

“Jesus Confronts Hypocrisy”

Lesson Text: Luke 11:37-44 **Background Scripture:** Luke 11:37-44 **Devotional Reading:** 1 Samuel 15:19-23

Luke 11:37–44 (NIV)

³⁷ When Jesus had finished speaking, a Pharisee invited him to eat with him; so he went in and reclined at the table. ³⁸ But the Pharisee was surprised when he noticed that Jesus did not first wash before the meal.

³⁹ Then the Lord said to him, “Now then, you Pharisees clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside you are full of greed and wickedness. ⁴⁰ You foolish people! Did not the one who made the outside make the inside also? ⁴¹ But now as for what is inside you—be generous to the poor, and everything will be clean for you.

⁴² “Woe to you Pharisees, because you give God a tenth of your mint, rue and all other kinds of garden herbs, but you neglect justice and the love of God. You should have practiced the latter without leaving the former undone.

⁴³ “Woe to you Pharisees, because you love the most important seats in the synagogues and respectful greetings in the marketplaces.

⁴⁴ “Woe to you, because you are like unmarked graves, which people walk over without knowing it.”

TODAY’S LESSON AIMS

- **Learning Facts:** To summarize the woes Jesus proclaimed.
- **Biblical Principle:** To explain why the Pharisees were hypocrites.
- **Daily Application:** To identify a common area of hypocrisy among Christians and suggest ways to avoid it.

INTRODUCTION

Counterfeit Money, Counterfeit Behavior

After the creation of modern money, an inevitable invention followed: counterfeit money. For example, ancient counterfeiters minted coins made from metals that were less valuable than the authentic coins. The counterfeit coins were dipped in silver to mimic the real coins. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, fraudsters clipped the edges of authentic coins in order to extract bits of the precious metals. From those clippings, they would create a counterfeit coin.

Contemporary money has undergone developments to limit counterfeiters. Many modern coins have grooved or milled edges to show that none of the valuable precious metals have been removed. These efforts, while preventing some counterfeiters, have not done away with the practice altogether. Profits await the successful counterfeiter.

People sometimes “counterfeit” themselves by pretending to be someone they are not. Scandals arise when people say they believe or value one thing but act in a way that opposes that value. Jesus had no tolerance for hypocritical behavior, especially from the religious leaders of His day.

LESSON CONTEXT

The Gospel of Luke is the first of a two-volume work attributed to “Luke, the doctor” (Colossians 4:14). The man Luke was likely the same individual mentioned as the traveling companion of the apostle Paul (2 Timothy 4:11). This would explain the use of “we” throughout the book of Acts (examples: Acts 16:10–12; 20:5–6; 21:1), which is the second volume of Luke’s writing (1:1–3). Together, the books of Luke and Acts describe the establishment and expansion of the first-century church.

Today’s Scripture is part of a larger section that details Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem (Luke 9:51–19:44). Immediately prior to the events of this lesson’s Scripture, Jesus had been teaching (11:1–4) and healing (11:14–15). His teaching called out the wickedness of the people (11:29–32) and emphasized the importance of their internal spiritual transformation (11:33–36).

The religious leaders undoubtedly heard what Jesus was teaching and doing as he traveled to Jerusalem. The New Testament Gospels describe Jesus' interactions with the Pharisees more than any other party of first-century Judaism. The Pharisees were a small but influential sect. Their focus was on strict adherence to Judaism (see Acts 26:5), which would have involved obedience to the Law of Moses (also called Torah), the first five books of the Old Testament. The Pharisees believed that by faithfully obeying even the smallest parts of the law, they would experience blessing from God. In an effort to follow the law faithfully, the Pharisees had established a tradition to guide their behavior (see Mark 7:3–5). The Pharisees sought to “build a fence” around the Law of Moses by enforcing this tradition and their own rules. The expectation was that by following the Pharisees' tradition, a person would faithfully keep God's commands—even down to the most obscure command.

The Pharisees' zeal, however, had caused them to lose sight of the intentions of the law and the extent to which they had been influenced by tradition. They had focused so heavily on their prideful adherence to tradition that they neglected to cultivate hearts of worship that the law required (see Matthew 15:1–9). Jesus denounced the Pharisees for their pride and hypocrisy (examples: 23:1–7; Luke 18:9–14). As a result, instances of conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees arose (examples: 6:1–11; 16:13–14; John 7:28–34; 11:57).

Despite the hostile relationship, Jesus accepted invitations to eat with the Pharisees. Today's Scripture describes the second time in Luke's Gospel that Jesus dined with a Pharisee (see also Luke 7:36–50; 14:1–6). Accounts similar to those found in today's lesson are found in Matthew 15:1–20; 23:5–7, 23–28; and Mark 12:38–39.

Two People: Luke 11:37–41

Prior to this verse, Jesus had been teaching the crowds regarding wickedness and judgment (Luke 11:29–32) and how they might live in a manner indicative of spiritual health (11:33–36). The text is silent regarding the reason that this certain *Pharisee invited Jesus to eat with him*. Inviting a teacher to a meal was common in the first century A.D. The meal allowed the teacher to demonstrate his or her expertise and wisdom. By extending the invitation, the host desired to receive some level of honor from the guest and from the wider community of people. Extending invitations to the socially outcast, people like “tax collectors and sinners,” was generally avoided (see 5:27–31). Perhaps this Pharisee wanted to question Jesus in private. Or perhaps he wanted to demonstrate his own piety by way of extending an invitation to the traveling teacher.

1. Who invited Jesus to dinner? (Luke 11:37)

What Do You Think?

How can your sharing a meal with another person give you the opportunity to show God's love to that person?

Digging Deeper

Who will you invite to share a meal with you this upcoming week?

The Pharisee noticed that Jesus *did not first wash* up before He sat down to eat. It was common for first-century Jews to perform ceremonial washings for purification (examples: John 2:6; 3:25; 11:55). Such occurrences were a way for the people to become ritually clean as described by the Law of Moses (Leviticus 11–15). For Pharisees, cleanliness in general and handwashing in particular were ways to follow the religious tradition (see Mark 7:1–4). Although the Law of Moses required periodic washing (examples: Leviticus 11:28; 15:4–27), the Pharisees had broadened the practice.

One would expect that a guest would follow the customs and manners of his or her host. Being surprised, astonished, or amazed at someone did not always have positive connotations, as was the case with Jesus (Mark 6:6) and the apostle Paul (Galatians 1:6). This Pharisee did not have positive regard for that fact that Jesus did not first wash.

Jesus did not object to washing. He washed the feet of the Twelve (John 13:1–12). He even scolded a host for failing to provide water for washing (Luke 7:44). In this instance, Jesus' refusal to wash served as an act of provocation and gave Him the opportunity to teach those in attendance at the meal.

2. What did the Pharisee notice before Jesus sat down to eat? (Luke 11:38)

Knowing what the host was thinking, Jesus responded by giving a “spiritual analysis” of the *Pharisees*. Jesus was not primarily concerned about food safety practices. Instead, He used the example to rebuke the attitudes and behaviors of the Pharisees. Jesus in a roundabout way said, washing only the outside of the cup and dish presents an obvious problem. While the vessels might appear clean, the inside that touches food or drink will remain unclean. The dish still has potential for contamination. Cleaning dishes for food and drink requires total commitment!

Jesus knew that the Pharisees were more concerned with outward displays of purity than with the actual purity of their hearts and minds. The Pharisees’ inner impurity was evident in their public actions. *Wickedness* (v. 39 of today’s lesson) is a generic term for evil actions. The apostle Paul used the same term when describing the actions of the unrighteous (Romans 1:28–31). Such actions are indicative of the evil present in a person’s heart (see Mark 7:20–23). Greed characterized the desires of many of the Pharisees (Luke 16:14). They even engaged in predatory behavior to gain wealth at the expense of vulnerable members of their community (see 20:46–47).

Calling the Pharisees *foolish* (v. 40 of today’s lesson) intensified Jesus’ indictment of their wicked behavior. In a later parable, Jesus used the designation “fool” when describing “a certain rich man” and the spiritual dangers he faced because of his greed (Luke 12:13–21). Both the Pharisees and that parable’s main character were fools because their lives lacked integrity.

Jesus’ rhetorical question (in verse 40 of today’s lesson) highlights that God *made* the whole person: the outside parts which are seen and the inside parts which are unseen. God Himself is perfect (Matthew 5:48) and pure (Job 4:17; compare Habakkuk 1:13). Therefore, God desires total purity from his creation. God wants people to live lives that are pure from the inside out, not concerned only with appearances (see James 4:8). Jesus explained the folly of shallow cleanliness in place of developing actual spiritual purity and lives of integrity.

3. What did Jesus call the Pharisee out about? (Luke 11:39-40)

What Do You Think?

What steps can believers take to develop spiritual purity and personal integrity?

Digging Deeper

How do Romans 12; Ephesians 4:20–32; and Colossians 3:5–17 inform your actions in this regard?

One correction for the Pharisees’ greed and wickedness involved doing the right thing and giving generously of their wealth. This could be accomplished through charitable gifts given to the poor. Although the Law of Moses contains no reference to these specific gifts, it does include guidance on caring for people in need (Exodus 23:10–11; Leviticus 25:35–43; Deuteronomy 15:7–11; etc.). Therefore, practices of justice in the form of generosity were not a new requirement for the Pharisees. Jesus was calling them to follow the law that they already had claimed to value.

Jesus’ command appears to deny the value of one practice (washing) in order to uphold the value of another (giving). However, it is the intent, rather than the act itself, that determines the purity of that act. How a person allocates his or her wealth is one way to indicate the status of his or her heart: a *clean* heart is *generous* with worldly wealth (see 1 John 3:17–18).

4. What instructions did Jesus give them? (Luke 11:41)

What Do You Think?

How do you practice generosity that comes from having a clean heart?

Digging Deeper

What steps do you take to overcome challenges to demonstrating hospitality?

Three Woes: Luke 11:42–44

The first three “woes” of six denounce the Pharisees for their wrong priorities. These six woes parallel the woes in Matthew 23. Jesus started with the sins of the Pharisees (Luke 11:42-44) and then turned to the sins of the scribes, for it was their interpretations of the Law that formed the basis for the whole Pharisaical system (Luke 11:45-52, not in today’s lesson).

A woe is a proclamation intended to announce pending pain, threat, or grief. Such proclamations are common in the Old Testament prophets (examples: Isaiah 5:8–30; Micah 2:1–2). Jesus also proclaimed such warnings (examples: Matthew 11:21; 26:24; Luke 6:24–26; 17:1). On one occasion, Jesus proclaimed woes upon the teachers of the law and the Pharisees (Matthew 23:13–32).

The first woe came as a result of the Pharisees’ keeping a minor command without showing regard for a weightier command (see Luke 11:42c, below). A tithe is a gift of a *tenth* from the larger whole (example: Genesis 14:18–20). The Law of Moses provided guidelines on how the Israelites should give a tenth of their goods for worship and to support the Levites and people who were impoverished (Leviticus 27:30–33; Deuteronomy 14:22–29; 26:1–15).

Herbs like *mint* and *rue* can grow wild and can flourish without oversight and care from humans. Determining the appropriate amount of these herbs to tithe would have required great attention to detail from the Pharisees. While the Law of Moses gave no specific command regarding the tithing of wild herbs, the Pharisees practiced such a thing. Their practice hedged all around the law while disregarding the explicit requirements of the law.

Tithing should have been a joyous act of love to God. The Pharisees had turned the practice into an opportunity to demonstrate their rigorous obedience to the law, even regarding insignificant herbs.

5. What did the Pharisees need to prioritize? (Luke 11:42)

What Do You Think?

In what ways do you tithe to God from your time, energy, or thoughts?

Digging Deeper

How will these types of tithes demonstrate your love for God and for your neighbors?

The same God who acted with justice and mercy toward his people by rescuing them from Egypt (see Exodus 12:31–42) also required that His people show *justice* (v. 42c of today’s lesson) and mercy to others in need (see Zechariah 7:9–10). The Old Testament provides guidance regarding treatment toward people experiencing poverty, many of whom were widows, orphans, and resident aliens (examples: Exodus 22:21–27; Deuteronomy 24:10–22). God judged people who failed to show fair and just treatment toward others (see Amos 2:6–8).

At the heart of the Law of Moses and Jesus’ teachings were the dual commands regarding the people’s *love of God* (Deuteronomy 6:5; Matthew 22:36–38) and their love for others (Leviticus 19:18; Matthew 22:39; Luke 10:26–27). God’s people followed the former command as they demonstrated their willingness to adhere to the latter command.

Jesus declared woe on the Pharisees for their neglect of these two commands. They had practiced the unrequired smaller aspects of law—tithing herbs—while leaving undone the command to love others (see Matthew 23:23). They had attempted to honor God while also neglecting the command to show justice to their neighbors. The religious leaders of Jesus’ day had shown a lack of regard for people in need (see Luke 20:46–47). Further, they had acted pridefully regarding their observance of the law (see 18:9–14), leading them to show disregard for others (see Matthew 23:1–4). They had failed to live in the manner required of them: a life of humility marked with mercy and justice (see Micah 6:8).

The second woe calls out the prideful and arrogant behavior of the Pharisees. Their *love* was misdirected, concerned for their own status rather than the well-being of others.

First-century *synagogues* were the locations for the reading and teaching of Scripture (example: Matthew 4:23). Most synagogues would have lacked sufficient seating, requiring some people to stand or sit on the floor. The religious leaders,

however, would not have to take on these positions. They would sit in *the most important seats* of honor and prestige, likely visible to all people in the building.

The Pharisees' desire for recognition also included their attitudes in the public square. Jesus warned against similar actions from the teachers of the law as they "like to walk around in flowing robes and love to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces" (Luke 20:46). The nature of these greetings is unknown, but they likely involved excessive deference by other people to these leaders. God desires that his people act with humility and treat others with respect and dignity, regardless of social status (see Romans 12:3).

6. What were Jesus' second and third woes? (Luke 11:43-44)

What Do You Think?

How can believers ensure worship services do not turn into opportunities for self-promotion?

Digging Deeper

What steps can your congregation take to avoid playing favorites?

This final woe in today's lesson does not mention a specific sin committed by the Pharisees. Instead, the woe introduces a metaphor that demonstrates Jesus' disgust. In an ironic twist, Jesus proclaimed that the Pharisees—people most concerned with purity—had become not only defiled but also a source of defilement themselves. Jesus considered them hypocrites because they claimed to honor the law while ignoring its core: loving God and others (see commentary on Luke 11:42c, above).

If a Jewish person came into contact with a dead body, the person became ritually unclean and would have to take steps to be considered clean (see Numbers 19:11–22). This held true even if a grave was unmarked and the person who came upon it did not realize their proximity to the dead. In a similar manner, people would unknowingly become unclean when they followed the teachings and the practices of the Pharisees. This was like people walking over *unmarked graves* and not being aware of their own defilement. The behavior and attitudes of the Pharisees were causing others to suffer grave harm.

CONCLUSION

In many ways, faults similar to those Jesus pointed out in the Pharisees can be found in people today. The Pharisees prioritized outward displays of holiness, while failing to do the important work of love, mercy, and justice. Pursuing counterfeit displays of holiness, while potentially easier than going after what God requires, leaves people as hypocrites. God wants His people to experience holiness in all aspects of their lives.

Followers of Jesus must remember to honor the commands to love God, show justice, and demonstrate merciful love, above any other traditions. Only then will believers exercise a "pure" religion before God (James 1:27). A failure to do so indicates that one's heart has not been transformed.

Consider the following questions: Does your behavior lead you to love God more deeply? Does your behavior lead you to act justly or advocate for justice for others? If you can answer positively to both questions, then you are on the right track to loving God and your neighbor.

PRAYER

Heavenly Father, we desire to be holy people. Take away our need to impress others, and impress on us the image of your Son, Jesus Christ. Show us how we might be generous with our giftings in order that we might love You and our neighbors. In the name of Your Son, Jesus. Amen.

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER

Pure religion requires that we love God and our neighbors.