

Commentary on Luke 11:37-12:12

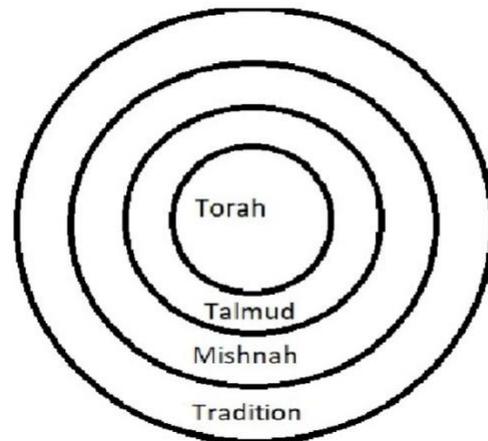
Woe to the Pharisees (Luke 11:37-44)

Our study starts today right after Jesus has finished teaching and responding to the crowd about their proclamation that Jesus was driving out demons with the authority and power of Beelzebub and their demands for a sign. As soon as Jesus finishes His teaching, we see that a Pharisee invited Jesus to eat with him at his house. Luke gives us context clues about the type of meal it was. The Greek word for “accepted” in vs. 37 *aristao* means “to have lunch”¹ and we see that Jesus was reclining at the table which was the protocol for a formal meal². We see that the Pharisees are astonished that Jesus did not wash before eating His meal. The type of washing mentioned here wasn't merely washing your hands for hygienic reasons, but rather, was a ceremonial hand washing ceremony that observant Jews would participate in as a sign and symbol of their religious propriety.

To better understand the difference between handwashing, tithes and teachings (coming up next!), let's pause here to learn about the Jewish religious laws, interpretations and traditions in Jesus' day. In this bullseye, we see the **Torah**, the first five books of the Old Testament, is at the center.

Surrounding this, is the **Talmud**, which is the Jewish scholarly interpretation and application of the Torah. The Talmud was written to better explain and interpret laws that may not be

clear in the Torah. The next ring is the **Mishnah**, which are interpretations of the Talmud. The Mishnah is divided into six orders which are arranged topically: seeds (prayer, diet, and agricultural laws), festivals (holidays), women (and family life), damages (civil law), holy things (sacrifices, offerings, dedications, and other temple-related things) and purities (purity of vessels, people, food and dwellings)³. The outer ring is **Tradition**, which are practices that develop from applying the Mishnah and Talmud (or the interpretation and application of the interpretation and the application of the interpretation and application of the Torah!).



When it came to washing, the **Torah** stated it was only necessary if one had touched a bodily discharge (Lev. 15:11). However, the Pharisees had expanded on washing as a means to distinguish observant Jews from non-observant Jews and Gentiles so that the washing or not washing wasn't based on physical hygiene (like washing your hands after you use the restroom or

¹ Morris, Leon “ Luke: Tyndale New Testament Commentary Series,” InterVarsity Press, 1999, p. 222

² Edwards, James, “Edward, James, “The Pillar New Testament Commentary: The Gospel According to Luke.” Eerdmans Press, 2015, p. 354

³ <https://www.gotquestions.org/Mishnah-midrash.html>

sneeze!), but more on religious propriety (who is being a really good and holy Jew!).⁴ In fact, 25% of the Mishnah was devoted to issues of purity and washing⁵ where detailed accounts were given as to how, when, why and where to perform washings.

Jesus being Jesus knows that the Pharisees present are “concerned” that He is not performing the ritual practices of washing and responds to their “concern” using a parable. In verse 39, He uses the parable of a cup, stating that the Pharisees are careful to wash the outside of the cup and make sure it looks nice and clean, but on the inside, they are full of greed and wickedness. Jesus is accusing the Pharisees of being more concerned about their outward appearance than on their inner integrity and the state of their hearts. When Jesus commands to give alms (money and help for the poor) in vs. 41, He is challenging their inner hearts towards the opposite of greed and wickedness in order that they might be aligned with God’s generous and kind heart for justice and the poor. When we give generously from the heart, everything is clean.⁶

Jesus then goes on to deliver three woes, or expressions of regret, to the Pharisees. The first woe is over tithing. Jesus states that the Pharisees tithe a tenth of the mint, rue and every herb, but neglect justice and the love of God (ouch!). The Torah required that the Israelites set aside a tenth of their fields’ produce for the support of worship centers and their workers, foreigners, orphans and widows (Deut. 14:28-29). There are also several passages in the Old Testament (Lev. 27:30-31; Num. 18:22; Neh. 10:37-38, 12:44, 13:5, 12; Mal 3:8, 10) and in the Mishnah that address agricultural tithing. However, none of the passages address the tithing of herbs. What is Jesus getting at here? The Pharisees are going so far above and beyond to follow ambiguous observances of the law (tithing herbs!) that they are ignoring and displacing the major observances of justice and the love of God which the Old Testament is NOT ambiguous about (Micah 6:8, 1 Sam. 15:22, Is. 42:1). Jesus, however, does not command the Pharisees to stop tithing, but rather, to focus on BOTH the tithing and the love and justice of God.

The second woe is directed toward the Pharisees love of recognition, attention and praise from people. The first (love of recognition) is their desire to have the best seats in the synagogue, which are in the front facing the congregation. The second (attention and praise from people) is their desire for respectful greetings and acknowledgments in public spaces. Jesus is concerned that their love for this form of praise and attention supersedes their desire for recognition from God.

In the third woe, Jesus compares the Pharisees to unmarked graves which people walk over without knowing it (vs. 44). According to Leviticus 21:1,4,11 and Numbers 19:11-22, if a person came in contact with the dead, including someone’s final resting place (a grave), they were defiled for seven days. Every year, people would whitewash gravestones so that people walking along the fields where these graves were located would not accidentally step on them and become defiled. Just as people who walked over an unmarked grave became ceremonially unclean, people who

⁴ Edwards, p. 354.

⁵ Edwards, p. 354.

⁶ Morris, p. 223.

were attracted to the teachings and walked in the ways of the Pharisees were rendered unclean and defiled in the sight of God.⁷

Woe to the Lawyers (Luke 11:45-54)

Next, Jesus addresses the lawyers in the room. Lawyers in Jesus' time were known for their mastery of the Torah and commanded high esteem in religious crowds. It is interesting to note that the lawyer addresses Jesus as "Teacher," which denotes his high esteem for Jesus and His teaching.

The first woe Jesus gives to the lawyers is that they loaded people with "burdens hard to bear" (Luke 11:46). These burdens were the scriptural interpretations and traditions of the elders. The religious rules and expectations that the lawyers established for their followers were impossible to follow. For example, it was taught that on the Sabbath, a man may not carry a burden on his right or left hand, on his bosom on his shoulder BUT he may carry it on the back of his hand or with his foot or with his mouth or with his elbow or in his ear or in his hair or in his wallet or between his wallet and his shirt or in the hem of his shirt or in his sandal⁸ (confused yet?!?!). Multiply this insane level of dos and don'ts by all the regulations set forth in the law and you can see how exasperating it must have been for followers who were earnestly attempting to faithfully follow the law. Jesus adds to this woe that not only did the lawyers create all of these regulations and burdens, but they did nothing to help their followers follow them. Also, these lawyers knew all the loopholes to get around following these laws themselves. Edwards states that "teachers must not only inform people, but they must also aid people. They must show people what do, but also support them in doing it – and above all, attempt to live by it *themselves*."⁹

The second woe addressed how the lawyers treated the prophets. He called them out on how they build tombs and memorialize the prophets their ancestors killed. He gives them a detailed history of how generation after generation of the Israelites killed and persecuted the prophets and messengers God sent them. He started with Abel in Genesis 4 and went to Zechariah the prophet, who was killed between the altar and sanctuary which was in the temple – God's holy place! (2 Chronicles 24:20-21). Jesus is telling the lawyers that the blood of all the prophets who have been killed by their ancestors will be on their hands.

Jesus' third and final woe states that the lawyers "have taken away the key to knowledge," (Luke 11:52). The key to knowledge is the key that unlocks the meaning of Scripture. Instead of using their knowledge and training to help people better understand the wonders and mysteries of God's Word, they made God's Word more confusing and harder to understand turning it into a book of obscurities and a bundle of riddles which only the experts could understand. Not only did the lawyers do this to their followers, but they also were preoccupied with the mysteries and head

⁷ Edwards, p. 357; Morris, p. 224.

⁸ Morris, p. 225

⁹ Edwards, p. 358.

knowledge they had been so pleased to obtain that they missed the actual things God was saying in the Scriptures.¹⁰

Jesus' "come to Jesus" talk with the Pharisees and lawyers was met with His audience leaving the meal to begin plotting and scheming of ways they could trap Jesus in something He might say. Instead of taking His call as a warning and an invitation to examine their hearts and actions and then repent, they have their hearts set on how to find fault and persecute Jesus. Jesus is the next in the line of prophets God sent to the Israelites to call them back to Himself.

Leaven of the Pharisees (Luke 12:1-3)

After Jesus' meal with the Pharisees, we see more crowds (thousands!) trampling to get close to Jesus. Jesus begins teaching His disciples along with the crowds beginning with a stern warning to beware of the leaven (yeast) of the Pharisees, which Jesus states is hypocrisy. The Greek word for hypocrisy is *hypokrisis* which was primarily a theatrical term denoting the mask an actor wore to impersonate a given character.¹¹ The metaphor of leaven would be familiar to Jesus' listeners as making bread was a common, daily custom. Leaven or yeast, would be mixed into flour causing dough to rise. It does not take a lot of yeast (which are small and miniscule grains that almost blend into the flour in color and texture) to do this job. The result is quite obvious. A gaseous reaction occurs which puffs up the bread in volume and lightness. Jesus is warning His followers to beware of hypocrisy which masks itself as outwardly self-righteousness. In reality, the man-made traditions of the Pharisees were preventing them and the people they lead from accepting the Good News of Great Joy from Jesus Himself.

Jesus goes on to state that what the Pharisees are doing will not remain hidden behind their hypocritical masks for long, "for there is nothing which is concealed which will be disclosed or hidden that will not be made known," (Luke 12:2).

Have No Fear (Luke 12:4-7)

Jesus then tells His friends to not fear those who may physically kill them. This fear of death, of killing the body, is a legitimate fear. However, Jesus realigns where His followers' fear should lie—not on the ones that can only physically end their lives, but on the one who has authority over their eternal lives and eternal punishment and can send them to hell. The Greek word for hell in this passage is *Gehenna*, which was the valley south of Jerusalem which empties into the Kidron Valley. This was where the Judahites prior to King Josiah sacrificed their sons and daughters in burned offerings to Baal Molech on a hill called Topeth (Jer. 7:32, 19:4-6, 32:34-35; 2 Kings 16:3, 21:6). During King Josiah's reign, Topeth was destroyed into a smoldering rubbish pile to remind the Judahites of the wickedness that occurred there (Jer. 18:1-4, 19:2, 10-13; Neh. 2:13; 2 Kings 23:10). This hill was visible from the temple and was a graphic image of hell to Jesus' audience.¹²

Jesus then reminds His listeners about His care and remembrance of sparrows and His followers. Sparrows were small, insignificant birds which were five for two pennies at the marketplace.

¹⁰ Morris, p. 226

¹¹ Edwards, p. 363.

¹² Edwards, p. 365

Jesus states that God remembers all of them, that He knows the number of hairs on each of His follower's heads (Psalm 139 in action!) and reminds His followers that they are more valuable than the sparrows God knows and remembers.

Acknowledging Christ Before Men (Luke 12:8-12)

Finally, Jesus sets up two positive/negative options for His followers. In Luke 12:8, He states that whoever acknowledges Jesus before the Son of Man will be acknowledged before the angels and God. The Greek word here is *homologeō* which means "to declare, confess and personally profess." However, those who deny Jesus and His unique authority, His teaching and His ultimate supremacy will be denied before God.

In Luke 12:10, Jesus states that anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven. What exactly does it mean to speak a word against the Son of Man and be forgiven? Jesus is saying that a word spoken against Him can be forgiven. People can speak against Jesus, repent, and be forgiven (think of Peter's denial of Christ and his subsequent repentance and restoration).

However, those who blaspheme against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven. What does it mean to blaspheme the Holy Spirit? The Greek word for blaspheme is *blasphemeō* which means "to revile, treat with irreverence and scornful insolence." Without the help of the Holy Spirit, it is impossible to see Jesus for who He is – full of grace, mercy, healing, and forgiveness. If we blaspheme/ revile (active verb tense) the Holy Spirit, we are blocking off our access to Jesus and all He offers us. However, once we actively stop blaspheming the Holy Spirit, we allow that wall between us and the Holy Spirit to be removed so we can experience His grace and forgiveness.

Finally, Jesus reminds His followers that when (not if!) His disciples are persecuted and brought before people in authority that they should not fear. The Holy Spirit will be present with and in them and give them the words to say at the very hour they need them. Jesus is not telling His followers how to secure a way out of the situations they face, but that the Holy Spirit will inspire them in a manner through which the Gospel will be proclaimed, and God's Kingdom purposes moved forward.¹³

Jesus' Upside-Down Kingdom

What do these passages teach us about Jesus and His Upside-down Kingdom?

- 1) Jesus flips upside-down the religious ideas of what is considered "clean." Being "clean" does not consist of doing the outwardly "correct" things whether it be ceremonial handwashing (like in the Luke passage), listening to the right music, aligning ourselves with a particular political party, reading the right Bible translation, etc. Jesus challenges us to rethink and examine the things we may be trapped into thinking are "clean" but are not the Gospel.
- 2) Jesus is the perfect truth teller and is not afraid to challenge people in authority. We often want to paint a picture of Jesus as always being kind, loving, and non-confrontational.

¹³ Morris, p. 231.

Edwards states, “Doing good to those who hate you does not mean being nice in the face of hatred and injustice but speaking and acting in ways that have the potential to reduce or eliminate hatred and injustice. The great violation of the agape love-ethic is not confrontation, but indifference. Jesus is not indifferent.”¹⁴ Jesus cares not only for the issues of injustice He is confronting the Pharisees and lawyers about, but also for their hearts to respond to His Upside-down Kingdom. He is concerned for the inside and outside of the cup.

- 3) Jesus takes hypocrisy seriously. He warns us of the dangers of hypocrisy and how it can spread and prevent people from seeing a true, full picture of Jesus and His Kingdom.
- 4) As followers of Jesus, it is not a matter of if we will face persecution, but when. We can rest assured that God knows every hair on our head, that He remembers us, and that His Holy Spirit will teach us what to say exactly when we need it.
- 5) Jesus continues to call people to Himself to experience His love, care, grace and forgiveness. He is willing to say the hard things that can break our hard hearts so that we can experience Him more fully. Read the word to the song, “Closer,” by Charlie Hall. May this be our prayer today and may we continue to press closer to Jesus. May the power of His Words, which are full of grace and mercy, fall on our ears and break our stony hearts.

Closer

By Charlie Hall
Flying into Daybreak (2006)

*Beautiful are the words spoken to me
Beautiful is the one who is speaking*

*Chorus
Come in close, come in close and speak
Come in close, come closer to me*

*Bridge
The power of Your words
Are filled with grace and mercy
Let them fall on my ears and break my stony heart*

¹⁴ Edwards, pp. 361-362.

Discussion Questions for Luke 12:13-59

Luke 12: 13-21 Coveting

Observation

1. Who is present in these verses?

2. Describe the attitudes or hearts of the man in the crowd who yells at Jesus compared to the rich man in the parable.

Interpretation

3. What do you make of Jesus' response to the man in the crowd. What does this teach us about who Jesus is?

4. What does "covetousness" mean?

Application

5. When have you experienced "coveting" rearing its ugly, sinful head in your life? What did you learn about Jesus in that experience?

6. In what ways do you find security in money, possessions or accomplishments? How do these verses assure you of TRUE security in Christ?

Luke 12:22-12:34 Don't be anxious!

Observations

7. Describe the different images and pictures Jesus uses for encouraging us to not be anxious.

8. List the different commands Jesus gives His disciples.

Interpretation

9. Why should we not worry, according to these verses?

10. What is the primary objective of a believer according to Jesus? What does this mean?

Application

11. What thing(s) do you worry about the most? How does Jesus' teaching here provide you comfort?

12. What does it look like in your life to "seek Jesus' kingdom"?

Luke 12:35-47 Get Ready!

Observations

13. What happens for the ones who are ready when their master comes home from the wedding banquet?

14. When is the Son of Man coming?

15. What is Jesus' answer to Peter's question (v.41)?

16. What are the two pictures of the servant that Jesus describes?

Interpretation

17. How do you react to these verses compared to Luke 12:22-34 and the balance between "don't be anxious" but "be ready!"? What does Jesus teach us in these two sets of verses?

18. Why does the master serve the servants? What does this teach us about Jesus and His character?

19. Describe how the parable (12:42-47) underscores Jesus' teaching in Luke 12:35-40. What do you learn here?

Application

20. What helps you "be ready"? What things is Jesus inviting you to do or change in order to "be ready"?

21. How do you apply the following statement to your life: "Everyone to whom much was given, of him much will be required, and from him to whom they entrusted much, they will demand the more,"?

Luke 12:49-59 Division and conflict

22. What does Jesus say about division?

23. List the signs Jesus mentions in v. 54-56.

24. Who is Jesus addressing in these verses (v. 54-59)? What does He call them?

Interpretation

25. Jesus has been called the Prince of Peace in Scripture (Is 9:6), yet He describes a very different picture of Himself in 12:49-53. Why?

26. Why does Jesus bring up signs in v. 54-56?

27. What does Jesus teach about how we are to settle disputes in v. 57-59?

Application

28. Do v. 49-53 make you uncomfortable or do they bring you comfort? Explain. How does this affect how you seek to follow Jesus?

29. What signs of Jesus' presence on earth bring you joy, heal your broken heart and shape how you live?