

Religious Leaders Unmasked

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[0 : 0 0] It was a joy to be with you this morning. Thank you so much for the invitation and a particular joy to be with you, James, on the day you're being baptized. Let's turn in our Bibles to Luke chapter 11, where I think you've been studying in this gospel in recent weeks, and we come in that series to Luke chapter 11, verse 37.

After so many notes of a positive nature in our service, rejoicing in new life and new faith, and rejoicing in God's ability to bring people from darkness and into light, suddenly we're plunged in these verses into a world of negatives, where Jesus is speaking to a group of religious leaders. When Jesus had finished speaking, a Pharisee invited him to eat with him, so he went in and reclined at the table. But the Pharisee, noticing that Jesus did not first wash before the meal, was surprised. Then the Lord said to him, Now then, you Pharisees, clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside you are full of greed and wickedness. You foolish people! Did not the one who made the outside make the inside also? But give what is inside the dish to the poor, and everything will be clean for you. Woe to you, Pharisees, because you give God a tenth of your mint, rue, and all other kinds of garden herbs, but you neglect justice and the love of God. You should have practiced the latter without leaving the former undone. Woe to you, Pharisees, because you love the most important seats in the synagogues and greetings in the marketplaces. Woe to you, because you are like unmarked graves, which men walk over without knowing it. One of the experts in the law answered him,

Teacher, when you say these things, you insult us also. Jesus replied, And you experts in the law, Woe to you, because you load people down with burdens they can hardly carry, and you yourselves will not lift one finger to help them. Woe to you, because you build tombs for the prophets, and it was your forefathers who killed them. So you testify that you approve of what your forefathers did.

They killed the prophets, and you build their tombs. Because of this, God in his wisdom said, I will send them prophets and apostles, some of whom they will kill, and others they will persecute.

Therefore, this generation will be held responsible for the blood of all the prophets that has been shed since the beginning of the world, from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah, who was killed between the altar and the sanctuary. Yes, I tell you, this generation will be held responsible for it all. Woe to you, experts in the law, because you have taken away the key to knowledge.

[3 : 4 2] You yourselves have not entered, and you have hindered those who were entering. When Jesus left there, the Pharisees and the teachers of the law began to oppose him fiercely, and to besiege him with questions, waiting to catch him in something he might say.

If the elders this morning had, during the song, opened up the floor here, rolled back the carpet, and carried away these huge, thick, heavy bits of wood. It's very reassuring for me to see their thickness. And then they had gone around the whole church and got all the Bibles from the pews, all our own personal Bibles, all our iPhones that have Bibles in them, and they had thrown all of that into the water and then put the bits of wood back and nailed them down and rolled the carpet back and put glue down.

That would have been a symbol. And that would have been the symbol of the elders of the church doing what the religious leaders who were listening to these words of Jesus were doing.

Here were men leading the people of God, the nation of Israel. They had been entrusted with that leadership. They had access to the scriptures and the words of the Old Testament prophets.

And yet as we see this exchange take place between them and Jesus, we realize that what they had done was not pass on the word of God as they were meant to, quite the reverse.

[5 : 33] They had despised it, hidden it, locked it away, twisted it, disobeyed it themselves so that they could get off lightly in their obedience and constructed a whole system of religious life that was simply evading the need to love God with heart and soul and mind and strength, as God's people had always been asked to do.

And so we have this very hard-hitting exchange. These words that come from the lips of Jesus and in so many ways strike a note of dissonance as we read the Gospels.

We're used to hearing Jesus speak with words of invitation and love and grace. And then suddenly in a passage like this, he sounds so different. But he had to speak like that.

And he wanted to speak like that to these people. There was a fellow on the radio this morning who was explaining that his brother had died, sounded as if it was an accident.

And he had always blamed God. And he said he was still open to thinking about God. A spiritual dimension to his life was still there.

[7 : 07] But he blamed God because God surely was meant to intervene to prevent such times of sadness. And after all, he as a child with a good religious upbringing had been to the chapel and to the services at school and sat there for hours.

He'd paid his dues, he said. You know, I put in the right number of hours of boredom. Surely now God was meant to intervene and stop my brother from drowning.

And you could see the man had come through a lot of pain and grief and sadness. But his whole idea of who God is and how God might act in this world had been twisted.

And he'd been given an idea of a religious formula rather than a divine relationship of grace and mercy.

And that's why Jesus had to speak to these leaders in these tones. Look at verse 49. I want to take that as perhaps the most stinging of the verses.

[8 : 22] God in his wisdom said, well, because of this, because the prophets had been killed by their forefathers, God in his wisdom said, I will send them prophets and apostles.

Some of whom they will kill. And others they will persecute. An extraordinary declaration of mercy that is from heaven, isn't it?

That the Old Testament prophets had been killed by the forefathers of the men Jesus was addressing now. And here is God saying, I will, I will send them prophets.

I will send them apostles. I will do whatever I can to enable men and women to hear my words of grace and forgiveness.

Some of those prophets and apostles, they will kill and persecute. But I want people to hear me. And I want them to know me.

[9 : 24] And that's why Jesus, speaking in this passage, is very much the last of the prophets.

He's adopting the tone of a prophet. If you go back almost at random to one of the Old Testament prophets, you will hear this language of, Woe to you, woe to you, you have done this when you should have done that.

Judgment is coming to the house of Israel. The people of God, the prophets were saying constantly through the Old Testament, the people of God have not been listening to the word of God. Listen to me, I bring you the word of the Lord.

Listen, listen. God loves you. He calls you back to himself. Woe to you. And Jesus is deliberately adopting the tone of a prophet.

And it's a very, very loving tone to adopt. It just doesn't sound like love in our culture. All of you who are parents adopt a prophetic tone, a loving tone, several times a day.

[10 : 33] You say, if you do not go and tidy your bedroom, then such and such will happen or such and such will not happen. Or you might say, oh, you've tidied your bedroom, adopting the tone of sarcasm.

Well done. How lovely when you know the bedroom's an absolute mess. That's a prophetic tone. It cuts right in, doesn't it? Or sometimes you'll speak an emotive language.

If you want to make mummy happy. Now, none of us would do any of that or hear anyone else do that and think, ooh, how terrible. That person doesn't love their children.

Not at all. It's part of love. To speak in words of warning and emotion and challenge and rebuke.

And to teach that there are consequences to your actions. That's all part of love and that's part of God's love. And that's the tone of the prophet here, as it was in Old Testament times, as it is in the gospel.

[11 : 39] Repent and believe for the kingdom of God is coming. That's a prophetic warning. And that's the language that Jesus is using here.

We use it in our families. And here we see the biblical need for the prophetic tone to be used. We see that the house of God has gone to chaos.

Here are people who have forgotten what the little children were being taught today in the children's address. That the water and the externals are just a symbol.

The Pharisee to whom Jesus went for tea was shocked that Jesus didn't wash his hands or his feet or whatever it was before the meal.

He was surprised. And Jesus knew he was surprised without him even saying so. Or maybe he did say so. Luke doesn't tell us. And Jesus says to him and to the others, No, no, no, you foolish men.

[12 : 43] It's not the outside that matters. Do the ritual washing if you want, but only do that as a reminder of what needs to be going on inside. In the heart.

Oh, he says to them because he knows them so well. You're so very good at carefully chopping up your garden herbs and putting one-tenth over into this little pile.

For all the time the poor man down the street who's meant to benefit from your godly inclination to give and to be kind is starving and you've not done anything for him.

There's no point in doing this with the cumin. Nobody wants a tenth of your cumin anyway. That's just meant to be a reminder. So that you will remember to be generous to the poor man at the gate.

Of course, they've got the whole thing the wrong way around, haven't they? The poor man at the gate could go to hell as far as they were concerned. They would just do the religious thing with their cumin. What a need there was for Jesus to speak in these prophetic tones because the whole of the worship of the house of God, the family of the Lord, had gone to pot, gone to seed.

[14 : 00] It was an empty charade. We were rejoicing today because, as James told us, what was happening in his baptism here was symbolizing what the Lord had done for him.

That was the reality of it. That's what we were rejoicing in. The work of the Spirit in someone's life.

The forgiveness that he has experienced. That was what mattered. And the symbol, the small thing, the external thing, points us to that.

What a need there was in Jesus' day. And the need was right through the entire leadership structure of the people in the temple, wasn't it?

I love it when, in verse 45, one of the experts in the law says to Jesus, almost interrupting him, Teacher, when you say these things, you insult us also.

[15 : 09] And Jesus replies effectively, saying, Well, I'm meaning to insult you as well. You experts in the law are as bad. He's been going at it with the Pharisees and the poor experts in the laws, cringing, and says, Oh, but this is hard for us.

And yes, it's meant to be. You're no better. That's what my father used to say to me when my brother had been bad, and I looked smug. You're no better. That's what Jesus says to him.

It was, the whole thing was riddled with hypocrisy, with externalism, with formulaic religion, and with the sham and the danger and the destructive seed of those who had managed to take the entire word of God as they had it in their scriptures, put it in a grave, and seal it up.

That's why Jesus focuses on the issue of graves so much. They have buried the word of God. They killed the prophets and buried them.

And Jesus says to the people who are listening, And you bury your fathers and honor them. But they buried the prophets and didn't listen to them.

[16 : 26] And you don't either. You have taken all your Bibles and opened up a great hole and put them in it and sealed the lid down. So, no wonder Jesus adopts the tone of a prophet.

Secondly, can we notice the responsibility of a hypocrite? If you are a hypocrite, or you're wanting to become a hypocrite, we need to be really careful that we understand the responsibility involved in that.

It's one of the age-old excuses that people have, isn't it, for not listening to the gospel or not engaging with the gospel because people quickly say, Well, the church is full of hypocrites, so I don't need to bother with Jesus.

While Jesus bothered with hypocrites and loved them very deeply, which is why he went to that home for tea and why he spoke as he did. But being a hypocrite carries a big responsibility.

Verse 50. This generation will be held responsible for the blood of all the prophets that has been shed since the beginning of the world.

[17 : 46] Oh, my goodness. That is a solemn responsibility. Right from the blood of Abel, right through history to the blood of Zechariah, who was killed between the altar and the sanctuary.

Yes, I tell you, this generation will be held responsible for it all. Because in behaving as they have done, these men have locked up the gates of the kingdom to people who might come into the family of God.

If you take away the word of God from the people of God, and if you live as if you belong to God on the outside, but you do not have the reality of a relationship with God on the inside, then you are responsible for keeping others away from the Lord Jesus.

What a very solemn warning that is. I noticed on your opening video that you as a church family are very happy to put up in front of everybody, we are not perfect, and then the tea falls over.

And what you're saying there is, we know we are still sinful. We're not perfect. Come into our family and discover that we all still struggle with selfishness and pride and rudeness and childishness and petulance and greed and all the things that everybody struggles with.

[19 : 30] We're not perfect. What a wonderful joy to be able to say that. It's part of the avoidance of hypocrisy. It's part of what it means to follow Jesus with integrity.

If I invited 15 of you at random to phone James' wife and children this time tomorrow, they'd be able to list a few of his sins between now and then, because we don't begin to follow Christ and then become perfect, do we?

We still struggle against sin and the devil and temptation. So hypocrisy does not mean that we never make mistakes.

No, hypocrisy means that we create a veneer of what looks religious and pious and perfect, while underneath that veneer we're not even attempting to please God our Father.

And it's that that carries the big responsibility. And sad to say, and this is the third thing I want to mention, it's not just the responsibility of the hypocrite, it is the determination of the religious that I want to finish with.

[20 : 52] There is a downward slope that goes from ignoring the Word of God to becoming a religious hypocrite to becoming absolutely determined to get rid of Jesus and his gospel.

That's where it ends, isn't it? Despite Jesus' words to these people when he left, the Pharisees and teachers of the law began to oppose him fiercely.

He had spoken to them in love and in warning. He had gone to their home and looked them in the eye and said, don't live like this.

Don't have a double existence that is apparently religious on the outside, but is full of self and sin on the end.

Don't do that. When he left, they began to oppose him fiercely, besiege him with questions.

[21 : 56] They waited to catch him in something he might say. They are collectively like the elder brother in the famous prodigal of the lost son.

Aren't they? The one who stood outside the house, bitter, angry, annoyed, determined to have nothing to do with this lavish grace and forgiveness that was demonstrated to his younger brother.

father. Well, if you're here today and you've always thought the church was full of hypocrites and that excuses you from engaging with Jesus in the gospel, then don't think that.

Because Jesus loves to engage with everyone, even those who were most opposed to what he said. He loves to engage with everyone. And what he warns all of us about today is that terrible road that goes from hypocrite to determined antagonism against the gospel.

Don't end up bitter, twisted, hating Jesus and his grace, but rather flee to the Lord with all your sins and imperfections and rejoice that he bids you come.

[23 : 30] Let's pray, shall we? Heavenly Father, we are all so capable of covering up the reality of our hearts and lives. We thank you that we cannot cover anything from you thank you that you know us inside out, you know us fully and thank you, Lord Jesus, that you speak to us frankly and invite us warmly to repent of all our sins which we do now.

You draw us to yourself and we come not as those who deserve anything from you but as those who are invited by you to lay down all our burdens and to know your rest and your joy and your cleansing.

So we come, Lord Jesus, with grateful hearts and in your name. Amen.