comfort and satisfaction. Greed is a mark of the almost Christian and those who teach them:

Greed focuses on SELF instead of LOVING others:

Matthew 23:25 - *Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: **justice** and **mercy** and **faithfulness**. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others.*

Notice in this passage (one where we will come back to often in this study, as one of the last definitive statements against the Pharisees before He died) that **greed was seen in the form of giving!** Greed is not just about hoarding, it is giving, but not to truly help, but simply to pass the path of least resistance, the bare minimum of whatever artificial standard is externally set (in a religious culture).

Greed is focused on SELF and TEMPORAL HAPPINESS

Philippians 3:18-19 - *For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their end is their destruction, their **god** is their belly, and they **glory** in their shame, with **minds set** on earthly things.*

Though greed can never deliver on what it offers, its focus is on gaining and giving to its god. Greed's god is self, forcing us to feed ourselves continually, never having enough, never being content, using people to serve us, and looking outward for joy instead of upward.

Greed is focused on SELF and is willing to USE OTHERS

2 Peter 2:3 - *And in their greed they will exploit you with false words...*

Those who teach any false religion that is focused on works or earning salvation will use system to manipulate, control, and coerce out of people what they really want. Peter warned of false teachers who would use the power of knowledge to keep people from real freedom. This is the type of thing that caused **Martin Luther** to consider writing against the abuses of the Catholic church against the people, as he observed the selling of indulgences to the people to funnel money into the building of cathedrals (when a coin in the coffer rings, a soul from purgatory springs!). History is full of teachers who sought to gain wealth, power, or control by holding knowledge and thus, holding the keys. Even today, we see this same exploitation, with many still trying to buy their way to heaven or influence with god, and many there to oblige their plan.

Test #1 - What truly drives and motivates you? Are you satisfied in God or in the things He gives? God is very clear about true followers: though they may **struggle** with their motives, there cannot be a split loyalty when it comes to money and possessions. This is also how we evaluate the teachers among us.

Open Opposition to God's Word (14b)

Heard all these things, and they ridiculed Him...

The Pharisees had grumbled at the fact that Jesus eaten with *sinner*s, signifying His acceptance of them. But after Jesus called out the use of money and temporal wealth, they now were outright belligerent. They began to **ridicule** Him, mocking Him for this foolish conclusion of calling a foolish and dishonest manager as **shrewd**. This showed what they truly thought about the wisdom that comes from above.

James 3:13-18 tells us there are two kinds of wisdom: 1) wisdom that comes from above that is pure, peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial, and sincere, 2) wisdom that comes from below that is earthly, unspiritual, and **demonic** that breeds bitter jealousy, selfish ambition, disorder, and every evil practice. The Pharisees prescribed to the latter. They liked wisdom. Craved it in fact, as long as it fit into what they believed first, and as long as it served them. But the wisdom that comes from above is **wisdom that is outside of ourselves, that is dependent on God giving it, not us creating it.**

Test #2 - Coming to Jesus in full conviction of faith rather than merely a profession means that we take God at His entire Word, not just the parts we like. We believe Jesus died and rose again the same way we believe God created the world: BY FAITH (Heb. 11:3!!!!) When we yield to Jesus, we yield to His Word and the wisdom contained, turning from the wisdom the world feeds us through demonic means.

Seeking to Justify Self (15a)

And He said to them, "Your are those who justify yourselves before men..."

Matthew 23:13, 15 - *But woe to you, scribe and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you shut the kingdom of heaven in people's faces. For you neither enter yourselves nor allow those who would enter go in. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisee, hypocrites! For you travel across the sea and land to make a single proselyte, and when he becomes a proselyte, you make him twice as much a child of hell.*

To justify is validate, substantiate, or defend oneself. This is when you were definitely not the one to take the last cookie, nor the one who drank the last of the milk without putting it on the grocery list (this is a good reason to have young kids ---extremely easy to throw them under the bus for these types of things). The be **justified before God means we are declared righteous**. This can only happen for us when God does the declaring as He sees Jesus' death on the cross applied to us, seeing His righteousness in us. Here the Pharisees were seen as those who **declared themselves righteous**, but it was not before God, but before men.

There are a few interesting marks here for the almost Christian and the one who teaches them: 1) the reason they feel they can justify themselves, pointing to what they have done, not on what they deserve, is they DO NOT believe in the holiness or glory of God. God is not absolute, can be manipulated, and is not all powerful. The true God is whatever standard WE CREATE, and He will take whatever we give. 2) The main one we are looking to appease and satisfy is others, not God. This is what drives **external action**, praying when people can see us, not in secret. Making sure people know what we give (and where), rather than something only God knows. Putting on the plastic smiles of contentment when you really jealous of what people have around you. Putting your arm around your wife's shoulder in public when you treat her with contempt at home. It is the main concern to be live up to a standard we set for ourselves as well as those around us. These are the **gods** we are living up to.

Test #3 - We are justified by Christ alone. This sets us free to worship God both in public and secret. Are we looking at our works to make us worthy before God, or are we doing everything to be seen by others? Does our private life match up to what people see in public?

Operating from a Dead Heart (15b)

But God knows your hearts...

Jeremiah 17:9-10 - *The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it? I the LORD search the heart and test the mind, to give every man according to his ways, according to the fruit of his deeds*

We all have heart disease, and its terminal. This is the essence of why external works or keeping the Law cannot save. When someone is diagnosed with heart disease - a malfunction of a valve or a failing chamber (as opposed to a blockage) --- the answer has to be addressed at that level. Nutrition may help the overall body feel better, but it cannot fix what's broken. We were all born dead in our sin, so our heart is born BROKEN, diseased, and dying. Not only that, but God has the equipment needed to see

what goes on at the level of our heart. We've all heard the stories of someone who was discovered to have massive heart disease and they did not know it, but accounted for so much. God knows us at the level of the heart, and it is at that level that He searches and will judge.

When God calls us to Himself, He does a heart transplant, moving us from a heart of stone to a heart of flesh (Ezekiel 36:26 - His promise to bring back His people), which allows us to obey Him from our heart (Eph. 6:6), calling on the Lord from a pure heart (2 Tim. 2:22), and can truly love each other from that same purity (1 Pet. 1:22). **Only God can change our heart** in a miraculous act of His grace. When our heart changes, everything changes. The only way to make a heart live is when we **repent of our sin in belief of God's holiness, our sin, and Jesus' payment for it**. The heart always reveals who we truly are.

Test #4 - Has God changed your heart? This would result in not only a change in obedience, but in love, affection, motivation, what we hate, what we trust in, and who we seek to glorify. A dead heart can still fake the acts of obedience, but not for long.

Craving Human Approval (15c)

For what is exalted among men is an abomination in the sight of God...

Isaiah 1:11-15 - What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? says the Lord; I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of well-fed beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bull or of lambs or of goats...Bring no more vain offerings; incense is an abomination to me. New Moon and Sabbath and the calling of convocations ---- I cannot endure iniquity and solemn assembly. Your new moons and your appointed feasts **my soul hates**.

Not only did the Pharisees do their work to be seen by others, but each time they functioned in worship with detached hearts and impure motives, it was a stench in God's nostrils. He hated it and deplored it. Religion becomes a show of pomp and circumstance, bells and whistles, stuff that is impressive at graduations and military commemorations but not in worship. when worship, whether personal or public, private or corporate, becomes a show, it is directed at each other, not on God. Almost Christians will go through some motions to give people what they want or get people off their back, but only the new heart can worship. That is why we find that those who don't want God still are willing to come with their family to church or come to a Christmas gathering.

The heart behind this is a gross misunderstanding of God. When we view God as One who wants external obedience, or some sort of checklist of "do's" and "don'ts", or when we believe He only wants us to "be good" and "go to church", we not only miss who He truly is, but we believe that god can easily be manipulated. That god is like a naive parent to a rebellious kid, the one who tells his parents what they want to hear to make it easier to sneak out at night. When we have a low, humanistic view of God, we think He is dumb, so we give Him what we think He wants, as long as others are satisfied.

Test #5 - Is our heart engaged with all that we do? Are we seeking to know the true God, to love and serve Him, or simply trying to manipulate Him to get what we want?

Rejecting the Good News of the Gospel (16)

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

Not only does someone become abominable to God by going through the motions of worship without connecting his heart, but compounding that foolishness is a rejection of what is given freely to us.

Notice that Jesus lays out a few details of what was missing. **First**, He mentioned the Law and the Prophets, a clear reference to the Old Testament, or old covenant (Luke 24:27, 44). The OT was a time of **promise, or anticipation**, of what was to come. There was still salvation by grace through faith, but it was banking on what was to come. **Second**, John the Baptist is mentioned as an end (until). John the Baptist coming on the scene in the beginning of Luke signaled a transition, and he himself was a bridge to that transition. He was the last of the OT prophets and the forerunner of the Messiah coming. This led to the New Testament, or new covenant, which Jesus enacted by His blood. The NT is the time of **fulfillment, a time of actuality**. **Third**, after that transition, **Jesus not only becomes the focal point and authority**, but the good news, or gospel of the kingdom is proclaimed. This is what the Pharisees missed.

The phrase "**everyone forces his way into it**" means that it will be a struggle to enter into the kingdom. We've already seen the way is narrow and the door is small, and this is the same idea. The struggle is that we must come to the end of ourselves, to stop trying to hold onto control, to keep our own life, our own pride, and simply yield it all to Christ. This is made open and available to everyone, but our own stubbornness causes us to reject.

The reason the Pharisees rejected this good news of the kingdom was the **ONLY** way to it was **through Jesus**. They were not about to yield themselves to this **ONE** who claimed and demonstrated His greatness, not only because He was not what they thought He was going to be, but because He demanded allegiance to Himself alone. They wanted to keep their positions of authority and their semblance of control. We cannot have control of our lives and have salvation in Jesus Christ. A constant demand of control and say in our own lives causes us to be almost Christians, like the Pharisees who taught this.

Test #6 - Have we understood the gospel of the kingdom? Have we repented of our sin, knowing that we cannot enter the kingdom based on anything we've done, but only by the work of Jesus?

Failing to Embrace Grace (and unable to live up to the Law) (17-18)

But it is easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for one dot of the Law to become void. Everyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and He who marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery.

This leaves us with the last two verses of this section, which are admittedly difficult to understand how they fit, and what to do with them. But, as we have said, there are no mistakes here and Luke was purposeful in His order (as was Jesus), so our job is to seek to understand what the intent was. Once we see that, this section not only is understandable, it's powerful.

The first thing we need to understand is the **surety and power of the Law**. Every bit of it, down to small strokes and vowel markers would do what they were intended to do for as long as the world exists. The Pharisees were openly devoted to the Law, which is why Jesus told the crowds "**unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.**" They loved the Law, but not the God of the Law.

That became clear with Jesus' **view and fulfillment of the Law**. Jesus did not come to abolish the Law, but to **fulfill it**. This meant that the Law did not fail because its goal was Jesus and its authority is expressed through Him. If they truly loved God and wanted to keep the Law, they would have acknowledged Jesus' authority and yielded to Him. But it was abundantly clear that they missed the point of the Law altogether. Jesus used their view of divorce to illustrate this point.

It would seem like a discussion about **divorce** comes way out of left field, but when we understand how the Pharisees of the day practiced divorce and remarriage, the **point becomes clear**. **First**, God designed marriage as a covenant relationship that was intended to be a **fusing together of two becoming one**

(Genesis 2:24). This was permanent, good, and death would be the only acceptable means of separation. However, because of the **hardness of heart** brought on by sin (Matt. 19:8), there was a provision put into the Law in **Deuteronomy 24:1-4** to divinely regulate it. This was not condoning nor condemning, and definitely not commending. It was a warning that if a man divorced his wife without just cause and she remarried another, and he ended up dying, the first husband COULD not remarry her or he would make her into an adulteress.¹ The point of the Law was to **prevent divorce and remarriage, or at least discourage it.**

By the time of Jesus, the most influential Rabbi's of the day, Hillel and Shammai, broadened the teaching divorce and remarriage (in this culture the reason to get a divorce was to get remarried - the two were tied together). Shammai held that immorality was the only grounds, but **Hillel** taught that any type of uncleanness could be grounds: bad meal prep, failure to produce a son, being less beautiful than another woman, disrespecting her mother - in-law were reasons given. You could imagine the instability this caused in marriages, and how the Law was used NOT FOR RIGHTEOUSNESS, but as a means of selfishness. Jesus was **not saying everything about divorce and remarriage here**, but cut to the point. Marriage was designed to be unbreakable, and divorce happens because of sin, hardness of heart, and self-glory, not a desire to glorify God. This was where the Pharisee's fell short, missed Jesus, and blatantly missed the point of the law.

NOW, a quick word to those divorced in this room. God hates divorce, as He hates all sin. Divorce should never be an option for a believer, but a sad reality of broken sinfulness. There is no "get out of marriage free" card. All sin can be redeemed, forgiven, and restored. We miss the point of God's grace when we live in a "I'm going to do this, even though its sinful, because I know God will forgive, right" kind of world. So to those who are contemplating, wavering, or thinking its an option for you, it is not. However, there are those who are divorced, are remarried, and they may not have been on Biblical grounds. To you, we know there is grace to cover all sin, and grace to cover any shame. This is the glory and paradox of God's glory and abundant grace.

The almost Christian and those who teach them use God's Word for their advantage, pick and choose in Scripture, follow the commands they like, and skip, justify, or re-interpret the parts they don't

Test #7 - Do we take all of God's Word as a means of grace? Do we yield to it all?

Why is this so important for us?

- **This is an opportunity for self examination** - 2 Corinthians 13:5 - "*Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves, or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you? ---unless indeed you fail to meet the test.*"
- **Hopeful Remembrance** - In Matthew Mead's treatment of this idea in the 1600's, called "**The Almost Christian Discovered**", he wrote "My design herein is , that the formal sleepy professor may be awakened, and the close hypocrite discovered; but my fear is that weak believers may be hereby discouraged; for, as it is hard to show how low a child of God may fall into sin, and yet have true grace, but that the sinner will be apt thereupon to presume; so it is hard to show how high a hypocrite may rise in a profession, and yet have no grace, but that the believer will be apt thereupon to despond."²
- **Awake O Sleeper** - Those who are close to salvation, who understand God, their own sin, and Jesus' work would be awakened to the deep and wide realities.

¹ Jesus did allow divorce in the case of persistent, unrepentant, hard hearted adultery (Matt. 5:31-32; 19:1-19) as well as a case where an unbelieving spouse leaves (1 Cor. 7:15)

² Matthew Mead, "The Almost Christian Discovered", p. 15