

**THE RADICAL RABBI:
“A RADICAL RESPONSE”
(Luke 11:37-54)**

INTRODUCTION

Our story today picks right up where we left off last week. But first off, to more effectively set the stage for what we’re going to be looking at today, remember that, over the last several weeks, we have realized a group of three pillars — foundational cornerstones that Christ intended for the church of which he was both the architect and builder: (1) the centrality of the Bible — God’s word, (2) the centrality of prayer to the God of that word, and (3) the centrality of obedience to God through that word— all three of those pillars working together to support the most core value of this church that was beginning with Jesus himself: as Peter so memorably said: ***“[Jesus of Nazareth is] the Messiah, [the Christ] the Son of the living God” — Matthew 16:16.*** Keep all that with you because we’ll be bringing it up later.

Now, more specifically, if you remember, last week’s lesson started off with Jesus miraculously healing a man who was demon-possessed. While it amazed the gathered crowd, the religious leaders reacted quite differently, accusing Jesus not of having divine power but rather demonic power. Jesus took their arguments apart, showing how ridiculous it was to think that somebody working for Satan would be freeing somebody from Satan. This confrontation with the religious leaders last week now continues this week as Christ’s confrontation with the religious leaders continues. So let’s get right into it **with a moment of prayer.**

TEXT

When Jesus had finished speaking, a Pharisee invited him to eat with him; so he went in and reclined at the table — Luke 11:37.

Now, after all the animosity and incredibly dangerous accusations that had been leveled at him, why would one of those Pharisees, apparently in the crowd that day, all of a sudden invite Jesus into his home?

Culturally, such a move would have signified friendship and relationship — which would seem to be very contrary to the feelings

they had shown Christ. But, nevertheless, the invitation was extended and Jesus accepted. But it didn't take long for an issue to show itself.

But the Pharisee was surprised when he noticed that Jesus did not first wash before the meal — Luke 11:38.

While the Law, meaning the initial commands given by God in the wilderness to Moses, said nothing about hand-washing, over time, the washing of hands before a meal had literally become codified into being as much a part of the Law as any of the Ten Commandments. As Mark explained in his gospel: ***The Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they give their hands a ceremonial washing, holding to the tradition of the elders. When they come from the marketplace they do not eat unless they wash. And they observe many other traditions, such as the washing of cups, pitchers and kettles — Mark 7:3-4.*** OK, so here's what we think that looked like: It is thought that, when it came to washing, the hands were immersed up to the wrist or, optionally, hands were appropriately purified by having water poured over them from a pure vessel (of which there were also rules about immersing vessels to remove impurities). The washing of hands was an area of religious observance of which the Pharisees were particularly zealous; it is no wonder that this Pharisee, upon seeing Jesus eat without first washing his hands, caused him, in the Greek, to marvel! He was literally thinking: "Jesus, what in the world are you thinking? Wash your paws, will ya?" If Christ was such an admired teacher, how could he even think to do such a thing so contrary to their holy, respected tradition?

Now the Pharisees were notoriously unwilling to budge the proverbial inch on any of their teachings, grounded as they were in the revered teachings of their predecessors. So whenever another teacher — in this case, Jesus — came along, the scribes and Pharisees, among others of the leadership, wanted to know where he stood on issues where their traditions dictated right from wrong; that was the basis for how they evaluated the teachings of others. Jesus had incurred their ongoing wrath precisely because he refused to bow to the "traditions of the elders" — those greatly-esteemed predecessors. And such a confrontation was about to take place, as Christ was going to use one of

their most hallowed traditions to take the religious leaders out to the ecclesiastical woodshed.

Then the Lord said to him, “Now then, you Pharisees clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside you are full of greed and wickedness. You foolish people! Did not the one who made the outside make the inside also? But now as for what is inside you — be generous to the poor, and everything will be clean for you — Luke 11:39-41.

The fundamental error of the Pharisees was their focus on external behaviors. They totally overlooked internal issues, especially their own — essentially thinking that the fix for somebody’s vulgar-speaking mouth was to brush their teeth!

Jesus pulls no punches in his denunciation of the Pharisees. He accuses them, while seen as clean on the outside, as being full of extortion and malice, that is, evil or ill will, toward others. And when he calls them “foolish” people, he is literally saying that their unbelief and opposition to the truth about God has made them literally mindless or stupid and “egotistically rash” in their lifestyle and their attitudes toward others. Remember that their role was to be as shepherds to the people of Israel, but instead they had corrupted themselves over personal influence, power and the opportunities to enrich themselves at the expense of those they were sworn to serve in the name of the Lord.

But Jesus is just getting started; he has a lot more to say — a whole lot more — specifically about how they misinterpret and mismanage the priorities of the God they claim to serve: ***“Woe to you Pharisees, because you give God a tenth of your mint, rue and all other kinds of garden herbs, but you neglect justice and the love of God. You should have practiced the latter without leaving the former undone” — Jesus Christ, Luke 11:42.***

Remember when Jesus was preaching the Sermon on the Mount? He started with the “beatitudes” — called that because they all start out with the word “blessed” — literally meaning being made happy by the joy of the Lord. Wow — what a great way to live, in the joyful blessing of the Lord!

But here, the exact opposite word is used — “woe” — meaning, literally, “grief, great sorrow or distress.” The outcome of lifestyle choices which the Pharisees and others of the religious leaders are making is having the exact opposite impact of blessing and, in fact, is going to fall back on them as grief and sorrow and distress in their own lives as a result. So they are outside of the joy of the Lord. Wow — what a lousy way to live!

Now, that said, Jesus is referring to tiny seeds and herbs that they dutifully tithed, but they neglected the priorities preached from their own scriptures — to maintain love and justice as Hosea had written (Hosea 12:6), to hate evil and love good as Amos had written (Amos 5:15) and, as God had directed the prophet Micah: ***He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God — Micah 6:8.*** They were satisfied that they had fulfilled their sacred duty by the tithing of things. But far more important than tithing things was tithing hearts — giving their time and energies to efforts in ministering to others that would please God — justice as a reflection of God, mercy as a reflection of God, humility as a means of bringing honor and glory to God. Those were the tithes that mattered.

“Woe to you Pharisees, because you love the most important seats in the synagogues and respectful greetings in the marketplaces” — Jesus Christ, Luke 11:43.

Now having just highlighted the scriptural call to humility, Jesus calls attention to their collective egos, underscoring the fact that the Pharisees and other leaders got more excited about reputation — having the best seats in the synagogues, receiving deferential and admiring acknowledgement when out in public — than they did about the spiritual, God-pleasing quality of their lives. Jesus in stripping away the facades of their robes, offices and learning reminded them that, while reputation is what people think you are, character is what God knows you are. They needed to view themselves through God’s eyes rather than through man’s eyes — including their own.

And then Jesus continues: ***“Woe to you, because you are like unmarked graves, which people walk over without knowing it” — Jesus Christ, Luke 11:44.***

This would have been an incredibly daring, jaw-dropping statement for Jesus to make to this particular audience. Ever since the days of Moses, Jews had been particularly careful about any risk of ceremonial defilement from contact with dead bodies; this verse specifically would have had great relevance: ***“Anyone out in the open who touches someone who has been killed with a sword or someone who has died a natural death, or anyone who touches a human bone or a grave, will be unclean for seven days” — God speaking, Numbers 19:16.*** As a result of this well-known stipulation, Jews made sure that graves were very carefully marked, even whitewashed.

But what Jesus is saying is that the Pharisees lived out their lives just like unmarked graves that did not look like graves at all. So, while they were incredibly insistent to others to maintain ritual cleanliness, the conduct of their lives actually wound up rendering those around them spiritually unclean. Or, to borrow from Christ’s similar comments as recorded in Matthew: ***“You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean. In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness” — Jesus Christ, Matthew 23:27b-28.*** The point that Christ was trying to impress on them is that, while their lives are outwardly clean, their inner lives are spiritually corrupted, polluting all those under their influence.

Then ***[o]ne of the experts in the law answered him, “Teacher, when you say these things, you insult us also” — Luke 11:45.*** The “experts in the law,” also known as scribes, were the specialists whose role was interpreting the law — both the written law and the massive system of “oral traditions” that had grown up in the 1,500 years since Moses. They were undoubtedly also present in the Pharisee’s home as they were both involved in the same desired outcome — the demise of Jesus of Nazareth, by any means necessary.

So Jesus includes them as well: ***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 — Luke 11:46.***

The additional “traditions of the elders” had done nothing but become incredible burdens to the people, but these teachers never did anything by means of teaching or explaining that helped the people see those traditions as anything more than very imposing, overwhelming, unforgiving taskmasters — leaving them with the undeniable conclusion that there was no way that they could ever please God.

“Woe to you, because you build tombs for the prophets, and it was your ancestors who killed them. So you testify that you approve of what your ancestors did; they killed the prophets, and you build their tombs. 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.’ Therefore this generation will be held responsible for the blood of all the prophets that has been shed since the beginning of the world, 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” — Jesus Christ, Luke 11:47-51.

Essentially Jesus is saying that nothing has changed in Israel over the centuries. The attitudes and actions of those he is addressing is no different than it was when the prophets, most accurately God’s spokesmen, were persecuted and killed because the words of God were not acceptable to those who heard them. So while the tombs of those who had died may have become monuments ostensibly to honor those prophets, the words of those prophets had fallen on deaf ears — both of those generations as well as this one. So because nothing has changed, that present generation to whom Christ is speaking, despite the fact that they did not personally participate in the killing of the prophets, tacitly agreed with their killing because the words of those prophets did not inspire change. Their lives right now have no more to do with God than did their ancestors. In fact, one commentator summed up Christ’s words this way: “Like father, like son!”

And it’s quite a list of men who did suffer simply for reflecting the truth of God, whether it was Abel by his offering of the ***fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock — Genesis 4:4a*** — recognizing that God deserved the very best he had to offer, to Zechariah (the last murder recorded in the Hebrew OT canon) who without regard to his

own personal safety faithfully represented God to the now apostate Joash king of Judah, fearlessly telling him: ***“This is what God says: Why do you disobey the Lord’s commands? You will not prosper. Because you have forsaken the Lord, he has forsaken you”*** — ***II Chronicles 24:20***. By order of the king, Zechariah was stoned to death — in the courtyard of the temple itself! And, as he lay dying, the Bible records him as telling the king: ***“May the Lord see this and call you to account”*** — ***II Chronicles 24:22b***, much like the Scriptures record God telling Cain as his brother lay dead: ***“Listen! Your brother’s blood cries out to me from the ground”*** — ***Genesis 4:10b***. And as Jesus peers into the deepest corners of their hearts, he says that they are no different in their day than their ancestors were in theirs.

And then Jesus finishes: ***“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”*** — ***Jesus Christ, Luke 11:52***.

Another major accusation! Instead of allowing the meaning of the law to be accessible to as many as possible, the detailed expositions of it that the scribes had developed had instead made the law and its plain meaning and message completely inaccessible to the people. What’s the point of having a word of God for his people that nobody could understand? It was not intended for a select few. God gave his word, in the package of his law, for the guidance and benefit of everybody. The scribes had betrayed the very word they were supposed to explain.

Finally Christ’s time at the Pharisee’s house came to an end. However, ***When Jesus went outside, the Pharisees and the teachers of the law began to oppose him fiercely and to besiege him with questions, waiting to catch him in something he might say*** — ***Luke 11:53-54***.

I can’t help but think that the scribes and Pharisees were thankful that there were not the usual crowds around them as Jesus went after them. They had carefully cultivated an image of holy men, and Jesus had shown just how filthy and unclean the lives under all the sparkling clean robes really were. No wonder they went after him with all kinds of questions. They had some serious face to try and save.

Instead of the resentment they did show, hitting their knees and begging for the forgiving mercy of the Son of God is what they should have shown. But their hearts were too cold for that. Jesus of Nazareth was the enemy — and they were going to do anything and everything they could to bring him down!

APPLICATION

They say that confession is good for the soul. Well, I've been here going on four years, and it seems that there is some confession that might be good for me, so here goes: In my past, I've been a radio announcer. In my past, I've been a police captain; actually, I worked undercover as an officer in the secret state police. In my past, I've been a college professor — taught history mostly. And, believe it or not, in my past, I've even been an inmate on death row, sentenced to die in the electric chair. Shocking, right? Wow, Pastor Dan; is all that true? Yes, in a way. Those are all parts I have had in plays in which I've performed over the years. But for all of these the same thing was true for each and every one of them: I was acting, pretending to be someone I'm not.

Why do I bring that up? Because that is most basically what a “hypocrite” is — it comes from a Greek word that means “an actor.” When used against somebody outside of a theater context, it means that somebody is a fake, pretending to be something they're not. A hypocrite is one of the worst things a Christian can be.

If you look in the Bible for the words “hypocrite” or “hypocrites,” you'll notice that, in the NT, every occurrence is in the gospels, and all of them are found in instances where Jesus is going after the religious leaders. Why? Because they were the ones with the word, the training and the education, in other words, every advantage to understand the wonders of God and his message for his people. But instead of that, they made use of it for their own selfish gains. So when Jesus was here, that's what they heard from him — they were actors playing a part — and he would never let them forget it.

Unfortunately, hypocrisy is still alive and well these 2,000 years later. Now of course, there is an underlying problem that makes hypocrisy inevitable. The founder of our faith was God himself in the person of

Jesus of Nazareth. He was perfect, completely sinless. We his followers are all but two of those things. Remember Paul's words: ***[All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God — Paul, Romans 3:23.***

So what's it all mean? It means that one of the most critical ways we have of showing our true selves — whether we are hypocrites and just religious church people, or whether we are genuine “deny yourselves, take up your cross daily, and follow Me” Christians — is how we react when we are wronged. Whether somebody had it in for us or whether somebody was just a clod and messed up, how do we react? So here's what that looks like:

Genuine Christians quickly seek out forgiveness when they have done somebody wrong. No excuses, no skirting responsibility. Genuine Christians know how to say, “I was wrong.” Then they say it, and mean it. They mean it because genuine Christians understand the words of David: ***Against you [O God], you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight — David, Psalm 51:4a.*** Translation: Before we have sinned against anybody else, we have sinned against God. And genuine Christians hate with every fiber of their born-again being the idea of sinning against the One who redeemed them through the death of His Son.

Genuine Christians also just as quickly forgive, knowing that somebody else's sin or mistake could just have easily been their own. Genuine Christians know that, this side of heaven, we are all inpatient in this spiritual hospital we call “the church.” And nobody is admitted to a hospital unless they are ill or injured. Genuine Christians understand that, this side of heaven, they are both. Genuine Christians understand that we are all “under construction” [reference the shirt] — that ***he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus — Paul, Philippians 1:6b.*** Therefore, genuine Christians forgive reflecting how they are forgiven — not as a product of anything they have earned, but totally, solely, only because of God's grace, his undeserved favor toward us, his uncompleted kids.

Genuine Christians forgive without keeping score. Paul said it this way to the church in Corinth: ***[Love] keeps no record of wrongs — Paul,***

I Corinthians 13:5b. Genuine Christians forgive and then let it go. If God can remember their sins no more (Isaiah 43:25; Jeremiah 31:34), then neither will they. That allows genuine Christians to forgive fully and freely without evaluating whether something is “fair.” Genuine Christians understand that there was not one “fair” charge against Christ that qualified him for the cross — yet there he was. What kept him there was not the nails, but his love for us, providing a once-for-all forgiveness that would please his beloved Heavenly Father, and provide God’s promised salvation to all who surrender their lives to him.

CONCLUSION

How Christians are with each other is one of the most transparent ways that the world has for evaluating whether all the claims of Christ are real and true — and whether Christians really buy into them or not. Relationships are tough because they deal with our perspectives and our perceptions and our moods and our strengths and weaknesses and our feelings. Relationships are tough because relationships are personal. But I promise you there is nothing ever been done more personal to us than Jesus Christ dying on the cross for our sins. Thanks to him, we have a personal promise of a personal forever beyond anything we could ever imagine. And genuine Christians continually seek to have Christ imprinted more and more on their hearts and minds, understanding that life is not about pleasing ourselves. Life is about pleasing God. Genuine Christians seek that ahead of all else. That’s why we cling to these pillars. Those are the facts that fuel our faith. So what’s your life about? Good days, bad days, hurtful days, whatever days, what’s your life about? Let’s pray!