

So Close and Yet So Far: The Religious Leaders

Welcome/Prayer

Foreword

This sermon series follows the season of Advent, the period of time on the Christian calendar which includes the four Sundays that precede Christmas. The word, *Advent*, is derived from the Latin word that means “coming.” So, Advent is a time to commemorate the coming of God’s Son, Jesus, into the world. In this Advent series, we’re going to consider the choice we have of either letting things keep us far away from the One whose birth we celebrate or drawing near to Him and embracing Him as Savior and Lord.

Introduction

The Jewish people and religious leaders had been watching and waiting for their Messiah, the one whom God would send to rescue His people, for centuries. Yet, when they heard that their long-anticipated king had arrived, they didn’t even take the time or make the effort to travel less than 10 miles to see the newborn king. Even though the Lord had come close to them, they stayed far away from Him. These people had become so content in their own little world of waiting that they became complacent, inasmuch as many of them failed to experience the miracle of Christ’s birth.

1. Describe some ways in which we get caught up in our own "little world" and miss out on things around us?
2. Why do you think the religious leaders in Jesus' day made no effort to check the "newborn king" in Bethlehem?
3. What images come to mind when you hear the word, complacent?

Preparation

Read the following text related to today’s message:

Matthew 2:1-6 (NLT)

Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the reign of King Herod. About that time some wise men from eastern lands arrived in Jerusalem, asking, ² “Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We saw his star as it rose, and we have come to worship him.” ³ King Herod was deeply disturbed when he heard this, as was everyone in Jerusalem. ⁴ He called a meeting of the leading priests and teachers of religious law and asked, “Where is the Messiah supposed to be born?” ⁵ “In Bethlehem in Judea,” they said, “for this is what the prophet wrote: ⁶ ‘And you, O Bethlehem in the land of Judah, are not least among the ruling cities of Judah, for a ruler will come from you who will be the shepherd for my people Israel.’”

Break it Down

What started as complacency in the lives of the Jewish people, later evolved into something much different. This can happen in our spiritual lives, too, thus leading us into some dangerous territory, as it did for the religious leaders in the Early Church.

Like the religious leaders, complacency keeps us far from Jesus by making us...

Comfortable

The religious leaders had created an entire religious system around the coming of the Messiah that the anticipation of that future event became their present reality. Consequently, they became so engrossed in maintaining the status quo that they had no time for or interest in the Savior they awaited. It's easy to become so comfortable in our spiritual lives that we don't want to move and do anything different that might enable us to experience the fullness of Christ's presence. Without reason to move closer to the Lord, we become ill-prepared to meet the challenges of the Christian life. Like the religious leaders of Jesus' day, we can construct an entire "church system" that fits us so well that we forget about the very One it was designed to help us encounter.

1. What makes you feel "comfortable" in church?
2. Describe a time you were spiritually moved or "stirred up" and then slipped back into your old pattern of behavior.
3. What are some ways in which Christians grow comfortable in their walk with the Lord?

Cynical

After Herod consulted with the religious leaders about the birth of the newborn king, we don't hear another thing about them until 30 years later and during Jesus' public ministry. They were cynical and critical about the miracles and works He was performing. Becoming complacent in our relationship with God, Christians, too, can become cynical of what He is doing in and around us.

1. What do you think caused the religious leaders to be cynical about Jesus and His ministry?
2. Where have you experienced cynicism or a critical spirit among believers?

Callous

If we don't draw near to Christ after He's come so close to us, our complacency and cynicism can make us callous. This is ultimately what happened to the religious leaders; they became stubborn and resistant to the Lord. Their hearts became hardened to God's grace, and their spirits were unable to feel the warmth of Christ's love. In fact, Mark tells us in his gospel that Jesus became both angry and saddened by their "hard hearts" (Mark 3:5 NLT), and those leaders are the very ones who orchestrated His crucifixion.

1. What does it mean to be "hardhearted," spiritually speaking?
2. Why did Jesus feel that the religious leaders had "hard hearts?" (see Mark 3:1-6)
3. What part of your relationship with God have you become calloused to?

Conclusion

Christmas reminds us that God in Christ has come so close to us. If we're really going to know Him and experience His power and presence, we have to avoid being complacent in our spiritual lives. It's going to take some effort on our part, but we'll be better prepared to meet the challenges of the Christian life.

1. What is one thing you can do during this Advent/Christmas season to insure you don't become complacent in your spiritual development?

Close in Prayer