

Deconstructing Unbelief, Part 1

Luke 11:45-54

Luke chapter 11. In our study of Luke's Gospel, we're in Luke 11. You can turn there in your Bibles. In this final section of the 11th chapter of Luke's Gospel, we find Jesus here in the home of a Pharisee. He has been invited to this home to share in a meal, probably a late breakfast or a lunch meal with the Pharisees and his other invited guests. A group of Pharisees and lawyers and servants would be there besides. And things have become rather awkward, you might say, around the lunch table.

The awkwardness started immediately when Jesus entered into the Pharisee's home and instead of lining up to join the handwashing, the purification ritual that the Pharisees and scribes practiced as an established tradition. It almost had the force of law. Jesus walked right past the servants, walked right past them pouring their water and he took a place at the table, sat down, and waited. Luke tells us in Luke 11:38 that the Pharisees was just astonished at this behavior. He was shocked to see that Jesus did not first wash his hands before the meal.

This was an offense. And it wasn't just bad manners on Jesus' part. This was not just a violation of social expectation, though it was all that. This was a ceremonial violation.

Jesus was bringing, in their minds, he was bringing impurity or uncleanness to the lunch table. The Pharisee, they didn't like this at all. This just wasn't done; that was Jesus' design. That was his intent to get this man's attention so that he could say this: look at verse 39. Verse 39, "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 to you.'"

Jesus has confronted here the Pharisees' empty ritualism, useless impotent traditions that they practiced. Jesus' confrontation was grace. This was love on his part. He was loving the Pharisees. He was loving this Pharisee. He is teaching the Pharisee and all of his gathered guests; he's teaching them the way to true cleanness on the inside. It's an internal, not an external thing. It's an actual cleanness before God, not just a symbolic cleanness of a ritual before men. This is a cleanness that's accomplished by God in the heart where the

heart is made clean before God. It's regenerated and given a new nature. This is grace on the Lord's part as he confronts these Pharisees. He confronts their religion.

And since no one spoke up, evidently, since no one asked to learn more from him about how to have a changed heart, showing that they wanted to understand how to become truly clean, that they were following him and understanding him. No one said how they agreed, and they wanted to go beyond the external so that they could get into the internal before God where everything is clean for you. I mean, what a promise. Since none of that happened, Jesus continued. He gives three woes. Three pronouncements of judgment upon the Pharisees' what you might call an ornamental religion, a religion just for show. And he starts there in verse 42. "But woe to you Pharisees! For you tithe the mint and the rue and every herb and you neglect justice and the love of God. These you ought to have done without neglecting the others."

So as Jesus diagnoses their hypocrisy, he begins with evidence. He's not just spinning this out of whole cloth, he is, he gives them evidence. They are preoccupied with minutia in religion. And it's minutia that they came up with on their own. This is man-made stuff. And they completely, in following man-

made tradition, they ignore the heart, the real heart of true religion. And that's something God came up with. They neglect justice, which is love for neighbor and they neglect love for God.

If only they'd look closer at the biblical command about giving the tithe. They would have discerned that loving God and loving neighbor is the joyful principle that's actually practiced in tithing. Tithing is just a, a manifestation of love for God and love for neighbor. It's an occasion for joy, to take what we have and to share it with others and that's what the tithe was meant to do. They're preoccupied with minutia. Tithing of the condiments on the table. So you gotta ask the question, what is it that attracts them to this externalism? Why would they give themselves to something as burdensome as this minutia? Tithing of their spices and herbs. I mean, that's gotta get burdensome, wearisome, tiresome. So why are they so easily distracted from the clearly written actual commandment of God, which is all about joy, all about love for God, love for neighbor? Why would they be enticed into tithing all their herbs and spices in the pantry.

Because of this: External show of religion gets you noticed before men. External shows and displays of religious devotion

and piety gets you some respect in public. Look at verse 43. "Woe to you Pharisees! For you," here's what they love, "you love the best seat in the synagogues and greetings in the marketplaces. You neglect justice and love for God." You don't love God. You actually love the praise of men. "You love the best seat in the synagogues and greetings in the marketplaces."

This is the essence of hypocrisy in religion. It's wanting the respect of other people. It's posturing so that other people look at you and think, wow, look how in tune that person is. Look how pious that person is. These guys want to be noticed. They want to be respected. They want to be praised by the world. Their hearts aren't moved by affection for God. They're not moved by love for neighbor. They're moved only by self-love.

And that is the most common and the least refined form of idolatry, which boils down to love for self. "They love the glory that comes from man," Jesus said in John 12:43, "more than the glory that comes from God." And ironically, in spite of all the time and attention and fastidious devotion to detail and remaining ritually pure, ceremonially clean in all these handwashing and tithing and all the rest, the Pharisees, verse 44, they are as defiled and as defiling as an unmarked grave.

"Woe to you! For you're like unmarked graves, which the unsuspecting people walk over them without knowing it." They walk over it, on their pilgrimage to Jerusalem and they're going there to participate in a, a weeklong or more of feasting and joy before God. If they walk over an unmarked grave, they're defiled, Numbers chapter 19, I believe it is, for seven days. They can't even participate in the feast. Can't draw near. Completely unaware.

The Pharisees moved about freely. Kind of like someone who's maybe in our society asymptomatic with Covid, moving around freely infecting everybody. And these guys infect everyone with the contagion of their false religion. By their teaching, by their example, they are spreading soul-damning religion of externalism, Pharisaism and so in just a few minutes, with just a few sentences here, Jesus has really diagnosed and exposed Pharisaic hypocrisy. He's exposed its empty ritualism by pointing to the evidence in verse 42. He's revealed its idolatrous heart in verse 43. And he's warned everybody about the defilement that's brought by its contagious nature in verse 44. The Pharisees here apparently, they are silenced because Jesus has just described them to a T. He has pronounced woes upon the entire way that they live, the way that they think. He's pronounced woes and judgment up on the way they

actually conduct themselves in their life. This is the whole manner of their existence. He just swept it all away with condemnation.

So where did they get this form of religion? What made them so certain that this is the path to righteousness? Why were they so sure that the traditions they kept and the rituals that they practiced, why were they so certain that this kind of living was the way to righteousness, the way to please God? And to the lawyers in verse 45. They're the brains behind the operation. "One of the lawyers answered Jesus and he said, 'Teacher, in saying these things you insult us also.'" Interesting, right? Jesus said, verse 42, "Woe to you Pharisees!" Verse 43, "Woe to you Pharisees!" "Woe to you!" verse 44. He's talking to the Pharisees. Pharisees say nothing.

It's one of the lawyers who takes the initiative to give an answer. Three things to notice about that. Just observations to make in the fact that this lawyer responded and the way he responded. First, notice how the lawyer is attempting to shift the attention from what Jesus has said to the offense that Jesus has caused. It's really a strong verb there, that's used about insult. It's the verb *hybrizo*, from which we get the word, *hubris*, that's where the word comes from. *Hubris* refers to an

exaggerated pride that thinks nothing about giving an offense far and wide, it doesn't matter. That's how arrogant the person is. They don't care about giving an offense because they think so highly of themselves that everything, they do is pure, everything they do is right, and they don't care about offending anybody else. That's hubris.

Well, that is kind of what's going on in the verb *hybrizo*. The basic meaning of *hybrizo*, the original sense of that verb is to conduct an invasion. And in an invasion, as you may or may not be aware, soldiers don't care too much about hurting people's feelings. Might even use some harsh language every now and again as they shoot bullets and throw grenades and mortars and all the rest. That's the basic meaning of this verb, is to conduct an invasion, and when it comes down to an interpersonal level, it's to violate somebody. To insult a person, to spitefully mock and revile them. It's often translated in the Bible to treat shamefully. Again, the lawyer, he doesn't seem interested here in talking about a single thing Jesus actually said. He's not concerned about the what of Jesus' words, he's concerned about how Jesus said it.

This is the very origin of the tone police, right? They're all concerned about tone and the insinuation here from this

lawyer is the offense that Jesus has caused, he's gone over the top. He's gone overboard. This is unwarranted. Jesus causing this offense, it's completely unjustified. Or maybe, overstated. Therefore, Jesus owes them an apology. At least his behavior, his words require some kind of an explanation. So subtly, this is what lawyers do. Subtly, he is trying to turn the tables on Jesus. He's trying to shift the focus from the substance of Jesus' indictment to the tone, to how he made everybody feel.

Lawyers understand this so well, that he who frames the debate wins the debate. The person who frames the argument and gets the first word in and frames everything, it's the one who wins the argument. That's how a courtroom's conducted. So he's trying to divert the attention here from the facts of Jesus' indictment to his bad manners. The way he's coming across. He's trying to put Jesus on the defensive. He's hoping to make Jesus uncomfortable enough to explain himself. He's trying to guilt him. Mark it down, folks, that is a tactic of a proud heart.

Second thing we need to notice in the lawyer's response is well, that he responded, that he answered. Listen, he felt stung here, by Jesus' indictment of the Pharisees' practice of religion. Why is that? Why would he feel stung? Because the lawyers, they're widely upheld as the experts in the law. So the

Pharisees are really putting into practice what the lawyers have taught them.

Fascinating, isn't it? That Jesus Christ, the living, and the incarnate word of God, when he speaks, it's as if God's Word is unleashed because it is. As Hebrews 4:12 say, "The word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, it pierces to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. No creature," especially one of these scribes, "no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him with whom we have to do."

It's not just the Pharisees here who are under the microscope. The scribes, these legal experts, these professional exegetes, and theologians, they make their living teaching what the Pharisees were practicing as a lifestyle. They are feeling exposed here. They're feeling flayed open, naked, and laid bare. So they are really eager to hide, find some cover, try to cover themselves up. And that's why the lawyer tries this tactic of shifting the focus. It's called blame shifting. Take the attention off of himself and talk instead about Jesus' tone, talk about how offensive he's been. Which brings us to a third

observation here. Each woe that Jesus pronounces upon the lawyers in verses 46 to 52.

Each of these woes that he pronounces upon the lawyers, each point of condemnation corresponds to and looks back to and explains the charges that Jesus brought against the Pharisees in their hypocritical religion. So every woe that Jesus pronounces against the lawyer, it points back to and explains, expounds, the reason for the hypocrisy in the Pharisees. But what I want you to see here just in kind of giving this general observation, what we need to recognize here is that what stands behind the hypocrisy of the Pharisees is the unbelief of the lawyers.

What stands behind the hypocritical practice, the pharisaical religion of the Pharisees is the teaching of these scribes, of these lawyers, the teachers of the law. Unbelief is the root cause of all false religion and hypocrisy is the rotten fruit that is produced by all false religion. And so, it's an evil heart of unbelief that will always give rise to and produce religious hypocrisy. Sure as an apple tree produces apples, so unbelief will produce hypocrisy.

So how are we going to think through the application to our own lives? I mean, are we here in our church, are we like these Jewish scribes, teachers of the law, these professional exegetes

and theologians who err from the start because we don't fear God or believe his word? I hope not. That said, though, we believers can go off track, can't we? We believers can go off track whenever we pay heed and listen to unbelieving voices. When we allow the voices, the opinions, the views of unbelief and especially the prescriptions of unbelief and the expectations of unbelief to direct the way we live and practice our Christianity, we can feel kowtowed into bowing to unbelieving voices. Pressured into doing what they expect.

So in that sense, I guess you could say that many of us are in the position of the Pharisees. Not that we are pharisees and hypocrites, but just that we're in their position. We can kind of sympathize with them because we're practitioners of religion, most of us here. We're not experts. I mean we don't, get paid to do this. We don't get paid to study Scripture. We have to really trust what the experts tell us. We have to read their commentaries, read their systematic theologies. We're at the mercy of their fidelity to Scripture, aren't we?

We have to listen to them and learn from them to inform the way we understand and practice our faith. So listen, if the people were reading and studying and everything, if they're rotten at the core. Guess what's gonna happen to us? Most people

in our churches are busy making a living, aren't we? We have to rely on the integrity, faithfulness of scholars, exegetes, theologians, who teach in our seminaries and our institutions. Those who write books that influence everyone on a popular level. Those who train the pastors that fill the pulpits of our churches. I don't have time, really, to go into it in any great detail, but I think we have some good reason to check that. To be cautious about the voices that we're listening to. There's a lot of bad stuff out there, a lot of bad stuff. And there's a lot more we can say, but we need to move on from these introductory matters and get to what Jesus actually says to these lawyers.

Jesus is deconstructing unbelief. He's deconstructing the unbelief that is informing their religion. He's pulling back the curtain and he's going back there and he's saying, this is what explains your hypocrisy. It's unbelief. So he's going to deconstruct the unbelieving scholarship, you might say, of the law experts and the lawyers and the scribes. Unbelief obscures the law. Simply put, unbelief obscures, or you might say, hides the law. Unbelief obscures the law.

Why did the Pharisees tithe their salt and pepper? Because the law experts have taught them to. This is the first woe that

Jesus pronounces upon them in verses 46. "One of the lawyers answered him, 'Teacher, in saying these things you insult us also.'" Then this in verse 46. "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.'"

The lawyers, they're the teachers of the law, also known in Scripture as the scribes. They are the law experts, the law teachers. The majority of the Pharisees were laymen. The lawyers are professionals. They're the educated ones. They're the ones who studied under the rabbinical schools. They're the ones who studied all the tradition of the oral tradition and the written tradition. They're the trained theologians. So these guys are the seminary professors. And it's through their close association with these Pharisees and the influence of Pharisee money, the scribes were able to broaden their popular appeal. They were able to come out from behind the ivory tower and come into the mainstream.

It'd be one thing if their teaching remained tucked away safely hidden in some ivory tower, hidden in obscurity, some scholarly theological journal that no one but other academics are ever gonna read. But no, they got out there and mixed in public. They liked the attention. They liked the feeling of

being the one with the answers. So they came out from outside of their ivory tower, and they accompanied the Pharisees. They're often paired together, scribes and Pharisees.

Their teaching infected everyone and as their teaching infected everyone, it burdened them significantly with heavy, heavy burdens. The verb there "to load people with," or "to burden people," it's directly related to the noun that's in the same sentence, the noun burden and that noun for burden refers to like a ship's cargo, which is rather apropos of a word picture because it conveys the weight of a burden.

Think about how much cargo goes into a ship and think about you offloading that ship one box at a time, to go to some freighter, some cargo carrier that goes across one of our major oceans and think about you being burdened with offloading that ship by yourself. Think about the many varieties of cargo that's contained in a ship. And all of that is being freighted into popular religion. It's like a ship's cargo; it's too much for a person to carry. It's impossible. It requires a ship's hold to carry all these burdens. So the number of burdens, the weight, the variety of burdens, impossible for anyone to carry by himself. It's like a ship's cargo and there's nothing but an ocean-going freighter that can carry all this weight.

Look, these lawyers created the burdens. The Pharisees tried to carry them. And so, they both taught and influenced the common people to do the same thing. And, and that really is who Jesus is speaking to here. He's saying this is what you are doing. You're laboring and you're heavy laden so if you feel this, come to me. These guys multiplied burdens that didn't help people at all. But Christ, in his meekness, Christ in his compassion, he comes to remove the yoke of slavery. He comes to save people from these onerous burdens and to bring them under his easy yoke to carry, very light burdens.