

Christ Reformation Church

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The Dead-End of Self-Reformation

*New Year's Day
January 1, 2017*

Sermon Text: Matthew 12:43-45

Scripture Reading: Luke 11:1-26

Today we begin a new year. And with each new year come all kinds of new year's resolutions. "I will quit...I will begin..." and so on. Some of these things are good and right, but we all know that there really are very few new year's resolutions that are acted on in the long term.

Some people might be resolving right now to "be a better person" in 2017. Maybe some even resolve to set things right where they have wronged someone.

But when it comes to the power of sin, to man's lost condition and alienation from God, and even in regard to the Christian's own battle against sin, self-

reformation cannot save, nor can it sanctify. In fact, as we are about to see, self-reformation when it comes to victory over sin is not only ineffective, it actually feeds sin AND it can put a person in a far worse state than when they began to "clean themselves up."

Self-Reformation Cannot Save

Let's read our central Scripture text this morning in its context in Matthew 12. Follow as I read:

Matthew 12:22-45 Then a demon-oppressed man who was blind and mute was brought to him, and he healed him, so that the man spoke and saw. (23) And all the people were amazed, and said, "Can this be the Son of David?" (24) But when the Pharisees heard it, they said, "It is only by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, that this man casts out demons."

(25) Knowing their thoughts, he said to them, "Every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste, and no city or house divided against itself will stand. (26) And if Satan casts out Satan, he is divided against himself.

How then will his kingdom stand? (27) And if I cast out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your sons cast them out? Therefore they will be your judges. (28) But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.

(29) Or how can someone enter a strong man's house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man? Then indeed he may plunder his house.

(30) Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters. (31) Therefore I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven people, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. (32) And whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come. (33) "Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or make the tree bad and its fruit bad, for the tree is known by its fruit.

(34) You brood of vipers! How can you speak good, when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. (35) The good person out of his good treasure brings forth good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure brings forth evil. (36) I tell you, on the day of judgment

people will give account for every careless word they speak, (37) for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned."

(38) Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered him, saying, "Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you." (39) But he answered them, "An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. (40) For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. (41) The men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here. (42) The queen of the South will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and behold, something greater than Solomon is here.

(43) "When the unclean spirit has gone out of a person, it passes through waterless places seeking rest, but finds none. (44) Then it says, 'I will return to my house from which I came.' And when it comes, it finds the house empty, swept, and put in order. (45) Then it goes and brings with it seven

other spirits more evil than itself, and they enter and dwell there, and the last state of that person is worse than the first. So also will it be with this evil generation."

Our focus is on verses 43-45. The context here is very important. It almost seems as if Jesus was interrupted or that He took a bit of a detour, then returned to the main subject at verse 43?

I say this because earlier, in verses 22-29, the subject is demonic possession when Jesus heals a demon possessed man. The Pharisees attributed Jesus' power to Satan, and He rebuked them powerfully, even telling them that they are right at the edge of spiritual "no return". If they persist in opposing Him, they will be guilty of the unpardonable sin of blaspheming the Holy Spirit. Why? Because it is by the Spirit of God that Christ healed this man *right in front of their eyes* thus demonstrating that Christ is victorious over Satan and therefore is the Messiah.

NOTE: Many people wonder if they have committed the unpardonable sin. So let's be clear. The unpardonable sin is committed by a person when that person receives plain, clear, conviction from the Holy Spirit that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and that His gospel is true, and then they reject it. You

have the very same thing described in Hebrews 6:4-6 where such people knowingly reject Christ and, like Esau, cross that line of no return, so that repentance and faith are impossible for them from then on.

Then in verses 30-42 Jesus continues to confront the Pharisees with their evil hypocrisy and unbelief. It is at verse 43 that Jesus returns to the main topic – this matter of his deliverance of that man from a demon.

Listen to what Jesus said once more –

(43) "When the unclean spirit has gone out of a person, it passes through waterless places seeking rest, but finds none. (44) Then it says, 'I will return to my house from which I came.' And when it comes, it finds the house empty, swept, and put in order. (45) Then it goes and brings with it seven other spirits more evil than itself, and they enter and dwell there, and the last state of that person is worse than the first. So also will it be with this evil generation."

In connection with this text, listen to the Apostle Peter teaching the very same thing:

2 Peter 2:17-22 These are waterless springs and mists driven by a storm. For them the gloom of utter darkness has been reserved. (18) For, speaking

loud boasts of folly, they entice by sensual passions of the flesh those who are barely escaping from those who live in error. (19) They promise them freedom, but they themselves are slaves of corruption. For whatever overcomes a person, to that he is enslaved. (20) For if, after they have escaped the defilements of the world through the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and overcome, the last state has become worse for them than the first. (21) For it would have been better for them never to have known the way of righteousness than after knowing it to turn back from the holy commandment delivered to them. (22) What the true proverb says has happened to them: "The dog returns to its own vomit, and the sow, after washing herself, returns to wallow in the mire."

Here is our central doctrine given in these texts which we must get a very firm understanding of-

Everything done by the Pharisees, even their own Temple and sacrifices, was devoid of the Spirit of God. It was a religion without the presence of the Lord, and as such anything it seemed to accomplish only set people up for greater and more terrible bondage to the devil and sin.

And so it is today. Any religion, any self-denial, any "good deed" done by man to somehow improve himself, to gain God's approval, is worse than fruitless. It is damning and can even bring a person to a point of spiritual no return.

Thus, this business of church, of Bible reading, of professing to belong to Christ, is no trifling thing. It is no game to be played at.

What Christ is telling these false teachers here is that their religion simply teaches and requires people to "clean their house." Through self-effort they are to obey the Law, along with all the man-made traditions the Pharisees laid on them, and if they do a good enough job, they will have merit with God. It really is the very same thing he told them elsewhere-

Matthew 23:25-28 "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. (26) You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and the plate, that the outside also may be clean. (27) "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness. (28) So you also outwardly appear righteous to others,

but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.

This is the only destination then that man's own religious and moral efforts will take him to. And the irony is that the more pious and holy such a person appears to be, in their heart and mind and soul they are just making a very comfortable habitation for more evil and the devil to reside.

Christless religion is what we are considering then. A religion devoid of the Spirit of God. A religion like that of John and Charles Wesley and George Whitefield in their "holy club," who, in spite of incredible efforts at doing good deeds, saying prayers, and even being ordained as priests in the church, had no place or thought for the new birth Christ told Nicodemus about.

And once more, notice very carefully, such religion is exceedingly dangerous. *All it does is prepare a place for sin and the devil.* Listen to Jesus again –

(Matt 12:29) Or how can someone enter a strong man's house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man? Then indeed he may plunder his house.

Christ is saying that HE has plundered the strong man, as evidenced by the

fact that he delivered the possessed man. But He also means that the Pharisees had NO power to conquer and bind the devil, so the strong man would always win in the end –

And people seeking deliverance from sin and Satan in such a way will end up in far worse condition than before.

This is not just about the devil and demons and casting out demons. The primary point in Jesus' teaching here is, to state it once more, that self-made religion pursued in one's own power with no place for Christ or the Spirit of Christ in it, most assuredly brings people into a worse state than they were in before.

You can be sure that local churches typically have such men and women who exalt themselves in very pious appearance but are in 7-fold bondage to the evil one.

Listen to Peter again as he puts it so accurately:

2 Peter 2:17-22 These are waterless springs and mists driven by a storm. For them the gloom of utter darkness has been reserved. (18) For, speaking loud boasts of folly, they entice by sensual passions of the flesh those who are barely escaping from those who live in error. (19) **They promise them freedom, but they themselves**

are slaves of corruption. For whatever overcomes a person, to that he is enslaved.

(20) For if, after they have escaped the defilements of the world through the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and overcome, the last state has become worse for them than the first.

(21) For it would have been better for them never to have known the way of righteousness than after knowing it to turn back from the holy commandment delivered to them. (22) What the true proverb says has happened to them: "The dog returns to its own vomit, and the sow, after washing herself, returns to wallow in the mire.

Men, women, young people – do NOT pretend. Christ must change your heart. You must be born again by faith alone apart from works. Do NOT try to “make yourself a Christian” through empty religious motions.

Recently I was talking with a lady who is right in the middle of this very kind of religion parading as a local Christian church. The man who is the head of the church deacon board is, in reality, a wicked man. Yet he will stand up in front of the church and weep and talk about the Lord. Everyone in the church for the most

part regards him as a model Christian man. But according to these verses, men like this are synagogues of Satan, full of demons and vileness. Would the people in that church believe you if you told them? Nope, no way.

Such a man, you see, has pursued his own self-made religion, rejected the true Christ and gospel, and now for all his “Christian service” he is far worse off than if he had never heard of Christ at all. Because over and over again, until that day when the Lord gave him a clear vision and taste of the goodness and truth of Christ, this guy scorned it just like Esau did.

I have no doubt at all that many, many local churches are dominated and controlled by just such people. The outward, visible “church” of Jesus’ day certainly was.

The Beauty of Christ

And that brings us to the beauty of the free gift of the gospel-

Romans 3:21-28 But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it— (22) the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: (23) for all have sinned and fall short of the glory

of God, (24) and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, (25) whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. (26) It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. (27) Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? By a law of works? No, but by the law of faith. (28) For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.

This is the difference between the Old and New Covenants-

Jeremiah 31:31-34 "Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, (32) not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the LORD. (33) For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people.

(34) And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more."

Self-Reformation Cannot Sanctify

The heart of the new covenant is the presence of the Spirit of Christ in us. As we just saw here in Jeremiah, the old covenant was inscribed on stone, the new on our hearts. This is the new birth. Regeneration. Christless "Christianity" is devoid of the Spirit.

The Apostle Paul reminds us in his letter to the Galatians that we are very foolish if we, having been justified by faith alone and regenerated by the Spirit, then set out to follow Christ ourselves:

Galatians 3:1-3 O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified. (2) Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith? (3) Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?

It is by actively following the leading of the Holy Spirit in us that we are sanctified, not by somehow setting out on some program made by man. MOST “Christian” self-help programs and books are exactly that – SELF help. In contrast, listen to Paul –

Romans 8:3-14 For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, (4) in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. (5) For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. (6) For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. (7) For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. (8) Those who are in the flesh cannot please God. (9) You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. (10) But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. (11) If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who

raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you. (12) So then, brothers, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. (13) For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. (14) For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God.

See it? The SPIRIT of Christ IS in you, Christian. If He is not, then you aren't a Christian at all. So follow His lead. He convicts. He assures. He pours out God's love for you in your heart. He exposes evil and error and leads you in the right way. Read and read your Bible and then follow His leading. That is real religion. That is true sanctification. That is Christ.