

Prayers

To God

Almighty God and Lord of all; You are the one true God and the only source of our salvation! Come amongst us in power this very day, to minister to us Your love, Your grace, Your hope and Your healing. May we who have so much personal need never fail to ask for the help and blessing of Your Holy Spirit, so that our entire lives may be an authentic witness to Your liberating and transforming love. AMEN

For myself

Pray about your daily work

Think one by one of the people with whom you work, and those you meet each day. Pray for them one by one, and seek God's blessing on their lives, whatever your personal relationship with them!

For others

Pray for athletes involved in the Olympics. Pray especially for any who have become the target for damaging attacks on social media. Pray about the reporting of the events and the effect this will have on people's lives.

Meditation

Lord God, You are the worker of all miracles.

Miracles of grace by which hearts are moved,
The Spirit convicts, and Christ will save the lost.

Miracles of hope, which demonstrate to all
The power of Your perfect, never ending love.

Miracles of healing, which cure the hurting sick
And show Your generous love for all who suffer.

Miracles of blessing, which strengthen the soul
As the Spirit breathes again into tired lives.

Miracles of love, which bring true happiness
To those who entrust their families to the Father.

Miracles of faith, which happen repeatedly
Within our fellowships, until revival has truly come!

Lord God, You are the worker of all miracles!

Bible Passage

Luke 11:37-44

³⁷ When Jesus had spoken, a Pharisee invited Him to eat with Him, so He went in and took His place to eat. ³⁸ But the Pharisee was astonished when he saw that Jesus did not perform ritual washing immediately before the meal. ³⁹ So the Lord then said to him,

***“Now then, you Pharisees clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside, you are full of greed and wickedness. ⁴⁰ You have lost understanding! Did not the one who made the outside make the inside as well? ⁴¹ So give what is in the dish to the poor, and then as far as you are concerned, everything will be clean!*”**

***⁴² “How terrible for you Pharisees, because you tithe even your garden herbs such as mint and rue, but you neglect justice and the love of God. It is vital you do these things, without neglecting everything else.*”**

***⁴³ “How terrible for you Pharisees, because you love the most important seats in the synagogues and being respected in the market-places.*”**

***⁴⁴ “How terrible for you, because you are like unmarked graves, which people walk over without knowing!”*”**

Review

We can imagine the scene. Jesus had been invited by the leading religious figures of some place not so much to a formal dinner, but to a brief mid-day meal (11:37). They wanted to talk with Him about His teaching and doing what they liked best, which was to discuss the finer points of religious belief and practice. It seems that Jesus knew what He was doing however and where the conversation would go. He came to the meal without performing the ritual washing prescribed by the Pharisees but not yet generally accepted by working Jews in Israel (11:38). In so doing, He set up a tense situation in which he spoke about the sins of religiosity (11:39-44), which continues in tomorrow’s reading (11:45-54).

Jesus’ words here are certainly strong, and we can imagine the awkwardness created as He set about exposing the Pharisees’ faults. But this is not simply an intellectual or religious assault on His hosts, it is a record of Jesus’ plain teaching about the dangers of religiosity and the meaning of purity in God’s eyes. Some Bible versions make it seem that Jesus curses the Pharisees, especially when the words ‘*have you lost understanding?*’ are translated by some as the derogatory remark, ‘*fools!*’ (11:40 – see ‘going Deeper’). However, Jesus expresses deep concern at the lack of understanding of these supposed men of wisdom. As He points out the last verse, their ignorance unwittingly defiles others (11:44).

Now the Pharisees were essentially a sect within Judaism that was gaining increasing influence in Jesus’ day. They had begun as a group of lay Jews a couple of centuries earlier, and had set about trying to define Judaism in intimate detail by applying the Laws of Moses to every conceivable aspect of religious, social, family and personal life. No one could doubt their dedication and sincerity. However, when they rolled their eyes at Jesus’ indifference to their purity laws (11:38), they exposed their hypocrisy. It was not that everyone in Jesus’ day observed the minutiae of ceremonial cleansing before eating any food, because they did not.

They did however expect someone who was a leader to set the highest standards of ritual observance, and this is why they were shocked.

Jesus' devastating critique is well known and relatively easy for us to understand. He begins by expressing exasperation at the criticism levelled at Him by people who had lost the real meaning of a relationship with God the Father. Picking up the idea of washing a cup, he contrasts the 'external' and the 'internal', and accuses the Pharisees of being '*full of greed and wickedness*' on the '*inside*' whilst maintaining strict 'outward' religious observance (11:39). Such hypocrisy has always been anathema to God, who has made the whole person, inside and out (11:40).

This criticism of the Pharisees was nothing new. By Jesus' day, they were indeed respected for their devotion, but had become rich and powerful, and had taken advantage of the poor and weak. Jesus probably reflected popular opinion in His accusation, but more than this, the hypocrisy of the Pharisees was contrary to the spirit of God's true Law as revealed in the text of the Old Testament itself (e.g. Exodus 20f., Leviticus 19). Not surprisingly, Jesus called on the Pharisees to address the rich / poor divide and return what they had taken (11:41). This is similar to the main thrust of Jesus' teaching elsewhere, where he urges repentance before God (Matt 4:17, Mark 6:12), and the return of unjust gain (e.g. Luke 19:2-8). There can be no mistake, such deeds are more significant for keeping pure before God than outward ritual (11:41), and the true sin is religious hypocrisy with no practical faith.

However, Jesus did not stop there. Calling out in concern for those who were trapped in such things, He called out three times, '*How terrible ...*' (11:42,43,44), and drove home his concerns about false religion in three distinct ways. The first and longest of these sayings (11:42) warns against allowing the minutiae of religious observance to cloud true faith. At the end of the verse, Jesus carefully reminds those who heard Him that He was not calling for the rejection of religious ritual. But by then His main point was crystal clear; real religious observance must be founded on a pure love of God and respect for justice. Without this, all ritual become meaningless.

Verse 43 refers to the tendency for those who have power to like it and become attached to status and its advantages. '*Important seats in the synagogues*', does not mean the first century equivalent of comfortable pews or cushioned chairs. It meant sitting close to the synagogue authorities, so that when someone was asked to read from Scripture and teach, they would have prime position. The Pharisees believed they were the authentic voice of Judaism and were intent on broadcasting it. Likewise, it served their purposes well to be recognised and greeted on the streets and in the market places. For them, their faith was not something to be hidden at home; their express mission was to take control of Judaism, and they accepted every form of publicity available to them!

It should come as no surprise then to find that the last verse contains a stark warning to the Pharisees that because of their failings, they risked damaging God's people and making them impure. In those days, a dead body or a grave was considered ritually 'impure'. Anyone coming into contact with these would have to perform elaborate ceremonial washing to be able to rejoin the community and worship God. It was an dire accusation to describe the Pharisees as '*unmarked tombs*' which polluted Israel before God!

It is easy for us to believe Jesus' critique of the Pharisees without question, and perhaps make them a 'scapegoat'. We must recognise that Jesus' words here speak to religious and church authorities even to this day. Wherever Christian faith has developed with laws and rituals, due largely to the need for people to have 'methods' by which to worship and live, Jesus' warning nevertheless echoes. Unless God is loved above all, unless justice is done and the poor blessed, unless leaders look to God and not people, we end up walking in the footsteps of the Pharisees. These words of Scripture reveal that true faith is rooted in the heart of the believer and should not be replaced by mere human rules or rituals, however important these may be.

Going Deeper

Notes on the text and translation

V37 'He went in and took His place to eat'

Other translations:

'he went in and reclined at table' (NIV)

'he went in and sat down at the table' (NRSV)

This is not straightforward. The Greek words say something like this; *'going in, he reclined'*. Unless the reader knows that reclining was the normal seated position for eating, then he or she may not get the full picture; so most translators explain the phrase in some way. However, I do not go as far as to talk of a *'table'*, as do other translators; instead, I prefer to speak of *'taking place to eat'*, a perfectly good English phrase conveying the same ideas as the Greek *'recline'*.

V38 'perform ritual washing'

Other translations:

'did not first wash' (NIV)

'ritually purify His hands' (NRSV)

The Greek word is *'baptidzo'*, in this context, means to perform the ritual ceremony of washing. This is the same word as that used for baptism in the New Testament, and if we want to understand the practice of baptism in the New Testament, we should always remember its close association with ritual purity. I have not translated this simply as *'washing'* (see NIV), because the modern reader might also think it odd that Jesus did not wash before a meal! To prevent any temporary misunderstanding of the story here, I have therefore preferred to translate this *'ritual washing'*.

V40 'you have lost understanding'

Other translations:

'Fools' (NRSV)

'you foolish people' (NIV)

It is sad that in English there is no simple word that addresses people who can understand something that is not derogatory. Now, it may suit us to think Jesus was bold enough to tell his hosts they were fools, but the *'tone of voice'* of this passage seems to me to have been more agonised than impolite or condescending. For this reason, I have translated the Greek word according to its basic meaning, which refers to the loss of comprehension.

V41 'and then as far as you are concerned, everything will be clean!'

Other translations:

'and everything will be clean for you' (NIV)

'you will be clean all over' (CEB)

The trouble with the NIV and the CEB versions is this; it is not entirely clear what they mean. After looking at the Greek, it seems to me that the words translated 'for you' in the NIV and 'you' in the CEB really mean 'as far as you are concerned', and this makes a good deal of sense within the rest of the sentence. Hence my translation.

V42 'How terrible for you Pharisees'

Other translations:

'Woe to you, Pharisees' (NIV)

'Alas for you' (NJB)

Translators have long struggled to find a good way of conveying the idea of 'woe' in English. The Greek word is an exclamation full of horror and regret, largely suitable for a funeral! I prefer the phrase 'how terrible for you ...', which has the benefit of sounding more like deep upset than a curse.

Further Comments

Pharisees

The name 'Pharisee' has an uncertain origin. Some believe that it is related to an ancient Hebrew word for 'separate', and describes the ethos of Pharisees who have separated themselves from mainstream Judaism in order to be 'pure' before God. The idea is understandable, but surely extraordinary; why do God's people need such divisive parties? The Pharisees arose as a sect of lay people in the second century BC, so by the time of Jesus, they had developed a complex analysis of the Bible and a vast range of developed 'laws' that as far as they were concerned were indistinguishable from the Laws of Moses actually recorded in the Old Testament. For example, the Pharisees had hundreds of laws concerning the Sabbath, where the entire Old Testament says no more than that the Sabbath is a day of rest, and people should honour God by resting (it says nothing about worshipping God on Sundays, incidentally!).

In the Gospels, Jesus is hounded by Pharisees who see Him as a threat to their project of trying to infiltrate the entire Jewish hierarchy. However, there were some Pharisees who found Jesus' message impelling and divine, and amongst these are counted Nicodemus, the man who talked at length with Jesus as recorded in John 3. True Pharisees were deeply devotional people and some clearly saw the light through Jesus' teaching. As a whole, they were aware that inner holiness was of supreme importance, it is just that they felt this had to be demonstrated through the rigorous application of a comprehensive system of laws. If they were ever to find salvation, Jesus therefore needed to attack their priorities

The social message

As in so many places within Jesus' teaching, this passage brings with it an emphasis on meeting the needs of the poor. It may well have come as a shock to those who heard Him, but in general, Jesus did not accuse the Romans of being the reason for poverty in Israel. He sought to challenge the rich of Israel, that is, the Pharisees and the High Priests, as well as the tax collectors (Matthew 9:9). Jesus' teaching never deviated from these principles;

- the obligations of personal responsibility in matters of wealth
- the need to submit all to God
- the imperative to address the needs of the poor

Such a message is as challenging today as it has ever been, and those who experienced the advantages of privilege in first century Israel would have been as wary about letting any of it go as people are today.

The graves of saints

In Judea, tombs were important places, especially the tombs of the saints, including those of past prophets. It is not clear whether people in Jesus' day were able to accurately identify the tombs of some of the famous characters in the Old Testament, but at least one scholar thinks it likely. The aim of the Pharisees was therefore to be numbered with the saints of God and have their graves recognised after their death as people who had made a difference to the world in which they lived. Jesus' words here prophecy the opposite. He describes them as '*unmarked graves*' (11:44), the most awful end from the point of view of any Pharisees. In addition, the idea that these graves would be ignorantly walked on was doubly offensive because it implied that in death, they were impure.

Jesus' message was not welcomed by the Pharisees, but He had to deliver it, for their good and for ours.

Discipleship

Application

True religion

As I have made clear, we cannot escape the consequences of this passage of Scripture when applied to our religious life today. Some like to say that they have no religion, but this is simply a general word for how people put their faith into practice. If I attend a worship service that consists largely of singing worship songs, this can be as much a ritual as listening to words spoken by a priest. It is a fact of life that God has made us all very different with many preferences of music, art, language and aesthetics, and so people will always fall into different ways of worshipping God. The danger however is to allow those methods to be mistaken for God himself.

Few today would try and live a perfect life in the manner of the Pharisees, but other things get in the way of our inner purity. If I cannot worship God without singing the latest worship song then I have allowed music and personal preferences to determine my worship, and that is not godly. If I feel that 'communion' is not properly administered unless the right words are said, then in a similar way, I make a god out of words from a book that may be very helpful, but are not necessarily God's true 'Word'. Alongside this, we will sometimes inadvertently let books, pews, buildings and a host of other things come between us and our Maker. Jesus calls us to make sure that our hearts are right before God, so that He will be our Salvation and our Guide

Tithing herbs

It sounds extraordinary to us now, but this was done! It was proper practice for Jewish people to tithe all produce and give one tenth of a harvest to the Lord God; so they did this for even the smallest of herb crops! It is interesting that Jesus is careful to say that such minute attention to detail is still of value, but only if the heart is right with God, in '*love*' and '*justice*' (11:42).

Is it worth considering whether we have sometimes 'thrown the baby out with the bathwater', and there might be value in a certain amount of religious 'correctness'? For example, in tithing all we receive to make sure that we remember it all come from God, that is, everything

we have and own? We cannot discount the thought, and when God brings revival again in this world, I have often wondered whether He will call on His servants to a far higher standard of discipline and commitment than is common for Christians today. We cannot assume that our way of thinking about 'religion' is always 'right'. God will always lead His people to new things.

The most important places

It may be wise for us to read verse 43 again, because in competitive and worldly social environments today, it seems to me that too much church life is dominated by those who take advantage of others to gain status and power for themselves. I am cautious to be more specific here, but I have seen too many church people pursue jobs, careers and office in the church because they have a personal need of this power and influence. It is easy to dress this up as 'churchmanship', and some do, so be very careful. It hurts the church badly when people use the love of others as a step on a ladder, to climb where they wish to go.

Ideas for what to do

- Make a list of the things you do to worship God. Look at it carefully. Can any of these things be called 'ritual', in the sense that you feel you must have this or else you are unable to honour God? Think about such things carefully and pray about them.
- There may be times in your life when you have felt unable to worship God or keep close to Him in everyday life. Why do you believe this to be the case? Talk about this with a friend at church and explore someone else's perspective of such things.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. What, if any, are the similarities between the religion of the Pharisees and church life of today?
2. What does this passage tell us lies at the heart of true religion and our relationship with God?
3. What sins affect God's people today, comparable with 'getting *important seats in synagogues*' (11:43) or being '*respected in the market places*'?

Final Prayer

Lord Jesus, make me aware, I pray, of the dangers of my own religious practice. Remind me that You alone are God and nothing should stand between us, whether it is music, buildings, people, social life, or anything else. Cleanse my life of all that gets in the way of Your love, and keep me pure in faith I pray. **AMEN.**
