

Woe is Me?! Maybe, Maybe Not.
Luke 11:37-54

We begin with two foundational observations. For one, the last thing we want to think about – so the last thing many churches are willing to talk about – is divine judgment. So this is not a popular passage. Still, these are Jesus' words, so they bear just as close attention as anything else he said.

Jesus himself does not allow anyone to sidestep his warning. The list goes on at considerable length: six woes in a row! Besides that, consider the context in which he spoke: he was the invited guest in the home of a Pharisee. Just as in our day, even more in his, house guests are not expected to attack their hosts. Still, Jesus spoke, at considerable length, and with passion, against the errors of the Pharisees. In so doing, he does not merely break protocol; he is staggeringly rude. Clearly he considered this important to say. These are words that must still be heard – and spoken – today.

The second observation is that Jesus is not necessarily rebuking *us*. And if he is not rebuking us, then we should not own these verses as though he were. Those raised in guilt-inducing environments – think, many Christian homes, or many Asian homes, or many Asian-Christian homes – may take to heart a rebuke which Jesus does not intend. If you do not actually do the things that Jesus rebukes here, then his only word to you in this text is simply, “Don’t let other people treat you like this!” (Source of this suggestion: Bryan Che)

At the same time, we must also beware of the facile assumption that runs like this: Jesus is rebuking the Pharisees; thank God I am not a Pharisee! (You may recall that it was a Pharisee who first said, ‘Thank God I am not like other men!’)

So, in short, we give this passage due heed, without automatically assuming – or discounting – that Jesus is rebuking us.

The passage divides into two units: first, Jesus contends with the Pharisees, a Jewish religious group in his day (11:37-44); and then he contends with the scribes, a professional class of Bible interpreters (11:45-52).

Day 1: Luke 11:37-40 Inside-out, or outside-in.

Jesus first faults the Pharisees for priorities that are inside-out, or rather, outside-in. Whichever way you prefer to put it, their priorities are inverted. They focus on outward defilement and adherence to rules of external cleanliness and ritual purity, while their hearts are characterized by the sins of greed and wickedness. Yet God made both inside and out, and he is concerned about them both. Purity was a primary concern for the Pharisees. The Old Testament sets down requirements for the people of God, and the Pharisees take them seriously. Jesus

does not criticize careful attention to the Law. What he criticizes is neglect of other aspects of the law, including renunciation of sin. Their hearts are foul, but they act as though cleaning the outside of their bodies is sufficient.

Today our concerns for purity tend more toward hygiene than toward ritual observance or obedience to Old Testament requirements, so this passage does not apply directly. But in somewhat extended (yet still legitimate) application, it does address us in at least two ways.

For one, it raises question about our often casual commitment to holiness, especially since our preoccupation with hygiene (whether anti-bacterial soap, or frequently showering) is even more superficial than the Pharisaic preoccupation with ritual cleanliness (which was, at least, mandated by Scripture).

For the other, once we learn biblical standards of behavior, we can all too readily work on externals, on appearing to comply with Christian norms, rather than on actually being more loving and giving. For us, 'outside' refers more to surface appearances of virtue than to ritual requirements of purity, but Jesus' point still rings true: he calls us to inner transformation, not just outward compliance.

Day 2: Luke 11:41-42 Not just tithing to God, but also caring for the poor

Instead of ritual washing of the outside, Jesus counsels overcoming greed by giving to the poor. Instead, the Pharisees scrupulously tithe, even down to their spices. Yet they neglect justice, in this context, likely a second reference to caring for the poor. They tithe their spices, lest they eat anything impure (whatever was not first tithed would be impure), instead of sharing their food with the poor, who have little to eat.

The application of this passage is simultaneously straight-forward and puzzling, in a country as wealthy as contemporary America. It is straight-forward in the sense that we have so much more wealth at our disposal than most people in the first-century. So in addition to tithing to God, Jesus calls us also to care for the poor: "It is these [almsgiving] you ought to have practiced, without neglecting the others [tithing]." At the same time, application of this text is somewhat puzzling because so much of what we buy is superfluous and extravagant: does Jesus permit us no luxury, extravagance, or waste? A precise answer to this question is not all that pressing: wherever we end up, Jesus calls us at least to begin this journey. A small step may not be as noble as a giant leap, but it is a lot better than doing nothing.

Day 3: Luke 11:43-44 Elders and pastors, beware!

This exhortation applies especially to church elders and vocational clergy, though to a lesser extent, also to anyone else in positions of spiritual recognition. "The seat of honor in the synagogues" tracks reasonably directly to the title of elder or pastor, or to the position of respect that – sometimes – is accorded to preacher in

pulpit. “To be greeted with respect in the marketplaces” again tracks to elders or pastors who are warmly greeted not only in the church, but also in the community.

This warning applies in two directions. Ironically, while the vast numbers of Christians respect their pastors, some disrespect them, or compete with them for prominence in the church. Similarly, while in some contexts preaching is a respected (and sometimes even coveted) role, in others, it is subject to a steady barrage of criticism. Our leaders cannot apply Jesus’ exhortation to serve God, rather than to crave approval, unless we actually respect them and their roles.

In those contexts, however, where pastors and preachers are accorded great respect, Jesus’ warnings apply directly. Pastoring, preaching, and ministry leadership are not about getting an ego-boost. They are about honoring God and serving others. Church leaders can usefully appreciate those who warmly respect them, while also profiting from (without condoning) the ego-deflating effects of the discontent and disrespectful.

Day 4: Luke 11:45-46 Preachers and Bible-study leaders, beware!

Pharisees and scribes were overlapping but not identical sets. Some Pharisees were scribes, but not all; some scribes were Pharisees, but not all. Whether Pharisee or not, the role of the scribes was consistent: (a) adjudicate court cases, (b) teach the Torah to disciples, and (c) expound the meaning and application of the Old Testament law. Given the prominence of Scripture in Judaism, they were among the most respected members of society. They wore special long robes, like the nobles. They received special honor at feasts. They were typically greeted with respect. So they take Jesus’ words to the Pharisees as directed at them, too.

They begin by confirming that Jesus’ words are rude and insulting. From their perspective, such talk of judgment is slanderous; from Jesus’ perspective, it may be unpleasant, but it is necessary. Jesus’ first rebuke is that in applying the biblical text to everyday life, the scribes inundate people with endless lists of do’s and don’ts, crushing their walk with God under mountains of obligations.

As before, given our current context, this text applies in two contrasting directions. Many Christians today permit no sense of obligation to holiness. Yet Jesus’ words presuppose that we have obligation both to holiness and to God; he simply does away with the extremes of excruciating detail and excessive lists. So Jesus offers no support for those who permit no behavioral guidelines in the Christian life. On the other end of the continuum, for those who feel like they are never obedient enough, or holy enough, or eager enough – or for those now rare preachers and Bible-teachers who offer endless lists of do’s and don’ts – Jesus counsels, “Lighten up! Walking with God is not designed to be a burden.”

Day 5: Luke 11:47-51 Honoring the prophets? Or honoring their murderers?

In the most surprising of these woes, Jesus condemns those who go to great lengths to honor the prophets. "In building mausoleums," Jesus asks, "are you honoring the martyred prophets? Or are you honoring your ancestors who killed them? Your ancestors killed them, and you bury them." By the end of this account, his disputants demonstrate their colors: they become hostile toward him, cross-examining him, waiting to catch him in something he might say, and eventually turning him over to the Roman authorities for execution. And so, in promoting the execution of Jesus, they become liable for the accumulated guilt of all murders of the righteous in Scripture, from the first (Abel, Gen 4:8-14) to the last (Zechariah, 2 Chron 24:20-22 [2 Chronicles is the last book in the order of the Hebrew Bible]).

Of course, this is not applicable to those who worship and follow Christ. But it does explain why God condemns those who reject Christ, for their rejection stands alongside those who crucified him. And it reminds us to pray for those whom we know who reject Christ, that they might repent and come to faith, so that this fate not befall them.

Day 6: Luke 11:52 Taking away the key of knowledge

The role of the scribes was to interpret Scripture, to help guide people toward God. Instead, their teaching of Scripture guided them and others away from Jesus. They took the key that was entrusted to them – the Bible – and used it to lock – rather than to open – the door to faith.

This again is not applicable to those who genuinely worship and follow Christ. But it does point to a phenomenon which occurs in contemporary America. From religion professors and chaplains in universities, to the annual Christmas- and Easter-time television exposé of Jesus and Christian origins, many professional religionists in our culture make a living debunking faith in Jesus and undermining Christian convictions. Also included under this warning would be those televangelists whose career is spent lining their pockets rather than preaching the gospel. And those pastors who lose their faith but keep their jobs. Or to anyone else in our day who makes a living off of faith, while discouraging it in others.

In these, as in all other cases, though, it is not our role to condemn such false teachers. We rightly leave that to Christ. At the same time, we remember that in Scripture, when God warns of judgment, he generally does so in order to motivate repentance. And we also pray for our leaders – pastors, elders, favorite preachers, and authors – that they will never turn from the faith, and fall under such condemnation.