



THE GOSPEL OF
Luke

SESSION OBJECTIVE: LUKE 11:37-54

To understand more about the hypocrisy of the Pharisees and the lawyers.

“Hypocrites!”

I read a story recently about a car theft that took place in Oregon. A woman stopped at a small grocery store to run in and grab a few items, and left her car running with the doors unlocked. While inside, a man noticed the car running and jumped in and drove off. After driving for a few blocks, to his dismay, he noticed in the backseat of the car a four-year-old little girl! According to the police report, he turned around and came back to the store and not only returned the girl, but scolded the mom for bad parenting! After demanding that the mom take the little girl, he then proceeded to continue with the car theft.

It’s a strange thing when people are committed to one kind of justice while so blatantly ignoring another. This is precisely the kind of thing of which Jesus chastised the Pharisees and the Lawyers. They were committed to certain aspects of the law while blatantly breaking other parts of it. They were hypocrites, and Jesus called their attention to it.

An Awkward Dinner Party

Verse 37 begins by setting the stage for this next part of the story: “While Jesus was speaking, a Pharisee asked him to dine with him, so he went in and reclined at table.” While there, the Pharisees noticed that Jesus did not properly wash before eating, as was their custom. This begins a set of rebukes that Jesus initiates, first against the Pharisees and then against the Lawyers. Below is a brief breakdown of each set.

PHARISEES

Jesus responds to the Pharisees' complaint that Jesus has not washed properly before the meal in verse 39: "Now you Pharisees cleanse the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside you are full of greed and wickedness." Jesus' complaint against them is not that they are insistent on this kind of cleansing, as this was prescribed in Leviticus 11:32-33. His point, rather, was that they were committed to evaluating only the outside, and not the inside as well, especially as it pertains to their own inner condition. They were concerned with public appearances and outer personas, but failed to address their own wickedness with themselves.

Jesus then proceeds to give three "woes" to them. The first woe is in verse 42: "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." Jesus rightly recognizes that they have tithed things that are prescribed by the law to give (Deut. 14:22), but at the expense of the weightier and more central things the Old Testament is insistent upon, namely, "justice, and the love of God" (Deut. 14:28-29; 1 Sam 15:22; Isa 42:1; Mic 6:8).

The second woe comes in verse 43: "Woe to you Pharisees! For you love the best seat in the synagogues and greetings in the marketplaces." Jesus reinforces what He knows to be true of the hearts of the Pharisees; they love the spotlight. They wanted to be seen as committed, Godly men, but were unwilling to do what it required on the inside to be genuinely Godly. They were all about outer appearances, not inward change.

The third woe against the Pharisees is found in verse 44: "Woe to you! For you are like unmarked graves, and people walk over them without knowing it." Jesus speaks to the clearly dead spiritual condition of these religious leaders. They are "dead" in their "trespasses and sins" (Eph. 2:1) and are not even aware of it.

LAWYERS

These "woes" create a sort of collateral damage. Verse 45 says, "One of the lawyers answered him, 'Teacher, in saying these things you insult us also.'" In response, Jesus takes a sort of "when in Rome" approach: "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" (Lk. 11:46). Jesus first chides the lawyers for their commitment to inventing laws over and above what the Torah dictates (Mk. 7:2-5; Gal. 1:14). They had so overcomplicated God's law by over qualifying and expanding the meaning of it. And yet, Jesus insinuates that they themselves were guilty for not following that which they held over other people. In essence they are hypocrites.

The theme of hypocrite continues in the second woe to the lawyers in verse 47: "Woe to you! For you build the tombs of the prophets whom your fathers killed" (Lk. 11:47). It was hypocritical for them to construct statues of these prophets because they were not any different than their fathers: "So you are witnesses and you consent to the deeds of your fathers, for they killed them, and you build their tombs" (Lk. 11:48). They would have killed the prophets too (Acts 7:52), just as they will kill Jesus not too long after this (Lk. 23:10-12). As a result, Jesus pronounces guilt on them. In verses 49 through 52, He appeals to the first murder recorded in biblical history, Abel, in Genesis 4:1-12, as well as the last one recorded, Zechariah, in 2 Chronicles 24:20-22. His point is that the guilt of these murders are going to be laid upon this generation. As unfair as that might sound, it's justified because they are no different than their fathers.

The third woe comes in verse 53: "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." Their many traditions and extra laws had prevented people from truly understanding God's knowledge that leads to salvation. They themselves had not entered (the kingdom of God) as evident by the fact that they rejected both John and Jesus (Lk. 7:30).

Proving Him Right

After such hard sayings, the Pharisees and lawyers were presented with a choice. Either listen to Jesus' words and heed what He said, or reject Him and further harden their hearts (Ps. 95:7-8; Heb. 3:15). They choose the latter: "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." They continued to try and trap Jesus in hopes that they might find something to accuse him of. In fact, this is an escalation of attacks from the religious leaders. The words "press" and "provoke" indicate that they were opposing him fiercely and besieging Him.

What About Now?

There are several takeaways from this. For one, the theme of hypocrisy in the six "woes" should be a clear warning to all believers to beware lest they also fall into it. It is easy to construct and believe rules that exist outside of the Bible and in the end, those rules lead us further away from Jesus, not closer. The tendency to construct statues of individuals that we would actually likely want to tear down if they were living is also something we should consider. It's easy to idealize people for the good things they did and disconnect with how opposed we would have been towards them. Finally, this passage serves as a warning of the danger of hearing truth and hardening our hearts. This was an opportunity for these religious people to repent of their self-righteousness and change. Instead, they doubled down and continued to persecute Jesus. We are at risk of the same thing whenever we hear the truth of God that calls us to change and yet reject it and continue to do whatever we think is right.

Study Questions

Day One

1. Read Luke 11:37-41. While Jesus was speaking, who approached Him? What did that person ask Him? When He arrived, what surprised them? How did Jesus respond to their reaction?

2. Read Luke 11:42. In your own words, summarize the first "woe."

Day Two

1. Read Luke 11:43. In your own words, summarize the second "woe."

2. Read Luke 11:44. In your own words, summarize the third "woe."

Day Three

1. Read Luke 11:45-46. Who began to speak to Jesus after He pronounced “woes” to the Pharisees? In your own words, summarize the first “woe.”

2. Read Luke 11:47-51. In your own words, summarize the second “woe.”

Day Four

1. Read Luke 11:52. In your own words, summarize the third “woe.”

2. Read Luke 11:53-54. What was the response of the Pharisees and lawyers? What did they do?

Week 46 Discussion: A Chance to Change

At the end of Luke 11:37-54, the Pharisees and lawyers, “began to press him hard and to provoke him to speak about many things” after being confronted with the truth. It was their chance to change, and instead of heeding Jesus’ words, they hardened their hearts and became even more contentious against Him. Today, we often experience moments where we are given a chance to change, whether through confrontation or undesirable consequences of our behavior. Talk as a group about moments in your life when you were given the chance to change. Did you change? Or did you continue to do what you were doing? How did it work out for you?

1. Icebreaker: Have you ever been confronted with the truth of God’s Word in a convicting manner? If so, did you change as a result of it?
2. Which of the six “woes” convict you the most? Why?
3. Why is it hard to listen to criticism in the moment?
4. Have you ever *not* listened to criticism? How did it work out for you?
5. Have you ever confronted someone with truth? How did it go?
6. How can the church be a place that both confronts sin and also demonstrates grace?

Takeaways:

1. Jesus pronounces “woes” over the Pharisees and lawyers for their hypocrisy.
2. The Pharisees and lawyers do not listen, but amplify their hatred for the Lord.