

7/27/25

**A Table of Trouble*****Luke 11:37-42*****Pastor Doug Scalise, Brewster Baptist Church**

Driving home from Connecticut on Friday, I was listening to a history podcast about 16<sup>th</sup> century Great Britain when the monarchy was swinging back and forth from Catholic to Protestant, and terrible things were done — including burning people at the stake for being on the wrong side. One of the leaders of the podcast said, “It’s hard for people today to understand how people could fight over the color of vestments or the location of a table in a sanctuary, but they did.”

If someone asked you what’s the most important part of your faith, spirituality, or religion, you probably wouldn’t say something related to vestments or the placement of furniture. In a calm, rational moment, you might mention the Great Commandment to love God and our neighbor, which would be correct. However, if something important to us is involved, we can get emotional and angry. Twenty-five years ago, when we were planning this worship space, there were people who spoke to me about the need for stained glass windows, a pipe organ, and how we couldn’t possibly have a screen because that was secular and would degrade the Sanctuary and make it feel like going to a drive-in movie. I like beautiful stained glass windows as much as anyone, and the sound a pipe organ can make with a skilled organist is amazing — yet, neither of them is essential to the Christian faith, nor does the presence of a screen, drums, or guitars drive out the presence of the Holy Spirit.

We don’t want to make the mistake of prioritizing things we like, or our personal preferences that aren’t eternally significant, while neglecting something that’s crucial to faith. Unfortunately, throughout Christian history, and even in our own lives, that has happened, or can happen, more often than it should. We see this in today’s Gospel passage from *Luke 11*, when Jesus is invited, for the second time, to dine in the home of a Pharisee. The Pharisee is amazed at something Jesus doesn’t do. Jesus speaks strongly about what the Pharisee isn’t doing. Rather than a fun and enjoyable meal and conversation, it leads to A Table of Trouble. Let’s eavesdrop on this uncomfortable scene to learn from it for our relationship with the Lord and how we live out our faith.

***Luke 11:37-42***, “While he was speaking, a Pharisee invited him to dine with him; so he went in and took his place at the table. The Pharisee was **amazed to see that he**

**did not first wash before dinner.** Then the Lord said to him, *‘Now you Pharisees **clean** the **outside** of the cup and of the dish, but **inside you are full of greed and wickedness.** You fools! Did not the one who made the **outside** make the **inside** also? So give for alms those things that are **within**; and see, everything will be **clean** for you. **But woe to you Pharisees! For you *tithe* mint and rue and herbs of all kinds, and **neglect justice and the love of God; it is these you ought to have practiced, without neglecting the others.**’***”

Have you ever been part of a dinner that didn’t go well? Maybe there was an argument, a disagreement, or someone got up and walked out? Maybe you did. Have you ever sat at a table and felt your blood pressure rising, your pulse quickening, and sweat starting to bead on your skin? If you have, those memories aren’t pleasant ones, but perhaps there’s a small amount of consolation in knowing that even Jesus had some meal experiences like that.

I mentioned, two weeks ago, that the Pharisees were a Jewish religious movement known for strict devotion to the Law of Moses and the oral tradition of their faith, belief in the resurrection, and a desire to bring holiness into all areas of life — and most of them, in the Gospels, are portrayed as being opposed to Jesus’ teaching and the example he was setting. Yet, we hear of three occasions when Jesus accepts an invitation from a Pharisee to share a meal. Jesus would eat with anyone, but he also spoke the truth to everyone.

Have you ever thought about what it might be like if you could have a conversation with Jesus in your home? If, in your imagination, you think having dinner and a little talk with Jesus would consist of quiet pleasantries, and Jesus being gentle, kind, and telling you how precious and special you are, these verses come as a shock. If you can imagine Jesus sitting with you at your table, you probably aren’t hoping or expecting that Jesus would strongly reprimand you for the areas in your life where you’re falling far short of what he expects from you, but that’s what happens to this Pharisee. So, we have to think it’s possible he could do the same with us, just like a loving parent sometimes has to have a conversation with a child in which they say, “I love you, but I expect more from you than....”

I saw a sign that said, “Christ is the head of this house, the unseen guest at every meal, the silent listener to every conversation.” While the sentiment is nice, the

Pharisees and lawyers would have felt much more comfortable if Jesus had been “the silent listener to every conversation,” rather than speaking so strongly. I ended the reading at verse 42, but Jesus goes on **for twelve more verses** criticizing the Pharisees and experts in the law of Moses for how they practice their shared faith — for their false piety, attention to minutia while neglecting vital matters, desire for praise from others, making the demands of faith a burden to others without lifting a finger to help, rejecting God’s prophets, and possessing the knowledge of God’s teachings but neither using it themselves nor helping others to do so. This is as strongly as Jesus is portrayed speaking to anyone, and his words are a warning, not just to Pharisees and experts in the law, but to all who profess to follow him.

It can be easy for us as Christ followers, 2,000 years later, to think, “Those Pharisees and lawyers, how could they focus on things that were small and petty and neglect the most important things we’re supposed to do?” Luke is writing several decades — perhaps close to 40 years — after these events took place, and I doubt he would have chosen to include a scene like this one, unless the behaviors of the Pharisees and lawyers were being displayed by some people in the church. Is it possible that there could be people in the Church, or who call themselves Christians, who miss the main point of the good news of Jesus Christ? It sure is. Let’s look at the story more closely.

Jesus and the Pharisees had much in common. They worshiped together on the sabbath in the synagogue. It’s Pharisees who warn Jesus that King Herod wants to kill him (*Luke 13:31*). Luke records Jesus receiving three dinner invitations from Pharisees, and he accepts each one. This Pharisee isn’t described as saying anything, but he must have given Jesus quite a look for not washing his hands before dinner. You might think, what’s wrong with the Pharisee being amazed that Jesus didn’t wash before dinner? After all, one of the first things many of us were taught, as children, was to wash our hands before eating. Washing your hands is good hygiene and one of the best things you can do to prevent catching an illness. Earlier in the chapter, Jesus was driving out demons, and it’s probably good to wash one’s hands well after performing an exorcism, so the Pharisees’ surprise is understandable.

Ritual purity was important to the Pharisees. They washed their pots, pans, cups, and bowls, as well as their hands. The school of Shammai — most Pharisees in this period — said that the outside of a cup could be clean even if the inside were not; the

minority view of Hillel's followers was that the inside of the cup must be cleaned first. Jesus sides with the school of Hillel on this point, but does so to make a figurative statement about **the heart**. Jesus is sharply critical of religion that has hardened into regulations that suffocate and condemn and reflect a heart that hasn't been touched by God's love and grace.

In *Luke 11:41*, Jesus uses the phrase “*give for alms those things that are **within***” to emphasize the importance of inner purity and genuine compassion over outward appearances of piety. It means that true righteousness stems from a transformed heart. It suggests that genuine acts of generosity and kindness, motivated by love, are a sign of a heart that is clean and pleasing to God. “*Give for alms those things that are **within***” shifts the focus from external rituals and appearances (like the Pharisees' meticulous washing of hands) to the internal state of the heart.

“**And see, everything will be clean for you**”: This highlights the result of our inner transformation. Jesus is saying that when a person's heart is purified by God's love, it has a ripple effect, making our entire life clean and pleasing to God. Jesus was addressing the Pharisees and experts in the law who were preoccupied with external cleanliness, while neglecting justice, love, faith, and mercy. They focused on washing cups and utensils, but ignored the need for a clean heart. Jesus emphasizes that true righteousness comes from within, from a renovation of the heart that leads to outward actions of love and compassion. This verse is aligned with other scriptures that emphasize the importance of the heart, such as **1 Samuel 16:7**, where God looks at the heart, not outward appearances, and **Psalms 51**, where David pleads with God to create in him a clean heart and to renew a right spirit in him.

In how he speaks to the Pharisees and interpreters of the Law in today's passage in Luke, Jesus is standing in the tradition of the prophets who criticized the religious and political leaders of their day. We heard earlier, **Isaiah 1:16-17**, “*Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.*” In **Jeremiah 7:5-6, 8-11**, the Lord God is speaking forcefully through the prophet against those in Jerusalem, urging them, “*For if you truly amend your ways and your doings, **if you truly act justly one with another, if you do not oppress the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in***

***this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own hurt...Here you are, trusting in deceptive words to no avail. Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, ‘We are safe!’ — only to go on doing all these abominations? Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your sight? You know, I too am watching, says the Lord.”***

Like the prophets before him, Jesus urges the Pharisee, and us, to focus on justice, love, mercy, tithing, and showing generosity to the poor. These are much more important than ritually washing your hands before eating — which is still a good idea. I’m sure the Pharisee, and everyone else present in the house at the time of this meal, never forgot the forcefulness of Jesus’ words. Perhaps, that’s why they were preserved and passed on.

Jesus gave the Pharisees and teachers of the law something to aim for — imagine if this passage could be changed from woes and condemnation to beatitudes and praise for their good lives of faith. I’m sure Jesus would have preferred to have been able to say, “Blessed are you Pharisees! For you practice justice and the love of God, while you tithe on even your smallest sources of income. Blessed are you Pharisees! For you love to give others the seats of honor, and greet the lonely and overlooked persons in the marketplace. Blessed are you! For you are like unmarked springs; you bless others without realizing it.” In the same way to the experts in the law, I’m sure Jesus wished he could say, “Blessed are you lawyers! For you ease the burdens on others and help them carry their loads. Blessed are you! For you honor the prophets and strive to heed their warnings. Because of you, there is hope for this generation. Blessed are you, for you have found the key to knowledge; you have entered, yourselves, and you have helped others to find the way also.”

What would it mean for us to strive to structure and live our lives in such a way that Jesus could speak words of blessing on us for how we’re honoring and loving God and other people?

In the words of another of the prophets, ***Micah 6:8 in The Message***, “*But he’s already made it plain how to live, what to do, what God is looking for in men and*

*women. It's quite simple: Do what is fair and just to your neighbor, be compassionate and loyal in your love, and don't take yourself too seriously — take God seriously.”*

**Prayer:** Lord, help us not to neglect justice, love, mercy, and peace. Jesus, Bread of Life, too many people in your world are hungry. Each day, human beings, from babies to elders, are dying of malnutrition in the Gaza Strip of **Palestine**. In **Sudan**, over 1/3 of the population lives with extreme hunger. In **Haiti**, the combination of drought and rising food prices have led to widespread food insecurity. In **Mali**, the people are on the brink of famine. More people are facing food insecurity on Cape Cod and across our nation. Help us feed your children.

Prince of Peace, we see violence and war around the globe. We pray for **Israel**, **Palestine**, **Iran**, **Russia**, **Ukraine**, **Myanmar**, **Sudan**, and all war-torn nations. We're grateful that a declaration of principles for a permanent ceasefire in eastern **Congo** has been signed after thousands of lives have been lost. Help us bring about your peace.

We pray for ourselves and our nation, that we would choose compassion over cruelty, generosity over greed, justice over corruption, peace rather than brutality, truth rather than lies, kindness rather than contempt, that we might reflect what matters most to Jesus and to you, almighty God, in our lives, actions, and decisions. Help us to live in such a way that Christ might be able to speak words of praise and blessing to us, rather than words of woe or condemnation. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

## Discussion Questions

1. Have you ever experienced a tense or uncomfortable dinner conversation? What made it difficult, and how did you respond?
2. Why do you think Jesus accepted dinner invitations from Pharisees, even though many of them opposed him? What does this say about his concern for people, his approach to relationships, and telling the truth?
3. Jesus criticizes the Pharisees for focusing on outward cleanliness, while neglecting the inner life. Can you think of a current example of focusing on external appearances, rather than inward transformation?
4. In verse 42, Jesus says the Pharisees “neglect justice and the love of God.” How can we make sure we’re not focusing on small things and neglecting what God cares about most?
5. Jesus calls out hypocrisy — but also keeps showing up at the table with people. What does this teach us about how to balance truth and grace in difficult conversations?
6. What’s one area in your own life where you’re tempted to “clean the outside of the cup” while neglecting the inside? What would it look like to let God transform you from the inside out?