

Acting All Spiritual Without Being Spiritual At All

Luke 5:33-39

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Summary: How do you view Jesus? Is he like a patch, a way to supplement and aid you as just a part of your religious experience? Or is he truly the transforming, all-consuming Savior that he claims to be—the only way to Heaven? Join Stephen today and explore one of Jesus’ many earthly encounters with the Pharisees, and the words of freedom he offers to all who believe.

In the early 1900s, Edwin Hubble became a household name as the astronomer who discovered our galaxy is not the only galaxy in the universe.

You’ve seen those staggering photos delivered over the past 30 years from Hubble Telescope, named in his honor.

For the believer, these photos have done exactly what the Psalmist David said they would do: ***The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork (Psalm 19:1).***

In other words, the bigger and more magnificent our universe becomes, the bigger and more magnificent our Creator God becomes.

That wasn’t necessarily Edwin Hubble’s intention or conclusion.

Hubble was a gifted man in many ways. Bill Bryson writes that at one high school track meet in 1906, a teenage Hubble won the pole vault, shot put, discus, hammer throw, and standing high jump. That same year, he set a record for the high jump for the state of Illinois.

Hubble was physically impressive; one author wrote, “he was handsome almost to a fault.”

Hubble was intellectually brilliant. He studied physics and astronomy at the University of Chicago and was among the first Rhodes scholars at Oxford.

When Hubble began his career as an astronomer in 1919, only one galaxy was known to us: The Milky Way.

But five years later, Hubble wrote a landmark paper on his discoveries that proved the universe contained many

galaxies—and that it was expanding. Albert Einstein praised Hubble for proving what no physicist or astronomer had ever imagined.

Edwin Hubble was now guaranteed a unique place in human history. The problem, was, none of it was enough for his expanding self-image.

Hubble would embellish his past; he added story after story about his accomplishments that would later be proven untrue.

He claimed to have spent most of his late 20s as a prestigious lawyer in Kentucky. In reality, he had spent those years as a high school teacher in Indiana.

Hubble told people how he had daringly rescued drowning swimmers. But that event never happened.

Hubble bragged about how he had taken on an exhibition bout with a world-class boxer and surprised the champion with an amazing knockdown punch.

That wasn't true either.

He boasted that in World War I he had bravely led, quote, "frightened men to safety across the battlefields of France."

The truth was, he arrived in France weeks before the end of the war; he had led no one to safety.

Bill Bryson, *A Short History of Nearly Everything* (New York: Broadway Books, 2003):
citation:preachingtoday.com

What is it in human nature that makes us want to appear better than we really are?



Have you ever lied to make yourself sound better, or do you know someone who often lies? What is it about us that makes us want to protect our image?

By the time Jesus entered the scene in the first century, Judaism had become a race to enhance your religious résumé; to add to your public appeal and your standing before God.

The Pharisees seemed to be winning the race, setting new records with their long prayers and long faces and long lists of rules.

To the Pharisee, godliness was related to joylessness. You couldn't possibly be happy and holy at the same time.

And then Jesus comes along. His ministry starts at a wedding feast and He even creates fresh wine to keep the festivities going. The average person on the street loved being around Him; even children weren't afraid of Jesus.

The Pharisees were becoming irritated that Jesus wasn't acting spiritual; He wasn't fitting the profile of piety. He wasn't playing by their rules.

He was beginning to expose the fact that their spiritual résumés were deceptive.

They were adding things to make themselves appear more impressive.

You see, they had mastered the art of acting spiritual without being spiritual at all.

That same act you and I can play, and we get rather good at it. And since this is a temptation for us all, at any time, let's be aware of the danger.

What does it look like to act all spiritual without being spiritual at all?

Well, that's the theme of what happens next. Let me take you there—we're back in **Luke's Gospel, chapter 5, now at verse 33:**

And they said to him, "The disciples of John fast often and offer prayers, and so do the disciples of the Pharisees, but yours eat and drink."

Luke 5:33

The disciples of John the Baptizer were no doubt sincere—in fact, Old Testament fasting accompanied repentance and confession (Joel 1:13 and Esther 4:1-3), and repentance happened to be the theme of John the prophet's preaching.

Fasting is never commanded for the church in any New Testament verse; however, we see the early church fasting, not in confession and repentance, but for wisdom and direction. In other words, fasting took place because they were focused on praying and didn't want to stop to eat.

It wasn't some mystical magical way of self-punishment or self-discipline to get God's attention.

But for the Pharisees and their disciples, they were masters of putting on a show.

Let me give you a little background.

According to Leviticus 16, the nation Israel was commanded to fast once a year on the Day of Atonement.

But by the time of Jesus, the Pharisees had decided that true godly people—truly spiritual people—fasted not once a year but twice a week.

And it was always related to gloomy remorse. They considered it a sacrifice of their own bodies to God, a way to gain God's attention.

But it wasn't just to get God's attention. They wanted everyone else's attention too and so the two days they decreed for fasting were on Mondays and Thursdays, which happened to be the two primary market days in Jerusalem.

Many of them would rub ashes on their cheeks, whitening their faces to make themselves look gaunt, as if they had been fasting for days; they would refuse to wash and they wore disheveled clothing. People in the marketplace would be given the impression that true spirituality was solemn and serious, if not joyless and gloomy.

Adapted from R. Kent Hughes, Luke: Volume 1 (Crossway, 1998), p. 190

We have our parallels today, don't we? One author wrote that one Sunday

morning they were sitting in church behind a young family when the little girl in front of them turned around and began smiling at all the people behind her. When her mother noticed, she grabbed her arm and said in a loud whisper, “Stop that smiling, we’re in church!” She gave her a little swat and said, “That’s better.”

ibid

Now I’m not suggesting you let your kids make a racket in church. My mother could reach across four boys lined up on that church pew and just by snapping her finger—that was the voice of God—we knew judgement was on its way.

I grew up in a church that was formal with a touch of heavy starch; the pastor spoke without ever getting too excited; he read Scripture like it was a eulogy—solemn and serious. Frankly, that was the way it was.

And I’ll never forget that moment, as a college junior, I had a part-time job there in town mopping the floors of a florist shop in the evenings. They had a radio on a shelf, and it was always turned to elevator music. Well, it was just me in there, so one night I went over and started turning the knob on the radio – that’s when radios had knobs.

I tuned into a guy preaching and it was compelling; and then somewhere in his message he did something I’d never heard a pastor do in the pulpit—he laughed. I remember being shocked; I had never heard such a thing.

Now, you need to remember, I was in college, so this was 15-20 years ago!

From then on, I made sure I arrived on time to that flower shop to mop that floor and hear this man preach, on a program I learned was called Insight for Living with Chuck Swindoll.

The Lord’s teaching was sprinkled with incredible wit; he often handled his detractors with humor. There were times you can imagine Peter and the other disciples doubled over with laughter.

Yes, Jesus was a man of sorrows (Isaiah 53:5), but He was also filled with joy (John 15:11).

Warren Wiersbe, Luke, Volume 1: Be Compassionate (Victor Books, 1989), p. 56

Joy is a close companion to laughter. Jesus prayed that His joy would become our joy (John 17:13) that our joy might be full (John 15:11).

And listen, from what we’ve discovered in our study thus far, I think it’s safe to say that one thing you would never expect to hear from a joyless Pharisee was laughter.



Is your faith characterized by joy or joylessness? Is your disposition one of happiness or sorrow?

And that happens to be a large part of Jesus’ answer to them here: they’ve said to him here in verse 33, “Why don’t your

disciples fast like ours do? Why aren't they gloomy and gaunt on Mondays and Thursdays? Don't you know that's what really spiritual people act like on Mondays and Thursdays?"

Notice the Lord's answer in verse 34:

*And Jesus said to them,
"Can you make wedding
guests fast while the
bridegroom is with them?"*

Luke 5:34

In other words, how can they not stop smiling? Jesus effectively said to these Pharisees, "Your disciples are in a funeral march, my disciples are at a wedding feast."

Yes, there will be three days of sorrow and fasting because there is a funeral coming soon, which the Lord goes on to essentially prophecy in **verse 35**:

*"The days will come when
the bridegroom is taken
away from them, and then
they will fast in those days."*

Luke 5:35

This can't be a reference to ongoing mourning and fasting through the church age following Christ's ascension back to Heaven, because we know that when Jesus rose from the grave, the celebration began all over again—and continues to this day.

Yes, we have days of sorrow and suffering, but we're not waiting until Heaven to smile.

- Joyful thanksgiving becomes the underlying attitude of the believer now (**Colossians 3:17**);
- Joyful singing becomes the practice of the church in every generation now (**Ephesians 5:19**);
- Joyful responses alert the world that we really are different; we're not just acting spiritual, we belong to a risen Savior.

Paul writes that even during great affliction you have this remarkable disposition of joy (**1Thessalonians 1:6**).

Why? The Bridegroom is with us; He will never leave us nor forsake us (**Hebrews 13:5**).

In fact, it's now clearer to us than it was to His early disciples that not only is He our Bridegroom, but we happen to be His bride (Ephesians 6).

How does a bride feel and act on her wedding day? Does she get sick to her stomach? Maybe. Is she nervous? Probably. Does she have all the answers about tomorrow? No.

But all of that is eclipsed by the joy of seeing her Groomsman—the One to whom she has given her heart; the one who is about to watch her walk down that aisle.

He is our Groomsman, and we are His bride.

Jesus ties our joy as disciples to the joy of a wedding.

Now in the days of Jesus, couples didn't go off on a honeymoon, they stayed at the father's house, where the groom had built an addition to bring his bride home.

After the ceremony, the wedding feasting would begin there at the family home, sometimes lasting an entire week or more; the bride and groom were traditionally dressed as kings and queens, often wearing makeshift crowns as if they had been coronated as royalty.

Adapted from [Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary: Volume 1](#) (Zondervan, 2002), p. 374

All of this presents a picture of our own future. The Lord will descend at any moment to take us up to the clouds to meet Him in the air (I Thessalonians 4), then we, His bride, will be taken away to His Father's house where he has prepared for us a place (John 14), and we will be robed as royalty and given crowns to wear—not make-believe—they will be for real (Revelation 20).

All that eclipses whatever you might be going through today. That's how you can give thanks; that's why you can sing; that's how you go through adversity with joy. You're on your way to the Father's house and the marriage supper of the Lamb.

Martin Luther the reformer once wrote, "The Christian should be a cheerful person. If they aren't, the devil is tempting them."

Hughes, p. 193

Tempting them to do what? To take your eyes off the Bridegroom, who is coming

down that aisle at any moment to take you away.

The Groom is what matters most.

Darrell L. Bock, [Luke: Volume 1](#) (Baker Exegetical, 1994), p. 518

Jesus essentially says that His disciples are not at a funeral, they're at a wedding; they're not fasting, they are feasting.

Now with that, the Lord takes these Pharisees a little deeper into the reason why they aren't prepared to do any singing.

Notice verse 36:

*He also told them a parable:
"No one tears a piece from
a new garment and puts it
on an old garment. If he
does, he will tear the new,
and the piece from the new
will not match the old."*

Luke 5:36

In other words, Jesus didn't come to patch up Judaism.

John Phillips, [Exploring the Gospel of Luke](#) (Kregel, 2005), p. 107

The robe of the Messiah's redemption can't be used to patch up something that is old and fading. Jesus offers a new robe of righteousness.

John Phillips writes it colorfully this way: "Jesus isn't going to darn some new religious ideas into the threadbare system of a worn and fading Judaism. His teaching cannot be tacked on to rabbinical ramblings . . . His teaching is new, vital, and refreshing."

Ibid

But listen, that's religion to this day. You can't patch a little bit of Jesus into false religion. I know unbelievers who think they have a little bit of Jesus, among other things. He's one of their many options.

Jesus isn't one of many options; He is the *only* way to the Father (John 14:6).

Along that same line, the Lord delivers a second illustration, here in **verse 37**:

“And no one puts new wine into old wineskins. If he does, the new wine will burst the skins and it will be spilled, and the skins will be destroyed. But new wine must be put into fresh wineskins.”

Luke 5:37-38

Wineskins were usually made from sheepskin or goatskin, and the neck area of the animal would become the neck of the container. The skin would be scraped and cleaned and treated. But over time the skin would age and become brittle.

Bock, p. 520

The Jew would never put new wine into an old, brittle wineskin.



Has Jesus truly transformed your life, or have you tried to fit him into your already-established views of religion?

As the grape juice ferments, yeast transforms sugar into alcohol and releases carbon dioxide gas. New wineskins can stretch to contain that increased volume, but an old wineskin will split open under the pressure.

Charles R. Swindoll, *New Testament Insights on Luke* (Zondervan, 2012), p. 138

In other words, this gospel message of the new covenant is only going to grow and expand.

Darrel Bock writes, “Jesus is essentially revealing that His teaching is new; there's going to be a new period—what we call a new dispensation—a new approach to God, now without sacrifices and priests and temples and ceremonies.

Adapted from Bock, p. 521

All the old covenant was a shadow that is now fading as the sunrise of the new covenant is dawning.

This was the message of **Hebrews**, **where it's spelled out in chapter 8**; listen to this:

In speaking of a new covenant, he makes the first one obsolete. And what is becoming obsolete and

*growing old is ready to
vanish away.*

Hebrews 8:13

What does that mean to you today?

- You don't need a priest to enter into the presence of God.
- You don't need to confess your sins on Saturday; you can confess immediately through Christ.
- You don't have to sacrifice an animal to atone for your sin; you trust the final sacrifice of Christ forever forgiving your sin.
- Your walk with God isn't restricted by diet or ceremony or circumcision; you are free in Christ.

Now why wouldn't everybody in Jesus' audience here respond by saying, "Let me in on this freedom! Let me in on this new covenant relationship, this new robe and this new wine."

I'm tired of acting; I want the real thing.

Jesus tells them why. He wraps up His discussion by quoting a rather blunt proverb here in **verse 39**:

*"And no one after drinking
old wine desires new, for he
says, 'The old is good.'"*

Luke 5:39

In other words, it is a characteristic of the human heart to resist anything new.

What I've been doing is good enough for me. I don't want to try something new. That's human nature.

I will not eat green eggs and ham.

Not in a house, not with a mouse,

Not on a train, not in a tree;

Not in a tree;

Let me be!

That's pretty good theology.

I have found in my ministry that older people rarely come to faith in Jesus Christ.

God's grace is no less available to them, but the older a person becomes, the more likely they are to say, "This is the way I am and this is the way I've been for a long time. You're telling me I've been wrong all my life?"

"Let me be!"

People want to cling to their comfortable religious traditions and have no interest in the new, fresh, saving truth of the gospel.

Adapted from John MacArthur, [Luke 1-5](#) (Moody Publishers, 2009), p. 342

This is Satan's strategy, and the longer he binds—the longer he blinds—the heart of an individual, the tighter the chains that enslave them and ultimately lead them to Hell.

Paul wrote to the Corinthian church that the god of this world—a reference to Satan—has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ

who is the image—the very nature—of deity (**2 Corinthians 4:4**).

“No, you don’t want that! Stay here in the dark where you’re comfortable! If you do anything, add a little something to your resume, turn over a new leaf; you don’t need a new life.”

But what Jesus says here is our message today.

The church’s goal is not to make unbelievers comfortable with their patchwork systems of religion.

Ibid

Christianity is not a new leaf; it is a new way of living.

No, Jesus isn’t a little patch to add to your clothing; Jesus is an entirely new wardrobe!

I’ll never forget a few years ago giving the gospel to a woman who had come to see me with questions. She had been a faithful Roman Catholic all her life; she didn’t miss confession, the mass, the services, the prayers, the candles, you name it—she faithfully did it.

I turned her attention to the Scriptures and explained this new and living way through Christ alone, by faith alone. That a relationship with God through Christ was possible because Christ had paid for it and it was now the gift of God, not of works lest anyone should boast (**Ephesians 2:8-9**).

I’ll never forget seeing tears begin running down her cheeks as the Spirit of God opened her eyes. She sat there repeating over and over again, “I can’t believe it’s free; I can’t believe its free; I can’t believe it’s free.” And she prayed to receive the gift of forgiveness and everlasting life through her all-sufficient Lord.

Repentant sinners don’t take acting lessons on spirituality. They don’t ask, “What do I need to add to my resume to look good to God?”

They come broken and transparent and humble to discover this new wine. They wear this new robe of Christ’s righteousness, all of it offered to them for free.

Because Jesus paid it all.

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