



Potomac Hills
Community Church, PCA
RELEVANT • RELATIONAL • REAL

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What Jesus said about Legalism

**“Revealed Grace” - a series from Luke
Luke 11:37-54**

THE OPENING: “*A Skeptical View of Faith.*”¹

What do you believe? And why do you believe it?

Because most people hold to their beliefs with a passion, whether they’re right or wrong. For example, take Aristotle and Galileo.

INTRODUCTION: “*The Strength of Belief.*”²

The great philosopher Aristotle taught that heavy objects fall to the ground faster than light ones. Because he was one of the greatest thinkers of all time, people believed him.

Finally, 2,000 years after Aristotle's death, Galileo summoned learned professors to the base of the Tower of Pisa. Then he climbed to the top and pushed off a 10-pound weight and a one-pound weight at the same time. Much to everyone's amazement, both landed at the same time.

The power of belief in conventional wisdom was so strong, however, that the professors **refused** to believe what they had seen. They denied Galileo's experiment and insisted Aristotle was right. The strength of their belief in what they had been taught would not allow them to admit they were wrong. Rather than accept the truth, they persisted in believing an inaccurate teaching.

A person's beliefs hold the greatest potential for good or harm in life. What is believed about God holds the potential for death or life everlasting. Many men are taught wrong and thus believe wrong, and yet they hold to it so strongly that they would rather stay wrong than admit it and change.

1 Adapted from “*Office Hours*” an online column by Dr. J. Budziszewski at www.boundless.org

2 Adapted from *Strong Men in Tough Times* by Edwin Louis Cole, found at <http://online.newmanmagazine.com>

And that's precisely what Jesus is dealing with in today's passage. He is confronting a number of people who have received dramatic and overwhelming evidence that He is the Son of God, the Messiah ... and yet, refuse to believe in Him. And not only do they refuse to believe in Him, they are asking for more evidence.

We pick up the story in ...

Luke 11:29-36, *"As the crowd pressed in on Jesus, He said, "These are evil times, and this evil generation keeps asking Me to show them a miraculous sign. But the only sign I will give them is the sign of the prophet Jonah. [30] What happened to him was a sign to the people of Nineveh that God had sent him. What happens to Me will be a sign that God has sent Me, the Son of Man, to these people.*

[31] "The queen of Sheba will rise up against this generation on judgment day and condemn it, because she came from a distant land to hear the wisdom of Solomon. And now someone greater than Solomon is here—and you refuse to listen to Him. [32] The people of Nineveh, too, will rise up against this generation on judgment day and condemn it, because they repented at the preaching of Jonah. And now someone greater than Jonah is here—and you refuse to repent.

[33] "No one lights a lamp and then hides it or puts it under a basket. Instead, it is put on a lampstand to give light to all who enter the room. [34] Your eye is a lamp for your body. A pure eye lets sunshine into your soul. But an evil eye shuts out the light and plunges you into darkness. [35] Make sure that the light you think you have is not really darkness. [36] If you are filled with light, with no dark corners, then your whole life will be radiant, as though a floodlight is shining on you.""

Just prior to the events and pronouncements in this passage, Jesus had been dealing with hard hearts. These hearts were so calloused that, although they had just witnessed a demon cast out of a man so he could talk after not having been able to talk for years, they dismissed the miracle out of hand. First they attributed Jesus' power to Satan, and then they asked Him for a sign from heaven.

In response to their accusations, Jesus mercifully reasoned with them, demonstrating the folly of illogical thinking, then He gave them a pretty straightforward warning.

Now He takes up their less strident, but just as hard-hearted request for a miraculous sign.

But now the mute man is praising God and yelling "Thank You Jesus" at the top of his lungs. In all of the Gospels there are about 35 different miracles performed by Christ.

"But if you could perform a miraculous sign, **then** we would believe."

Because the real issue is simply **unbelief**.

And that's how unbelief works ... it never has enough evidence.

And so now Jesus takes on their unbelief.

He calls to their memory to famous events from history when Gentiles responded to the Word of God – the amazing cases of Jonah and the Queen of Sheba.

In the first story, Jonah, upon receiving God's call to go preach to Ninevah, did just the opposite and went to Tarshish in the other direction. Most of us are familiar with the story ... there's a tossing sea, terrified sailors, Jonah gets tossed overboard and swallowed by a huge fish. In his watery tomb, he repents and gets coughed up onto a sandy beach. So he goes to Ninevah and told them about the miraculous way God changed his mind about preaching to them. His very experience made him a sign to the Gentiles and Ninevah repented.

The other story, of the Queen of Sheba, is found in 1 Kings 10 and 2 Chronicles 9. In her own land of Sheba, which is probably in southern Arabia in the modern country of Yemen, though many Ethiopians claim Sheba as their own, anyway, she hears of Solomon's wisdom, and at great cost, travels to see him. Once she sees him she believes the reports and gives praise to the God of Israel.

With the stories of Jonah and the Queen of Sheba in mind, now we can look at Jesus' response to those who asked for a miraculous sign.

v. 29-32: A SIGN FOR HARD HEARTS³

"As the crowd pressed in on Jesus, He said, "These are evil times, and this evil generation keeps asking Me to show them a miraculous sign. But the only sign I will give them is the sign of the prophet Jonah. What happened to him was a sign to the people of Nineveh that God had sent him. What happens to Me will be a sign that God has sent Me, the Son of Man, to these people."

Jesus declares that He will be like Jonah to them – that was the sign. Jonah's life became a type or model of Christ's death, burial, and resurrection when he was tossed to his intended death in the sea, buried in the fish, and then delivered up alive.

It's made a little more explicit in Matthew's account where it says, **Matthew 12:40**, *"For as Jonah was in the belly of the great fish for three days and three nights, so I, the Son of Man, will be in the heart of the earth for three days and three nights."*

The great sign that Jesus gives to all, and especially to those who think they need miraculous signs in order to believe, is the miracle of His atoning death, burial, and resurrection. This is the gospel.

³ Much of the exposition is adapted from Preaching the Word: Luke, volume two by R. Kent Hughes, pages 13-19.

Paul said it like this, **1 Corinthians 15:3-4**, *“I passed on to you what was most important and what had also been passed on to me—that Christ died for our sins, just as the Scriptures said. He was buried, and He was raised from the dead on the third day, as the Scriptures said.”*

There is some much needed correction here for parts of Christianity that have gone headlong in pursuit of miraculous signs and wonders. Jesus said, *“This **evil generation** keeps asking Me to show them a miraculous sign.”*

Other signs aren’t that important. Jesus said the ultimate sign is the “sign of Jonah.” He is that sign. He is the Gospel. He calls you to belief, not to seek more signs.

Then Jesus explains that this sign will lead to judgment for those who don’t believe. He says the Queen of Sheba will judge this generation because she believed after seeing Solomon’s wisdom, *“And now someone greater than Solomon is here—and you refuse to listen to Him.”*

Jesus doesn’t just have wisdom; He is wisdom.

1 Corinthians 1:30 says, *“God alone made it possible for you to be in Christ Jesus. **For our benefit God made Christ to be wisdom itself.** He is the one who made us acceptable to God. He made us pure and holy, and He gave himself to purchase our freedom.”*

Jesus then goes on to say, v. 32, *“The people of Nineveh, too, will rise up against this generation on judgment day and condemn it, because they repented at the preaching of Jonah. And now someone greater than Jonah is here—and you refuse to repent.”*

Jonah’s preaching was simple and to the point, and Ninevah, despite being a Gentile city, responded in repentance and faith. Now we have Jesus’ preaching, which is simple and to the point, but the religious leaders refuse to repent or believe. So the Ninevites will sit in judgment against them some day.

Listen to the weight of these words.

We live in a day and age when we have the explicit accounts of the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ. We have the Word of God written, and the teaching of the Church for 2000 years. We have the Holy Spirit working actively in our midst.

How great is our responsibility to repent and believe!

Francis Schaeffer once said, “God really is there. He really does exist, and He made us for Himself. Knowing that He is there, and therefore that we do not live in a silent universe, changes everything. To know that we can speak, and there is Someone who will answer fills the vacuum of life that would otherwise be present. And then, when we realize His love for us as individuals—that Christ really did die for us as individuals, for us personally—life is entirely different.”

It's always great when Francis Schaeffer has a timely quote for one of my sermons.

v. 33-36: A CHALLENGE TO ALL HEARTS ⁴

At this point Jesus' teaching takes on a broad application to drive home the message that we must make every effort to open ourselves to the light of who He really is.

And even for believers, it is all too easy to become hardened to the sign of Jonah, by taking it for granted. Lifelong familiarity with the rhythms of the gospel can dull us to the realities of the gospel, so that we listen to it with the same vitality with which we hear the weather report.

Jesus is reminding us that having the light is of little use if you close your eyes. He begins this section by describing the effects of His own gospel preaching. He says, "*No one lights a lamp and then hides it or puts it under a basket. Instead, it is put on a lampstand to give light to all who enter the room.*"

The truth of His life and message is evident and must not be hidden. The light of Christ must be put in a prominent place so it shines on everyone.

Second, he says, "*Your eye is a lamp for your body. A pure eye lets sunshine into your soul. But an evil eye shuts out the light and plunges you into darkness.*"

This one's a little harder to understand because, technically speaking, the eye is not a lamp, it doesn't generate light. But what Jesus means is that the eye is the lamp because it lets light in, allowing the mind to understand, and respond to whatever the light reveals. If your eye is good, everything can function properly. But if your eye is bad and you can't see, or choose not to see, then the body is full of darkness. It can't see, understand, or respond to the world.

In the same way, your spiritual perception either will or will not admit the light the Jesus shines, and our minds and hearts will be illuminated or darkened accordingly.

Jonathan Edwards wrote about this in his own life. He said ...

"I had then ... the greatest delight in the Holy Scriptures of any book whatsoever. Oftentimes in reading it every word seemed to touch my heart. I felt a harmony between something in my heart, and those sweet and powerful words. I seemed often to see so much light exhibited by every sentence, and such a refreshing food communicated, that I could not get along in reading; often dwelling long on one sentence, to see the wonders contained in it; and yet almost every sentence seemed to be full of wonders."

This is the way a healthy mind and heart reads and understands God's Word

⁴ Jonathan Edwards quote is taken from The Works of Jonathan Edwards, page xiv.

... when our eyes are open. When our eyes are closed, we are blind to the Word, and our souls suffer.

Therefore we need to hear and follow Jesus' challenge in v. 35, ***“Make sure that the light you think you have is not really darkness.”***

“Make sure” is putting the ball in our court. We are the ones who have to open our eyes, receive the light, repent of our sins, and **believe** the gospel.

We start by being people who repent and believe **everyday** *“that Christ died for our sins, just as the Scriptures said. He was buried, and He was raised from the dead on the third day, as the Scriptures said.”*

In other words, we need to preach the Gospel to ourselves everyday.

Where do we start?

Well, first we pray and then we open the book and read God's Word.

The alternate method is to first open God's Word and then pray.

It's up to you. Either way is fine.

During the French Revolution some Christians were crammed into a dungeon where once a day for a few moments, as the sun stood at a particular angle, one of the prisoners who had a Bible would be hoisted on others' shoulders to a sunlit crack in the wall, where he would study the Scriptures. When the light dimmed, he would be lowered down, and his friends would say, “Now tell us what you read while you were in the light.”

We ought to be able to ask each other the same question, ... “Tell me what you read while you were in the light.”

You must “see to it, then, that the light within you is not darkness.”

You must repent and believe the Gospel.

I want to end with a practical example of the difference there is between belief and unbelief, as we apply the doctrine of adoption to our lives.

APPLICATION: “Adoption: An Example of Belief”⁵

Having the right belief often means that first we must get a proper view of ourselves. Jim Tonkovich writes about this in an article on BreakPoint Online, the Biblical worldview teaching ministry of Prison Fellowship.

I want to read what he wrote. It's long ... so you'll have to listen carefully.

Several years ago I came to a great watershed in my life, a continental divide in my thinking. For years I thought of myself as (a) smart and (b) good. I did my best to amass a great deal of evidence in support of those notions. Much of my

⁵ Adapted from “No Longer Orphans” by Jim Tonkovich, www.BreakPoint.org Jim Tonkovich is the new Managing Editor of BreakPoint. He is a Teaching Elder in Potomac Presbytery. This article is adapted from his talk at Prison Fellowship Ministries' weekly staff devotions on July 25, 2001. His text was 1 John 2.28-3.3. © 2001 Prison Fellowship Ministries.

sense of self had to do with being smart and good. But I can remember standing in the bedroom for a long time one afternoon as the truth sunk in: I am **neither** smart nor good.

I've come to see my life—most everybody's life in fact, and especially the lives of those of us who are "professional Christians"—as an existence occupied with attempts to appear smart and good. We want to prove it to ourselves, to other people, and especially to God. My realization that I'm not smart and good was a grand gift of God's grace because it paved the way for me to quit living as an orphan and begin living as a child of the King.

Literature is full of stories of orphans, and while they may have happy endings, they're not happy stories. Orphaned when her loving father died, Cinderella becomes a slave in her own home. In The Secret Garden Mary Lenox, a poor, unpleasant orphan, returns to England to live a solitary life in a depressing mansion on the moors. The Artful Dodger and Fagin draw Oliver Twist into street crime.

In each case, the orphan is on his or her own to make the best of life, to be smart and good or not. You say, "Wait a minute, those stories have happy endings." Sure they do. But the happy endings come about because the plot twists in such a way that the orphans **are no longer orphans**. The orphans discover that they are loved, that they have a family.

How would each story end if there were no fairy godmother, no cousin with his mother's secret garden, no long-lost grandfather? It would have been just a matter of time before sweet, young Cinderella jumped from her garret, Mary Lenox became old and bitter, and Oliver Twist was hanged.

Or if we choose less macabre and more American-success-story endings, each of them may have "made something" of themselves by being smart and good and working really, really hard.

But does hard work guarantee a happy ending? The world is full of smart, good, hardworking people whose endings seem anything but happy.

Spiritually, there were no believers in the New Testament who worked harder than the Galatians. And Paul reserved his harshest criticism for them **Galatians 3:1** says, "*Oh, foolish Galatians! What magician has cast an evil spell on you? For you used to see the meaning of Jesus Christ's death as clearly as though I had shown you a signboard with a picture of Christ dying on the cross.*"

They are "bewitched," he says. Yes, bewitched into thinking that hard work, goodness, and smarts can secure for you the life of God that is really found in Jesus.

The only *guarantee* of a happy ending for an orphan is the discovery that he's **no longer an orphan**, that she has a home, and that the days of having to be

smart and good and working really, really hard are over.

The good news is that if you're a Christian, if you've put your faith in Jesus Christ and his death on the cross in your place, then you're no longer an orphan. You no longer have to fend for yourself and live by your wits.

Followers of Christ no longer have to prove or pretend that we're smart and good. And because we're no longer orphans, our happy ending as children of God is assured, guaranteed. It is already, though not yet. And we can get on with the joyful, playful business of life in our Father's house.

And that's precisely Saint John's point as he writes his first letter. First John has no clear outline. It has a stream-of-consciousness quality. On the other hand, John leaves us no doubt about why he wrote. **1 John 5:13** says, "***I write this to you who believe in the Son of God, so that you may know you have eternal life.***"

He says, in fact, that your happy ending is already written.

Your happy ending is guaranteed by Christ's complete work on the Cross and our resulting adoption.

What does adoption mean for us? What do we need to know so badly?

First, daughters and sons are loved. John calls his readers "beloved" partly because he loved them. But it's more than that: it's because they—you—are God's beloved. And that's one of those things that our theology says is true, but our hearts falter in believing. "I am God's beloved?" Paul begins Romans by referring to Christians as those "loved by God"—that is, God's beloved ones.

That's you, child. The orphan in us winces. "Who, me?" Yes, you.

Second, daughters and sons bear the family resemblance.

1 John 3.1-3 says, "*See how very much our heavenly Father loves us, for He allows us to be called His children, and we really are! But the people who belong to this world don't know God, so they don't understand that we are His children. Yes, dear friends, **we are already God's children**, and we can't even imagine what we will be like when Christ returns. But we do know that when He comes we will be like Him, for we will see Him as he really is. And all who believe this will keep themselves pure, just as Christ is pure.*"

Are we really God's children now?

It doesn't seem that way.

We, like John's original readers, experience persecution, trouble, sickness, setbacks, and battles with sin. In answer, John points us to Jesus.

Did Jesus look like God the Son?

Did he look like the sovereign Lord of all creation, the giver and sustainer of all life? No. The world was no friend to God's one and only Son and neither should we expect it to be a friend to all God's adopted daughters and sons.

Yet in the middle of the troubles and trials, the God who provided past grace

in our justification and adoption promises to provide unlimited future grace in this life and in the next (1 John 3.2).

There's a reality and yet an incompleteness to our Christian experience. **Now** we are sons and daughters. And as if that weren't enough, John says, "There's even more." Jesus will appear. We will see Him as He is. And as a result of seeing Him as He is, we will **be** as He is.

Future grace is the promise that the family image that God is now forming in us will be perfected. We will be like Him not by hard work, smarts, and goodness, but by the gift of God. He who calls, justifies, adopts, makes us holy, and glorifies us—makes us like Jesus.

This does not mean it doesn't matter how we live so long as we believe. No, the lives of children bear the family character. Right living is what happens when God gets a hold on you and me and convinces each of us that Jesus died for **my** sins and that **I**—even I—am His child.

John tells us our future is guaranteed. With that future in mind, knowing that just as God began the work in us, He will carry it out, our lives change. This is what the Bible means by "hope" (1 John 3.3).

Our lives change because we know our story has a happy ending. We're daughters and sons. We are no longer orphans. We are free to be children.

Friends of mine in California, Dick and Charlotte, had three high schoolers when their son Jonathan came along. It was diapers and teething all over again. When Jonathan was about five, Dick and Charlotte went to Korea and adopted Timmy, an orphan who was four at the time.

When Timmy got home to California he was good. I mean he was **very, very good**. He was so good and cooperative and polite and smart that Dick and Charlotte started to worry about him. He wasn't like a real kid. He was too perfect, like a robot—like an orphan.

Finally after about a year came a day that made Dick and Charlotte want to stand up and cheer. Timmy purposely, defiantly, rebelled and disobeyed his parents. He was disciplined, but Dick and Charlotte remember it as one of the greatest days of their lives.

Why?

It was the day an orphan became a son.

Timmy's disobedience showed that he knew and understood—he had **faith**—that they weren't going to put him in a box and ship him back to Korea.

They weren't going to abandon him. He knew they loved him even if he disobeyed. He had a family. He had a home. He was no longer an orphan.

"How great is the love the father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!"

Trying to prove to yourself, others, and God that you're smart and good and somehow worthy is a burden **you don't need** to carry.

Many Christians live like orphans for years longer than they need to: fending for themselves, proving they're smart and good, laboring at the Christian life. Even working for a church or a ministry may be a part of that pattern; I know ministry has often been my response to orphan thinking. "If I do this, the Father will like me." But God, who already calls us His beloved children, invites us to believe His promises that call us home.

We're no longer orphans. We needn't think like orphans, act like orphans, or live like orphans. We are children, and God's children live happily ever after.

The only real question is: Do you believe it?

Because once again Luke wants us to see that the Jesus story is not only about Him, but also about us. These texts **reveal** God at work; and show us how God **reveals His power** in order to call people who sometimes act like orphans ... to "Come, be one of My children."

And that's **grace**, because we're getting what we don't deserve.

Luke brings us that same essential message of grace over and over again.

You see, it was **grace** that was wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger. It was **grace** that dwelt among us, **grace** that healed the sick, cured the blind, raised the dead, and challenged unbelief with belief.

It was **grace** that partied with the tax-collectors.

It was **grace** that wouldn't cast the first stone.

And it was **grace** that was nailed to the cross; **grace** that the tomb couldn't hold, **grace** that now sits on the right hand of the Father, and **grace** that will one day come back for you and me.

Why? Because ...

It's all of grace from beginning to end.

And it's all of Grace because it's all of Christ.

Luke tells the story of how **Jesus revealed that grace**, died to provide it, rose again to bestow it, and will return to establish its presence over all of creation. The church **must show what such grace looks like** ... starting by bringing that grace to those among us who want to be dearly loved children of God, but who often act like orphans.

And all God's children said, "Amen."