

Jesus and the End of Religion (1)

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Preacher: Andrew Reid

[0 : 00] Well friends, let's pray while you remain standing. Father, we pray that you would help us to understand your word this morning. And understanding it, Father, please help us live rightly in response in both adoration and praise of you and your Son and in obedience to your will. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Amen. Well I want to begin this morning's Bible talk by thinking a little bit about religion with you.

You see, the word religion is generally used to explain a system by which humans seek to relate to God. And most major religions of the world are agreed on a number of key points which they regard as chief elements of religion.

For example, they are agreed that we are the creation of a God or series of gods. They are agreed that this God or gods has created humanity and the world with a purpose. They are agreed that we humans are generally a long distance from the divine intention for us.

In other words, they are agreed that we humans are not all that we should be. Now most religions of the world therefore construct a system whereby humans might draw near to God or the gods.

[1 : 18] Now depending on which religion this is, there are different means of doing this. For example, some religions say that you draw near to the divine by being part of a particular religious institution.

Others say that you need to perform certain acts, perhaps such as sacrifices or the like. Others say you need to fulfil particular religious obligations of one sort or another.

Other religions maintain that you need particular people to put you in contact with the divine. In other words, you might need a priest or a priestess or someone else who can sort of act as an intermediary between you and the divine.

Other religions say that you need to have some sort of secret knowledge or practice that will initiate you into the divine. Others say you need to perform certain moral or even religious acts.

Others say, well, you need actual special buildings such as a temple that you need to go to and only when you're there can you be in contact with God. Others say, well, special acts are needed or observing special days is the thing that you must do.

[2 : 24] No matter what it is, as I said before, these systems are ways of reaching out to God and they are at the core of what the world knows as religion.

Religion, I think, can be defined as a system of practices or observances that bring you near to the divine. Now, I need to say that Old Testament faith and Christian faith have a number of things in common with other religions.

For example, both are agreed that we are the creation of God. Both Old and New Testaments agree that God created us with a purpose. Both state that God's purpose for us is to relate to the God who made us.

Both agree that we have broken relationship with God by thinking and acting independently from Him. Both Old and New Testaments agree that this willful independence from God has put us in a very difficult situation with God.

Our independence, or if you like, our sin, has separated us from God. Both agree that unless this gets sorted out, well, we cannot expect things to get any better with God.

[3 : 32] In fact, they can only get worse. And it's at this point that I think Christianity begins to depart or part company with other religions. And today, Jesus Christ is going to show us the very first hints in His ministry of how Christianity is different.

He is going to show us this in the most unusual context. He's going to reveal some deep and revolutionary truths to us at the most unlikely place and at the most unusual occasion.

A wedding. It's not really where you expect to be put in touch with lots of religious truth, is it? But here are some of the most fundamental ones and Jesus is going to teach them to us today. We are going to find out from Jesus the distinguishing mark of Christian faith and discover the difference between Jesus and every other religion.

We are going to find out that Jesus transforms our understanding of religion. So, let's take a quick run through the story and you might like to open your Bibles at John chapter 2.

So, John chapter 2. And when you look at it, it's a very straightforward story, isn't it? A marriage is taking place in a place called Cana. Mary, the mother of Jesus, is among the invited guests and it appears as though Jesus and His small band of disciples have also been invited.

[4 : 50] And so, there they are. They're all at a wedding. And let me explain just a little bit about weddings in the first century so you get a feel for what's going on. Weddings in this part of the world at this time could last, well, as long as a week or two.

And those of you who paid for weddings, you won't see nothing really. So, anyway, presents were given and those in charge were expected for this time, for however long the wedding went, to have plenty of food and wine.

And to fail to supply these things would have brought significant embarrassment to the couple being married and to their families. In fact, it would have caused disgrace and in the ancient world to be disgraced is a terrible thing.

It was a dreadful embarrassment and shame that would probably be remembered and talked about for years to come and joked about perhaps, oh, them, they're the people who ran out of food and wine.

You see, it's a terrible thing. But that's exactly what happens at this wedding. You see, verse 3 tells us that the wine runs out. It is gone. And for some reason, Mary, we don't know why, assumes some sort of responsibility for this turn of events.

[6 : 00] And in this time of need, she turns to her oldest son. It appears as though she's come to rely upon him for his resourcefulness. And so she speaks to him in verse 3 and she says to him, they have no wine.

And Jesus replies, in what appears to be a little abrupt, he says, woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come.

Mary appears to ignore what Jesus says in response and just hands it over to him. What else are older sons for? And then Jesus gets the servants to fill some stone jars with water and then he gets the servants to serve the contents of the jars.

And when it is served, it is clear that this water has turned into wine. And let me tell you, it's not cask wine. It's not cheap wine. It is very good wine.

It is wine of a higher quality than the already good quality wine that has been served. And the story ends with this note. Jesus did this, the first of his signs in Cana of Galilee and revealed his glory and his disciples believed in him.

- [7 : 11] So there are just the facts. There's what happened. Now at this point, I need to say that there are some obvious problems with all of this, isn't there? First of all, there's the problem of what on earth is going on with Jesus and his mum?
- Why does Jesus say these fairly abrupt words to his mother? Second, there's the issue of the miracle itself. I mean, do these things happen? And third, there's the issue of what is going on under the surface here.
- What actually is this all about? And what are people believing in when they believe at the end? So let's take a look at each of them in turn. And perhaps you've got an outline there you might like to follow.
- Otherwise, just follow with me. Let's have a look at this close interaction between Jesus and Mary. Look at verse 4. My translation of the Bible has Jesus saying these words, Woman, what concern is that to you and to me?
- My hour has not yet come. Now, other English translations reflect the Greek, which is just a little stronger. And they translate it this way. Woman, what have you to do with me?
- [8 : 13] It's not the sort of language I'd use with my mum to tell the truth. But Jesus is... The word woman sounds a little harsh, doesn't it? And when Jesus uses the...
- But let me balance it out. When Jesus uses the same language at the most tender moment in his life, he uses the same term, woman. And that is when he's dying on the cross in John 19, verse 26.
- So though we hear it hardly, it's probably not that hard in impersonal as it sounds. The second half of what Jesus says is, I think, a little more difficult. He says, Woman, what concern is that to you and to me?
- Or if you want to put it a slightly different way, Why are you involving me in this? Or even, What have you to do with me? That's even harsher, isn't it?
- Now, the form of the words is used elsewhere in the Gospels. It's used by an unclean spirit toward Jesus when Jesus casts an unclean spirit out. But let me tell you what I think Jesus is saying. I'll sort of paraphrase it here.
- [9 : 13] It's a bit longer than it occurs in the text, but it might help you grasp what is going on. I think Jesus is saying something like this. Look, even, Look, Mum, I know that this family are about to suffer disgrace.
- I know that you have taken some sort of responsibility for what is happening here. But this is your responsibility. It is not my responsibility.
- And I don't want family responsibilities to be the dominating influence in my life. Therefore, I don't want you to dominate what I do and when I do it.
- I need to be separate from your demands. I need you to know this. I know that other mothers might be able to exercise pressure of this sort of sort, but I need you to know that it cannot be the case with me.
- Can you see what he's saying? And Jesus is being very clear that his mother has to start seeing him in a different light. You see, he's no longer just simply his son.
- [10 : 15] He's begun his ministry and he's begun his ministry as what we've heard of him in the last couple of chapters. God's promised one, the Messiah, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, the Son of Man.
- You see, he's not here, is he, to do his mother's will? He's here to do his father's will. He's here for the appointed hour that his father has brought him to this point.
- That must take priority, not the demands of humans, no matter how close they are. Not even if that person is his mother. Let me say that again.

Jesus is here for God's appointed hour and that must take priority, not the demands of humans, no matter how close they are, not even if that person is his mother.

Now, that's the first thing about this passage and I think I needed to explain it because I'm not sure it's always fully understood. Look at our second problem though and that's the issue of miracles. You see, there are many people in our world today and perhaps you are among them who read this story and just simply cannot believe it.

[11 : 18] They think, the story of Jesus turning water into wine, that is just too fantastic to be believed. It's therefore a lovely story but totally fictitious, utterly imaginary.

It just did not happen like that. These things do not happen. But this runs, if I can say so, with respect if you are someone who thinks that way, that this runs totally contrary to everything we know about God from the beginning of the Bible through John and the rest of the Bible.

You see, one of the very first things you learn about God in the Bible is that God is a creator. That's the very first, in one sense, big theological truth that God teaches us about himself.

If he is not that, then the rest doesn't work. God rules creation. He is the God who rules over everything. He is a God who can do anything he wants with his creation and in his creation.

So do you think that if God had an ultimate message, the sort of message that he had for all of world, for all of time, if he had this ultimate message that he wanted to say to his world, then you'd think he'd use everything to make it clear, wouldn't you?

[12 : 27] You'd expect that as creator he might even intervene in his creation. He might cause something spectacular to occur, some spectacular events to occur in order to isolate, point to, signify the importance of this event.

And that is part of what Jesus is saying in verse 11. Look at it, or verse 12. Jesus says, Jesus did this, the first of his signs in Cana of Galilee and revealed his glory and his disciples believed in him.

So this is what this miracle is. It's exactly that, a sign. These things are signs and they'll continue through John's gospel. They are pointers to Jesus and his glory.

We've already seen John the Baptist doing it, haven't it? Pointing and saying, there's the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. These signs are to point people, drive people to put their faith in Jesus.

And in this case, it has that result. For the disciples put their faith in him. This sign drives them to put their faith in Jesus. So that in mind, let's see what it is that God's pointing towards.

[13 : 32] If God's doing some pointing here, let's try and work out what he's pointing to. Let's see if there are any hints as to some meaning below the surface of this miracle.

Now to do this, I need to give you some important background. Remember Jewish weddings? Remind you, this is a Jewish wedding. That means, well it's a wedding of people who believe in the Old Testament.

That means, it's a wedding of people whose view is that humans are rebels from God. Humans living independently from God who made them. Their history shows them that. Their nature is to run away from God's purpose for them.

The history of Israel is a history of doing exactly that. Now the Old Testament prophets knew that God didn't like being distanced from his creation. He didn't like being alienated from his people.

He wanted to return back to friendship with them. And for that reason, the Old Testament prophets looked forward. And in the Old Testament prophets, they often pictured it as a time when God would sort out humanity's ills.

[14 : 33] When God would deal with independence, sin, rebelliousness. And you know, when the prophets spoke about this, they had this wonderful image which Ruth captured for us and which Isaiah chapter 25 and other places capture for us.

And it's an image of a great banquet. An enormous feast. A massive party. They talked about this great party with great food, great drink being served.

And when forgiven rebels would sit down in friendship with God and humans would not be distant from him but sup at table with him, eat and drink in his presence with great joy and with no fear of judgment.

They would feast in God's presence with happiness and no fear. Now with that in mind, look at verse 4. Here's the first hint. Jesus says, My time, my hour has not yet come.

Do you know what I think Jesus is saying? I think he's pointing forward. The hour, I think, is the hour of his death primarily. And what I think Jesus is saying is that the time to deal with sin is not yet. That hour has not yet come.

[15 : 43] It's not yet time to have great food and drink in God's presence because it is not yet my time to die for human sin. Can you see what's going on then? Mary comes to Jesus.

She comes with this normal everyday issue of wine shortage. Jesus sees behind her question a deeper meaning. He sees that she's coming to him and saying, Bring in the end time blessings of friendship with God.

Now perhaps he's imagining that that's just another reading of what she's saying. And what he says is that time's not yet here. It is not yet time for the great wine and the great banquet of the future.

But let's move on again. Let's look at the second hint. The second hint comes in verse 6. The second hint comes from the six stone jars that Jews use for ceremonial washing. Now I want you to imagine the situation.

Jewish wedding's pretty special in this way. Every Jew who walked in the door of this wedding party would have gone to these stone jars and they would have dipped their hands in them.

[16 : 52] They would have gone through a series of different washings and there were all sorts of cleansing and rites of purification that they would have done and these were part and parcel of their religion. They were symbols of how they Jews were separate from the rest of the world.

No one else had to do this but they did. They were consecrated to God. You see, and the symbol was these vessels. They were set apart for God in the midst of a world defiled by sin.

So they come in out of that world, they wash their hands, they say, we are God's special people and I want you to notice what happens. Jesus tells the servants, take those jars that represent all of this and he tells them, put some water in them and then he says, offer the contents to the master of the banquet and the master of the banquet drinks what is offered.

He is astounded at its quality and can you see what Jesus has done? It's a non-verbal thing. You've got to sort of picture it in your mind to understand what's going on. It is non-verbal but it is potent.

What Jesus is saying is this, he's communicating that what makes a friend with God is not those stone jars with all that water in that you go through washings for.

[18 : 07] It is not cleansing and ritual and the like that makes up true religion. No, John 1 has told us what makes a friend of God. Do you remember it from John 1? It's accepting Jesus, receiving Jesus.

That's what makes a person a friend of God. Accepting the gift of God's Son and forgiveness that goes with it. That's what makes us friends with God. So Jesus is, if I can put it this way and I do want to put it this strongly, Jesus is spelling the end of religion with all its ritual and its apparatus.

You see, what matters is not rituals. What matters is not stone jars with all their cleansing and associated matters. What matters is drawing near to God through Jesus.

It's that drawing near to God that Jesus offers. That is what matters. This is a new way of doing things that is utterly superior to those old ways. It's like what Jesus is saying, look, it's like comparing dirty Palestinian water with the greatest vintage wine you have ever come across.

Jesus is saying, I'm bringing some whole new way of relating to God the best way, the vintage way, the best and holiest way of relating to God.

[19 : 22] Think back to John chapter 1. In fact, turn back to it in your Bibles, John chapter 1 and I want you to listen carefully with that in mind and listen to what Jesus has to say.

Hear the contrasts and the comparisons. John chapter 1. In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God.

He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through Him and without Him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in Him was life and the life was the light of all people and the light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it.

He was in the world and the world came into being through Him but the world did not know Him. And He came to that which was His own and His own people did not accept Him but to all who received Him who believed in His name.

He gave the power to become children of God. How did He become a child of God just believing in His name? And they were born not of blood nor of the will of flesh nor of the will of man but of God.

[20 : 35] and the word verse 10 sorry I've now moved to verse 14 and the word became flesh and lived among us and we have seen His glory the glory as of the Father's only Son full of grace and truth.

And John testified of Him and cried out this is He of whom I said He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because He was before me and from His fullness we have all received grace upon grace.

And then notice the contrast in the last verse the law as noble as it was the law indeed was given through Moses grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

Can you hear it? It's all about relating to Him. It's not about Moses and His laws which came from God but it's about what they pointed toward Jesus in whom there is grace and truth.

Friends I want to close by doing two things. First let me just summarise what we've learnt. Hopefully this is what we've learnt. That is we've learnt that all humans are out of relationship with God because of sin.

[21 : 45] We've learnt that God sends Jesus into the world to sort this out. We've learnt that what is important as far as God is concerned is not so much keeping religious rituals as becoming His child.

And we've learnt that approaching God through religion and ritual and approaching God through Jesus are like drinking water and wine. They just do not compare.

These are the things we've learnt from this passage. However, I don't want to stop there. You see, if you've learnt this, there are incredibly significant implications. You see, each one of us I think, I certainly do and you are probably the same as me, have long established ways of relating to God.

Perhaps you're like me, I'm a person of immense habit and I have habitual ways of relating to God. Some of us have learnt these ways of relating to God from our parents.

Some have learnt from experience. Some have learnt these ways of relating to God through our churches. Perhaps there are customs and habits that we've developed or lists, for example, of what makes a good Christian or a bad Christian or lists even of right or wrongs.

[22 : 56] Perhaps there are laws and rituals and ceremonies and mystery. Perhaps it's even things like the Lord's Supper which we're going to celebrate later on where you might think that makes you close to God. Or maybe you might think that to draw near to God you need to be part of a particular institution or perform religious acts or need particular people to put you in contact with God.

Need a priest or a minister or whatever to convey God's blessing and stand between you and God. Maybe we think that being Christian is all about secret knowledge or practices that bring us near to God or moral or religious acts or special buildings or special places or special days.

Friends, if that is you, then this passage comes to us and in these actions on this wedding day we see the actions of Jesus and we see God speak to us and he tells us that the secrets of true faith are to embrace a person.

A person is to cast your life upon this person. It is to follow him with trust and obedience.

To do anything else, please hear me, is to be left drinking mud while there's vintage wine to be savoured. Please grasp what I'm saying. Jesus is not here fundamentally to set up a new religion better than every other religion.

[24 : 22] Jesus came to make friends, to make friends for God. He came to give people the right to become children of God.

He did not come to set up religious paraphernalia. Christian faith is about relating to a person and if you relate it to that person, you will of course act and live in a different way.

Your faith in Jesus is what identifies you. Your conduct in response to Jesus also will identify you. You are primarily disciples though of Jesus, not practitioners of religious practices.

Now of course you may do things religious and that's fine but it is the person who distinguishes you. You are Christians, followers of Jesus.

He is Jesus, the Word of God, the Son of God, the Messiah, the Lamb of God, the Son of Man. So friends, I wonder if I might urge you to do something to help you remember and not forget this.

[25 : 25] Next time you go to a wonderful party, next time you know you go to eat good food and to drink good drink, I wonder if you might stop for a moment before the first drink or the first whatever it is that's passed around and remember the great party that is to come.

Which will turn the party that you are at, well it will put it in the shade basically. And then when you celebrate the Lord's Supper as we are going to do here this morning, make sure you stop and you remember what this is about.

Thank Jesus that he's freed you from religion and ritual. Thank him for the relationship he's brought you into with God.

Thank God that he sent his son into the world to die for you, that he is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. And look forward to that great party that you'll be part of at the end of the world if you are his disciple and renew your decision to be that.

Make it again, decide you'll cling to Jesus. Be determined that you won't turn back to that which is inferior. You won't go back to drinking mud when there's wine on hand.

[26 : 50] Let's pray. Father God, thank you for the glories of your son, our Lord Jesus Christ.

Thank you that we don't have to force our way into your presence, but that because we are children of yours through your son, Jesus Christ, we can march boldly into your presence and eat and sup with you.

Thank you for that little foretaste that we'll have this morning when we celebrate the Lord's Supper and we long for that day when we might do it in your presence. Come Lord Jesus.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen.