

# **LUKE**

## Part 47: “The Truth about False Righteousness”

Luke 11:33-54

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Sunday, January 20, 2019 (Epiphany Season)

### **Scripture Reading**

<sup>33</sup> “No one after lighting a lamp puts it in a cellar or under a basket, but on a stand, so that those who enter may see the light. <sup>34</sup> Your eye is the lamp of your body. When your eye is healthy, your whole body is full of light, but when it is bad, your body is full of darkness. <sup>35</sup> Therefore be careful lest the light in you be darkness. <sup>36</sup> If then your whole body is full of light, having no part dark, it will be wholly bright, as when a lamp with its rays gives you light.”

<sup>37</sup> While Jesus was speaking, a Pharisee asked him to dine with him, so he went in and reclined at table. <sup>38</sup> The Pharisee was astonished to see that he did not first wash before dinner. <sup>39</sup> 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. <sup>40</sup> You fools! Did not he who made the outside make the inside also? <sup>41</sup> But give as alms those things that are within, and behold, everything is clean for you.

<sup>42</sup> “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. <sup>43</sup> Woe to you Pharisees! For you love the best seat in the synagogues and greetings in the marketplaces. <sup>44</sup> Woe to you! For you are like unmarked graves, and people walk over them without knowing it.”

<sup>45</sup> One of the lawyers answered him, “Teacher, in saying these things you insult us also.” <sup>46</sup> 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. <sup>47</sup> Woe to you! For you build the tombs of the prophets whom your fathers killed. <sup>48</sup> So you are witnesses and you consent to the deeds of your fathers, for they killed them, and you build their tombs. <sup>49</sup> Therefore also the Wisdom of God said, ‘I will send them prophets and apostles, some of whom they will kill and persecute,’ <sup>50</sup> so that the blood of all the prophets, shed from the foundation of the world, may be charged against this generation, <sup>51</sup> 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. <sup>52</sup> 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.”

<sup>53</sup> 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, <sup>54</sup> lying in wait for him, to catch him in something he might say. <sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> [\*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version\*](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Lk 11:33–54.

*Almighty God, unto whom all hearts are open, all desires are known, and from whom no secrets are hidden, cleanse the thoughts of our heart by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, so that we may perfectly love you and worthily magnify your holy name. We pray this in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN.*

## **Introduction**

A few weeks ago, our church gathered on Christmas Eve to celebrate the good news that Jesus has come into the world. Our Christmas Eve service is always one of my favorite services of the year because during this service we do something as a church that we only get to do once a year. After the sermon is over, we dim the lights of the sanctuary, we stand up, we sing Christmas carols, and we *light candles*. As a church family, we watch the candles glow and shine in the darkness. We remember together that the gospel of Jesus Christ is good news of peace and hope and joy that is like light breaking into our dark world. And we remember that this light of the gospel is not just meant to be declared with our lips – it is to be displayed with our lives.

Here in Luke 11, Jesus has been talking about the word of God and how true blessing comes by hearing and seeking and responding to the word God. But the blessing of God's word was never meant to be something that we keep for ourselves. In the first part of our Scripture this morning reminds us that the light of God's word is meant to shine in and through the lives of the people of God: *"No one after lighting a lamp puts it in a cellar or under a basket, but on a stand, so that those who enter may see the light" (Luke 11:33, ESV).*

This idea is not a new idea to the Bible. God's people have always been called to display his glory to a watching world (see Ex. 19:4-6 & 1 Pt. 2:9-10). The idea is this: if you truly come to know the triune God who created all things and redeems us from sin, you can't help but be changed by him. If your heart truly encounters the truth of God's word, his truth will set you free, and your life will look different.

*But*, as this text goes on to show us, it is possible to hear the word God, to know a lot of things about the word of God, to even teach the word of God, and not *obey* the word of God. It is possible to say you worship God and look like you are worshipping God, but in reality, be worshipping your own pride in God's name. This is especially evident in the lives of Jesus's adversaries that we meet in this passage – the Pharisees and lawyers.

So while there is a true righteousness that comes from knowing and worshipping God, the Pharisees often represent a false righteousness that comes from merely knowing *about* God. Now, sometimes it is really easy to see the Pharisees as two-dimensional villains that are really easy to beat up on like a piñata. But in reality, *false righteousness is a very subtle and dangerous temptation for all of us*. So as we look into this text in which Jesus confronts Pharisees and lawyers, I want us to explore how he exposes *"The Truth about False Righteousness."*

## **Exposition**

### **1.) False righteousness cares more about external ritual than true devotion.**

A Pharisee hears Jesus's teaching, and he invites Jesus over to his home for a meal. Then, a bit of a minor scandal happens. You see, the Pharisees have a very specific hand washing ritual that they expected to be meticulously observed. But Jesus, this very famous Rabbi, did not perform this ritual before he ate.<sup>2</sup>

Now, it might be easy to take the Pharisees' side in this argument initially. Most people expect each other to wash their hands in polite society regularly. But what is happening here is not an issue of hygiene.

In the Old Testament Jewish Law, there were laws of cleanliness. The purpose of these laws about cleanliness served a practical, hygienic purpose, but additionally, these laws and practices were to remind God's people that they were to live as a people who were holy and set apart unto the Lord. Jesus would have undoubtedly obeyed any law concerning cleanliness that was prescribed in Scripture.

However, the Pharisees took things to another level. They didn't just want to obey the laws of Scripture. They made up their own laws that went above and beyond what Scripture required. They did this not only with laws about cleanliness but all of the laws of the Old Testament. If the Scripture told them to give a tenth of their income, the Pharisees would we'll even give a tenth of everything in our spice rack.

Eventually, they focused on their own commands so much that they began to neglect God's commands, like loving the Lord their God with all their heart, soul, and mind, and loving their neighbors as themselves. This is why Jesus said: ***"But woe to you Pharisees! For you tithe the mint and rue and every herb, and neglect justice and the love of God. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others"*** (Luke 11:42, ESV).

Jesus is saying it is truly possible to care about external religious rituals while at the same having an internal heart that is *cold* toward God. The Pharisees did the right cleansing rituals, they tithed their spice racks, but they were spiritually dead on the inside. Because of this, the spiritual influence of the Pharisees was death-giving instead

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<sup>2</sup> "The *Mishnah* records what the ritual hand washing was like. This cleansing had to be perfect to be effective. "The hands are susceptible to uncleanness, and they are rendered clean [by the pouring over them of water] up to the wrist. Thus if a man had poured the first water up to the wrist and the second water beyond the wrist, and the water flowed back to the hand, the hand becomes clean; but if he poured both the first water and the second beyond the wrist, and the water flowed back to the hand, the hand remains unclean. If he poured the first water over the one hand alone and then bethought himself and poured the second water over the one hand, his one hand [alone] is clean. If he had poured the water over the one hand and rubbed it on the other, it becomes unclean; but if he rubbed it on his head or on the wall [to dry it] it remains clean' (*Yadaim 2.3*)." R. Kent Hughes, [\*Luke: That You May Know the Truth\*](#), Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1998), 22.

of life-giving. Like walking over an unmarked grave, when people would come in contact with Pharisaic ideology, they would walk away unclean and not even know it.<sup>3</sup>

But here is the scary thing about talking about Pharisees. Pharisaical tendencies are really easy to see in other people, but very hard to see in ourselves. As C.S. Lewis once warned, we must not be pharisaical to even the Pharisees.

The temptation toward pharisaical ritualism and self-righteousness is a temptation that appeals to all of us in some way. It happens anytime we look to a certain set of behaviors (also known as rituals) and say, “If I do this, then I know I’m a good person. If I do this, I know that I am justified before God and/or man.”

So some people today might be tempted to say, “Look, I’m a good person because I go to church, attend a Bible study, and I once went on a mission trip.” Those are not bad things. But simply doing those things does not mean that you are a good person. And hauntingly, you can do those things and still have a heart that is completely cold toward God.

And this temptation doesn’t just apply to religious people, by the way. Secular people have their own rituals that they can point to validate their own sense of righteousness. Their mindset is, “Look, I’m a good person because I bought a pair of Tom’s, I eat organic food, and I virtue signal the right causes on social media.” Or, “Look, I know I’m a good parent because I always go to my kids’ soccer games.” Or, “Look, I know I’m a good husband because I bought my wife a piece of jewelry for our anniversary.” Again, those are not bad things. But you can still do these things and be a hateful, self-righteous person.

*Here is the problem. When we look to something that we do for our own justification and moral validation, we are setting ourselves up for failure in one of two ways. Either we will live in a state of pride because we ignore all of our failings and point to our good deeds. Or, we will crush ourselves in self-condemnation, because deep down we can never do enough good to cover up the wrong we do.*

*If you are a Christian, you must understand this: you are not justified because of your righteous deeds. You are justified because you trust in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ! Your righteousness is the righteousness of Christ! And because of that righteousness, you have the power to truly love God and truly love others! And you have the power to not fall into self-condemnation when you fail, but rather fall into the grace that empowers you to repent and take back up the task to love God and love people!*

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<sup>3</sup> “The picture part of the analogy is clear. People were unknowingly walking over unmarked graves. But it is uncertain to what this refers. It may mean that the Pharisees were like walking dead and that those in contact with them (their followers) became unclean just as they would by contact with a dead body (Num 9:6–10; Lev 21:1–4, 11). Another possibility is that their followers were unconscious that contact with the Pharisees’ teachings was death-giving.” Robert H. Stein, *Luke*, vol. 24, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 341.

With this said, does this mean the true problem of the Pharisees was their rituals? No! The problem with the Pharisees was their hearts that felt that they could earn their righteousness through their observation of rituals. In fact, Jesus says of these rituals “*these you ought to have done, without neglecting the others.*”

Here is what this means for us. There are spiritual rhythms that are good for our souls: reading your Bible, praying, coming to church, singing songs of worship and praise, taking communion, connecting in Christian community, serving your church, serving your community, going on mission trips. These are good and godly spiritual rhythms that can cultivate a love for God. You need to do these things. But the goal is not the doing of spiritual rhythms – the goal is a love for God.

Spiritual rhythms and rituals are not what make you righteous before God. Only Jesus will make you righteous before God.

## **2.) False righteousness cares more about biblical knowledge than biblical obedience.**

After Jesus give the Pharisees a talking-to, the “lawyers” (νομικῶν) speak up. Now, the lawyers in this text are not attorneys in the modern sense. These lawyers were scholars of the Law/Torah. Other translations call them “experts in the law” or “religion scholars.”

So think of it this way: if Pharisees are like bad pastors with bad theology, the lawyers were the seminary professors that trained these bad pastors in their bad theology. So when Jesus calls the Pharisees out, the lawyers get understandably get mad. They say, “Jesus when you call out our star students, you make us look bad too,” (as if they could intimidate Jesus with their censure). And Jesus is like, “Now that you mention it, yes, you are also worst”: “*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’*” (Luke 11:46, ESV).

You see, these “lawyers” were professional scholars of the Old Testament Scriptures. They should have seen their job as an opportunity to help ordinary people understand and apply the word of God to their lives. But for whatever reason, by the time of Jesus’s life they had made worshipping God so complicated that it was essentially impossible for the common person. It gave them pride because they were the only ones who understood how this worked. It gave them job security because everyone needed them to tell them what was in bounds and out of bounds. The word of God was like a spiritual tax code, and they were the IRS.

Here is the big idea: it is possible to study the Bible, but miss the point of the Bible. There is a type of biblical knowledge that leads one to be puffed up with pride (cf. 1 Cor. 8:1), instead of being led toward love of God and people. This has always been a temptation toward false righteousness for people who deeply study and teach the Bible.

But let us be very careful not to misunderstand what Jesus is saying here. Jesus is not saying, “Look, guys, the lawyers have done a bad job of teaching Scripture, so we should reject Scripture.” He is not saying, “The religious scholars have bad theology, so we should reject all theology.” No. The answer to bad biblical teaching is good biblical teaching. The answer to bad theology is good theology. That’s why in exposing the flaws the scribes and Pharisees, Jesus points us right back to the message of the prophets and the apostles; i.e., the Bible (cf. Lk. 11:49).

What does this mean for us? It means we need to be very suspicious of theology distracts of from a “love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith” (1 Tim. 1:5). But we should never downplay the value of understanding God’s word. If you get God wrong you get everything wrong. The thoughts you believe to be true about God are the most important thoughts you have.

True knowledge God (which is what the word “theology” means) leads us to life, freedom, joy, faith, and worship. But likewise, true knowledge of God necessarily leads to obedience of God. John Frame, one of my seminary professors, made sure to make his students understand that you cannot divorce theological understanding from theological application. In fact, he defined true theology as *“the application of God’s word [...] to all areas of life.”*<sup>4</sup> In other words, if you fail to apply God’s truth, you haven’t yet really understood God’s true.

We, like the religious scholars of Jesus’s day, can all fall prey to the sin of valuing biblical knowledge over biblical obedience. What’s the solution to this temptation? We have to intentionally humble ourselves before the word of God, keep watch on our hearts, and commit to submit ourselves to the God’s authority in our lives.

Quick illustration, urgently want my three sons to not play in the street, I do not want my oldest son to say, “Well, technically, we are not *in* the street, we are *on* the street. Perhaps we can hold a panel discussion *on* the street to discuss what you might have meant?” In the same way, God is not asking us to argue over non-essential matters of his word. He wants us to trust his character, and to know that his words are meant to lead us to life and flourishing and joy.

### **3.) False righteousness is by its very nature opposed to true righteousness.**

False righteousness has always existed. Look at Jesus’s words: *“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”* (Luke 11:47–51, ESV).

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<sup>4</sup> John M. Frame. *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1987), 76.

From the foundation of the world, God has sent his servants to oppose false-righteousness in all of its forms prophetically. And, from the foundation of the world, false righteousness has been murderously opposed to true righteousness.

Cain murdered Abel because Abel's righteousness exposed Cain's wickedness (Gen. 4:1-6). King Joash the King murdered Zechariah the priest because Zechariah confronted him with the word of God instead of supporting his political agenda" (2 Chron. 24:20-22).

And soon, the Pharisees and lawyers will get so fed up with Jesus exposing their false righteousness that they will conspire to murder him too. After this conversation, these guys are now seriously wanting to plot against Jesus, ensnare Jesus, and even kill Jesus (Lk. 11:53-54).

And here is what we need to hear: if anyone in the world should have recognized Jesus, it was these guys. These guys knew their Bibles up and down. They prided themselves on being God's people. But their example shows us; it is possible to say you are God's people and miss Jesus. Their example shows us that Jesus is committed to expose any false righteousness that we might be relying on, and we can respond by letting Jesus change us or resisting his work within us.

The word of God is pleads with us here in the Bible belt, "Don't miss Jesus!" If your first inclination when you wonder whether or not you are a good person is to throw out all the stuff you do, then this text is for you. Humble yourself before it. Let it expose the fact that your righteousness is not enough. Let it expose your need for a savior, and then cling to the hope of Jesus!

Religion, not Rome, sent Jesus to the cross.

The irony, of course, is that the false righteousness of the Pharisees sent Jesus to the very cross that would be the fountain of our righteousness. Because, at the cross, Jesus would take upon himself our sin so that we would take upon ourselves his righteousness. As the Apostle Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5:21: ***"For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God"*** (2 Corinthians 5:21, ESV).

And why is it so important to believe that our righteousness is only the righteousness of Christ? Because if our righteousness comes from what we have done, then we get the glory. But if our righteousness comes from what Jesus has done, then Jesus gets the glory.

Redeemer Christian Church, may we be a people who set aside the temptations and snares of false righteousness. May we take hold of the gift of the imputed righteousness that comes by faith alone. And may we give Jesus Christ all the glory, and display the light of his righteousness to a watching world.

AMEN.

## **Community Group Discussion Starters**

- 1.) *Read Luke 11:33-54, and summarize what is happening and being said in your own words.*
- 2.) *How might Jesus's teaching in Luke 11:33-36 be connected to Jesus's confrontation with the Pharisees and Lawyers in Luke 11:37-54?*
- 3.) *Jesus's rebuke of the Pharisees illustrates how often times people can go through the motions of external, religious rituals without ever experiencing any love for God within their hearts. It is often easy to see this tendency in other people's lives, but how have you seen this tendency work out in your own life?*
- 4.) *The "lawyers" in this passage were scholars of the Old Testament Law (also known as the Torah). Jesus rebukes them for knowing a lot about the Bible but failing to obey the Bible. How can we guard our hearts against the tendency to know the Bible but not obey the Bible?*

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