

**Luke 11:37-54**

<sup>37</sup> After he had spoken, a Pharisee invited him to dine at his home. He entered and reclined at table to eat.<sup>38</sup> The Pharisee was amazed to see that he did not observe the prescribed washing before the meal.<sup>39</sup> The Lord said to him, “Oh you Pharisees! Although you cleanse the outside of the cup and the dish, inside you are filled with plunder and evil.<sup>40</sup> You fools! Did not the maker of the outside also make the inside?<sup>41</sup> But as to what is within, give alms, and behold, everything will be clean for you.<sup>42</sup> Woe to you Pharisees! You pay tithes of mint and of rue and of every garden herb, but you pay no attention to judgment and to love for God. These you should have done, without overlooking the others.<sup>43</sup> Woe to you Pharisees! You love the seat of honor in synagogues and greetings in marketplaces.<sup>44</sup> Woe to you! You are like unseen graves over which people unknowingly walk.”<sup>45</sup> Then one of the scholars of the law said to him in reply, “Teacher, by saying this you are insulting us too.”<sup>46</sup> And he said, “Woe also to you scholars of the law! You impose on people burdens hard to carry, but you yourselves do not lift one finger to touch them.<sup>47</sup> Woe to you! You build the memorials of the prophets whom your ancestors killed.<sup>48</sup> Consequently, you bear witness and give consent to the deeds of your ancestors, for they killed them and you do the building.<sup>49</sup> Therefore, the wisdom of God said, ‘I will send to them prophets and apostles; some of them they will kill and persecute’<sup>50</sup> in order that this generation might be charged with the blood of all the prophets shed since the foundation of the world,<sup>51</sup> from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah who died between the altar and the temple building. Yes, I tell you, this generation will be charged with their blood!<sup>52</sup> Woe to you, scholars of the law! You have taken away the key of knowledge. You yourselves did not enter and you stopped those trying to enter.”<sup>53</sup> When he left, the scribes and Pharisees began to act with hostility toward him and to interrogate him about many things,<sup>54</sup> for they were plotting to catch him at something he might say. (Luke 11:37-54)

---

**Context.** The principal divisions of the Gospel according to Luke are the following:

- I. The Prologue ([1:1–4](#))
- II. The Infancy Narrative ([1:5–2:52](#))
- III. The Preparation for the Public Ministry ([3:1–4:13](#))
- IV. The Ministry in Galilee ([4:14–9:50](#))
- V. The Journey to Jerusalem: Luke’s Travel Narrative ([9:51–19:27](#))
- VI. The Teaching Ministry in Jerusalem ([19:28–21:38](#))
- VII. The Passion Narrative ([22:1–23:56](#))
- VIII. The Resurrection Narrative ([24:1–53](#))

Our reading come from the “travel narrative” which begins following the Transfiguration, Jesus “*he resolutely determined to journey to Jerusalem*” (Lk 9:51). Leading up to our passage we encounter narratives about:

- would-be followers of Jesus (9:57-62)
- the 72 disciples sent out on mission (10:1-22)
- the Parable of the Good Samaritan (10:25-37)
- an encounter with Martha and Mary (10:38-42)
- discussions about prayer including The Lord’s Prayer (11:1-13)
- casting out of demons and accusations against Jesus (11:14-28)
- an evil generation who asks for signs of Jesus’ authority (11:29-22)

From these encounters with a variety of people, Jesus now engages Pharisees and legal experts at the table of a Pharisee. The parameters of this narrative unit are carefully marked: “*he entered ... he left*” (vv 37, 53). Controversies with the Pharisees are regularly set by Luke within the context of Jesus’ eating with Pharisees (Lk 5:29–39; 7:36–50; 14:1–24). This particular encounter is framed by Luke with the verses that come immediately before:

<sup>33</sup> “*No one who lights a lamp hides it away or places it (under a bushel basket), but on a lampstand so that those who enter might see the light.*”<sup>34</sup> *The lamp of the body is your eye. When your eye is sound, then your whole body is filled with light, but when it is bad, then your body is in darkness.*<sup>35</sup> *Take care, then, that the light in you not become darkness.*<sup>36</sup> *If your whole body is full of light, and no part of it is in darkness, then it will be as full of light as a lamp illuminating you with its brightness.*” (Luke 11:33-36)

The saying about the lamp, used earlier in the context of listening to the word of God (8:16), is repeated here in a similar context. Jesus and the gospel proclaimed by him are the light (lamp) God offers to his people. To refuse this light (for example, by seeking signs) is to prefer darkness in one’s life. The lamp of the gospel is always burning, but it is not necessarily burning for you (v. 36). A secondary application of the lamp image is to one’s eyes, understood as the window that can be fogged or shaded and thus keep the light from entering the person – which is an appropriate segue to the encounter with the Pharisees.

### Commentary

Luke briefly mentions the Pharisee’s invitation to a meal; the reason for the invitation is not given. But as it came after an address (*After he had spoken*, v.37), it is a reasonable inference that the host was interested in Jesus’ teaching. When Jesus came in, the Pharisee was amazed that he did not wash the meal. This had nothing to do with hygiene, but was a rule made in the interests of ceremonial purity. Before eating anything, scrupulous Jews had water poured over their hands to remove the defilement contracted by their contact with a sinful world. The quantity of water and the manner of washing are prescribed in minute detail in the Mishnah (*Yadaim* 1:1ff.). The Pharisee clearly expected that Jesus, as a noted religious teacher, would conform to the accepted practice. It is not recorded that the Pharisee said anything, but Jesus discerned their amazement and commented accordingly.

### *An inner life*

Jesus stresses the importance of the inward where the light is supposed to illuminate the whole person so that there is no part in darkness. This is in contrast to the Pharisees who are seemingly focused on the exterior conformity to rule, traditions and practices. The implied trajectory of this encounter will be “*When your eye is sound, then your whole body is filled with light, but when it is bad, then your body is in darkness.*” The problem comes when the exterior focus is “the tail that wags the dog” so to speak. While the exterior can resemble wonderful practice, it is still possible that the interior is filled with greed and wickedness. The antidote to greed is perhaps to give away one’s money in alms. Luke records several sayings of Jesus about the need to be poor (6:20; 14:33; 12:21), but he also shows that riches are not condemned as long as they serve the needs of others and do not make one a slave (12:15; 19:8; 16:13).

The Pharisee was concerned with what one does. Jesus is focused on who one is interiorly in order that the interior light within forms the exterior. Jesus is not shy about assessing the Pharisees’ posture in life: *You fools!* (v.40)

Jesus goes on to an instruction about almsgiving, the precise meaning of which is disputed: *But as to what is within, give alms, and behold, everything will be clean for you.* (v.41) Some hold that Jesus is going for the ironic carrying the sense: As regards the things within, give alms and everything is clean (so you think!). Others that Jesus is giving a round-about command: better cleanse that which is within. Such meanings cannot be dismissed as impossible, but it is perhaps best to take it that Jesus is stressing the importance of the inward over against the outward. And so it is better to take the words as referring to the

importance of a right inward attitude when we give alms. We must give from our hearts and not just make an outward gesture.

*<sup>42</sup> Woe to you Pharisees! You pay tithes of mint and of rue and of every garden herb, but you pay no attention to judgment and to love for God. These you should have done, without overlooking the others.*

To our 21<sup>st</sup> century ear, the expression “woe to you” is often taken as the words proclaiming condemnation and ultimate destiny of perdition. It is easily imagined on the lips of a firebrand evangelical preacher. There are two ways “woe to you” can be understood – both of which contain the warning that sin and rejection of Jesus has eternal consequences. In one way, think of the evangelical preacher calling down eternal damnation in all its fiery spectacle, his thunderous voice harshly crying out, “Woe to you...” Frightening to say the least. In another way, one recognizes that “woe” is a biblical cry of lament, sorrow, and disappointment. Think of the same preacher, voice replete with a plaintiff sorrow, in that he feels he has failed in his mission and the consequences for the listener are horrific. The words are no less harsh in their consequences. This latter sense reflects the prophetic tradition. A woe warns of lament or sorrow about the current condition and attitudes of some people, which left unchanged leads to condemnation. Woe is an expression of regret, not of vindictiveness, with a meaning like ‘Alas.’

Jesus grieves over the Pharisees for their tithing practices. Tithing was commanded in the Law (Lev. 27:30; Deut. 14:22, etc.). It was meant to be a joyful offering of love. The calculation of one tenth of all the stalks of garden herbs made a burdensome mockery of it. This kind of detail was not required by the Law. The Pharisees were going beyond what was required. There was nothing actually wrong in doing this and Jesus does not say that they should not have done it. But when people concentrate on the trivial, they are apt to overlook the important. The condemnation of the Pharisees lay, not in the fact that they tithed herbs, but that in their zeal for trifles they neglected justice and the love of God.

*<sup>43</sup> Woe to you Pharisees! You love the seat of honor in synagogues and greetings in marketplaces.<sup>44</sup> Woe to you! You are like unseen graves over which people unknowingly walk.”*

A further result of Pharisaic preoccupation with the outward was the love for being in the public eye – in ever in a prominent place: the best seat in the synagogues where one sits up front facing the congregation. A mark that one was clearly a person of distinction. Public salutations were reported to have become ritualized and elaborate ensuring that proper deference would be shown. The linguistic meaning of the word “pharisee” means “set apart, separated” related to Hebrew *pārûšh* – these expected public greetings were another evidence of being “set apart” from ebb and flow of common life.

Jesus compares the Pharisees to graves which are not seen. Contact with a burial site/grave was considered to be a defilement which separated people from the everyday activities of religious and secular life. This is complicated by the fact that people were sometimes buried in unmarked graves and people could easily walk over such a grave and unwittingly contract religious defilement. There is irony in the comparison of the religious Pharisees, who thought so well of themselves, to these unsuspected sources of defilement. The implication is that people who walked in the teaching and ways of these Pharisees became morally unclean.

*Then one of the scholars of the law said to him in reply, “Teacher, by saying this you are insulting us too.”<sup>46</sup> And he said, “Woe also to you scholars of the law! You impose on people burdens hard to carry, but you yourselves do not lift one finger to touch them.<sup>47</sup> Woe to you! You build the memorials of the prophets whom your ancestors killed.<sup>48</sup> Consequently, you bear witness and give consent to the deeds of your ancestors, for they killed them and you do the building.<sup>49</sup> Therefore, the wisdom of God said, ‘I will send to them prophets and apostles; some of them they will kill and persecute’<sup>50</sup> in order that this generation might be charged with the blood of all the prophets shed since the foundation of the world,<sup>51</sup> from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah who died between the altar and the temple building. Yes, I tell you, this generation will be charged with their blood!*

The “scholars of the law” are not legal experts, they are experts in Scripture, member of a learned profession – and as such should have known better. Jesus levies two charges against them. Leon Morris nicely describes this first charge:

The first count is that they asked others to do difficult things and did not help them. The burdens hard to bear were the scribal interpretations of the Law and the traditions of the elders. These were taken with the utmost seriousness. The Mishnah lays it down that it is more important to observe the scribal interpretations than the Law itself (Sanhedrin 11:3). The reasoning is that if it was a serious matter to offend against the Law which was sometimes hard to understand, it was a much more serious matter to offend against the interpretation which, the scribes thought, made everything clear. The lawyers ought to have expounded God’s Law in such a way that it helped and inspired people. Instead they made it a wearisome burden. The lawyers’ failure to touch the burdens with one of your fingers may mean that they did not lift a finger to help other people, or that their interpretations enabled them to escape themselves. They did not need even to use one finger. Perhaps we can see something of the situation by considering an example. On the sabbath, they taught, a man may not carry a burden ‘in his right hand or in his left hand, in his bosom or on his shoulder’. But he may carry it ‘on the back of his hand, or with his foot or with his mouth or with his elbow, or in his ear or in his hair or in his wallet (carried) mouth downwards, or between his wallet and his shirt, or in the hem of his shirt, or in his shoe or in his sandal’ (Shabbath 10:3). Multiply this by all the regulations of the Law and ordinary people have a burden beyond bearing even to know what they might do and might not do. But there is also a multitude of loopholes for a lawyer who knew the traditions which enabled him to do pretty well what he wished. (Leon Morris, *Luke: An Introduction and Commentary*. Vol. 3 of *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988; 223-224)

The second charge is that their suborning the Scriptures to the Mishnah and other legal interpretations, they were corrupting the understanding and role of the Prophets. The scholars thought that they were honoring these heroes of the faith by building splendid tombs for them. It is always easier to honor dead saints than living ones. Jesus charges that were just the undertakers for those who killed the prophets and, in that way, give unconscious assent to the murders.

<sup>52</sup> *Woe to you, scholars of the law! You have taken away the key of knowledge. You yourselves did not enter and you stopped those trying to enter.”*

The final “woe” reveals a paradox. The scholars professed to expound the meaning of the Law and thus to be the teachers of the people, but in fact they have taken away the key of knowledge, i.e. the key that unlocks the meaning of Scripture and brings people to the knowledge of God. Their methods were such that people could not get at the essential meaning of God’s word. Instead of opening up the treasures of knowledge, the lawyers closed them fast. They turned the Bible into a book of obscurities, a bundle of riddles which only the experts could understand. And the experts were so pleased and preoccupied with the mysteries they had manufactured that they missed the wonderful thing that God was saying. They neither entered themselves nor allowed others to enter. There were ordinary people on their way to the knowledge of God until these teachers turned them away.

<sup>53</sup> *When he left, the scribes and Pharisees began to act with hostility toward him and to interrogate him about many things,*<sup>54</sup> *for they were plotting to catch him at something he might say.*

Luke marks a basic change in their tactics vis-à-vis Jesus; in the past they had engaged in reactive opposition (though cf. 6:11), but from now on their relations with Jesus will be characterized more by their proactive attempts to cast him in a negative light and to snare him (e.g., 14:1; 15:2).