

Religious Hypocrisy
Luke 11:37-12:3

Well, we are continuing in our series through Luke's gospel. To remind you of our passage from last week, Jesus responded to those who desired to see more signs and miracles from Him, from those who had postponed their faith, but He said that He would not give them any sign except for the "sign of Jonah," that is, His resurrection from the dead.

And then He said that the reason why people don't see the light that He is, is not because the light is dim or hidden, but because their eyes are blind to the light. That is, they cannot see His glory though it is standing right in front of them.

So, from that scene regarding spiritual blindness comes our next passage where Jesus will confront religious hypocrisy.

I. THE SCENE v. 37-38

Luke 11:37-38

37 While Jesus was speaking, a Pharisee asked him to dine with him, so he went in and reclined at table. **38** The Pharisee was astonished to see that he did not first wash before dinner.

Just to make sure we all understand who the Pharisees were, they were the religious Jewish leaders of Jesus' day. They were known to be theologically conservative; extremely strict followers of God's law. So much so, that they would add rules on top of God's laws so as to ensure that they, and everyone else, would not transgress the law of God.

And here in the house at this dinner party we see an example of this. The Pharisee who invited Jesus over to dinner was "astonished" that Jesus did not ceremonially wash his hands before dinner.

Maybe you've heard the old adage, "cleanliness is next to godliness." Well, that is not actually in the Bible, however, the Pharisees seemed to really believe it. And they took it to an extreme, creating an elaborate ceremony for washing their hands.

In giving strict attention to their own rules, this Pharisee saw Jesus as breaking the law of God by not washing before dinner the way he thought all people should. But, to understand the warranted rebuke from Jesus in this passage, it is important to understand that Jesus did not break any of God's laws here. All that Jesus did was violate man-made religious rules. Jesus violated the Pharisees' rule, but not God's law.

And so this sets up the confrontation between Jesus and those at dinner...

II. THE CONFRONTATION v. 39-41 also 12:1 "hypocrisy"

Luke 11:39-41

39 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. **40** 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.

So Jesus here does not mince words. He calls them fools because they are more concerned with their outward appearance than with the condition of their hearts. He says, "Your hands are clean, but your hearts are filthy." It's like washing the outside of your dishes while ignoring the inside. No one would consider those dishes clean.

ILLUS - I remember a handful of years ago we went to get into our car and when we did we were hit in the face with a terrible odor. As we searched the car we realized that one of our girls' sippy cups, filled with milk, had rolled under the seat where it had been baking in the hot car. When we opened it, obviously the milk had curdled and smelt terribly. But when we took the cup inside we did not just wash the outside of the cup and then fill it back up with milk and give it to our daughter. That would be disgusting... and terrible parenting. We cleansed both the outside AND the inside. Only then is that cup truly clean.

And Jesus said to the Pharisees, you've given attention to the outside, your actions and rituals, but you've completely ignored the inside, your hearts. And God who made the outside made the inside too. He cares about your heart.

And Jesus gives definition of this problem when he address his disciples at the end of our passage in chapter 12...

Luke 12:1-3

1 In the meantime, when so many thousands of the people had gathered together that they were trampling one another, he began to say to his disciples first, "Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is **hypocrisy**. **2** Nothing is covered up that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known. **3** Therefore whatever you have said in the dark shall be heard in the light, and what you have whispered in private rooms shall be proclaimed on the housetops.

The Pharisees, though they were very religious and looked moral in their outward, external actions, inwardly, were wicked. They looked like they were living lives of spiritual vibrancy, but in reality they were spiritually dead. They were hypocrites.

What follows in Jesus' confrontation with the Pharisees and lawyers at dinner, is Jesus identifying those characteristics that were common to religious hypocrites of his day but they are characteristics that could easily be seen in our lives today as well.

So, Jesus gives a warning to the disciples there and for us as well. We might be able to fool others with our outward spiritual appearance but no one is able to fool God. "Nothing is covered up that will not be revealed." He sees beyond the shiny gleam of our religious lives and sees the true nature of our hearts. Therefore, we should take heed lest we become hypocritical Pharisees ourselves.

So Jesus pronounces various "woes" to the Pharisees. And we've heard this language before in Luke, it's a way of expressing sadness for their condition. It's like saying, "Man, I feel sorry for you."

III. WOES TO THE PHARISEES v. 42-44

Luke 11:42

"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."

The first characteristic of a religious hypocrite that Jesus points out is...

1. Religious Hypocrites Elevate Law Over Love

The Pharisees were following the law that called for a tithe, that is, the giving of the first tenth of their resources to the Lord. And they were so zealous in their tithing they would take even their spices and ration out the tithe with extreme precision.

But while they go to great lengths to keep the tithe, they were ignoring the greatest commandment of all, to love God and love people.

This is what Jesus meant when he said to them in Matthew's gospel...

Matt. 23:24

You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel!

That is, you are giving your attention to the tiniest of details while ignoring the most important responsibilities.

This really is a danger for all of us. We must beware of loving our own made-up rules, rituals, or preferences while neglecting loving the Lord and our neighbors. This is according to Jesus, religious hypocrisy.

Luke 11:43

Woe to you Pharisees! For you love the best seat in the synagogues and greetings in the marketplaces.

2. Religious Hypocrites Love Recognition and Praise for their Spirituality

Pharisees were well respected. They would be offered front row seats at church (you might not think the front row is a reward, but for them it was because everyone could see them). They would be well known in the community and highly respected and in their pride, they ate up the attention. They were eager for people to not only see their spirituality, they were eager to be recognized and celebrated for it.

But Jesus calls us to a different way of life. Jesus calls us to a life of humility that serves the interests of others before our own. A life that makes our sacrifices in secret. A life that waits patiently for the Lord to put us in the positions He wants us in. A life that doesn't care about the opinions of others. It is a way of life that stands in complete opposition to the life of the Pharisees.

Luke 11:44

Woe to you! For you are like unmarked graves, and people walk over them without knowing it."

This woe is significant for two reasons. Not only was he declaring them dead by calling them "unmarked graves," but he was also saying that their way of life was contaminating everyone else who looked up to them.

He was referring back to the law in this woe.

Numbers 19:16

Whoever in the open field touches someone who was killed with a sword or who died naturally, or touches a human bone or a grave, shall be unclean seven days.

Again, anyone who came into contact with a grave would be unclean. So Jesus' declaration here is that...

3. Religious Hypocrites Are Not Only in Personal Danger, They Are a Danger to Others

It is one thing to believe a certain way that leads to personal error, but it is another thing to lead others astray in that error. It is a sad condition to be constrained by made up rules and rituals, but it is an even greater sorrow to bind others by those same made up rules. We must be careful in our pursuit of godliness, that first of all, we are truly walking in the way of the gospel and not anything more or less, but second of all, to be careful in not demanding of others things that are not in line with the gospel. If we do, we are religious hypocrites.

So Jesus says “woe to you Pharisees” because they’ve elevated the law over love, they loved recognition and praise for their spirituality, and they were a danger to other people.

But then, the scene shifts. Someone speaks up...

IV. WOES TO THE LAWYERS v. 45-52

Luke 11:45

One of the lawyers answered him, “Teacher, in saying these things you insult us also.”

So, Luke tells us a “lawyer” answers Jesus. Now, its important to understand who the lawyers were. We’ve seen them before in Luke’s gospel. They were not the same as lawyers as we know them today. They did not go to trial to prosecute or defend people in accordance with the legal system.

When we read of lawyers in gospels, it means something different. We might say that lawyers were the theological ninjas of the day. They *were* experts in the law, but God’s law. They knew it inside and out. It might be helpful to think of the Pharisees as “fundamentalists” and the lawyers as “seminary professors.” Not all Pharisees were lawyers, and not all lawyers were Pharisees, but occasionally there were lawyers who were also Pharisees.

And this lawyer speaks up almost to say, “Jesus, I don’t think you mean to, but that is actually insulting to me and the other lawyers.” Thinking that Jesus didn’t realize how offensive He was being, He might back off. But he was mistaken. Jesus again does not hold back, and begins pronouncing woes to the lawyers as well...saying you are in a different position as most Pharisees, but your hearts are the exact same.

He gives 3 more woes, now to the lawyers...

Luke 11:46

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.

And in addressing the lawyers, Jesus points out a few more characteristics of religious hypocrites...

1. Religious Hypocrites Exercise Authority Without Compassion

Again, these were supposed to be Israel’s spiritual leaders who led Israel into a love for God and His law, keeping His commands as an expression of submission to and joy for their good King. But the lawyers slipped into legalism. They added rules on top of the law, so much so, that their rules replaced God’s law. So the people began to believe that this legalistic obedience was necessary for their salvation. And Jesus says that this is a burden for the people. The rules were so complicated that it was impossible to follow them.

One commentator likened it to trying to follow a study Bible written by the IRS.¹ There were so many rules, laws, and policies that the average person would have a hard time keeping it straight, so they would just have to trust the word of the lawyers. But to make things worse, these lawyers, rather than helping, just condemned those who couldn't do it on their own. Again, they exercised authority without compassion, they were domineering in their leadership.

Luke 11:47-51

47 Woe to you! For you build the tombs of the prophets whom your fathers killed.

48 So you are witnesses and you consent to the deeds of your fathers, for they killed them, and you build their tombs. **49** Therefore also the Wisdom of God said, 'I will send them prophets and apostles, some of whom they will kill and persecute,' **50** so that the blood of all the prophets, shed from the foundation of the world, may be charged against this generation, **51** 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.

Now, what does Jesus mean here? Jesus is saying that...

2. Religious Hypocrisy is Rebellion Against God

The forefathers of the lawyers and Pharisees killed the prophets of God in generations past. They did so because they hated the message of truth. They hated to hear of how they were sinful and guilty of pride, injustice, and idolatry. And so they murdered the people who brought that message. But then, generations later, memorial tombs were built for the prophets to show them honor. However, Jesus says that is nice and all, but they were sharing in their fathers' murderous rebellion. And it wasn't an issue with the tombs, it was an issue with their hearts. Understand, that they were no different from their ancestors. They still walked in rebellion towards God and were guilty of the same pride and injustice.

For the religious hypocrite it is tempting to give some outward show of devotion or some sort of penance while at the same time never truly repenting in their hearts. And when we do that, all we are doing is trying to disguise our rebellion with religious action. But that is, again, hypocrisy.

Luke 11:52

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."

3. Religious Hypocrites are Hindrances to Life and Salvation, Rather than a Help

Though the lawyers were meant to teach the people to know God and follow Him well, they ended up, with their man made rules and laws, keeping people from even knowing

¹ Ryken, *Luke*, vol. 1, 634.

God at all. They were obstacles in the way to salvation rather than an assistance to see the way clearly.

And again, this is a helpful warning for all of us who recognize the call to point people to Jesus. We must guard ourselves from letting our own preferences or any religious tradition that is not found in Scripture stand in the way of people, or ourselves, from seeing the beauty of the gospel.

V. POSSIBLE REACTIONS TO EXPOSED HYPOCRISY

Now, at this point you can imagine this had to have been the most awkward and uncomfortable dinner party ever. Jesus was the invited guest and He lets loose on the religious leaders.

And it would be good to ask ourselves, if I was there, if I was the one who threw the party and Jesus confronted me like that, how would I respond? If Jesus pointed out my own religious hypocrisy what would be my reaction?

1. For many, I think they would respond with rebellious rage.

That is exactly what Luke tells us happened there that day...

Luke 11:53-54

53 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.

There was tension in the air and there was anger in the hearts of the Pharisees and lawyers and they were ready to see Jesus silenced for good.

However, should the Lord reveal in your life, or my life, any hint of religious hypocrisy, we can respond differently.

In fact, I want to point out to you a striking parallel of this scene we just read, with a passage from Isaiah in the OT.

In Isaiah chapter 5, we read the Lord speaking through His prophet Isaiah concerning the wickedness of the people of that day. And in chapter 5 the Lord pronounces “Woes” to the people, regarding their sin of pride, injustice, and even drunkenness. Interestingly, there are 6 woes pronounced in Isaiah 5, exactly like in Luke 11.

However, when we go on into Isaiah 6, we read of a seventh “woe,” this time not from the lips of the Lord concerning the people, but from the lips of Isaiah concerning himself.

At the sight of seeing the Almighty, Holy God on His throne, Isaiah responds with...

Isaiah 6:5

“Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!”

Isaiah was broken when he realized his own sinfulness, his own religious hypocrisy in the sight of the Lord. And that is exactly how the Pharisees and lawyers should have responded that day when Jesus was with them. The next “woe” should have been their own.

Should the Lord convict you concerning your hypocrisy, which He is bound to do at some point in your life, don’t respond in rebellion like the Pharisees, respond with...

2. Humble Confession

We say, yes, Lord, you are right. And woe is me for I am a man of unclean lips as I stand before the Holy throne of God. You’re right Lord. At times I do care about my religious activity more than my inward attitude towards you and others. At times I do care more about my spiritual appearance in the sight of others rather than my spiritual health in Your eyes.

The truth is we are all Pharisees at some point in our lives.

VI. GOSPEL HOPE FOR THE HYPOCRITE

But there is **gospel hope** for us. The good news is that God’s grace extends to and covers our hypocrisy. Jesus lived a perfect, hypocrisy-free life for people like you and me, religious hypocrites. He always followed the Lord consistently, never added things to God’s law that wasn’t in line with God’s heart, and came to give freedom to others from the slavery of their sin rather than bind them to a new kind of slavery that is just wrapped with religious appearance.

Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 5:21...

2 Corinthians 5:21

For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Though Jesus was without sin, He took on our sin, all of it. All of our pride, all of our greed, all of our selfishness, and all of our hypocrisy. And in taking our sins on Himself at the cross, He paid the debt we owed to our Holy God. And because of our repentance and faith in the work of Christ, we are found in Him, given a righteousness that is not our own, but nonetheless ours.

And this is really good news for us, because now we don’t have to pretend that we have it all together. We don’t have to flaunt our spirituality in front of others, seeking approval or admiration. In fact, we shouldn’t flaunt it because that faith we have, any spiritual growth we enjoy, any spiritual maturity that is experienced was not of our own

doing, but wholly gifted to us by God’s grace. So there is gospel hope for us in our hypocrisy.

But Jesus’ words against the Pharisees and the lawyers are a **good warning** for us as well, particularly as we fulfill our call to point others to Jesus. We need to be careful of what we are communicating when we speak on behalf of the Lord. Unfortunately, I have been to a number of churches that would be considered “fundamentalist.” I have heard many sermons that consisted of nothing more than pronouncing the “rules” of Christianity, doing nothing but heaping guilt on the congregation without ever offering them the hope of the gospel. And don’t misunderstand me, godliness and holiness are real calls on our lives. We are called to turn away from sin and pursue holiness as we reflect God who is perfectly holy.

However, *do good things* is not the gospel message of Jesus. Believe and *then* do good things as a result, is the message. We are first given new hearts before we do good works, not the other way around. We must not reverse the order, because in so doing, we are not proclaiming the true gospel of Jesus. And instead of clearly showing the way of salvation we will be standing in the way blocking other from entering, just like the lawyers.

As Philip Ryken has noted, “We must not present the Christian Faith as a law to keep rather than a gospel to believe.”²

But you might be listening to this and thinking, what the Pharisees and lawyers were called out for by Jesus, is exactly what I thought Christianity was. Perhaps all you know and think of Christianity is that it is a heavy handed religion, focused on rules and judgment on those who don’t keep them. Maybe it was because of your experiences with churches in the past. Maybe you sat under a pastor or a ministry that was domineering in the way they led. Maybe you saw men who were supposed to gently shepherd their people, but instead heaped guilt and shame on anyone who didn’t fall in line. Maybe you’ve seen church leaders or other supposedly spiritually mature Christians proudly flaunt their spirituality for all to see, making you feel less than or insecure because of where you are in your faith, or you’ve become cynical because you know they lead a very different life than the one they present on Instagram.

Well, the good news is that Jesus is better than what you’ve seen or known before in your experiences. You see, unlike the Pharisees of Jesus’ day, and unlike any modern day legalist, Jesus’ yoke is easy and light.

Matthew 11:28-30

28 Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. **29** Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. **30** For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

Jesus offers an invitation for all of us who have felt the weight of perfection crush them, trying to live up to the expectations of others, the expectations of our culture, the ex-

² Ryken, *Luke*, vol. 1, 635.

pectations of ourselves, of our families, and the expectations we thought were God's. Jesus says coming to Him should be like taking an eternal weight off of your shoulders. If people have presented Christianity as different than that and you are exhausted of heavy handed religion and keeping man made rules and rituals, of being let down by putting your hope in people you thought had it all together, Jesus invites you to come to Him to find rest.

And the reason His yoke is easy and His burden is light, is because God gives through Jesus what He demands through the law. Does God demand perfection? Does God expect His people to be perfectly holy? Yes, He does. And His law shows us that. But that is not all God shows us. He showed His love for us by sending His son to fulfill that law on our behalf so that now we can be seen as perfect and holy in Christ.

So, let me ask, in what ways might you be hypocritical in your actions or attitudes? You can repent of those today and find rest in Jesus. His grace covers our hypocrisy.

Are you exhausted today, spiritually exhausted, because you have been trying and trying to keep rules in order to be found righteous before God? Jesus invites you to come to Him by faith to find rest. Jesus asks you to lay down your imperfect obedience and you will receive His perfect obedience.

VERSES

Luke 11:37-38

Luke 11:39-41

Luke 12:1-3

Luke 11:42

Matthew 23:24

Luke 11:43

Luke 11:44

Numbers 19:16

Luke 11:45

Luke 11:46

Luke 11:47-51

Luke 11:52

Luke 11:53-54

Isaiah 6:5

2 Corinthians 5:21

Matthew 11:28-30

SERMON DISCUSSION GUIDE

Jesus is invited to dinner at the home of a Pharisee. Due to a confrontation regarding ceremonial hand-washing, Jesus uses the opportunity to rebuke the Pharisees and lawyers for their religious hypocrisy. This account gives us warning as well, that we might guard ourselves from slipping into pharisaical, religious hypocrisy.

How would you define hypocrisy? What are some examples of “religious” hypocrisy?

Jesus identified 6 characteristics of those who would be considered religious hypocrites.

Describe each one.

Have you ever experienced these in the church?

Have you experienced these in your own heart?

- 1. Religious Hypocrites Elevate Law Over Love** (Luke 11:42)
- 2. Religious Hypocrites Love Recognition and Praise for their Spirituality** (Luke 11:43)
- 3. Religious Hypocrites Are Not Only in Personal Danger, They Are a Danger to Others** (Luke 11:44)
- 4. Religious Hypocrites Exercise Authority Without Compassion** (Luke 11:46)
- 5. Religious Hypocrisy is Rebellion Against God** (Luke 11:47-51)
- 6. Religious Hypocrites are Hindrances to Life and Salvation, Rather than a Help** (Luke 11:52)

How does the gospel address our hypocrisy?

What does it mean that, unlike the Pharisees, Jesus’ yoke is easy and his burden is light (Matt. 11:30)?