

“Be on Guard”

August 9, 2020

Luke 11:37-54

I. Introduction

By this time in Christ’s ministry, the religious leaders were ready to do just about anything to get rid of Him. This hatred would continue to fester and grow until the Jewish leadership would eventually coerce Pilate into having the Roman government crucify Jesus of Nazareth. Trying to find some reason—any reason to accuse Jesus and to cause Him to lose favor in the people’s eyes, “a Pharisee invited him to eat with him.”

The Pharisees and the experts in the law or lawyers, were not the majority in the ruling council of Judaism—the Sadducees were. While the Sadducees basically followed the Torah, the 1st five books of the Old Testament, the Pharisees, used the entire Old Testament to develop an extensive tradition of oral law, applying it to every area of life. This made them the strictest of the Jewish religious sects. Their name comes from a Hebrew word that means “to separate.” They viewed themselves as separated from and superior to everyone else because of their unmatched zeal for the Mosaic law and the rabbinic traditions. Although there were only about 6000 Pharisees during Christ’s time, they exerted a powerful influence on Judaism and the Jewish council. The experts in the law—the lawyers or scribes were scholars who tried to determine what following the law meant.

In today’s Scripture, Jesus condemned the false spiritual leaders of Israel. He was angry about the sins of the leaders and what they were doing to the people. Although He was more than a “little upset,” He didn’t lose His temper and become “out-of-control” angry—lose His cool, so to speak. But as well as being angry, He was also sad. As 2 Peter 3:9 says, He doesn’t “want anyone to perish.” This is seen in the word “woe.” Woe is used to show sorrow as well as wrath or judgment; pain as well as anger. Jesus knew that if they didn’t repent and believe then these leaders and their followers—no matter how sincere they were—would spend eternity in hell. Since they ignored the judgment that awaited them as they lived in their own, man-made religion, Jesus tried to get their attention with 7 different rebukes.

II. The Scene

Luke set the scene: when Jesus “went in and reclined at the table, the Pharisee, noticing that Jesus did not first wash before the meal, was surprised.” Jesus was eating with Pharisees. The shock wasn’t that Jesus’ hands were physically dirty, but that He had not performed the ceremonial washing to make them ceremonially clean. The Pharisee was amazed that Jesus ignored the tradition and since he was the host, he no doubt felt insulted. But Jesus refused to affirm man-made regulations that had nothing to do with the commandments of God. Knowing what his host was thinking, Jesus responded with 4 different rebukes or warnings.

III. Warnings to the Pharisees

A. First: You are clean on the outside but filthy inside. The basic error of the Pharisees was thinking that righteousness was only a matter of external actions, but Jesus said, “inside you are full of greed and wickedness.” The point was that despite their outward devotion to ritual, ceremony, and tradition, on the inside they were full of sin and evil. They were clean on the outside but filthy inside. In [Matthew 23:27](#) Jesus put it this way, “You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men’s bones and everything unclean.”

Jesus’ words, “Did not the one who made the outside make the inside also?” was a rebuke to the Pharisees. To think that God would only be concerned about their keeping of external rituals and not about their hearts was the height of foolishness. [1 Samuel 16:7](#) says, “But the LORD said to Samuel, ‘Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The LORD does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.’” [Turn to Micah 6:6-8.](#) These are things the Pharisees should have known, and they were foolish to ignore them.

The Pharisees boasted of their giving—in the Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector in [Luke 18:10-14](#), the Pharisee prayed, “I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.” But they did not give “what was inside” to the Lord. Jesus said the way to make the outside pure was to make the inside pure.

Jesus' words to the rich young ruler in [Matthew 19:21](#) say the same thing, “**If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.**” Their shallow, self-serving perspective kept them from focusing on what was in their hearts.

B. You have wrong priorities. Jesus went on to pronounce judgment on their foolish, sinful, simplistic approach to spiritual truth. The first judgment or woe was that the Pharisees have wrong priorities. They were careful about tithing even the tiny leaves and seeds from the herbs, but they ignored more important things like justice and love. They focused on the minute details of their manmade regulations but failed to obey the Law's two great commands; to love God and their neighbors. Jesus didn't say that they should stop tithing, but that they should put their religious activities into proper perspective. You have wrong priorities.

C. You are full of pride. Jesus then said, “You are full of pride:” “**You love the most important seats in the synagogues and greetings in the marketplace.**” The attitude of the Pharisees was the direct opposite of true spiritual leadership. Jesus taught His followers that humble service, not demanding pride, is the mark of true spiritual leaders—[turn to Matthew 23:8-12](#). The Pharisees were driven by desire for status. They put reputation above character. They thought that sitting in the right seats and being acknowledged by the right people would make them spiritual. Reputation is what people think we are; character is what God knows we are. Their character was questionable; they had wrong priorities and they were full of pride. Jesus then said:

D. You defile everyone. Despite the appearance of holiness and righteousness, Jesus compared them to “**unmarked graves which men walk over without knowing it.**” You defile everyone. The Old Testament prohibited touching a corpse or a grave ([Numbers 19:11-22](#)) and those who did so became ceremonially unclean, so Jews made sure that graves were carefully marked. But the Pharisees were like unmarked graves that did not look like graves at all. They were defiling the unsuspecting souls of those who came into contact with them with their false teachings.

IV. Warnings to the Experts in the Law and the Pharisees

A. You create impossible burdens. Someone at the table came to the Pharisees' defense, “**One of the experts in the law answered him, "Teacher, when you say these things, you insult us also."**” Lawyers were

experts in the interpretation and application of the Mosaic and rabbinic law. They were usually Pharisees. Since they developed the religious system the Pharisees practiced, to insult the Pharisees was to insult them as well.

In response to the lawyer's protest over the insults, Jesus pronounced 3 more woes or judgments on them—although they applied to the Pharisees as well. First, Jesus said, "You have created impossible burdens." All of their interpretations and traditions did nothing to relieve the sin-burdened hearts of the people. The Law itself did nothing to reduce people's burdens—**Romans 8:20** says, **"Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by the works of the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin."** By adding more burdens to God's law, the experts in the law just made things worse.

The lawyers weren't interested in helping those who were burdened in any way. The experts in the law had no mercy, grace, or power to offer the common people, while they themselves hopelessly struggled under the crushing burden that they had imposed on themselves as well as on the people. They just continued to create more problems for the people who already had problems enough. Only Jesus has the answer for those burdened with sin—**turn to Matthew 11:28-30**—Jesus came to bring rest not impossible burdens.

B. Jesus then said, **"You are only pretending to honor the prophets."** As they decorated the tombs and graves of the prophets and the righteous, the scribes and Pharisees would boast that they were far above their ancestors who had killed them. They would honor these martyrs with great ceremonies. But they only pretended to honor the prophets. Jesus exposed them as hypocrites when He said, **"You testify that you approve of what your ancestors did; they killed the prophets, and you build their tombs."** In spite of their claim to be different than their ancestors, they had the same rejection of spiritual truth as did their forefathers.

The future actions of these so-called religious leaders would prove the truth of Jesus' statement that they were no better than their fathers. He said, **"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.'" The prophets and**

apostles they would kill and persecute were the New Testament apostles and prophets; John the Baptist ([Matthew 14:1-11](#)), Stephen ([Acts 7:58-60](#)), the apostle James, the brother of John ([Acts 12:1-2](#)) were killed, while Peter and John ([Acts 4:1-3](#)), all the Apostles ([Acts 5:18-41](#)), and others ([Acts 8:1](#)) were persecuted. However, their ultimate crime would be the crucifixion of the Son of God, Jesus Christ, their Messiah and the Prophet of prophets.

Jesus declared that **“this generation will be held responsible for it all.”** They had the teaching of the prophets in the Old Testament, they had heard John the Baptist, the 12 Apostles, the 72 evangelists, and most importantly they had had the privilege of hearing the truths of heaven taught by the Son of God. They had seen His power over demons, disease, death, and nature in many undeniable ways and yet they rejected Him. Jesus talked about the coming judgment of the pretenders, [turn to Luke 19:41-44](#).

C. You have shut the door. Finally, Jesus said, **“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.”** [Matthew 23:13](#) puts it this way, **“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You shut the door of the kingdom of heaven in people's faces. You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to.”** You have shut the door. You have shut the door to the kingdom of heaven so that even those trying to get in cannot. It was bad enough that the spiritual leaders kept themselves out of heaven, but worse because they stood in the way of others.

They took away the **“key of knowledge”** by misinterpreting the Word of God, by denying the Messiah, by denying the need for repentance and the gospel of grace, By teaching man-made traditions and laws—a religion of works for righteousness—they closed the door—they shut the door to salvation for all who listened to them.

D. The Response Sadly, the Pharisees and experts in the law didn't listen to Jesus warnings. Instead of repenting of their sins and recognizing their false religion, **“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.”** They looked for a way to kill Him.

V. Conclusion

It's easy to sit back and point fingers at the Pharisees and the Jewish society, but are we any different? In our culture there are ideas like: "There are no absolutes; we must welcome all people and judge no one; God is a God of love; Jesus was a good teacher; His example of meekness and humility should be copied by everyone." Such ideas have crept into churches who now preach things like: *Christians shouldn't force their beliefs on others; all one has to do is be sincere. Christians should be accepting of all people, beliefs, and lifestyles. Christians should love everyone and everything they do. Christians should be leaders in compromise and shouldn't cause dissensions.*

Some people and, I'm afraid, even some preachers—like the Pharisees of Jesus' day—have turned their own prejudices into universal principals and substitute their own ideas for the truth of God. Such attitudes ignore much of the Bible. God is a God of love, but He is also a God of wrath and justice. In **Romans 12:19** Paul writes, "Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord." Jesus may have been a model of meekness and humility, but He also didn't accept compromise. That's what we see in today's Scripture. That's what we see as He drove the moneychangers and animal sellers out of the Temple (**Luke 19:45**).

God has given teachers and preachers to His church (**Ephesians 4:11**) and we should listen to them. But we should also test what we hear by Scripture to make sure they are teaching the truth—**turn to 1 Thessalonians 5:19-22**. We must be on guard against false teachers who pretend to be moral, love God, and teach truth, yet in reality are prideful, sinful, concerned about appearances but do little or nothing about one's inner soul. To be able to test, you need to know God's Word—you need to study it, even memorize it so that you are always ready.

Finally, we must also guard ourselves. It is so easy to become a Pharisee or hypocrite. Again, you need to know God's Word so that the things you say and do and even think and dwell on are God's truth not some contrived "human or man-made truth." Let me close with these words from **2 Timothy 2:15**: "Do your

best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth.” Be on guard!