

<sup>15</sup> *He who has ears to hear, let him hear!* <sup>16</sup> *But to what shall I liken this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to their companions,* <sup>17</sup> *and saying: 'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we mourned to you, and you did not lament.'* <sup>18</sup> *For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon.'* <sup>19</sup> *The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Look, a glutton and a winebibber, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!'* But wisdom is justified by her children.”

Text: Mt. 11:15-19 A 10/27/24 Reformation Ge. 15:1-6 Eph. 2:1-10 Ps. 95 Resp. Ps.: 85  
Hymns: 266, 373 (1-4), 373 (5-7), 262

## **DON'T JUST “PLAY” RELIGION**

Dear fellow believers in Christ,

Jesus said of the Pharisees, *“These people draw near to Me with their mouth, and honor Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me. And in vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men”* (Mt. 15:8-9). It was the same way with the church at the time of Martin Luther. It’s what happens when people play religion.

Jesus begins our text by saying, *“He who has ears to hear, let him hear”* (literally from the original, *“let him keep on hearing.”*) What Jesus has to say to us is very important. It’s not easy to understand at first hearing. So let’s listen with ears of faith as the Holy Spirit makes our Lord’s words plain to us.

Jesus asks, *“To what shall I liken this generation?”* (“generation” referring to the unbelieving Jews). Jesus means: *“To what can I compare these unbelieving Jews?”* *“It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling”* (from the original, *“and who keep on calling”*) *“to their companions, and saying: 'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we mourned to you, and you did not lament.'”* Jesus means: *“You unbelieving Jews are like children who want everyone to play the games you want to play and are upset when they don’t.”*

The unbelieving Jews – the Pharisees and the people who followed them – liked to play religion. They made up all sorts of religious rules and laws, and expected everyone to observe them. They thought that if a person did, he would be saved. But Jesus called them *“whitewashed tombs”* (Mt 23:27). They looked good on the outside because of their seeming pious, ‘religious’ works. In the inside, however, they were dead. They didn’t place their trust in God for salvation. They only played religion. They didn’t like anyone who criticized their game, either.

That’s why Jesus says, *“For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon.'”* John the Baptist was a Nazarite. Nazarites didn’t drink liquor. John ate locusts and wild honey for his food. The Pharisees had rules about what a person could eat and drink, but John’s personal diet was even stricter than theirs. John wouldn’t ‘play’ religion according to the Pharisees ‘rules,’ so they didn’t like him.

The church in Luther’s day had made up a bunch of rules about how we’re saved. Luther wouldn’t ‘play’ religion according to their rules. For that he was excommunicated and declared an outlaw whom anyone could kill.

What the Pharisees especially didn't like about John were the 'rules' he laid down for religion. John's message was "*Repent!*" because we're all sinful and none of us is good enough to earn salvation. John told the people to believe in Jesus, "*the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world*" (Jn. 1:29). The Pharisees thought John was possessed by a demon.

The point Jesus is making is that those who play religion refuse to see sin – in particular their own sin – for what it is. The unbelieving Jews thought they were truly 'religious' and good. But John told them to repent because they were sinful just like everyone else. The Apostle Paul, a former Pharisee himself until God opened his eyes to the Truth, tells us that we "*all have sinned and come short of the glory of God.*" (Ro 3:23)

The church of Luther's day taught that if we do enough works we'll get to heaven. But Luther knew, and we know, that our good works don't take any of our sins away. What especially troubled Luther was, how can we know we've done enough good works to make up for all of our sins and get us to heaven?

A person who only plays religion fools himself into thinking that the good things he does will get him into heaven. The Bible tells us, "*If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us*" (1 Jn 1:8). A person may be a member of a church. He may do many charitable deeds which earn him the praise of others. He may say some things that sound spiritual, and even quote some Bible passages. But if he believes that being religious only means that we try to be good people, his religion is salvation by works. That's the problem with ministers and churches that avoid talking about sin and repentance. They're constantly talking about being loving and tolerant. They say that Jesus is a way of salvation, but not the only way of salvation. What's their religion? It's salvation by good works! If we don't acknowledge our own sinfulness and repent of it and trust in Jesus alone for our salvation, we're spiritually and eternally lost!

You and I can't just play religion. Let's never fool ourselves into thinking there's something good in us that makes us better people before God than others. John the Baptist's message is the only way to salvation: repent and believe in Jesus. It's only when we honestly acknowledge our sinful nature and repent of our sins that we receive Jesus' forgiveness and salvation. "*If we confess our sins,*" Scripture assures us, "*[God] is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness*" (1 Jn 1:9).

Jesus had more words for the unbelieving Jews. "*The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Look, a glutton and a winebibber, a friend of tax collectors and 'sinners'.'*" The Pharisees didn't like John the Baptist because he was too strict for the way they wanted to play religion. They didn't like Jesus because they thought He wasn't strict enough!

Many times Jesus healed people on the Sabbath. God established the Old Testament Sabbath as a day of rest. But the Pharisees carried it to the extreme. They ignored Jesus' wonderful miracles of healing some people who had been diseased or crippled. All they cared about was that Jesus sometimes healed (in their estimation, did work) on the Sabbath. But Jesus said that, as God, He is the Lord and Master of the Sabbath. Why shouldn't He who gives us rest from our sins also grant physical rest from pain and suffering on the Sabbath? (Mk 2:27-28). We're familiar with Isaiah's words in his fifty-third chapter: "*Surely He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows*" (v 4). We immediately think of Christ's suffering and death on the cross to

take away our sins. But did you know that once when Jesus was casting out demons and healing everyone who was brought to Him, Matthew said that Christ's miracles of healing were also in fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy: "*Surely He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows*"? (Mt 8:16-17)

In the religious game played by the Pharisees, none of them should associate with their fellow Jews who collected taxes for the hated Roman government. They should also avoid association with those whom they referred to as "*sinners*" – fellow Jews who wouldn't play religion by the Pharisees' rules and be the 'good' people the Pharisees believed themselves to be. The Pharisees hated Jesus for refusing to play religion according to their rules. Jesus associated with and ate and drank with everyone, so the unbelieving Jews called Him a glutton and a drunkard.

Jesus associated with everyone in order to bring His saving Gospel to everyone. Jesus said, "*I have not come to call the righteous*" (the self-righteous), "*but sinners*" (but those who know they're sinners) "*to repentance*" (Lk. 5:32). The Son of God isn't 'too good' and 'too religious' to associate with anyone, if it might mean that person's salvation. That's because Jesus loves everyone and wants us all to be saved. That's what Jesus means when He says in our text that "*wisdom is justified by her children*" that is, "*wisdom is proved right by her actions.*" John the Baptist and Jesus were wise in preaching repentance over sin, and forgiveness. Everyone who follows this way of salvation is going to heaven.

God opened Martin Luther's eyes to understand that "*the just shall live by faith*" (Ro. 1:17). Luther was overjoyed to know that although we can't make ourselves righteous before God, we're righteous before God by faith alone in Jesus!

The unbelieving Jews who only played religion couldn't know Jesus and His love. They thought that only those who tried hard enough to be good deserved to be saved. They hated Jesus' message of salvation for all people – for all sinners who simply and humbly repent and freely receive Jesus' forgiveness. Paul says, "*We preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block*" (1 Cor 1:23). The majority of the Jews hardened their hearts against Jesus and shut out His love for them, and His offer of forgiveness and salvation. They refused to be moved by Jesus' words, "*The Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost*" (Lk. 19:10).

Those who play religion are so busy trying to save themselves that they can't see that only Jesus can save them. Those who play religion are so impressed by their own perceived goodness that they're blind to the reality of their sinfulness. They'll never know the love of Jesus for sinners. As Scripture says: "*While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us*" (Ro 5:8). They don't know what it means to be loved by Jesus, and to love Jesus in return.

Paul reminds us, "*God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ.... For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast.*" (Eph. 2:4-5, 8-9)

Dear Christian friends, we dare never play religion. May God grant us the grace always to see ourselves as the sinners we truly are before Him, to repent of our sins, and to know His grace and salvation through faith in His Son! Amen.