

Luke 11:29-54: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Luke chapter 11 verses 29 to 54. Luke chapter 11 verses 30 to 54.

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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. 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. Woe to you, Pharisees, for you love the best seat in the synagogues and greetings in the marketplaces. Woe to you, for you are like unmarked graves, and people walk over them without knowing it.

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.

[2 : 18] Woe to you, for you build the tombs of the prophets whom your fathers killed. So you are witnesses and you consent the deeds of your fathers, for they kill 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. 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. 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.

In the second half of Luke chapter 11, Jesus is called by the crowds to give them a sign. And Jesus gives them nothing but the sign of the prophet Jonah. Now why are they given the sign of Jonah?

[3 : 22] Jesus, among other things, is declaring in advance what he is going to do in his death and resurrection, so that when it happens, it will be clear what was intended. The Israel of Jonah's day was adulterous as a people, and Jonah was sent to the people of Nineveh in part as a sign of God's judgment of leaving Israel and going to the nations, provoking Israel to jealousy by showing them mercy.

The Israel of Jesus' day would experience the same thing. It is also a sign to Israel of its own judgment of exile, but deliverance. The unfaithful prophet Jonah is thrown into the sea, as his nation will be thrown into the sea of exile.

However, if Israel in exile, like Jonah in the belly of the big fish, calls out to the Lord for deliverance, they may find rescue. Christ as Israel is cast into the sea of the Gentiles and into the exile of death itself.

Yet he will rise up, like Jonah. Jesus' whole mission is a sign. He is the sign to Israel, and the resurrection most particularly. Jesus here particularly speaks about Jonah as a sign to Nineveh. And presumably as a sign to Nineveh, he is especially a sign of the Lord's power and judgment. The Ninevites of Jonah's day responded to Jonah as the sign and to his preaching, but Israel will not respond to Christ.

[4 : 40] Christ is the greater than Jonah. He is also the greater than Solomon. The Queen of Sheba travelled to see Solomon, but yet Jesus is God's wisdom in person. So you have the northern city of Nineveh and the Queen of the South.

Both of them will rise up in judgment on the last day against Israel. I do not believe it is accidental that both of these groups that rise up in judgment against Israel are Gentiles.

The faithful response of the Gentiles to Christ will be a cause of Israel's own condemnation. A lamp is used to illumine. And here Jesus uses the idea of the lamp to describe the eye.

We can talk about the apple of the eye, for instance. It's that thing that we are focused upon. It's that thing that we cherish above all else. The eye orients the body. It turns the head.

It moves the entire body as a result. If your eye has light as its focus, then your entire body will be affected by that, filled with light. Your eye will take on the character of those things that you give it to looking at.

[5 : 40] And your body will take on the character of your eye. The eye here is not just a receptive organ, in Jesus' understanding. The eye is not just taking in light. It's giving out light.

The person with a healthy eye views the entire world in a way that brings light to it. They bring light through their wisdom. They bring light through their generosity. They bring light through their faith. We must train ourselves to use our eye in a way that brings light to the world. To view the world in a way that illumines it. Jesus is invited to eat with a Pharisee.

And before eating, the Pharisee is astonished that Jesus does not cleanse himself. The point of this washing is not hygiene, but ritual purity. But Jesus teaches that true purity or impurity lies within and flows from within.

Ritual is not a substitute for or a source of purity. It's a symbolic expression of purity. A true purity is manifested in a giving disposition of heart.

[6 : 38] And as the heart is pure, everything else becomes pure. Jesus then launches into some woes upon the Pharisees. They fixate upon the minutiae of the law.

And they utterly neglect the big picture. The law is about justice and the love of God. The law is not just a lot of different commandments that we must observe. These separate laws.

It's a unified body of material. A unified body of material in the principles of loving God and neighbour. The things that really matter, the things that really have weight, are justice and the love of God.

And a way of practising the law that detaches the law from these core principles of loving God and neighbour, and makes it merely about legalistic observance, is a perversion of what the law stands for.

And Jesus declares a woe upon the Pharisees on this account. The Pharisees are also those who desire the praise of men over that of God. They want to be praised in the towns and in the squares.

[7 : 37] They want to be recognised in the synagogues. They want the honour of men. And yet they do not care about the honour of God who sees the heart. They want the external honour of society.

They are unmarked graves. They spread impurity to others without the other people even knowing it. There is a humorous shift in Jesus' discourse at this point, as a lawyer suggests that Jesus' statements are whistling past their ears, and he wants to warn Jesus to be careful lest he catch them in friendly fire, at which Jesus turns his sights upon the lawyers and lets rip.

They place heavy burdens upon people, but they will not touch them at all. They teach, but they do not do. They do not lead by example, but simply crush the people in legalism.

The scribes build up the tombs of the prophets that their fathers killed, while continuing the tradition of persecution and rejection of God's messengers that have been sent to them. Indeed, Jesus says that the blood of Abel, the first martyr in Genesis chapter 4, to the blood of Zechariah, the last in 2 Chronicles chapter 24 verses 20 to 22, will come upon them.

That generation will suffer the full weight of God's judgement upon those who unrighteously shed the blood of the martyrs. In addition to all their other sins, the scribes remove the means of knowledge from the people.

[8 : 53] They are entrusted with teaching the scriptures, but they lock it up in their traditions and false teaching. They themselves do not enter into the kingdom, but they prevent others from doing so too.

A question to consider. There is a lot of treatment of internal and external things within this chapter. What are some of the ways in which the external practice of ritual can spring up from a reality within?



