

Woes Revisited

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[0 : 00] Okay, well we are going to turn now to Luke chapter 11 to look at verses 37 to 54.

We're carrying on our series of sermons throughout Luke's Gospel over this year, and we're now looking at verses 37 to 54.

And the title of the sermon is How and Not in Parentheses, How Not to Change. Now the context here to set the scene is that in chapter 11 so far Jesus has been radically changing people.

He's been going around and changing lives. He's been exercising demons and setting people free in that way. He has been preaching, he's been teaching people how to pray, and also he has just been speaking in verses 33 to 36 about the nature of change, the nature of the change that Jesus brings into our lives.

When he starts speaking about internally being filled with light rather than with darkness, and then when internally you're changed the light spreads outwards externally.

[1 : 20] And then the point at which we're going into the passage in verse 37 is that Jesus meets two people with whom he fundamentally disagrees on the nature of change, the nature of how to change, and have your life made different.

The first person he meets is a Pharisee. This guy is a kind of middle class religious guru who's wealthy enough that he can afford to spend a good bit of his time reading religious books, and becoming an expert on religious law, and he can even afford to go around spending his time being a kind of religious expert's advice giver.

So he meets this Pharisee, and he also meets a religious lawyer. Now what the text means by that, a lawyer, isn't that he was like a solicitor like we have, that you go to if you want to sell a house or that kind of thing, and who also happens to be religious?

A religious lawyer, the closest thing that we have, probably that we would know in the UK, is in the Muslim community you have Sharia law experts, and they're the kind of people that you can go to if you're a Muslim with questions, you know, is it okay if I eat chicken on a Thursday, and they'll go through and build up this big body of yes you can do this, no you can't do that.

That kind of a person, but Jewish, that's the kind of religious lawyer that he meets, a guy who spends all of his time reading books about religious law, and then answering questions for people on whether you can or cannot do a certain thing at a certain time.

[2 : 58] So he meets these two people, and he completely disagrees with them on the nature of change, and he disagrees with them to the point that he actually pronounces six woes against them.

Now there are just two things to grasp as we go into this passage that are really important for us to understand it. The first thing is that the central issue here is the nature of change.

What Jesus wants us to know is that if your life is going to be changed, the change starts internally, and it has to, in order to move from the inside to the outside.

I mean the question in all of it is really how do we relate the things that we do or external things, or actions with the way that we are, with our nature.

The default position that we have in our society is really not that different from what the Pharisee and the religious lawyer believed. Although we do bad things, we are fundamentally good people.

[4 : 01] That's the norm where we live in the Western world. A couple of illustrations of that, I'll illustrate it first of all with a Nina Simone song. Even if you've not heard of her, most people that you know will agree with this.

It's a song called Don't Let Me Be Misunderstood. The context of the song is that she shot her next door neighbour's son with an air gun.

The song is basically an apology for that. It's all about how can't you see that I'm just human, I have thoughts like anyone, no one alive can always be an angel when everything goes wrong, you see some bad.

The verses are all about that. They're an apology for bad actions. But the chorus is, but I'm just a soul whose intentions are good. Oh Lord, please don't let me be misunderstood.

What she's doing is separating the things she does from the person she is. I do bad things, but I am a good person. Another example I've used in a sermon quite recently, but I think it's a really good one.

[5 : 04] Joey Barton, he's a premiership footballer. He plays for Newcastle. Constantly having run-ins with the law, I think he's just come out of prison for assaulting someone in Liverpool and out in the streets.

He also assaulted one of his teammates not that long ago and was charged for that. Before that he extinguished a cigar in the eye of one of his team's youth players.

But whenever he does something like this and invariably gets in a lot of trouble with the law, what he says in his press statement is, I'm sorry I did this, but I am a good person. So we do bad things, but we are nonetheless good people.

That's what we believe. And the Pharisee and the lawyer basically agree. The inside is good, although the outside is bad. So therefore all you need to do is change the externals, change your behaviour, get some new rules to follow.

And they tinker around with the outside trying to change things, but they never challenge the inside. They ignore it. And Jesus totally disagrees with that, because he sees a connection between what we do and who we are.

[6 : 15] According to Jesus it's impossible to be a good person who does bad things. We do bad things because at the core we are fundamentally bad people.

So when Jesus wants to change us, he doesn't just start at the outside and aims to rearrange the deck chairs on the Titanic as it goes down. He starts to immediately challenge the inside, the core, the internal, rather than the external.

He doesn't just say behave differently, he says become a new person, be filled with light from the inside rather than darkness. So that's the first big thing to grasp as we're going into this passage.

It's all about the nature of change that it starts internally and moves inside outwards rather than outside inward. And the second thing is what it means for Jesus to pronounce all of these woes.

W-O-E and not W-O-W. A woe which he pronounces against those who teach otherwise. I think one of the best ways to define it is that it's a sorrowful denunciation.

[7 : 24] He's denouncing those who think differently, saying what you think is wrong, it's invalid, it's dangerous, and he's judging it. But he's doing so sorrowfully.

He's doing so with a big degree of sadness and it's not a denunciation, he takes pleasure in giving, but he has to nonetheless. And you see that all throughout the Bible with woes, that they're sorrowful denunciations.

So let's go into these verses. Let's look at what happens. Verses 37 and 38. 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, noting that Jesus did not first wash before the meal, was surprised. And at Jesus, he's just been finishing describing the nature of change from inside outwards, and a Pharisee invites him for a meal.

He goes in, he sits down to eat, and at this point everything kicks off. The main thing is that the Pharisee notices that Jesus has not washed his hands before eating. And the hand washing here isn't for hygiene.

[8 : 29] It's a religious ceremonial invention that the Jewish religious lawyers expected you to do in order to be keeping all these laws, so that you can be good with God, and the full effect of the Pharisee's response.

It's lost a little bit in surprise, because maybe because we can read that, and you can be surprised at something in a good way. You can have good surprises, you can have average surprises, but really it's more like horrified, disgusted.

That's the kind of response that the Pharisee has. You have Jesus there who's perfect, who's the Son of God, who's there eating dinner with you, and yet you're disgusted at him because he hasn't kept this tiny little rule that you made up.

Now there's no record that the Pharisee said anything, but his horror at Jesus not keeping this Phariseic regulation must have been obvious. So Jesus responds.

It is obvious, you know, when you horrify someone with a cultural faux pas, especially at dinner, but Jesus responds to him, and he gets right to the heart of the matter, that the Pharisees have a fundamentally wrong understanding of the nature of change.

[9 : 46] They only target external change, new behavior, better keeping of religious laws. He says they clean the outside of the cup and the dish, but he brings out right away that the heart of the matter is a matter of the heart.

He says that he calls them, you foolish people did not the one who made the outside make the inside also. Isn't the God that you want to please by cleaning the outside, the God that you also need to have pleased, they've been clean on the inside?

And he looks at what's inside them in verse 39 and says, inside you are full of greed and wickedness. The word for greed literally is the word for robbery.

It's greed to the point of taking what you want from other people and wickedness, literally evil intentions. And then he calls them fools, which again in Jesus context has a moral connotation.

These are immorally wicked people. And when he tells them to give what's inside the dish to the poor, having just called them robbers with evil intentions, it's clear what he's getting at, that the Pharisees who tend to be middle class and who tend to be well off enough that they can afford to spend their time doing religion as a hobby and going around making sure that everyone else is as religious as you claim to be, Jesus is getting at them saying you have built your wealth immorally.

[11 : 20] And what you have on the outside is just a sham. It's a façade. And then he launches into his woes against the Pharisees. So we're going to go through them, the three woes. Number one is for neglecting God's love and justice.

Verse 42, woe to you Pharisees, because you give God a tenth of your mint, rous 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. Now the background to this is that in the Bible there's the principle of tithing that you give God's 10% of your income.

And the Old Testament applies this, not just to money, but also to your main crops, the kind of staple foods that the people had to live on, you know, to your wheat and your barley, and you give God 10% of that, which generally goes to feed the Levite priests and the poor, but nowhere in the Bible does it say that you should tithe things like mint and rous and garden herbs.

This was not a command that God gave, but the Jewish rabbis had built up this huge body of religious laws about this kind of stuff, but none of these rules were commanded by God.

[12 : 38] That's the point here. And the parallel passage to this, in Matthew 23, Jesus speaks about them setting apart a tenth of their dill and their cumin seeds in order to make sure that God received one out of every ten tiny cumin seeds.

So Jesus says that they do this with a slavish attention to man-made rules, making the tiny things huge, but they neglect two things. They neglect God's justice because their relative social wealth has largely been gained in morally, Jesus says, by rubbing the poor.

So they think that even though they trample on the poor and they're full of evil intention, God is nonetheless going to accept them because they give God one out of every ten cumin seeds, and because they give God a tenth of their mint.

Also, they neglect God's love. They do not reflect God's love for the poor. And their own attempted relationship with God is not based on divine, gracious love.

It's based on, God will be happy with me because I gave him some seeds. Token offerings that God never asked for in the first place. Now, to really bring this out, in the Old Testament, there are various places where God commands people to do various outward acts, like ceremonial washings in Isaiah 1, verses 10 to 17, for example.

[14 : 03] God has commanded them to do washings and sacrifices, but God himself says in those passages that to carry out these external things, the things that God actually wants and has commanded, whilst internally you're unclean, God says, that's absurd, that does not please me, don't do it.

And, you know, God is saying, bring me animal sacrifices, but then he says in those passages, look at yourselves, you're inwardly filthy, your sacrifices, don't please me, stop, enough.

And if God says that about things he actually wants and has actually commanded, how much more is he against things that he never asked for in the first place, like thinking you don't have to practice love or justice, but you can give God a tenth of your mints, you can give God, you know, the 10p in your pocket.

So the first sorrowful denunciation against the Pharisees is because they neglect major things like God's love and justice, and they prioritize trivialities, whilst neglecting the big things that reflect who God is, like love and justice.

Woh number two, pompous piety. Verse 43, woe to you Pharisees, because you love the most important seats in the synagogues and greetings in the marketplaces.

[15 : 27] The Pharisees loved to be publicly acknowledged as the most righteous people around. The most important seat in the synagogue, the synagogue being the place that Jews would meet every week to worship God and hear the Bible read and pray, the most important seat is the seat at the front, but not the front pew, but the seat that's actually next to the preacher at the front.

So the person that's sitting there is looking out at everyone else, you know, kind of saying, look at me, I'm the embodiment of everything you're hearing up there, shamelessly sitting with everyone looking in front of you, and Jesus said to the Pharisees that you guys love it, you love to have people looking to you.

The thing that you love about coming to worship God is the public acclaim of your own goodness and your self-righteousness, and they also love greetings in the marketplaces.

In this culture, you know, an honour and shame culture, the people that had high up social positions didn't just get a high or a hey, they got a big formal acknowledgement with their title and platitudes about how great they are and noble, and Jesus denounces the Pharisees because they love it when people stroke their egos.

He says, you love it when people tell you how great that you are. You are the one that you live to glorify and enjoy. So that's the second woe.

[16 : 57] It's against people whose religion is characterised by self-absorbed pomposity. And the last woe against the Pharisees is for causing unholiness.

He says this in verse 44, woe to you because you are like unmarked graves, which men walk over without knowing it. And we really have to frame this one in relation to what's just come before.

The Pharisees love the most important seat in the synagogue because they think they know how to change you. They think they know how to tell you how to become a different person. They have all their made-up rules, and they're there to tell you that your behaviour needs to change in various ways.

And they honestly believe that they, in the most important seat of the synagogue, with all their titles in the marketplaces, that they have a sanctifying effect on people, that they can make you holy.

And when you see this verse in that context, that's when we understand it, the unmarked graves is a reference to what happened just before Passover in Jerusalem.

[18 : 00] A couple of weeks before Passover, all the graves in and around Jerusalem were whitewashed in order to warn people from stepping on them, because if you step on them, you become ceremonially unclean.

And because you're unclean, you cannot go into the temple, you cannot participate in Passover, you cannot go to God in their context. Unmarked graves were awful things in this culture.

And he's telling the Pharisees, you think you make people holy, you think you can change them, but in fact you make them unholy. You make them unable to go to God. And the full impact of this, Jesus says that you're like unmarked graves that people step on, without knowing it, people step on them without realizing it.

You're going along and you don't realize that you've stepped on something unclean, you don't realize that you've trodden over an unmarked grave, and because you don't realize that you've done that and you don't know that you're unclean, you go into the temple to try and meet with God, and you're albeit unwittingly unclean, but you end up defiling the temple.

The application of that is that when they think they sanctify people, they actually make them unholy, and they cause people to come to God, thinking that they're okay before God, when in fact they're not.

[19 : 26] And we're building on this to apply it to show that Jesus is the only one who can change us, and he does so from the inside out, rather than from the outside in, like the Pharisees, like legalistic religion, like moralism, and every other religion in the world, which is works-based rather than grace-based, which only Christianity is.

Everything else will make you think that you are becoming holy and that you are prepared to meet God, when in fact you are not. And what happens next? I love this. Verse 45.

One of the experts in the law answered him, Teacher, when you say these things, you insult us also. And this guy basically puts Jesus on the spot, saying something like, well, expecting Jesus to say something like, sorry, you know, I wasn't insulting you.

I didn't mean the lawyers too, just the Pharisees. I bet this guy had no idea what was coming next. He didn't bargain on it. Three woes against religious lawyers. Number one, for legalistic religion, 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. These people who just tell people to change externally, without telling them how to be changed internally in the first place, to give you the internal power to change, and the reason to want to change, preaching all law and no gospel, with this huge body of laws that they're constantly expanding for every moment of your life, all of which have to be kept in order to appease God.

[21 : 10] Jesus says, these are burdens that people cannot carry. In telling them just to be changed externally, you're giving them an emission impossible, because they need internal change in the first place.

Without internal change, they are powerless to be different on the outside. And these religious lawyers, he says, will tell you how to behave, but they cannot empower you to change.

And he pronounces a woe against them for that. And within that, I think there's an implication, isn't there, that God is different, that when he...

Because his word does tell us to change externally. But more than that, he also helps us in our sanctification.

He helps us, by first of all, changing us internally, and he gives us forgiveness unconditionally for all sins past, present, and future. He gives us the Holy Spirit living within us.

[22 : 13] He gives us the facts of the Gospel to fill us with gratitude to make us want to change externally, but not out of a slavish kind of hope.

Not even hope, because it's so bleak, but a slavish way of thinking that if I do enough good things that God will love me on the last day, God is not like that. Everything he gives us is to help us.

There's spiritual power in grace that changes us. So he pronounces a woe against them because they're legalists, rather than people who believe the Gospel. He also, secondly, pronounces a woe against them for hypocrisy.

And just in a nutshell, these people, they commemorate dead saints, dead prophets, dead people like that, who their ancestors killed.

And their ancestors killed them because they were rejecting those who God was sending, they were rejecting God's message. And they do that, saying, oh, it was a terrible shame that in the past they killed off all these holy people that God sent, whilst they in their lives are trying to kill off the holy people that God had sent to them.

[23 : 20] They want to get Jesus killed. And Jesus calls them hypocrites for saying, oh, it was a shame that that happened in the past, wasn't it? And we'll build these great memorials to all of these people that died, and yet in the here and now we want to do the same.

And he says that they're hypocrites, that they're actors who play a part, and when they're off the stage, they're completely different. Third woe against the religious lawyers is from making people ignorant of God.

In verse 52, Woe to you, experts in the law, because you have taken away the key to knowledge. You yourselves have not entered, and you have hindered those who were entering.

What these people had done was bury the Bible, completely bury it, under a mountain of man-made laws, and telling people, if you want to know God, first of all, here are a million commandments that you must embody perfectly in the whole of your life, and in their legalism, they have completely eclipsed the Gospel, which they never knew in the first place.

And because they never knew it, because they never came to God, they are hindering those who were coming to God, Jesus says. And it's really similar, the way that Jesus concludes his woes against the Pharisees, because they thought they were making people holy, when in fact they were making them unholy, and the lawyers as well, the same kind of way, they thought they were bringing people to God, when in fact they were making it impossible to know God.

[24 : 53] Now, I want to round this off in conclusion with some application questions, which are on the Sherman notes that you have. The Pharisees and the lawyers responded to Jesus' words with hatred, in verse 53, at the very end.

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.

They responded to Jesus' words with hatred, and that's what has provoked them, telling them that you're not good people who do bad things, that you're bad people who do bad things, and if you want to do good things, you need to let me make you a new person at the core.

And they responded with hatred. The question for us is, does Jesus' approach horrify, which it did to the Pharisees in verse 38, or insult, which this did to the lawyer in verse 45?

Does it horrify or insult us? It's a really probing question. Secondly, how clearly do I understand that real change, lasting change in my life, must begin inside and outwork itself, rather than begin outside and embed itself, which can't happen?

[26 : 21] How clearly do I understand that in the way that I relate to God, in the way that I depend on Him for grace, for leading in His Word in order to be changed? And lastly, am I as intolerant of legalism as Jesus?

Because Jesus was utterly intolerant of it. Anyone saying that any hint of salvation by works, any hint of pleasing God with what you can do, that's one of the big problems that we have had in the free church as a denomination.

We have tolerated legalism when Jesus does not. And in closing, because there are some of you who are preachers, who are training to be preachers and ministers, I want to make a particularly strong application of this to you, because we need to rigorously scrutinise our own preaching and ask ourselves every time we preach, am I simply telling people to behave in a different way without telling them the Gospel, and without explaining to them why and how they should live in a different way?

Or am I telling them that, A, they have an internal problem, which makes any kind of salvation by works impossible, and B, that Jesus' death for our sins atones for all that wrong, and C, that the internal change that comes with forgiveness, through grace as it's motivating and enabling factor, that that internal change is the only thing that will ever lead to them living differently.

And on that basis, having set them free in the Gospel, we then tell them how to live differently. But we cannot assume that people know the Gospel in order to know how to when we give application in sermons.

[28 : 13] Amen. Let's respond to God in His Word and prayer. Our Father, thank You that You are a God who is honest with us. We thank You that Your Word speaks to the core of the problem in our lives, which is that we are not good people who do bad things.

And we thank You and praise You so much that You haven't left us in that, but that You've sent Jesus Christ into the world to be our Savior, and to atone, and to pay for all of the wrong that we have done, both in our actions and in who we are.

And we thank You that in Him that we can be filled internally with light and with darkness rather than dark. And Lord, we pray that You will help us to be utterly intolerant, as Jesus was, of the idea that we can somehow contribute to our salvation through our good works, that we can somehow please You with tiny things, with tithing, cumin and dill, as though You were a tiny God who only had to be pleased in tiny ways.

And we thank You that You have sent Your Son to please You and Yourself on our behalf. And Lord, we pray that You will help us to be set free by Your grace in order to be changed and to be filled with light and to be a source of light to others also.

Thank you for your word. Amen.