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Series: Doing Justice

Part 4: The Sin of Passing By

Text: Luke 11:37-42

I have been accused of being religious. I am not! Religion might be defined as one’s subscription to a set of rituals and ceremonies. The Pharisees were religious. They gave themselves to strict acts and ceremonies. They held themselves, and others, to a high standard. I am *not* religious. Rather, I am in a growing relationship with the God who created me and sent Jesus to die in my place, as a substitutionary sacrifice for my sin.

Luke, who writes with the precision and careful attention to detail that we expect of physicians (Colossians 4:14), gives us details of the Pharisees’ mindset.

Jesus was open to everybody. He didn't turn down this dinner invitation (37). I need to get out more. I want to be outside the Church enough, that outsiders invite me to dinner. Look at Jesus. He does not hesitate. I am thinking of Paul’s admonition to the believers in Colosse. Colossians 4:5-6:

*Walk in wisdom* ***towards those who are outside****, redeeming the time. Let your speech always be with grace, seasoned with salt, that you may know how you ought to answer each one.*

When Jesus came into the meal setting, the Pharisees didn't *say* anything. They merely *thought*. Jesus, who knows all things, addressed the elephant in the room: the legalism which informed the thinking and actions of so many in His day, particularly the Pharisees. The question here is not one of hygiene. It is a question of Jesus’ failure to subscribe to tradition and ceremony. Jesus calls these folks out on their commitment to externals. Jesus calls these people *fools* (40). These Pharisees concentrate their attention and energies on what people *do.* Jesus is more interested in what people *are.*

Verse 42 contains a commendation: you tithe on all your herbs AND a condemnation: you pass by justice and God’s love. Even the affirmation which Jesus gave was a bit tongue-in-cheek. They did tithe on the herbs but that was to trivialize tithing. The New Testament scholar, Leon Morris, writing of tithing, says that “...this calculation of one tenth of all the stalks of garden herbs made a burdensome mockery of it.” (*The Gospel According to Luke,* Tyndale New Testament Commentaries. P.204)

Maybe the Pharisees thought they had to choose between tithing and social engagement. No such choice is necessary. We often think in terms of either/or when so many matters are both/and.

That line in verse 42 is quite an indictment: You pass by justice. You think justice is negligible; unimportant; not worthy of your personal investment; not as important as tithing mint and rue.

Passing by is seeing an action and failing to respond to it. It is being a law enforcement officer in Minneapolis and watching Derek Chauvin kneel on George Floyd’s neck for 8 minutes and 46 seconds and saying nothing. It is listening to a neighbor go off on another neighbor and you remain silent. Passing by is the neglecting of that which ought to be done and acting as if it doesn't matter.

To do justice is to act as one ought. The phrase at the end of verse 42 is a concise definition of justice. Justice is our doing what we *ought to have done.* In so doing, we do not ignore other tasks. However, the commitment to justice is what drives us. It is the *ought* of our lives. In pursuit of the life of justice, it is very easy to get sidetracked, distracted, off-track, fogged, mixed up or simply lose one’s way. We sometimes forget or ignore the *you ought to have done* aspect of our lives, our calling. These to whom Jesus spoke seemed more concerned about appearance than substance. Verse 39 alludes to the care with which they might clean a dish. From William Barclay’s commentary on Luke:

*“Large stone vessels of water were specially kept for the purpose because ordinary water might be unclean; the amount of water used must be at least a quarter of a log, that is, enough to fill one and a half egg-shells. First the water must be poured over the hands beginning at the tips of the fingers and running right up to the wrist. Then the palm of each hand must be cleansed by rubbing the fist of the other into it. Finally, water must again be poured over the hand, this time beginning at the wrist and running down to the fingertips. To the Pharisee, to omit the slightest detail of this was to sin. Jesus' comment was that, if they were as particular about cleansing their hearts as they were about washing their hands, they would be better men.”*

Verse 43 refers to their making sure they sat in the best seats in the synagogue. Verse 44 compares these Pharisees to unmarked graves. Numbers 19:16 teaches that the person who touches a grave shall be ceremonially unclean for 7 days. To avoid touching a grave by accident, Jews would whitewash the sepulchers so that they could be clearly seen. Jesus said these Pharisees were like graves that couldn't be seen. Just as people inadvertently walked over the unmarked graves, so these had inadvertently bought into the hypocrisy around them- almost without being aware of it.

This failure of the Pharisees to be just and to receive and demonstrate the love of God, occasioned the pronouncing of six woes upon them (v. 42,43,44,46,47,52).

I want to suggest two reasons Jesus condemns these Pharisees.

1. The Pharisees were guilty of majoring on externals.

Michael Wilcock on Jesus:

*He is not afraid to tell them that their religion, although it is the major preoccupation of their lives, is in fact a hollow sham. They have never allowed the Spirit to bring about the revolution in them and therefore there is no transformation either.* (The Message of Luke. 11:37-54)

2. The second reason Jesus condemns these is that they trivialized that which was weighty. They have taken tithing and mocked it. They have acted as if justice and divine love were small things.

**Closing**

This text summarizes the *why* of Jesus’ coming. My friend Ravi Zacharias used to say, “Jesus did not come to make bad people good; He came to make dead people live.”

Jesus did not come to give us more rules. He came to show us God’s grace and God’s love. Christ ALSO calls us to, through our actions, do justice. Jesus came to steer us into the *these you ought to have done* parts of life (v. 42).

Without the presence of Jesus in us, motivating us, we will, like the Pharisees, pass by justice and the love of God (v. 42), every time!!!!

As you and I seek to act justly in the world and as we seek to address political and economic injustices, we do so completely free of religiosity. We give ourselves not to some **ritual** alone, but some **actions**.

God, help us!!

Amen