

*It's The Inside That Counts*  
*By Jason Huff*  
*Deuteronomy 30:15-20, Psalm 36, Luke 11:37-54*

Today's Gospel reading comes from Luke 11:37-54. Listen now to God's Word. "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, noticing that Jesus did not first wash before the meal, was surprised. 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. You foolish people! Did not the one who made the outside make the inside also? But give what is inside the dish to the poor, and everything will be clean for you. 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. Woe to you Pharisees, because you love the most important seats in the synagogues and greetings in the marketplaces. Woe to you, because you are like unmarked graves, which men walk over without knowing it." One of the experts in the law answered him, "Teacher, when you say these things, you insult us also." Jesus replied, "And 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. Woe to you, because you build tombs for the prophets, and it was your forefathers who killed them. So you testify that you approve of what your forefathers did; 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 will kill and others they will persecute.' Therefore this generation will be held responsible for the blood of all the prophets that has 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. Woe to you experts in the law, because you have taken away the key to knowledge. You yourselves have not entered, and you have hindered those who were entering." When Jesus left there, the Pharisees and the teachers of the law began to oppose him fiercely and to besiege him with questions, waiting to catch him in something he might say."

This time last year, we started our great house hunt. We went from Macomb to Mount Clemens looking for someplace we might call home. We found that a lot of homes look great from the outside...the lawn was cut, the roof was solid, the siding looked decent. But as we found out, it's the inside that counts. We'd walk through house after house, and each one had been trashed. Papers strewn around, walls punched through, garbage on the floors...they were disaster areas. After going inside, you wouldn't touch them with a ten-foot pole. There was one beautiful home...it had a wonderful exterior, it looked fantastic, and it even looked well-kept on the inside. It looked like a dream. But when we looked in the crawl space, there was four feet of water in it. The mold and rot were so bad that it wasn't certain that the house could even be salvaged. Such a waste – a house worth \$400,000 in a good market reduced to worthlessness.

In a personal way, that's exactly what Jesus is warning about in today's passage. When we first hear Jesus in this passage, He surprises us with the harsh tone He has with the other guests around the table. But Jesus' words to the religious leaders of *His* day are incredibly important for us to understand because they get to the heart of why so many people reject the church in *our* day...and how we can defend against being hypocritical in our faith.

The story starts with Jesus accepting an invitation to a meal at a Pharisee's house. The Pharisees were the dominant Jewish party of the day, and they often opposed Jesus, but He still went. Now the Pharisees had a ritual they had created to be ceremonially clean. The Bible didn't demand it, but the Pharisees were obsessive-compulsive about outward purity. They had huge water basins they used to wash their hands and their kitchen items so they would be ritually clean. Washing ceremonially as you ate in a Pharisee's home was a big deal. This wasn't about soap and water and our modern concerns with disease – this was about proving that you were a godly person by an external action other people recognized.

And Jesus would have nothing to do with it. He knew the social convention, but it meant nothing. In fact, it helped keep the Pharisees in their illusion that they were the only people who truly followed God. Jesus points out the problem. The Pharisees were concerned about ritual and ceremony, but God is interested in the heart. The hearts of the Pharisees were as wicked as anybody's – if not more so! The word used to describe the Pharisees is “greedy,” but the Greek is stronger...it's a wildly selfish greed that will trample on anyone who gets in the way. Their rituals didn't fool God. He knows everything about us, including what we really think and believe no matter what we might say. Being clean from the inside out is what really matters.

Jesus' solution to the problem is difficult to understand – our translation this morning says “give what is inside the dish to the poor, and everything will be clean for you.” The idea here is that Jesus wants them to stand with the poor, not just giving them money but empathizing with them out of compassion. They had to become truly righteousness, not pretenders.

Then Jesus speaks three woes about the Pharisees. Now the word “woe” is not something we normally use. It's not a curse. Instead, it's grief about immanent disaster. When Jesus proclaims these woes, he's angry, but he's also sad. He's grieving how horrible it will be on the day of judgment for the Pharisees. And each thing He mentions is a warning for them and for us.

The first woe is about neglecting our responsibilities to God and to each other while keeping up appearances. The Pharisees tithed on *everything*, even some tiny herbs exempt from the tithe by the law! Jesus says that tithing shouldn't be neglected - but that's another sermon. He says that their fixation on tithing every last little thing should instead be about justice and the love of God! The Pharisees didn't really care about the poor. They cared about following the minutia of the law as they interpreted it, and anybody who didn't do it their way was condemned.

But they missed the point of the law that still holds true for us today. God wants our hearts to be right with Him. The law shows us our need for God because we can't keep every commandment. If you take Jesus' teachings seriously, where lust is the same as adultery and hatred is the same as murder, every one of us has broken each of the Ten Commandments. Jesus came so that we might have forgiveness and that our hearts could be changed and made holy. We love one another and we love the stranger or the poor person in our midst because God has shown us His kindness. We deserve God's wrath but we receive God's mercy – and so we are called to show that mercy to those who need it in our midst. We shouldn't fixate on the little things. If a PowerPoint slide is off or someone says something not quite right, so what? God the Father sent Jesus so that we could go beyond the petty little things and focus on real relationship, so that we could forgive the mistakes, and the Pharisees didn't get that.

Jesus' second woe is based on the Pharisees' love of authority and power and recognition. The Pharisees got the seat of prominence in the synagogue...the seat facing everybody else right up front at the center of attention. And if you were a dignitary like a Pharisee, the greeting ritual was a long ceremony that pointed out your spiritual position. The Pharisees dressed the part; you would always recognize them in a crowd.

We still see this today. In today's churches, contemporary, traditional, who knows how to dress? But in churches of all kinds, sometimes, if you don't look like everybody else, you're not accepted. We can also fall into the trap of having a position in the church or attending church merely because it looks good. The Pharisees tried to prove their righteousness by how they were seen. Are we like them? Do we do things for show believing that God will see how good we are and grant us access to heaven when we die? Because God doesn't care about all our religious trappings, what clothes you wear or the people you know or how spiritual people *think* you are. All that matters to God is whether or not you have received His gift of forgiveness through Jesus Christ and turned away from sin so that the Holy Spirit can work within you and cleanse you from the inside out. Nothing else matters.

Jesus then pronounces that the Pharisees are like unmarked graves that people walk over without realizing it. By Old Testament law, touching a dead person made you unclean. This wasn't something the Pharisees made up; it was the way the Jewish people learned from the Law how to perceive death as something foreign and alien. God's intent was never for us to die in the first place; our sin was what brought death into the picture. When Jesus calls the Pharisees unmarked graves, He's saying they are spiritually dead. All their pretending is worthless. But what's more, when people come into contact with them, they become unclean themselves. They started thinking that following the Pharisees' man-made rules was the only way to be righteous. They fell into the trap of the Pharisees' legalism unaware. Truth be told, it worked...though there were less than 6,000 Pharisees in Jesus' day, the movement the Pharisees started became rabbinical Judaism, which is the core of religious Judaism in a variety of ways today.

But the same thing can happen to us. When we let personal preferences or denominational differences divide us, we're doing the same thing. We argue over things like traditional and contemporary worship, spiritual gifts like speaking in tongues, minor differences in beliefs. Now some distinctives we teach are important, but if we judge churches who sing a little differently or have a unique take on some minor thing, we're guilty of the same sin. We are supposed to be unified as Christians. Occasionally we disagree on big issues like certain sins, and we're not going to find unity because our first loyalty is to Christ. But we can't let our own personal likes and dislikes in church become rules that bind other believers.

Then there's a shift in the passage. The scribes were people who studied the Scriptures as their profession, not unlike seminary professors today. They were friends with the Pharisees. So one of the table guests makes it clear that what Jesus is saying is offending everybody at the table. Then Jesus starts listing woes on the scribes! He's showing them that they too are guilty.

Jesus' first problem with the scribes is that they burdened the people with rules and regulations. The scribes and Pharisees were known for creating rules to avoid breaking God's law. For example, they forbid healing on the Sabbath. Even if you were poor, you couldn't pick up leftover grain in a field on the Sabbath. They expanded the Law to the point that the average person couldn't possibly keep track of it all, and then the scribes condemned people for not following their man-made rules. And yet the scribes and Pharisees found ways around their own laws. For example, they determined you could travel a quarter mile from home on the Sabbath and then return. But if you kept food at some other location, you could travel up to two miles to get there and back. Since the scribes were well-to-do, they'd store food at another scribes' home and then travel as they wanted. The vast majority of people barely had enough food to make a day's meals, so they couldn't bypass the restriction. That's hypocrisy plain and simple.

Sometimes we do this still today. Some interaction this morning...how many of you have been told that it's sinful to drink any alcohol? How about dancing? Playing cards? Movies? Music? Do you know that there are churches that ban instruments in worship? All of these rules came from somebody trying to keep somebody else from sinning. All of those things could potentially lead to sin if abused, but the Bible doesn't ban them. Here's the point – no external law is going to stop us from sinning. Some things in this life are good to avoid for our health and well-being; Scripture makes that clear. But Christ gives us the freedom not to sin. When we've given our lives over to Him, Christ gives us the ability to choose to do the right thing. When we create rules that ban something that can be used by God for good, we're the ones who are sinning! Only God knows the number of people who have rejected Him because they've been told that something they enjoy is a sin when it's not. We should work together to steer one another away from true sin. But when we do, we should make it clear that there are some things that are open to discussion and aren't just condemned out of hand.

Jesus' second woe on the scribes is another toughie. The scribes and Pharisees showed their piety by keeping up the tombs of the prophets. Yet Jesus said that, just like their forefathers, they hate and murder the prophets who come and tell them of their sin and the need to repent. On the outside, they honored the prophets, but inside, they hated the truth that the prophets told. Jesus says that His generation would be held responsible for the deaths of all the prophets. But why? The why is that His generation will murder Him, God's own son, the prophet beyond all prophets. And yet, in the midst of it all, God still offers forgiveness to those who condemned Jesus to death if they turn from sin and believe in Jesus for salvation.

In the modern church, we don't think about prophets much. The prophet is a mouthpiece for God who speaks God's truth to His people about both the present and the future. Prophets call for repentance. Every biblical prophet laid out the people's sins and told them to change to avoid God's righteous judgment. So how well do we take news of our own sin? We often pick on sins that others do that rarely affect us, but we have a hard time listening when someone points out our own. Plenty of sins affect us in the modern church. Some are big, like adultery, pornography, greed, you name it. But the smaller ones affect a lot of us...like pride, gossip, covetousness...often, we do what we want to get what we want. When we hear our sins named, we shouldn't be angry at the person who confronts us. Otherwise, we're just as bad as those who hated the prophets. But if we take those warnings to heart and surrender our sins at the foot of the cross to Jesus and abandon them there, we can overcome this woe.

Final woe of the morning...Jesus accuses the scribes of taking away the key of knowledge. They don't have knowledge, and they've taken away the means by which others can gain godly knowledge. While Jesus doesn't define the key of knowledge, as I understand it from the rest of Scripture, the key is grace. Without grace, the law that was meant to show us how to enter into a loving relationship with God becomes a bunch of regulations to follow to the letter. Without grace, we become slaves to the law. The law condemns us because we can't follow it. Without grace, we can't forgive others, and we can't understand how God could possibly forgive us. But with grace, we can start to see how we need God's forgiveness and mercy. With grace, we can forgive others because God has forgiven us. We literally become gracious, we live out grace, and we know that Jesus' grace to us in his death and resurrection is real. And we can grow in the real knowledge of God because we see everything through the lens of God's grace to us. But without that lens, we risk winding up like the scribes, who thought they were holy people but really acted nothing like what God really wanted.

I started this morning talking about our house hunt. We eventually found a place that many of you have seen and some of you have visited. It wasn't perfect on the outside – a couple windows need replacing, a chimney needed to be set, got to brick in the old milk chute – and the inside needed some fixes too. But the outside didn't lie about the inside, and both were well worth the effort to get into shape. It's still got plenty of room for improvement, but now it's truly home. This morning, we've got a choice before us, a choice to get our inside and our outside on the same page. The woes that Jesus pronounced about the scribes and Pharisees are not against them alone. If we make Christianity just a religion of man-made rules rather than a relationship with the holy God of the universe, then we've missed the boat. We may look beautiful on the outside, but we will still be self-centered and full of sin. But if we are willing to surrender ourselves to God and let Him rule us, if we turn ourselves over to His grace and let Him wash us, then we will truly be clean inside and out. Which will you choose today?