

**Luke 11:37-54**  
**Woes to the Pharisees and Scribes**

There is no virtue in being religious. Just because a person has some kind of faith, it does not mean they are spiritually sound. Just because a person leads a good, moral, upstanding life, does not mean they are saved. It is not a matter of being religious, that is, attending services, saying the right things, and doing the right things that saves. It is a matter of faith in Jesus Christ and His atoning sacrifice. Religion and faith are different things.

For example, the people described in Romans 1 were religious. Paul wrote that “<sup>22</sup>professing to be wise, they became fools, <sup>23</sup>and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures” (Romans 1:22-23). They had religion. Yet since it was not true, saving faith, “God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, so that their bodies would be dishonored among them” (Romans 1:24). As Jesus taught in another context we ought to seek to “<sup>13</sup>enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who enter through it. <sup>14</sup>For the gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life, and there are few who find it” (Matthew 7:13-14).

The closer Jesus got to the end of His earthly ministry, the more intense His conversations with His adversaries became. He no longer preached to the masses, but rather disciplined His closest followers. As His popularity with the crowds increased, so did the animosity of the various Jewish sects who opposed Him. The greater Jesus became, the more intense the opposition became.

The confrontations increased in both intensity and number because, while Jesus often spoke of love and healing, and performed miracles to attest to His compassion for others, He never omitted an opportunity to address issues of sin. The truth Jesus proclaimed included both the promise of blessing and the punishment of evil. With those who twisted the truth. He was most direct. Jesus understood that the greatest challenge to the kingdom of God came not from without but from within. He knew that those who seemed the most religious were those most likely to lead people astray. Those who appeared the best on the outside were the most corrupt within.

This passage is similar to another recorded in Matthew’s account of the life of Jesus.

Quick comparison with Matthew 23

<u>Luke 11:37-54</u>	<u>Matthew 23:13-36</u>
Six woes	Eight woes
Done in a home	Said in the temple
Addressed to Pharisees and scribes	Addressed to the crowds but directed to Pharisees and scribes

**An Invitation**

It seems that this event occurred immediately after Jesus finished speaking to the crowds following His healing of a demon-possessed person. Because of that miracle, He had been challenged as an ally of Satan. Jesus responded both with logic and a challenge. The conversation had been direct and unmistakable. Though He had been praised by a woman in the crowd, the Jewish leaders had been less impressed. Nevertheless, one of them invited Jesus to dinner.

“A Pharisee asked Him to have lunch with him” (v. 37) Luke records. Despite the tension, Jesus was offered a meal, and perhaps even more surprisingly, He accepted and “went in, and reclined at the table” (v. 37). This was probably the earlier of the two main meals eaten during the day, and in this culture, to eat with someone implied a relationship. It is important to note the uncomfortable relationship Jesus had with the Pharisees did not preclude Him from accepting the invitation. Scripture does not reveal why the invitation was offered. Giving the man the benefit of the doubt, we can suggest that the invitation was given perhaps to find out more about this rabbi, perhaps there was genuine curiosity. He certainly must have had some good reason because Pharisees did not eat with sinners. We do know, however, why the invitation was accepted. Jesus had something to say.

We can pause here to learn that Jesus was willing to go into the company of unbelievers. We should follow His example in this. We must remember that we are not called to either monasticism or incivility. We are here for a purpose. It does not further the kingdom of God to be discourteous. We must be willing to associate, when appropriate, with unbelievers. But we must never be lured into participation in their sin. We must rely upon the Holy Spirit to guide us and fill us to be witnesses in every encounter we have. We can share the kingdom of God as well in a living room as in a pulpit.

### **The Confrontation**

As a quick review, the Pharisees were one of four main Jewish religious sects in Palestine at the time of the Roman occupation. During the intertestamental period, when Roman soldiers conquered the area, there had been different forms of response to the new rulers. Some, like the Sadducees tried cooperation. These were usually the more wealth and elite, and held high priestly offices. They thought they could maintain their position by working with Rome. At the other extreme were the zealots. These people were revolutionaries. They fought back against Rome, and wanted an independent Jewish state free from Roman domination. Another group, the Essenes, sought retirement in the desert and withdrew from interaction with Rome. They believed their own purity and ‘separateness’ provided the best response. Their community at Qumran gave history the Dead Sea scrolls.

Finally, the Pharisees attempted to maintain Jewish identity by a reliance on the strict keeping of the Law. Beginning as a group who opposed the Hellenization of Judaism during the reign of Antiochus Epiphanes (c.215-164 BC), their number grew to about 6,000 at the time of Jesus. Not as wealthy or politically connected as the Sadducees, they were popular with the people and had great influence in the Sanhedrin.

In the home of the Pharisee, the guests had arrived, the low table was set, and the guests reclined around it. As Jesus began to eat, though, there was a problem, for “when the Pharisee saw it, he was surprised that He had not first ceremonially washed before the meal” (v. 38). The point was not hygiene. This

issue was entirely ceremonial. As Mark elaborates on this in his account, the concern was that a Jew may have touched something a Gentile had previously held, “<sup>3</sup>(for the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they carefully wash their hands, thus observing the traditions of the elders; <sup>4</sup>and when they come from the market place, they do not eat unless they cleanse themselves; and there are many other things which they have received in order to observe, such as the washing of cups and pitchers and copper pots)” (Mark 7:3-4).

There were hundreds of such details. The very manner of how the water was poured was important.

“A quarter [of a log, a specific unit of volume] of water is to be poured onto the hands, for [the ritual washing of the hands for] one person, and even for two. Half of a log [is to be poured from] for three or four. And from [a vessel containing] one log [of water], five or ten or even one hundred [people may wash their hands]. Rabbi Yose says: but only provided there not be less than a quarter [of a log remaining] for the last one of them [to wash]. One may add [water, by pouring it onto the hands past where it had fallen] on the second [pouring of water; i.e. on a third pouring, one can pour past where the waters fell on the second pouring]. But one may not add on the first [pouring; i.e. on the second pouring, one may not pour past where the waters fell on the first pouring]” *The Mishna: Yadaim* 1;1.

The Pharisee was shocked that this rabbi had not followed the appropriate protocols for washing. But Jesus knew what he was thinking. Not waiting to be challenged, “the Lord said to him, ‘now you Pharisees clean the outside of the cup and of the platter; but inside of you, you are full of robbery and wickedness’” (v. 39). Jesus was direct. He did not soften His words. Robbery referred to the taking of something by force, and was even used to describe an act of rape. Wickedness encapsulated every manner of depravity and maliciousness. His point was simple. The Pharisee was missing the larger requirement of the Law.

<sup>10</sup>Hear the word of the Lord,

You rulers of Sodom;

Give ear to the instruction of our God,

You people of Gomorrah.

<sup>11</sup>‘What are your multiplied sacrifices to Me?’

Says the Lord.

‘I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams

And the fat of fed cattle;

And I take no pleasure in the blood of bulls, lambs or goats.

<sup>12</sup>When you come to appear before Me,

Who requires of you this trampling of My courts?

<sup>13</sup>Bring your worthless offerings no longer,

Incense is an abomination to Me.

New moon and sabbath, the calling of assemblies—

I cannot endure iniquity and the solemn assembly.

<sup>14</sup>I hate your new moon festivals and your appointed feasts,

They have become a burden to Me;

I am weary of bearing them.

<sup>15</sup>So when you spread out your hands in prayer,

I will hide My eyes from you;  
Yes, even though you multiply prayers,  
I will not listen.  
Your hands are covered with blood.  
<sup>16</sup>Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean;  
Remove the evil of your deeds from My sight.  
Cease to do evil,  
<sup>17</sup>Learn to do good;  
Seek justice,  
Reprove the ruthless,  
Defend the orphan,  
Plead for the widow” (Isaiah 1:10-17).

<sup>21</sup>I hate, I reject your festivals,  
Nor do I delight in your solemn assemblies.  
<sup>22</sup>Even though you offer up to Me burnt offerings and your grain offerings,  
I will not accept them;  
And I will not even look at the peace offerings of your fatlings.  
<sup>23</sup>Take away from Me the noise of your songs;  
I will not even listen to the sound of your harps.  
<sup>24</sup>But let justice roll down like waters  
And righteousness like an ever-flowing stream” (Amos 5:21-24)

<sup>6</sup>With what shall I come to the Lord  
And bow myself before the God on high?  
Shall I come to Him with burnt offerings,  
With yearling calves?  
<sup>7</sup>Does the Lord take delight in thousands of rams,  
In ten thousand rivers of oil?  
Shall I present my firstborn for my rebellious acts,  
The fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?  
<sup>8</sup>He has told you, O man, what is good;  
And what does the Lord require of you  
But to do justice, to love kindness,  
And to walk humbly with your God?” (Micah 6:6-8).

The lesson Jesus was making was clear. We must never forget that it is the state of our souls that demands attention. Externals are of no eternal value apart from that.

“Watch over your heart with all diligence,  
For from it flow the springs of life” (Proverbs 4:23)

“But the Lord said to Samuel, ‘do not look at his appearance or at the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for God sees not as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart’”(1 Samuel 16:7).

But Jesus was not finished. He was never so unkind as to leave sin ignored. He was not concerned about political correctness or euphemisms. He called sin by its name. He made no excuses. He understood that a serious disease required serious medicine, and He, of all people, knew what would be required to pay the penalty for sin. So He continued, “<sup>40</sup>you foolish ones, did not He who made the outside make the inside also? <sup>41</sup>But give that which is within as charity, and then all things are clean for you” (v. 40-41).

Again Jesus did not mince His words. By calling them foolish, He accused them of lacking common sense, being ignorant, and thinking in the simplest of terms. He was emphasizing what Paul would point out clearly much later that “he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter; and his praise is not from men, but from God” (Romans 2:29).

### **The Declaration**

Warming to His subject, Jesus then declared the unavoidable judgment that would befall those who continued in their foolishness and wickedness. “But woe to you Pharisees! For you pay tithes of mint and rue and every kind of garden herb, and yet disregard justice and the love of God; but these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others” (v. 42). There was a law regarding tithing outlined in both Leviticus 27 and Deuteronomy 14. But it was unnecessary to observe the law in such excruciating detail. The context of the Law shows that the three crops of grain, wine, and oil are intended. It was a typical stretching of the Law. It was an emphasis of human institutions over divine ordinances.

We must remember that there will always be those in the body of Christ who exalt matters of secondary importance. How important it is to some the music, the style of dress, the room decor, etc. Yet, Scripture clearly teaches that “justice and love of God” combine all that is required; love of man and love of God. Instead of focusing on what is of secondary importance, let us “<sup>12</sup>as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; <sup>13</sup>bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you” (Colossians 3:12-13).

After chastising the Pharisees for their emphasis of the less important, Jesus then continued by rebuking them for their desire to be the center of attention. “Woe to you Pharisees! For you love the chief seats in the synagogues and the respectful greetings in the market places” (v. 43). The seat in question was the seat at the front facing the congregation. The person sitting there could best hear the person speaking or reading and view the whole congregation, as well as be seen by all. To be escorted there was a great honor.

This was typical behavior for the Pharisees. They wore long robes, coveted the place of honor at feasts, prayed loudly and publicly, and demanded appropriate greetings in the marketplace. The latter was not a mere ‘hello’ but rather an elaborate greeting of great attention. Rather than focusing on their role as shepherds of God’s people, they sought attention for themselves. They desired their own glory, not God’s.

This behavior led to the third judgment of Jesus on the Pharisees. “Woe to you! For you are like concealed tombs, and the people who walk over them are unaware of it” (v. 44). Just before Passover, tombs would be painted with white paint to mark them out so no one would inadvertently defile themselves and become ceremonially unclean. The illustration Jesus is making is that people who align themselves with the Pharisees are spiritually defiled and unclean. The Pharisees contaminated the souls of those whom they should have been serving as spiritual leaders.

It was perhaps surprising that the audience held its collective tongue for so long. Perhaps this was the authority of Jesus, perhaps the inner workings of conscience. No doubt the room had grown very quiet as Jesus spoke. There must have been awkwardness and no small amount of uneasiness. But finally someone in the group spoke out reminding Jesus that there were those who might be offended at what was being said. I presume the man expected Jesus to retreat a bit and say that He hadn’t meant to be unkind or rude, but that as a good rabbi He was just having a friendly dialogue with fellow religious leaders. If so, the man was to be disappointed. Jesus had no intention of backing down.

“One of the lawyers said to Him in reply, ‘Teacher, when You say this, You insult us too’” (v. 45). His profession placed him in the party of the Pharisees and surely Jesus had not meant to offend him. But indeed Jesus had. Doubling down on His comments Jesus continued, “woe to you lawyers as well! For you weigh men down with burdens hard to bear, while you yourselves will not even touch the burdens with one of your fingers” (v. 46).

Sometimes referred to as teachers of the law or scribes, this man was a member of the group affiliated with the Pharisees who kept track of the details of the Law and all of its possible permutations and applications. They were truly experts and knew the Law inside and out. Every fine point, every nuance, every loophole was at their disposal.

Jesus rebuked them for creating unnecessary burdens (the word implies a weight impossible to carry, like the cargo of a ship) while yet not following the same commands themselves. Since they knew the Law so well, these scribes could take advantage of particular passages that the average Jew did not know.

“[If] one carries out [an object] either with his right hand or with his left hand, or in his lap, or on his shoulder, he is liable [the latter] being the carrying [method] of the Kehat family. But if one carries [an object] on the back of his hand, or with his foot, or in his mouth, or with his elbow, or in his ear, or in his hair, or in his belt facing downwards, or between his belt and his shirt, or in the hem of his shirt, or in his shoe, or in his sandal, he is exempt because he did not carry in the way people [usually] carry” (Shabbat 10:3).

A lesson here is that it is a great sin to teach others what we do not practice ourselves. Not that we are perfect, but that we are genuine. There simply must be some agreement between what we say and what we do. We must be able to say with Paul, “the things you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, practice these things” (Philippians 4:9).

Jesus continued His chastisement. “Woe to you! For you build the tombs of the prophets, and it was your fathers who killed them” (v. 47). The current generation of scribes and Pharisees had built elaborate

tombs over the burial sites of the ancient prophets as a demonstration of affirmation. They prided themselves on never having been a part of the apostasy of Israel. But Jesus denied this. He claimed that the only true way to honor the prophets was to live lives that reflected their teaching. Since they did not do that, “so you are witnesses and approve the deeds of your fathers” (v. 48).

In fact, their deeds were worse, since they rejected not prophets and apostles only, but the Messiah Himself. In other words, since their lives were in agreement with those who killed the prophets, they were accountable, “from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah, who was killed between the altar and the house of God; yes, I tell you, it shall be charged against this generation” (v. 51).

The generation in which Jesus lived had every advantage. They had the prophets and the Law. They had the preaching of John the Baptist. They had the Messiah Himself performing miracles and wonders in their midst. Their ears had heard the Word of God proclaim Himself to be the Messiah. But still they did not listen. They were without excuse.

Finally, Jesus concluded His rebuke with “woe to you lawyers! For you have taken away the key of knowledge; you yourselves did not enter, and you hindered those who were entering” (v. 52). Summing up all the wrongdoing that the Pharisees and scribes had done, Jesus ultimately addressed the fundamental issue of salvation. All of the details, all of the show, all of the burdens of the Law did nothing to bring people closer to the kingdom of God. In fact, it was quite the opposite. It drove them away.

We can learn that there is great sin in keeping from others the knowledge of Jesus Christ. Today we have even more advantages than those living at the time of Christ, for we have the Scriptures complete and perfect and the Holy Spirit to illuminate them. “How much severer punishment do you think he will deserve who has trampled under foot the Son of God, and has regarded as unclean the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has insulted the Spirit of grace?” (Hebrews 10:29).

### **The Response**

The party probably broke up quickly after Jesus finished speaking, whether or not people had finished eating. Jesus had made Himself clear, and the response of those who heard Him was equally so, “<sup>53</sup>the scribes and the Pharisees began to be very hostile and to question Him closely on many subjects, <sup>54</sup>plotting against Him to catch Him in something He might say” (v. 53-54).

The dénouement had begun.

### **Take Aways**

May we allow God to search our hearts to determine if there is anything of the Pharisees or scribes in us, that we may be genuine in our faith and not merely pursuing the externals of religion.