

Home Group Leaders Discussion Guide

Luke 11:37-54

Q. Who was the last person you had over for dinner? Who was the last person to invite you over for dinner? (possible icebreaker)

If you're like me, you probably generally only invite people over for dinner that you either like or want to get to know. And you're probably only invited over to dinner with people who like you and/or who want to get to know you. What we see of Jesus throughout the Gospels is someone who is indiscriminate when it comes to who He shares meals with. Be it tax collectors, prostitutes, various other "sinners", or even religious leaders like the Pharisee we read about in this passage. Jesus simply has an "arms wide open" approach to humanity.

Q. When it comes to your approach and interaction with your fellow humans, are you more guarded, suspicious, exclusive, indifferent, open, inclusive? Explain

Luke is not clear as to the motives this unnamed Pharisee had for inviting Jesus over for a meal. Was he wanting to trap or test Jesus? Was he genuinely curious about Jesus? We're not told. But he was certainly "*surprised*" (11:38 NIV) when Jesus didn't wash His hands before eating. This had less to do with sanitary standards of the day, and more to do with ceremonial cleanliness...much of which had been humanly added to the God-given Law.

We decry "religiosity" a lot...and for good reason. In this passage we see Jesus take the Pharisees to task because of their "religiosity". But what do we really mean when we talk about "religiosity"? To a large extent we're talking about "image management"; keeping up appearance or airs so that people will view us positively, even if it's not an accurate reflection of who we really are or an accurate picture of the condition of our heart. Additionally, there's the added tendency to place ourselves above others, or provide reason to look down on others because we're better at jumping through hoops than they are. When religion is used as a way to prop ourselves up or put others down it is twisted, distorted, and ugly...i.e. "religiosity"

Q. In what ways are you tempted to make yourself appear better than you really are? In what ways do you tend to look down upon others? In what ways are you tempted to use your faith/religion to accomplish this?

And this is why Jesus laid into the Pharisees and experts of the law (scribes/lawyers) in this passage. Jesus really, Really, REALLY doesn't like it when people use religion improperly (for their own selfish purposes or to hurt others). He said, "*You foolish people!*" (11:40 NIV) "Foolish" here means "mindless" or "stupid". You're not going to make many friends calling people that...though it doesn't seem as if Jesus was trying to make friends in this situation. They just didn't get it. So Jesus pronounced 3 woes to help the Pharisees see the error of their ways. (Spoiler alert: if we jump down to verses 53-54 we see it didn't have the desired effect—namely repentance. I have a sneaking suspicion Jesus knew it wouldn't.)

In the first “woe” Jesus gets on them for missing the point. Legalistically tithing to the minutest detail is meaningless if it’s not done with a heart for others (justice) and worship of God. Yes, the Law commanded that they tithe. But when it’s done in order to check off a box or for the sake of performance, as opposed to understanding the heart of the Law (again, love God and love others) then it’s all a sham.

The second “woe” gets on them for their motives. Being a religious leader is a matter of calling. Yes, it is an honor, but it is also a great responsibility. Shepherding God’s people should never be taken lightly. But instead of caring for the flock, they were concerned about the status and prestige that came with their role. They wanted people to look up to them more than they wanted to serve others. That’s a terrible trait in a leader of any kind, but especially a religious leader.

The third “woe” gets on them for their fruit or results. Instead of helping people they were actually hurting people. This circles back around to the start of the conversation regarding washing/ceremonial cleanliness. Walking over an unmarked grave would make someone ceremonially unclean (see Numbers 19). Whereas Jesus “broke” an arbitrary, man-made addition to the law by not washing His hands, Jesus claimed that following the example of the Pharisees would make someone unclean according to the actual Law because their example brought death instead of life (and dead things made one unclean).

Q. How have you seen/experienced religious leaders abuse, misuse, or neglect their position?

Q. Let’s not limit our discussion to religious leaders; much of what Jesus has to say here is targeted to people of faith in general.

-How have you gotten caught up in religious minutia and missed the point of it all?

-In what ways do you, perhaps, focus on image or reputation or esteem of others? This is a preoccupation with self. Jesus wants us to get our eyes/focus off ourselves and onto helping/blessing others.

-How have you, perhaps, misused your faith to the harm of someone else?

While Jesus is being quite firm with His words, His heart is nevertheless for the Pharisees. (Not for their practices, but for them as people—Jesus loves people, ALL people, even misguided religious leaders.) A “woe” is an exclamation of grief. Jesus was grieving by pronouncing these “woes”. And His hope was that they would see the error of their ways and grieve as well, and repent. Alas, all evidence points to them not repenting.

I personally find verse 45 rather humorous, *“One of the experts in the law answered Him, ‘Teacher, when you say these things, you insult us also.’”* To paraphrase Jesus’ reply, “Oh, I’m sorry, I don’t want you to think you are only guilty by association, or to think that these words are only indirectly aimed at you. Let me be very direct...” Jesus then proceeds to lay out 3 woes for the experts in the law.

A quick preface before we move forward. It would seem that Jesus was even more harsh to the experts in the law than the Pharisees (and He was pretty harsh toward the Pharisees). So a brief reminder: the Pharisees were more of a self-proclaimed political, social, religious pressure group who only had clout because the people gave it to them. But they had been long established since the inter-testimonial period, so their place in society was rather entrenched. The experts in the law (or scribes/lawyers) were the ones who studied, commented, and taught the law. They would be considered the “Biblical scholars” of the day, so their “authority” was based on knowing Scripture better than everyone else. That’s not to say they all agreed with one another (shocking); for example, the priests and Sadducees had their favorite “experts in the law” who saw/interpreted Scripture the way they preferred, while the Pharisees had their favorite “experts in the law” who lined up with their stances. So, basically, pretty similar to today.

Q. Who is your favorite/preferred “Bible expert”? (The scholar, commentator, teacher, pastor, writer, whatever, that you go to when you have questions, or who you’ve gleaned/learned a lot from.)

The first “woe” to the experts/teachers of the law gets on them for adding to the law, while not helping people understand the heart of God. What was the purpose of the Law if not to help people know God better? But the experts of the law (and the Pharisees) wanted to bring about God’s blessing (or avoid His punishment) through their adherence to the Law. Unfortunately, they missed the point of the Law entirely.

This leads to the second “woe”. It is based on what Jesus said in verses 47-51 that I’d say He’s harder on the teachers of the Law. (The Pharisees wouldn’t have been nearly as powerful if the experts of the Law didn’t back them up.) The whole point of the Law and the prophets (both the writings of the prophets and the prophets themselves) was to call people to repentance and faithful living under the reign of God. Jesus’ words here in this “woe” indicate that their misuse of Scripture was actually consistent with the unfaithfulness, disobedience, and lack of proper response to God that had marked Israel’s entire history. And the time was fast approaching for the punishment/judgment to be doled out. Jesus was foreseeing the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD, as the judgement that would come on “this generation”.

Quick side note: the mention of Zechariah in this passage throws Bible scholars into a tizzy (for understandable reasons). The description seems to fit Zechariah son of Jehoiada mentioned in II Chronicles 24:20-24. But in Matthew’s parallel of this passage (Matthew chapter 23) Jesus mentions Zechariah son of Berechiah (the writing prophet whose book bears his name). Granted, “son of...” can mean father, grandfather, great grandfather, etc. But that actually doesn’t help in this situation, because these 2 Zechariah’s lived about 300 some odd years apart. So was there another martyr/prophet Zechariah whose life and ministry wasn’t recorded in Scripture? It was a common name. Was Matthew a bit confused when writing his Gospel? That can cause us to think through our understanding of “inspiration” of Scripture, or at least inerrancy. Personally, I don’t think it’s anything to get hung up on, the point of the passage at hand remains: the sins of Israel’s past and present was coming upon this generation.

The third “woe” gets to the irony of it all. The experts in the law who should be providing knowledge not only weren’t providing said knowledge, they didn’t know (or hadn’t entered into) that knowledge themselves. So they made themselves out to be something when they were, in fact, nothing.

And as one might expect, Jesus’ word and woes weren’t well received by the Pharisees and teachers of the law. It’s easy for us to look back on them and shake our heads at their blindness to their situation and shortcomings. But it should also cause us pause to consider if we have any blind spots we need to recognize and repent from (individually and communally).

- Q. What “woes” might Jesus pronounce on the church/Christians today?**

- Q. From a posture of the heart perspective, do you find yourself quick to admit error or quick to rationalize, justify yourself...and perhaps villainize whoever is trying to correct you?**

- Q. Describe a time when someone tried to correct you. How did you take it? Did you change? (Or perhaps another way of wording this question: Describe a time when you received correction and you didn’t take it well, and describe a time when you did take it well and responded positively/correctively.)**