

JESUS EATS WITH A PHARISEE

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE

Luke 11:37–44

A VERSE TO REMEMBER

The Lord said to him, “Now you Pharisees clean the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside you are full of greed and wickedness.”
(Luke 11:39)

Daily Bible Readings			
M	Aug. 28	Mark 7: 1–8	Follow God, Not Human Traditions
T	Aug. 29	1 Sam. 1:19–23	Obedience, Not Sacrifice
W	Aug. 30	Ps. 6	Be Gracious to Me, O Lord
Th	Aug. 31	Luke 7:24–34	Jesus, a Friend of Sinners
F	Sept. 1	Luke 14:7–14	Humility Before God and Others
Sa	Sept. 2	Exod. 30:17–21	Come to God in Cleanliness and Holiness

STEPPING INTO THE WORD

Jesus was a creative and effective teacher. He often began by intriguing his listeners with his actions. He drew on scriptures, images, and lessons that were already familiar to his hearers, and he used them as a foundation to present new ideas. He seemed remarkably comfortable with conflict and confrontation, so he was able to press home his teachings in ways that sometimes must have felt extremely uncomfortable to his listeners.

In addition, Jesus’ teaching was effective because he knew exactly what he wanted to teach. His message was clear, solid, and consistent, and he wanted to nurture rich and deep faith in his followers. He wanted people to respond to the good news of the gospel with their whole beings, inside and out.

In this week’s story, a Pharisee has invited Jesus over for dinner. For many years of Christian history, Pharisees were painted as the enemy, people who distorted or got wrong everything about faith in God. With that view of the Jewish leaders, we might hypothesize that this particular Pharisee invited Jesus to dinner in order to get to know him better for

the purposes of tripping him up or revealing a scandal about him.

Today scholars often view Pharisees as people of faith whose hearts were at least sometimes in the right place but whose strategies were far too legalistic. In that scenario, perhaps the host wanted to learn more about how Jesus viewed faith. Perhaps the host was intrigued by the picture of faith that Jesus had been presenting in his teaching and healings.

At the dinner party, Jesus engages his remarkable teaching skills. He omits a ceremonial action that the Jewish leaders considered necessary, which raises concerns. In response, he draws on Old Testament law, powerful metaphors, and direct, confrontive statements to make his point about consistency in our outer and inner beings.

Jesus, teacher and friend, help us hear your voice in stories where you confront people who can seem distant and unrelated to us. Help us grasp what you consider to be essential about how to love God with our whole beings.



SCRIPTURE

Luke 11:37–44

11:37 While he was speaking, a Pharisee invited him to dine with him, so he went in and took his place at the table. ³⁸The Pharisee was amazed to see that he did not first wash before dinner. ³⁹Then the Lord said to him, “Now you Pharisees clean the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside you are full of greed and wickedness. ⁴⁰You fools! Did not the one who made the outside make the inside also? ⁴¹So give as alms those things that are within and then everything will be clean for you.

⁴²“But woe to you Pharisees! For you tithe mint and rue and herbs of all kinds and neglect justice and the love of God; it is these you ought to have practiced, without neglecting the others. ⁴³Woe to you Pharisees! For you love to have the seat of honor in the synagogues and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces. ⁴⁴Woe to you! For you are like unmarked graves on which people unknowingly walk.”

Note: Find Scripture Notes for this reading on the final page of the lesson.

LOVE THAT COMES FROM THE WHOLE SELF

The middle chapters of Luke's Gospel contain a mix of Jesus' teaching, healing, and encounters with individuals and groups. In response to Jesus' teaching, a Pharisee invites Jesus to dinner. Upon arrival, Jesus chooses not to engage in the ritual handwashing, which included dribbling water on the hands, practiced by faithful Jews at that time. Jesus' host was amazed at this omission, providing Jesus with the chance to speak bluntly.

Jesus' confrontive words in Luke 11:39–41 center on God's desire for consistency between the outside appearance and the inside realities of every person. Jesus uses an everyday metaphor of dishes and cups, which need to be cleaned both inside and out. Not only did God make the outside and inside of each person, but God also desires that both be clean. The remedy for greed and wickedness on the inside, Jesus indicates, is to "give as alms those things that are within and then, everything will be clean for you" (v. 41). *Alms* are gifts of money or goods given to the poor; Jesus does not explain what it looks like in practice to give the inside of ourselves as alms. Many Christians interpret this verse as a call to confession. When we bring our whole selves to God in confession, God cleanses our greed and wickedness.

Jesus continues his bold criticism by focusing on the Jewish leaders' inadequate priorities (v. 42). Yes, they give 10 percent of the harvest as commanded in Leviticus 27:30–34, but they neglect God's equal priorities of justice for the poor and love for God. The Greek word for love here is *agape*, used throughout the New Testament to indicate faithful, sacrificial love. According to Jesus, they have chosen to focus on measurable actions while neglecting more challenging concerns.

The Jewish leaders also seek to look good to others (v. 43), one more way they prioritize the outside over the inside. Because they have set themselves up as a model of faith while neglecting significant priorities that God desires, they are polluting the lives of those who look up to them. Jesus uses another powerful metaphor in verse 44, comparing them to unmarked graves, significant to the Jewish people because contact with the dead made people unclean for seven days (Num. 19:16). The Pharisees' hidden uncleanness was in fact toxic, contaminating the nation.



The Jewish leaders were concerned about appearances and easily measurable details. Where do you see this tendency in the church and in yourself today?

HARMONY BETWEEN THE INNER AND OUTER BEING

One of the psalms attributed to David expresses the significance of the inner person in God's eyes: "You desire truth in the inward being. . . . Create in me a clean heart, O God" (Ps. 51:6, 10). Jesus' discussion with the Pharisees, precipitated by his omission of ritual handwashing, evokes this priority of God's.

In Matthew's version, Jesus mentions hypocrisy or hypocrites three times (Matt. 23:25–28). Without being named directly, hypocrisy is indeed one of the central themes of Luke 11:37–44. Our word *hypocrite* comes from the theater of ancient Greece, and the word originally meant to act a part in a play. Later, the word came to mean a false pretender to virtue or religion.

Jesus' words in Luke 11 reveal components of hypocrisy, including wrong priorities (vv. 39–42) and putting reputation above character (v. 43). Sadly, these traits have an impact on not only the lives of the Pharisees themselves but also the people who look to the Pharisees as models. Leaders who act in hypocritical ways contaminate those who admire and follow them, in ways that might be invisible on the surface but are still very real (v. 44). Hypocrisy can be present in all of us, especially when we slide into forms of religious observance that emphasize outward and manageable forms of obligation and rules. Hypocrisy grows in us when we focus on an outer shell and avoid true intimacy with the God who made and redeemed our whole beings and wants to transform us through and through.

Jesus, in his clear and powerful teaching, wants to bring integrity back to faith in God. Jesus wants us to know the God who delights in us and calls us beloved. This God can bring harmony between our interior and exterior lives, enabling us to experience the expansive love of God in our whole beings and giving us a deep well of love to share with others.

The Jewish leaders of Jesus' time embraced a form of purity that stresses faith practices based on measurable actions. Jesus' deeds and words reflect the God who desires an engagement with the world that comes from a wholehearted love for God. This kind of love demonstrates consistency between inner commitments and outer actions and reflects God's priorities of well-being and justice for all. To show love to people on the margins, we need a strong inner core of love that comes from God.

 In what ways do you experience harmony between your inner and outer self? In what ways would you like to?

STEPPING INTO THE WORLD


Perhaps you have purchased a piece of furniture that has a laminated surface. As it gets older, the laminate may come loose, revealing the particle board inside. Perhaps you own other furniture made of solid wood, and as the surface wears out, the dings and stains can be sanded out and refinished. In his interaction with the Jewish leaders, Jesus indicates his desire that we be like solid wood furniture, the same inside and on the surface.

We nurture that consistency inside and out through many different faith-based actions. We praise and thank God—alone and with others—in order to increase our ability to love God. We learn God’s values from the Bible, listening to sermons, attending Bible study classes, or meditating on God’s priorities in the Old and New Testaments. We hear of God’s heart of love for all people and for the whole beautiful world that God created, and we try to care about the people and situations God cares about.

We confess our sins and receive God’s forgiveness. We strive to avoid acting a role, playing a part in a play, as we live in our homes, our neighborhoods, our workplaces, and Christian community. In supportive settings, we honestly describe our struggles and weaknesses, and we ask in prayer for God’s help in dealing with them. We try to be honest in all settings.

At any moment, these actions that help us love God with our whole selves can shift in the direction of trying to look good to others or striving to earn God’s approval through measurable actions. When we look honestly at our lives, we often see instances when we have played a role, trying to impress. When we look honestly into our hearts, we often see a mess of motivations and desires. We can come to God in prayer and honesty over and over, asking that God give us clean hearts and a right spirit within us (Ps. 51:10). We can ask for the Holy Spirit’s power day by day to help us love God and follow in the footsteps of Jesus, embracing his priorities and reflecting his purity of heart.

Jesus indicates that hypocrisy is profoundly destructive because it contaminates others. Therefore, we can pray for purity of heart for ourselves. We can also pray for the ways our life influences others, especially when people look to us as a model.

 Which faith-based attitudes and actions help you grow in loving God with your whole heart? Which attitudes and actions help you grow in your love for others?

SCRIPTURE NOTES

The following notes provide additional information about today's Scripture.

1. Jesus develops this *inside/outside* theme by contrasting the outward cleanliness of the Pharisees' cups and platters with their internal corruption, implying that external ritual practice is no indicator of internal moral righteousness.
2. As commentator Joel Green remarks, "Jesus directs attention toward a purity that overcomes socio-religious barriers, in direct contrast to one that separates people from one another and keeps them separated." The church today should strive for a purity that is inclusive and breaks down walls of separation.¹
3. Jesus' concern is with giving to those in need (v. 41) and practicing "the justice of God" (v. 42). Possibly echoing Micah 6:8, this teaching defines true holiness, for rather than highlighting social boundaries, these sorts of activities break down the divisions between groups, particularly between social classes in the case of almsgiving.
4. Jesus adds an ironic twist to his critique. In comparing the Pharisees to unmarked graves that people walk over without recognizing them, he accuses the Pharisees of spreading impurity. Because corpses were ritually impure, Jewish law required that graves be marked clearly; otherwise, one might accidentally and unknowingly become impure. The hypocrisy of the Pharisees has become a threat to those with whom they come into contact.

1. *The New International Bible Commentary: Gospel of Luke*, by Joel B. Green (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishers), 471.