

# When religion is deadly

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[ 0 : 00 ] I'm reading from Luke chapter 11 verses 37 to 54. While Jesus was speaking, a Pharisee asked him to dine with him, so he went in and reclined at table.

The Pharisee was astonished to see that he did not first wash before dinner. 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.

You fools! Did not he who made the outside make the inside also? But give us alms those things that are within, and behold, everything is clean for you.

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.

Woe to you, Pharisees! For you love the best seat in the synagogues, and greetings in the marketplaces. Woe to you! For you are like unmarked graves, and people walk over them without knowing it.

[ 1 : 13 ] One of the lawyers answered him, Teacher, in saying these things you insult us also. And he said, Woe to you lawyers also! For you load people with burdens hard to bear, and you yourselves do not touch the burdens with one of your fingers.

Woe to you! For you build of the tombs of the prophets whom your fathers killed. So you are witnesses, and you consent to the deeds of your fathers. For they killed them, and you build of their tombs.

Therefore also the wisdom of God said, I will send them prophets and apostles, some of whom they will kill and persecute, so that the blood of all the prophets shed from the foundations of the world may be charged against this generation.

From 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.

Woe to you lawyers! For you have taken away the key of knowledge. You did not enter yourselves, and you hindered those who were entering.

[ 2 : 35 ] As he went away from there, the scribes and the Pharisees began to press him hard, and to provoke him to speak about many things lying in wait for him, to catch him in something he might say.

Morning, friends. Let me add my welcome to your, to Simons. I'm Jake. I'm part of the church family here, but also a ministry trainee at Grace Church, and we'll be looking at those verses together in a moment.

One observation we've had of doing church online is it's much harder to talk to the speaker, the preacher, afterwards. So if you've got thoughts after the sermon, or you've got questions, I'd love you to email them to me if you want to.

It's Jake at [gracechurchdulich.org](https://gracechurchdulich.org), fire in some things, and we can converse and see if we can understand the passage a bit better together. Let's pray together as we look at God's word this morning.

Father, your word is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path. And so we pray please this morning that you would help us to see and give us clarity and help us please to stand firm with Jesus.

[ 3 : 47 ] Amen. Well, many of us will have experience of walking against the tide, possibly literally at the beach, fighting the waves, but also metaphorically, as we stood with someone being bullied or fought for justice when everyone else was going with the flow.

And the question this morning is, will we stand with Jesus even as everyone else rejects him? More specifically, will we stand with Jesus even when impressive-looking religious systems reject him?

Or will we be drawn in because we want to be part of the mainstream? Over the last few weeks, we've seen in Luke's gospel what following Jesus looks like. And the key thing he said was back in chapter 10, verse 42.

He was clear. Jesus said, one thing is necessary to sit at his feet and listen to his word. So his teaching and preaching is just what we need to hear. It's he. He's the one who is concrete evidence of God's kingdom into our uncertain world.

And it's his teaching and preaching we need. But that idea has been scoffed at and mocked. The crowd back in chapter 11, verse 15, reckoned Jesus was from Satan.

[ 5 : 01 ] And the crowd in verse 16 wanted Jesus to be a performing monkey. Now, two weeks ago, as we saw Jesus rebuke the crowd in verse 28, I think I took a bit of a bite out of Jesus' scolding.

I sort of made an apology for Jesus seeming a bit mean. Where actually I should have helped us all to see how absolutely fierce he was being. As he called the crowd before him a wicked generation. He wasn't being overdramatic. Their refusal to see who he was and listen to him really was evil.

And so I'm sorry for not helping us to see that more clearly.

But I hope this morning we will see Jesus really isn't one to mince his words. In these verses, he absolutely slates the religious leaders. And it's not Pharisee bashing for the sake of it.

We know Luke writes his gospel to give us confidence. We really have made the right call if we're following Jesus. So these verses are here to expose the religious leaders for the frauds they are.

[ 6 : 02 ] So that we see religion for what it really is and aren't drawn in. If the choice is between good-looking, upstanding, moral and ethical religion on the one hand or sticking out because we're committed to Jesus and his word on the other, well, Jesus wants us to be in no doubt which way to go.

So what becomes probably the most awkward party in history, Jesus lays into his host and all of the guests exposing the truth that religion is deadly.

Have a look at verse 37 with me. Jesus is invited in by a Pharisee, one of the religious leaders of the day, and he heads straight for his place at the table.

And the provocation has started from the get-go. See, Jesus would have known that the custom the Pharisees had to ritually wash before eating was so important to them. But he walks straight past the station of washing.

And not because he doesn't care about hygiene or NHS advice, but because he wants to make a point and it works. Have a look at the Pharisee's reaction in verse 38. He's absolutely stunned, a jaw to the floor, astonished.

[ 7 : 16 ] I can imagine him thinking about the tabloid newspaper headline already. Jesus ignores religious custom, failing to wash hands before dinner. They think it's a scandal, but Jesus wants to highlight their folly.

Verse 39, Now you Pharisees, cleanse the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside you're full of greed and wickedness. In their obsession to be clean, they've come up with all sorts of ways to be pure externally, but they've ignored what's on the inside.

And Jesus slates them. Of course God knows what they're really like. Verse 14, You fools. Did not hear you made the outside, made the inside also.

And no amount of hand washing and deep cleaning, no amount of religious smokescreen can disguise their sinful hearts from God who sees all. But they won't admit to their internal problems, so Jesus continues his expose.

And we get six woes, so we really feel the force of it. Religion is deadly. We're going to take each in turn. Woe one.

[ 8 : 30 ] Religion is deadly because it looks good, but it doesn't actually love God. Verse 42, 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 Pharisees, they're master tithers. In terms of giving, they would put us all to shame. They tithe everything that they own, even tithing rue, which is basically a garden weed.

If they found a penny in the street, they'd not keep it for themselves. They'd cut a little sliver off and give that bit to the church. And it looks good. These guys would be making the temple prosper with their funds.

And notice Jesus doesn't say a bad word about their giving. It's just that there's nothing motivating it. Yes, they tithe impeccably, but they're supposed to lead God's people and they don't even love

him.

Their religion has blinded them to what matters most. Instead of loving God and caring about justice, they're obsessed with counting herbs. But before there's time to think, the next woe comes quick as a flash.

[ 9 : 37 ] Woe to, religion is deadly because it's all about impressing people. Verse 43. Woe to you Pharisees who love the best seat in the synagogues and greetings in the marketplaces.

These religious leaders, they don't love God, but they do love to be seen as respectable. They love the seats in the synagogue that mean everyone can see them nodding affirmingly at all the right moments and see them looking really earnest in prayer.

It's so ugly acting so others think you look good. But it's why they love to go to the marketplace too. Because their status means they'll be greeted with honour and respect and they love that.

Oh Rabbi, welcome. Lovely to see you Rabbi. Can I give you a special discount Rabbi? But it's deadly. Because any effort to do good is actually just so they're well thought of.

With a couple of woes delivered, things are getting a bit awkward and Jesus turns the screw. Woe three. Religion is deadly because it keeps people under God's judgment. Verse 44.

[ 10 : 47 ] Woe to you. If you're like unmarked graves and people walk over them without knowing it. Before Jesus' death at the cross as a sacrifice for sin, taking God's judgment, God's people used to go to the temple to make sacrifices for themselves.

When they went, they were supposed to be ceremonially clean as a sign of devotion. And that meant avoiding things like coming into contact with the dead. So if you walk on a grave, you can't go to the temple and receive forgiveness.

What would be worse is if you walked over an unmarked grave on your way. You think you're fine, not realising you're still under judgment. And the Pharisees, they're like unmarked graves because people are taught by them and they think that it's doing them good.

But in fact, the deadly infection of religion is being spread. And all who catch it end up refusing Jesus' offer of forgiveness and remaining under God's judgment. If woes one and two seem just all superficial, woe three reveals deep horror.

Religion, it might look good, but it doesn't actually love God. It's really all about impressing people and it keeps people under God's judgment. It's evil.

[ 12 : 07 ] Well, I wonder if you can imagine the scene around the dinner table now. Faces are red with anger, fists are clenched, the Pharisees are fuming and so are the lawyers. Now, these guys aren't lawyers as springs to our minds.

These are the religious law experts. They're supposed to be best at understanding and teaching God's law. And in verse 45, they're feeling lumped in with the Pharisees and want to defend themselves.

But with a moment's hesitation, Jesus rounds on them too. Slam, it's woe four. Religion is deadly because it loads people with burdens. Verse 46.

Woe to you lawyers also. If you load people with burdens hard to bear and you yourselves do not touch the burdens with one of your fingers. These lawyers were supposed to help God's people understand his good and perfect law.

But instead, they add laws upon laws upon laws of their own. Rather than helping people love God, they burden them with rules and rituals. Now, I'm going to get Lizzie's help with this.

[ 13 : 09 ] I want you to imagine Lizzie is a good Jewish woman. She's feeling guilty for her sin. So she comes to the temple for help.

In theory, she's come to the right place. But instead of pointing her to God's generous promises of grace and mercy, the religious leaders say, look, here's what you need to do to be a good Jewish woman.

We need to take this sack of rules and keep all of them. We need to read these books and memorize them.

Take this prayer scroll and repeat them every day. And then I want you to recite these confessions. Got that? Good. And when you go to dinner, make sure you wash everything thoroughly. Do all these things, you'll be a good Jewish woman. All right?

[ 14 : 11 ] Off you go. Okay. Okay. See, these lawyers were supposed to help God's people understand his good and perfect law.

And it was designed to reveal God, to display his love and to help his people to love him rightly. Understanding it should have brought people freedom and joy and delight.

But these lawyers, they just load people with burdens. It's exactly what religion does. While things don't improve with woe number five, religion is deadly because it silences God's messengers.

There's a recurring narrative that runs through the Old Testament. God sends prophets and messengers to speak to his people. But time and time again they ignore and mistreat or often kill them.

They really do shoot the messenger. Now on the face of it, these religious leaders in front of Jesus, they seem better. Yes, their fathers did kill prophets.

[15:20] But verse 47 suggests these guys actually honour these prophets by looking after their tombs as if they're paying them respect. But that should raise our eyebrows because surely the best way to honour a prophet would be to take their message and spread it far and wide.

Though the truth is that only prophets these people actually honour are dead ones. They might look good but this generation of religious leaders are the climax of a long line of God's people murdering God's messengers in the name of religion.

We get a glimpse of their attitude in verse 53 and 54 as they begin to try and trap Jesus. And we see their true colours in a few chapters time when they have Jesus try for blasphemy and hand him over to be crucified.

See, Jesus is building a picture for us. Religion might seem a little harmless if it's just hollow and people pleasing. Who cares? But it's a deadly cancer that spreads and grows turning more and more evil the deeper it goes to the extent that God's messengers who get in the way are killed and those who come to find safety are actually led away from God.

It's evil. Well, if the murdering of messengers doesn't prove the point maybe keeping people from eternal life will be the clincher. And woe six, religion is deadly because it hides God's word and hinders people entering God's kingdom.

[16:56] Have a look at verse 52. Woe to you lawyers if you've taken away the key of knowledge you did not enter yourselves and you hindered those who were entering.

In the scriptures God's word reveal everything needed for salvation. The scriptures they point to a God of compassion and kindness who offers forgiveness and eternal life.

And these religious leaders they have it all in their grasp to share with people. They hold the key to salvation but they've hidden it behind rituals and rules.

They might as well have thrown it in the bin. Not only that they put the key out of reach so that those who want to enter and receive eternal life can't.

and instead of hearing God's word they get offered promises of if you keep these rules and have a respectable morality then God will like you.

[18:00] It's evil. Because if listening to God's word is what people really need if coming to Jesus for entry into God's kingdom is the way to eternal life then anything that hinders people from that is a disgrace is wicked.

Imagine coming to these religious leaders to learn more about your God to hear from him and then being sent away with a list of rituals to observe and know knowledge of God. It's so sad.

It's not just sad is it? That is evil. Now imagine with me in the midst of COVID-19 someone is looking for hope in the face of death perhaps that's you.

Suppose that person they come to church which should be a good place to start and they hear some hymns and prayers and the word of God read and they see emblems of the cross on the windows and the walls but when the preacher gets up he teaches a moral lesson about how to be a better person and how to earn a place in heaven by good works like attending mass or tithing 10% and reciting a couple of prayers each day.

Well he's just sent the visitor home with no idea what the cross is about and no real hope in the face of death unless he can keep the rules. It's so sad when religious leaders teach you need to try harder and be better when God is offering free and full grace in Jesus Christ with complete assurance of hope beyond death because of the cross and resurrection and none of it through works but simply by faith in Jesus.

[19:42] But more than sad that is evil when that happens and we can't use that word lightly but where bishops vickers priests church leaders pastors elders anyone teaching in any church across the country where they sideline Jesus where they hide his teaching and preaching giving it a backseat and instead promoting self-improvement and religious rituals that is evil but those people

would and will receive a severe woe to you from Jesus what they're doing is keeping people from the forgiveness they desperately need so wherever we go to church we need to ask is the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ being clearly proclaimed here does what is taught about Jesus here lead me to trust him for forgiveness and eternal life or is it about dressing up in religion and being good enough religion it's deadly it looks good but it doesn't love God it's all about impressing people it keeps people under God's judgment it loads people with burdens it silences

God's messengers and it hides God's word hindering people entering God's kingdom but what of it because not many of us who are listening in are Pharisees we may see something of ourselves in some of these woes but Jesus isn't attacking his own followers rather this is here in our Bibles because God wants us to see religion for what it really is even when it looks good trusting Jesus and his word for salvation simply receiving forgiveness and love from God can seem well it can seem weak and childish trusting a crucified king might feel foolish and listening to Jesus' word will cause us to stand out especially when it comes to the eternal realities of things like heaven and hell and things like Jesus' teaching on sex and marriage so it ends up that religion with its sophisticated rituals and grown up thinking that we can fix ourselves up and update

Jesus' ideas to fit in with the culture ends up that that is very attractive particularly when it's considered more normal and mainstream and acceptable in society we don't want to stand out so we can be tempted to keep quiet and go with the flow but to what end as we then drift from Jesus' teaching and his preaching and we sideline him in place of rules and rituals so that is a catastrophic slippery slope when the Pharisees and lawyers were on themselves now we need to see religion is deadly and rather than helping people come to God religion ends up a delusion it tries to dress us up with good deeds and leaves us thinking I'm alright actually I've been to Grace Church this week I've said the confession I'm fine for another seven days my performance it'll be good enough for God and thinking that means

I don't see my need for Jesus so however good it looks don't be drawn into religion stick with Jesus stick with the Christ well maybe some of us have been drawn in already by the lure of religion maybe maybe if that's you you need to have a rethink we need to ask does our version of Christianity come up with the goods does it lead me to trust Jesus and listen to his word or is it just a bit of dress up with church attendance and good morals if it is just dress up we may well need to repent turning away from our attempts to fix ourselves up and coming to Jesus for free and complete forgiveness well there might be some of us who are listening in not yet committed to Jesus but are asking big questions about life and faith and religion well I hope we can see it's not religion of any kind or some grand institution that we need we don't need spiritual YouTube gurus or the

Pope or to look deep inside ourselves if we're asking big questions about life and faith the best place to look is the Lord Jesus why not use these days to really examine who he says he is and what he came to do at the cross and if you want an initial glimpse of true Christian hope just listen carefully to the words of our last song at the moment well the spread of good looking moral religion is rife in our culture and in our church millions of people are walking around trusting their good works and upstanding character for safety before God but Jesus exposes the lie of religion it's deadly and it keeps people from the one thing they really need to come and sit at Jesus' feet listening to his life giving word we don't need religion what we desperately need is rescue everyone desperately needs

[ 25 : 15 ] Jesus let's pray together oh father we're sorry for the times when we want to be part of the mainstream rather than stick out for Jesus Christ I thank you for your generous and constant forgiveness one for us at the cross and it's to that we hold it's to him because there our sin has been defeated and therefore Jesus is always our plea before you the chains of rituals and religion and sin are released we can sink we're free because of Jesus and so we praise you for him our father amen