

June 2, 2019
Sunday Morning Service
Series: Luke
Community Baptist Church
643 S. Suber Road
Greer, SC 29650
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To Ponder . . .

Questions to ponder as we prepare to hear from Luke 11:37-54.

1. Would you be concerned if Jesus pronounced a woe on you?
2. Why would Jesus do that?
3. Why would a Pharisee invite Jesus to dinner, and why did He go?
4. Why didn't Jesus wash His hands, and what difference did it make?
5. Is it possible that we could be as guilty as the Pharisees who Jesus condemned?
6. What is one of your chief "religious" preferences, and why do you hold it?

WOE BE UNTO YOU!
Luke 11:37-54

The title of the sermon is similar to the Old English phrase that is seldom heard anymore, "Woe betide you." It comes from the Early Modern English period, and loosely translating into modern-day English means "May woe rise up against you." The phrase was used in past times to decry a person's actions. Maybe your grandmother in

the 1960's might have said, "Woe betide you if I catch you snitching cookies before dinner again."

In a similar way "Woe be unto you" is an ancient phrase that we seldom hear but which carries plenty of meaning if an authority utters it sincerely. It is definitely a rebuke.

Now try to imagine how you would feel if Jesus, God the Son, the eternal Judge and Savior from sin, leveled the words against you repeatedly and quite seriously. I cannot think of anything that would be more frightening. But there is no concern about those words from our part of the Master's Vineyard. We're okay. It's the Pharisees and Lawyers who were in trouble, and rightly so. They were such horrible, awful people. Really? Quite frankly, I picture Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea as being pretty good guys, who highly respected Jesus, and even put themselves at risk to demonstrate care for Him. They were Pharisees and members of the Sanhedrin, the council that ultimately condemned Jesus to death.

Actually, it seems like the Pharisees and Lawyers would compare quite closely to some of the most serious, devout, professing Christians we know. They were esteemed by the general populace to be the most godly, religious people in society. Most people would have concluded that those men, of all people, were on their way to heaven. But because of 20/20 hindsight, we know that the guys were a bunch of hypocrites. Be that as it may, we probably would not have had that knowledge had we lived with them and not heard Jesus expose them.

That being true, we need to realize that Jesus pronounced woes on some very religious people who in many ways would compare to conservative, Bible-believing, church-going, Fundamentalist-kind-of people who believe they can appease God's wrath through their legalism. These Pharisees would be like some of the most devout members of dead, orthodox churches who are trying to earn their way into heaven by their good works.

Some of those folks are the kindness, nicest people I know. But they are also some of the most pernicious enemies of the pure gospel. Attempting to appease God by our good works will necessarily, at some point, render us gross hypocrites. We cannot be consistent in our rule-keeping because human flesh is inconsistent by nature. Thus, we become hypocrites who keep our rules and criticize anyone and

everyone who doesn't try to live just like we do. Far better for us to continually resort to the grace of God offered in the gospel and thank God for being merciful to us sinners. Far better for us to depend on Christ alone to make us righteous like He is.

A Sticky Situation (vv.37-41).

A Pharisee invited Jesus to come to dinner. *While Jesus was speaking, a Pharisee asked him to dine with him, so he went in and reclined at table (v.37).* This invitation and Jesus' response falls within the context of a lengthy argument between Jesus and the religious leaders of Israel. They accused Him of casting out a demon by the power of Satan. Jesus explained that they had come face to face with the power of God in the kingdom of God which was in their presence because He, the king, was in their presence. Then Jesus warned the religious leaders that they would be condemned on judgment day by the faith of the Queen of Sheba and the people of Nineveh.

It was in that context that a Pharisee invited Jesus to dinner. The invitation might seem a bit odd in light of the tense conversation. Why did the Pharisee do that? It is very likely the man desired an opportunity to grill Jesus or trap Him in His words. Nevertheless, Jesus accepted the invitation. The narrative that follows illustrates how we should interact with unbelievers. We need to be in their presence. We can do that by buying up opportunities for lunch, coffee, activities, social events, and other such meetings. However, learn from Jesus that we should not leave our opportunities without pressing toward the good news of the gospel. If our only goal is to be a friend to a sinner, we fail miserably. As they stand before the great judgment seat of Christ, they will wonder what kind of friend you were to never warn them about the consequences of their sins.

Jesus went to the Pharisee's house for dinner, but He didn't follow the acceptable custom. *The Pharisee was astonished to see that he did not first wash before dinner (v.38).* The Pharisee was astonished to see that Jesus did not participate in ceremonial hand washing. This was not the same as your mother telling you to wash your hands before dinner for hygienic reasons. Rather, the Pharisees required an elaborate process which illustrated a cleansing from all

the potential defilement of the world. The ceremony did not make a person cleaner spiritually, though that was the intent. The Pharisee still came to the meal with a heart that was full of defiling sins.

It appears that Jesus intentionally neglected the meaningless outward tradition. The Pharisee was aghast that Jesus didn't do the religiously acceptable thing. He was as astonished as we would be to see a mechanic who had just been working under a car, walk up to the First Lady in his greasy coveralls, and put his arm around her shoulder, leaving greasy hand prints on her beautiful white dress. We would be shocked—like the Pharisee was.

One of the most difficult lessons for us to learn is how to distinguish between the laws and principles of God's Word and our personal preferences. I have preferences in a lot of areas of life. Some of them are based on lessons that were drummed into my head by superiors who held these preferences before I did. But when my superiors were drumming the lessons into my head, they forgot to tell me they were preferences, not Bible doctrine. Insisting that everyone practice preferences like these are the reason and cause for much division in the Body of Christ today. There are plenty of offenses in the world of religion today. But when we take offense, we need to make sure it is because of something Jesus calls offensive, not because of our deep-seated opinions. We are too easily like the Pharisee who was shocked when the "religious teacher" Jesus didn't do what was acceptable in his circles.

In response to the hypocrite's shock, the Lord said, "You guys are foolish." (vv.39-41) *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" (v.39).* As far as the text reveals, the Pharisee didn't say anything about Jesus' unacceptable actions. He didn't need to because his response was obvious. That Jesus' action was very unacceptable was written all over the guy's face.

Jesus responded to the man's shock by explaining how the Pharisees were only concerned with the outside of the cup. They engaged in all kinds of ceremonies and traditions that applied to the outward, seeable aspect of their lives. But they were not at all concerned with the dirt, filth, and sin on the inside of their hearts. Many of you remember George Mulfinger. Several years ago his

office mate told me the story about the day he was going to get some coffee. He said, “George, do you want me to get you a cup of coffee?” George said, “Yes” and handed Jim his cup. Jim looked in the cup and said, “George, the inside of this cup sure is dirty.” To which George replied in his typical dry humor, “What harm can a little residue?”

That is how hypocrites respond to the dirt of sin they know is in their own hearts. The general, overall failure of the Pharisees and Lawyers was their concern for outward appearances. Alms giving and religious expressions like public prayer were really important to them. Dressing the right way in ostentatious robes to catch the attention of others was crucial to them. All this outward show was hypocrisy.

In their pride and self-righteousness, the Pharisees ignore a very important principle. *You fools! Did not he who made the outside make the inside also? But give as alms those things that are within, and behold, everything is clean for you (vv.40-41)*. Jesus’ address to his host was as shocking as His failure to do the acceptable tradition. Holy God made the outside of us which the hypocrites were careful to adorn appropriately and care for. But the same Holy God made the inside, our eternal spirits, which God requires to be maintained in the righteousness that is beyond ourselves by faith in Christ.

A Stinging Accusation (vv.42-57).

Woe to Pharisees (vv.42-44). The Pharisees illustrated how hypocrites get hung up on details while ignoring important principles of godliness. *“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” (v.42)*. They were very concerned about little, insignificant details that really didn’t matter. Jesus taught us that it is good to be concerned about tithing, but not to the neglect of the important issues. Tithing was supposed to be an expression of love for God. Justice is an expression of love for others. We must do both.

The second “woe” indicates how hypocrites love attention for their accomplishments. *“Woe to you Pharisees! For you love the best seat in the synagogues and greetings in the marketplaces” (v.43)*. The

hypocrites did not show genuine love for God or for others because they loved themselves. Calling attention to yourself, even in ministry, is a pretty good indication of who you really love.

Third, hypocrites infect innocent people with their hypocrisy. Jesus pronounced, *“Woe to you! For you are like unmarked graves, and people walk over them without knowing it” (v.44)*. This statement stems from the Old Testament law that required that if anyone touched a tomb or grave, either intentionally or accidentally, they were rendered ceremonially unclean for a week (Numbers 19:11-22). Therefore, to prevent the problem, the Jews required that graves be clearly marked and tombs be whitewashed so that passersby could identify them.

Jesus pronounced woe on the Pharisees for causing people to fall into the sin of their own self-righteousness. For Jesus to pronounce “Woe” is a serious warning. Too many folks will figure this out too late. Some well meaning, very devout keepers of traditions and preferences will be shocked to find themselves standing before Christ’s great white throne of judgment and learning that they are not even getting into heaven in spite of all their good works (Matthew 7:21-23).

Other genuine Christians will be shocked to get to heaven and find people all around them praising God in perfection, who they were sure never praised God correctly on earth. Just because a person does not adhere to our preferences is not an indication they are not born again.

But Jesus wasn’t finished with His woe pronouncing. Jesus also pronounced woe to lawyers (vv.45-52) when one of the lawyers who was apparently at the meal expressed umbrage. *One of the lawyers answered him, “Teacher, in saying these things you insult us also” (v.45)*. Lawyers were generally identified also as scribes. They were typically, though not always, members of the Pharisee party. They were experts in the interpretation and application of the Mosaic law and especially experts in the laws of the Rabbis. They had developed the whole legal system to which the Pharisees adhered. That is why the lawyers took Jesus’ pronouncement of woes on the Pharisees as an insult to themselves.

In response to the lawyer’s complaint, Jesus issued warnings as severe as what He had leveled against the Pharisees. He told the guy

that the legalists make life unnecessarily difficult. *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" (v.46).* In all their concern to "do what pleases God," the experts in law made it more impossible to please God. In the first place, even trying to keep God's law He gave through Moses cannot make a person right with God. The purpose of the law is to reveal that we need the Savior's sacrifice to cover our sins and make us righteous. The law is a continual reminder that we depend on God's grace every day. The law draws us back to God every day where we confess our sins and are cleansed by Christ's blood.

They lawyers didn't get this principle about the purpose of law. Therefore, they demonstrated the foolishness of human self-righteousness and pride. Their laws for keeping God's law were extreme. They could not do anything to help the poor people who struggled under their rules. Even they could not keep the rules they made.

Consider how absurd their laws were from one example about carrying burdens on the Sabbath. "On the sabbath, they taught, a man may not carry a burden 'in his right hand or in his left hand, in his bosom, or on his shoulder.' But he may carry it 'on the back of his hand, or with his foot or with his mouth or with his elbow, or in his ear or in his hair or in his wallet carried mouth downwards, or between his wallet and his shirt, or in the hem of his shirt, or in his shoe or in his sandal'" (*Shabbat 10:3*) (Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Luke*, The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975, p.205)

I am working on a study for my men's Bible study regarding the doctrine of baptism for the dead, which is taught by most of the groups affiliated with the line of ancient Roman and Greek churches. There is little difference between the foolish conclusions of those church fathers and that of the lawyers. No one with a shred of Bible knowledge and understanding would submit to such manmade requirements.

Furthermore, Jesus pointed out that the lawyers were guilty of persecuting God's messengers. They honored dead preachers. "*Woe to you! For you build the tombs of the prophets whom your fathers killed" (v.47).* Instead of being indwelt by the Spirit of God to honor

God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, they honored dead saints. And yet even as they built shrines to the dead saints, they hypocritically ignored the fact that their fathers killed God's servants. But they refused to acknowledge who killed the preachers. Jesus pointed out, "*So you are witnesses and you consent to the deeds of your fathers, for they killed them, and you build their tombs" (v.48).*

The problem was that the hypocrites claimed they were different than their fathers. "*Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you build the tombs of the prophets and decorate the monuments of the righteous, saying, 'If we had lived in the days of our fathers, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets'" (Matthew 23:29-30).* But Jesus knew their hearts. Jesus knew those very people would press for His own death.

The Pharisees and lawyers were guilty by association. "*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 foundation 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" (vv.49-51).*

In wisdom, God foretold that those very people with whom Jesus was arguing would persecute and kill prophets and apostles. They would ultimately kill the Greatest Prophet, the Christ whom God sent to them. They, therefore, would be so wicked that God would hold them responsible for the blood of all of His martyred servants. And many false religionists have followed in their train. How many innocent servants of the Lord were persecuted and put to death by organized religion during the Reformation?

Third, the hypocritical lawyer-kind-of-people distort the truth. "*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" (v.52).* Though people like this seem to be devout, knowledgeable, and deeply religious, they are devoid of spiritual truth. Because they are devoid of spiritual truth, they cannot teach it. They substitute their own teaching for spiritual truth which robs their listeners of the key of knowledge. False religionists cannot draw a person to know God. False religion places a barrier between God and

those who would seek Him. Jesus pulled back the current of deceit for all the world to see what the religious leaders were really like.

An Incorrect Response (vv.53-54).

The hypocrites responded in exactly the wrong way. Instead of repenting of their sins, they provoked Jesus. *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 (v.53).* Picture Jesus leaving a very uncomfortable meal. As He did, the hypocrites pressed the offensive. Thereafter, they asked Jesus questions about many different things. Obviously, the topic was religion and their laws. This was not genuine interest but a hostile attack.

Instead of trying to trap Jesus, the hypocrites should have repented. They should have done the very thing John had called on them to do a couple of years earlier when they went out to see him preaching in the wilderness. They should have responded in repentance as Jesus had invited them to do so many times. The kingdom of heaven had come to them and they needed to repent. But it appears that repentance and confession of sin was the furthest thing from their minds. Such is the case for all religious hypocrites. Only the miracle of God's grace can interrupt a false teacher's bent toward error, causing him or her to confess sin.

Instead of acknowledging the problem, the religious leaders became even more deceptive. They were *lying in wait for him, to catch him in something he might say (v.54).* The brilliant thinkers attempted to trap the Savior. They acted like hunters who laid a trap and then sat in the bushes waiting for Jesus to walk into the trap. Self-righteous people still do the same kind of deception. Obviously, it is the nature of false teachers to be completely ignorant about who Jesus was.

The sad reality is that as they reject Jesus, hypocrites reject the One they needed most. While claiming to be wise, they proved they were the greatest of fools. God's law (which they claimed to honor) condemned them. Their own laws condemned them. But they saw themselves as righteous, needing no Savior from sin.

The problem still exists. Trying to appease God through good works is the greatest of lies from Satan the father of lies. The vast

majority of religious people who have ever lived and who are alive now, believe they can win atonement for their sins through their good works. They are blind enemies of Christ who they might call, "The greatest man who ever lived," or "One of the greatest prophets." But only when God's grace overwhelms the sinner can he or she embrace Jesus Christ as their only Savior from sin, their only hope for eternal life. Thank God if you know that! Thank God for delivering you from the darkness of self-righteousness.