

## **Luke 11:24-28**

### **Transformation or Reformation**

There is nothing wrong with eliminating sin. Indeed, throughout the ages, eliminating the evils of sin has been a focus of the Church. Beginning with the early Church, through the Middle Ages, into the Age of Enlightenment and on into our modern age, Christians have been focused on removing from society both sin and sinners. In the early Church there was persecution. In the Middle Ages there was the Inquisition. In our more civilized modern era, the 19th century saw the advent of the social gospel movement, counteracting the forces of science and theological neo-liberalism. Twentieth century manifestations included the prohibition of alcohol and the anti-abortion movement. These days, gay marriage seems to be the most common target. Many argue that if only our nation would eliminate these evils and return to Judeo-Christian values, all would be put right.

This is well intended, but there are many problems with this approach. First, since many non-Christian faiths advocate the same moral reforms, it often brings evangelical Christianity into alliances with groups with which we have little else in common. This can lead to the appearance of brotherhood where none can exist and cloud more important salvation issues.

Second, it is naive to think that the good old days were anything more than old. There was no halcyon time (apart from Eden) where man lived without sin, either individually or corporately. Scripture clearly teaches that all of man throughout all of time is a sinner. The world is in decay and will continue to do so until Christ returns. The second law of thermodynamics works in the spiritual realm as well.

Third, a focus on eliminating sin alone can lead to a works-based faith. We can believe that if we clean up our lives, we deserve to be saved. We can merit God's favor with good behavior. Such a thought is contrary to Scripture, because "all our righteous deeds are like a filthy garment" (Isaiah 64:6). We can never reform ourselves enough. If we stop lying, cursing, being selfish, and all our other sins, God still does not *have* to let us into heaven. Good behavior does not make us Christians.

And finally, and most importantly, eliminating sin does not spiritually change the sinner. As this passage teaches, there is more to the Christian message than the command to stop sinning. We must also be transformed into new creations by faith in Jesus Christ. The Church has a message of reconciliation, not moral reform. <sup>18</sup>Now all these things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation, <sup>19</sup>namely, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and He has committed to us the word of reconciliation. <sup>20</sup>Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making an appeal through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God" (2 Corinthians 5:18-20). Only after being reconciled to God, will moral reform be of eternal consequence.

The Bible has always taught that reform ought to be internal, not external.

“And rend your heart and not your garments.  
Now return to the Lord your God,  
For He is gracious and compassionate,  
Slow to anger, abounding in lovingkindness  
And relenting of evil” (Joel 2:13).

“Cast away from you all your transgressions which you have committed and make yourselves a new heart and a new spirit!” (Ezekiel 18:31).

There is nothing we can do to improve ourselves enough to be righteous in God’s eyes, for “by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight” (Romans 3:20). In fact, if it were possible for us to reform ourselves sufficiently to warrant the forgiveness and mercy of God, then it would not have been necessary for Jesus to die for our sins, “for if righteousness comes through the Law, then Christ died needlessly” (Galatians 2:21).

### **The Situation**

This passage continues what is a very lengthy section, from verses 14-36. Jesus had cast out a demon and used that moment as an opportunity to challenge those who believed that He was in league with Satan. While many pressed Him for a sign (He would specifically answer their request in verse 29) Jesus had concluded His teaching by stating categorically that “he who is not with Me is against Me; and he who does not gather with Me, scatters” (Luke 11:23). In other words, Jesus was drawing the lines clearly. Either you were a believer, or you were not.

But what defines a believer? In this passage Jesus continued His explanation of what it meant to be “with Him” by employing a very graphic illustration. He told of a man who had been under the influence of an “unclean spirit” (v. 24). Eventually, due to circumstances Jesus does not explain, the demon left the man and journeyed “through waterless places seeking rest” (v. 24). Jesus was very familiar with demons. He had dealt with them successfully on several occasions. One can easily recall the Gerasene demoniac and the herd of pigs. But while we know very little about this particular demon, Scripture invariably emphasizes their evil and destructive nature.

### **Reformation**

While the specific reason for the departure of the demon is not explicitly stated, one possibility is that the demon left voluntarily as an act of validating the phony exorcisms of Jewish or pagan spiritual leaders. However, that seems less likely considering the larger point Jesus is making. The context of the entire narrative allows us to infer that the man had, in some way, taken control back over those areas which the demon had, at first, influenced him. We need not fully comprehend all the nuances of the illustration. His words were clear enough to His listeners.

The demon traveled through “waterless places” (v. 24). Since demons are fallen angels, and as such are spiritual beings, this cannot refer to the deprivation of water in the literal sense. Rather, it is a metaphorical description of aimless wandering through a wasteland. The contrast is with earthly paradise before the fall.

Eventually bored and restless, the demon said, “I will return to my house from which I came” (v. 24). The interesting use of the term “house” implies not just that the man was influenced by the demon, but that the demon actually dwelt within the man. When the demon returned, it found the man’s heart “swept and put in order” (v. 25). The man had, in some ways, cleaned up his life. This perhaps refers to the partial reform of many under John the Baptist who were baptized but did not fully commit to follow Jesus as the Messiah. In Matthew’s parallel account, he importantly adds that the man’s heart was “unoccupied” (Matthew 12:44). That is, the man had made necessary changes to his behavior, but he had not made a commitment to follow a new master.

That created a problem. The man had dealt only with the externals. He had treated the symptoms but he had not cured the disease. And because the man had done nothing more than reform his fallen ways, Jesus said the demon “goes and take along seven other spirits more evil than itself, and they go in and live there; and the last state of that man becomes worse than the first” (v. 26). The words used here mean to take up a permanent dwelling. Despite his moral reform, the man’s condition had not improved. In fact, though he had eliminated some sin from his life, he was spiritually worse off now than before.

This is just what Scripture informs us we are to expect if we settle for moral reformation alone. “For if, after they have escaped the defilements of the world by the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and are overcome, the last state has become worse for them than the first” (2 Peter 2:20). And we will be again defiled if we have settled for eliminating sin but not changing our hearts. The man became now more than ever a slave to his sin. This is the danger of moral reform without spiritual regeneration. Spiritual nature, like physical nature, cannot abide a vacuum.

We must remember how dangerous it is to be content with moral reform without conversion. It is not enough to lay aside sin. To believe that all we need to do is cease to do wrong is believing in salvation by works. Not only must Satan be cast out, but the Holy Spirit must be allowed to reign. We must change masters. We are a slave to someone, be it Satan or Christ. “Do you not know that when you present yourselves to someone as slaves for obedience, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin resulting in death, or of obedience resulting in righteousness?” (Romans 6:16). We are never our own. We cannot think to attain salvation by moral reform. If we try, we only change one devil for another; we change from Satan to self-righteousness.

It is important to remember that when Jesus taught, He pointed out the failure of external moral reform alone. In some of His most passionate moments, Jesus repeatedly denounced the most morally reformed people of His generation - the Pharisees. “<sup>27</sup>Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which on the outside appear beautiful, but inside they are full of dead men’s bones and all uncleanness. <sup>28</sup>So you, too, outwardly appear righteous to men, but inwardly you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness” (Matthew 23:27-28).

Like the Pharisees, and like the man in the story, those who think moral reform is sufficient are worse off than other unbelievers, because they think they have no need for a Savior. Thinking themselves safe and secure, they are on the most dangerous ground of all. Just because we are not what we once were, does not mean we are what we ought to be.

## Transformation

Perhaps after pausing to let His point sink in, Jesus then continued. But He was soon interrupted, by a voice from the crowd. “While Jesus was saying these things, one of the women in the crowd raised her voice and said to Him, ‘blessed is the womb that bore You and the breasts at which You nursed’” (v. 27). One of the distinctive characteristics of Luke’s narrative is that he often focused on women. We can remember Elizabeth and Mary, of course, but also, the prophetess Anna, the widow at Nain, and Mary Magdalene.

This unnamed woman was in the crowd. She had been listening. Finally, overcome with emotion, she loudly spoke for all to hear. She uttered a common Jewish proverb of praise. In that culture especially, mothers were valued by the success of their sons. Whether she believed Jesus was actually the Messiah or not is unclear, but she was at least favorably impressed with His power and authoritative teaching. So, naturally, she praised His mother.

She was not incorrect in doing so. Remember Elizabeth’s song of praise, “<sup>41</sup>when Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the baby leaped in her womb; and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. <sup>42</sup>And she cried out with a loud voice and said, ‘Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!’” (Luke 1:41-42). Mary had indeed been blessed. She was blessed because she had believed and obeyed, “and Mary said, ‘behold, the bondservant of the Lord; may it be done to me according to your word.’ And the angel departed from her” (Luke 1:38). Mary’s faith was sure and it would stand the tests of time and heartache. We see that even after the crucifixion, Mary persevered. “These all with one mind were continually devoting themselves to prayer, along with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with His brothers” (Acts 1:14). Mary was indeed blessed, though perhaps for reasons the woman did not know.

And Jesus did not deny her compliment. Instead, He elaborated on it, “on the contrary, blessed are those who hear the word of God and observe it” (v. 28). It reminds us of the teaching of Jesus in Galilee, “My mother and My brothers are these who hear the word of God and do it” (Luke 8:21). How wonderful are the privileges of obedience! We are the nearest relatives of Jesus.

Jesus taught often the necessity of obedience. From narratives like that of the two builders:

“<sup>24</sup>Therefore everyone who hears these words of Mine and acts on them, may be compared to a wise man who built his house on the rock. <sup>25</sup>And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house; and yet it did not fall, for it had been founded on the rock. <sup>26</sup>Everyone who hears these words of Mine and does not act on them, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. <sup>27</sup>The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house; and it fell - and great was its fall” (Matthew 7:21-24).

To simple commands, “if you love Me, you will keep My commandments.” (John 14:15).

But Scripture is clear that simple obedience is not enough. Our obedience must be predicated on our relationship with Jesus Christ. “<sup>23</sup>This is His commandment, that we believe in the name of His Son Jesus Christ, and love one another, just as He commanded us. <sup>24</sup>The one who keeps His commandments abides

in Him, and He in him. We know by this that He abides in us, by the Spirit whom He has given us” (1 John 3:23-24). We must abide in Christ for our obedience to be relevant to our spiritual state.

Ultimately we are called to obey. But before obedience, we must be reconciled to Jesus Christ. We must by grace through faith, come to a place of relationship with Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Anything less is insufficient. Anything else is inadequate.

As the body of Christ, to focus on obedience alone (or first) brings many problems

It is not what we are called to do - “Go therefore and make disciples” (Matthew 28:19).

It wastes time, money and energy -

“Can the Ethiopian change his skin

Or the leopard his spots?

Then you also can do good

Who are accustomed to doing evil” (Jeremiah 13:23)

It won't work - “Those who are in the flesh cannot please God” (Romans 8:8)

It creates unfortunate alliances - “Do not be bound together with unbelievers; for what partnership have righteousness and lawlessness, or what fellowship has light with darkness?” (2 Corinthians 6:14)

It is usually selective in the sins it chooses to focus on - “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23).

It creates an adversarial attitude toward non-believers, <sup>24</sup>“The Lord's bond-servant must not be quarrelsome, but be kind to all, able to teach, patient when wronged, <sup>25</sup>with gentleness correcting those who are in opposition, if perhaps God may grant them repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth, <sup>26</sup>and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, having been held captive by him to do his will” (2 Timothy 2:24-26).

The Great Commission is that we <sup>19</sup>“go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, <sup>20</sup>teaching them to observe all that I commanded you” (Matthew 28:19-20). But people are not disciples because they obey, but because they believe. While it is true that “faith, if it has no works, is dead” (James 2:17), it is also true that <sup>27</sup>“where then is boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? Of works? No, but by a law of faith. <sup>28</sup>For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law” (Romans 3:27-28).

Works are important and moral reform is integral to sanctification. But if it is not based on saving faith in Christ, it is irrelevant eternally.

### **Take Aways**

May we remember our true Great Commission. Let us focus on faith first, then works.