

Luke 11

Christ and Prayer in His Messianic Ministry

Prayer

¹One day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said to him, “Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples.”

²He said to them, “When you pray, say:

“Father,

hallowed be your name,

your kingdom come.

³Give us each day our daily bread.

⁴Forgive us our sins,

for we also forgive everyone who sins against us.

And lead us not into temptation.”

⁵Then he said to them, “Suppose one of you has a friend, and he goes to him at midnight and says, ‘Friend, lend me three loaves of bread, ⁶because a friend of mine on a journey has come to me, and I have nothing to set before him’.

⁷“Then the one inside answers, ‘Don’t bother me. The door is already locked, and my children are with me in bed. I can’t get up and give you anything.’ ⁸I tell you, though he will not get up and give him the bread because he is his friend, yet because of the man’s boldness he will get up and give him as much as he needs.

⁹“So I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. ¹⁰For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened”.

¹¹“Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? ¹²Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? ¹³If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!”

(Luke 11:1-13)

Learning the Lord’s Prayer (Luke 11:1-4)

In this chapter of Luke we find the Lord’s first instruction about prayer. It begins with this information, “One day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said to him, ‘Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples.’” (11:1) Christ then teaches them a brief version of the Lord’s Prayer which had also been taught in the Sermon on the Mount. (Matthew 6:5-15)

There are some questions which are not easy to answer. Why are there two versions: the one from Matthew differs from the one in Luke 11? Let us note that the two versions do not contradict each other but rather complement each other. It is not necessary to conclude that the Lord twice at different occasions taught this prayer but it is possible that in the course of time the Lord's Prayer simply was developed from the forms which we find in the Gospels.

It was not uncommon for disciples to ask their teacher also to teach them how to pray. Sometimes the prayers had to do with specific teachings. Our Lord has no difficulty teaching them a prayer, parts of which may well have been known already.

Both versions have as central petition: your kingdom come. Both the preaching of John the Baptizer and our Lord focused on the fact that the Messianic "kingdom of heaven is near" (Matthew 4:17, Luke 4:43). If this is the case, it will be reflected in the "kingdom prayer" that Jesus taught. The Lord's Prayer is the kingdom prayer par excellence.

Our Lord exercised a constant daily habit of prayer. His prayers were not necessarily short, for his disciples had to wait until he was finished (Luke 11:1), but he did advocate a shorter public prayer than the Pharisees and teachers of the Law, who wanted to be admired by people and felt that in the abundance of words there is victory. Jesus called it "babbling" (Matthew 6:6,7). The better prayers are the ones that we pray behind closed doors in secret, for then we stand personally before the throne of God.

The Hearing of our Prayers Assured (Luke 11:5-13)

In Luke 11:5-13 our Lord devotes ample time to the hearing of prayer. We should note this very carefully. Sometimes we say "all we can do now is pray" but in fact it is an admission to accept the inevitable. When praying in a trial we must pray in accordance with Christ's will and always acknowledge his sovereignty.

We must pray in faith knowing that God can and will give what is asked or needed. Jesus gives an example to drive home a point. Let's say a man has a friend who knocks on his door at night because he is in need, but the friend will not get up because it is night and he does not want to wake up his entire family. So he says: don't bother me; go away, I can't help you.

Jesus makes clear that this is not the way to treat a friend. A true friend will give help because of the boldness of his friend. Otherwise he may be branded as a friend who does not help in need.

Now of God it can never be said that he will be bothered by our petitions. Note the Lord's promise in verse 9, "So I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you." I wonder if we always take this seriously or sometimes take it with a grain of salt. For emphasis the Lord repeats the matter in verse 10, "for everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened."

The Lord gives one more example. “Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!”

We love our children and if we can, we give them what they need. Is God’s love and care for us not incomparably greater? In this is love that he gave for us his only-begotten Son so that we might receive through him the forgiveness of sins (1 John 3:16).

There is one more item to note in this passage about the hearing of prayer. Our Lord says: “how much more will your Father in heaven give the *Holy Spirit* to those who ask him!” (Luke 11:13) Sometimes our prayers are materialistic or corporeal. But when we pray we must ask first for spiritual strength and for enduring faith. Ask God foremost for the Holy Spirit who sustains us in all trials and needs.

Doctrinal Certainties

The Reformed faith stresses the importance of prayer as a direct calling upon God. In Jesus Christ we may go right into the heavenly throne room.

The Heidelberg Catechism speaks about the necessity of prayer as follows, “...prayer is the most important part of our thankfulness which God requires of us. Moreover, God will give his grace and the Holy Spirit only those who constantly and with heartfelt longing ask him for these gifts and thank him for them.” (Lord’s Day 46, Q & A 116)

That same Lord’s Day includes the Lord’s Prayer as the prayer which Christ our Lord himself taught us. This Lord’s Day also states about the hearing of prayer, “we must rest on this firm foundation that, although we do not deserve it, God will certainly hear our prayer for the sake of Christ our Lord as he has promised in his Word.”

Homiletical Horizons

We must realize that prayer is not a natural thing for us to do. Perhaps we may have many reasons why we do not pray. Prayer is something that has to be learned both in its form and content. Therefore the disciples asked the Lord “teach us to pray...”

It is important that in family devotions also children learn to participate in praying. The family prayer should include matters that are mentioned beforehand as important for family members and those in the broader community. However the position of father and mother as spiritual leaders should never be forgotten.

Questions

- 1) Does prayer mean that everything we ask will always be given to us? For what should we pray?

- 2) Does God sometimes answer “no” to our prayer? Is there any Biblical passage that speaks about this?
- 3) Why is thanksgiving always to be a part of our prayer?
- 4) How should we prepare for prayer?

Jesus and Beelzebub (Luke 11:14-28)

¹⁴Jesus was driving out a demon that was mute. When the demon left, the man who had been mute spoke, and the crowd was amazed. ¹⁵But some of them said, “By Beelzebub, the prince of demons, he is driving out demons. ¹⁶Others tested him by asking a sign from heaven.

¹⁷Jesus knew their thoughts and said to them: “Any kingdom divided against itself will be ruined, and a house divided against itself will fall. ¹⁸If Satan is divided against himself, how can his kingdom stand? I say this because you claim that I drive out demons by Beelzebub. ¹⁹Now if I drive out demons by Beelzebub, by whom do your followers drive them out? So then, they will be your judges. ²⁰But if I drive out demons by the finger of God, then the kingdom of God has come to you.

²¹“When a strong man, fully armed, guards his own house, his possessions are safe. ²²But when someone stronger attacks and overpowers him, he takes away the armor in which the man trusted and divides up the spoils.

²³“He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me, scatters.

²⁴“When an evil spirit comes out of a man, it goes through arid places seeking rest and does not find it. Then it says, ‘I will return to the house I left.’ ²⁵When it arrives, it finds the house swept clean and put in order. ²⁶Then it goes and takes seven other spirits more wicked than itself, and they go in and live there. And the final condition of that man is worse than the first.”

²⁷As Jesus was saying these things, a woman in the crowd called out, “Blessed is the mother who gave you birth and nursed you.”

²⁸He replied, “Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it.”

(Luke 11:14-28)

Luke does not give the circumstances under which the Lord drove out a demon that was mute. When this demon was cast out from its victim, the man who had been mute spoke, and the crowd was amazed (11:14). This account is also reported in Matthew 12 and Mark 3. Matthew adds that some people were astonished and started asking the question: “Could this be the Son of David?” (Matthew 12:23)

This is a very important moment, the first time this question is publicly asked and discussed. Is Jesus perhaps the Messiah, the Son of David? The Jewish leaders are now really in a bind. How can they hold the dedication and obedience of the people if word gets around that Jesus is without doubt the Messiah?

It becomes evident that the Jewish leaders really need to act. Drastic measures are in order. For if this rumor of Jesus being the Messiah gets out of control, disaster will strike. It could become an all-out war against the Roman occupiers. So the leaders of Israel at this point engage in an emergency response.

The Jewish leaders cannot deny that something impressive happened when Jesus drove out the demon from the mute man, who could suddenly again speak. So they come up with a very nasty explanation, "By Beelzebub, the prince of demons, he is driving out demons." (11:15)

Beelzebub was the name given to a Philistine god and was slightly altered to render it "Lord of the flies" (Lord of the "dung heap"). More importantly, Beelzebub was the name given by Jews to Satan or the devil. This is how the Jewish leaders used it here.

What Jesus is doing is either God's work or it is devil's work. Only these possibilities could explain the miraculous effect. All lesser demons had to obey the highest demon. This is typically a pagan way of thinking. So the Jewish leaders explained that we do not see here the work of God, or of the Messiah, but in fact we see the work of the devil.

Meanwhile it is a very serious accusation which shows the desperate hatred that the Jewish leaders have for the Saviour. Our Lord does warn them that they are now "blaspheming the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 12:31,32). This sin will not be forgiven because the sinners will never repent. It is called a sin against the Holy Spirit because the truth that the Spirit has evidenced is ascribed to the devil. It is a conscious decision against the Lord despite the clear evidence that has been given.

The allegation that Christ works through Beelzebub will be soundly dismissed. But Luke adds that some accused him of being in league with the devil, while others tested him by demanding a sign from heaven. Devil-worker, said many. Prove that you are the Messiah with a heavenly sign, said others. Meanwhile the sign that was given in the healing of the mute man is cast aside. Those who base their faith on signs will always require a greater and more sensational sign.

We read that Jesus "knew their thoughts". Sometimes we say: "I know what you're thinking", but really we don't. But when this is said by the Lord, it means that he knows how and why they reason as they do. He sees the greater, underlying conflict, the kingdom of darkness resisting the kingdom of heaven. He knows how they operate, how utterly evil they are.

The Lord proceeds to show clearly that their way of thinking is deeply flawed. He says, "Any kingdom divided against itself will be ruined and a house divided against itself will

fall” (11:17). Everybody knows that. If Satan is divided against himself, how can his kingdom stand? It is a matter of common sense. The accusation is inwardly contradictory and is utterly absurd.

There is another point being made here. “Now if I drive out demons by Beelzebub, by whom do your followers drive them out? So then, they will be your judges” (11:19). The Jews themselves also had exorcists, who claimed to work by the power of God. If exorcism can only be performed by Beelzebub, how do the Jewish exorcists do it?

But if what Christ does is “by the finger of God, then the kingdom of heaven has come to you.”(11:20) I love the expression, “the finger of God”. Exorcism rites are filled with magical ceremonies and suggestive actions, but God does it all as with his finger.

The explanation for the miracle is simple: someone stronger than the devil has come over the healed man and has driven out the evil spirit. Now the Jewish leaders are called to make an important decision, “He who is not with me is against me” (11:23). This is a direct challenge to the Jewish leaders. They will choose against the Lord.

It does become clear that there is no neutrality in this conflict. There is no safe zone, so to speak. We are either with Christ or against him. It is important that we convince ourselves and others that an important decision must be made to be for Christ and with Christ.

Evil Spirits Do Return

This episode with Jesus being accused of being in league with Beelzebub, the prince of devils, leads the Lord to another warning.

When an evil spirit comes out of a man, it goes through arid places seeking rest and does not find it. Then it says: ‘I will return to the house I left.’ When it arrives it finds the house swept clean and put in order. Then it goes and takes seven other spirits more wicked than itself, and they go in and live there. And the final condition of that man is worse than the first. (11:24-26)

Sometimes we think that if a person is truly cleansed of an evil spirit, really converted, you might say, that person is set for life. The demon will not return. But we must continue to be vigilant. The demon seeks a place to stay. It goes all over, even into the deserts, the most God-forsaken places, but finds no place and therefore decides to check out its former abode. We are warned that the devil continues to seek opportunities to enslave us again.

Outwardly all looks fine. The house is swept clean and put in order. Another diabolical attack is not suspected or pondered. But the demon goes and finds seven other demons, more wicked than itself, and they go and live there. We may think that we have been reformed and are now free, but we are warned here to be on guard, lest we are again led astray. It says, “And the final condition of that man is worse than the first.” (11:26)

These words are not meant to make us afraid. We are being confronted with a terrible reality. Demons stay active until the day of Christ's return. We need to be vigilant in how we live our lives, to what we expose ourselves, in whom we hide ourselves. The only one who has vanquished demons then and now is our Lord Jesus Christ.

We tend to let demons get a grip again. The Bible speaks elsewhere of a dog returning to its vomit. (Proverbs 26:11; 2 Peter 2:22) This is certainly not a pleasant sight. We easily fall back into old ways and past sins. Peter writes, "It would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than to have known it and then to turn their backs on the sacred command that was passed on to them." (2 Peter 2:21) In the end the Jews chose as king a wicked Caesar above the Messiah of God.

Christ's words were really quite impressive, probably nothing like people had ever heard before. Someone one in the crowd is very impressed. "As Jesus was saying these things, a woman in the crowd called out, 'Blessed is the mother who gave you birth and nursed you.'" (11:27)

The woman spoke when he was still speaking. Apparently she had been very impressed by the Lord's refutation of the charge by Israel's leaders. She wanted to commend him, without being singled out herself. Some explainers feel that these words were perhaps inflammatory and that Jesus therefore did not like them.¹

The Lord did not deny the truth of her words. He heard them in agreement and said, "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it." (11:28) The Lord quotes from Proverbs 8:32. It is a necessary addition. Jesus tells them that simply agreeing with his teaching is not enough; they must act on what they hear. Many give their assent; few follow with action.

The Sign of Jonah (Luke 11:29-32)

²⁹As the crowds increased, Jesus said, "This is a wicked generation. It asks for a miraculous sign, but none will be given it except the sign of Jonah. ³⁰For as Jonah was a sign to the Ninevites, so also will the Son of Man be to this generation. ³¹The Queen of the South will rise at the judgment with the men of this generation and condemn them; for she came from the ends of the earth to listen to Solomon's wisdom, and now one greater than Solomon is here. ³²The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now one greater than Jonah is here.

(Luke 11:29-32)

At this point the crowds keep swelling around Jesus but our Lord does not lose his focus or perspective. It is important to note this because oftentimes great leaders are destroyed by immense popularity or outright rejection. Of course, our Lord is not to be compared with any other leader for he is the Messiah, the Holy One of God. It is good,

¹ Greijdanus, o.c., page 551.

however, that we see how the Lord maintains this focus. He does it by abiding with the Word of God.

The Lord states very plainly as the crowds keep increasing that “this is a wicked generation.” (11:29) One of the characteristics of this wicked generation is that it asks for a miraculous sign. He had cast out a demon, and as if that was not a convincing sign, they immediately asked for a sign from heaven (11:16). They ask for a sign and close their eyes to the signs that they have received. You will never convince anyone through a sign alone. People just keep asking for more and better. That is the sense of the verb: constant asking, increasingly demanding, and almost forcing a sign from him.² It is pure sensationalism which the Lord detested.

The Lord states that none will be given, “except the sign of Jonah”. We read that as Jonah was a sign to the Ninevites so also the Son of Man will be a sign to this generation.

The sign of Jonah is of course that as Jonah was in the fish for three days and nights, so the Lord will be buried for three days and three nights only to be raised triumphant from the dead.

We have here the added sense that Jonah, after returning from the sea, was able to preach to the people of Nineveh. The people of Nineveh heard that the judgment of God was coming and they took this very seriously. The Ninevites believed in gods and feared them. The gods of Nineveh were fickle and cruel. So the people of Nineveh declared a fast, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth. The king called upon his people to participate in this repentance, and said, “Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish.” (Jonah 3:9) But Israel would not repent after having seen great signs and heard the Word of God. One day the people of Nineveh will stand up to testify against them.

“The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now one greater than Jonah is here.” (11:32) It is impossible to comprehend that a fierce pagan nation would repent at the preaching of a runaway prophet, but they did. It is even harder to comprehend that the people of God rejected the Word spoken by the chief prophet and teacher, Jesus Christ. But they did.

We read here also of another ‘sign’, the one of the “Queen of the South”. It says, “The Queen of the South will rise at the judgment with the men of this generation and condemn them; for she came from the ends of the earth to listen to Solomon’s wisdom,

² The verb *Zeteo* means more than just asking, it has in it the sense of demanding and forcing. Once the crowd is under a certain spell, it’s almost impossible to stop.

and now one greater than Solomon is here.” (11:31) The account of this visit by the Queen of Sheba is told in 1 Kings 10, where the Queen of the South says, “Praise be to the LORD your God, who has delighted in you and placed you on the throne of Israel. Because of the LORD’s eternal love for Israel, he has made you king, to maintain justice and righteousness.” (1 Kings 10:9)

Heathen rulers and peoples come to acknowledge the greatness of God, through people like Solomon and Jonah; but when he who is greater than them all comes, he is rejected by his own people.

The Lamp of the Body (Luke 11:33-36)

³³“No one lights a lamp and puts it in a place where it will be hidden, or under a bowl. Instead he puts it on its stand, so that those who come in may see the light. ³⁴Your eye is the lamp of your body. When your eyes are good, your whole body also is full of light. But when they are bad, your body also is full of darkness. ³⁵See to it, then, that the light within you is not darkness. ³⁶Therefore, if your whole body is full of light, and no part of it dark, it will be completely lighted, as when the light of a lamp shines on you.”

(Luke 11:33-36)

At this point we begin to realize that the Jewish leaders have rejected Christ and that the people will also come to reject him, and we have to ask ourselves how this rejection could have come about.

Was it, perhaps, partly the fault of Jesus himself? Sometimes things are unclear because they were not put forth boldly and strongly. To stay with the words of Luke 11, was there enough light on the matter? Are there not two sides to every coin?

Perhaps there are. The Lord lets us look at these two sides. Christ has not done anything in darkness or without clarity. “No one lights a lamp and puts it in a place where it will be hidden, or under a bowl. Instead he puts it on its stand, so that those who come in may see the light.” (11:33) What Christ did, was always plain to see for all. What he said, was always clear to hear for all.

Christ continued, “Your eye is the lamp of your body.” (11:34) The Jews had eyes (and ears), and there was enough light, but they were spiritually blind and deaf. Our Lord makes clear that the eye is the lamp of the body. Light comes into the body through the eye. This means that if your eyes are good, your whole body is also light. But if they are bad, your body is also full of darkness.

This leads to a strong admonition: “See to it, then, that the light within you is not darkness. Therefore, if your whole body is full of light, and no part of it is dark, it will be completely lighted, as when the light of a lamp shines on you.” The one side is that Jesus’ works were clear and visible but the other side is that the Jews did not see their meaning and splendour (11:36). Unbelief is not a matter of ignorance but of blind ambition and outright rejection. Unbelief is a matter of hanging on comfortably to a

wicked lifestyle. Often we know exactly that we are wrong, but we simply refuse to change. There are indeed two sides. We really don't need more signs but we need good eyes to see what is happening. This means that we need an entirely different attitude.

Christ Condemns the Pharisees (Luke 11:37-54)

³⁷When Jesus had finished speaking, a Pharisee invited him to eat with him; so he went in and reclined at the table. ³⁸But the Pharisee, noticing that Jesus did not first wash before the meal, was surprised.

³⁹Then 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. ⁴⁰You foolish people! Did not the one who made the outside make the inside also? ⁴¹But give what is inside [the dish] to the poor, and everything will be clean for you.

⁴²"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.

⁴³"Woe to you Pharisees, because you love the most important seats in the synagogues and greetings in the marketplaces.

⁴⁴"Woe to you, because you are like unmarked graves, which men walk over without knowing it."

⁴⁵One of the experts in the law answered him, "Teacher, when you say these things, you insult us also."

⁴⁶Jesus 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.

⁴⁷"Woe to you, because you build tombs for the prophets, and it was your forefathers who killed them. ⁴⁸So you testify that you approve of what your forefathers did; they killed the prophets, and you build their tombs. ⁴⁹Because 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.' ⁵⁰Therefore this generation will be held responsible for the blood of all the prophets that has been shed since the beginning of the world, ⁵¹from 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.

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."

⁵³When Jesus left there, the Pharisees and the teachers of the law began to oppose him fiercely and to besiege him with questions, ⁵⁴waiting to catch him in something he might say.

(Luke 11:37-54)

The Six Woes

“When Jesus had finished speaking, a Pharisee invited him to eat with him; so he went in and reclined at the table.” (11:37) He accepts this invitation from those who had just called him a blasphemer in cahoots with the devil. The Lord shows tremendous patience and forbearance.

Unlike some others, this Pharisee does not appear to have any specific plan to embarrass Jesus. Perhaps it was a gesture of goodwill, an attempt to de-escalate growing tension between Jesus and the Pharisees. Things are getting out of hand; it's time to mend some fences and build some bridges.

Jesus accepts the invitation. But the Lord does not stick to the prescribed rituals. For example, he does not wash before eating the meal. Some explainers think the Lord purposely omitted various cleansing rituals in order to unmask the hypocrisy of the Pharisees.³ But that is not clear from the text itself. In any case Christ does not let the controversy disappear.

That this Pharisee had the best of intentions, is deduced by some from the fact that the Pharisee “was surprised” that Jesus did not first wash before the meal. He was not looking for any transgression of the law, but saw something that deeply amazed him. Mark gives us some more of the pre-dinner rites, “The Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they give their hands a ceremonial washing, holding to the tradition of the elders. When they come from the marketplace they do not eat unless they wash. And they observe many other traditions, such as the washing of cups, pitchers, and kettles.” (Mark 7:3,4)

To be sure, the Law itself does speak of ceremonial washing but this one is not found in Scripture; it came from “the tradition of the elders” (Mark 7:3) and had gained an immense status.

Our Lord knew what the host was thinking. His approach is to show how absurd they act and how they only seem to be keeping the Law. He unmask their hypocrisy and lack of love.

The Jews were obsessed with being (ceremoniously) clean. But Jesus makes clear that cleanliness only affects the outside of the dish and does not change the inside of the dish. He applies this to the Pharisees. They may look good from the outside, but inside “you are full of greed and wickedness” (11:39). The outside looks good, but the inside looks terrible. He asks them, “Did not the one who made the outside make the inside

³ Geldenhuys, o.c. page 341.

also? But give what is inside [the bowl] to the poor, and everything will be clean for you” (11:40). An act of mercy and kindness covers a multitude of sins and makes a man “clean”. The Lord does not seek superficial outward cleansing but a renewal of the heart.

Then follow six specific “woes”. “Woe” is a word of exclamation used to introduce the certainty and severity of imminent judgment. It has come to this; the gloves are off. And the Lord does not just mean only the one who invited him, for he says: “Now then, you Pharisees (plural)...you foolish people... woe to you...” (11:39-41) There are six items that begin with a “woe” The first are directed to the Pharisees, but each includes the ruling class. Let’s briefly look at each “woe”.

Woe #1: 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.” (11:42)

The Pharisees are very precise in meeting the demands of the law: a tenth of even the smallest herbs is carefully counted out and given to God. But when it comes to the bigger picture and true religion in giving justice and showing love, the Pharisees are noticeably absent. How can people be so diligent when it comes to minor matters and so careless when it comes to the bigger, most important matters?

Jesus is not telling them that they do not have to tithe. He says, “You should have practiced the latter without leaving the former undone” (11:42b). When we live by the law we have to keep all of it.

Woe #2: “Woe to you Pharisees, because you love the most important seats in the synagogues and greetings in the marketplaces.” (11:43) The Pharisees are unmasked in their self-righteousness and false piety. They think they are better than others and deserve to be recognized as being important. Our Lord always taught that it was better to sit down in the last row and wait if one was, perhaps, invited to a better place (see Luke 14:7-11).

Woe #3: “Woe to you [Pharisees], because you are like unmarked graves, which men walk over without knowing it.” The Pharisees customarily white-washed the graves of the dead, so that no one would accidentally touch them; if someone touched a grave or a dead person unwittingly, they were unclean. To stay pure the Pharisees had the graves white-washed so that they could keep themselves far away from any defilement. But the Lord Jesus tells them that they are themselves whitened graves, so that everyone who comes into contact with them, is defiled.

Now follows woe # 4. It is important to understand that the Lord was never out to insult people. He sometimes spoke to them in clear and unmistakable terms. When the teacher of the law said that Jesus was also offending them, the Lord immediately focuses on the man (11:45).

And you experts in the law, woe to you, because you load people down with burdens that “they can hardly carry, and you yourselves will not lift one finger to help them.” This was a rather extreme statement. We are not surprised that one of the experts in the law answered the Lord as follows, “Teacher, when you say these things, you insult us also” (11:45). They are deeply offended. This is no way to speak to esteemed leaders. It’s a low blow, totally unnecessary, some said. In Numbers 19 you can find various regulations regarding uncleanness and the water of cleansing. It is in the Law of Moses. The way Jesus spoke to the Pharisees was out of order, some said.

Sometimes what we say may technically be right, but the way in which we say it may be totally wrong. The teacher of the law warns Jesus that he is going too far. Is this the case here?

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.” The teachers of the law (men who interpreted and applied the Law of Moses and thus had a much honored place in Israel) are not a hair better than the Pharisees, even worse actually, because they add to the Word and burden the people. These stalwart theologians had totally soured the joy of God’s people and made religion an impossible burden of law upon law. The teacher of the law may be offended, but our Lord is outraged because he knows how his flock is being suppressed in an intolerable legalistic religion.

Woe #5: “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, 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.” (11:47-51)

I am sure that such words had never been said before to the teachers of the law and the Pharisees. The teachers of the law loved to teach history and build monuments to a rich history, but it is a history of rebellion, murder, deceit, unfaithfulness. The Lord says: this generation will be held responsible for all!

Note that Abel is called the first prophet (“from the beginning of the world”) and the list goes on to Zechariah. The murder of Abel is described in Genesis 4:8 and of Zechariah in 2 Chronicles 24:20-24. The NIV Study Bible states in Matthew 23 that 2 Chronicles was the last book of the Jewish Bible, so Jesus means all the prophets from Genesis to Revelation⁴. Zechariah was stoned to death in the courtyard of the temple.

⁴ See NIV notes on Matthew 23:35, 36.

The Lord also specifically mentions the apostles. The murder of godly men was continued from the Old Testament into the New.

Woe #6: “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.” (11:52) The key to knowledge is a proper understanding of the way of salvation through faith, by God’s grace in Christ. The very teachers who should have shown the way of redemption have obscured it by their faulty reasoning and false theology. They did not go the way themselves, and they hindered others who were on the right path. This is not an offensive way of speaking but a divine indictment.

It appears that the die is now cast. “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.” (11:53,54) They will get him; it’s only a matter of time.

Questions

- 5) What should we conclude about the fact that there are two versions of the Lord’s Prayer? (Matthew 6 and Luke 11). Does this make the Lord’s Prayer less reliable?
- 6) What is the central petition in the Lord’s Prayer?
- 7) What is the importance of *personal* prayers? What is your most important petition?
- 8) What can we say about the hearing of prayer? Does God hear? Does he always grant the petitions that we pray?
- 9) What should come first in all our petitions?

Clarence Stam