

What's the Difference Between the Outside and the Inside?

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Please consider donating to this work in the San Francisco Bay Area online at ChristChurchEastBay.org. Good morning.

My name is Denise Yon. I'm part of the San Francisco Community Group and Women Reading Women. Today's scripture reading is from the Gospel of Luke, chapter 11, verses 37 to 54, as printed in your liturgy.

When Jesus had finished speaking, a Pharisee invited him to eat with him, so he went in and reclined at the table. But the Pharisee was surprised when he noticed that Jesus did not first wash before the meal.

Then the Lord said to him, Now then, you Pharisees clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside you are full of greed and wickedness.

[1 : 05] You foolish people. Did not the one who made the outside make the inside also? But now, as for what is inside you, be generous to the poor, and everything will be clean for you.

Woe to you Pharisees, because you give God a tenth of your mint, rue, and all other kinds of garden and herbs, but you neglect justice and the love of God. You should have practiced the latter without leaving the former undone.

Woe to you Pharisees, because you love the most important seats in the synagogues and respectful greetings in the marketplaces. Woe to you, because you are like unmarked graves, which people walk over without knowing it.

One of the experts in the law answered him, Teacher, when you say these things, you insult us also. Jesus replied, And you experts in the law, woe to you, because you load people down with the burdens they can hardly carry, and you yourselves will not lift one finger to help them.

Woe to you, because you build tombs for the prophets, and it was your ancestors who killed them. So you testify that you approve of what your ancestors did. They killed the prophets, and you build their tombs.

[2 : 16] Because of this, God in his wisdom said, I will send them prophets and apostles, some of whom they will kill, and others they will persecute. Therefore, this generation will be held responsible for the blood of all the prophets that has been shed since the beginning of the world, from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah, who was killed between the altar and the sanctuary.

Yes, I tell you, this generation will be held responsible for it all. Woe to you experts in the law, because you have taken away the key to knowledge. You yourselves have not entered, and you have hindered those who were entering.

When Jesus went outside, the Pharisees and the teachers of law began to oppose him fiercely, and to besiege him with questions, waiting to catch him in something he might say. This is the gospel of the Lord.

Praise to you, O Christ. Thank you, Denise. Let's go to the Lord in prayer as we open up his word. Father, I do not presume to have anything to say in and of myself to your people, but you are God who speaks, and you speak truth, and you speak grace, and I pray that you would give us ears to hear and to receive your truth and your grace today, that we might behold your Son, the Savior, that we might earnestly desire pure hearts in your eyes, and that we might behold the wonderful news of how you've made provision for our cleansing and our purity in Christ.

Give us a heart for Jesus, we pray, in the name of Jesus. Amen. Amen. So you may have noticed over the past couple weeks as we've been getting deeper and deeper into Luke's gospel that Jesus has been having more and more, like, really tense interactions with this particular group of religious folks called the Pharisees.

[4 : 10] And in this text that we just heard read, this is definitely the most direct, it's the harshest, the most confrontational, and offensive that we've seen Jesus speak to anyone so far in the gospel of Luke.

Now, maybe some of you are desensitized to this, how lambastic Jesus is being here, because, hey, these are the Pharisees, right? Even if you're not a Christian, you know that you don't want to be a Pharisee.

You don't want to be a Pharisee. These are the bad guys, the hypocrites, the self-righteous, legalistic, judgmental, hard-hearted, lacking in compassion, arch-nemeses of Jesus throughout all the gospel accounts.

So in our minds, like, yeah, get him, Jesus, right? Pile it on, amen, amen, woe to you, Pharisees. But, you know, that we view the Pharisees as bad guys is actually more a testament to the pervasive influence of Christianity in the modern Western world than an actually helpful way to approach this episode in Jesus' life.

Because, listen, the Pharisees may be the bad guys to those of us living in a Western civilization that's been undeniably shaped by the life and teachings of Jesus, but I guarantee you that in this moment, around this super-awkward dining table in Luke chapter 11, and across the whole Jewish community at this time, the Pharisees and the experts in the law, they had a very different reputation.

[5 : 31] See, the predominant thesis of the Jewish people in Jesus' day was that the reason that Israel was under occupation by the Romans was that their forefathers had disregarded the prophets, rebelled against God, and chosen to live in uncleanness and unrighteousness.

And the people who most believed this thesis and who devoted their whole lives to bringing the nation back to a kingdom of purity and cleanliness before the Lord, the people who led the way and who were looked to for direction about how to live a clean life, it was the Pharisees.

According to New Testament scholar Lynn Kohik, the majority of the evidence indicates that the Pharisees were seen as on the people's side while preserving the highest goals and the highest standards of purity.

So the Pharisees really were the champions of Israel. These were the national heroes, believed to be the most righteous, the purest people in the community, the very preservers of Jewish life, Jewish religion, Jewish culture.

And they bravely lived strict and disciplined Jewish lives, even while Roman soldiers marched through their streets and pressured them to just assimilate, right, to Greco-Roman culture.

[6 : 44] So it should actually stun us to observe how aggressively Jesus goes at his dinner host and his fellow guests here. I just want you to imagine yourself sitting around that table, right?

Verse 37 says that the Pharisee invited Jesus into his own home. So it's not like this was one of the more antagonistic or jealous Pharisees from the start. Not every Pharisee was a Jesus hater.

This Pharisee, this host probably was even sympathetic and curious about Jesus. Jesus was probably his guest of honor, right? Then verse 38 simply says the Pharisee was just surprised when he noticed that Jesus did not first wash before the meal.

Who knows if he even said anything? Maybe he raised an eyebrow. Maybe he said something like, hmm, oh, that's interesting. He didn't wash his hands. We don't know exactly. But what we do know is that that was all it took for Jesus to become the kind of dinner guest that we all dread to have in our homes, right?

The kind of dinner guest that we pray our children will never become, insulting the host, insulting the fellow guests, calling people fools at the table, and pronouncing woes around the table, right?

[7 : 55] This is the kind of story that makes me question the bright rainbow WWJD, what would Jesus do, bracelet used to wear in my youth, right? It's like, really? Would Jesus do that? Should I do that too? I don't know, right?

But of course, if he's Jesus, and our core confession as Christians is that Jesus Christ is Lord, we've got to recognize he's not wrong here. So the question we need to ask is, what was it that got Jesus so fired up?

What is it that brings out the fire and ire of Jesus and leads him to cut the cordial and break all social conventions of politeness and niceness?

So again, here Jesus is, not having washed up before eating, but FYI, there is actually no commandment in the law of Moses saying that people need to wash their hands before they eat a meal. Only the priests carrying out their ceremonial duties in the tabernacle were commanded to wash their hands before eating.

Or people who'd become unclean by coming into contact with a dead body or with blood or an unclean animal, those were the only times you need to wash before eating. So it's not like Jesus was breaking any of the laws of Moses.

[9 : 01] So what was likely going on here was that the Pharisees, in their dedication to making Israel clean again, they applied these ceremonial washing practices just to everyone, just to be safe.

And not just to the priests or those who'd come into contact with unclean things, they applied it to everyone. So again, Jesus hasn't broken Moses' law, he's merely broken an extra law and custom of the Pharisees.

But at the same time, it's still a surprise for the Pharisees to see this. And I so love how Luke writes here in the next verse, then the Lord. He didn't say then Jesus, but he says then the Lord.

Like Luke's emphasizing, he may be a lunch guest here, but Jesus is never a mere guest. He's always the Lord of every table. And as the Lord, he has something to say to the Pharisees about what it means to be clean.

Now the word for washed here in verse 38 is the word baptizo. All right, where we get the word baptized. It's the word baptizo. So you have this Pharisee who is surprised that Jesus didn't baptize himself before the meal.

[10 : 04] And so Jesus is like, oh, you want to talk about baptism? You want to talk about what it really means to be clean? Verse 39, now then you Pharisees, clean the outside of the cup of the dish and the dish, but inside you are full of greed and wickedness.

He's saying, wait, you guys with your triple washed hands are getting caught up in the fact that I haven't baptized mine before eating? That's really your biggest hangup?

This external, superficial, even maybe superstitious act of cleansing your hands? Well, I have a question for you. What about your hearts? Have you cleansed the greed and wickedness from your hearts?

Or are you the kinds of people who only clean the outside of the cup, but not the inside? Anyone have a roommate like that? It's gross. I've had many roommates like that. Jesus insists that we got to be clean both inside and out.

Verse 40, you foolish people, did not the one who made the outside make the inside also? Both inside and out matter to God because he made both. And just because something or someone looks clean and nice and good on the outside, it doesn't mean that they're clean on the inside.

[11 : 14] It doesn't mean that at all. So Jesus says in verse 41, but now as for what is inside you, be generous to the poor and everything will be clean for you. And what he means here isn't, okay, do this different external religious act of giving to the poor instead and that act is gonna make you clean rather than just washing your hands before a meal.

No, actually, the Pharisees, actually, they might have given more alms out to the community than anyone else in their society. The key words in this verse, verse 41, are as for what is inside you.

In the Greek, you could also translate this as give alms with respect to what is inside you, meaning don't just do the deed with your hands, but actually do the deed from your heart, like with actual care and compassion and love and zeal for God.

See, Jesus sets a much higher bar for righteousness than mere external acts of religiosity or even charity. If you truly want to be clean, he says, it's gotta start with your heart.

And this bar is high and it's hard and it's heavy because it really is so much easier to just follow a rule and check a box, right, than to cultivate love and compassion in our hearts.

[12 : 23] Like here in verse 42 where Jesus says, woe to the Pharisees for giving a tenth of even the tiniest herbs and paying so much attention to every single little piece of mint and rube but neglecting justice and love for God.

It totally makes sense to me though how people, myself included, could get caught up in that. For so many of us, especially those of us who are like me, grew up in an evangelical upbringing, churchgoers all my life, we've been doing church for a really long time.

Many of us can find ourselves in a set it and forget it kind of mode, right? We show up to church every week, but it's out of habit, no problem. It's just built into our way of life.

It's built into our life that once a month we're going to help prepare the communion table, be on the welcome team, help with the kids' ministry. It's just built in. We've also, you know, just figured out how to habit stack, right?

We figured out how to have our daily devotions, read our Bible and pray every day. We just stack it onto our daily coffee. It's done. It's automatic. We also electronically automate our giving. 10%, I don't even see it.

[13 : 23] I don't even feel it anymore. It just goes. And we don't even, like, think about it when we give. We're fine. We're good. We're clean. We don't curse.

We don't gamble. We don't get high. We don't get drunk. We're on cruise control. This is what our parents taught us to do. This is what we do. So can I please get my Stellar Christian sticker now, right?

An A plus on my spiritual report card. Well, Jesus would remind us that it is possible to do all of this and more, and yet to neglect justice and the love of God.

Like, you may have checked all the boxes, but when was the last time you checked your heart? When was the last time you prayed Psalm 139? Search me, O God, and know my heart.

Test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me and lead me in the way everlasting. We need to be a self-examining, heart-examining people.

[14 : 23] We need to be regularly asking ourselves and each other in community, are we growing in our love for others and our love for God, or have we been content to check the boxes and just live our lives unexamined and on autopilot?

Now, in case you thought I was just going to go after the conservative religious evangelicals, I also have a word for the more theologically liberal of those in the room. Maybe you have a mainline background. Maybe you especially love passages like this and you're cheering Jesus on at this point because you see Jesus in this passage like polemicizing against meticulous, petty rule following.

And you love this because you yourself are not really interested in getting into the details and the specifics of honoring every part of God's law with every part of your life.

You're just focused on love and compassion, just broadly speaking, without much definition. Well, I want to remind you that Jesus also says here at the end of verse 42, you should have practiced the latter, so you should have practiced justice and love for God, without leaving the former undone.

Jesus is not criticizing the Pharisees' attention to detail in tithing, just their neglect of the even more important things. But make no mistake, Jesus wants it all, and he's worthy of it all.

[15 : 41] So yes, we need the big boulders in place. Pursue justice. Have compassion for people. Love God from your heart. And then though, look for all the many infinite ways you can express that justice and love and compassion in the details of your life.

So if this is you, my question for you is, are you pursuing a dynamic relationship with God in all the details of your life? Are you searching the scriptures and seeking to apply them, or have you settled for some just broad, generalized, culturally acceptable, ambiguous notion of love, and following this kind of Jesus that you just imagined in your head, but that you haven't investigated in his words?

Jesus wants us to grow in the former and the latter, justice for the world, love for God, and intense attention to all the infinite ways we could honor and worship him in the minutest details of our lives.

Because again, he's worthy of it all. So like, how are we using our commutes? How are we using our leisure? How are we thinking about even our family vacation? Sure, God doesn't bind us with legalistic rules for what to do on BART, or what to do with the last half hour that we have before we go to sleep, or how to use our PTO, but it all does still belong to him.

And I wonder how many of us acknowledge the truth that it all belongs to him. The next thing Jesus criticizes the Pharisees for in verse 43 is their love of status and respect in the synagogues and the marketplace, their lust for popularity and influence.

[17 : 17] According to Jesus, they are blind and they don't realize their actual status in the eyes of God. He likens them to unmarked graves in verse 44. Because see, in their society, it wasn't like they had cemeteries where everyone was just buried in the same place.

No, people were buried all over the place, so it was very important to mark those graves or else you would be stepping on someone's burial site and in the Jewish faith, you would be considered as unclean. So Jesus was saying, not only were the Pharisees not nearly as clean as they thought, but that they were also unknowingly making others unclean.

See, this is not just about us being clean in the eyes of God, like individualistically. We need to check our hearts, we need to practice self-examination, and we need to take a good long look at ourselves in the mirror of the Scriptures because our cleanliness or lack thereof has major implications for others, for our community, for the world, our coworkers, our children, our neighbors.

And the question is, what if you are an unmarked grave and you don't realize it? Don't you want to know? And might you be willing to ask God to show you and to change you if need be?

The Pharisees and the law experts weren't willing to acknowledge these realities or even the possibility of these realities or to make any changes to their lives and lifestyles and how they viewed the world.

[18 : 36] Verse 45 says, one of the experts in the law answered him. He didn't say, oh, that was really convicting. Tell me more, Jesus. He says, teacher, when you say these things, you insult us also. He was upset.

And Jesus is like, yeah, I meant to be offensive. I know. Verse 46, and you experts in the law, woe to you because you load people down with burdens they can hardly carry and you yourselves would not lift one finger to help them.

He continues to go at it. As the guy's putting a matzo ball in his mouth, Jesus keeps going, right? See, while these experts in the law believed themselves to be so pious because they had given themselves to understanding and teaching the law of God to the people, they'd gotten so fixated on being right rather than being righteous, on knowing the truth without applying it in love.

They missed the point of the law. We sang about this earlier. The law was never meant to save anyone. And yet the focus of the experts of the law was telling people what the law meant, what it said, and burdening them with all the details of how they'd fallen short of these laws.

These laws that tell us that we are unclean and impure and unrighteous sinners before a holy God who will not abide in the midst of our filth. These law experts were content to only have bad news for the people.

[19 : 50] And they thought that that was their righteousness, their knowledge about the law. Zero compassion, zero grace, zero personal relationship with God, only truth about other people's uncleanness and about the reality and about their teachings that even these law experts were the cleanest in the community.

And the worst part is this. The Pharisees and these experts in the law, they actually have no idea how far they are missing the mark. They have no idea of how unclean and complicit with even evil and murder they are.

You know, in this ancient Jewish tradition that the Pharisees and the experts of the law were a part of, they actually prided themselves on venerating and honoring the prophets who they recognized that their forefathers had rejected and not listened to and got them into the mess, right?

So this generation of Jewish religious leaders were known to build and decorate these beautiful tombs to honor the prophets who they recognized as they were right all along. But the question was, were they going to recognize the next prophets that God sent to them?

Like John the Baptist? Like Jesus of Nazareth? See, Jesus is saying, your opposition to me and the offense that you're taking at me is the same thing your fathers felt.

[21 : 09] And every rebellious, hard-hearted generation since the beginning of time, it's what they all felt when confronted by truths they didn't want to hear, truths that didn't fit their preconceived notions about the world.

So you Pharisees and law experts may indeed build and decorate beautiful tombs, but really, you're just accomplices with every other prophet-murderer, every other murderous generation that hated truth, even while thinking they belonged to the truth.

Jesus says, you are more like self-serving, self-interested, envious and murderous Cain than righteous, worshipful, and sacrificial Abel. And just as your kings of old, stoned prophets like Zechariah who rebuked them for worshiping idols, all their blood is just as much on your hands even though you think your hands are clean.

And Jesus recognizes what a tragedy and travesty this is because experts in the law, sorry, and Jesus recognizes what a tragedy and travesty this is, says in verse 52 that they're the ones, these experts in the law, are the ones who are supposed to have the key to knowledge, but they don't know the truth themselves.

They don't know God themselves. And they're not only blind to the truth, but they're hindering others from entering into the joy of knowing the truth themselves, of knowing God themselves.

[22 : 33] Now maybe you're thinking to yourself, cool, thanks, I know where this is going, the lesson here, the application is, don't be like the Pharisees, right? And you wouldn't be wrong. Don't be like the Pharisees, focus on being clean on the inside and the outside, got it.

Get rid of greed and wickedness in your heart even while you go out and feed the poor. Make sure you tie it to God while not neglecting justice and love for God. Make sure it's genuinely from your heart and out of compassion, right?

Don't use your religion to pursue status and popularity. Check yourself before you wreck yourself like an unmarked grave, right? Don't just burden people but help people bear their burdens. Don't be so sure you're much better than those prophet-rejecting, prophet-killing ancestors and also quit hindering others from knowing God by your failure to know God yourself.

Got it, right? Don't be like the Pharisees. Let's wrap up. Let's pray. Go in the name of Jesus to love and serve this world and try not to be a Pharisee, right? Is that the benediction today? Well, that's definitely a huge part of this.

These are the things that Jesus hated. These are the things that fired Jesus up and made him the dining guest that none of us would want to have. But if that's the only thing we get from this passage, then I think we've also missed the point.

[23 : 44] You know, one principle of biblical interpretation that I learned in college and that I want to pass on to you, one question that I think will help you understand the Bible a lot better is this question, well, first, you know, most of us, when we pick up the Bible and we read this or that story, we think, okay, what is the moral and or who is the hero so I can copy that, right?

And who are the bad guys or what are the bad behaviors that I'm not supposed to emulate? And also, you could do a lot worse in reading the Bible, but what if our approach, and this is the question, what if our approach began with asking ourselves the better question, how am I worse than the worst characters of the story?

How am I in more need of confession and repentance and redemption than the bad guys here? And how is Jesus the only real good guy?

And what good news does he offer bad guys like me? Have you ever read the Bible that way? Like, what if we're not supposed to simply identify with the good guys and the heroes of faith in these stories?

What if we are the bad guys in the story? We're worse. Needing to repent, needing to be transformed. What if we're the ones desperately in need of redemption? So sure, we should definitely watch out for every single thing that Jesus mentioned around this awkward dining table, directed at his host and his fellow guests.

[25 : 04] But man, if the Pharisees, with all their devotion and dedication and good intentions and discipline and knowledge of the Scriptures, if they could be blind to what Jesus wanted them to see, how much more susceptible might we be when we spend our free time not memorizing Scripture, not giving alms to the poor or trying to bring revival to our nation, but scrolling our phones and busying ourselves with pleasure and consumption.

If the Pharisees could not see reality as God saw it, when they're trying so hard not to miss it, how much more might we be missing it as some of us are complaining about grayscale and this digital detox during Lent, right?

You know, it is so sobering and so striking to me how this passage ends. Jesus has just been a very unconventional guest. He's very directly rebuked everyone around the table.

He's called them a whole bunch of things. He's called them out on a whole bunch of things in their lives. And you know, this presented them with a choice, right? They could repent, confess, and try to change or they could even just at least be curious to learn more.

Like, oh my goodness, we might have been wrong. Please tell us more. But they chose the nuclear option. Verse 53, when Jesus went outside, the Pharisees and the teachers of the law began to oppose him fiercely and to besiege him with questions waiting to catch him in something he might say.

[26 : 31] Their choice was to be offended at Jesus, to start viewing him as a threat and as an enemy and as someone to take down rather than even considering the remotest possibility that there was something in their lives that needed to change.

Even the smallest speck of dust in their eyes, no, they couldn't even entertain that possibility. Instead, they fought back and looked for an opportunity to catch him in something he said, which by the way shows that he hadn't said anything yet that they could pin him down on.

Everything he said was true. They just knew that they didn't like what he was saying to them as a prophet. They didn't like what he said to them about the changes they need to make in their lives at the deepest level of their hearts in order to truly be clean in the eyes of God.

They couldn't see who was truly the master and lord at the table. And so, of course, he was offensive to them. So my question is, are you willing to let Jesus be the lord of your table?

Are we willing to admit that there might be far more uncleanness in our lives and in our hearts than we realize? Are we open to hearing that hard word from God? God. The Pharisees and the experts in the law, they couldn't bear to hear such a hard word.

[27 : 41] They couldn't bear to entertain the slightest possibility that Jesus was telling the truth about them. Why? Because in their minds, if they really were as unclean as Jesus was saying, how could they ever wash themselves clean enough to stand in the presence of God?

If Jesus was right, then triple washing their hands, baptizing themselves a million times a day would never sufficiently purify them, especially not all the way inside, right?

But you see, that was precisely the problem with their thinking and precisely the religious ideology that most fired Jesus up with wrath and with anger. He wasn't so much mad at the Pharisees, he was mad at their way of inhabiting the world, at their thinking, at their ideology.

The Pharisee host raised an eyebrow when Jesus didn't baptize before the meal and this was because he had no clue the point and the picture of baptism. He had no idea that the way to a true relationship with God is not to keep yourself clean, but to admit that you can't and to be cleansed by another.

To get baptized is not an active thing you do to yourself. No, we get baptized. It's a passive activity that we undergo and the baptism that we must undergo is the washing that Jesus offers us through his own baptism into a bloody death and resurrection.

[29 : 01] That is the only way we can truly be clean in the eyes of God by faith in union with Jesus Christ. This Pharisee and his guests couldn't see it so they pushed Jesus further away rather than pursuing closer intimacy and union with him.

But what we're going to see as we continue journey through Lent, as we continue journeying through Lent, what we're soon going to be reminded of is another table, right? Where the host of that table doesn't scoff at the uncleanness of his guests or demand that they clean themselves before they eat with him.

But this perfectly pure host, he gets down on his knees to wash their feet. I have to wash you. I have to wash your feet, he tells them.

It has to be me. And it is my greatest joy to do so, even if it requires a cross. And this, this is the gospel.

Jesus demands the utmost purity and cleanliness from us and the fact of the matter is that we are filthy from head to toe, inside and out.

[30 : 07] None of us could stand the rebuke he leveled at the Pharisees and experts in the law here, let alone live up to the rest of the commandments that we find in his word. We have chosen death and uncleanness instead, but the good news is that so did he.

He chose death in our place. He chose uncleanness upon his body on a cross to put it to death so that by his resurrection we might live in his light and purity.

This is the gospel. And it's only when we've internalized this news that we will ever begin to have cleansing within.

It's only when we've internalized the gospel. This news that Jesus offers us a better cleansing by his blood. That he's willing to cleanse us when we can't do that on our own.

It's only when we accept this good news and let it bury itself deep into our hearts and souls that we will ever live the kinds of inside out clean lives that we all know we want to live up to for our neighbors, for our children, for the world, for the Lord.

[31 : 16] Lord, we have to internalize the gospel of Jesus Christ. Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for the devastating news that we cannot clean ourselves and the even better news that you and your son were up to the task and at great cost and a great expense to yourself.

So let us respond in worship, oh God, to the one who's cleansed us by his blood. In his name we pray. Amen.