

The Ugliness of Religion

John 11:45-57

Call: Ps 8:1-2; Matt 19:14 (NIV)

Scripture: Rom 8:1-2; 14-16 (NIV)

I. Intro

Good Morning! My name is Shawn Reese. I'm one of the pastors here. Today we return to our studies in the Gospel of John in chapter 11. We went through the incredible story of the raising of Lazarus last week. And, this week we come to the end of chapter 11, the response to the miracle. This text has some interesting links with Luke 16, Jesus' parable about the rich man and Lazarus (Lk 16:19-31). Of course, these two Lazarus' are two different people. But, in this parable in Luke, Lazarus is a poor man who lays at the gate of a rich man, longing for crumbs from the rich man's table. After a time, both the rich man and Lazarus die. Lazarus is carried away to be comforted by Abraham, while the rich man calls out for help from Hell. When no help comes, he pleads with Abraham to send a messenger to his home to warn his five brothers what the afterlife may hold for them. Abraham gives a stunning answer:

He says, "They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them."

"No, father Abraham," the rich man says, "but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent."

Abraham said to him, "If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead."

And that's exactly what has happened in John 11. Lazarus, the man who was dead for four days, was called out of the grave by Jesus with just a command. And, what we find in our text today is even Lazarus' resurrection will not be enough to convince some people to believe in Jesus, even the most religious of people. Today we see the ugliness of religion.

Today, we'll focus on verses 45-53, and we will leave time to hear the story of a good friend of mine. So, I invite you into our text, John 11, verse 45.

II. The Scene (45-46)

45 Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what he did, believed in him, 46 but some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done. (ESV)

A. Some Believe

The raising of Lazarus is the climactic sign in this Gospel, besides Jesus' resurrection. And, in this case, many people believe in Jesus because of it. So after much hostility toward Jesus over the last few chapters, verse 45 brings great encouragement. But the next verse does not.

B. Fear

There are others who go to the Pharisees to tattle on Jesus. As we saw back in chapter 9, people tattle on Jesus out of fear for what the religious authorities might do to them.

Verse 47.

III. The Ugliness (47-48)

47 So the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered the council and said, "What are we to do? For this man performs many signs. 48 If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation." (ESV)

A. The Authorities

So, now the religious heavyweights come together. The council or Sanhedrin was the chief court of the Jewish nation. Although Rome limited its power, it was the highest governing body in first-century Judaism. This was the place where Religious politics took place.

Leon Morris says that since so little is made of the Jewish trial of Jesus in this Gospel, this meeting right here is the real trial of Jesus. For it is here where the ultimate decision is made to solve the Jesus problem.

B. What to do?

Jesus has exasperated the religious people of the day, and Lazarus is the last straw. They haven't been able to silence Jesus. He simply continues to do signs. And if those earlier signs weren't amazing enough, how much more attention will he get from raising a man from the dead? Notice they can't even say his name. He's simply, "this man." They hate him so much, they cannot utter his name. And, the shadow of the cross begins to block the sunlight.

C. Two Consequences

The Religious leaders see two significant consequences to doing nothing.

1. First, they genuinely fear that everyone will begin following in Jesus. Although an exaggeration, these leaders recognize Jesus' popularity with the people. The people might leave them to follow him. They might be the real losers in a mass conversion to Jesus. They may lose support. They may lose money. They may lose control.
2. Secondly, the Romans might view Jesus as a rival king to Caesar. If that happens, the Romans would come and take away their Temple, maybe even their nation.

They must do something! In a few verses, they will render their verdict: death for Jesus. Next chapter it will be death for Lazarus.

D. Ugly, Ugly, Ugly

This is the ugliness of religion. These religious heavyweights are so caught up in their "religion" they are missing God right in front of their eyes.

1. **They want control.** The religious authorities are fearful of losing control, so they need to get rid of Jesus. Religion always seeks to maintain control over life. Religious people always put categories around people so they can be controlled. Religion even objectifies God so that when he acts unlike their expectations, they get angry. Have you

ever done that, maybe at someone from a different denomination? God did something amazing with a small charismatic church and you just knew that was impossible?

2. **They want power.** Religion always wants power. Religion focuses on me, and therefore is always trying to keep Lord Shawn in power. These religious authorities don't want to lose their power.
3. **They are all about externals.** Religion always builds a hard shell around itself in order to maintain power and control.

G.K. Chesterton, the famous 20th century preacher, once used the metaphor of crustaceans to refer to people of religion. Crustaceans have their bones on the outside where you can see them and they can scare you with them. They look mean. And they are mean with all those shells and claws: crabs, lobsters, crayfish. Even the words sound uninviting! You don't want to ever get close to them. Religion is to be a crustacean, all about externals. Isn't that a good description for these leaders?

4. **Bottom line – these religious authorities are all about self.** Notice how the council says, "*Our* place and *our* nation." Hold it. Isn't it God's place and God's nation? Religion focuses on me and strokes my pride: Lord Shawn. Religion is centered on self, not God. Religion is "self turned in on itself" as Luther said. Paul will come along in his letters and talk about living in the flesh. What Paul means by that is to live with me at the center. My identity is rooted in my family name, my talents or my achievements. It is ego-centric not God-centric. Paul actually shares his credentials: "*circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee;*" zealous and blameless (Phil 5:5-6). But, then, Paul says, it's all rubbish compared to a relationship with Christ.

Jesus has just given a dead man life and these religious men will in a few verses pronounce their verdict: death for Jesus. We may lose control! We may lose our power! We may lose our squeaky clean image!

Know anyone like that? I do. It's me. I've tried to do this Christian thing in my own power a lot. I like being in control. I take every chance to share my credentials with people. I catch myself saying I, me, mine a lot. I'm a crustacean Christian a lot. And, usually after crashing hard, I have to reorient my life so that I rest in my true identity, that I am a child of God. It's relationship, not religion.

Caiaphas now speaks up, verse 49.

IV. The Prophecy (49-50)

49 But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, "You know nothing at all. 50 Nor do you understand that it is better for you that one man should die for the people, not that the whole nation should perish."

A. "That Year"

We are now introduced to Caiaphas, the "high priest that [particular] year," when Jesus will go to the cross for the sake of the world. I also think John, as he does, is ironically drawing attention to the "high priest." The high priest was considered the shepherd of the people. He was also the atoner for sins for the Jewish people. The high priest was appointed by God to go into the Holy of Holies once a year with the blood of sacrifice, which he offers for his sins and the sins of the people. Could it be that John points out that Caiaphas was "high priest that year" to draw our attention to who the true high priest is?

As the book of Hebrews details, that particular year is the year of the transition from the old covenant and the temporary priesthood, to the new covenant, the eternal covenant, with the eternal high priest, Jesus Christ (Heb 7:22, 24). Jesus is our great and eternal high priest (Heb 9:7-12) who atones for our sins once and for all at the cross. We'll come back to this in a moment.

And that brings us to Caiaphas' prophecy, one of the great sentences in all of Scripture.

B. The Prophecy

Caiaphas speaks up and begins a bit rudely. He arrogantly puts down the others saying, "You know nothing at all!" The Sadducees were known to act in this manner, so this line fits with what is known about them. But, the high priest also has the role of making God's will known (Num 27:18-21). In this way, he functions a bit like an Old Testament Prophet. And, what Caiaphas says can only be described as remarkably prophetic, verse 50. *"It is better ... that one man should die for the people, than the whole nation perish."* On the simple level, Caiaphas intends to save the nation.

But, the deeper meaning is explained by John, verse 51.

V. The Children of God (51-53)

51 He did not say this of his own accord, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation, 52 and not for the nation only, but also to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad. 53 So from that day on they made plans to put him to death. (ESV)

A. John's Interpretation

John helps us grasp the full meaning and irony of Caiaphas' words. Caiaphas actually prophesies about Jesus' sacrificial death. Jesus will substitute himself, will exchange himself, for the nation of Israel.

B. The Gathered Church

But, not only will Jesus die *for* the nation of Israel. John points out that he will die *for* all people everywhere. His death will draw the scattered children of God, both Jew and Gentile, together

into one body, the church. In his death, Jesus will unite all his followers into one family, the children of God.

C. Jesus' Matching Prophecies

We've seen words like this before from Jesus himself in this Gospel. In chapter 6, Jesus says, *"I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats this bread will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world."* (John 6:51). In chapter 10, Jesus said that he, the good shepherd, would lay down his life for his sheep. So Caiaphas is simply repeating what Jesus has already said. It's as if Caiaphas is moving his lips, but Jesus is doing the speaking.

It's like the story of Joseph in Genesis. Joseph's brothers intended evil against him, but God intended it for good, the saving of many lives (Gen 50:20).

D. The Lamb of God

Jesus dies a sacrificial death for us "that year." Salvation is accomplished "that year." John the Baptist had told us way back in chapter one that Jesus was *"The lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world"* (John 1:29). This image now comes into focus. Indeed this text and chapter 12 transition the book into Jesus' Passion, meaning that Jesus' sacrificial death frames chapters 1-11, the whole first half of the book.

E. The Atonement

This is the good news! Jesus will go to the cross for all people. John apparently wanted this truth out in front of the Passion narrative, so people can keep the cross in the proper perspective as we complete his Gospel.

In Romans 3, Paul says that we all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. Earlier in that chapter, Paul quotes the Psalmist who laments that none are righteous, not even one. No matter how good any of us are, we have all fallen short of a right relationship with the living God. And, the sobering truth is that we are absolutely powerless to make things right. In the Old Testament, the high priest would make atonement for the sins of the people through an elaborate and constant sacrificial system. But, in *that particular year*, when the old religion came to an end, God so loved the world, he gave his only Son that whoever believes in him will not perish but have eternal life, as children of God. Jesus goes to a cross *that year*. *"He who knew no sin became sin on our behalf"* (2 Cor 5:21). On that Roman cross, Jesus Christ, the righteous one, took upon himself what should have been given to all of us. The one took the place of the many. The great exchange happens. Christ takes our sin upon himself, and we receive his righteousness, so that when God looks at us, as Barth said, "There stands Another. God looks at this Other." (Barth, 151). God looks upon Jesus who took our place.

F. A Child of God

And, we enter into a relationship of love as children of God, whom Jesus gathers together. Remember the prologue? *"To all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God"* (John 1:12). As Bonhoeffer said, "Jesus doesn't call us to

religion, he calls us to life,” through an intimate relationship with him, a relationship of love (Bonhoeffer, 361)! We have a new identity! Jesus is our brother and God is our good, good father. So, over against Crustaceans, we are children of God, which at least means these things:

1. **I can give up control and rest in the control of God.** The pandemic showed us that we’re not in control anyway, right? I can let go of grasping and fighting for Lord Shawn’s reputation and Lord Shawn’s kingdom, and go about fighting for His reputation and promoting His kingdom. I can “*be still before the Lord and wait patiently for him*” (Ps 37:7). By the way, I know when I’ve given up control when I’m praying without ceasing.
2. **With that, I turn the center of life over to Jesus.** Lord Shawn is gone. Lord Jesus is here and I stay close to him. Being a child of God is to replace me at the center of life and put Jesus there. Religion is about what I do. Being a child of God recognizes what God has already done through Jesus. Resting in being a child of God nurtures humility, not pride.
3. **With that, I cultivate dependence on the Spirit.** Over against the flesh, as Paul says, children of God live by the Spirit, who is in me, for me and works on me. As a child of God, my job is to be attentive to Him and surrender to His leading, especially to his lead in crying, “Abba Father” (Rom 8:15).
4. **And, with that, I belong to a family.** As a child of God, I belong to a united family of love. We are a gathered family. So, I would encourage you to enter in and engage in our family. Jump in and put roots down.

VI. Conclusion

What is a Christian? Not a crustacean. The richest answer is “a child of God.” As JI Packer said, “To be a child of the living God is like a fairy tale, only it’s true!” (Packer, 207-8).

Amen.

VII. Benediction

Now, receive this benediction from Galatians, from the Message:

You can tell for sure that you are now fully adopted as his own children because God sent the Spirit of his Son into our lives crying out, “Papa! Father!” 7 Doesn’t that privilege of intimate conversation with God make it plain that you are not a slave, but a child?

Go live in that identity this week. Amen.

Resources

Barth, Karl, *Dogmatics in Outline*

Bonhoeffer, Dietrich, *Letters and Papers from Prison*

Bruner, Dale, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*

Johnson, Darrell, *Preaching the Gospel According to John* (Regent College Course)

Klink, Edward, *John* (Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the NT)

Morris, Leon, *The Gospel According to John*

Packer, JI, *Knowing God*