

Truth for Today

The Bible Explained

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Luke's Gospel: Jesus and the Pharisees, Lawyers and Scribes (Luke 11:37-54)

In this section of Luke 11, Luke 11:37-54, we find a number of woes presented by the Lord Jesus Christ. Each woe denounces the deeds of the religious leaders of His day. However, at the same time, each one is tempered with a measure of grief showing how the Lord Jesus desires in them a change of heart.

The passage begins with an invitation to Jesus from a Pharisee. We read: *"And as he spake, a certain Pharisee besought him to dine with him: and he went in, and sat down to meat. And when the Pharisee saw it, he marvelled that he had not first washed before dinner. And the Lord said unto him, Now do ye Pharisees make clean the outside of the cup and the platter; but your inward part is full of ravening and wickedness. Ye fools, did not he that made that which is without make that which is within also? But rather give alms of such things as ye have; and, behold, all things are clean unto you"* (Luke 11:37-41)

Professed purity

The Lord Jesus Christ makes a moral judgment of the Pharisees in Luke 11:37-54. He begins by considering their professed purity. The invitation to a meal from a Pharisee provided the opportunity for the Lord Jesus to teach. He, therefore, accepted the invitation. Previously, he had entered into the house of a tax-gatherer. The Pharisees thought the job of tax collecting was one to be despised and associated it with those who were sinful. In Matthew 9:11 we read: *"When the Pharisees saw this they said to his disciples, 'Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?'"* Just as freely, He now seats Himself at the table of a Pharisee. Jesus showed no favouritism to either. However, He did know what was within all men and was prepared to speak truthfully at all times in order to bring about blessing.

The Pharisee, seeing Jesus sit without first washing, was amazed. Apparently, all the Pharisees of the time would customarily wash their hands up to the elbow before eating. They reckoned that they may have been outwardly defiled in the everyday course of life and needed to be cleansed. They thought eating with unwashed hands would taint the food and contaminate them inwardly. Such was their religion.

The Lord Jesus immediately speaks of the Pharisees in general by saying: *"Now do ye Pharisees make clean the outside of the cup and the platter; but your inward part is full of ravening and wickedness."* Strictly speaking, He does not condemn the Pharisees for washing; but He highlights the fact that they are, already in themselves, covetous and depraved. The Greek word for *"ravening"* means "plundering" emphasising their greed. The Greek word for *"wickedness"* means "depraved ones" or "malicious deceivers". If the effort of the Pharisees put into dealing with that which was outward was put into cleansing their hearts by repentance and faith then they might have been commended by the Lord Jesus. Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea are two exceptions that prove this rule.

So, these are stern words from the Lord. Only He who was totally pure - totally sinless could rebuke in this way! He, the Christ, is the Holy One of Israel, yea, the Holy One of God (see Luke 4:34).

The Pharisees were well respected by the people; but the Lord Jesus calls them fools saying: *"Fools, hath not he who hath made the outside made the inside also?"* The word for *"fools"* means "mindless ones". They were people without understanding. The Pharisees were so intent on seeking the approval of men that they forgot they needed God's approval. Men could see that which was outward and public, but the Creator was able to see that which was private and inward. As the latter part of Hebrews 4:13 states: *"...all things are naked and opened unto the eyes of him with whom we have to do."* The Lord looks upon the heart and, in the case of the Pharisees, finds the heart particularly deceitful and wicked.

The conclusion to this section shows that all things could be clean to them if they forsook their greed and deception and showed fruits of repentance in giving to the poor alms of **all** that they had. The word *"alms"* indicates both the gift and manner in which it is given. Alms are "gifts of compassion" showing that the needs are both seen and met in love.

Priorities

The next woe addresses the fixation of the Pharisees upon trifles rather than dealing with more vital issues. Their priorities were completely wrong! Jesus said: *"But woe unto you, Pharisees! for ye tithe mint and rue and all manner of herbs, and pass over judgment and the love of God: these ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone"* (Luke 11:42).

Believing Jews tithed. This meant they gave one tenth of their income to God. The tithes were used to support the Levites in their holy work for God. So, they gave honestly according to the law. This was besides other offerings that were made by them. The Pharisees about whom Jesus was speaking paid additional tithes on small things like herbs which were not required by the Law. They did this in order to give the impression that they were far better than other people. Yet, the amounts of these tithes were minute. They were paying for the praise of men rather than seeking to please God. They would have been better occupied in exercising fair judgment and pouring out His love. Both the latter are vital! How important it is for us to humble ourselves and respect and obey God rather than seeking out self-aggrandisement. Let us make righteousness and love the focus of our lives.

Pre-eminence

The Lord Jesus then addressed the desire of the Pharisees for pre-eminence. He stated: *"Woe unto you, Pharisees! for ye love the uppermost seats in the synagogues, and greetings in the markets"* (Luke 10:43). The seats of honour for the elders of the synagogue were placed in front of the ark containing the Law, in the highest part, where they sat with their faces to the people.

The markets were town squares where they soaked up the generous greetings of the people. They were the opposite in character to the Lord Jesus Christ who *"made Himself of no reputation"* (see Philipians 2:7). The Pharisees sought to be recognised and revered in both the public and religious spheres.

Places of defilement

The Lord then tells them that they, themselves, are places of defilement. In Luke 11:44, He states: *"Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye are as graves which appear not, and the men that walk over them are not aware of them."* Here the Lord not only addresses the Pharisees but the scribes also. The scribes were those educated people who wrote out the scriptures and read or taught from them. They were usually classed along with the chief priests and the elders. Unfortunately, they did not practise what they preached. The Lord Jesus describes both the scribes and Pharisees as unmarked graves which, without knowing, people walk over and are therefore defiled. This defilement is seen in Numbers 19:16 where we read: *"And whosoever toucheth one that is slain with a sword in the open fields, or a dead body, or a bone of a man, or a grave, shall be unclean seven days."* Under the Law of Moses, touching a grave in any way made a person unclean. So Jesus seems to be saying that those who associated themselves with the scribes and Pharisees of His day were, unwittingly, being defiled in the sight of God. This is extremely convicting language which shows how far these religious leaders had moved away from the truth that they so freely taught.

The same may apply to religious leaders today when they do not practise the truth of the scriptures. In fact, they may go further by changing the teaching of scripture to suit themselves or by turning a blind eye to scriptures that would condemn sin and demand Biblical discipline in the churches. In the latter case, they are defiling real believers who attend those churches because *"a little leaven leavens the whole lump"* (1 Corinthians 5:6).

Pressurised people

The next woe opposes the way that that the lawyers pressurised people by placing heavy burdens upon them and do nothing to help them. We read: *"Then answered one of the lawyers, and said unto him, Master, thus saying thou reproachest us also. And he said, Woe unto you also, ye lawyers! for ye lade men with burdens grievous to be borne, and ye yourselves touch not the burdens with one of your fingers"* (Luke 11:45-46).

The lawyers were insulted by the words of Jesus to the scribes because they, themselves, acted in a similar way and with a similar role. They were tutored in the laws of Moses which they then taught in the schools and the synagogues. These lawyers insisted that the requirements of the law be kept. How easy it is for those with religious authority to insist on obedience to God's word from the people without giving any advice which would help them to do so. These lawyers couldn't, of course, because they themselves were not able to keep the commandments.

The opposite is true in Christ. He came from heaven to put away the greatest burden upon people's hearts - sin! He has borne the judgment of God that the sinner deserved. Those who trust in Him and His work are set free from any future judgment for sin. Their destiny is glory! Nevertheless, the New Testament reveals many of the commandments

of the Lord which Christians ought to keep. How does He help them to do so? Why, He has given believers two main things.

1. A new nature that seeks to obey God. Christians are born again (John 3:3); they are a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17).
2. The Holy Spirit who empowers the Christian to live a holy life.

While it is true that there is a battle going on between the old, sinful nature and the new one in every Christian, they know they have a God who is faithful and just to forgive their sin (through the blood of Christ) when they confess that sin. Furthermore, they know they will have the final victory through Christ who loved them and gave Himself for them.

Pretentious piety

The woe that follows shows the pretentious piety of these religious leaders. The Lord Jesus reproves them with these words: *"Woe unto you! for ye build the sepulchres of the prophets, and your fathers killed them. Truly ye bear witness that ye allow the deeds of your fathers: for they indeed killed them, and ye build their sepulchres. Therefore also said the wisdom of God, I will send them prophets and apostles, and some of them they shall slay and persecute: that the blood of all the prophets, which was shed from the foundation of the world, may be required of this generation; from the blood of Abel unto the blood of Zacharias, which perished between the altar and the temple: verily I say unto you, It shall be required of this generation"* (Luke 11:47-51).

By building the sepulchres of the prophets slain by their ancestors, they were seeking the praise of men for their apparent godliness. The Lord Jesus could see their hidden motive. He looked at these monuments as showing that they, themselves, would act in a similar way to their murderous fathers. These buildings could be looked at as a memorial of their fathers' murderous acts against God. In fact, the same attitude was shown by them to John the Baptist and, especially, Jesus Himself. It showed that they were prepared to kill those who were truly sent by God. They might have raised grand buildings to the remembrance of those godly servants when they were dead, but would they have heard and obeyed the word of God that came through them? The answer is a resounding, "No!"

Jesus went on to show that the deaths of those prophets and other godly men were known to God before they were sent. He knew what the religious and civil leaders of the nation would do to them. Their deaths were a witness to the manner in which they despised God and His word. The generation of which the Lord speaks is a moral generation - a generation marked by wickedness and adultery. It is this generation that would come under the judgment of God. Those who professed to belong to God, but denied His power would suffer for the sins of their fathers in rejecting God's testimony in that day when divine vengeance is poured out on the earth. Sadly, they will suffer the fury of God in the Great Tribulation period as God uses the King of the North to sweep through Israel in the same way He used other armies against them in the past.

Perversity

The Lord Jesus goes on to speak of the Perversity of the lawyers: *"Woe unto you, lawyers! for ye have taken away the key of knowledge: ye entered not in yourselves, and them that were entering in ye hindered."* You may ask, what is the key of knowledge? We find the answer in Proverbs 1:7: *"The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge: but fools despise wisdom and instruction."* The knowledge in our passage refers to the instruction of the Scriptures. Without *"the fear of the LORD"*, the Bible cannot be properly understood. In that day, the lawyers were teaching the people without a true understanding of those Scriptures themselves. They were interpreting them wrongly. In fact, the One who is the Wisdom of God was among them. The One who was the way, the truth and the life was He who was speaking about them. The key to true knowledge is knowing and fearing God and that must include Christ also. It is Christ who is the main focus of all the scriptures. We read of the risen Christ speaking to two disciples on the Emmaus Road in Luke 24:25-48. Luke 24:25-27 state: *"Then he said unto them, O fools, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken: ought not Christ to have suffered these things, and to enter into his glory? And beginning at Moses and all the prophets, he expounded unto them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself."*

By their poor interpretation of the truth, the doctors of the law did not know the way into the kingdom of God and they were preventing their congregations from entering it because their teaching was false. They didn't recognise the prophetic truth that pointed to Jesus as their own Messiah.

There are false religions around today which freely quote scripture, but their teaching is false. In fact, it is often anti-Christian. The Apostle John wrote: *"Whosoever transgresseth, and abideth not in the doctrine of Christ, hath not God. He that abideth in the doctrine of Christ, he hath both the Father and the Son"* (2 John 1:9) Christian truth may be tested by that statement. Today, there are also false teachers in our churches as was predicted by the Apostle in 2 Peter 2.1: *"But there were false prophets also among the people, even as there shall be false teachers among you,*

who privily shall bring in damnable heresies, even denying the Lord that bought them, and bring upon themselves swift destruction."

Provocation

Finally, in Luke 11:53-54, we see the provocation of the scribes and Pharisees. They began to urge him vehemently, and to provoke him to speak of many things: laying wait for him, and seeking to catch something out of his mouth, that they might accuse him. These religious leaders did not recognise the Lord Jesus as the expected Messiah whom they ought to have revered. Their attitude showed they thought He was just a great teacher and being jealous of Him sought to get Him to say something which they might use to condemn Him. In this, they failed. Why? Because He is the sinless Son of God. He is the Holy One of God who, in a future day, will judge them.

FB Hole wrote: "The Lord evidently uttered these tremendous denunciations with calmness of spirit. The best of men would have spoken differently. Hence to us comes the injunction, "Be ye angry, and sin not" (Ephesians 4:26). We easily sin in being angry against sin. He needed no such command. His opponents thought they had but to provoke Him further and He would easily succumb. He did no such thing as they anticipated, as the next chapter shows." (Hole FB, *The Gospels and Acts*, (ISBN: 9780901860422).

In conclusion, the "hypocrite" has been the theme of many writers in the past. For example, Thomas Fuller stated, "He does not believe who does not live according to his belief". William Shakespeare wrote: "God has given you one face, and you make yourself another."

Of the hypocrite, we might say:

*"O, outwardly-saintly leader,
with solemn words and actor's face,
Why do you destroy the faith of those
whom God has turned to grace?
You may appear the mind of God to know,
but bear the stench of sewage deep below.
O saved and seeking souls, beware!
Try his words with heart and mind sincere;
the truth of God alone receive - revere!"*

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Thank you for listening to this *Truth for Today* talk on Luke 11:37-54.

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