

## **Repent of Your Religion**

April 7th, 2013

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."*

Last Wednesday I was at the Miles' home for our monthly prayer meeting and Rob opened up our time by reading from Romans 11: <sup>22</sup>Note (lit., "Look at") then the kindness and the severity of God: severity toward those who have fallen, but God's kindness to you, provided you continue in his kindness." And he read a couple of verses, then, to remind us of both God's wonderful kindness, and His terrifying severity.

In our study of Luke we've come to a section where we are seeing a lot of the severity of Jesus. We saw it last Sunday ("This generation is an evil generation..."), we'll see it next Sunday ("Fear Him who has authority to cast into hell"), and these six "Woe's" season our text today with the fragrance of the severity of Jesus Christ. And so it's good to be reminded from Romans 11 that beholding God's severity is a biblical command. Because we like to look at the kindness of God (and that should be our favorite!), but we're often not too thrilled with considering the severity of God. But both are commanded!

So let's heed this command today by noting from this text the severity of Jesus. First, we'll simply note that Jesus is in fact severe (because that disrupts some of our common conceptions of Jesus, and His love). Then we'll look at what Jesus' severity is directed towards, and then finally we'll consider what we should do in light of Jesus' severity.

### **The Severity of Jesus**

First, let's note simply *that* Jesus is severe. There's a tough side to Jesus, a harsh, strong, violent side. He is not afraid to offend people. In fact, that seems to be what He is after in this particular incident. Luke takes us into the home of a Pharisee, who asked Jesus to dine with him. Jesus goes with him and we're told, "<sup>38</sup>The Pharisee was astonished to see that he did not first wash before dinner."

This was a big deal to the Pharisees, who had a long list of very meticulous, specific instructions for how hand-washing was to take place, even though there was no explicit command for this type of conduct in the Law. And so for Jesus not to engage in this ritual was a premeditated, calculated insult to their values. When the Pharisee expresses surprise, Jesus calls him a fool, and then blasts the religious establishment with a series of "Woe's". And when a lawyer says to Him, "Jesus, you know you have offended some people," He responds: "<sup>46</sup>Woe to you lawyers also!"

So let's get the point here that there is a tough side to Jesus' love. If there were no great evils, and no deaf hearts, no spiritually dead souls and no eternal consequences, then maybe the only fitting forms of love would be sweet, tender words and soft, gentle touches. But that's not the world that we live in. There is real evil, and deafness, and blindness and hardness, and consequences, and danger, which require severe love.

This came home to me this week when I was playing in the backyard with Halle and Felicity. We were playing with a bouncy ball, and it sailed past Halle and the wind got a hold of it and it went across the street. I had turned to take a look at Felicity, and when I turned back I saw the ball across the street and Halle running after it, just as she was approaching the street. And I yelled like I have never yelled before, "Halle, stop!". And she stopped, and she started to tear up a little bit.

That scream was a scream of love. It was a tough love, a severe love, because the danger in that moment was real. And that is what calls for the severe love of Jesus in this story. He is before people who are in grave spiritual danger, and they are endangering other people too: "44Woe to you! For you are like unmarked graves, and people walk over them without knowing it." (cf. v.52). You're just like your parents, rejecting the messengers of God, and their blood is going to be required of you (v.47ff)!

And so when Jesus sees people making choices and saying and doing things that are moving them away from God, love compels Him to speak boldly to urge them back towards the God who they are straying so dangerously from. That's how the severity of Jesus is really an expression of His love. Let it serve to free you from the cultural chains of defining love as a mission of self-esteem enhancement.

In our culture, love and how we express it to others is controlled by how we think people will feel about our words and actions. We're very thin-skinned, easily prone to feeling like victims, offended, wounded, and always placing the blame on someone else. If they convince us that we've made them feel bad, we think, "I must not be loving." The bottom line isn't truth or what's best for people; it's how people feel about themselves. It's boosting self-esteem. But that view of love won't work here. So let's be careful to allow Jesus to define true love, not our culture. After all, He is love incarnate!

## **Jesus Hates Religion**

Now let's turn, then, to what it is that arouses the severity of Jesus. And if the very fact that Jesus can be so severe is a surprising thing for some people, what His severity is directed towards is even more surprising. We're living in a time culturally where gay marriage is at the forefront of the current events, and that equality logo is everywhere, right? And a lot of moral conservatives look at what's going on in our

culture and lament the degradation of our values, and warn of the danger of moral relativism.

Now I just said that the severity of Jesus is aroused here because there is a grave spiritual danger present in this dining room He's in, but what is the danger that's present? It's not relativism, but it's religion. This text highlights something that is a consistent theme in the book of Luke, which we've seen before and we'll see again: that Jesus' harshest, sharpest, most severe warnings were not directed at homosexuals and drug addicts and adulterers, but at those who because of their tithing, church attendance, Bible reading and rule-keeping think that they're better than "those people".

You see who He's addressing at this dinner? The Pharisees and religious law experts. They're the morally and spiritually elite among God's chosen people, the ones who meticulously kept 613 commands with dietary laws and laws for purification, who made sacrifices in the temple and looked down on Gentiles and sinners. These guys are moral. They're not drunk. They're not committing adultery. They're not stealing. They're not murdering. They're not putting the equality logo on their Facebook pages. These are decent, upstanding, moral, religious people. And Jesus says that they're very dangerous.

That's really the main point of this passage: that those who engage in religious activity devoid of inward, heart transformation, are both in danger and dangerous. And what's especially dangerous is that they look so good and clean and righteous on the outside. But the inside -- what truly matters (1 Samuel 16:7) -- is rotten. They think they're fine, actually superior to everyone else, and yet no one arouses the indignation of Jesus more than religious people. Here are some of the symptoms of this condition:

- Focusing on outward behavior rather than inner character and the life of the soul: <sup>39</sup>*You Pharisees cleanse the outside of the cup*

*and of the dish, but inside you are full of greed and wickedness.  
40 You fools!"*

- Majoring on minors and miss the most important things: *"42 You tithe the mint and rue and every herb, and neglect justice and the love of God. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others."*
- Wanting to be seen and praised by others for our religious accomplishments: *"43 You love the best seat in the synagogues and greetings in the marketplaces."*
- Being quick to criticize others but slow to help them: *"46 You load people with burdens hard to bear, and you yourselves do not touch the burdens with one of your fingers."*

Do you have a hard time admitting your flaws? Are you defensive with people who point them out to you? Do you tend to compare yourself with others to determine how you're doing spiritually? Do you doubt God's love for you when you stumble into sin? Do you evaluate your spiritual health by looking only at your behavior, not your character? Is your obedience of God's rules marked more by duty or joy?

Now does it sound like pretending you're okay when you're not and building a religious persona and spending all of your energy trying to be good, and to look like you're put together in front of others is what God is after? You don't have to be an intellectual to see that Jesus is looking at these very religious people and saying, "You've missed it." And it's so tragic how many in our day miss it, doing religious stuff and missing the Savior! And they'll be railing on gay marriage and abortion right as they plunge their way into damnation, because they don't love God and their neighbor (v.42).

*"<sup>22</sup>On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' <sup>23</sup>And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'"*

## **What Shall We Do?**

Now, in light of Jesus' stunning severity towards the most religiously active people of His day, what are we supposed to do? The one command from Jesus to these men comes in verse 41. After calling them fools for being concerned with what they look like on the outside without regard for the inner lives, Jesus says, "<sup>41</sup>But give as alms those things that are within, and behold, everything is clean for you."

He's talking about their hearts. "Give your heart to Me! Love Me!" You can do religious activity out of guilt, fear, insecurity and pride and selfishness, and that's what the Pharisees and lawyers did. But they had no love for God in them...that is why they were subject to Jesus' severity, now and in the age to come. But in the home of another Pharisee (7:36f), Jesus had already shown how to get this heart of love.

Remember that in the home of Simon the Pharisee, a notoriously sinful woman came along and demonstrated deep love for Jesus. As Simon scoffed at Jesus' accepting a "sinner", Jesus told Simon a parable about a moneylender who forgave two people a debt, one very large and one very small. Which one would love the moneylender more? Simon knows the answer, which is obvious: "The one who was forgiven more." Then Jesus applies the parable by pointing out all the ways she showed love to Him, while Simon did not. And He concludes: "<sup>47</sup>Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven—for she loved much. But he who is forgiven little, loves little."

Great love for God arises through the experience of seeing the wealth of His love for you. And that wealth of love is shown in what Jesus was willing to give for us. "<sup>9</sup>For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus

Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich." Jesus Christ, the King of kings, gave up the joys of heaven, experienced the afflictions and infirmities of our human frailty, suffered poverty and deprivation, endured insults and slanders and blasphemies and contempt, and died the shameful and agonizing horror of crucifixion.

He did all this not to suffer and sacrifice for His own sin -- there was none -- but to experience the spiritual poverty of sin's curse in your place. You'll give as alms those things that are within when you see the way in which Jesus gave alms for your sin-impoverished soul, the way He took the eternal "woe" of His Father's vengeance on Himself, to pay your sin-debt. Love for Jesus comes into being when we are given eyes (through the New Birth) to see the beauty of Jesus' love for us. In the words of the Apostle John, "<sup>19</sup>We love because he first loved us."

A heart of love for God is humanly impossible, because of the hardness of the fallen human heart. In calling us to give Him a heart of love, not religious activity, Jesus is demanding the impossible. But praise God, He grants what He commands. As we celebrate the Lord's Supper together, we remember in His broken body and shed blood the price that was paid to purchase for us the new heart and the verdict of *clean*:

*"<sup>25</sup>I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. <sup>26</sup>And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. <sup>27</sup>And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules."*

Let's remember His death together, and cherish anew the grace of God which pays for our sins, brought us to life, and clothes us with power to do what is right. Praise Jesus that, even today, you can humbly come to Him and say, "Jesus, help me! I'm religious; I'm doing a lot of stuff,

but I don't truly love You. My real concern isn't You, but how I'm viewed. Help me!" And by His broken body and shed blood, He will.