

Prayers

To God

Praise God for the wonder of His provision for you this very day. Let your praise continue throughout your day.

For myself

Pray about your daily work

Jesus, I am grateful for the work You have given me to do. Forgive me for those moments of doubt when I find it hard to understand where my work fits into Your plans for Your Kingdom. Open my eyes to the wonder of Your world and my place within it, so that I may serve You all my days. AMEN

For others

Pray for your enemies, especially those at work or in your local church. Pray blessing on those who dislike or hate you

Meditation

Don't stand back:

Don't let others try to do for you
what God would have you do,
And you will grow in spiritual confidence
as His loved and trusted servant.

Don't let your heart be distracted,
place your trust in Christ Jesus,
Draw on the amazing love of the Father
And receive His strength and guidance.

Don't let the enemy catch you out
keep alert, keep constant watch,
And you will gain control of all those sins
that have tempted you from within.

Don't let the world become your idol
don't serve its wants and needs
Be free to choose the narrow pathway
And live by the truth of God's Word.

Bible Passage

Luke 11:45-54

⁴⁵ One of the experts in the law spoke up,

“Teacher, when you say these things, you insult us too.”

⁴⁶ Jesus replied,

“How terrible for you as well, you experts in the law, because you load people down with impossible burdens, and you will not lift even one of your fingers to help them.

⁴⁷ “how terrible for you, because you build monumental tombs for the prophets, but it was your forefathers who killed them. ⁴⁸ In this way you witness to your approval of what your forefathers did; they did the killing and you did the building! ⁴⁹ Because of this, God in his wisdom said,

‘I will send them prophets and apostles, but they will kill some of them and persecute others.’

⁵⁰ “As a result, this generation will bear responsibility for the blood of all the prophets shed since the creation of the world, ⁵¹ from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah, who was killed between the altar and the sanctuary. Yes, I tell you, this generation will bear responsibility for it all.

⁵² “How terrible for you experts in the law, because you have removed the key of knowledge. You have not entered yourselves, and you have stood in the way those who were entering.”

⁵³ As Jesus was leaving, the Pharisees and the teachers of the law began to attack Him fiercely and threw many questions at Him, ⁵⁴ waiting to catch Him out in something He might say.

Review

It is relatively easy for us to read this part of Luke’s Gospel and quickly conclude that the Pharisees had failed in their duty to God and to the people. This, after all, was Jesus’ accusation (11:39,40), and much of today’s reading develops this theme. Three times, Jesus exclaims to an ‘expert’, ‘*how terrible for you ...*’ (11:46,47,52) as He focusses on the consequences of spiritual and social failing amongst the theologians of His day. What would it have been like, however, to have been on the receiving end of Jesus’ words, which pinpointed sins and exposed faults? Our passage begins with a pained question put to Jesus by one an ‘*expert of the law*’ (11:45)

Who were these experts? They were probably Pharisees with special knowledge of the Biblical texts, people whose work was to study the law and apply it. All Pharisees had to abide by the law, but not all Pharisees were engaged in the intricate work of understanding it and setting these rules for others; this was the work of ‘experts’. Certainly, this man felt that his faith had been impugned by Jesus. Whilst responsible for the detailed application of the law, he probably felt that he understood the difference between inward and outward religion, so Jesus’ outburst offended him. He probably spoke for all those who were at this meal with Jesus (11:37).

The shape of this argument had been cast (11:37-44), however, and Jesus was not one to stand back from confrontation. It may have been that He was angry with this expert, but it is equally possible that Jesus was desperately concerned for his plight and that of His fellow citizens, before God. The consequences of their misjudgement of God's Law and grace were staggering, and each saying in this passage (beginning '*How terrible for you ...*' - 11:46,47,52) focuses on one such cost.

The first accusation was simply put and is easy to understand, but this does not mean that it was a simple matter. He told the hurt expert that his laws were an impossible burden for ordinary people (11:46). History shows just how easy it is for laws to become oppressive, however necessary they may seem. It is a point not lost on politicians of the left and the right even today, but in first century Judea, Jesus' accusation would have cut the ground from beneath someone whose life had been dedicated to identifying the finer details of the Law by which people were supposed to please God.

Yet Jesus went further and accused the expert of doing nothing to help the ordinary people for whom his laws were intended. This highly religious man believed that laws helped people come closer to God, but Jesus said his efforts showed his blindness to people's real needs. Jesus touches on an important point; there is a limit to how much structure people need in this life. We are reminded that Jesus did not come to found a new 'system', called the church, with laws and regulations defining a new people of God to replace the Jews. He came to establish a relationship with God so that people of all kinds could be saved, and then organise themselves in suitable ways to both honour God and live a full life giving testimony to their faith. This verse (11:46), together with the rest of this passage of Luke (11:37-54) tells us that Jesus was not interested in religion as such, He wanted people to know the Father. All else would flow from this.

Jesus' next concern was historical; he vigorously claimed that God's servants had been rejected by those to whom they were sent. This is certainly a key Old Testament theme, but we should be careful. Christian history has its own dire stories of people sent by God who have been misunderstood and persecuted (for example, George Fox, the founder of the Quakers), sometimes even killed (for example, the travelling preacher John Ball 1338-1381).

In verses 47 to 51 however we can see that Jesus knew this was His own fate. Old Testament prophets had indeed been badly treated; prophets such as Elijah and Jeremiah had been dreadfully rejected (1 Kings 19:10f., e.g. Jeremiah 27,28), along with many others. Jesus Himself said this oppression lasted from Abel, the righteous man murdered by his brother (11:51 – see Genesis 4:8), to Zechariah, the prophet who offended the Judean King Joash (11:51 – see 2 Chronicles 24:19-21). But not far from His mind was surely the tragic loss of His forbear, John the Baptist (Luke 9:7f.). Such great men of God lost their lives witnessing to the message God had given them, and Jesus knew He would do the same.

This is why Jesus said in verse 50; '*this generation will bear responsibility for the blood of all the prophets ...*' Archaeology reveals that in Jesus' own day, many elaborate monumental tombs had been created for the ancient prophets as places of pilgrimage. But what good was this, said Jesus, if the reality was that the revelation of God witnessed to by these great people had not yet been accepted, and the authorities had replaced a covenant relationship with God with legalistic religion?

The most telling point Jesus made comes last; He said that the burden of legalism '*removed the key of knowledge*' (11:52), where the 'key of knowledge' refers to salvation itself, and a true relationship with God. He said to the experts around Him, '*you have not entered yourselves*' but moreover, '*you have stood in the way of those who were entering*' (11:52). If there was one thing that Jesus abhorred, it was people being prevented from coming to God to receive His love (see also Matthew 18:6f.).

Perhaps Jesus knew that what He said could never be accepted by most Pharisees and those involved in the Judaism in His day. But this did not stop Him speaking out the truth about God and the Law. His opponents never quite grasped the force of His arguments, because after hearing Him, they continued to try to trip Him up according to their own understanding of God's Law (11:53,54). They believed they could trap Him on a legal point, when in truth, they could never compete with the One who knew God far more deeply than they would ever know.

Going Deeper

Notes on the text and translation

V48 *'they did the killing and you did the building!'*

Other translations:

'they killed the prophets and you built their tombs' (NIV)

'for they killed them and you built their tombs!' (NRSV)

My translation here is very close to the original Greek. Many other Bible versions add a reference to the prophets to make the sentence easier to read, but I reckon it is straightforward enough.

V49 *'I will send them prophets and apostles'*

There is no difficulty with the translation here, but we may be surprised to find Jesus speaking of 'prophets and apostles'. Surely, you might think, the term 'apostles' is one that comes from the time of the early church, of Paul and Peter, and the growth of the church in the Roman Empire. The term 'apostles' is simply a Greek word meaning 'one who is sent', and Jesus used it here in its simplest form. God had sent many messengers to His people, not all of them prophets. Perhaps he was thinking of people like Job or Saul's son Jonathan who helped David at a critical time in his life (1 Samuel 13,14)

Further Comments Jesus' opponents

Throughout the Gospels, Jesus' opponents are described variously as Pharisees, Sadducees, scribes, elders, teachers of the law, and experts in the law (or 'lawyers'). It is wise if we have a grasp of who these people were:

- Pharisees were a large group of zealous Jews who in Jesus' day, were increasingly dominating the social and religious life of Israel; significantly, they believed in the resurrection. They hounded Jesus from the beginning of His ministry and plotted His death (e.g. Matthew 12:14);
- Sadducees were a party of traditional Jews closely associated with the High Priestly family in Jerusalem; they believed they kept the ancient faith of their forefathers in the face of 'modern' developments such as Pharisaism (which they loathed), and they did not believe in the Resurrection. They only appear occasionally in the story of Jesus, especially at Caesarea Philippi (Matt 16) and in the days before His death (Mark 12:18);
- Scribes were copyists employed by the religious authorities for the specialised task of writing and were therefore closely associated with every and any form of the religious

establishment. Because such a profession does not exist today, we forget their importance.

- Elders were senior and often elderly community leaders who had a vested interest in the religious establishment. Their role in the community was to keep it safe by making sure that it did not stray from the orthodox. They acted as judges, deciding local legal cases.
- Teachers of the law are referred to in Luke alone (2:46, 5:17), and may be an alternative name, used by him for the more familiar 'rabbi';
- 'Experts in the law' or 'lawyers' appear largely in Luke (10:25, 11:44f. 14:3f.) alongside Pharisees. The term probably refers to Pharisees with a degree of specialism in the study of the ancient texts. All Pharisees were committed to their system of rules, but only these experts were responsible for identifying these rules.

Between the altar and the sanctuary

The Zechariah mentioned here is not the same as the prophet whose work is recorded in the Bible under this name. He lived during the return of Israel to her 'Promised Land' after the exile in Babylon (Zech 1:1f.). The Zechariah mentioned by Jesus is the one from 2 Chronicles 24:19-21), a brief story about a prophet of the same name who confronted King Joash around two and a half centuries previously.

We are told that Zechariah was killed '*in the court of the house of the Lord*'. He had delivered a speech of prophetic power to King Joash, saying that unless the King honoured God's commandments, the people would not prosper. This raised King Joash's ire and he was then stoned. This brief passage tells us that Zechariah was the son of a priest, and was therefore a priest himself, and one who was permitted to serve at the Lord's altar in Holy place of the Jerusalem Temple. The Old Testament does not define where he was killed, but in Jesus' day, tradition may well have reflected a story that this prophet died after being sought out in the Temple sanctuary. It was an act of barbarity on the part of the King, and defiance of his God.

Discipleship

Application

Rules and rules – what about the Sabbath?

Here, Jesus exposes the disgrace of theology that has lost touch with real life and real people, and unfortunately, similar things happen today. It is easy for us to cast aspersions on church traditions other than our own, for each church has its rules and regulations simply because no 'society' can exist without them. However, we must look to ourselves and ask if we succumb to the demons of legalism ourselves, and to give an example of this, I ask you to think about the Sabbath day. Many a church has been spilt over attitudes towards the Sabbath, and what can or what cannot be done on this special day.

Now I would be the first to want to honour the Sabbath day as God has commanded, but ever since I researched this in the Bible, my outward stance on this has changed. Firstly, nowhere in the Bible are we told to worship God on the Sabbath day. Secondly, the Sabbath is Saturday, and not Sunday. Sunday has always been the first day of the week, being the day chosen by Christians for worship because it was the day Jesus rose from the dead. In addition, there are no rules in the Bible for the Sabbath (Genesis 2:1-4 and Exodus 20:10f.), except that we should honour God by resting from our daily work. The Old Testament

describes worship as a festive event (Leviticus 23), and Jews in the centuries before Christ decided to worship God in synagogues on the Sabbath Day (Saturday) because many could not attend festive or daily worship in the Jerusalem Temple.

With this Biblical background and clear Christian teaching about weekly worship on a day other than the Sabbath, why do we beat each other up over the matter? And why is it that I have found some question my teaching because I do not emphasise the traditional Victorian attitudes towards the Sabbath, with its rules about what constitutes 'rest'? Even Jesus strongly challenged the Jews over their over-legalism of the Sabbath (Matthew 12:1-14)!

My point is this; please think carefully about the rules used by people to define Christian faith. Too many are still in the business of making faith a matter of rules and regulations, and exercise ungodly control over others as a consequence. This is of course a matter of fine judgement, in which the Bible is surely our guide to God's Word, and Jesus is our teacher. We ignore Jesus' words about legalism here to our peril, whatever its source.

Killing the prophets

It is a tough thought, but God's people need to be constantly vigilant that they do not persecute those who bear God's word. An attitude that says 'this doesn't happen now' is the greatest danger, because history, even recent history in the church says that it does. Some of God's most faithful servants today have been hounded out of one or other church; what a disgrace! Indeed, there are some who have been killed because they speak out for the Lord, not often by other Christians but certainly by people of other faith convictions. These things are important to God and to His church, and we need to both talk about them and investigate the truth of them, if we want to be about our Lord's work. He knew that it was typical human behaviour to reject God's messengers and persecute the faithful, so let us expect this and watch our own attitudes with care.

Ideas for what to do

- Ask some questions about the leadership and governance of your church. Find out what its rules and regulations are concerning booking of premises or property, concerning the use of money, the practice of worship, who preaches and who takes communion, etc. Which of these rules do you believe will change over time, and which are basic to God's people, the church?
- Pray for those who are persecuted and who face great peril if they speak out God's Word today.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. How do you think this passage connects with church life today? How are God's messengers ignored or persecuted today?
2. Is it true today that we tend to honour people after their death rather than in life?
3. Who creates the laws and regulations within your church? Why is this necessary, and have they gone too far?

Final Prayer

Lord God and Father of all, protect us from being overzealous about our faith, to the point that we make unreal and ungodly demands on others. Save us from requiring others to

practice their faith as we do, save us from demanding that others worship as we do, and help us to open our hearts to others as Jesus did. Thank You, Lord Jesus, for loving us all.
AMEN
