

WOE TO YOU PHARISEES!

Luke 11:37–54

Key Verse: 11:44

“Woe to you! For you are like unmarked graves, and people walk over them without knowing it.”

Do you ever use the word “Woe”? Maybe not; it’s an old word. With the same sound, but a slightly different spelling, people today say “Whoa!” to get a horse to slow down. Young people say “Whoa!” to express fascination or hallucination. But in today’s passage Jesus uses the old word “Woe!” six times, not to say “Wow!” but to grieve over the hypocritical religious leaders. Earlier, Jesus contrasted his disciples, whom he called “blessed,” with those who someday will receive God’s “woes” (6:20–26). He also told the cities too proud to repent, “Woe to you!” (10:37). But what are these “woes” about? Do we really have to have a lesson on six woes? What could it have to do with *us*? And what should we learn from it? May God open our hearts and speak to us through his living word today.

From 9:51 to 19:27, his longest section, Luke records Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem. The point of this journey is not the places they go, but the teachings Jesus gives. On this journey Jesus is laser focused on training his disciples. As he begins, he challenges them all to live sacrificially and put him first (9:57–62). Next, he sends out 72 to every town and place where he himself is about to go, to do the same work he did (10:1–12), and they experience the power of God (10:17–19). Through his Parable of the Good Samaritan, he taught us to show wounded and helpless people his compassion and mercy (10:25–37). At Martha and Mary’s house, he taught us to be like Mary, and make sitting at his feet, listening and learning, our top priority (10:38–42). When a disciple asks him how to pray, he gives a model prayer, called “the Lord’s Prayer,” to help center our prayers on God and truly depend on him (11:1–13). To sum it up, Jesus trained his disciples to put him first, do his work, show his mercy, keep learning from him, and learn to pray like him. Facing criticism, Jesus has just challenged people to stand on his side (11:23). Now, when invited to a meal, Jesus pronounces six woes on the Pharisees. But what’s this got to do with the theme of discipleship? Through these woes Jesus is training his disciples not to turn out like Pharisees.

So who are these Pharisees? In Luke’s Gospel they appear soon after Jesus begins his ministry. Ordinary people were astonished by Jesus, because his teaching had such authority (4:32). His word was so powerful, he could even command unclean spirits to come out of people (4:36). His healing ministry also was amazing; he could cure any who were sick with various diseases (4:40). And he was diligent, going from town to town preaching in the synagogues (4:44). Soon, great crowds were gathering to hear him and

be healed of their diseases (5:15). Then, Pharisees and teachers of the law from every village of Galilee and Judea and from Jerusalem showed up to check up on him (5:17).

And immediately they became critical. When Jesus told a paralytic, “Man, your sins are forgiven you,” the Pharisees said it was blasphemy (5:21). When he went to a tax collector Levi’s house, they grumbled at his disciples, “Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?” (5:30). The Pharisees were fasting often, and offering prayers, but Jesus’ disciples were eating and drinking (5:33). Once, the Pharisees caught the disciples in a field plucking and eating heads of grain, rubbing them in their hands—which they saw as work—and they asked why Jesus let them do what is unlawful on the Sabbath (6:2). They were watching Jesus, too, to see if he would heal on the Sabbath (6:7), which they also considered unlawful work. Every move Jesus made, they criticized. Yikes!

What’s wrong with these Pharisees? Luke explains in chapter 7 that they had refused to be baptized by John; so, they remained spiritually blind to what God wanted (7:30). All their Biblical knowledge and discipline, willpower and effort, only made them proud and self-righteous. Saddest of all, they really didn’t like Jesus’ forgiveness. Once, a Pharisee invited Jesus to his house to eat with him. But when a sinful woman came in, wet Jesus’ feet with her tears, wiped them with her hair, kissed them, then anointed them with ointment, the Pharisee questioned how Jesus could possibly be letting such a person touch him (7:36–39). Though the woman was so repentant, so full of grace and love for Jesus, this Pharisee watching her was disgusted.

The Pharisees disappear for a while. But now, here they are again, trying to say Jesus’ ministry is powered by Satan (11:15). So Jesus pronounces woes on them. He knows they’ll persecute and kill him, and do the same to his apostles (11:49). But he wants his disciples to hear these woes and learn from them. His scathing rebukes infuriate the Pharisees, so they press him hard to provoke him and catch him saying something wrong (11:53–54). Jesus warns again about their hypocrisy (12:1). And on this journey the Pharisees keep appearing, watching him carefully (13:14,31; 14:1; 17:20a). When he talks about money, they ridicule him (16:14). Jesus keeps challenging them (13:15–16; 14:3–5,11; 15:7; 16:15; 18:9,14) and they keep grumbling about his ministry to sinners (15:2). A highlight is when Jesus tells the Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector, to show that what’s most important is to have a repentant heart (18:9–14). The Pharisees may seem ludicrous. But actually it’s easy to become like one.

So how does today’s event begin? Read verse 37. “While Jesus was speaking, a Pharisee asked him to dine with him, so he went in and reclined at table.” It’s surprising that Jesus goes with him. And what happens? Read verse 38. “The Pharisee was astonished to see that he did not first wash before dinner.” This washing was not to get

one's hands clean; it was just a ritual, to attempt to look holy. How does Jesus respond? Read verses 39–40. “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. You fools! Did not he who made the outside make the inside also?’” Jesus is contrasting the outside with the inside. The Pharisees were all about the outside, what people see. Their focus on looking good was as silly as washing the outside of a cup but leaving the inside dirty. Who does *that*? God, who made our inside, sees and considers it more important than our outside. He wants us to focus on what's in our hearts, not on how we appear.

How can our hearts be clean? Read verse 41. “Give as alms those things that are within, and behold, everything is clean for you.” At first, this is not so easy to understand. But “give as alms” simply means “help the needy.” To Jesus, this is more important than ritual holiness. To give alms doesn't mean tossing someone a few extra coins. To give alms, we need a heart that cares, that empathizes, that's merciful. Giving alms means showing sincere kindness to suffering people, sharing what we have with them. It reflects inner purity. Jesus challenges his disciples about this also (12:33). In Acts, Luke says giving alms to the poor is pleasing to God (Ac10:2,4,31). So this needs to be our motive: to please God. To Jesus, heartfelt giving to the needy, to please God, is a good way to clean out our hearts.

Though he's a dinner guest, being criticized for skipping the hand washing makes Jesus incensed. It's not that he's got an anger problem, or that his pride is hurt. It's his holy indignation. He finally gives these legalists a righteous rebuking. Read verse 42. “But woe to you Pharisees! For you tithe mint and rue and every herb, and neglect justice and the love of God. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others.” It's similar to keeping outward rituals but having a dirty heart. The Pharisees were so meticulous about tithing—even from all their garden herbs. They were obsessed with such minutiae, but Jesus said they were neglecting justice and the love of God. At first, “justice” and “love” sound like abstractions, but they're real, and they affect real people. People all over the world are suffering from all kinds of injustice. And so many people are suffering not knowing the love of God. Instead of majoring in the minors, we need to care about what matters most to God—real people and what they suffer. Disciples of Jesus don't neglect helping people find God's justice and God's love.

Read verse 43. “Woe to you Pharisees! For you love the best seat in the synagogues and greetings in the marketplaces.” Here Jesus goes deeper, touching on the Pharisees' real problem: seeking their own honor. Their strict religious observances—washing their hands, tithing from their herbs—it was all for their own honor. Jesus knew how much they craved the top honors. It was what was driving all their religious observances—not God's glory but their own honor. They weren't even aware they were

doing it. But all the ordinary people watching could see it plainly. We may think Jesus' disciples were above it, but they were sick with it, too. Earlier, right after he predicted his suffering, his disciples were arguing about which of them was the greatest (9:44–46). Later, he's going to say more about seeking seats of honor (14:7–11). Here, he simply exposes the Pharisees' selfish desire. Disciples of Jesus keep struggling against this selfish desire for personal honor until it's rooted out.

Read verse 44. “Woe to you! For you are like unmarked graves, and people walk over them without knowing it.” This is kind of quiet and anti-climactic; why is it our key verse? It speaks to the most serious problem of the Pharisees: their corrupting influence. Through his law God trained his people to be both holy and healthy. With this objective, God taught that a rotting corpse is unclean. Even one touch of a dead animal or person made anyone unclean. God said even touching a grave would make someone unclean for seven days (Nu19:16). If the grave were unmarked, walking on it was still a problem. So what's Jesus' point? He's telling the Pharisees, “Woe to you! For you are like unmarked graves, and people walk over them without knowing it.” It's the *Pharisees* who're the source of uncleanness—despite their showy efforts to be holy. They try so hard not to associate with sinners, but their hypocrisy is the real source of contamination. Just being around such people can make us sick spiritually. Like these Pharisees, if all we do is work on our outward appearance, hoping for the top seat of honor and pretending to serve God, we're actually contaminating others.

Read verse 45. “One of the lawyers answered him, ‘Teacher, in saying these things you insult us also.’” This guy also was sensitive about his own honor. He didn't really care that what Jesus was saying was true; he just didn't want to be insulted. Does Jesus back off? Nope. “And he said, ‘Woe to you lawyers also! For you load people with burdens hard to bear, and you yourselves do not touch the burdens with one of your fingers’” (46). These men crushed people with the highest standards of God's laws, always pointing out how nobody could ever measure up. But they couldn't care less whether or not people started doing what God said. These lawyers wouldn't lift a finger to help anybody. It's another important lesson: Jesus' disciples don't just teach; they make an effort to help people, in specific, practical ways, to start doing what Jesus said.

In his fifth woe Jesus rebukes them for building the tombs of the prophets (47). Seeing those holy tombs they built made them feel so righteous, so superior. But Jesus says in doing it, they actually “consent to the deeds of your fathers, for they killed them, and you build their tombs” (48). Any real prophet of God, calling for true repentance, they wanted good and dead, put away in a fancy tomb. These phonies were in such denial. In fact, they were standing in a long line of those who persecuted God's servants. The whole Old Testament, from Abel's murder (Ge4) to the murder of the prophet Zechariah

(2Ch24:20–25), was a history of God’s servants being persecuted and killed. The Pharisees were proud of their spiritual legacy, but actually it was a shameful history of their stubborn refusal to repent. From God’s point of view, in rejecting Jesus they would be charged with the guilt of all the innocent blood shed by God’s prophets throughout history (49–51).

Jesus has one last rebuke, his sixth woe. Read verse 52. “Woe to you lawyers! For you have taken away the key of knowledge. You did not enter yourselves, and you hindered those who were entering.” They thought they were the most outstanding teachers. But before God, they were nothing but a hindrance, and worse, they themselves wouldn’t even make it into God’s kingdom. It’s a shocking warning.

So what’s the Pharisees’ root problem? They think everything is *theirs*: Jerusalem, the temple, the Scriptures, the synagogues, the rituals. They forgot that all these things actually came from God. They’ve been teaching people to follow God through a strict legalistic system. But it’s actually been driving their people away from God. So God sent John the Baptist to call his people back to him, to really repent (1:16; 3:3). The Pharisees think they’re Abraham’s descendants, guaranteed a place in God’s kingdom; but frankly, they have no spiritual fruit (3:7–9). They’re rejecting Jesus because he’s not playing by their rules.

But Jesus was sent by God to fulfill God’s plan. He began his ministry by quoting the prophet Isaiah, saying, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (4:18–19; Isa61:1–2). God sent Jesus to proclaim not rules and regulations, but God’s favor, God’s grace, real liberty, and the good news of God’s kingdom (4:43). Jesus was fully dedicated to obeying God’s will. If we miss Jesus and his message, we’re missing God’s point. It’s why Jesus repeatedly said that receiving him is like receiving God himself (9:48; 10:16). So, in rejecting Jesus, the Pharisees were rejecting God.

The Pharisees were like the religious leaders of old. Through the prophet Ezekiel, God rebuked those so-called leaders, saying: “The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the injured you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought, and with force and harshness you have ruled them” (Eze34:4). The Pharisees were like those bad shepherds who only fed themselves (Eze34:2,8). These Pharisees who were criticizing Jesus had zero interest in seeking the lost. This was their most serious spiritual problem. But Jesus came to fulfill what God wanted. Jesus came to be the true shepherd like David over God’s people

(Eze34:12,15,23). Luke's Gospel, called the Gospel for Outcasts, proclaims so beautifully that our Lord Jesus came for the lost (15:4,6,9,24,32; 19:10). And he's training his disciples to do the same. He wants us all to grow in his image and truly seek and save the lost.

May God help us repent of our self-righteous pride and hypocrisy, seeking our own honor. May God help us accept our Lord Jesus Christ as the one sent by God with his good news of grace. May we accept his woes, his rebukes, personally, so that our inner person may be changed. May he change us from those full of sin and selfishness to those full of his compassion. May God help us accept his training until we can seek and save the lost, like our Lord Jesus did.