



# CAPITOL COMMISSION

## The Tragedy of Spiritual Blindness (Luke 11:37-53)

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Works versus faith is one of the great debates in Christianity. Most religions give you a list of things to do or not to do to be considered devout. But Christianity is different; it says you come to God by faith alone. When God gave the law to the Jewish people at Mt. Sinai, he told them they were to love Him with all their heart, soul, and might. The moral and ceremonial laws he gave them were to reflect a heart worship of God. Fifteen hundred years later, when asked what was the greatest commandment, Jesus gave this same requirement. But he added a second commandment from the law – “love your neighbor as yourself”. Jesus came to earth to fulfill the Law. He told the people that the kingdom of God had come upon them, and he demonstrated this by numerous miracles.

As Jesus continued his earthly ministry he met increasing opposition from the Jewish religious leaders. In Luke Chapter 11, Jesus confronts his enemies and begins to talk about his kingdom agenda. In his discourse on prayer in Luke 11: 1- 13, Jesus makes it clear that a person enters the kingdom by the Holy Spirit. Jesus’ casting out a demon in Luke 11:14 produced a discourse on the kingdom of God versus the kingdom of Satan. Many of those who saw the miracle marveled, but some, particularly the leaders, accused Jesus of being in league with Satan. Still others sought some kind of sign that Jesus was the Messiah. Jesus deals with all of these responses. He says that his being able to cast out demons shows that the kingdom was among them. Jesus is stronger than the kingdom of Satan. He calls those who ask for a sign “an evil generation” and begins to associate a blessing with those who are outside of Israel. Israel should have been a light to the world but they turned inward and thought only of themselves.

Sadly, the Jewish religious leaders who should have been the first to recognize that the kingdom of God among them, were blind to the truth. In Luke 11:37 – 53 Jesus addresses the issue of why these so-called devout people could not see the light of the truth.

*(37) While Jesus was speaking, a Pharisee asked him to dine with him, so he went in and reclined at table. (38) The Pharisee was astonished to see that he did not first wash before dinner. (39) 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. (40) You fools! Did not he who made the outside make the inside also? (41) But give as alms those things that are within, and behold, everything is clean for you.*

*(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. (43) Woe to you Pharisees! For you love the best seat in the synagogues and greetings in the marketplaces. (44) Woe to you! For you are like unmarked graves, and people walk over them without knowing it.”*

*45 One of the lawyers answered him, “Teacher, in saying these things you insult us also.” (46) 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. (47) Woe to you! For you build the tombs of the prophets whom your fathers killed. (48) So you are witnesses and you consent to the deeds of your fathers, for they killed them, and you build their tombs. (49) Therefore also the Wisdom of God said, I will send them prophets and apostles, some of whom they will kill and persecute,’ (50) so that the blood of all the prophets, shed from the foundation of the world, may be charged against this generation, (51) from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah, who perished between the altar and the sanctuary. Yes, I tell you, it will be required of this generation. (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.”*

*(53) As he went away from there, the scribes and the Pharisees began to press him hard and to provoke him to speak about many things, (54) lying in wait for him, to catch him in something he might say.*

### WHY THEY COULD NOT SEE THE LIGHT

“You cleanse the outside of the cup” This condemnation of the Pharisees and other religious leaders recorded in Luke 11 occurs when Jesus is invited to the home of a Pharisee. Given the attitude of most Pharisees toward Jesus, it is most likely he invited Jesus in order to find fault with him. It does not take long for that to happen. The Pharisee host is appalled that Jesus did not wash his hands before he ate dinner. This was not a hygiene concern, but one of the vast numbers of traditions which had grown up through the years. In an effort to interpret the Old Testament commandments and keep people from breaking them, the Jews had developed all kinds of extra-biblical rules which were written down in the Talmud and the Mishna. One of these was a ritual washing of the hands consisting of pouring water over them three times and rubbing them together. There was nothing particularly wrong with this tradition, as long as it was not thought to have spiritual value. However, it had become more important than the actual commandments of God. That is what Jesus addresses.

### BIBLE STUDIES

LEGISLATORS: TUESDAYS (SESSION WEEKS) AT 8:00AM, ROOM 100 RYAN BUILDING  
STAFF, LOBBYISTS & LEGISLATORS: WEDNESDAYS (NON-SESSION WEEKS) AT 1:00PM, ROOM 315 MAIN CAPITOL

# *Pennsylvania*

## **The Tragedy of Spiritual Blindness (Luke 11: 37-53)**

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Like many religious people, the Pharisees were focusing on the outward appearance; as long as they looked pious, that was enough. But Jesus points out that inside they are full of greed and wickedness. Their focus was not on God but themselves. They were not keeping the traditions to honor God but to impress others. Meanwhile, their actual conduct was breaking God's commandments. In Matthew 23:14 Jesus accuses them of mistreating widows. They put on a good front and most people, including the disciples, thought the Pharisees were good people.

*“Woe to you Pharisees”* Jesus then proceeds to pronounce woes upon the Pharisees. Essentially, he is calling down misery and misfortune on them. They may not have seen it this way, but God did. He mentions their meticulous tithing of even the herbs they grow while ignoring the really important issues of justice and love of God. Again, the point is that their focus is on externals. Their desire for the best seats in the synagogues and being recognized in public are examples of this. Jesus uses the image of a hidden grave to show the Pharisees how they are concealing their own inward corruption by keeping up outward appearances.

We are all prone to overlook our own sins while pointing out those of others. Christians need to be careful that they too do not fall into this same trap. Because we regularly attend church, help support it with our financial gifts, read the Bible and pray, we can begin to think we are pretty good Christians. We can begin to look down on other believers who do not do as much as we do. But even worse, a person may believe these outward things guarantee their salvation. But that does not mean we should not do these good things. Note in verse 42b that Jesus does not say they should stop tithing the herbs. It seems that Christians often want to “throw out the baby with the bathwater” – to get rid of everything from the past just because it has been misused or become a ritual. For the Jews tithing of one's material wealth was a sign of their faith and trust in God; it was not to be an end in itself. God wants us to do good deeds, not for our own glory or to show how righteous we are, but out of a love for him and others.

*“Woe to you Lawyers”* In verse 45 one of the lawyers responds indignantly – “you insult us also”. This is not a judicial lawyer but an expert on the Mosaic law and the Talmud. Jesus' condemnation of the lawyers is harsher than that of the Pharisees because they were actually leading people away from the light of the truth. He says they put burdens on people that they cannot bear, yet do nothing to help them. These burdens are a metaphor for the extra-biblical traditions which the lawyers insisted people had to carefully keep to be acceptable to God. The comment about their not being willing to touch them with their fingers means there was no leniency shown for any

violation. The whole focus was on rules and appearances rather than love of God or love for others. Paul addresses this issue in Colossians 2:8 when he warns believers not to be taken captive by human tradition.

The lawyers honored the prophets who had been martyred in past generations by erecting beautiful tombs over their graves. These lawyers wanted to identify themselves with these Old Testament prophets, but Jesus says they have more in common with those who had killed the prophets. It is easier to build monuments to dead prophets than it is to obey them when they are alive.

Jesus says that the blood of all the prophets will be required of this generation. Why would this be true? The lawyers and Pharisees of Jesus' time did not kill these Old Testament prophets. The reason for their guilt will be that they are the ones who will kill Jesus the Messiah. It was the coming of the Messiah that the prophets foretold. If the Jewish leaders had really honored the prophets, they would have recognized Jesus as the Messiah from their prophecies.

### **KEEPING PEOPLE FROM THE TRUTH**

*“You have taken away the key of knowledge”* The most damning accusation that Jesus brings against the lawyers comes in verse 52. It was bad enough that the lawyers and Pharisees themselves had substituted outward adherence to traditions for true love and devotion to God, but they had also kept others from the truth. Luke uses the term “the key of knowledge”. The lawyers were supposed to enlighten the people by explaining the Scriptures; instead they had kept them in ignorance. In a sense, they had locked up the truth of the Scripture and thrown away the key by imposing their faulty interpretation of God's Word.

The kingdom of God had come upon them in the person of the Messiah, Jesus Christ, but the Jewish leaders and many of the people did not recognize him. They were focused on the outward man and so judged Jesus by their own non-biblical standards. There were a lot of religious people in Judea and Galilee in those days, but not many spiritual people. Jesus Christ is calling those who would be his followers to a much higher standard than mere outward adherence to commandments of his Word. He desires a heart change which will result in us obeying him because we love him and desire to please him. Our desire should not be to impress others by our pious appearance, but to strive to please God who gave himself for us.