

The Gospel According to Luke

“The Dead Pharisees Society”

Chapter 11:37-54

Introduction

Religious rituals are becoming more popular among Christians. Ash Wednesday provides a good example. Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of what is called Lent. “Lent” means *to lengthen*, and refers to the *lengthening* of the days of the year leading to Easter. Lent is the forty days prior to Easter Sunday. During Lent, people are asked to give-up certain things as a sign of repentance and a desire for renewal. Counting backwards (and not counting Sundays), Lent always begins on a Wednesday. It is Ash Wednesday because those observing it have ashes placed upon their foreheads, usually in the form of a Cross. Those ashes are supposed to be the byproduct of burning the previous year’s palm leaves. The palm leaves are leftover from another ritual – that of bringing palm leaves to church on Palm Sunday.

While many will tell you that Lent and Ash Wednesday were celebrated by the first followers of Jesus, they are not in the Bible, and you can’t find them in Church history until about the fourth century. Still, it grew as a religious ritual – especially among Roman Catholics.

With the Reformation of the 16th century, many protestant Christians abandoned the practice of Ash Wednesday. In recent years, however, protestant churches have begun to celebrate it. According to *USA Today*¹, “millions of Catholics, Lutherans, Episcopalians **and a growing number of evangelical Protestants** (*emphasis mine*)” attend Ash Wednesday services.

Religious rituals **are** becoming more popular among Christians. What do we think about religious rituals?

¹ Article by Cathy Lynn Grossman 3/3/2003

I can tell you what Jesus thought about one religious ritual. The Pharisees performed a ritual hand-washing before every meal. It wasn't a soap-and-water affair; it wasn't even about personal hygiene. It was a symbolic ritual of pouring water over your hands to 'cleansed' you from what was considered *spiritual* dirt. Out in the world, you would come into contact with people who were defiled by sin. Ritual hand-washing symbolized you were being cleansed from contact with sin.

It might help if I put it in simpler terms. Do you remember *cooties*? The Pharisees thought that they got cooties out in the **marketplaces**! Ritual hand-washing got rid of cooties.

Jesus purposely refused to participate in ritual hand-washing. His comments leave no doubt in your mind what He thought of it. **He illustrated His comments by using images from the graveyard!** He considered those practicing the ritual to be spiritually dead.

You'll need to look at religious rituals, like Ash Wednesday, one at a time to determine your participation. Jesus' insightful comments about ritual hand-washing give you guidelines to follow.

We'll see Jesus explain two things: #1 Rituals Are Unmarked Graves That You Should Avoid, and #2 Rules Are Grave Markers That You Should Abandon.

#1 Rituals Are Unmarked Graves That You Should Avoid (v37-44)

If ever anybody had cooties and needed a ritual hand-washing, it would have been Jesus. He had been coming into contact with, and touching, all manner of sinners and defiled persons: the sick, the demon-possessed, even the dead. Instead you read,

[Luke 11:37](#) And as He spoke, a certain Pharisee asked Him to dine with him. So He went in and sat down to eat.

[Luke 11:38](#) When the Pharisee saw *it*, he marveled that He had not first washed before dinner.

The symbolic expression of washing away impurity from one's hands dated back to the Book of Exodus. Moses was commanded to make a brass wash-basin, called the laver, and to place it at the entrance to the altar area of the Tabernacle so that the priests could wash their hands before approaching the altar to offer sacrifices. The washing of hands made them ritually pure.

Most religious rituals, among Christians, do have some connection to the Bible. A connection is *not* a commandment, however. You have to stretch things pretty far to justify most rituals.

When Jesus refused to wash before dinner, He knew what He was *not* doing. He avoided the ritual hand-washing on purpose. Among other things, it was to give you and I guidelines to apply when dealing with rituals.

Luke 11:39 Then the Lord said to him, “Now you Pharisees make the outside of the cup and dish clean, but your inward part is full of greed and wickedness. Luke 11:40 Foolish ones! Did not He who made the outside make the inside also?”

Since they were just about to recline to eat, Jesus began with an illustration from the table. No one washes only the outside of a **cup** or **dish**, but leaves the inside filthy. Performing ritual hand-washing was just like that – cleaning the outside while **the inward part is full of greed and wickedness**.

Guideline Number One for rituals is that God is interested in *relationship* more than ritual. He's interested in what's **inside**. You can't simply go through the motions of a religious ritual and think it will have any effect on your heart.

Rituals can therefore be dangerous. They can be performed formally, with no thought given to them at all. You memorize the movements, and what I call the 'mumblings' – while your heart remains far from God.

Why are so many believers being attracted to rituals? At first, the ritual seems so meaningful. Someone explains a biblical connection for it, and you experience it as a part of your relationship with God.

But, over time, it becomes empty and hollow – movements and mumblings.

Jesus continued to discuss rituals, but He introduced another one besides hand-washing: Giving and tithing.

Luke 11:41 But rather give alms of such things as you have; then indeed all things are clean to you.

Luke 11:42 “But woe to you Pharisees! For you tithe mint and rue and all manner of herbs, and pass by justice and the love of God. These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone.

The word **woe** is used in the sense of concern for their wellbeing. Jesus was not condemning them; He was warning them.

The Old Testament gave specific commands about giving and tithing. That’s why Jesus says, **these you ought to have done**. They were not really rituals; but the Pharisees had turned them into rituals by adding to them their own traditions. **Tithe** means *ten percent*. The Pharisees added to the **tithe** by counting-out ten percent of their kitchen spices!

They were commanded to tithe; they practiced extreme tithing, making it into a ritual; but the ritual still had no positive effect. If anything, it had a negative effect: They thought they were spiritual by tithing spices while overlooking **justice and the love of God**.

Guideline Number Two for rituals is that taking good things to extremes does not make you more spiritual. You can’t improve upon simple obedience to God’s Word.

Jesus had one more guideline for rituals:

Luke 11:43 Woe to you Pharisees! For you love the best seats in the synagogues and greetings in the marketplaces.

Luke 11:44 Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like graves which are not seen, and the men who walk over *them* are not aware of *them*.”

The **best seats in the synagogue** were those reserved for people who seemed the most spiritual. They were in the front – facing the

audience. Because these men were placed in these **best seats**, for all to see, they were recognized **in the marketplaces**. People would come up to them to ask for answers or advice.

Jesus had an entirely different perspective of them. They were like **graves which are not seen**. The **graves** in New Testament times were often caverns, or hewn out of rocks or hillsides. You could walk by one, or over one, without even knowing you had done so. Coming into even slight contact with an unmarked grave was one of the things that the Pharisees said made you unclean.

Jesus described the Pharisees as unmarked graves! Here they were, practicing ritual hand-washing to remove the defilement of coming into contact with sinners. Jesus said that it was sinners who were being defiled by coming into contact with them!

Guideline Number Three for rituals is that they often have the opposite effect upon those who practice them. Instead of drawing you into a closer relationship with God, rituals build barriers between you and God; and between you and others.

Rituals can be dangerous. They may not start out that way; but they almost always end up that way. Christians are being attracted to them, hoping to experience greater spiritual life; but rituals can leave you spiritually dead.

I am wary of the renewed popularity of rituals among Christians. I think they are a Trojan horse that will eventually kill the joy of having a personal relationship with God. **Avoid** them; they are not necessary, and can be deadly. At the very least, remember the guidelines Jesus set forth.

In His last **woe**, Jesus included the **Scribes** along with the **Pharisees**. They were offended. It's good that they were, because we learn,

#2 Rules Are Grave Markers
That You Should Abandon
(v45-54)

Scribes, also known as **lawyers**, were Pharisees who were considered the experts in interpreting God's Law. All **lawyers** were Pharisees, but not all Pharisees were **lawyers**. They were the Super-Pharisees!

The Scribes had added six-thousand rules to God's Law. For example, the Fourth Commandment instructed the Jews to **do no work** on the Sabbath Day. The Scribes had added thirty-nine classifications of work, and each classification had endless sub-categories. They said that carrying anything equal to or heavier than a dried fig was work. It was therefore permissible to carry something that weighed less than a dried fig on the Sabbath. But if you put the item down, or dropped it and then picked it up again, it would be counted as doubling its weight and you would thus be breaking the Fourth Commandment!

Jesus compared the Scribes to grave markers. We just saw that the graves in the First Century were caverns and caves. Typically they would have a stone door or covering. This door would be whitewashed and otherwise decorated with ornaments to mark out the grave, letting travelers know there was death and defilement inside.

The Scribes should be seen as grave markers. There was death and defilement inside their elaborate system of rules. They and their rules should be **abandoned**.

Luke 11:45 Then one of the lawyers answered and said to Him, "Teacher, by saying these things You reproach us also."

Luke 11:46 And He said, "**Woe to you also, lawyers! For you load men with burdens hard to bear, and you yourselves do not touch the burdens with one of your fingers.**"

I just mentioned the ridiculous rule regarding the weight of a dried fig. Think about the tremendous **burden** that trying to keep such rules would put upon you. The Scribes were not helping you by coming up with all these rules to follow.

Wait a minute: Are there no rules? Sure there are; but they are simple, and they are internal rather than external. Love is the rule of

your life. If you love God, and love your neighbor as yourself, you don't need any other rules. You will do what is good and just and right from the motive of love.

Outback Steakhouse has a slogan, *No rules - just right*. I don't know what that has to do with cooking my steak medium-well, but it touches upon what I'm saying. There are no rules to follow if you just do right.

How do you 'do right'? Earlier in this chapter Jesus gave you a simple formula. It's in verse twenty-eight, where He said, **hear the Word of God and keep it**. Let's see how that applies to us by looking at what Jesus next told the Scribes.

Luke 11:47 Woe to you! For you build the tombs of the prophets, and your fathers killed them.

Luke 11:48 In fact, you bear witness that you approve the deeds of your fathers; for they indeed killed them, and you build their tombs.

The Old Testament reads like an obituary of persecuted prophets. God sent them with simple words for the people to hear and keep; the Jews persecuted and killed them. The Scribes seemed as though they were honoring the dead prophets by digging deep into their words. But, by adding their own rules, they **killed** the prophets all over again!

Rules added to the word of God kill its power. The Word of God itself is alive and powerful. The best illustration of this, one I've used before (and Pastor John Miller used at our Beloved's Banquet), is the encounter Jesus had with the man with the withered hand. Jesus told the man to **stretch forth his hand**. It was the one thing he could not do – **until he received the Word of God**. Then he was immediately strengthened to do it. God's Word was God's enabling.

The man with the withered hand needed no rules or regulations to aid him in stretching forth his hand.

Luke 11:49 Therefore the wisdom of God also said, 'I will send them prophets and apostles, and *some of them they will kill and persecute,*'

Luke 11:50 *that the blood of all the prophets which was shed from the foundation of the world may be required of this generation,*

Luke 11:51 from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah who perished between the altar and the temple. Yes, I say to you, it shall be required of this generation.

Abel, the son of Adam and Eve killed by his brother, Cain, was the first martyred prophet. In the Jewish version of the Bible, **Zechariah** was the last martyred prophet.

The generation Jesus was addressing was the most spiritually privileged generation up to that time. Jesus was present on earth; He was more than a **prophet**, more than an **apostle**. He was the **wisdom of God** – the living Word of God. They had the words of all the prophets; they had the words and witness of John the Baptist; and they had Jesus Himself. Much was being given to them; much would be **required** of them.

In verse forty-nine, Jesus said, **some of them they will kill and persecute**. He was looking into the future – to the Book of Acts and through the Church Age.

Luke 11:52 “Woe to you lawyers! For you have taken away the key of knowledge. You did not enter in yourselves, and those who were entering in you hindered.”

Jesus called God’s Word **the key of knowledge**. These Scribes had the key; but, by adding to it, they made no use of the key themselves, nor did they allow anyone else to use it.

It’s a tragic fact of Church history that it’s leaders often kept it from the people. Even though we have God’s Word, it can be kept from people in other, more subtle ways:

1. You keep it from them when you don’t emphasize it by teaching it systematically.
2. You keep it from them when you teach it in a way that portrays it as difficult for the average person to comprehend.
3. You keep it from them when you talk about it, rather than simply preach it.

With all of our modern resources, how much more will be required of us? **We need to get the Word out!**

Luke 11:53 And as He said these things to them, the scribes and the Pharisees began to assail *Him* vehemently, and to cross-examine Him about many things, Luke 11:54 lying in wait for Him, and seeking to catch Him in something He might say, that they might accuse Him.

The **Scribes** and **Pharisees** were comfortable with their burdensome, external forms of religion. Their rituals and their rules had become barriers that kept God's Word from reaching their hearts.

Maybe that's the point. Rituals and rules seem to be things that will draw you closer to God, but they are not. Rituals are barriers; rules are burdens.

Conclusion

Christians are getting more-and-more interested in rituals and rules. You should avoid rituals; you should abandon rules.

Instead, believe Jesus when He said,

Matthew 11:28 Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.

Matthew 11:29 Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls.

Matthew 11:30 For my yoke *is* easy, and my burden is light.

