

Luke 11:45-54
October 20, 2019

Open with Prayer

HOOK:

Q: What do you think is the ultimate discredit of a religious leader? What would you tag as the “big fail” of a religious leader? [Let people engage; In the name of religion, in the name of the Old Testament, in the name of God, in the name of righteousness, in the name of holiness, a religious leader prevents people from salvation.]

Transition: Every reasonable person understands how important it is to be told the truth. When it comes to being spiritually enlightened, no one wants to be misled from truth. We all want to be *drawn to God*, not turned away from God. We all want truth. We understand that life unravels and becomes chaotic if we don't know the truth about these things that make up our lives. We expect lawyers to be honest, accountants to be honest, our business associates to be honest, the people that manage our retirement to be honest. We expect our parents to be honest. As parents you want your kids to be honest. Life requires that!

Jesus is still dealing with the religious leaders of the day. If you were with us last week, you know that a Pharisee had invited Jesus to share a meal in his home, and the first issue that arose was that Jesus didn't ceremonially wash His hands. In today's text, Jesus confronts the experts in the law on multiple counts. Let's see what they are and what we can learn from it.

BOOK:

⁴⁵ One of the experts in the law answered him, “Teacher, when you say these things, you insult us also.”

⁴⁶ Jesus replied, “And you experts in the law, woe to you, because you load people down with burdens they can hardly carry, and you yourselves will not lift one finger to help them.

⁴⁷ “Woe to you, because you build tombs for the prophets, and it was your forefathers who killed them. ⁴⁸ So you testify that you approve of what your forefathers did; they killed the prophets, and you build their tombs. ⁴⁹ Because of this, God in his wisdom said, ‘I will send them prophets and apostles, some of whom they will kill and others they will persecute.’ ⁵⁰ Therefore this generation will be held responsible for the blood of all the prophets that has been shed since the beginning 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 be held responsible for it all. ⁵² “Woe to you experts in the law, because you have taken away the key to knowledge. You yourselves have not entered, and *you have hindered those who were entering.*”

⁵³ When Jesus left there, the Pharisees and the teachers of the law began to oppose him fiercely and to besiege him with questions, ⁵⁴ waiting to catch him in something he might say.

Process Observations/Questions:

Q: What did you most like about this passage? What resonated with you? [Let people engage]

Q: What did you least like about this passage? [Let people engage]

Q: What did you find in this passage that you didn't understand? [Let people engage]

Q: What do we learn about Jesus in this passage? [Let people engage]

LOOK:

Jesus is the key to the Scriptures (Luke 24:44–48). When you take away that key, you cannot understand what God has written. As helpful and necessary as theological studies are, the most important requirements for Bible study are a yielded heart and an obedient will.

Close in Prayer

Commentaries for Today's Lesson:

Wiersbe, W. W. (1996). *The Bible Exposition Commentary* (Vol. 1, p. 218). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

The scribes felt the sting of our Lord's words and tried to defend themselves. Jesus used three vivid illustrations in answering them: burdens, tombs, and keys.

The scribes were good at adding to the burdens of the people, but they had no heart for helping them carry those burdens. What a tragedy when "ministers" of God's Word create more problems for people who already have problems enough! A pastor friend of mine prays daily, "Lord, help me today not to add to anybody's problems." Jesus had these "religious burdens" in mind when He gave the gracious invitation recorded in Matthew 11:28–30.

The scribes were also good at "embalming" the past and honoring the prophets who had been martyred by the religious establishment *to which they belonged*. Both Bible history and church history reveal that true servants of God are usually rejected by the people who most need their ministry, but the next generation will come along and honor these people. The Pharisees were like "hidden graves," but the scribes built elaborate tombs!

The first recorded martyrdom in the Old Testament is that of Abel, and the last is that of Zechariah (see Gen. 4:1–15; 2 Chron. 24:20–27, and remember that 2 Chron. is the last book in the Hebrew Bible). Jesus did not suggest that the scribes and Pharisees were *personally* responsible for killing the Old Testament prophets. Rather, He was affirming that *people just like the scribes and Pharisees* did these terrible things to God's servants. Their ultimate crime would be the crucifixion of the Son of God.

Finally, the scribes were guilty of robbing the common people of the knowledge of the Word of God. It was bad enough that they would not enter the kingdom themselves, but they were hindering others from going in! It is a serious thing to teach God's Word and not everyone is supposed to do it (James 3:1). Unfortunately, what some people call "Bible study" is too often just a group of unprepared people exchanging their ignorance.

But there is another side to this: the scribes convinced the people that nobody could understand and explain the Law except the trained and authorized teachers. We have some of that arrogant attitude showing itself today. Teachers who overemphasize the Bible languages give people the impression that the Holy Spirit cannot teach anyone who does not know Greek and Hebrew. There are so many "study Bibles" these days (and many of them are helpful) that you wonder if a student can learn anything from a simple text Bible. We must not despise true Christian scholarship, but we must also keep things in balance.

Jesus is the key to the Scriptures (Luke 24:44–48). When you take away that key, you cannot understand what God has written. As helpful and necessary as theological studies are, the most important requirements for Bible study are a yielded heart and an obedient will. Some of the best Bible teachers I have known in my own ministry were men and women who learned the truth of God's Word on their knees and on the battlefield of life. They were Spirit-taught, not man-taught.

He aroused their anger (vv. 53–54). Hypocrites do not want their sins exposed; it hurts their reputation. Instead of opposing the Lord, these men should have been seeking His mercy. They deliberately began to attack Him with "catch questions" in hopes they could trap Him in some heresy and then arrest Him. What a disgraceful way to treat the Son of God.

But there are religious systems today that are very much like the system defended by the scribes and Pharisees. The leaders interpret and apply the Word for the followers and you are not permitted to ask embarrassing questions or raise objections. The leaders exploit the people and do little or

nothing to ease their burdens. Worst of all, the leaders use the system to cover up their own sins. God's truth should set us free, but these groups only lead people into more and more bondage.

God has given teachers to His church (Eph. 4:11), and we should listen to them. But we should also test what we hear by the Scriptures to make sure they are teaching the truth (1 Thes. 5:19–21), and we should not permit anyone to bring us into bondage and exploit us (2 Cor. 11:20).

It is a privilege to have the light of the Word of God and the privilege of prayer. The enemy wants to rob us of the blessings of spiritual growth and freedom. His plan is to substitute hypocrisy for reality and to encourage us to be more concerned about the outside than the inside: reputation and not character.

So serious is this danger that Jesus will have more to say about it in Luke 12. Meanwhile, let us beware!

Martin, J. A. (1985). Isaiah. In J. F. Walvoord & R. B. Zuck (Eds.), *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Vol. 2, p. 237)

11:45–52. Jesus then pronounced three woes on the **Law ... experts** (vv. 46–47, 52). They placed **burdens** on others which effectively kept them away from the way of knowledge. And they built **tombs for the prophets**, thus identifying with their **forefathers who killed ... the prophets**. Outwardly they seemed to honor the prophets, but God knew that inwardly they were rejecting the prophets. So they would **be held responsible for the blood of all the prophets. The blood of Abel** and **the blood of Zechariah** refers to the killing of innocent men involved in serving God. Abel was the first innocent victim (Gen. 4:8), and Zechariah the priest (not the writing prophet, though see Matt. 23:35) was the last martyr in the Old Testament (2 Chron. 24:20–21; Chron. was last in the OT Heb. order). Jesus' indictment became even more severe when He noted that not only were they themselves staying away from **knowledge** (i.e., Jesus' teaching) but were also taking **away the key**, that is, they were keeping the knowledge from others (cf. Luke 13:14).

11:53–54. **The Pharisees** and lawyers **began to oppose** Jesus **fiercely**. They were constantly questioning Him, plotting against Him, and hoping **to catch Him** saying something wrong.

Cabal, T., Brand, C. O., Clendenen, E. R., Copan, P., Moreland, J. P., & Powell, D. (2007). *The Apologetics Study Bible: Real Questions, Straight Answers, Stronger Faith* (p. 1538). Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers.

11:47–48, 50 Jesus asserted that the same spirit that caused the ancestors of the scribes to reject and murder God's prophets animated the scribes' rejection of Him. They demonstrated their collusion by building tombs for the prophets their ancestors murdered. The scribes, of course, would object that their monuments to the prophets implied the opposite.

11:51 For additional details on the identification of Zechariah, see note on Mt 23:35.

Stein, R. H. (1992). Luke (Vol. 24, pp. 341-345). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

11:45 This verse has no parallel in Matthew and marks a change in the scene from the Pharisees to lawyers.

One of the experts in the law. See comments on 7:30.

You insult us also. Those in the Pharisaic community who were most responsible for the Pharisaic teaching were the experts in the law. They recognized that Jesus' woes were particularly directed at them.

11:46 The second set of woes begins with the condemnation of the lawyers for creating innumerable laws and traditions (cf. Mark 7:2–5; Gal 1:14).

You load people down with burdens. By their interpretation of the law and the addition of their traditions, they made serving God impossible for the average believer. The preoccupation with the details of the Pharisaic tradition often resulted in the neglect of God's commandments found in the OT (cf. Mark 7:2–8). The concern for ceremonial aspects of the Jewish law was also seen by the early church as a "yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear" (Acts 15:10).

You yourselves will not lift one finger to help them. This can be interpreted in two ways: (1) you make no attempt to help the average person keep all these laws or (2) not even you, yourselves, through your casuistry keep the obligations of the law which you impose on others (cf. Matt 23:3). The first interpretation, which complements the preceding criticism in the verse, is to be preferred.

11:47–48 The fifth woe involves the hypocrisy of building monuments (literally *tombs*) to honor the prophets while not honoring their message (cf. Luke 11:42; Mic 6:8) or the message of the present-day prophets, John the Baptist and Jesus (Luke 9:22; 11:49; 13:33–34), and such leaders of the early church as Stephen (Acts 7), the apostle James (12:2–3), and Jesus' brother, James (Josephus, *Antiquities* 20.9.1 [20.200]). James's martyrdom is not mentioned in Acts, but it was almost certainly known to Luke and his readers. This teaching is repeated in Acts 7:51–52.

Build tombs for the prophets. On one hand the Pharisees acknowledged the truth of the prophets' message while on the other they endorsed what their fathers did. The latter is shown by their concentration on externals rather than on the inner condition of the heart (which is a rejection of the prophets' message) and also by their refusal to heed the present-day prophetic message. While the lawyers were called the sons of those who killed the prophets (cf. also Acts 7:52), Peter's Jewish audience in Acts 3:25 was called the sons of the prophets because they responded favorably to the prophetic message (4:4).

11:49 Because of this. That is, because of the behavior described in 11:39–48.

God in his wisdom said. This is literally *The wisdom of God said*. It is not known what exactly is meant by "wisdom." The following have been suggested: a saying recorded neither in the OT nor in the surviving intertestamental literature; a lost book called "The Wisdom of God"; Jesus himself prophesying regarding the early church (cf. Matt 23:34); or wisdom personified (Prov 1:20–33; 8:1–36). Selecting among these conflicting interpretations is also influenced by how one interprets the tense (past, aorist) of the verb "said" (Luke 11:49), "this generation" (11:50), and the reference to "Zechariah" in 11:51. If this Zechariah is the Zechariah of 2 Chr 24:20–22, how could the present generation be held responsible for martyrdoms occurring centuries before?

I will send. This could refer to an event fulfilled in OT times or, more probably, to one about to take place. It is best to understand the tense as a prophetic perfect, in which the following prophecy about the future is spoken of with the certainty of a past event.

Prophets and apostles. Although the reference to prophets could refer to the OT prophets, Luke's readers would undoubtedly have understood "apostles" to refer specifically to the Christian apostles (Acts 1:2). Therefore "prophets" should also be interpreted "Christian prophets" (11:27; 13:1; 15:32; 21:9–10). This interpretation receives additional support from the future tense of "I will send."

Some ... kill and others ... persecute. The fulfillment of this prophecy will be described by Luke in the second volume of his work (cf. 1 Thess 2:15). It appears best to interpret the expression “the wisdom of God” as referring to Jesus, now speaking a prophetic word about how this generation would confirm the actions of their forefathers by killing the prophets and apostles of the new age.

11:50 Will be held responsible. Compare Gen 9:5; 42:22; 2 Sam 4:11; Ps 9:13; Ezek 3:18, 20; 33:6. Compare 1 Thess 2:16.

The blood of all the prophets. This generation, repeating the past evil deeds of their fathers by martyring God’s servants in the present, will be held guilty of all such crimes from the beginning of creation until the end (cf. Matt 23:32; 1 Thess 2:16). This refers primarily to the final judgment (cf. Luke 11:31–32), but it might also contain a reference to Jerusalem’s destruction in A.D. 70. “Blood” is a metaphor for the death/murder of the prophets and apostles (11:47–49).

11:51 Abel. The term “prophet” is used broadly enough to cover the first martyr, Abel, who was killed for his righteousness. Abel is described as a prophet because Luke regarded the entire OT as prophecy.

Zechariah. It is best to interpret this as a reference to the high priest whose death is recorded in 2 Chr 24:20–22 rather than to a later Zechariah slain by the Zealots in the temple in A.D. 67 (Josephus, *Wars* 4.5.4 [4.334–44]), for it is doubtful that Luke’s readers would have been familiar enough with the events of A.D. 66–70 to have known of this other Zechariah. If the order of the OT books was the same in Jesus’ day as in the present Hebrew OT, Abel to Zechariah would represent the entire OT canon, from the first book (Genesis, Abel) to the last book (2 Chronicles, Zechariah). Since the murder of God’s prophets is attested to from the beginning to the end of the Scriptures, Theophilus should not have been surprised that Jesus of Nazareth, the Prophet, Christ, and Son of God, also died at the hands of wicked men (Acts 2:23).

11:52 You have taken away the key to knowledge. The sixth and final woe condemns the leading expositors of the law, for their false interpretation of Scripture and their many traditions had deprived the people of the key to knowledge, i.e., God’s plan of salvation. The phrase “key of knowledge” can be understood as the key that is knowledge (a genitive of apposition) or as a key that leads to knowledge (an objective genitive). The latter is more likely.

You yourselves have not entered. This is evident by their rejection of John the Baptist and Jesus (Luke 7:30). What they had not entered, according to Matt 23:13, was God’s kingdom.

Have hindered those who were entering. The religious teaching of the experts of the law was not simply unhelpful; it was in fact an obstacle to seekers and caused them to oppose God’s messengers. Their “religion” was worse than neutral; it was hostile.

11:53 The Pharisees and the teachers of the law. The term “teachers of the law” (*grammateis*) serves as a synonym for “experts of the law” (*nomikōn*) of Luke 11:45.

Began to oppose him fiercely. Luke indicated by his use of “oppose” and “besiege” (two present infinitives) that a new level of antagonism toward Jesus began at this point.

11:54 Waiting to catch him in something. This expression is used in Acts 23:21 of people waiting in ambush to kill the apostle Paul. The pericope ends ironically; those who possess the key to knowledge, who build tombs to honor the prophets and even tithe all kinds of herbs, follow their fathers by seeking to trap Jesus in order to kill the greatest of the prophets. “To catch him in something” refers not to overcoming Jesus in debate but to finding an accusation against him that would hold up in a trial and foreshadows the events of Luke 22:66–23:25.

The Lukan Message

Each of the six woes is a variation on the central theme of the passage, which essentially addresses the concentration on external religious performance to the neglect of one's inner spiritual character. In the end, however, God judges the heart (16:15; Acts 1:24; 15:8). This same concentration on externals and outer appearances is encountered in the early church as well (Acts 11:1–18; 15:1–29). The passage also touches upon several Lukan ethical concerns. The narrow concentration on tithing herbs allowed the Pharisees to ignore their responsibility for justice to the poor and the outcast, thus permitting greed and wickedness to flourish unchecked (Luke 11:39–42). The love for money (16:14) caused the Pharisees to “devour” the homes of widows (20:47). An earlier woe against the rich is also appropriate here (6:24). Luke's reaction to greed is clear from his addition in 11:41—Sell and give alms to the poor. The importance of this theme is also stressed in 16:9–12; 19:8. To follow Jesus means leaving everything (see comments on 5:11). One way to guard against the sin of greed is to use one's possessions wisely. Another is to love one's neighbor. This theme is described in 11:42 as the pursuit of justice. The pairing of the love of God with the love of justice cannot help but recall the two commandments that summarize the law (see comments on 10:27). Another way to avoid enslavement to externals is by remembering Jesus' teaching on true greatness. One should refrain from seeking one's own glory or exaltation. The woe against such pursuits in 11:43 is echoed throughout the Gospel.

In this passage Luke also revealed the culpability of the Jewish leadership in rejecting the preaching of John the Baptist and Jesus (11:47–51). This rejection both corresponds to their fathers' killing of the prophets and exceeds it. Although they claimed to honor the prophets by building tombs for them, they rejected both their message and the present prophets and apostles (11:49). There is a clear reference to Jesus' coming death in Luke's editorial comment in 11:53–54. See comments on 9:22 and Introduction 8 (1). The judgment that was to come upon Israel (see Introduction 7 [2]) is also foreshadowed in 11:50–51 and has been prepared for by 11:31–32.

The Holy Bible: New International Version. (1984). (Lk 11:45-54). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

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