

Empty Religion

by Anton Bosch

This sermon delves into Luke chapter 11, focusing on Jesus' interactions with the Pharisees. It highlights the Pharisees' emphasis on external rituals over internal transformation, challenging listeners to examine their own hearts and motives. The sermon emphasizes the importance of genuine faith that impacts both the inside and outside, urging believers to prioritize justice, love, and authenticity in their relationship with God and others.

Scripture: Luke 11:39, Luke 11:42, Luke 11:43, Luke 11:44

Topics: "Authenticity in Faith", "Internal Transformation"

Description

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Transcript

So we're in Luke chapter 11, Luke chapter 11 and I'm going to read 37 through 44. Luke chapter 11 verses 37 through 44. And as he spoke a certain Pharisee asked him to dine with him and so he went in and sat down to eat.

When the Pharisee saw it he marveled that he had not first washed before dinner. Then the Lord said to him, now you Pharisees make the outside of the cup and dish clean, but your inward part is full of greed and wickedness. Foolish ones, did not he who made the outside make the inside also? But rather give arms of such things as you have, then indeed all things are clean to you.

But woe to you Pharisees for you tithe mint and rue and all manner of herbs and pass by justice and the love of God. These you ought to have done without leaving the others undone. Woe to you Pharisees for you love the best seats in the synagogues and greetings in the marketplaces.

Woe to you scribes and Pharisees hypocrites for you are like graves which are not seen and the men who walk over them are not aware of them. And then he speaks with the lawyers and we're going to deal with the lawyers next week. And so Jesus's interaction with the Pharisees is very significant and I'm not going to go through an explanation of the four different groups but they were four different groups and they were both political parties as well as theological sects in Israel.

The most important ones were the Pharisees and the Sadducees. And it's interesting and then of course there were the Essenes and the Zealots. Some of Jesus's disciples were Zealots.

It's interesting that of all of the groups Jesus interacts with the Pharisees more than he does with any of the other groups. And in fact I checked that in the Gospels the word Pharisee appears 90 times. The word Sadducee appears nine times, so ten times more often.

And in fact the times when the word Sadducee appears it is together with Pharisees as they confront Jesus. So they united only in this one thing and that is that they hated Jesus. But Jesus is closer to the Pharisees.

If Jesus was not who he is he would probably have been a Pharisee. The Pharisees were to the right of the political spectrum and they were on the conservative side of theology. I think that the Pharisees would probably be very much similar to us.

And again if we had to choose and we don't encourage choosing on that basis because that is the basis of division. But if we did have to choose then we would probably be Pharisees today. Jesus is doctrinally very similar to them.

His commitment to the law and to Israel is very similar to them. And the Pharisees unlike the Sadducees came from the common people. They were not an elite class that you got sort of born into as the Sadducees were.

But the Pharisees were just ordinary people who had a love for God's word and dedicated themselves then and many of them full-time although some of them would have jobs like Paul. Paul was a Pharisee until he got saved obviously. So they devoted a lot of their time to the study of scriptures.

The lawyers are different and we're going to speak about the lawyers. Most of the lawyers came out of the Pharisees. So they were a subset of the Pharisees.

It's interesting that Jesus is closest to the Pharisees than he is to anyone else. And yet at the same time he has more confrontations with the Pharisees than he has with anyone else. And I thought about that and I realized that the problem was that he expected more of them.

He didn't expect that much from their scenes because they were like monks. They lived in closed communities. They didn't interact with anyone very much.

They just studied the scriptures and literally in their sort of cloisters. And it's they who gave us the Dead Sea Scrolls that comes out of one of those very closed communities. He wasn't particularly close to the Zealots because they were political animals more than they were religious.

They would be, excuse the expression, but they would be the proud boys of today. They would be on the extreme right to by force and by weapons sought to overthrow the Romans and to reestablish the Jewish. And Jesus didn't have much to do with them and he didn't seem to particularly care for them either.

He didn't care much for and expect much from the Sadducees because they were just way off in too many ways. They were way off doctrinally. They didn't believe in spiritual things.

They didn't hold to the prophets. They only believed in the first five books of the law. They were political sellouts.

They had gotten into a deal with the Romans to keep the people in subjection to the Romans and there was financial stuff. They ran the temple and all sorts of other things. But Jesus expected something from the Pharisees because it is they who were closest to the truth.

And yet they miss it by a mile. And that is the seemingly frustration that Jesus has with them. And so not only do they confront him but he confronts them because he is expecting more of them.

And we find ourselves in a similar situation today. There are all sorts of brands of Christianity. There are liberals and there are hyper-conservatives and there are those who are living in monasteries and that kind of thing.

There are those who take up arms as we have seen recently to establish their both political and religious agenda. And yet there are those who seem to be close to us. And it is they that we expect something of.

We expect those who love the Word of God, that love the Lord, that love the body of Christ, to produce something more than they are producing. And that's the problem. And so what Jesus is dealing with here is very real to us today.

And so let's begin to look at it. And so as he spoke a certain Pharisee asked him to dine with him. And he went and sat down to eat.

Now this is not the only time Jesus ate with the Pharisees because there was a lot of common ground. And so he would eat with the Pharisees when they would invite him. They would invite him for two reasons.

One because there were some who genuinely wanted to know the truth like Nicodemus. Nicodemus was such a Pharisee. There were those who were looking for a reason to trip him up and to accuse him of something.

There were others who wanted to be with him because of the crowd that followed him. Remember he was a rabbi just like they were. And so they had their different motives.

And we don't know what the motive was for this guy, but he invites Jesus. And Jesus goes and he sits down to eat. Except that he missed one thing, and that is he didn't wash his hands.

So when the Pharisees saw it, he marveled that he had not first washed before dinner. Do you think Jesus didn't know he was supposed to wash his hands? Of course he knew. Is there anyone amongst us who doesn't know that you're supposed to wash your hands before you eat? I'm not asking if you do it.

I know many don't, but we all know we're supposed to do it. Now the washing of hands is described in the law, but it is not commanded in the law. So it tells you how to wash, but it doesn't tell you you must wash.

And obviously what these guys had done is they had added, as with everything else, they had added endless rules and regulations as to how you wash. You had to pour the water. You couldn't wash in a basin.

You had to pour the water over your hands. So somebody had to do that for you, just the same way as we do in rural parts of Africa. When you eat there, before you eat, because you eat with your hands, not those with a Western culture, but with an African culture, you eat with your hands.

And so the servant will come with a basin and with a jug of water and pour the water and you wash your hands. But there had to be two rinsings, two pourings. If you allow the water, in fact, they were scientifically incorrect, because if you allowed the water to run from your hands down, then that was, you were unclean.

The water had to run from your wrist down to your hands. Now you'll see the doctors do it the other way around, because obviously you want the filth to run away from your hands. But these were the laws that they had.

Jesus knew he had to wash, but he doesn't. And he doesn't on purpose, because he is seeking a confrontation. Now it doesn't mean that we must seek for confrontation for the sake of argument.

Jesus is trying to get through to them. He's trying to get a message to them. He's trying to save them.

Remember, while they are opposing him all the time, he is still the Good Shepherd who seeks those that are lost. And so he wants them to engage with him, so that he can present the gospel to them. And so he does this thing of not washing, and just sits down, because he knows there's going to be a response.

And of course the response is, the Pharisee marvels that he didn't wash. The Pharisee doesn't say anything. Again, you notice that Jesus understands his heart.

He doesn't say anything, but the Jesus knew what he said, what he was thinking. And the Lord said to him, now you Pharisees make the outside of the cup and the dish clean, but your inward part is full of greed and wickedness. And this was the heart of the Pharisaic religion.

It was all about external stuff. And as I meditated on this passage this week, I realized that this is a very, very real problem to every one of us. Let's not point to them out there, or their church, or those guys, or those guys.

Every one of us has a problem with external and internal religion. It's easy to engage in external religion, because there's a set of rules. The rule says you wash your hands.

This is how you wash your hands. We have rules. You tithe.

This is how you tithe. This is where you tithe before tax or after tax. All of the rules that we make that has to do with external stuff.

But Jesus is saying you clean the outside. In other words, you wash your hands, but you're not washing your hearts. That's basically what he is saying.

You engage on the stuff on the outside, but inside things are not right. And I think that as we have gone through this time of COVID, eight months that we have been outside, and many have made this accusation that churches have been closed, that we're not allowed to worship, because we're not allowed to sing. Now I'm not making a political statement, but I think that it's an important point that we need to make.

If the only way I can worship is by vocally singing a song, what is that? It's external religion. For eight months, for almost a year now, because it's been longer, we were in here for a couple of months, and then for a while we were online, but it's over a year now, that we have not sung hymns publicly. But we've encouraged you to sing the hymn in your heart.

And some people are saying, no, that's not good enough. You must sing it outward. This is exactly what Jesus is dealing with here.

They will do the outward stuff. Now you say, well, what's wrong with singing out? Doesn't the scripture say that we must sing and make melody to the Lord? Yes it does, but it says in our hearts. But then it does speak about singing vocally and singing out, and of course there's value, and it's good to make our voices heard.

But here's the problem. If you've been singing these hymns as long as I have, 50, 60 years now, 60 years I've been singing these hymns, it's easy to sing the hymn without it touching your heart. It's just words.

It's just things you say. You know the hymn, you know the tune, you know the words. But there's nothing happening inside.

It's not being sung from our heart. It's just off the top of my head. It's external.

It's not internal. And I think it's been a good exercise for us to look at the words and to not worry so much about whether I'm in tune or not, whether I've got the key or not, but to look at the words, to listen to the music, and to bring a response from our hearts. And I'm not denying the importance.

I'm looking forward to the day we don't have to wear masks. I'm looking forward to the day that we're able to sing again, even though we don't sing that well. But I'm looking forward to that, because it is an important part of our worship.

But if you cannot worship unless you're inside of this building, if you cannot worship unless you're singing a song, if you cannot give to the Lord unless somebody comes around with a bag or a plate and putting it in the box in the back is just not good enough, and we can go on and on and on and on. These are external stuff that we have built our religion around. And I believe that one of the things that we needed to learn in this last year is that it's more than being inside of the chapel.

It's about more than actually singing with our voices. It's more than somebody bringing the plate around and the deacon standing in front and thanking God for the offering and going through all of the rituals. And we have worshipped God for this last year without the ritual, outside with a minimum of stuff and of traditions and of external.

And God has been amongst us, and lives have been changed, and God is still real. Folk, we need to make sure that our religion is not the washing on the external, but on the internal. It's for this reason why, and I come under a lot of criticism because I don't make appeals or altar calls, but I'm not interested in people making an external confession and coming to the front and kneeling at the altar and crying crocodile tears when nothing is really happening inside.

But I want the Word of God to touch your life, and for something to happen inside. And from the inside you have an expression ultimately on the outside. But you see, we build our whole religion just like the Pharisees, all on the external stuff, the things that we do on the outside.

Foolish ones, did not he who made the outside make the inside also? To them it was all about outside. It wasn't about... and he's saying, but God is the God of the outside and the inside. I'm not meaning the outside the chapel and inside the chapel, it's the outside of the body or outside of the heart and inside of the heart.

God is the God of both. Now here's a very difficult verse. But rather give alms of such things as you have, that indeed all things are clean to you.

Now there's very few translations. This is the New King James that I'm using. It's basically the King James and the New King James that translated this way.

Most of the other translations translated this way. And this is the American Standard Version. But give for alms those things which are within, and behold all things are clean unto you.

They gave alms. But you remember how they gave alms. They would blow a trumpet.

They would call attention. On the street corner there's the beggar and they would make a noise. And with great flourish they would take the ten dollars and put it in the man's hat.

So they gave alms. They tithed. And we're going to talk about tithing in a moment.

So why does Jesus say give alms of the things that are within? What was within? Let's go back. But your inward part is full of greed and wickedness. Now he's saying give away what's inside.

In other words he's not saying give this to other people. God forbid, because he's going to deal with that as well. We're going to see that in the last verse.

But I believe what he is saying is get rid of the junk that's inside. Stop giving alms on the outside, but give away, get rid of, empty yourself of the greed and the wickedness that's inside of your heart. You see they were happy to give money, but they held on to their pride, and their greed, and their lust, and their sectarianism, and all of those kinds of things.

And so if we want to receive from God, we need to get rid of some stuff first. We need to make room. Remember, was it last week, week before, we spoke about the man who's had the demon, and the demon is thrown out, but the house is left empty.

And the other demons come back again. And we spoke about the need for us to empty ourselves of the stuff that shouldn't be there, but we can't just leave it vacant, because then other worldly stuff will come back, whether they're demons, or whether it's just other stuff. But we need to fill that space with the Lord, and his word, and his goodness, and his grace.

And here you find exactly the same idea. Jesus is saying, get rid of the stuff that's inside that shouldn't be there. And obviously the implication is so that you can make room for the things that need to be there.

So let's go back to verse 42 then. But woe to you Pharisees! Terrible word, woe. Woe to you Pharisees! For you tithe mint and rue, and all manner of herbs, and pass by justice and the love of God.

These you ought to have done without leaving the others undone. Now the law actually excuses them of tithing on certain herbs. And rue is one of those herbs that they did not have to tithe on.

So what they were doing is they were going over and beyond, and tithing even on the stuff that they did not have to tithe on. Now we've spoken about this before, but can you imagine how ridiculous it is? You're cooking, and you put mint in the food, and you count the leaves. Nine mint leaves, or nine cumin, or whatever it is.

And then one gets put one side. That's for the Lord. And then I guess you do the same with pepper.

They didn't have pepper, but you know weigh the pepper. I mean they would literally, if they lived today, they would have a micro scale and weigh. Okay, we put 0.05 grams of pepper.

So I need to calculate that, and give God his. This is literally how they lived. Just making sure they didn't break the smallest little rule.

But again it just to do with the stuff they were doing on the outside. It had nothing to do with what was going inside. And inside he says you have neglected justice, and the love of God.

Two very important things, and Matthew mentions different things, but Luke uses these two things. Justice. And when he speaks about justice here, he's not talking about the fact that I'm justified by faith.

He's talking here about being fair. About being just in how I treat other people. Being just in my decisions, in my judgment.

And there were many areas in which they were unjust. They were unjust in their judgment of Jesus. They were unjust in their treatment of those who had not risen to their elevated spiritual status.

They were unjust in their treatment of those who were not ethnically the same as them. And you know I don't preach a social message. But if we are not just, you can tithe until the Lord comes.

You can be fastidious about being in the meeting on time and every meeting. You can be religious about reading your daily bread, and doing whatever other religious stuff you do. But if you're unjust in the way you treat people, you've denied the essence of the faith.

It's no good doing the outside stuff if it's not, if there's nothing happening inside. And then he speaks about the love of God. Now one of the things about these guys was because of their legalism.

And this is what legalism is all about. There's no grace. There's no love.

It's all about the rules. And if you don't keep the rules, if you don't wash your hands before the time, you're nothing. And folks, it's easy in a Bible-based church like ours to become legalistic.

To become all about the rules. To become, to get all tied in knots about the meaning of the scripture. Should I do this? Should I do that? Do I tithe before deductions? Or do I tithe after deductions? And I'm just using that as an example.

Do I pray for five minutes or do I pray for six minutes? Do I read one chapter or do I read two chapters? And it becomes about the rules and the way we treat other people is about the rules. I grew up in that environment. And I'm not going to get into the examples, but the length of your hair, the color of your shirt.

God forbid you wear a pink shirt, brother. That's effeminate. Men wear white shirts.

Men have short hair. Women have long hair. And the list goes on and on and on and on.

But there's no justice and there's no love. May God help us to have the real religion. The religion that begins on the inside and then finds its expression on the outside.

You can't do it on the outside and think it's going to find its way inside, because all that finds its way inside is pride and arrogance. I thank you Lord that I'm not like this poor man over here. I fast and I pray and I tithe and I do all this stuff.

And you know Jesus said, I don't even hear that. God doesn't even hear that man's prayer. Now it doesn't mean... Now here's the problem.

There are many Christians today who have over reacted to this legalism and said, well we're not going to have any rules. We're not even going to go to church. But there is an enormous percentage of Christians in the world today who don't go to church because they say that's all a show.

It's all about the externals. It's all about doing stuff. We're about doing stuff inside and I don't have to be in a church or in a group of believers.

I don't have to do anything because it's just between me and God. Notice what Jesus says. These you ought to have done without leaving the others undone.

In other words, he's not saying stop doing the right thing. Stop doing the religious stuff, but do them with the right heart. You need to have the outside and the inside.

The problem is where does it start? Is it all on the outside and there's nothing inside? Or am I hoping that the outside will affect the inside? No, it needs to come from a changed heart. It needs to come from the inside and that needs to change my behavior. It needs to change the things that I do.

Woe to you Pharisees, for you love the best seats in the synagogues and greetings in the marketplaces. Now those days, and they still have the ark. They call it the ark where the scrolls of the scriptures are kept behind a covering or behind doors and it's normally in this position.

I don't know whether they still have, but they used to have seats in the front here. Those of us who are older will remember the days when the preacher and the elders would all sit on the platform. Some churches still do.

Well, that was what Jesus was speaking about. You like to sit up here on the platform so everybody can see you. How you say, Amen.

How religious you act. Your robes with the long tassels and the long side curls. As you look at the brother next to you, yeah, my curls are longer than his.

What's this all about? Being seen by men. And the same with the greetings in the marketplaces. And it's not a matter of greeting someone, but it's the profuse greetings.

Hello, Dr. Professor Apostle. The most reverent doctor, so and so. It's the titles.

It's the bowing before. Oh, here's a great man of God. These were the things that Jesus is concerned with.

And folk, we say, well, you know, that's preachers. Preachers love to be seen. Preachers love their titles.

Preachers love to be greeted by their title. I'm not going to get into the titles thing. But folk, this is not just about preachers.

How much of what you do is because you're worried what other people are going to think. Or you want other people to approve of what you're doing. Over the years, I've just been amazed by people who will do nothing unless there's somebody to see them do something.

But if there's an audience, then we'll do things, whatever they may be. Folk, again, in our present situation, I've become deeply concerned in recent months by the number of folk who've written to me who are questioning their faith in the absence of churches meeting together. What I mean is their faith is falling apart.

Not because they're not hearing the Word of God. You can hear the Word of God. You can tune in to our broadcast or to a million other broadcasts right now.

You can hear the Word of God. You can read the Word of God. But their religion, and this is my concern, and I'm not judging them.

I'm trying to help them. But my concern is that their religion is about being seen. And when they can't be seen by others to be praying, to be reading, to be putting money in the bag, to doing whatever they do, their faith falls apart.

Because it's all about external stuff. There's nothing happening inside. And when they're isolated from other people, they don't know how to practice their faith.

How deep does my religion go? And if nobody watched you, if there was no one to see you, how much time would you give to the Lord today? Or would you have given to the Lord today? We're giving this hour. But if we didn't have a service, and there was nobody who was going to look askance at you because you didn't come to church, how much would you have worshipped? How much would you have prayed? How much would you have studied the Word of God? I don't know the answer. I'm asking you to ask yourself that question.

You see, we love to be seen. But how much of it is really happening on the inside? Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like graves, this is the last verse, which are not seen. And men who walk over them are not aware of them.

I don't know if you've ever considered that verse. It's a very interesting verse. And it's very, very powerful.

You remember that Matthew speaks about the fact when Jesus says in Matthew that you are like whitened sepulchres, whitewashed graves. The reason they whitewashed the graves, particularly before Passover, was because the law declared you to be unclean if you came close to a grave. So particularly before Passover, they whitewashed the graves, paint the graves, so that people could see where the grave was.

Here Jesus is using a different statement. And he says you are like graves which are not seen. Now remember, they didn't necessarily have, they had places where they would bury, but they would bury anywhere.

If you had some property, you would bury people on your property. And sometimes people were buried in tombs, sometimes they were buried in the ground, like we do. And over time, the markers disappear.

And you don't know where the grave is. We see that happening all the time. People build a building, they start digging foundations and they find human remains.

Oh, here was a burial ground. So what's the problem? The people who are walking across those graves, unawares that there's a grave, is technically, has become unclean. So what is Jesus saying to them? He's saying you are booby traps.

To other people's faith. Because people come into contact with you, not knowing who you are, and they have become defiled by their contact with you. That's what Jesus is saying.

How powerful is this? And folks, here's the question I'm going to leave with you this morning. When people meet you, when people come into contact with you, are they defiled by your religion or are they cleansed? Are you ministering death or life? What impact are you having on people who meet you? And they don't even know who they're meeting because they just see you in the street. They have a conversation with you at the line waiting to pay for something or whatever.

What is inside? Remember when Jesus speaks about the whitewashed tombs, he says that, you know, they look good on the outside, they're whitewashed, but inside they're full of dead men's bones. What's inside of us? And how does that affect people around us? Does it defile them? Does it minister death? Does it minister judgment? Does it minister the grace of God, the love of God, eternal life? Remember one of the things they said about Jesus, they marveled because the words that he spoke to them was life. What the Pharisees spoke was death.

They could just minister condemnation, but Jesus was able to speak life. Folks, what are we speaking? Because what comes out is what's inside. And if there is no reality inside, if there is no life inside, if there is no love, if there is no justice inside, what's going to come out cannot be any different.

See, and here's the problem. Only you and God knows what's inside. No one else.

All I as an elder and Henry as an elder can do is look at behavior and come to some conclusion as to what's inside based on the behavior. But some people are better actors than we are discerners, unfortunately. So what's inside? How much of my face is about doing stuff on the outside with no heart, no substance, no reality? And this is where people are struggling right now, because when you take all that stuff away, they come to the conclusion, there is no reality to my face.

It's all show and no go. It's all talk, but no reality. Folks, Jesus is the answer.

He is the one who is able to fill us with himself and with his spirit, who's able to give us reality to our face, so that what is happening becomes not, and in dealing with the lawyers, Jesus is going to speak about them, call them hypocrites. In Matthew, he calls them hypocrites over and over in the same passage. It's an act.

Folks, let's drop the act. Let's get real with God. Let's get real with ourselves to begin with, so that out of the abundance of a heart filled with the goodness and the grace and the kindness of God, the mouth may speak.

Father, we thank you for your word. Lord, these are hard things, and it's easy for us to read these passages and to condemn the Pharisees and to condemn other religions and other churches and other preachers, but Lord, help us to look into our own hearts this morning. Lord, we want to be individually and corporately people who have the substance of our faith, who have the reality of the indwelt Christ and of the fullness of the Holy Spirit, that what we speak may be life.

Lord, forgive us for those who come into contact with us and are turned off the Lord Jesus because of what they see in us. Lord, forgive us for contaminating others around us by our own shallowness and emptiness, but Lord, we pray that we may be encouraged this morning to come to you, to the well of living water and to drink, that from our innermost being may flow rivers of living water. Lord, we live in a dark and in a thirsty world.

There is a famine of your word. There's even a greater famine of reality today. I pray, Lord, that we may be those fountains of living water, that those who meet with us may be nourished and may be refreshed by the reality that flows from our lives.

I ask this in Jesus' name. I pray, Lord, that you'd go with us, keep us, protect us, bring us together again safely. On Thursday, we pray in Jesus' name.

Amen.

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