

Jesus and the Pharisees

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For some reason, most people have the expectation that others who deal with them will listen to what they say honestly and fairly. When we meet opposition, then, we start wondering if there is some flaw in our argument. In reality, though, the explanation is often much simpler. Sometimes, people decide that for whatever reason, they just ain't gonna listen, and nothing we can say will change their minds.

This was a problem that Jesus often had, and it is responsible for some of the most ludicrous scenes in Scripture. His enemies say and do patently irrational things because they have decided they don't want to listen. Let's look at one of these encounters this morning, an encounter between Jesus and the Pharisees.

Casting out a Demon

The first of these confrontations begins when Jesus casts out a demon. Believe it or not, this leads to a series of **ACCUSATIONS** made against Him. Luke describes this in Luke 11:14-16. This passage first of all reveals to us what it was like to be around Jesus. As Matthew's account reveals, this isn't some kind of ringer or confederate of Jesus. A man who is mute because he has been possessed by a demon is brought to Jesus, Jesus casts out the demon, the man speaks, and the crowd recognizes the miracle and rejoices.

However, the evidence of this miracle doesn't convince everyone who is there. Far from it! Instead, His enemies use His mighty work as a pretext to make two different attacks. First, one group claims that He casts out demons by demonic powers. Note that even these people don't dispute that a miracle has occurred. They can't. Instead, they shift attention from the clear fact of the miracle to an ad-hominem attack.

When we talk to others about the Bible, we can expect to face this kind of attack too. When we present the truth of the gospel, many reply, "You're the ones who think that everyone else is going to hell." Likewise, if we repeat the truth on homosexuality, many will tell us, "Oh, you're just homophobic!" We need to be wise to what's going on here. These responses are not honest responses. They're attempts at character assassination, to make our goodness rather than the Scripture the subject of discussion.

The second attack comes from people, who, having seen one sign, want to see another before they will believe in Him. This seems outwardly reasonable. After all, isn't it fair to ask for more evidence? We see the same attitude in those, who, when confronted with one passage that says something they don't like, demand to see another that backs the first up. They don't actually want to see another passage, and they will be happiest if we can't produce one. Instead, they want to cling to their current beliefs, and they will use the non-appearance of the second passage as an excuse to disregard the first.

We see how Jesus addresses the first of these attacks in **HIS REPLY**. It appears in Luke 11:17-23. Note that Jesus doesn't get flustered and stutter, "No, I don't cast out demons by Beelzebul!" Doing so would have been like that politician a few years back who ran ads saying, "I am not a witch." All that did was get people wondering if she actually was a witch!

Instead of falling into the denial trap, Jesus counterattacks. He first points out the logical problem with the accusation—if Satan fights himself, he will soon destroy himself. He then puts His accusers in a dilemma of their own. Jesus' disciples, who apparently have some family connection to His accusers, have been casting out demons too. If Jesus casts out demons by the power of Beelzebul, then the sons of the Pharisees have been doing the same thing. If they're on God's side, then Jesus must be too.

We need to learn from Jesus not to defend ourselves from ad-hominem attacks. Don't fight the battle on the ground your opponent picks. Counterattack! Point out that your beliefs about who is going to hell are utterly irrelevant. Only God's word matters. That gets us back to talking about what we want to talk about—the Scripture—instead of debating what bad people we are. Likewise, if somebody calls you a hater or a homophobe, ask them how their principles of tolerance allow them to be so intolerant of differing opinions. That's the way Jesus would have dealt with it, and we want to be imitators of Jesus.

From here, Jesus moves on to the implications of His casting out of the demon. It proved that He was stronger than the demon, and indeed than the demon's master, Satan. That meant that everybody had a choice. Either they lined up with Jesus and God, or they opposed Him. Like Him, we need to draw lines in the sand. Either people accept God's teaching on salvation and sin, or they don't. There's no third way.

From here, Jesus shifts focus to discuss **THE RESTLESS DEMON**. Read with me from Luke 11:24-26. In context, this passage is somewhat difficult to interpret. Jesus has just finished casting out a literal demon, but it seems strange that He would waste time discussing the migration habits of literal demons. Instead, I think this connects with His last comment about either gathering with Him or scattering.

In this case, the story about the restless demon has two applications. It may have been literally true. A man freed from demonic possession who did not become a disciple of Jesus was presumably vulnerable to demonic re-possession. Second, though, it speaks to the tenacity of evil in our own lives. Let's say that there's some temptation that we've really been struggling with, some persistent sin that we hate but can't seem to get rid of. One day, we reach a tipping point and get rid of it. At that point, we have a choice—to gather with Jesus and benefit from His protection, or try to go it alone. Friends, if we're trying to banish a sin from our lives without His help, sooner or later, we're going to fail. We're going to go back to the extramarital affair or the bottle or the workaholic lifestyle. Only Jesus offers lasting peace.

Finally, Jesus tells us who **THE BLESSED** are. We find this discussion in Luke 11:27-28. This isn't part of Jesus' larger argument; instead, He's responding to an interjection from the crowd. Some woman, carried away by enthusiasm for Jesus, cries out about the blessedness of His mother Mary. He replies that the truly blessed are those who hear the word and observe it.

From this, there are two applications we ought to make. First, despite the religious groups out there that want to venerate and make a big deal out of Mary, this text makes clear that she's no more special than any ordinary follower of God. Second, it tells us what we have to do to gather with Jesus. We have to hear Him and keep His word. If we don't, even though we may have a reputation as pristine as that of the Pharisees, we have failed in what God intended for us to do.

Signs and Understanding

As Jesus continues His reply to His adversaries, He next touches on the subjects of signs and understanding. This begins with His discussion of **THE SIGN OF JONAH**. Consider His words in Luke 11:29-30. First of all, let's appreciate the setting here. To me, this has a vaguely high-school feel to it. When I was in high school, if you saw a whole bunch of the other kids suddenly look in one direction and run that way, you knew a fight was going on and you wanted to watch it. In the same way, this crowd is increasing because all the Jews want to watch Jesus slug it out verbally with the Pharisees.

Now that Jesus has dealt with those who have accused Him of demonic powers, He turns His attention to those who want a sign. He tells them that they will only have the sign of Jonah. This has two layers of meaning. The first has to do with the preaching of Jonah. He was only one man, but when he went to Nineveh and warned its inhabitants that the city would be overthrown, they repented. The Jews of Jesus' day received Him as their preacher of repentance. His message alone should have been enough.

Second, though, Jesus' connection of Himself with Jonah has a different meaning. Jonah, after all, was famously swallowed by a great fish and spent three days inside it before being spat out. Jesus was going to spend three days dead in His tomb before rising. Even that, though, would not convince His generation.

This text gives us the answer to the question "How much evidence is enough?" If Nineveh repented at the word of a single preacher, people today ought to repent at the word of a single passage. The good and honest heart only needs to hear God speak once before obeying. The dishonest heart will press for another passage that says the same thing, and another passage after that, as an excuse to keep from obeying. The cry for more evidence has no logical force when sufficient evidence already has been provided by God.

Because of this, **CONDEMNATION** was going to be heaped on the Jews. Jesus presents this interestingly in Luke 11:31-22. He cites two people/groups that are going to condemn this wicked generation: the queen of Sheba, who came to hear Solomon, and the Ninevites, who repented at the preaching of Jonah. Neither the queen nor the Ninevites were Jews. They weren't part of God's people. However, they were honest enough to listen to God's wisdom anyway. By doing so, they implicitly condemned the Jews, who were God's people, who had been prepared for centuries to receive a greater teacher than Solomon or Jonah either one, yet refused to listen to the Messiah when He appeared.

How about us? Most of us here are regular attendees. We have heard hundreds of sermons. We have every advantage when it comes to obeying God. What does it say about us when others who don't have those advantages obey God when we don't? What if we've been resisting the command to be baptized for

years, and then an outsider is baptized for the forgiveness of his sins on the basis of a few studies? What if that new Christian serves God with a purity and zeal we don't match, even though we've been disciples for decades? As surely as the examples of the queen of Sheba and the Ninevites condemned the Jews, the example of that outsider condemns us. We had the advantages, but he obeys, and we don't.

Finally, Jesus discusses **THE EYE** and its importance. Read with me from Luke 11:33-36. Clearly, this is not a treatise on ophthalmology. Jesus is not talking about literal eyes. Instead, this is a figure of speech, in which the eye represents our understanding, and the body represents our lives. That eye, that understanding, can be sound. If that's the case, and we understand accurately the things of the spirit, our entire lives will be transformed by that understanding. On the other hand, our eye can be evil. It can be so anxious to reject the gospel that it attacks those who bear it. It can be so determined not to change that it ceaselessly demands more evidence. If indeed our understanding has been darkened and corrupted, that too will have an effect on our entire lives. Instead of being filled with goodness, those lives will be filled with evil.

Our Lord's point is plain. Every human being on the planet has got to be honest with the truth. We have to seek the will of God with our whole hearts. If not, our dishonesty will destroy us.

All this gives us a lot to think about before the Lord's Supper. First, let's remember Jesus as He really was. He wasn't merely a gentle man who sat around hugging children. He was a fierce and forthright defender of the truth, and He calls us to be like Him. He also provides us with the sign of Jonah. His resurrection prefigures the resurrection of all who trust in Him. Second, let's reflect on our own spiritual lives. Are we doing what we ought? Or, like the Pharisees, are we finding excuses not to?

Hypocrisy

The final portion of Jesus' discussion with the Pharisees concerns the subject of hypocrisy. The whole thing comes up because of the Pharisees' views on **WASHING**. Luke tells the story in Luke 11:37-41. This is another area in which the traditions of the Pharisees had gone far beyond the Law's requirements. Under the Law, a man who touched a dead body or otherwise came in contact with the unclean had to ceremonially wash himself. By the time of Jesus, the Pharisees had taken to washing themselves before every meal just in case they had come in contact with something unclean. Jesus didn't do this before seating Himself, and in the eyes of His Pharisee host, this was a shocking violation of the traditions of the elders.

Jesus, of course, isn't about to let thoughts like that, even unspoken, slide by. He points out that the Pharisees' concern for outward cleanliness wasn't matched by purity of heart. They might be careful to wash before eating, but they made no effort to cleanse hearts that were filled with the love of money. This was all the more ironic because the Law didn't require Jews to wash all the time, but it did require them to be generous and not oppress the poor. If they would only obey God, they wouldn't need to wash.

It's easy for us too to get caught up in a focus on the external instead of the internal. However, we also must remember that God expects purity of heart from us too. In our worship, we sing to the Lord according to the ancient pattern. We've got the externals down when it comes to worship. However, we have to make sure that we have the internals down too. Singing that is lifeless, mechanical, and rote is no more pleasing to God than is the use of musical instruments. He accepts only our best.

Next, Jesus pronounces three **WOES** against the Pharisees. Luke recounts them in Luke 11:42-44. The Lord's words paint a grim picture of who the Pharisees were spiritually. They prided themselves on keeping the very smallest commandments while forgetting justice and love. They cared more about the praise of men than they did about the praise of God. Finally, Jesus calls them "concealed tombs". This too gets back to the Jewish rules about purity. As I said earlier, those who came in contact with dead bodies became unclean. A concealed tomb could cause a Jew to become unclean without being aware of it. In the same way, these Pharisees, who were supposedly teachers of the Law, spread corruption to those who heard them.

Members of the Lord's church are commonly accused of being Pharisaical in their religion. I'm not going to spend time denying the accusation. Instead, I want us to examine ourselves and make sure that it isn't true of us. It easily can be true. The devil doesn't leave people alone simply because they pay strict attention to God's law. Instead, he tries to use their very zeal to corrupt them.

Jesus calls us here, then, to consider our motivations. There are many commandments that He wants us to keep, but we can't ever forget what underlies them. Everything that we do as Christians is supposed to be driven by love. We honor God's law for His church because we love. We speak truth because we love.

Without love, honoring God's law becomes an exercise in smug self-righteousness. Without love, speaking truth is an opportunity to criticize others and demonstrate our moral superiority. Without love, every other commandment in the Bible inevitably turns to evil. That's a horrible fate for any believer, all the more so because these evildoers will sincerely believe that they're pleasing God with their loveless service.

The correct response to this, though, is not to chuck all the commandments out the window. In the right spiritual context, they are necessary and good. Instead, we must learn to read those commandments in the light cast by love, and we must only apply them in a way that allows God's love to shine in us.

After He finishes with the Pharisees, Jesus starts in on the **LAWYERS**. Read with me from Luke 11:47-52. First, we must understand that the word "lawyer" has a different meaning to us than it did to Jews 2000 years ago. To us, a lawyer is someone who is an expert in the law of the land. In the Jewish nation, though, the Law of Moses was the law of the land, so a lawyer was an expert in religious law. This one particular lawyer is apparently indignant about the way that Jesus is abusing his Pharisee buddies, so he metaphorically lines up with them and dares Jesus to continue.

Without missing a beat, Jesus does. Having condemned the Pharisees with three woes, He condemns the lawyers with three more. The first is that they load ordinary Jews down with burdens that they themselves are unwilling to bear. The problem was that the body of Pharisaical tradition had become too complex for anybody but an expert to understand. It laid down all of these impossibly cumbersome rules. However, the experts knew where all the loopholes and backdoors were, so that they could dodge the parts of the traditions that they didn't feel like following while still claiming to be holy. The lawyers would tell the people, "You can only travel 3000 feet from your home on the Sabbath," but they would invent a loophole that let them declare some tree by the roadside their temporary home, so a lawyer could keep traveling.

The lawyers also shared in the guilt of their prophet-killing fathers. They liked their prophets safely dead. After all, dead prophets deliver no inconvenient prophecies. They even made really pretty tombs for the dead prophets. However, when faced with a live prophet, like Jesus, they opposed Him in the same way that their fathers had fought against the prophets. For this, Jesus promised them that all of the guilt accumulated by previous generations would be charged against this one, as indeed it was during the cataclysmic destruction of the temple and the Jewish nation in 70 AD, about 40 years from this time.

Finally, Jesus pronounced woes on the lawyers because their lawyerly ways kept the Jewish people from knowing and following the law. They contributed not to enlightenment, but to ignorance.

There are few passages of Scripture that better show the problems with powerful religious leaders than this one. All kinds of religious authorities, both past and present, set up two classes of rules, one for the masses and one for the spiritual elite. How many religious leaders have preached honesty while embezzling from the church? How many have condemned immorality while carrying on half a dozen affairs? All of that comes from an arrogant mindset that says, "I'm better than you are, and your rules don't apply to me."

To maintain this class distinction, many religious leaders do their best to keep their people ignorant and dependent on them. I do everything I can to encourage the brethren here to read their Bibles and draw their own conclusions; in many denominations, Bible study and independent thought is actively discouraged.

There is only one cure for this disease, and it's the word of God. History has proven that any time people let a man become a religious authority, he abuses that authority. Power corrupts, no less within the church than outside it. Let's resolve always to place our faith in God, and never in men.

The result of this ringing condemnation was **HOSTILITY** on the part of the Pharisees and the lawyers. Luke reports on this in Luke 11:53-54. It kind of makes me wonder what the Pharisees were before, when they were accusing Jesus of being a tool of demonic powers, but now apparently they're really upset with Him and looking for an excuse to bring Him down. This always leads to embarrassment rather than triumph for the enemies of Jesus, but they're pretty determined about it regardless.

This shows, as always, the polarizing effect that Jesus had. On the one hand, some people loved Him and gave their lives to following Him. On the other hand, others hated Him and were willing to pay to have Him murdered. By the time Jesus' ministry was over, there weren't too many people left in the middle.

If we are His disciples, we will polarize too. Sometimes, we're tempted to crawlfish and hem and haw when we face an attack against the truth. That's not what Jesus did. He told it like it was, and if people didn't love the truth, that was just too bad. If we tell it like it is too, if we call out the enemies of the kingdom for irrationality and hypocrisy, they aren't going to love us for it. However, that's all a part of discipleship.