

To Seek and To Save the Lost

Woes to the Pharisees and Lawyers – Part 1

Luke 11:37-44

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Scripture

Jesus encountered growing opposition on his journey from Galilee to Jerusalem. Today's text "contains Jesus' most direct rebuke of the Pharisees and [lawyers], a significant portion of the Jewish religious leadership."¹

Let's read about Jesus' pronouncement of woes upon the Pharisees and lawyers in Luke 11:37-54, although this week we will only study Jesus' pronouncement of woes upon the Pharisees in Luke 11:37-44:

³⁷ While Jesus was speaking, a Pharisee asked him to dine with him, so he went in and reclined at table. ³⁸ The Pharisee was astonished to see that he did not first wash before dinner. ³⁹ And the Lord said to him, "Now you Pharisees cleanse the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside you are full of greed and wickedness. ⁴⁰ You fools! Did not he who made the outside make the inside also? ⁴¹ But give as alms those things that are within, and behold, everything is clean for you.

⁴² "But woe to you Pharisees! For you tithe mint and rue and every herb, and neglect justice and the love of God. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others. ⁴³ Woe to you Pharisees! For you love the best seat in the synagogues and greetings in the marketplaces. ⁴⁴ Woe to you! For you are like unmarked graves, and people walk over them without knowing it."

⁴⁵ One of the lawyers answered him, "Teacher, in saying these things you insult us also." ⁴⁶ And he said, "Woe to you lawyers also! For you load people with burdens hard to bear,

¹ Darrell L. Bock, *Luke: The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 330.

and you yourselves do not touch the burdens with one of your fingers. ⁴⁷Woe to you! For you build the tombs of the prophets whom your fathers killed. ⁴⁸So you are witnesses and you consent to the deeds of your fathers, for they killed them, and you build their tombs. ⁴⁹Therefore also the Wisdom of God said, 'I will send them prophets and apostles, some of whom they will kill and persecute,' ⁵⁰so that the blood of all the prophets, shed from the foundation of the world, may be charged against this generation, ⁵¹from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah, who perished between the altar and the sanctuary. Yes, I tell you, it will be required of this generation. ⁵²Woe to you lawyers! For you have taken away the key of knowledge. You did not enter yourselves, and you hindered those who were entering."

⁵³As he went away from there, the scribes and the Pharisees began to press him hard and to provoke him to speak about many things, ⁵⁴lying in wait for him, to catch him in something he might say. (Luke 11:37-44)

Introduction

In February 2013, Great Britain's Food Standards Agency closed a slaughterhouse and a processing plant after investigators found horse carcasses had been used to make beef burgers and kebabs sold in Britain. A month later, Swedish furniture giant IKEA was drawn into the food labeling scandal as authorities said they had detected horsemeat in frozen meatballs labeled as beef and pork and sold in 13 countries across the continent.

Shortly after the European horsemeat scandal broke, the story took an unexpected twist. When officials in Iceland heard about horsemeat getting into beef products, they decided to run tests to ensure the same thing wasn't happening in Iceland. Icelandic meat inspectors didn't find any horsemeat, but one brand of locally produced beef pie left it stumped: it contained no meat at all. Instead it *appeared* to be some kind of vegetable

product. One of the lead inspectors said, “That was the peculiar thing. It was labeled as beef pie, so it should be beef pie.”²

Hypocrisy may be defined as “the practice of professing standards, beliefs, etc., contrary to one’s real character or actual behavior.”³ Well, it is hypocritical to call something a beef pie when it is not a beef pie. But it is far more hypocritical to call someone a Christian when he or she is in fact a spiritual fraud.

The religious leaders of Jesus’ day had substituted true godliness with spiritual hypocrisy. So, Jesus spoke vigorously against their spiritual hypocrisy.

Lesson

The analysis of the incident of Jesus’ pronouncement of woes upon the Pharisees and lawyers in Luke 11:37-54 warns us of the danger of spiritual hypocrisy.

Let’s use the following outline:

1. The Setting for the Rebuke (11:37-38)
2. The Statements of the Rebuke (11:39-52)
3. The Reaction to the Rebuke (11:53-54)

I. The Setting for the Rebuke (11:37-38)

First, let’s look at the setting for the rebuke.

People had been demanding a sign from Jesus to show that he was indeed the Son of God and savior of sinners. But Jesus said that his death, burial, and resurrection would be the only sign they would receive. What people needed was not some other sign, but faith to believe what God said in his word about the person and work of Jesus. Jesus was giving people plenty of light regarding the gospel, but the blindness of their

² CBCNews, “Horsemeat Found in IKEA Meatballs in Europe” (2-25-13); CBCNews, “Iceland Tests Find Meat Pies Contain No Meat At All” (3-1-13).

³ See <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/hypocrisy?s=t>.

sin was keeping them from believing the gospel.

Luke then said that **while Jesus was speaking, a Pharisee asked him to dine with him, so he went in and reclined at table** (11:37). Jesus had many significant discussions over a meal (cf. 5:29; 7:36; 10:38; 14:1; 22:1; 24:42). We learn from Jesus' example that he often ate with unbelievers.

We should also eat and interact socially with unbelievers. One qualification, however, should never be forgotten, when following Jesus' example in this matter, as Bishop J. C. Ryle said, "Let us take heed that we go down into the company of the unconverted in the same spirit in which Christ went. Let us remember his boldness in speaking of the things of God."⁴ Too often we make friends with unbelievers and never mention the things of God.

Luke noted that **the Pharisee was astonished to see that Jesus did not first wash before dinner** (11:38). Now this washing was not what we are accustomed to doing. Parents tell their children to wash their hands before dinner because they need to get the dirt off their hands. In other words, they wash their hands for hygienic reasons. In Jesus' day, however, the Pharisees taught that people needed to wash their hands for religious reasons. They needed to clean themselves ceremonially. However, as R. C. Sproul noted, "These laws were passed on to the people as if they were sanctioned by God, and binding on the consciences of the people. Reading between the lines, it is clear that Jesus deliberately broke the laws of the Pharisees, in order to teach them a very important lesson."⁵

Jesus used the opportunity to warn people of the danger of spiritual hypocrisy.

⁴ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on Luke*, vol. 2 (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1879), 43.

⁵ R. C. Sproul, *A Walk with God: An Exposition of Luke* (Great Britain: Christian Focus Publications, 1999), 249.

II. The Statements of the Rebuke (11:39-52)

Second, let's examine the statements of the rebuke.

During the course of the dinner Jesus addressed statements of rebuke to the Pharisees and also to the lawyers.

A. *To the Pharisees (11:39-44)*

First, let's examine Jesus' statements of rebuke to the Pharisees.

Jesus issued a fourfold rebuke to the Pharisees. The first is a general rebuke, and the last three consist of specific woes.

1. For Their Foolish Duplicity (11:39-41)

First, Jesus rebukes the Pharisees for their foolish duplicity.

In response to the Pharisee's astonishment that Jesus did not first wash his hands before dinner, Jesus said to him, "**Now you Pharisees cleanse the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside you are full of greed and wickedness. You fools! Did not he who made the outside make the inside also?**" (11:39-40).

The Pharisee was concerned only with the externals. He did not pay attention to his own heart. The Pharisee paid attention to his observable conduct, but did not pay attention to his inner spiritual condition before God. J. C. Ryle said, "Our Lord points out the absurdity of attaching such importance to the mere cleansing of the body, while the cleansing of the heart is overlooked. He reminds his host that God looks at the inward part of us, the hidden man of the heart, far more than at our skins."⁶

In his autobiography, *Be Myself*, Warren Wiersbe writes

⁶ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on Luke*, vol. 2, 43-44.

about his first church building project as a young pastor in Indiana. He and the church's building committee were working with a church architect named Frank Schutt. At one of the committee meetings, Wiersbe says he learned a good lesson about architecture and theology, something he hadn't been taught at seminary. In the meeting he asked Mr. Schutt, "Why do we need such an expensive, high ceiling in the auditorium? We're not building a cathedral. Why not just build an auditorium with a flat room and then put a church façade in the front of the building?"

Wiersbe writes that in a very quiet voice, Mr. Schutt replied, "Pastor, the building you construct reflects what a church is and what a church does. You don't use façades on churches to fool people. That's for carnival sideshows. The outside and the inside must agree."⁷

How about you? Is there a difference between what you do and who you are? You come to worship, you give money, you serve on a ministry team, and you call yourself a Christian. But are you regenerate? Are you justified before God? Is your outside a true reflection of what is on your inside?

Beware of foolish duplicity.

2. For Their Heartless Legalism (11:42)

Second, Jesus rebukes the Pharisees for their heartless legalism.

Jesus' rebukes now take the form of a series of woes. Jesus said in verse 42, "**But woe to you Pharisees! For you tithe mint and rue and every herb, and neglect justice and the love of God. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others.**"

The word **woe** (*ouai*) can also be translated as "Alas!" Darrell Bock says that "the woe is expressed to warn of danger

⁷ Warren Wiersbe, *Be Myself* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1994), 104.

and the nearness of judgment.”⁸

Jesus warned the Pharisees of heartless legalism because they majored on the minors. They paid their tithes to the last detail, but they ignored justice and love. Interestingly, while tithing was commanded for believers living in the Old Testament dispensation, there was no biblical command to tithe on **mint and rue and every herb**. The Pharisees, however, took God’s command to an excessive extreme and tithed on everything.

In the midst of their obsessive arithmetic regarding tithing, the Pharisees lost the joy of giving generously to God. But, worse than that, they did not deal justly with their neighbors, and they also did not really love God. As Philip Ryken says, “This is the heart of hypocrisy: keeping the letter of the law in one or two minor areas of obedience, while at the same time neglecting the big things that matter more to God.”⁹

We are so prone to implement our stupid laws while neglecting what God really commands us to do. Recently, *The Huffington Post* just ran an article titled “11 Bizarre Laws That Could Send You To Jail.” Although it is tough to verify all of these alleged laws, it is nevertheless a sober reminder of the kind of legalism that has no connection to the Bible. For example:

- In Alabama it is illegal to wear a fake mustache that causes laughter in church.
- In Delaware it is illegal to whisper in church.
- In Texas it is illegal to go to church in disguise.
- In West Virginia, no clergy members may tell jokes or humorous stories from the pulpit during church services.¹⁰

⁸ Darrell L. Bock, *Luke: 1:1–9:50*, vol. 1, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1994), 583.

⁹ Philip Graham Ryken, *Luke*, Vol. 1: Chapters 1-12, Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2009), 624.

¹⁰ See http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/06/01/weird-church-laws_n_5398732.html.

We must be careful not to make the same mistakes as the Pharisees and get things out of proportion. We must give generously of our finances to God. And we must also must love God and treat our neighbors with justice.

Beware of heartless legalism.

3. For Their Vain Pride (11:43)

Third, Jesus rebukes the Pharisees for their vain pride.

He said in verse 43, **“Woe to you Pharisees! For you love the best seat in the synagogues and greetings in the marketplaces.”**

Commentator William Barclay says:

The chief seats at the synagogue were the seats out in front facing the audience. In the congregation itself the best seats were at the front and they decreased in honor the further back they got. The advantage of these seats was that they could be seen by all! The more exaggerated the respect of the greetings the Pharisees received in the streets the better they were pleased.¹¹

We struggle with pride. We compare ourselves to others. Who made the highest grade? Who makes the most money? Who drives the nicest car? Who lives in the nicest house?

Sadly, we bring that same pride to church. We want people to notice us and what we do for the Lord. Even if we say that we do not care for recognition, we secretly delight when people praise us. We want people to notice our service for Jesus. We want people to say something about how well we did something in the church. And, of course, the preacher wants people to compliment him on his fine sermon!

¹¹ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke*, The New Daily Study Bible (Louisville, KY; London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 185.

All of this is vain pride. Philip Ryken says,

Jesus shows us a different way to live. He teaches us to be faithful in service, to take the lowest place, to give other people credit, to make our sacrifices in secret, to wait patiently for him to put us in the position where we belong, and to care nothing for other people's opinions. Jesus teaches us to live this way because it is the way he lived, all the way to the cross.¹²

Let us beware of vain pride.

4. For Their False Teaching (11:44)

And fourth, Jesus rebukes the Pharisees for their false teaching.

Jesus said in verse 44, **“Woe to you! For you are like unmarked graves, and people walk over them without knowing it.”**

Philip Ryken tells the following story:

When I was in junior high school I traveled to England with a group of students from Wheaton College. We spent a day and night near Salisbury Cathedral. That evening some of us wandered onto the cathedral grounds and started to play Frisbee. Soon a couple of local residents walked over and told us off in proper English fashion. We were playing in a graveyard, they said, and we needed to cease and desist. As we looked around we saw that there were indeed some old flat gravestones, although they were so covered with grass that we had hardly noticed.¹³

If they had been Israelites, touching an unmarked grave would have rendered them ceremonially impure for one full week. According to Numbers 19:16, anyone who touched a

¹² Philip Graham Ryken, *Luke*, Vol. 1, 625.

¹³ Philip Graham Ryken, *Luke*, Vol. 1, 626.

grave was unclean for seven days.

So, in order to help Israelites not touch graves unknowingly, the people whitewashed them regularly. That way people could see the graves and avoid touching them.

Jesus likened the Pharisees to unmarked graves. People assumed that their religious leaders were faithful to God's truth, and that they could trust them. But their teaching was the way of death and not the way of life. So, they were like unmarked graves, leading people astray and away from God.

Are we leading people astray by what we teach about God? Will anyone not be in heaven because we have taught error? Are our children taught clearly about Christ and salvation?

Let us beware of false teaching.

Conclusion

Therefore, having analyzed the incident of Jesus' pronouncement of woes upon the Pharisees in Luke 11:37-44, we should seek after true godliness.

Let us leave this passage, as J. C. Ryle wrote,

with a settled determination to watch and pray against hypocrisy in religion. Whatever we are as Christians, let us be real, thorough, genuine and sincere. Let us abhor all canting [i.e., insincerity] and affectation, and part-acting in the things of God, as that which is utterly loathsome in Christ's eyes. We may be weak, and erring, and frail, and come far short of our aims and desires. But at any rate, if we profess to believe in Christ, let us be true.¹⁴

Yes, let us be true. Let us be true to Christ. Let us be done with spiritual hypocrisy. Let us live truly for Christ, all the way from the inside out. Amen.

¹⁴ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on Luke*, vol. 2, 47.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and membership in his church family,
develop them to Christlike maturity,
equip them for their ministry in the church
and life mission in the world,
in order to magnify God's name.*

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PRAYER:

O Lord our God, Jesus warned us of the danger of spiritual hypocrisy. We look at this narrative and know that we need to examine our hearts.

Help us to repent of foolish duplicity, heartless legalism, vain pride, and false teaching. And enable us to trust in Jesus Christ alone for the gift of eternal life. Help us to live in spirit and in truth.

And for this I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

BENEDICTION:

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.

CHARGE:

Now, brothers and sisters, go and serve God wholeheartedly!