

**“Woe to You!”**

**March 31, 2019**

**Brian Watson**

There was a show on television called *Undercover Boss*, in which top executives went “undercover” to work a lowly position in their own company. They did this to see what life was like for their run-of-the-mill employees. Usually, the CEO or COO of the company would find a hard-working employee and reward them after the “big reveal” that they were actually the boss and not some new hire. So, for example a hard-working Russian immigrant working a night-shift job at 7-Eleven was rewarded with his own franchise. But you could imagine what would happen if that lowly employee chewed out his or her undercover boss. Imagine if Jeff Bezos went undercover at Amazon.com, the company he created. Imagine he was working at one of Amazon’s many facilities from which they ship packages, putting all kinds of items in boxes, getting them ready to ship. And then imagine that his manager chewed him out for doing it wrong. What do you think might happen next?

Well, something like that happens with Jesus. Jesus is the ultimate undercover boss. He is God, who became a human being. He wasn’t quite undercover—prophets told of a day when God would be born a human (Isa. 9:6; Mic. 5:2), and Jesus revealed his identity to those with eyes to see. But Jesus did that subtly. He didn’t arrive on the scene and say, “I am God!” He came as a humble man. He was born to humble parents—his birth mother, Mary, and his adoptive father, Joseph, a carpenter. He grew up in the small, unspectacular town of Nazareth. He hung out with fisherman and tax collectors and others who weren’t regarded as the cream of the crop. He beckoned the sinner and the outcast to come to him.

But Jesus did interact with the middle managers of his day, the Jewish religious leaders. Unfortunately, instead of finding a bunch of hard-working employees who deserved to be rewarded, he found a number of self-righteous hypocrites. And when they tried to correct Jesus, Jesus called them out on the carpet and chewed them out.

We’ll see that today in the Gospel of Luke. We’ll read Luke 11:37–54. Jesus is invited to eat with a Pharisee, a member of the influential group of Jewish lay leaders who took the law that God gave Israel very seriously. They tried to apply that law to all of life in very strict ways, and they ended up adding their own traditions to that law. When Jesus doesn’t follow their traditions, this Pharisee is astonished. Implicitly, he’s trying to correct Jesus, to show that Jesus

is in the wrong—in the Pharisee’s eyes, at least. And that doesn’t go well. Jesus rebukes the Pharisees and the experts in the law. Instead of listening to Jesus’ rebuke, they get angry and seek to destroy him.

Let’s go ahead and read the whole passage, and then I’ll go back and explain what’s happening. Here is Luke 11:37–54:

<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>

There are many things you don’t want to hear from God. One of those is “Woe!” That’s like a curse and a warning that you are about to be condemned. Why does Jesus unload on the Pharisees and the lawyers this way?

Let’s go back to the beginning of the passage. The Pharisee has invited Jesus to eat with him, and Jesus agrees. He probably went to the Pharisees house, where other Pharisees had gathered. There were also “lawyers” there. As I’ve said before, “lawyer” doesn’t mean an

---

<sup>1</sup> All biblical quotations come from the English Standard Version (ESV).

attorney. Rather, a lawyer was someone who was an expert in the law that God gave to Israel at Mount Sinai, over a thousand years earlier. The lawyers were the supposed experts in how to interpret that law, and the Pharisees were the ones who added their own traditions to that law, adding manmade laws to God's law.

Before we even start to analyze Jesus' words, we should pause to think about how amazing it is that Jesus would eat with these people. Meal scenes are important to Luke, because meals are important. To eat with someone is to share life with someone. Eating is a social event. It's an intimate event. You're taking something and putting it inside of you. You don't eat with just anyone. But it seems that Jesus is willing to do that. He is willing to eat with these people he is about to rebuke. That alone is a lesson. We should be willing to meet with different people, people who have different beliefs than we do. We should spend time with them, and even dine with them. And we shouldn't talk behind people's backs, so as to make things "us" versus "them." Jesus didn't do that. He was willing to confront people in person.

When Jesus ate with these people, they were surprised that he didn't wash his hands first. This wasn't about hygiene, but about a religious practice. God had given the Israelites a number of laws that talked about purity and cleanliness. The idea was that sin, which is rebellion against God, makes us unclean, and that to approach God, we have to be made clean. So, when the priests served at the tabernacle and the temple, where God was worshiped, they had to wash themselves first. The Jewish religious leaders took the laws that God gave to the priests when they served at the temple (Exod. 30:19–21; 40:12) and extended them to all Jewish people at all times. According to the Talmud, "If [a man's] hands were dirty all becomes unclean." A different rabbinic teaching said that if a man ate bread without washing his hands, it was like he was with a prostitute.<sup>2</sup>

But Jesus didn't wash his hands. To be clear, Jesus wasn't breaking any of God's commands. But he was breaking the traditions of the Pharisees, and they couldn't believe this. But Jesus couldn't believe how they had missed the point of God's law. Darrell Bock, in his commentary on Luke, says, "For the Pharisees, the issue is ritual purity before God; for Jesus, it is additional burdens to God's revelation."<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> David E. Garland, *Luke*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 493.

<sup>3</sup> Darrell L. Bock, *Luke: 9:51–24:53*, vol. 2, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1996), 1112.

So, Jesus chews them out. Here again is the first part of the rebuke, in verses 39–41:

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.

Jesus is criticizing the Pharisees for focusing on outward appearances instead of the real issue, what is inside a person. What’s the point of cleaning the outside of a cup if what is inside is dirty? What is more important? Obviously, what is inside the cup is more important. Jesus accuses the Pharisees of being greedy and wicked. That accusation of greed will come up later in Luke’s Gospel. In Luke 16:14–15, we read:

<sup>14</sup> The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all these things, and they ridiculed him. <sup>15</sup> And he said to them, “You are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts. For what is exalted among men is an abomination in the sight of God.”

God is not fooled by outward appearances. In fact, Jesus calls them fools, which is a loaded term, reserved for those who don’t know God (Ps. 14:1; 53:1; 92:6; 94:8). Just last night, I read this in Jeremiah 4:22:

“For my people are foolish;  
they know me not;  
they are stupid children;  
they have no understanding.  
They are ‘wise’—in doing evil!  
But how to do good they know not.”

These people don’t know God, and they don’t seem to realize that God cares more about what is inside a person than what rituals they perform.

Jesus tells them that they should give to charity that which is inside of them, and that will make them clean. In other words, inside, they treasure money. They are greedy. They used their position as religious leaders to make money. Of course, it’s not wrong for someone to be paid for their work, and the Bible says that those who do the work of God should be paid by others. But it’s wrong if someone is motivated by greed. And that was the case with these Pharisees. The only way to fix this situation was to break their grip on their idol. Instead of clinging to their money, they should have given it away. God doesn’t call us to give everything away, but if something is an idol, if something becomes more important to us than God, it must go.

What Jesus is railing against is hypocrisy, the idea that we can put on a religious mask when we're deeply messed up inside. We're not fooling God when we do that. He knows our thoughts, our desires, and our motivations. But we do try to fool others, to put on a good show so that others will look at us as righteous when actually we're not. Jesus is saying that you can't divide your life into public and private parts.<sup>4</sup> What you are inside is what you truly are.

Here's the next part of Jesus' rebuke, in verses 42–44:

<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.”

The Pharisees majored on minors, and they seemed to be blinded to the majors. God gave the Israelites commandments about tithing, giving ten percent of all their crops (Deut. 14:22–27). The Pharisees observed that law down to the smallest plants like mint and rue, which was an ornamental plant used as a condiment and sometimes as a medicine. But they missed the big picture, which was that God called us to love him and to love our neighbors. They should have observed the laws about tithing, but they should have been more concerned about larger issues of justice. God wants one hundred percent of us, not just ten percent.

Here's one example of what they did. In another passage in the Gospels, Jesus rebukes the Jewish leaders for focusing on manmade traditions and not on God's word. This is what Jesus says in Mark 7:9–13:

<sup>9</sup> And he said to them, “You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition! <sup>10</sup> For Moses said, ‘Honor your father and your mother’; and, ‘Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.’ <sup>11</sup> But you say, ‘If a man tells his father or his mother, “Whatever you would have gained from me is Corban” ’ (that is, given to God)— <sup>12</sup> then you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or mother, <sup>13</sup> thus making void the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And many such things you do.”

The law of God said to honor one's parents. That's the fifth commandment. But the Pharisees used their tradition to break that law. They could have given money to support their elderly parents, but instead didn't give to their parents because that money was supposedly “given to

---

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 1113–1114.

God.” It would be given to the temple instead. So, in observing their tradition, they broke God’s law. They missed the point.

Instead of caring about loving other people and loving God, the Pharisees loved the attention they received. They enjoyed having seats of honor in the synagogue. They loved to be greeted in the marketplace. Today, if they were pastors, they might enjoy being called “The Right Reverend John Doe,” or if they were the pope, they might revel in being called, “Holy Father,” or “Vicar of Christ.” One of the reasons I have asked people to call me “Brian” and not “pastor” is because “Brian” is my name, and I don’t refer to all of you by your job positions or even positions within the church. I don’t want to be put on a pedestal. But these Pharisees loved it.

What the Pharisees didn’t realize is that instead of bringing life to people, they brought death. Jesus calls them unmarked graves. Touching a corpse was something that could make a person unclean (Num. 19:16). If graves weren’t marked clearly, someone might step on a grave and inadvertently become unclean. Jesus is pointing out the irony of the situation: those who thought they were clean are actually filthy, and instead of leading people to spiritual life, they brought spiritual death. In Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus says this:

<sup>27</sup> “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people’s bones and all uncleanness. <sup>28</sup> So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness (Matt. 23:27–28).

These words of Jesus are intense, and if any of us were hearing them, we would probably be insulted. That’s what happened to one man, an expert in the law. He says to Jesus, in verse 45, “Teacher, in saying these things you insult us also.” It’s like the man is saying, “Hey, Jesus, that may be what the Pharisees are like, but we’re different.” And then Jesus turns his attention to the lawyers. He doesn’t let them off the hook. So, Jesus tells them, in verse 46, “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 law had become a burden to people. The way that it was taught by these leaders didn’t point people to life. If they understood the law correctly, the lawyers would have told people that the law revealed God’s righteous standards and our sin. But the sacrifices that the law described revealed that God is gracious, that he provides for atonement. And they should have understood portions of the Hebrew Bible that emphasized God’s grace and the hope that one day a special figure would come, the Messiah, who would

make things right. If they understood the prophets correctly, they would have understood that this Messiah, the anointed king, would also be the one who suffers on behalf of his people, dying to take the penalty of their sins and rising from the grave to make them righteous before God (Isa. 52:13–53:12).

But instead of doing that, the teachers of the law just kept adding more rules for people to obey. A long list of rules doesn't bring life. It becomes a crushing load, almost impossible to obey completely. Those rules brought guilt and shame, not life. Laws don't change the inside of a person. Laws are necessary, but they alone can't change a person's life, and a long list of laws becomes a burden that no one can bear.

Jesus, of course, brings life. He didn't come to do away with God's law, but to fulfill it (Matt. 5:17). In other words, Jesus didn't just take a giant eraser to the Old Testament. God had reasons for giving the law. But Jesus said that he was going to fulfill the law, obey it perfectly, because we can't. He was going to show us the meaning of the law, which was to point us to God. The law points out God's holiness and righteousness. And it reveals our sin. The only one can forgive our sin is God. And God does that by sending his Son, who obeys the law perfectly for us and is the perfect sacrifice for our law-breaking.

After Jesus died on the cross and rose from the grave, the apostles came to realize the meaning of the law. The apostle Paul said this in Romans 10:1–4:

<sup>1</sup> Brothers, my heart's desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved. <sup>2</sup> For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. <sup>3</sup> For, being ignorant of the righteousness of God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness. <sup>4</sup> For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.

Paul wanted other Jewish people to realize that goal of the law was Jesus, that a right standing with God could only be achieved by trusting in Jesus. But many Jewish people trusted in their own efforts instead of trusting in Jesus. Instead of embracing the one who came to fulfill the law, they rejected him.

Even some Jewish people who became Christians failed to understand that the law was fulfilled. They wanted Gentiles to submit to Jewish law. But the apostle Peter said this to them, in Acts 15:10–11:

<sup>10</sup> Now, therefore, why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? <sup>11</sup> But

we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.

Salvation comes only through faith in God and his promises. The lawyers didn't understand this. They heaped more regulations upon the people, and they did nothing to help people bear that huge burden.

Jesus issues another woe to both Pharisees and lawyers in verses 47–51:

<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.

This rebuke is a bit harder to understand. These Jewish leaders had built tombs to honor the dead Jewish prophets, people like Isaiah. But some of these prophets were killed by their forefathers. So, the tombs were actually monuments to their ancestors' unrighteousness. If you look at Matthew's description of Jesus' rebuke (Matt. 23:29–36), this comes a bit clearer. There, Jesus tells them that they are thinking something like this, "If we had lived in the days of our fathers, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets" (Matt. 23:30). But Jesus says, "Don't kid yourselves. You're just like your ancestors. If you lived then, you would have killed those prophets." Jewish tradition says that Isaiah was martyred, and a number of unnamed prophets were killed for speaking truths that people didn't want to hear (1 Kgs. 19:10, 14). Generally, people don't like to hear the truth when it makes them uncomfortable, when it tells them they must change. So, people work to silence the truth.

Jesus is basically telling these leaders that the only prophets they honor are dead ones. The great Prophet, Priest, and King, Jesus himself, was standing in their presence, and they weren't listening to him. God's prophets were continually ignored (Jer. 7:25–26). God even planned to send more prophets and apostles, and they would be killed, too. Jesus would die at the hands of Jews (and Romans), and so would Stephen (Acts 7) and Jesus' brother, James.

Jesus says that this has always been the case. The first murder victim was Abel, who died at the hands of his jealous brother, Cain (Genesis 4). The last book of the Hebrew Bible (which has the same content as our Old Testament but is ordered differently) is Chronicles. He told the



people, “Because you have forsaken the LORD, he has forsaken you” (2 Chron. 24:20). And they killed him for it. He is the last prophet in the Old Testament to die. So, Jesus is saying, you have always done this to God’s prophets, from the beginning, from A to Z. And the implication is that they will keep on doing this.

Jesus’ final rebuke comes in verse 52: “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.” The Scriptures should have been used like a key to unlock entrance into the kingdom of God. If the lawyers understood the Old Testament correctly, they would have focused on the heart of the law. They would have taught people to love God and neighbor. They would have taught people that righteousness only comes from trusting God (Gen. 15:6). They would have taught a message of truth, but also of grace. They would have known God’s promises of a Messiah and they would have recognized that the Messiah when he came. But they didn’t. Instead of giving people the key of knowledge, they took it away. They kept people from entering God’s kingdom, and they themselves won’t enter it—unless they repent. Unless they change their ways, confess their sin, and seek forgiveness, they will be shut out forever. Unless they embrace God’s Son and Messiah, Jesus, they will be condemned. The same is true today.

Unfortunately, we have no indication that they were going to change. Luke tells us that upon hearing these words, “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” (Luke 11:53–54). Because they hated Jesus, they wanted to trap him in his words. They wanted to catch him saying something false. So, they tested him. As we’ll see, they continue to disbelieve him. They ask him questions they think will trip him up. But Jesus never fails. And eventually, they’ll silence him—or so they think.

The language of “lying in wait” in the Bible is pretty damning. The book of Proverbs talks of sinners who try to entrap others, lying in wait for them (see Prov. 1:10–10, particularly vv. 11 and 18). But such people actually “set an ambush for their own lives. Such are the ways of everyone who is greedy for unjust gain; it takes away the life of its possessors” (Prov. 1:18–19).

Jeremiah speaks of evil people who do the same. It says,

<sup>26</sup> For wicked men are found among my people;  
they lurk like fowlers lying in wait.  
They set a trap;  
they catch men.

<sup>27</sup> Like a cage full of birds,  
     their houses are full of deceit;  
 therefore they have become great and rich;  
<sup>28</sup> they have grown fat and sleek.  
 They know no bounds in deeds of evil;  
     they judge not with justice  
 the cause of the fatherless, to make it prosper,  
     and they do not defend the rights of the needy.  
<sup>29</sup> Shall I not punish them for these things?  
                     declares the LORD,  
     and shall I not avenge myself  
     on a nation such as this?" (Jer. 5:26–29)

These unbelieving Jewish leaders would try to entrap Jesus, but they would only succeed in entrapping themselves.

This passage of Luke is intense. But we need to hear it. Luke presents this to us not to give us some interesting historical information. He intends this to be a warning to Christians.

We need to make sure that we don't become like the Pharisees and scribes, or lawyers. It's easy for us, in our sin, to focus on appearances and external things, and to ignore what matters most. Generally, it's easy for us to put on a good show, to appear to be something we're not. We do this to fool others, to get their approval. Religious leaders sometimes do this to get money and perhaps some small measure of fame. But Jesus warns us to be wary of putting on a show. God sees the heart. What is inside of us makes us clean or unclean (Mark 7:14–23). We will either have wicked desires and motivations or we will have a heart changed by God. We will be dominated by evil spirits or the Holy Spirit.

Why are we here? To earn something from God? Because we're expected to be here? Or because we truly love God, we are thankful for our salvation in Christ, and we know it's good to worship God together? What message do we send to the world? Do we only focus on laws—"Do this; don't do that"—or do we tell people the message of grace? We do need to say that certain things are right and other things are wrong. But we can never present ourselves as self-righteous, as better than others. We are beggars telling other beggars where they can get bread.

If you are a Christian, think about your motivations. Think about how you come across to non-Christians. We must not put on a "holier-than-thou" appearance. We must not think we're above spending time with non-Christians and even eating with them. We must be like Jesus. We must tell them the truth in love. We must talk about sin, but perhaps the best way is to talk about how we are sinners saved by grace. I have often told non-Christians that I'm not a good person,

that I need salvation that only Jesus can give. In fact, the longer I'm a Christian, the more aware I am of my sin and my need for God's grace. Tell people that message. Show people how that message has changed your life by loving them and not acting self-righteous.

If you are not a Christian, know that God knows your inside. He knows all that you've done, but he also knows why you do it. He knows your inner thoughts, desires, and motivations. If you're being honest, you should realize that you are not clean on the inside. God made us to love him and serve him, and this is good because God is perfect in every way. God also made us to love each other. If you're being honest, you know that you have failed to do these things. Acknowledge that before God. Confess your sin to him. Trust that Jesus has done everything you need to be made right with God. Ask God for forgiveness, and you shall receive.

Whether we're Christians or not yet Christians, we need to be open to hearing Jesus' correction. We all have blind spots, places where we are blind to our sin. We can easily look back at Christians who existed two or three hundred years ago and say, "I can't believe they had slaves!" We can look back at some Christians who lived one hundred years and say, "Look how racist they were!" What will Christians say of us one hundred or two hundred years from now? Let's ask God to reveal our sins and let us be ready to receive Jesus' corrections.