

Sermon 63: Luke 11:37-54: Defleecing Wolves

OUTLINE

Exposing the Pharisees
Exposing the Lawyers

INTRODUCTION

What is a shepherd to do when there are wolves? You might think that the right thing would be to kill the wolves and protect the sheep. When spiritual shepherds are dealing with spiritual wolves our tactics are slightly different. We have to confront the wolves hoping that the Spirit will use the truth to help them see and repent, we long to see the wolves themselves saved and become sheep, but we also have the responsibility of warning the sheep. In this next section as we come to the climax of Christ's confrontation with the unbelieving crowd, Christ lovingly confronts the wolves, and warns the sheep. We see that Jesus confronts the Pharisees and the lawyers in v37-54, and then we see Him warning the sheep in 12:1. Jesus has been bumping heads with those in the crowd because of their unwillingness to believe, this portion suddenly gets very strong as Jesus is not merely confronting unbelief but the religious teachers of God's people who have deceived, misled and been responsible for the condemnation of those who have followed their teaching. The gloves are off as Christ rips the sheep's clothing off of the wolves exposing the true nature of their teachings, practices and spiritual condition. This portion is more than a true teacher angrily castigating false teachers, Jesus is speaking as a prophet as He speaks for God giving God's perspective on their hearts, actions, and standing before Him. Jesus not only condemns the self-righteous but warns of future judgement and prophesies the fall of Jerusalem.

The NT warns time and time again that false teachers are going to try and creep in among us and they will be dressed in sheep's clothing, and that we must be on alert. Jesus as a prophet and the best analyser of false teaching will highlight for us some of the typical characteristics of legalism which will help us guard our own hearts and spot wolves ourselves. So today I want you to think with me about Jesus' analysis of false legalistic religion. Test the teaching of this pulpit, test your own hearts, test the teaching that you hear from other sectors. We will approach this section under two headings looking at Jesus exposing first the Pharisees and then the Lawyers/scribes.

Exposing the Pharisees

V37-38, 'While Jesus was speaking, a Pharisee asked him to dine with him, so he went in and reclined at table. ³⁸The Pharisee was astonished to see that he did not first wash before dinner.' The setting for the confrontation is a dinner party. Jesus has just called the crowds an evil generation because they have demanded a sign; ironically the Pharisees would have agreed with Jesus for different reasons that they were an evil generation. This is likely why Jesus has been invited by a Pharisee to dine. The Pharisees were very particular about who they dined with and would not dine with all sorts of people lest they become unclean. The Pharisees may have thought that they had enough in common with Jesus that they could get Him into their group. Little did they suspect that Jesus considered them worse than the crowd. The event that brought everything to a head was an inane instance of Jesus not washing His hands and the astonishment of the Pharisees. 'The following passage from the Mishnah gives a good idea what people like the Pharisees meant when they said, "Go wash your hands before dinner": The hands are susceptible to uncleanness, and they are

rendered clean up to the wrist. Thus if a man had poured the first water up to the wrist and the second water beyond the wrist, and the water flowed back to the hand, the hand becomes clean; but if he poured both the first water and the second beyond the wrist, and the water flowed back to the hand, the hand remains unclean. If he poured the first water over the one hand alone and then bethought himself and poured the second water over the one hand, his one hand is clean. If he had poured the water over the one hand and rubbed it on the other, it becomes unclean; but if he rubbed it on his head or on the wall it remains clean.⁴¹ Handwashing in and of itself is a good thing, we all know the phrase 'cleanliness is next to godliness', but the Pharisees believed that cleanliness is godliness and it was this changing of the way of salvation, this suppression of the truth, this destructive lie that oppressed and deceived God's people, symptomatically revealed in their concern for handwashing, this is what Jesus reacts to as He rolls out some of the strongest language of condemnation in the gospels.

Jesus statements against the Pharisees are simply structured. In v39-41 Jesus will outline the problem generally speaking of the matter of lesser things being emphasized over the important things. Then Jesus will pronounce three woes against particular aspects of their false religion. The 'woes' are the opposites of the beatitudes. Where pronouncing one blessed it to call for or announce God's favor on them, and in particular the blessing of eternal life, to pronounce a woe is to call or foretell God's disfavor namely His judgement. Think of Isaiah in the presence of God and after seeing the intrinsic holiness of God his own sinfulness is laid bare and he cries out 'woe is me!' These woes are typical of OT prophets who were condemning Israel for her sins and warning of a pending judgement of God.

V39, '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.' Jesus is sitting at a table with cups and dishes in front of Him, and true to style He draws on these everyday items to illustrate spiritual truth. Here Jesus tells us that legalistic religion is hypocritical, it has double standards. It sets up man made laws and prioritizes those, this is represented by the outside of the dish of cup, but they overlook the more important things, the thing inside the cup or dish, the water or food itself. The state of Judaism as Jesus encountered it was terrible, it may have started off with good intentions about being pure and keeping God's law, but it was not long before unnecessary additions to God's law were added out of fear. *Laws to keep us away from breaking God's law is a tenet of this legalistic false teaching.* The various additions to the Sabbath laws would be illustrations of this. A fixation upon handwashing and not whether He was the Messiah was a symptom of this problem. *Legalism distracts us from the gospel.*

Jesus tells us that the Pharisees were generally full of greed and wickedness. Outwardly they were washing hands, they were straining the unclean bugs out of their drinking water so that they were not defiled, but they robbed widows. That word greed can mean extortion or robbery. Jesus will expand on this later in 20:45-47, 'And in the hearing of all the people he said to his disciples, ⁴⁶"Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and love greetings in the marketplaces and the best seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at feasts, ⁴⁷who devour widows' houses and for a pretense make long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.'" And again in Matt. 23:16-22. For Jesus to characterize the Pharisee as full of wickedness would have stung, they prided themselves on their purity, they had a reputation for it, it was those not committed to the strict set of laws who were wicked and responsible for Rome invading Israel as a

1 Ryken, P. G. (2009). [Luke](#). (R. D. Phillips, P. G. Ryken, & D. M. Doriani, Eds.) (Vol. 1, p. 620).

Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing.

punishment for her lawlessness. This is a word generally describing someone who is lawless or godless and shocking when used of the most scrupulous religious observers of the day.

V40-41, 'You fools! Did not he who made the outside make the inside also? ⁴¹ But give as alms those things that are within, and behold, everything is clean for you.' These are strong words indeed, you will remember that Jesus said in Matthew. 5:22 that anyone who says you fool will be liable for hell. Jesus is not insulting the Pharisees, rather He is making a spiritual assessment of them. In the Bible, what is a fool? Ps. 14:1 tells us that the fool says in his heart that there is no God, the fool is someone who lives, speaks and thinks as if God is not real, a practical atheist. The fool is someone who is wise in his own eyes and values his own opinion and view of things above everyone else's; this is why they do not learn from others. The fool is someone going their own way, who has veered off of God's way and are on the way of destruction. To call a Pharisee a fool is to say that they are not in God's will, or teaching God's law, but are full of themselves and their own ways and are against God and not for Him. It is not an insult but a true spiritual assessment. *Legalism like folly prefers its own ways and opinions to God's.*

Jesus reveals that if they had only done the things on the inside of the bowl, the weighty matters that God actually required of the Jews then they would be clean. Handwashing does not clean you, but failing to do all that the law actually requires, even though you wash your hands will make you unclean. There may be a double entendre in v41 with the word 'within'. Does it refer to those laws God has required of us, or does it refer to the heart being properly engaged in our service of God, and the answer would have to be yes. So if we give as alms, alms referring to our helping of the poor, which are some of the big things God does indeed require, Micah 6:8, 'He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?' If we render lawful and loving obedience then the problem of cleanness takes care of itself and we don't have to add laws to make ourselves clean. *Legalism tries to make itself acceptable before God by doing more than God requires, and ironically it makes itself unclean.*

V42, '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.' *Here Jesus reveals to us that legalism majors on minors and is therefore selective in its obedience.* Tithing, the giving of our firstfruits to God was an important part of OT worship, it was something that Israel was rebuked for neglecting but the Pharisees in their error were overscrupulous about tithing and even tithed the harvest on their garden herbs. These small, self-assigned rules were preached and monitored by the Pharisees but they left the big things like justice and love for God undone. Some people are open in their disobedience against God by openly disregarding God's law, *legalism is deceptive in that we have a veneer of obedience to God as we perform some small religious act, but all the while we are sinning by way of omission in the more important things.*

There are some helpful definitions of sin here. Firstly, *because God commands us to love our neighbours, any religion that does not serve man is empty religion and legalism.* The two great commands are to love God and our neighbour, and error is found in doing one without the other, no matter which one we leave off. If we go to church regularly, tithe, sing songs, teach Sunday school but mistreat our wives or kids, this is the hypocrisy Jesus is condemning here. Secondly, *any religious action that is not done out of love for God is legalism. Law without love is legalism.* Obedience to God done in fear; or so others will be pleased; or out of heartless habit; to do stuff for God grudgingly and not gladly because of our love for Him is legalism and not praiseworthy or acceptable. From time to time we may

have to do the right thing because our cold hearts are not feeling it right now, but this is very different to obeying God because He might send us to hell, or sullenly, or to be seen by others.

V43, 'Woe to you Pharisees! For you love the best seat in the synagogues and greetings in the marketplaces.' Now we are all familiar with the childish problem of seeking attention, Jesus is addressing something so much more serious than that. *Legalism is insecure and needs constant assurances from other legalists, it plays to the crowd appealing to its base. Self-righteousness is proud of its own accomplishments and wants other to congratulate them as much as they congratulate themselves.* Jesus rebukes this generation for doing things in order to be seen by men, whether it is praying, fasting or giving alms. Jesus teaches a parable because of their propensity to seek the places of honour at public gatherings. True religion lives for the audience and satisfaction of one, even if no one else watches or thanks us, we do it because our goal is to please God not merely be thought well of as religious.

V44, 'Woe to you! For you are like unmarked graves, and people walk over them without knowing it.' A grave was something that could make you unclean for a week in the OT, graves were whitewashed to make them visible so that you did not make yourself unclean by accident. In other verses Jesus compares the Pharisees to tombs in that the exterior is freshly whitewashed but the inside it full of rot and death. Here the picture has more to do with how others are affected. The Pharisees, ironically claim to be alive and pointing out the way of life to others; but in truth they are dead and they contaminate others. The picture may even allude to an open grave which would be a hazard to those who fall into it. The Pharisees lead others into the same grace they are already in. *Legalism thinks it is alive but it defiles and takes other into the grave with it.*

Exposing the lawyers

V45, 'One of the lawyers answered him, "Teacher, in saying these things you insult us also." This dinner had all the important people at it and this included the lawyers, or otherwise known as the scribes. The lawyers were the theologians who would have come up with the legal formulations that the Pharisees practiced. If the Pharisees were the pastors, the lawyers were the bible college lecturers. The Pharisees implemented what the lawyers taught. The lawyers feel insulted by Jesus words. But remember you can only feel insulted if you think that you are better than the insult being levelled at you. The lawyers felt insulted because Jesus was implying that they were wicked, disobedient, deceivers, and they thought the opposite of themselves. Jesus is now going to show that He was not insulting them by accusing them of things that are not true, but that they are in fact in that deplorable position. Once again there are three woes.

V46, '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.' We have a few options here with regards to what Jesus could mean against the lawyers. Is He accusing them of simply burdening the people with the law of the OT but not stressing conversion, like what the later Judaizers did when Paul was preaching? Or is He talking about how they would make up laws, extra laws that God did not require, and burden the people with man made laws? Or is He talking about how the lawyers would impose laws while themselves getting out of them by finding all sorts of legal loopholes? We can find good arguments for all three. The main issue seems to be their loveless application of the law, *legalism lovelessly applies the law to others.* When it comes to making rules for others to keep, we are experts, when it comes to condemning others because of their guilt we are zealous

pulpiters. The true pastor of souls not only outlines what God requires of us but is keen to point us to God's resources to help us do what God requires. The false pastor feels like he has done his duty in preaching if he has left the congregation with a hard list of to-dos. Some mistake harshness and leaving people with the feeling that they are to do the impossible with speaking the truth in an uncompromising manner; Christ reminds us that the true shepherd of souls directs us to the law but helps us to find the means God has provided, the motivation God instills, and the power God supplies to do His will.

The word burden there is the word used to describe the cargo of a ship, this would have been the biggest cargo that the ancient world could envisage. And their lovelessness is emphasized by Christ showing that they will not even lift a single finger in aid. I have said it before but it is worth saying again, your view of God determines how you apply the law to yourself and others. *Legalism does to others according to their false understandings of how God does to them. If you think that God is a harsh and loveless task master who you have to perform works for in order to enter heaven, then when dealing with others, whether it be your children or other Christians, you will impose the law in the same way you think God imposes it on you.* The lawyers thought that they had to keep laws to get into heaven, God's and their own, so they ruthlessly imposed these on the Jews.

V47-51, 'Woe to you! For you build the tombs of the prophets whom your fathers killed. ⁴⁸So you are witnesses and you consent to the deeds of your fathers, for they killed them, and you build their tombs. ⁴⁹Therefore also the Wisdom of God said, 'I will send them prophets and apostles, some of whom they will kill and persecute,' ⁵⁰so that the blood of all the prophets, shed from the foundation of the world, may be charged against this generation, ⁵¹from 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.' This second woe condemns not only the lawyers but likely the Pharisees as well. In all the woes mentioned it is specified, woe to you Pharisees or woe to you lawyers. However here it is unspecified probably indicating that Jesus is addressing both. Now the religions leaders built tombs and monuments to the OT prophets, this would have been done in a sincere attempt to honor them and their message. But because they reject the One all those prophets were pointing to, because they are presently rejecting The Prophet, with a capital P, they are just as guilty as their fathers who murdered the prophets. And because they themselves will murder Christ, they are no better than those who rejected God's word before them. So although they are attempting to build a tomb it is as if they have driven the last nail into the coffin, although they are attempting to honor the prophets they might as well as put the last shovel of sand into their graves because they will murder the greatest prophet and the one they were all bearing witness too.

In v49 there is a difficult saying, 'Therefore also the Wisdom of God said, 'I will send them prophets and apostles, some of whom they will kill and persecute.' What is the Wisdom of God? Is it an apocryphal book? No! Is it some former prophecy? We have no record of one. The most likely understanding is that it is Christ Himself, the ESV has even capitalized it indicating that it is possibly a proper noun. If that is the case then Christ is prophesying that this generation will persecute it prophets and apostles. They have already persecuted John the Baptist, but they will also persecute the prophets and apostles of the NT church, we see this unfolding in Acts.

This rejection we are told in v50 will result in all the blood of every saint and prophet ever killed being required of this generation of Jews. The blood of Abel all the way to Zechariah. This is one of two Zechariah's in the Bible, it could be the author of the book by that name in the minor prophets. Or it could be the martyr in 2 Chron. 24:20-25. Good arguments

could be made for either. The point is that this trail of blood, this list of faithful witnesses and the guilt for their deaths is being placed squarely on the shoulders of this generation. Why? Because they were faithful witnesses to the One who has now come and this generation is rejecting. He is not merely an innocent man, or merely a prophet, He is the promised One, the Prophet, the God man. And He is the content of all their witness. This is the last straw and if they reject Christ, there will be reckoning that will fall on this generation, this was realized in 70 AD when Rome invaded Israel and destroyed Jerusalem and the temple. What is important to note is that Jesus is not hiding His importance, or the seriousness of rejecting Him. It was not for a lack of warnings that they rejected Christ and brought this upon themselves. He warned them and they did it anyway. *Legalism is so self-deceiving that it denies a Savior from sin even when He is standing in front of them performing miracles.*

V52, '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.'" You might have thought that the destruction of Jerusalem would be the climactic indictment against the rulers but the worst of all they do is saved for last. This last woe condemns on three fronts. Firstly, as teachers of God's word they have diluted, twisted, added to, detracted from, and obscured the word of God. They have taken away the key of knowledge. The Bible which points out that we are sinners, but God is a gracious Savior to those who cannot save themselves, and He sends One to save them. All of this is lost to Israel as they are forced into slavery, Like Pharaoh the rulers will not let the people of God go. *Legalism hides the gospel from view misunderstanding the whole story line of the Bible.* Secondly, they themselves are lost. *Legalism does not save you from the wrath of God but heaps it up.* Thirdly, *Legalism not only damns the false teachers who teach it, but those who believe and follow it.*

And how does legalism respond to being called out in this way, v53-54, '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, ⁵⁴ lying in wait for him, to catch him in something he might say.'
Legalism rejects the truth and does not repent, it responds with aggression, it tries to outsmart the truth with arguments asking question not to learn but to entrap, and ultimately it will commit the most highhanded act in the ultimate rejection of Christ.

I will conclude merely listing the various observations we have made regarding legalism.
Laws to keep us away from breaking God's law is a tenet of this legalistic false teaching. Legalism distracts us from the gospel.
Legalism like folly prefers its own ways and opinions to God's.
Legalism tries to make itself acceptable before God by doing more than God requires, and ironically it makes itself unclean.
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