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Luke 11:37-54

40th Message

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THE REAL PROBLEM WITH RELIGION

SERIES: *THE GOSPEL OF LUKE*

Last fall I joined a new gym and after one of my workouts I met a man named Farshid. When he told me he was from Iran, I asked questions about what his life was like in Iran. One of the first things he told me was as that he hated “organized religion.” Listening to his story, I learned that his family had been forced to flee their country when Ayatollah Khomeini came to power and declared Iran to be an Islamic state. Farshid was just seventeen at that time. His family lost everything they had, including a way of life where family relationships and community solidarity meant everything. What Farshid meant by “organized religion” was when religion becomes a tool to dominate and control others for political agendas that rob the weak and powerless of their dignity as human beings.

By contrast, we have seen in Luke’s gospel that Jesus came “to proclaim liberty to the captives” and “to set at liberty those who are oppressed” (4:18-19). Freedom was the major thrust of Jesus’ mission—freedom from guilt, debt, sin, oppression, hate and abuse. Freedom was more than a dream, Jesus made it a reality by confronting and overpowering evil at its source: the devil and his minions. In our text last week Jesus cast a demon out of a mute, freeing the man to speak. In the aftermath he explained that this was a sign that “the kingdom of God has come upon you” (Luke 11:20-22). In today’s text the conflict escalates from confronting a demon in an individual, to confronting evil that is embedded within Israel’s leadership and governs its institutions. Now we discover that Jesus’ description of an exorcised demon that wanders and eventually returns in greater numbers and force—such that the last state is worse than the first—has a broader application to the nation. N. T. Wright explains,

The point of Jesus’ exorcisms, after all, was not simply to heal as many individuals as possible... Rather, he was aiming to enact God’s kingdom, for Israel and the world. Israel, like a demon-possessed person, had been ‘cleansed’ by various movements of reform. But unless the living presence of God came to dwell in its midst, Israel would remain vulnerable to the return of demons. Jesus stood there among his people, embodying the return of God to Israel. Unless they turned from accusation to acceptance, the demons that had led them to ruin in former days would come back in full force.¹

As Jesus challenges the dark side of Israel’s religious leaders, I want you first to consider what he might be saying to you about your own similar tendencies. And second, because we are the salt and light of world, I want you to ask yourself if God might be leading you to confront institutionalized evil in the realms in which you live, work, worship and play.

I. The Setting: Guess who is coming to dinner? (Luke 11:37-38)

While Jesus was speaking, a Pharisee asked him to dine with him, so he went in and reclined at table. The Pharisee was

astonished to see that he did not first wash before dinner. (Luke 11:37-38 ESV)

Luke sets the stage for our story with an invitation to dine with a Pharisee. The fact that the Pharisee would extend an invitation to Jesus for a meal suggests a certain openness to listen to Jesus; however the invitation could also have been given for the purpose of testing him. In either case, when you were invited into someone’s home there were well-established social conventions that governed table fellowship. Joel Green explains,

The extension and acceptance of an invitation signaled the abeyance of hostility, a social contract whereby host and guest were to act with honor toward one another. This would require, for example, that Jesus prepare for the meal in the way prescribed by the Pharisees and that he withhold any negative (insulting) valuations of the host or his treatment in the home of the host; to perform otherwise would signal a breach in the implicit social contract.²

For the Pharisee washing (*baptizō*) was not a trivial matter, for it signified ritual purity before God. As a lay-led pressure group their goal was to purify Israel through an intensified observance of Jewish law. To that end they developed an elaborate tradition of oral laws, applying it in great detail to every area of life. What happens when you invite Jesus to dine in that world? He deliberately takes his seat without washing.

II. Three Woes for the Pharisees (Luke 11:39-44)

A. The real problem: A lack of integrity

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. You fools! Did not he who made the outside make the inside also? But give as alms those things that are within, and behold, everything is clean for you.” (vv. 39-41)

Lest we be shocked by Jesus’ anti-social behavior, Luke refers to him as Lord, which gives his words divine authority. As the prophesy of Simeon reminds us, Jesus “is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed...so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed.” (Luke 2:35). Acting in the role of a prophet, Jesus uses his invitation to dine with the Pharisee as an opportunity to expose the hypocrisy that was rampant among Israel’s most observant Jews.

In their quest for purity, the Pharisees became so obsessed with the cleanliness of things outside a person (i.e. cups and plates) that they totally ignored what was on the inside. Their squeaky clean exterior became a cover for a life of extortion (*harpagē* – “robbery, plunder, greediness, rapacity”) and wickedness (*ponērias* – “evil in the sense of being opposed to God;” used absolutely it refers to Satan, “the evil one”). Devoid of integrity and authenticity, evil took root and now thrives unchecked in their hearts.

Jesus calls them “fools,” a term with diabolical overtones. A “fool” (*aphrones*) is one who has no moral sensibilities and, as a result, cultivates deviant behavior that is damaging to the community. Living a double life of corrupt elitism that plunders the poor is an affront to God, who created both the inner and outer man, and in whom there is no division, for God is “one” (Deut 6:4). The charge penetrates to the bone and provides the summary for all that follows.

Jesus’ rebuke is designed not to just condemn, but to create an opportunity for repentance. In order to help his host get back on the right path, Jesus redefines what constitutes a pure life in God’s eyes. Like Israel’s prophets before him, Jesus defines purity in terms of compassionate generosity for the poor—giving “as *alms* the things that are within.”

Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean...
seek justice,
correct oppression;
bring justice to the fatherless,
plead the widow’s cause. (Isa 1:16a-17)

Is not this the fast that I choose:
Is it not to share your bread with the hungry
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover him,
and not to hide yourself from your own flesh? (Isa 58:6a-7)

In biblical thinking almsgiving implied more than merely writing a check to one’s favorite charity. The root of the term “alms” (*eleēmosunē*) is “mercy” (*eleos*), and thus to give alms was to generously give of yourself (which includes your resources) to those in need, in the same way as the Good Samaritan had done (Luke 10:33-35). Such acts of mercy break down the social and economic barriers that distance the elite rich from the poor. Green comments that “for Luke, almsgiving was an expression of genuine social solidarity, of embracing those in need as if they were members of one’s own kin-group.”³ When generous compassion becomes the focus of your life, everything is pure. As James writes,

Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world. (Jas 1:27 TNIV)

In typical prophetic style, Jesus continues his assault on the Pharisees with three “woes.” The significance of adopting this form of speech would not be lost on his audience. When a prophet in Israel delivered a “woe” oracle, it was God’s final plea to repent, signaling his patience was at an end and judgment was at hand (Num 21:29; Jer 13:27; Ezek 24:6, 9). Each woe gives concrete evidence of their lack of integrity.

B. Three manifestations of the problem

1. Ritual supersedes relationships

“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.” (v. 42)

The first woe concerns their obsession with tithing. The tithe was “a tenth” of one’s crops and material possessions that was given to God to honor him as King and to celebrate him as the generous giver of all of life. To ensure that they remained ceremonially pure, the Pharisees intensified the laws of tithing (Lev 27:30-33; Deut 14:22) to such a degree that the weightier things of the law, such as justice for the poor and love for God, were forgotten. Religion goes terribly wrong whenever ritual takes precedence over relationships, and even

worse when the ritual is man-made. Isaiah condemns the Israelites, “their worship of me is a commandment of men learned by rote” (Isa 29:13 JPS).

2. Status supersedes service

“Woe to you Pharisees! For you love the best seat in the synagogues and greetings in the marketplaces.” (v. 43 ESV)

Secondly, rather than being motivated by love of God, they love the spotlight. It doesn’t matter whether they are engaged in worship or doing their grocery shopping, you’ll always find them perched high on their pedestals, faces aglow with the adulation of every passer-by. The Talmud kept their pride afloat by mandating that “elaborate greetings were compulsory for teachers of the law.”⁴ Later Jesus levels a similar charge at the scribes, who strut their stuff like runway models decked out in expensive gowns, which were purchased at the expense of the widows they impoverished (Luke 20:46-47). Such privileged attention leads to an elitist mentality that is destructive to healthy communities, as Paul outlined to the Galatians, “They eagerly seek you, not commendably, but they wish to shut you out so that you will seek them” (Gal 4:17 NASB). Religion goes terribly wrong when status supersedes service.

3. Pride spreads like a deadly disease

“Woe to you! For you are like unmarked graves, and people walk over them without knowing it.” (v. 44)

Thirdly, if purity is defined as generously sharing of one’s resources with the poor, then those who live their lives for status and wealth become a breeding ground for corruption and defilement within a community. As John Carroll observes,

The Pharisees, so invested in public recognition—despite robust commitment to a holy life, to maintenance of ritual purity, separated from what defiles—unwittingly render unclean everyone with whom they come into contact, as though they are unmarked graves that make those who walk over them unclean.⁵

Religion goes terribly wrong when its leaders are infected with the deadly and contagious disease of pride, and no one knows it.

III. Three Woes for the Legal Experts (Luke 11:45-52)

A. Woe to the burden makers!

One of the lawyers answered him, “Teacher, in saying these things you insult us also.” 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.” (vv. 45-46 ESV)

At this point we learn there is another group of guests who had been invited to the Pharisee’s home to listen to Jesus. Lawyers were experts in Torah interpretation. For one of them Jesus’ remarks hit a little too close to home, so he comes to the Pharisees’ defense and politely offers an objection. His challenge provides Jesus the perfect segue to expose the evils perpetuated by these legal experts.

Instead of an apology, our friend finds three woes landing on his plate. Woe to you lawyers, who take pride in all your legal linguistics in interpreting my law. But to what end? They take God’s law and use it to impose arduous burdens on others, crushing them with no mercy or assistance. Jesus’ language puts them in league with Pharaoh who “set taskmasters over them to afflict them with heavy burdens” (Exod 1:11). But God took pity on his people and promised to deliver them:

“I will take you to be my people, and I will be your God, and you shall know that I am the LORD your God, who has brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians.” (Exod 6:7)

God kept his word and harnessed all the forces of creation to decimate Pharaoh’s oppressive kingdom and liberate his people. After Israel was freed from her Egyptian taskmasters, the Lord your God “bore you on eagles’ wings” and “carried you, as a man carries his son, all the way you went until you came to this place” (Exod 19:4; Deut 1:31). Our God is not a God who burdens his people; he liberates them! The law dictates that God’s people should do likewise, freeing people wherever they go. The Law stated that even “If you see the **donkey** of one who hates you lying down under its **burden**, you shall refrain from leaving him with it; you shall rescue it with him” (Exod 23:5). Not even a donkey of your enemy was to be crushed by a burden.

When the magicians in Egypt were unable to duplicate all the miracles that Moses did, they said to Pharaoh, “This is the finger of God” (Exod 8:19). And now Jesus was casting out demons, liberating people by “the finger of God.” By contrast, what are the legal experts doing? They take pleasure in creating burdens so heavy that no one is able to carry them. And, even worse, they won’t lift even a finger to touch one of the burdens, as if the burdens they created have made God’s people unclean.

Religion goes terribly wrong whenever you come to church and the sermon leaves you burdened down with guilt, rules, holy projects or political agendas. For Jesus came to set us free from all our burdens. And “if the Son set you free, you will be free indeed” (John 8:36). Jesus’ invites all who “labor and are heavy laden” to “Come to me...and I will give you rest, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light” (Matt 11:29-30). To study God’s word should never be a burden, for the righteous testify that it is their supreme delight (Ps 119:16; Jer 15:16), “reviving the soul...[and] more to be desired than gold...sweeter also than honey, and drippings of the honeycomb” (Ps 19: 7, 10). Obedience is not a matter of bending of our wills to a harsh taskmaster, but a wondrous transformation that occurs as we, “...with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another by his Spirit that abides within.” (2 Cor 3:18). And such transformation leads to good works, “which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them” (Eph 2:10).

B. Woe to tomb builders

“Woe to you! For you build the tombs of the prophets whom your fathers killed. So you are witnesses and you consent to the deeds of your fathers, for they killed them, and you build their tombs. Therefore also the Wisdom of God said, ‘I will send them prophets and apostles, some of whom they will kill and persecute,’ so that the blood of all the prophets, shed from the foundation of the world, may be charged against this generation, 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.” (vv. 47-51)

While the Pharisees are like unmarked graves that defile people unknowingly, these lawyers memorialize the prophets by openly building and maintaining their tombs. Jesus looks beneath their pious veneration and labels it ritualized hypocrisy. In his appeal to “the Wisdom of God,” Jesus asserts his elevated status over these

experts on the law as a person with direct access to God’s own design.”⁶ Carroll writes,

The unexpressed explanation is like their ancestors they, too, oppose God’s agents, both prophets (like John and Jesus) and apostles presently sent by Jesus. In the era of God’s reign, inaugurated by Jesus’ ministry, it is now time for the chickens to come home to roost...John’s proverbial ax is poised at the root of the tree (Luke 3:9); divine judgment upon a nation that has resisted God’s messengers, sometimes with violence, has been delayed for a season but is now impending. The last straw will be the repudiation of Jesus, God’s definitive prophet in Jerusalem.⁷

This generation will be charged with the bloodguilt of all the prophets, from the first murder by Cain to the murder of Zechariah, the last prophet killed in Old Testament canon.⁸ Because Jesus is the one who atones for all sin, to refuse forgiveness he gives makes one culpable for all sin. Harsh words indeed, but we must remember God never brought judgment upon his people without explicit warnings given by the prophets. These oracles of judgment still held open the possibility of repentance, for both individuals and the nation (Jer 18:7-10). It was a testimony to God’s grace and patience that kept that door open for an entire generation of forty years and the death and resurrection of Jesus.

C. Woe #3 – You locked the door!

“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.” (v. 52)

The strongest condemnation is reserved for the last. These legal experts were supposed to pull back the veil on divine truth and make it accessible to all. However with all their legal linguistics they buried the key to knowledge. And worse still, not only did they not take advantage of the “key” and enter life for themselves, but they buried the key and locked the door, so no one else could enter as well.

In the kingdom of God there is no inner circle of knowledge, for everyone has equal access to the truth. What then is the key to knowledge? It is not a theological degree, or knowing Greek or Hebrew, or having a brilliant mind, or maintaining any prescribed ritual. It is simply a humble and contrite heart. As the sage asserts, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge” (Prov 1:7). Even a child, who enters the door with a humble heart and is willing to seek after God with his or her whole heart, will come to a saving knowledge of the truth (Prov 2:1-10).

IV. Institutionalized Evil – The Devil in Disguise (Luke 11:53-54)

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, lying in wait for him, to catch him in something he might say. (vv. 53-54)

Jesus’ condemning remarks further the rage of his opponents. The strategy of Israel’s leadership now escalates from reaction to one of entrapment and accusation. Evil is now fully institutionalized and the demons are welcomed home (Luke 11:24-26).

V. What is Our Role?

What role do we have in taking on institutionalized evil? We are the salt and light of the world. When the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out on the day of Pentecost in some sense every believer

became a prophet—"I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh...and they shall prophesy" (Acts 2:17-18). This does not mean that every believer has the spiritual gift of "prophecy," but it does suggest that the prophet's function of exposing evil through the light of God's word and calling people to repentance is the responsibility of everyone. As the apostle Paul exhorts us,

Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. For it is shameful even to speak of the things that they do in secret. But when anything is exposed by the light, it becomes visible, for anything that becomes visible is light. Therefore it says,

**"Awake, O sleeper,
and arise from the dead,
and Christ will shine on you." (Eph 5:11-14)**

Whatever sphere we live, work, play or pray in, God gives us the responsibility (and privilege) of exposing all things in the light of his word. This is not always easy by any means, but it is part of our mandate. When my daughter was playing soccer for an abusive soccer coach, another dad and I felt called upon to confront the coach. It wasn't pretty, but our daughters were grateful. A friend of mine who works in marketing for a successful software company confronted his CEO about the discrepancy between the list of "values" set forth in the HR policy statements and the their treatment of new hires from India. The CEO refused to pay their moving expenses and made them work extremely long hours for lower pay than other employees. The reasoning was that, not having full citizenship status, they would work for substandard working conditions, knowing that if they objected hundreds of other candidates were eagerly waiting to take their place.

It's especially moving when God uses a woman to expose institutionalized evil. When Emily and I were vacation in Ireland this summer we happened to come across a monument to Veronica Guerin in the Dublin Castle gardens. As a reporter for the Irish newspaper the *Sunday Independent*, she courageously exposed the criminal activities of several drug dealers using inside information she received from a former gang member. The exposure led to several threats against her life, including shots fired into her home, but she would not be deterred.

On 13 September 1995, convicted criminal John Gilligan, attacked her when she confronted him about his lavish lifestyle with no source of income. He later called her at home and threatened to kidnap and rape her son, and kill her if she wrote anything about him.⁹

On June 26, 1996 two men on a motorcycle pulled up alongside Guerin at a stop light just outside Dublin and shot her six times. Her death caused an outrage and the Irish Parliament wasted no time in responding with tough tax enforcement laws so that the assets purchased with criminal funds could be confiscated. "The investigation into Guerin's death resulted in over 150 other arrests and convictions, as well as seizures of drugs and arms. Drug crime in Ireland dropped 15 percent in the following 12 months."¹⁰

Another noteworthy example is sixteen-year-old Malala Yousafzai from Pakistan. At the age of eleven years she exposed the terrible injustices of the Taliban by writing a blog for the BBC documenting what her life was like as they attempted to take control of the

Swat valley. Her father had inculcated in her the importance of education. When the Taliban banned girls from attending school, she courageously refused and became even more outspoken about a woman's right to education. In 2010 the New York Times did a documentary on her life.

On October 9, 2012 the enraged Taliban responded. A gunman boarded her school bus and going down the aisle demanded, "Where is Malala!" Yousafzai was shot in the head and neck, but miraculously survived and was flown to England for extensive rehabilitation.

The assassination attempt sparked a national and international support for Yousafzai...United Nations Special Envoy for Global Education Gordon Brown launched a UN petition in Yousafzai's name, using the slogan "I am Malala" and demanding that all children worldwide be in school by the end of 2015—a petition which helped lead to the ratification of Pakistan's first Right to Education Bill...In the 29 April 2013 issue of *Time* magazine, Yousafzai was featured on the magazine's front cover and as one of "The 100 Most Influential People in the World."¹¹

As the Scripture says,

**Out of the mouth of babies and infants,
you have established strength because of your foes,
to still the enemy and the avenger. (Ps 8:2)**

1. N. T. Wright, *Luke for Everyone* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 138-139.
2. Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 470.
3. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 471.
4. Darrell L. Bock, *Luke Volume 2:9:51-24:53* (ECNT; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1996), 1117.
5. John T. Carroll, *Luke, A Commentary* (NTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 260.
6. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 475.
7. Carroll, *Luke*, 261-262.
8. Zechariah's death is recorded in 2 Chron 24:20-22. By the command of Joash the king, he was stoned to death in the court of the house of the LORD.
9. "Veronica Guerin," Wikipedia.org.
10. Ibid.
11. "Malala Yousafzai," Wikipedia.org.

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