

Sermon: What's More Important?

(Life is not about what, but why!)

Text: Luke 11:37-54

Gary L. Wackler

February 14, 2010

Introduction: Jesus is shown eight times in Luke eating a meal. He is eating with friends or those interested in his ministry. Eating together in Jesus' time was normally a sign of friendship and respect. After Luke's twenty-fourth chapter, a reader feels like he is taking communion when a meal is mentioned.

As Jesus continues his walk toward Jerusalem, his popularity is on the rise with his followers and his detractors. His own death in the offing helps him crystallize his message to focus on "What's More Important." Not necessarily in a chronological order like Matthew's parallel account, Luke continues his theme of Jesus' engagement with the Jewish religious leaders. And even though Jesus is not a complainer, he has issues with the Pharisees and experts in the law. He had said:

Luke 11:34 (NIV) ³⁴Your eye is the lamp of your body. When your eyes are good, your whole body also is full of light. But when they are bad, your body also is full of darkness.

Jesus often could be found in company with the Pharisees. He had certainly eaten meals with them before. Jesus worshipped with these highly respected religious leaders. Have you ever been invited to a meeting that you knew wasn't going to go well? Jesus must have had a sense of what was going on. It was either after morning prayers or a time of worship that we hear Luke begin our story.

Luke 11:37-38 (NIV) ³⁷When Jesus had finished speaking, a Pharisee invited him to eat with him; so he went in and reclined at the table. ³⁸But the Pharisee, noticing that Jesus did not first wash before the meal, was surprised.

What was the offence here? Jesus had not washed his hands to remove the moral filth of any possible contact with spiritually unclean people. Handwashing was a man-made rule (tradition of the elders, Talmud). It was more ceremonial (**Mark 7:3-4**), certainly not part of the Mosaic Law. Yet, the Pharisees took this kind of custom very seriously.

Jesus had indicated: because the Pharisees could not see (**11:34**), they were full of darkness.

I. Jesus Complains against the Pharisees (vv. 39-44)

A. A general observation (vv. 39-41)

Luke 11:39-41 (NIV) ³⁹Then 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. ⁴⁰You foolish people! Did not the one who made the outside make the inside also? ⁴¹But give what is inside the dish to the poor, and everything will be clean for you.

When Jesus says “you Pharisees,” he is *not* generalizing like “you people.” He was addressing the group in front of him. In fact, the Pharisees were among some of Jesus’ friends and supporters. The Apostle Paul would eventually come from the ranks of the Pharisees, other followers, too, like Nicodemus, and possibly Joseph of Arimathea.

Also Jesus is not promoting poor hygiene or non-kosher kitchens, but he is more concerned about important issues. What appears kosher on the outside does not guarantee anything (Illus. LePrino Foods practice with orthodox rabbi). People can fool you, but God is never deceived.

B. A description of a Pharisee

(material taken from *The New Testament, its background, growth, and content*, by Bruce M. Metzger, pp. 40 ff.)

“The Pharisees appear first under that name during the rule of John Hyrcanus (135-105 B.C.).” Their name has traditionally been understood to mean “the separate ones.” There were, in fact, seven different groups of Pharisees because of differing views of interpretation. Sound familiar? (Kirk Havel’s comment about Lutherans).

The Pharisees were about 6000 in number in a total population of between 1.5-2.0 million. They were primarily found in Judah which would have been heavily a Jewish population. In Luke’s account, Jesus is in Galilee, a mostly Gentile population. Pharisees were generally highly regarded by the “common people” and had places of power and influence in most settings.

Pharisees believed that God was in control of history.

Pharisees believed in the immortality of the soul, and the resurrection of the body.

Pharisees allowed for the existence of angels and demons.

Pharisees had a very high-view of O.T. Scriptures, but also all the oral tradition that had accumulated over the centuries.

“In most religions there is an ever-present tendency to regard outward formalism as more important than inward disposition of the heart.” - Metzger, p. 41

We see and hear it with our friends who are *nominally* Roman Catholic. After a weekend of drinking and carousing, “As long as I make it to mass and occasionally see the priest for confession, I’m good.” Holiness groups that promote stringent rules about dress, makeup, jewelry, listening to music and video may have just as many unwed mothers as the liberal churches. Charismatics claim to be closer to God because of their special kind of involvement with the Holy Spirit, yet their members seem to fare little better than the general population when it comes to sinning. Our churches, the Christian Churches/Churches of Christ have “members” who are baptized (and by immersion as we insist is the only N.T. method), never to be seen again. I tell them that baptism is not the only thing. I even hear people talk about communion as if it were some magical meal for the forgiveness of sin. We do need to observe and practice certain religious acts as followers of Jesus, but if our hearts are disengaged then we are no better than the Pharisees about whom Jesus complained.

For the most part, one would say that the Pharisees were a very orthodox, Bible-believing group. So what’s the problem? While theologically Jesus and the Pharisees had much in common, practically; they were poles apart. It is not that the Pharisees taught wrongly, but they acted (wickedly) without having God’s heart for others.

So, Jesus provides:

C. A judgment against their blindness (vv. 42-44)

God is concerned with inside and outside. This first woe is about hypocrisy and goes to a person’s real character. Whatever we do ought to point out the justice and love of God.

Luke 11:42 (NIV) ⁴²“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.

The Pharisees could give one-tenth of even the least common of herbs they used in their food, and then some would neglect their obligation to parents and family claiming they could not meet their obligation to God if they helped others.

The second rebuke speaks to out-of-control pride that eventually leads to a lack of desire to serve others.

⁴³“Woe to you Pharisees, because you love the most important seats in the synagogues and greetings in the marketplaces.

Some Pharisees went to synagogue not to worship, but to be noticed and applauded for their apparent righteousness.

They would claim the “chief seats” for themselves. “This was a semi-circular bench around the ark and faced the congregation (Plummer) - Rienecker, p. 175
Worship is about *God* being seen, not us!

The last warning given to the Pharisees calls them “conductors of spiritual uncleanness.” Claiming to be leaders in holiness they cause their own followers to be contaminated by this false purity.

44“Woe to you, because you are like unmarked graves, which men walk over without knowing it.”

All these rules and laws about avoiding contamination, and it was the Pharisees who were contributing to the death of their own people. That was true spiritually, and would even be played out in physical ways in A.D. 70 with the destruction of Jerusalem. Judaism has never been the same. And until the Jews turn to Jesus they will continue to be unclean.

The reason Jesus was so hard on the Pharisees is they claimed to be Gatekeepers for the kingdom - Protectors of the Word of God. And here they were obstacles for Jesus, for the people, and ultimately for themselves.

There is nothing quite so dangerous as a hypocrite. He fools himself and he blocks others from understanding what it means to follow God. “Legalism is like carbon dioxide suffocation, it kills slowly and sometimes very subtly.” - Bock, *Luke*, p. 335

So that no one would feel left out:

II. Jesus Complains against the Experts (vv. 45-52)

Luke 11:45 (NIV) ⁴⁵One of the experts in the law answered him, “Teacher, when you say these things, you insult us also.”

A. A distinction for the experts in the law

There are different terms used for what the NIV calls “experts in the law.” They are sometimes called scribes, teachers of the law, or lawyers. Not always, but many times these “experts” in the Mosaic law were Pharisees. They were who the “common people” had explain the Scriptures to them. They were even called “rabbi” which literally means “my great one.” Other names were teacher and master. One can readily see how ego might be a problem, and how they might forget the purpose of worship.

The experts in the law had been responsible for expanding and interpreting the Ten Commandments. They had counted a total of 613 commandments, 248 being positive and 365, negative. It was their self-appointed job to make clear all the possibilities of keeping or breaking the law.

(material taken from *The New Testament, its background, growth, and content*, by Bruce M. Metzger, pp. 47 ff.) “In the course of the centuries it was decided that one might be allowed to walk through a grain field on the sabbath when the grain was ankle-high, but not if it were knee-high; for then one’s legs would strike the ripened seeds of the grain, and, by such action, one would thresh some of the grain.

Again, a poultice might be placed on a boil on the sabbath in order to prevent it from becoming worse, but not in order to promote its healing. If a cotton wadding which was worn in one’s ear happened to fall out on the sabbath, it might not be replaced, for this was judged to constitute lifting a burden. Even certain actions, not unlawful in themselves were forbidden on the sabbath lest they should become the occasion of actions deemed to be labor. Thus a woman was forbidden to look in a mirror on the sabbath lest perchance she see a grey hair and be tempted to pluck it out, which would involve ‘working.’”

The scribes, as they were called, also taught the law to as many Israelites as they were able. Some of the more renown experts in the law would have their own disciples. Because most people could not read, teaching was done through verbal repetition and committed to memory. The difference between Jesus and these scribes was Jesus taught with a different kind of authority (amen, amen; but I say to you...).

The other activity of these experts was applying the law, making their own pronouncements. There were liberal and conservative schools that followed the teaching of various rabbis. “The technical term used of rabbis when issuing authoritative decisions was ‘binding’ or ‘loosing;’ ‘to bind’ was to declare an action unlawful, and ‘to loose’ was to declare it lawful.” On the issue of divorce, some rabbis would allow it for burning the matza ball soup while others only for infidelity.

Jesus continues his appraisal of these experts in the law by issuing:

B. A judgment against their failures (vv. 46-52)

Luke 11:46 (NIV) ⁴⁶Jesus replied, “And you experts in the law, woe to you, because you load people down with burdens they can hardly carry, and you yourselves will not lift one finger to help them.

Our faith is never to be a drudgery or a heavy obligation that contains no joy. And those who would make it so - just don’t get it. The reason Luke shares this story with us must have something to do with the Church’s falling into the same traps of “organized” religion. No one is saying throw out all the rules. What Luke is trying to tell us is that our walk with God is about relationship and our heart’s condition. For the people we truly love, there is no call for a list of rules for how we should treat them. It should work that way in church.

Secondly Jesus says, ⁴⁷“Woe to you, because you build tombs for the prophets, and it was your forefathers who killed them. ⁴⁸So you testify that you approve of what your forefathers did; they killed the prophets, and you build their tombs. ⁴⁹Because 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.’ ⁵⁰Therefore this generation will be held responsible for the blood of all the prophets that has been shed since the beginning of the world, ⁵¹from 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.

Some things never change. Man still likes to be more important than anyone. Jesus is telling the experts they are no different than their relatives who had killed the prophets sent from God. Very quickly they will be involved in the same activity. And anyone who stands with Jesus will be under threat of the same treatment.

And finally Jesus says: ⁵²“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.”

It is important to believe in what you teach. That will provide confidence and conviction. If you do not believe what you are teaching, STOP! It is infinitely more important, though, that you are teaching the truth about God and Jesus.

There are too many experts today telling others about God.

There is the person who is deep in sin telling others there is no penalty for wickedness.

There is the person who has never read/studied the Bible telling others what it says.

There are unregenerate people telling each generation that there is no such thing as God or objective truth.

If you want to find your way to God, look for someone who truly knows Him. But at the end of the day, it is not how we match up to others that counts, but how we compare to God. We can only be righteous with his help.

Conclusion: I believe that certain commands of God are completely clear, yet we still need to be careful whom we call a sinner and what we define as sin. Also whenever you complain about someone else’s walk with God, there is a real danger that your remarks will not be received well (vv. 53-54), still, some issues must be addressed.

Luke 11:53-54 (NIV) ⁵³When Jesus left there, the Pharisees and the teachers of the law began to oppose him fiercely and to besiege him with questions, ⁵⁴waiting to catch him in something he might say.

Jesus was right in everything he said. The religious leaders plotted his death because he pointed out their sin. They also killed Jesus because he showed them God, and they just could not see it!

When a person is presented with the truth of God's word, he has but two choices: he will either believe and repent or resent the challenge and reject what could save him.

If the Word of God says you have a problem, then it must be corrected. All through life there will always be a question of: "What's More Important?"

Whatever it takes, we must do what God wants.