

Beneath the Surface

Passage: Luke 11:37–54 | From the series: Luke

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We've all been at that lunch where one person says the thing no one else dared to. This week, Jesus is that person. The ones who invited him never saw it coming. In Luke 11:37-54 Jesus pulls back the surface and reveals it's possible to appear faithful and still miss the heart of God: justice, mercy, love and care for people. How do we know when we've missed God's Heart?

We were so excited to get our first home. We'd been married a few years, saved up, and found a place in the East Bay. Everything about it looked good: corner lot, fresh paint, real curb appeal. You pulled up and thought, this looks good.

Then I was introduced to something called an inspection report.

I was shocked by how detailed it was. They had taken up-close pictures of everything they found. Suddenly, this house that looked so good from the curb had a whole list of things underneath the surface that needed attention.

The thing about an inspection is that it isn't concerned with curb appeal. They aren't there to stand across the street and say, "Wow, that paint looks good." Their job is to look closer. To get underneath. The curb doesn't tell the condition of the house.

That's not true of just houses. You can build a life with incredible curb appeal, say the right things, know the right things, be really good at "religious things" and still miss what matters most.

That is what makes this passage so uncomfortable. The people Jesus confronts care deeply about God. They know the Scriptures; they take obedience seriously. Yet in their attempt to honor God, they've missed God's heart.

How do we know when we've missed the heart of God?

This morning we are going to look in the window of a home where Jesus has been invited to eat. Before the meal is over, he's going to give the people around that table an inspection report they never asked for. And it all starts with some unwashed hands.

37 While Jesus was speaking, a Pharisee asked him to dine with him, so he went in and reclined at table. 38 The Pharisee was astonished to see that he did not first wash before dinner.

Jesus walks in, and the host notices he skips the hand-washing. On the surface, you might wonder what the big deal is. He didn't wash his hands. Not best practice, but come on.

To be clear, this is not the same as reminding your kids to wash up before dinner. This purity ritual started with the priests and worked its way into the home. The washing had less to do with dirt and more to do with becoming clean before God. One rabbinic saying goes so far as to compare eating bread with unwashed hands to sleeping with a prostitute. This was a big deal, and Jesus knew it.

And he did it in a Pharisee's home. The Pharisees were a religious group whose name literally means "the separated ones." They cared deeply about the things of God. They knew their Bibles. They took the Law so seriously that they built traditions around it to make sure they never crossed the line.

The scary part about the Pharisees is that they show us what it looks like to be so serious about God's law that you miss his heart.

Look at how Jesus responds to their astonishment.

39 And the Lord said to him, "Now you Pharisees cleanse the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside you are full of greed and wickedness. 40 You fools! Did not he who made the outside make the inside also? 41 But give as alms those things that are within, and behold, everything is clean for you."

Watch what Jesus does with that. He starts with the cup and the dish, then pivots straight to "you are full of greed and wickedness." Then he calls them fools, which in Old Testament wisdom literature isn't an insult about intelligence. It names a person whose pattern of life rejects the ways of God.

You can't separate the inside from the outside. No public self and private self. God made both, and they are tied together.

They saw Jesus' hands; he saw their heart.

In Matthew's account, Jesus ties what they're doing to the prophet Isaiah: "This people honors me with their lips, but their **heart** is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men."

Then Jesus says, "Give as alms." Almsgiving is caring for the poor, an expression of mercy, generosity, and concern for your neighbor. The phrase is working on two levels.

First, the intentionality they bring to washing hands and dishes should be aimed at the heart. Second, the very practical act of giving to the poor is how a heart gets cleansed of greed. It's the vehicle. It's hard to stay greedy while giving to people who can't give anything back.

Generosity is not only a fight for the poor; it is also a weapon against the greed in us.

And this is the foundation on which Jesus unleashes a boatload of woes.

You'll find "woe" all through the Bible, especially in the prophets announcing coming judgment. In Greek, it's a cry of distress. It holds both denunciation and lament. The NLT translates it as "What sorrow awaits you."

Seen through that lens, this helps us stop seeing Jesus as the rude lunch guest and shines the light on Jesus, who cares deeply about people headed down the wrong road.

Let's read the inspection report together.

The Woes to the Pharisees

42 "But woe to you Pharisees! For you tithe mint and rue and every herb, and neglect justice and the love of God. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others."

They are scrupulous, very meticulous about tithing to the point of extreme. The law called for a tithe on the harvest; they're counting out a tenth of the herbs in the window box. It's an over-the-top reading of the original command.

And yet they neglect justice. Doing right by people. How we treat one another, how we care for the marginalized, the poor, the vulnerable. This is what the prophet Micah said God was after all along:

"He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Micah 6:8)

Jesus isn't telling them to stop tithing. He's telling them they can't tithe their way out of caring for people. Both belong. The vertical and the horizontal. Both are worship.

43 "Woe to you Pharisees! For you love the best seat in the synagogues and greetings in the marketplaces."

Seating in the synagogue followed rank. The most honored sat up front, facing the congregation. This was a place of prayer and teaching, and yet what they loved was being seen. Being recognized. Being greeted by name in the market.

It's that human craving for prominence, in the one place where the focus was supposed to be on God.

44 "Woe to you! For you are like unmarked graves, and people walk over them without knowing it."

In that day there was a custom of coating graves with a limestone-and-water wash, especially before the pilgrimage feasts. The white made them easy to spot. That mattered, because contact with a grave made you ceremonially unclean. The marking warned: don't step here.

An unmarked grave gives no warning. You walk right over it and carry the defilement home with you, and you never knew. That's the charge. Their outside looks clean, but inside they are as dead

as the contents of a grave, and the people around them are being contaminated without knowing it.

They saw his hands; he saw their heart.

Neglected justice. Craving status. Contaminating people along the way.

So how do we know? Here's the first sign we've missed God's heart: when appearances matter more than transformation.

1. When Appearances Matter More Than Transformation

Look back at the list. The cup and the dish, tithing the herbs, the best seats. Each one is about how things look on the outside. And this is where it gets uncomfortable, in a productive way.

A mentor told me something years ago that I didn't fully understand then. He said, "The dangerous thing about ministry is that you can learn how to do it."

The longer I've been doing this, the more I understand what he meant.

You can learn how to preach, learn how to sing, learn how to lead public gatherings, learn what to say in the hospital room, lead a meeting, counsel somebody. You can get really good at the activity of ministry while your heart drifts from the God of ministry. That is not true of just pastors; that is true of Christians in general. You can learn the songs, the prayers, the Bible, and become proficient at the practices without being transformed by the person of Jesus.

We live in a world of optimization, polished resumes, personal brands, curated feeds. We are getting good at curb appeal. You can have the Christian vocabulary, the Bible app streak, the worship playlist and still be cruel to the people in your own house.

So the question isn't, "Do I look like a Christian?" The question is, "**Am I becoming like Christ?**"

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Just as he finished issuing the woes to the Pharisees, someone else jumps in, not knowing that he was about to become part of this wonderful inspection report.

45 One of the lawyers answered him, "Teacher, in saying these things you insult us also." 46 And he said, "Woe to you lawyers also! For you load people with burdens hard to bear, and you yourselves do not touch the burdens with one of your fingers."

The lawyers, sometimes called scribes or experts in the law, were the ones who interpreted and codified it. They built the fences around it. Rule upon rule, layered on top of the sacred text, until thousands of extra requirements had become a system that crushed the very people it was meant to guide. Breaking the original Law was serious. But the scribes' additions created an even greater fear.

And here's the part Jesus highlights. They loaded the weight on and never lifted a finger to help carry it. No encouragement, no support. Just more rules and a longer list.

Here's the second sign we've missed the heart of God: burdening people instead of helping.

2. When We Burden People Instead of Helping

A changed heart spills outward as mercy and compassion. Helping carry what someone else can't carry alone.

Have you ever helped somebody move? Imagine carrying a dresser into the house, and instead of helping to carry it, they throw more on top. Lord have mercy! Either take some off or help me carry this. That's what was happening, their version of "devotion" was adding weight.

Let me bring this home. In our Christian conservative circles, we are not short on opinions about how other people should move through this world. Theology, politics, parenting, sexuality.

But in the spirit of the text: Have we lifted a finger to help? To sit with them, bring them a meal, pray with them, help carry any of the weight?

It is easy to point out a burden. It is something else to help carry it.

What would it look like to make margin in our lives to get under the load with someone?

47 "Woe to you! For you build the tombs of the prophets whom your fathers killed. 48 So you are witnesses and you consent to the deeds of your fathers, for they killed them, and you build their tombs. 49 Therefore also the Wisdom of God said, 'I will send them prophets and apostles, some of whom they will kill and persecute,' 50 so that the blood of all the prophets, shed from the foundation of the world, may be charged against this generation, 51 from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah, who perished between the altar and the sanctuary. Yes, I tell you, it will be required of this generation."

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On the surface, this woe can feel unfair. They're building memorials to the prophets. Honoring them. What's wrong with that?

Here's what Jesus sees. Their fathers killed the prophets who spoke to them. This generation honors the prophets who are safely dead and resists the one standing in front of them. Same spirit. You can build a monument to a truth-teller and still refuse to be told the truth.

52 "Woe to you lawyers! For you have taken away the key of knowledge. You did not enter yourselves, and you hindered those who were entering."

The key of knowledge. They were supposed to open the door to God for people. Instead, they stood in it. They didn't go in, and they made sure no one else did either.

53 As he went away from there, the scribes and the Pharisees began to press him hard and to provoke him to speak about many things, 54 lying in wait for him, to catch him in something he might say.

And notice how the dinner ends. Jesus has just said, “You honor dead prophets and resist the living one.” They respond by leaving to plot against him. They prove the point on the way out the door!

Here’s the third sign we’ve missed the heart of God: when we become a barrier instead of a bridge.

3. When We Become a Barrier Instead of a Bridge

Prophets honored in stone and resisted in person. A door to God with someone standing in it. So here is the question I have to sit with. What kind of experience of God are people having because they encountered me?

There are people in our world who are not rejecting Jesus because they’ve carefully examined him. They’re rejecting him because they encountered us. They watched us use power in oppressive ways. They watched us baptize our political preferences and call it faith, in ways that harmed real people.

So when people encounter me, do they experience more mercy? More freedom? More truth? More generosity? More justice? More access to Jesus? Or have I somehow made God harder to get to?

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This is a heavy inspection report. You could easily walk out of here carrying all of it.

I am reminded of a contractor; he was a family connection who helped us with everything on our house inspection report. I remember asking him question after question. “How do you fix that? What about the crawl space?” Finally, he had to stop me.

“Cormac, this is what I do. This ain’t my first rodeo...”

Jesus doesn’t inspect what he isn’t willing to fix.

So the only right response to an inspection of our hearts is to turn to Jesus.

Turn to Jesus

Through confession and surrender, we let him work on the inside, so that we’re clean from the inside out. So our faith, our religious activity, and our spiritual practices are more than nice curb appeal. So that the core of who we are reflects the heart of God.

The kind of heart that loves people and points them to the Father.

For his glory. Amen.