

# Woe to the hypocrites

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[ 0 : 00 ] Our reading this morning is from Luke's Gospel, reading in Luke chapter 11 from verse 37 to 54.

Luke's Gospel, chapter 11, verse 37 to 54. 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.

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.

[ 1 : 11 ] Woe to you Pharisees! Because you give God a tenth of your mint, rue, and all other kinds of garden 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 synagogue, 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, Woe to you!

[ 2 : 34 ] They kill the prophets, and you build their tombs. 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 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 the law began to oppose him fiercely, and to beseech him with questions, waiting to catch him in something he might say.

[ 3 : 51 ] Amen. Well, I wonder what it is that you think true religion looks like.

What kind of behaviour do you think God wants from us? How should we act if we want to please him? The characters in this morning's passage, the Pharisees, the experts in the law, they think they know the answers to these questions.

They think they've got it all figured out. They know what will please God. And in their generosity, they share their insights with everyone else. That's their perspective on the matter.

But as we see here in these verses, Jesus profoundly disagrees with them, doesn't he? So I suggest that if this morning, if you have any interest at all in behaving in a way which pleases God, then it's time to listen up.

Jesus raises a number of different problems with the Pharisees and the teachers of the law with their approach, and we're going to work through each of them in turn. But before we work through those issues, let's make sure we've got the situation clear in our minds.

[ 5 : 03 ] Where are we? Well, verse 37, this is after Jesus had finished speaking. So we're moving on to a new situation after Jesus was talking to the crowds back in the preceding sections.

This Pharisee here in verse 37, he's heard some of what Jesus has been saying. He's interested enough to want to hear more. And being a man of some importance, he's not going to just follow Jesus around listening to what happens.

He brings Jesus onto his turf. He invites him to come and eat with him. Jesus is happy to accept the invitation, so off they go. But as Jesus walks into this man's house, he walks straight over, he sits down, and he starts to eat, completely omitting to wash his hands first.

Horrifying. Surprised is something of an understatement in verse 38. This Pharisee, he is astonished by this behaviour. He's extraordinarily disturbed.

How dare Jesus not wash his hands? And that's not because this is some precursor to our pandemic season where we must all wash our hands every time we walk through any door.

[6:13] No, the issue here isn't practical. It's ceremonial. This isn't like when you see somebody leaving the public bathroom without washing their hands. The issue here isn't hygiene.

It's religion. See, the accepted practice of the day, at least amongst this group of the Pharisees, the accepted practice is that before eating anything at all, you have water poured over your hands.

This isn't kind of scrubbing the dirt off. There's no soap involved or anything like that. Just pouring water over it. The point is to remove the defilement that's contracted by contact with a sinful world.

That's what the Pharisees did. That's what, in their minds, anybody who was serious about religion, that's what they would do. That's what they expected people who wanted to be right with God to do.

And here Jesus is claiming to be a teacher sent by God, and he doesn't even observe this very basic ceremony. How can he claim to come from God? If he won't do the things that God expects.

[7:18] So this provides the first critique for Jesus, sorry, provides the setting for Jesus' first critique of the Pharisees. Jesus says they need to be clean from the inside out.

You see here the accusation of verse 39. The accusation is that the Pharisees only clean the outside of the cup or the dish. Jesus is referring here to kind of another set of cleaning rituals.

That deal not just with the hens, but with all the different vessels used in the meal as well. But Jesus is clear here. That's not good enough. They've focused on one thing, but they've neglected something much more important.

Their behavior is like somebody who picks up a mug and diligently scrubs the bottom because somebody put it down in spilt juice on the counter. But they ignore the mold growing inside from last week's coffee residue.

It's ridiculous. Which one of these things is actually a problem? The outside or the inside? Well, verse 40 says the same person made both inside and outside.

[8:24] The same potter made the whole mug. And the point here is the same God made the whole person. That means he knows the whole person. Maybe other people around you, maybe they're fooled by a carefully polished exterior.

The person sat at the desk opposite you. They can only see the outside of your mug. But God sees everything. You can polish the outside as much as you like.

God sees past that. So what's the remedy? Well, verse 41, Be generous to the poor and everything will be clean for you. Maybe it's hard to see how these two things are related.

How things being clean follows on from being generous to the poor. But the point is that a right inward attitude is far more fundamental. Far more essential that everything else grows from that.

That the inside is more fundamental than the exterior actions. Because God cares about what's behind your behavior. Cares about the kind of attitude that's going to result in generosity to those in need.

[9:35] Not a focus on what steps can I do to look impressive. And to tick those boxes of religious commitment. Or perhaps you and I, perhaps we'd do well to reflect on where we're doing things for the sake of appearances.

The lengthy prayers when you can be heard in a prayer meeting. Without a corresponding commitment to prayer in private. A willingness to volunteer for service in areas where we're going to be seen.

Without a corresponding servant heart in less visible areas. And the second critique comes hot on the heels of the first.

The Pharisees are diligent in giving to God a tenth of everything right down to the herbs in their gardens. But Jesus says they're majoring on the minors. Their focus is in the wrong place.

Now, unlike the ceremonial washing that the Pharisees have instituted. This tithing, this giving of one tenth, this is actually required by God.

[ 10 : 40 ] The Old Testament law in Leviticus 27 and Numbers 18 and so on and so on. The Lord does require God's people to commit a tenth of their income to the support of the priests and the temple and so on.

The Pharisees haven't just made this up. So note that Jesus' critique this time is different. Where before he said, well just worry about generosity. Don't worry about the ceremonial cleansing. Here he says, verse 42, you should have practiced justice and love of God without neglecting the latter. In other words, it's not.

It's not a bad thing that the Pharisees want to be diligent in giving one tenth of everything. But it is bad when they use the fact of doing that as an excuse to neglect something more significant. So focused on those tiny details that they forget the big picture. I use a program on the computer that kind of keeps track of our family budget.

[ 11 : 39 ] And sometimes when you sit down and put the details in and bring it up to date, you do all that. And you find that somewhere along the line 3P has gone astray. That the amount the program says should be in your account isn't what the bank says is there.

And you track it down and it's a typo or whatever. But the question is, is it really worth the time to track it down? If it takes half an hour to do that, is that really a good use of my time?

Surely there is something more worthwhile I could be doing than worrying about a few pence. And as the Pharisees sit there counting out each individual mint leaf to make sure that they've given over one in ten.

One leaf, two leaf, three leaf, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine for me, one for you. One, two. What a waste of time. Of course they have not used their time wisely.

In focusing on that, they've missed all this. Stage magicians. They largely accomplish their tricks by misdirection.

[ 12 : 45 ] Look over here. Look at this. Look at this. Look at this. They say, causing you to miss whatever's happening over here. Of course, it's even easier for me if I can just take my hand out of the shot. Miss what's happening over here.

The Pharisees, they're doing the same thing, aren't they? Look at us tithing our herbs. Look, look, look. Don't look over there or you'll see that we neglect justice and the love of God. They're more interested in looking good than being good.

And you and I, what are the little things that we're doing that we think give us a tick in the God box, but we've skipped over the more significant terrace?

Are you congratulating yourself for putting a tin of beans into the food bank box at the supermarket? And all the while, you're buying your clothes from a manufacturer who, if you're honest, you know is paying their staff pennies, if anything.

Sounds like neglecting justice to me. Do you think God is pleased with you because you spend 15 minutes a day reading the Bible, but then as soon as you put it down, you go and join the rest of the family for breakfast and you fly off the handle?

[ 13 : 59 ] Or you go to work and swindle your customers or your employers, for that matter? It is good to do the small things. It is good to do the little details, but we can't afford to focus there to the detriment of the larger matters.

Verse 43. Verse 43 is a fairly straightforward objection to being the sort of people who want to be looked up to by everyone else. And human nature being what it is, we're all too capable of corrupting even religious situations to stroke our own egos.

But I don't have time to dwell on every section. And verse 44 is perhaps harder to understand what's going on. So let's look at that one together. Maybe you can ponder verse 43 in your own time.

Verse 44. Woe to you because you are like unmarked graves which people walk over without knowing it. Well, in what way are they like unmarked graves?

This is where it's helpful to have some Old Testament background. To have actually read Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy. To actually know what God said in the past that these things are presuming you know.

[ 15 : 21 ] It's helpful to know some of the laws that God set in place for his people. One of those is that close contact with the deceased renders a person unclean.

And that can happen not only by going and touching a body but just by being close to one. And that includes being close to a body that's already being buried. See there? Anyone who touches a bone or a grave will be unclean for seven days.

Therefore, therefore you mark graves clearly so that people can avoid standing on them. It's not just a memorial to the person in question, though it is that. But also so you don't accidentally wander too close to one without knowing it.

And unwittingly render yourself unclean. And so these Pharisees, these Pharisees who are so zealous, so keen to maintain outward purity.

To look pure. To be clean. So careful about setting these boundaries that avoid even the possibility of breaches. In fact, they have produced the opposite result.

[16:24] In a colossal irony, they themselves have become so impure that they contaminate not only themselves but also anyone they come into contact with.

Now, folks, we don't live in the same world of ceremonial uncleanness. God's expectations now are different to what they were then in some respects.

But that doesn't mean that this is irrelevant to us. I suggest what we need to do is to consider whether our failings are in danger of corrupting other people.

With or without we or they realising that it's happening. See, if you're known to be a Christian, if those around you know that you have faith in God, and you then treat as acceptable something that you shouldn't treat as acceptable, well, aren't you then in danger of leading astray, leading into sin, others who perhaps don't know their Bibles well enough to recognise the sin for themselves and just copy what you do?

Well, that possibility of people copying, assuming that what we do is acceptable, that should give pause not only to those of us in any kind of church leadership, not only to parents, but really should give pause to any and all of us who are witnessed by our friends and our neighbours in our day-to-day lives.

[18:04] Remember, for many, for most of the people who you know, their best definition of what a Christian is, is you. Verse 45, the focus shifts slightly.

Another person at the dinner party, an expert in God's law, he listens to what Jesus is saying, and it's hitting a little bit close to home for him. But he reassures himself, surely Jesus doesn't mean to include me and my friends in this condemnation, just those other people over there.

Jesus wants to tell them off, but surely he doesn't mean us. And so he comes and he seeks clarification. Do you realise that you're insulting us too? He asks.

Well, he doesn't get the answer he's hoping for. Jesus is very clear. No, this applies to them too.

And here's another set of condemnations to boot. Folks, it's easy sometimes, isn't it, to create in our minds reasons why God's laws don't apply to us.

Why, when we hear these condemnations from Jesus, well, that's for them, not for us today. And no doubt there are differences between us and them, but I think the example of these legal experts suggests that we are all too quick to try and wriggle out of the clear warnings that Jesus offers.

[19:29] And that is a dangerous thing to be doing. But it's not that specifically that Jesus criticises this man for. Verse 46. The problem with the experts in the law is that they load people down with burdens that they can hardly carry and will not lift a single finger to help them.

See, what these legal experts are doing is they're taking God's law. They're taking what God has said he expects of his people, and they're adding a layer on top. They're saying not just that, but this as well.

And actually, often, they're setting up their own rules as even more important than God's rules. One understanding argued, well, if it's a serious matter to offend against the law, which, let's be honest, is sometimes hard to understand, well, surely it's an even more serious matter to offend against this interpretation, which, the scribes say, makes everything clear.

If it's bad to make a mistake about something that's not quite 100% clear, well, how much worse to do something wrong against this that is perfectly clear?

And so they add a whole set of requirements. See, what these lawyers, what they should have been doing, is they should have been expounding God's law so as to explain, so as to help, so as to inspire.

[20:54] It should have been lifting people up, but instead they use it to beat down and destroy. And even as they weigh down others around them, they offer no assistance themselves, and they avoid the burdens.

They can see the edges of their rules. They can see them so well, they know how to go ahead and do whatever they want without fear.

As experts in the law, they know exactly how to wriggle through it and circumvent it. Sort of like how the richer someone is, the better the tax accountant they can hire, and somehow they end up paying less tax than someone making one-tenth as much as them.

Jesus does not have good things to say about people who use his rules to load down other people without coming alongside and shouldering the burden.

And still, still this litany of rejection is not done. Jesus isn't finished pointing out how these scribes have rejected God. Specifically, they've rejected his messengers.

[ 22 : 04 ] The phrasing of verse 47 is maybe slightly confusing, because at first sight it sounds like building a tomb for somebody. That sounds like something you do to honour them, doesn't it? And maybe that's even what these scribes claimed to be doing.

But that's not really what they intended, says Jesus. Now today we'd say something like, your ancestors killed the prophets and you buried them. You're complicit in their death.

Your accomplices, they killed them. You make sure they jolly well stay dead. From the first martyr to the last, they've rejected every messenger God sent.

Abel right back at the start of Genesis, and Zechariah probably chosen as an example, because the account of his death is in 2 Chronicles 24, which in their ordering of the books of the Old Testament comes right at the end.

The fact that the first prophet here is an A and the other is a Z, that's a coincidence that only works in English, not in the language Jesus was speaking. But the idea is the same.

[ 23 : 02 ] The examples convey the totality from start to finish. They have rejected the prophets. Every single one. These scribes, though they claim to be listening to God, they're refusing to hear those whom God sent.

And they're not going to listen to Jesus, the greatest prophet, either. In fact, according to verse 52, they've taken away the key of knowledge.

They make no attempt to enter in, to understand God's truth for themselves. And meanwhile, they take the key and they run away with it. They deprive others of the opportunity to hear as well.

They add their own layer of interpretation on top of Scripture that prevents people understanding what God actually said, what God actually desired from his people, and who God had actually revealed himself to be.

God desired to make himself known. And these people who claimed to be experts were hiding him away again. This one can perhaps be slightly subtle, but I saw this from Jared Wilson a couple of days ago, and I found it clarifying.

[ 24 : 16 ] He says, Preachers, it's probably not a good thing if after your sermon you hear comments like, I never would have seen that in the text. Because your job isn't to perform exegetical magic.

Biblical exposition is showing people what's actually there and helping them see what it means.

Now, many times this does mean you end up showing people things in the text that they could have seen, but simply didn't.

One great example is Tim Keller's preaching. He says, I never walk away from a Keller sermon thinking, where in the world did he get that? But I often walk away seeing things I might have seen on my own, but didn't until he showed me.

That's gifted teaching. The point is, if you come away from a sermon thinking, where on earth did that come from? Well, that's not a good sign at all.

And if the preacher can't tell you where it came from when you ask him, then that's really, really not a good sign. Friends, beware those who, though they will not say that they alone have the key to knowledge, will imply it by preaching and teaching in such a way that you think you have to go through them for real insight and understanding.

[ 25 : 38 ] Where does this leave us? Well, it left the Pharisees and the teachers of the law pretty angry, opposing him fiercely, wanting to catch him in something he might say.

They were already suspicious of him before this, and now it's confirmed. They just want to bring him down. And maybe some of you are feeling a bit of that yourselves this morning.

Maybe you're feeling attacked. Maybe some of this is hitting too close to home, and you're feeling a bit cross with Jesus for saying these things. I can't say it was comfortable to ask myself this week

when there are times that I'm tempted to present something in a way that makes you look at me and think, wow, what an insight, instead of looking at the text and thinking, wow, what a saviour. Times that I am tempted to keep the key of knowledge for myself. So you'll keep tuning in to this on a Sunday morning instead of me showing you how to see these things for yourself.

Maybe like me, this passage leaves you feeling somewhat uncomfortable. Well, let me offer us all some hope. Look back for a moment. See down through these verses how Jesus starts most of these complaints.

[ 26 : 57 ] Woe to you. Woe to you Pharisees. Woe to you experts in the law. And maybe you hear woe, and you hear a kind of gleeful denunciation, a delight in pronouncing judgment, a sort of doom on you declaration.

But that's not it at all. Friends, this is an expression of pain from Jesus. Regret, not vindictiveness. Arguably, alas, might be a more helpful translation.

Jesus regrets that this is the situation. Jesus doesn't want these people to be this way. And maybe primarily that's because of their impact on other people. That's what he focuses his objections on. But I think it's more than that as well. I think he regrets the impact on them as well. I think he regrets that they are presently far from God.

So why does he use this kind of forceful language? Well, so that they will see the depth of their problem in order that they might change. And I suggest his intention for you and me is the same.

[ 28 : 09 ] We were thinking about this a little bit at Christianity Explored this week. We were thinking about sin and hell. Why is it that Jesus uses such vehement language to warn about the danger of hell?

Because he doesn't want you to end up there. So heed the warning. Jesus wants you to stop heading away from him.

To recognize that you can't keep these man-made rules that the Pharisees have come up with. And you can't keep God's rules either. He wants you to see that you're harming other people with your actions.

That you're rejecting God and his messengers. He wants you to recognize these things and stop doing them. To cast yourself on his mercy. To come to him in repentance and faith.

Friends, come to Jesus. Because he is the one with the solution to the problems that he has highlighted for us this morning.