

Luke 11:37-54

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[0 : 0 0] Folks, I'd be really glad if you could turn in your Bibles to that passage that was read for us, Luke chapter 11. You'll also find you've been given on the way in a handout on a Sunday evening.

It's great to be encouraged that we're making progress towards a definite end. The end is coming, and you may find it also helpful just to keep you going and a place to write notes if you want.

But this evening we're dealing with an unpleasant subject, namely hypocrisy. And we'll be looking at one of its more unpleasant expressions, namely religious, self-righteous hypocrisy.

Something that we find, I think, most of us really distasteful. Although if we have any sort of self-awareness, I guess we'll recognize it in ourselves. And so I want to start with ourselves this evening, who will inevitably find a passage like this challenging.

You may have thought that as it was being read. And make the point that these words were not, first of all, spoken to us or written down to describe us.

[1 : 1 0] These are some of the strongest criticisms we can find from the mouth of Jesus anywhere in the Gospels. In fact, they're curses rather than criticisms. Woe to you.

Woe to you, he says. This is not so much a critique as it is a verdict on these people at this particular time. Look at verse 49, for example. Therefore, this generation will be held responsible for the blood of all the prophets that's been shed since the beginning of the world.

From the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah, who was killed between the altar and the sanctuary. Yes, I tell you, this generation will be held responsible for it all.

These are words spoken uniquely to that generation. And I think we need to take that seriously and understand why that is before we begin to work out how these words relate to us, which they most certainly do.

So let me begin with a question. Why has Dr. Luke included this account of dinner at the Pharisees' house in his Gospel?

[2 : 2 3] Why do you think that might be? Well, turn back to Luke chapter 1, right to the beginning. Because here we have Luke's purpose for his whole book.

He writes to somebody called Theophilus. We don't know who he was. But this is what he writes. Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word.

With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that, and here's the purpose statement, you may know the certainty of the things that you have been taught.

This is a book designed to give certainty and confidence to its first century reader, Theophilus, and presumably others, concerning what they've heard about the message of Jesus.

Now, in the first century, one of the biggest threats to confidence for a regular believer is that the religious authorities in Jesus' day rejected him and his message wholeheartedly.

[3 : 51] If you're a first century Christian, whether you're a Jewish one or a non-Jewish one, I think that's a real threat to confidence. How come, if Jesus was really the one that God had promised in the Old Testament, how come, if he's really the saviour of the world, was he so roundly rejected by those you would most expect to recognise him and receive him?

That's a big problem, don't you think? You see the problem? And so one of the things that Luke does, it's a significant thing that he does, is to document how and explain why these people rejected Jesus.

So that that rejection will not threaten the confidence of the first century believer. It's very important. If you don't look like you're on the winning side, you wonder why you don't look like you're on the winning side.

Luke did not include this section to make real believers feel wretched. That's the point. And if you're a real believer here this evening, you will recognise the Pharisee in yourself, as I have.

But that is not why this was written by Luke. And so if you're a real Christian here this evening, though the content of Jesus' words is challenging, you will find in the end that this passage will give great, great courage.

[5 : 22] For as in Jesus' day, the religion of the powerful elite rejected him, so in our own day, the religion of the powerful elite rejects Jesus.

And that, friends, is something that we bump into every single day of life. And we find it confidence-sapping if we're real believers.

So there's great encouragement here. Now, let's get to the detail. This evening, we're looking at the matter of religious observance. Let's get straight to the detail. Verse 37. When Jesus had finished speaking, a Pharisee invited him to eat with him.

So he went in and reclined at the table. But the Pharisee was surprised when he noticed that Jesus did not first wash before the meal. Let's focus in on the Pharisees first, because Jesus does.

Who are they? Well, they're a prominent religious group in first century Judaism. They're the main ethical culture shapers of his day. Serious about doing things right in God's sight.

[6 : 29] Convinced that lack of attention to religious norms was one of the major causes of the nation's difficulties in the past. Why do they wash before meals?

Because they're convinced that moral contamination comes from outside and can be kept outside. What does Jesus say about them?

Well, the first thing he says is that theirs is an outward religion that cloaks greed and wickedness. Verse 39.

Now then, you Pharisees, clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside you're full of greed and wickedness. You foolish people. Did not the one who made the outside make the inside also?

But now, as for what is inside you, be generous to the poor and everything will be clean for you. He says there is an outward veneer of moral purity in these people's lives.

[7 : 32] Highly driven by rules and external appearance. They had many rules about how to do things to be thought of as being a proper godly person.

They're confident that they're right. Critical of those who don't conform. Critical of Jesus, whose behavior here is provocatively non-conforming. Everyone in that age would have washed before dinner at the house of the Pharisees, but he doesn't.

His behavior provokes surprise and shock. Folks, every culture has a ruling religious elite that governs the behavioral norms of the day.

Every culture, including ours. And it really doesn't matter what your culture is. Every culture has a religion of sorts that regulates how people behave.

Whether it's Judaism back then, or Islam in other parts of the world now, or in this country, politically correct secular culture. Every culture has a ruling religious elite.

[8 : 42] And it's generally self-righteous and critical of those who don't conform. And Jesus seriously does not conform to the ethical norms of his day.

He doesn't do the washing at meals. Why? Because he will not play along with the pretense that corruption is a problem that can be kept out by ritual washing before dinner.

The key features of this controlling religion here are outward conformity, inward license, and hostility to God.

My wife Annie worked as a doctor in Pakistan for a while. I visited during part of that. And the lasting impression of that culture is that it is highly outwardly religious.

But that there is a paper-thin veneer over the untouched corruption underneath. That is a culture that is absolutely antagonistic to Jesus and those who follow him.

[9 : 47] Think of our own age. We look back now in our age at the Victorian era as being rule-bound, hypocritical, self-righteous, and corrupt.

And yet, modern secular Britain is highly rule-bound, politically correct. There are so many things that you're not supposed to say, opinions you're not allowed to express, or even hold privately, words you're not allowed to use, things you must do and mustn't do.

So much of our public behavior every day is driven by fear of being seen to step out of line. And the antagonism to Jesus, of course, is very strong in our culture.

An outward religion that hides greed and wickedness, that age back then is not the only age in which that's been a reality. Notice what else he says.

He says that they've got a superficial piety that avoids what really matters. Verse 42. Woe to you, Pharisees, because you give God a tenth of your mint and rue and all other kinds of garden herbs, but you neglect justice and the love of God.

[11 : 08] You should have practiced the latter without leaving the former undone. In first century Judaism, they were supposed to give a tenth of all their crops to God. It was a sign first of love towards God for his generosity and also a way of sustaining the temple system.

They needed food and so on. The Pharisees had become exceptionally particular about that. Every little bit of thing that grew in their fields, they religiously divided up into the tenth of God and the rest for them.

And yet, says Jesus, you neglect what's really important, justice and the love of God. You piously measure out your herbs week by week by week, but you don't care for people and you pay no attention to God.

In our road, where I live, the bins go out on Tuesdays. It used to be Monday, but it's changed recently to Tuesday.

And everyone in our street recycles. Outside every house, on Monday night, the bins go out. One week, it's general rubbish and garden waste. The other week, glass and plastic, paper and cardboard.

[12 : 22] Everyone does it. Why? Because ideologically, as a culture, we are seriously bought into saving the planet. Everything must be done to reduce the carbon footprint, to minimize the landfill, to be environmentally sound.

And so we do. The bottles and the glass and the cardboard and the waste food and the garden waste. And that's all good and fine. But it is quite seriously not what really matters.

For all round our streets, where the bins are neatly arranged outside, where the cardboard and paper have been carefully separated from the glass and the cans, inside the houses, there are families increasing in number every week, destroyed by greed and selfishness.

And in every single house, there's a TV screen giving a window onto a world, heaving with conflict, that sorting out plastic is not going to do anything at all for.

And without exception, everyone in every house, in my road and in yours, will die. Not because of the warming up of the world, but because of the world's sin problem.

[13 : 51] Tithing herbs, it looks impressive. Paying attention even to the smallest detail of agricultural practice. And no doubt people looked at that and were really impressed.

There's a person who takes piety really seriously. But Jesus says it's a smokescreen, a camouflage, window dressing, pretense, a box-ticking exercise to what's important in the world.

Might make you feel good about yourself, says Jesus, but it avoids what really matters. Namely, being rightly related to God and to people.

So we have here an outward religion that hides greed and wickedness and a superficial piety that ignores what really matters. What really does matter to these people? Verse 43. Look at that, please.

Woe to you Pharisees, because you love the most important seats in the synagogues and respectful greetings in the marketplaces. Self-promotion is what matters to these people.

[14 : 57] Underneath all of that religious observance, that outward piety, what really matters is looking good and being approved of. Climbing the social ladder, being in with the in-group, being approved of by the people that are worth being approved of.

And of course, that's the same in every age. It doesn't matter what the dominant form of religion is, whether it's first century Judaism or revolutionary Islam or Chinese communism or modern secularism.

It doesn't matter what ideological group we care to think of, whether it's the government or the professional body we belong to or the golf club or the gang or the bowling club, the denomination or the academic institution, what's mentioned in verse 43 is what really drives the behavior of the controlling elite in every age.

the promotion of the self, being in, being recognized, being someone to that group. And Jesus' verdict on that kind of religion in its first century Palestinian setting is verse 44, woe to you because you're like unmarked graves which people walk over without knowing it.

Walking on a grave back then in Judaism rendered you unclean, religiously unacceptable. And I think the point that Jesus is making here is that these people, though they look pious, are deadly if you get entangled in what they teach and how they do things.

[16 : 37] Stimulating dinner guest, isn't he? They certainly are stimulated because we move straight from the Pharisees, a religious movement, to a particular job within the religious system, the experts in the law, the clergy of the day.

Verse 45, one of the experts in the law answered him, teacher, when you say these things you insult us also. Remember where we are? This is at the dinner table in polite company.

Think how extraordinarily provocative Jesus is. Would you like to have him to dinner? Everyone is taking offense by this stage, but there's no apology at all.

Three more woes and they are all in different ways about these people's attitude to the scriptures. And they hang together in a really interesting and important way.

Now folks, and now is the time to wake up. I know that Sunday evening is not peak time in the week for most people and it's very easy to nod off but you're going to have to concentrate for about four minutes.

[17 : 43] So if your next door neighbor is looking a little bit drowsy, just give them a prod in the ribs. Now is the time to wake up and gird up your mental loins and think hard for a moment. What does Jesus say about the teachers of the law?

One, they promote legalism rather than loving people. Verse 46, you experts in the law, woe to you because you load people down with burdens they can hardly carry and you yourselves will not lift one finger to help them.

The picture of their teaching here is that it was a heavy burden for the hearers. Gave them an enormous weight of things to do without any help in doing those things.

Now hold on to that idea in your mind. That's what they did with the Old Testament. They taught it in a burdensome way. Second thing Jesus says about these people that they honor the prophets of old but belong with those who killed the prophets of old.

Verse 47, woe to you because you build tombs for the prophets and it was your ancestors who killed them. So you testify that you approve of what your ancestors did.

[18 : 55] They killed the prophets and you build their tombs. Because of this God in his wisdom said I will send them prophets and apostles some of whom they'll kill and others they'll persecute.

Therefore this generation will be held responsible for the blood of all the prophets shed since the beginning of the world. Yes, I tell you at the end of the verse this generation responsible for it all.

These people build tombs for the prophets of old. Now it's impossible to know what exactly they were doing. Did they build fancy tombs for them pretty them up or did they build new tombs for them or decorate them or build memorials?

We don't know exactly what practice Jesus is referring to here. At first glance it must have looked like respect for the prophets. But says Jesus it's not respect.

it's just carrying on the killing job that your forefathers did. They were in the prophet murdering business you were in the prophet tomb decorating business.

[20 : 02] You and your fathers you're all in the killing trade at dinner with polite people. Step back and observe folks.

Religious people often honour when they are dead people they would have hated when they were alive. I used to work in the London Hospital in East London in Whitechapel.

Outside the London Hospital in Whitechapel High Street is a statue to William Booth the founder of the Salvation Army. William Booth was absolutely hated when he was alive.

They built a statue for him when he was dead. Who hated him most when he was alive? The religious establishment did. Who is most interested in William Booth now he's dead?

The religious establishment is. Isn't that striking? It's always that way and it was that way with Israel because in the past Israel had repeatedly rejected God's messengers the prophets.

[21 : 09] They were always hostile to them. So much so that the sign of being a true prophet is pretty much that people are hostile to you when you speak. I think that's probably what verse 49 is going on about.

This isn't a straight quotation from the Old Testament. I will send them prophets and apostles some of whom they'll kill and persecute. Jesus might mean here something like if you read the Old Testament wisely you will see that the prophets God sends often get killed.

what is the message of the prophets? Well let me summarize the message of the Old Testament prophets in two statements. One you people have broken God's laws and need to repent.

Two you cannot keep God's laws you need a rescuer and God is going to send one. That I think is a reasonable summary if one has to do it in two sentences.

You've broken God's laws and need to repent but you can't keep God's laws and so God is going to send a rescuer. You need one. Sin is such a huge problem that you cannot keep God's laws you need a rescuer.

[22 : 21] That was the message of the prophets and of course that's a hated message because it gets at self righteousness. Now you can't live up to God's standards you need a rescuer. What is the message of the experts in the law in Jesus day?

Well the message of the experts of the law in Jesus day is wash before dinner. You must wash before you eat. That's how to avoid contamination. Now look do you see the difference between those two messages?

On the one hand the prophets in the Old Testament judgment is coming your only hope is the rescuer that God sends. On the other hand the teachers of the law in Jesus day before dinner that's the answer and many other things.

Here's the question. What should the faithful teacher of the law in Jesus day have been saying? Well the faithful teacher of the law in Jesus day should be saying here he is.

Here's the promised rescuer. Here he is at last. What should the faithful teacher of the law have been experiencing in Jesus day?

[23 : 38] Well the same as the prophets of old experienced. Hardship, persecution, difficulty. What are the teachers of the law in Jesus day doing instead of that?

Well they're just about to think of killing the promised one and they are in the positions of honor and have money to spare for decorating tombs.

And that's why the words of Jesus are so strong in verse 50. Therefore this generation will be held responsible for the blood of all the prophets.

Just as the message and mission of Jesus is the culmination of all the prophets have ever said, so this generation's rejection of him is in an important sense the culmination of all the preceding rejections.

Reject the ultimate messenger and the ultimate judgment falls on you. There's a chilling judgment implicit here, isn't there? This generation's rejection of me will be the end of national privilege for them.

[24 : 54] All this, folks, all this at the dinner table. He concludes verse 52, woe to you experts in the law because you've taken away the key to knowledge.

You yourselves have not entered and you've hindered those who were entering. You've read the law and taught it wrongly. It's supposed to point you towards a rescuer but you make loads of rules up.

It is absolutely characteristic of the religious hierarchy in every age to do precisely that. I was invited to speak at a student carol service a few years ago in a cathedral.

They managed to get the cathedral to lend them the building for the carol service. A number of CU's plugged together. But because it was a cathedral, the owners of the cathedral, if that's the right way to put it, felt necessary that they had to introduce the carol service.

Up got a clergyman at the beginning of the carol service, all dressed up in clergy gear. He said this, how good it is to come together at Christmas time to remember Jesus who came into the world to teach us to be good.

[26 : 13] good. Now if that's not somebody who has taken away the key to knowledge, then what is? That is not somebody who's understood the sin problem as the Old Testament reveals it.

If Jesus came into the world to teach us to be good, well, all we have to do is be good. But that's not what Jesus came to do. He came to rescue us from a problem that is quite beyond us to be good about.

it. Now that isn't really any different from the message the world teaches us all the time, all the time, every day. Teaches us in one way or another that all we need, all we really need is to behave a little better and all will be well.

Folks, our time has gone. A couple of reflections. Jesus is very uncomfortable because his analysis of human nature goes below the surface.

We may well have felt uncomfortable as we've listened to his words. Are you not aware of your own hypocrisy if you're a Christian? Now it is possible that there is a person here who does need to be made to feel uncomfortable this evening.

[27 : 27] Sometimes, occasionally, people do come to church in order to hide from God, in order to tick the religious box of life. If that's you, then be in no doubt that Jesus sees under the surface.

And today would be a great day to stop pretending that he doesn't and to turn to him for forgiveness and for mercy, which he holds out. But my guess is that that's not where most of us are this evening.

What Jesus does here is takes the lid off what's going on in the minds and hearts of the religious power brokers of his day. Why did Luke's readers need this?

Well, for the first century disciple, it was enormously important to know what these people were really like and why they rejected Jesus. Because as a first century disciple, you find yourself joining in with the persecuted minority.

And it must be that you ask yourself, am I on the right side? why wasn't Jesus recognized by these people?

[28 : 38] Why did they reject him? Were they wrong or am I wrong? And so here's the diagnosis. A diagnosis made over dinner and a trivial looking discussion about hand washing.

This is what really drives these people. Self-advancement, self-promotion. If they persecute you, it doesn't mean that you're not on the right side.

That must have been enormously encouraging for the first century disciple to hear. And we need this analysis for exactly the same reasons as they did.

Because in the 21st century, we find that our world is just like that world. Western secular culture is one of the most superficial, self-righteous, self-promoting, legalistic, and fear-driven in history.

It is totally convinced that Jesus is an absolute irrelevance, nay, a dangerous fanatic. Western secular culture, both formally and informally, keeps up rules, legislation, in an extraordinary way.

[30 : 01] Don't say certain words, don't think certain thoughts, don't smoke in public places, make sure you eat five a day, surely the most trivial, trivial rule that's ever been perpetrated, cycle to work, recycle your cardboard, and all that stuff.

And those rules create an atmosphere which is fundamentally burdensome, in which people are fearful of being seen to step out of line, in which people have a delusional self-righteousness which is skin deep, and completely fails to touch the problem of human greed.

Western secular culture is strongly opposed to Jesus and the rescue he's brought. It would be so easy for the ordinary believer to feel overwhelmed when faced with that mass of do this, don't do that, in order to be a proper person.

Don't you feel that? Don't you find it sapping, dispiriting? Don't you find yourself sometimes fearful and cowed into silence because it seems so prevalent and so powerful, that kind of attitude?

Do you ever lack confidence that you're really on the winning side or that anything good will ever come from what Jesus has done? How encouraging it is then to see him take the lid off what motivates the religious controlling elite in every age.

[31 : 37] He knows what's going on. He's quite brave enough and powerful enough to deal with it all in the end. So believer, take heart. Let's pray together.

Just a moment to reflect on what we've learned and to respond to God in the quiet and I'll lead us in prayer.

We thank you, Lord God, for this extraordinary conversation around the dinner table and for the way in which Jesus sees right to the heart of what motivates that powerfully religious and controlling culture.

And we recognize that the things we've seen here in these people back then are very characteristic of human beings in every age. We recognize that we find our own culture burdensome and depressing and superficial but we thank you that none of that is unknown to you and we pray that you would give us confidence that the things that look so powerful and the attitudes that look so prevalent are not really dealing with the human need and the human problem.

We thank you that you have sent a rescuer. We thank you that his vision is clear and his power is supreme and we pray that you give us confidence in standing for him in this his world.

[33 : 44] We ask these things in his name. Amen. Amen. Thank you.