Jesus, Religion & Your Heart
Luke 11:33-54

Well, as I was discussing with the youth a few weeks back, if you happen to have a red-letter Bible, which means whenever Jesus is speaking, the letters are in red, you will notice that the next few chapters in Luke are dominated by the teaching of Jesus. And, as I said to the young people, whenever we see these words in red our ears should prick up because we need to give Jesus our full attention. The entire bible is the Word of God and as 2 Timothy 3 reminds us, 'All Scripture is God-breathed and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.' But we really must give special attention to words in red. They shape everything. And that includes today's passage, which is the remainder of Luke 11. So let's pray as we get going.

Let me read the first 3 verses to you, Luke 11 verses 33 through 36.

33 "No one after lighting a lamp puts it in a cellar or under a basket, but on a stand, so that those who enter may see the light. 34 Your eye is the lamp of your body. When your eye is healthy, your whole body is full of light, but when it is bad, your body is full of darkness. 35 Therefore be careful lest the light in you be darkness. 36 If then your whole body is full of light, having no part dark, it will be wholly bright, as when a lamp with its rays gives you light."

My first point this morning is taken from the lyrics to an old Sunday school favourite:

'Be careful little eyes what you see'
Jesus is making his point in terms that we can all understand. He's saying, 'Listen, what you let in through your eyes matters…a lot!' A healthy eye is a clear or pure eye that takes in the light and benefits from that light. And a healthy soul is going to be one that takes in the light of God's truth. In Matthew 5:8, Jesus says that the pure in heart will see God. And when you can see God, and the eyes of your heart are focused on him, life makes sense, problems get smaller as your perspective gets bigger, life gets fuller, and relationships get better.

But Jesus warns us that receiving, or taking in this light is not automatic. We have to be receptive and make the effort. Because, the possibility of turning our eyes on darkness and taking it in, is very real, Why? Because we're surrounded by it aren't we? Remember, the devil disguises himself as an angel of light. And so things that will harm us often look good to us. Just as the fruit looked good to Eve, many vain things look good to us, and yet they will blur our vision and fill our body with darkness. Now, that could be the desire for more material things like homes, cars, holidays, comforts – and these become our focus. Young people [well, not just young; all of us], be careful what films you let your eyes on, what you look at on the internet, or read in magazines and books. We have to make the effort not to covet with our eyes don't we? We get like Gollum in Lord of the Rings! We have to have it. 'My precious!' We think we have to have what our eyes desire. I sometimes shock myself at the pathetic little things that charm me, like a bike part (I'm a cyclist) or a podium position.

Job made a covenant with his eyes; listen to what he said in Job 31:1 , 'I made a covenant with my eyes not to look with lust at a young woman.' Perhaps some of

us need to make a covenant with our eyes this morning. Don't be deceived, 'not all that glitters is gold.' And Jesus is saying, 'be careful what you take into your soul.' We have to guard our eyes, the eyes of our soul, very carefully because we can become blinded by sin and unbelief. Guard your eyes, because they will fill your body with either darkness or light, and you will reap what you sow. 'For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life' (Gal 6:8)

I really encourage you to keep your eyes focused on God this morning. But how can we do this? "How do I keep focused on God," you might ask. By looking to Him to fulfil your needs and desires and seeking His guidance in everything, having Him shape your character; through prayer and study of His word. Guidance is available through Jesus' teaching. But it can only guide when it is seen and received. One person (John MacArthur) said 'it's not a question of light; it's a question of sight. Light is everywhere. It's the sight that is the issue.'

So let's pray for wisdom and discernment, so that we don't fall prey to Satan's evil schemes. He's good at casting bait – bait the fish wants to take – and we're the fish, and he uses different bait for all of us, and that means what he uses for you will be different to what he uses for me. But it's all just an attempt to ruin God's plan for your life. Paul, writing to the Ephesians said, 'All things become visible when they are exposed by the light." (Eph 5:13.) Let's pray that the light of God exposes all things for us, especially the harmful things that can look so good, and let that light fill us, so that we can let it shine to those around us.

And so, as we read on, we'll see that there is a group of religious leaders that are manifesting this kind of darkness in their lives through false religion, hypocrisy, and hard-heartedness. Let's read together from verse 37-41.

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

And so Jesus begins to severely rebuke the Pharisees and the teachers of the law. Not exactly the gentle Jesus, meek and mild we perhaps thought! Jesus reserves his harshest words for these guys, and he relentlessly exposes the problem with their religion. My second point this morning is:

It's your heart, not religion that matters most

So Jesus accepts this invitation to the home of a Pharisee and goes straight in and reclines at the table. But hang on…he's forgotten to wash his hands…or has he? What was he thinking? How dare he? Nobody goes to the home of a Pharisee and walks right past the ceremonial hand-washing basin. Nobody except Jesus, the Son of God, on a mission to expose false religion. And so this Pharisee, Luke tells us, is absolutely astonished!

But you see Jesus didn't simply forget to wash his hands. He did it on purpose. Why? Because this was one of the many many many rituals that the Pharisees

and teachers of the law had elevated to biblical status and were imposing on the people. But nowhere in the Bible do we find, 'Thou must wash thy hands before dinner' 'You fools' Jesus calls them, he's saying, 'You've added all these extra laws to God's Word and what's worse is that now you're imposing them on everybody else, as though they are God's actual commands. But they're not, they're yours!' And so Jesus is coming along and rebuking them for doing exactly what Proverbs 30:5-6 says not to do, which is add to the Word of God. 'Every word of God proves true…Do not add to his words, lest he rebuke you and you be found a liar.

You see, the ceremonial hand washing was just one of the extra-biblical laws that these guys were authoritatively imposing. And there were many more. The OT itself contains some 613 laws given by God through Moses. And you'd think that that was enough to be going on with, but obviously not! These guys added tonnes more of their own!

You see, what Jesus is particularly angry about is the hypocrisy of what these guys were doing. You see they were going to all these lengths to cleanse the body, the outside, but all the time leaving their hearts totally uncleansed. And He's reminding his host, and everybody else there, that God is looking at the inner life, at the heart, and what is hidden in their hearts and that this is far more important to God than what is going on externally. 1 Samuel 16:7 reminds us of exactly this, 'The Lord does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.'

And we do well to give ourselves a heart check. It's a good practice to regularly take some time to assess our inner life in the presence of God; not just what we do, the externals, but also our heart behind what we do. Because let's face it, you can fool people, maybe you can even fool yourself, but you can't fool God.

God sees our hearts. God knows if we're truly in love with Him, and He knows our hidden motives. External religion can never judge the heart. It only judges the external appearances. So, we need to avoid this same trap of elevating our religious preferences to biblical commands. What do I mean? Well, anyone who's been in church for any length of time can, I'm sure, think of examples of what is meant by 'religious preferences.' It might be worship style: one person thinks drums are of the devil, another prefers the hymns, it might be bible translation: 'It's got to be King James Version, all the others are not inspired', it might even be rules about alcohol that the church set, rather than letting people come to their own conclusion from scripture. Dress, books, music, hobbies, whatever it is, let's be careful not to impose our 'preferences' upon others, because that just breeds legalism, resentment and a dead spirituality. Not to mention how it divides churches and ruins relationships.

But Jesus is on a roll now, he's just getting started. And so we'll read on. Verse 42,

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.* ***43*** *Woe to you Pharisees! For you love the best seat in the synagogues and greetings in the marketplaces.* ***44*** *Woe to you! For you are like unmarked graves, and people walk over them without knowing it."*

My third point this morning:

God hates hypocrisy

Jesus begins to pronounce woes upon the Pharisees and teachers of the law. When he says 'woe to you', he's literally saying 'what sorrow awaits you.' Jesus offers them repentance, but if they continue to harden their hearts: 'woe to them.' And so he brings their hypocrisy into the open, saying, 'you tithe mint and rue and every herb, and neglect justice and the love of God' These guys were so scrupulous about their religion that they'd literally go out in the garden and chop off a tenth of every herb and spice to put in the offering basket. I wonder how many of you guys blessed Westlake with some coriander this morning? Someone check the baskets! And Jesus is saying 'it's great that you tithe so meticulously but what about your fellow man? You don't even care if your fellow man is in need. You give God your herbs, but you don't even give your neighbour a meal' And so, despite following all these rules, they were neglecting the love and justice of God.

Jesus continues, saying, 'you guys love the front seats and the honour of the people but you're full of inner corruption and uncleanness like an unmarked grave, that people walk over without even knowing it' You see, it is possible to fool others. No doubt, people were thinking, 'Wow! You're the guy who gives 10% of your dill and your mint, and you always wash your hands and pray long prayers, you deserve the best seat in the synagogue…God must be so pleased with you' and yet it's quite the opposite. Jesus says 'no, you're deluding yourselves and others, woe to you' As one bible commentator (Ryle) rightly points out, 'In the secondary things of their religion they were great enthusiasts, but they were no better than pagans in many of the primary things.' In other words, they were majoring on the minors.

And we have to watch our hearts and be careful that we don't fall into this same religious trap. I don't know about you, but I really don't want to be committed to the wrong things like these guys were. For example, we don't want to be so scrupulous about our theological system, or some details of doctrine on secondary issues, that we neglect the more important things like loving and caring for others.

Rather, give your heart, your affections and your will to God. Stay open and be transparent before him. Repeatedly ask him, as David did, "Oh Father, Search me and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. Point out anything in me that offends you, and lead me in the path of everlasting life." (Ps. 139) Keep God, not religion, your primary concern. Keep Him your first love and at the centre of your life and then all your other actions will flow from the right heart and be pleasing and acceptable to Him.

And so, at this point, one of the lawyers comes to Jesus and says, verse 45, **45** *'Teacher, in saying these things, you've insulted us'* 'You've hurt our feelings Jesus…what about an apology?' And this just shows the hardness of their religious hearts. Jesus has said to them, 'Listen, give as alms those things that are within, and behold, everything is clean for you.' That's what you need to do…it's not too late! And these guys could have said, 'yeah it's true, we have over burdened people in our zeal, we are being hypocritical, we've got to change.' But they aren't willing to change. Jesus has confronted them, he's hurt their pride and now they want an apology, but Jesus doesn't give one. Instead he adds insult to injury, turning on the religious lawyers as well.

Verse 46: ***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.'* He's saying, 'Listen, you're burdening people unnecessarily and you're preventing them from learning about and knowing the true and living God.' Jesus is outraged with anyone who emphasises religion over true worship. And that is what religion does. It hinders people from falling in love with God. It ties them down at the level of the externals, never getting to the level of the heart.

Jesus continues, ***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.* ***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."*

And so we see just how hypocritical they are. With his insight, Jesus basically says, "Listen guys, if Zechariah or any other prophet, who you claim to honour, were alive right now, they'd challenge you, just as they did your ancestors, and how would you respond? In the same way as your fathers; you'd murder them, just as they did, because they'd be challenging this false religious system of yours." And we can know that what Jesus is saying here is absolutely true, because not long from now, these same religious leaders will have Jesus killed. Just like their spiritual fathers killed the prophets who opposed their religious system, so these guys will murder Jesus because he opposes theirs.

And so verses 53-54 prove, sadly, that they are not willing to humble themselves & repent. ***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 they continue to do this, until they eventually do bring a charge against him and he goes to the cross. But it's the cross that is the answer to religion and our hypocrisy. You see, the cross is not the end, but rather it's the beginning of new life. Jesus died on the cross in our place, for our sins, as our substitute, and rising from the dead, conquering sin and death, he now stands at the right hand of God in heaven offering us His righteousness and redemption. It's all about Jesus. It's not religion that will save you. Religion just makes people self-righteousness, boastful and legalistic. But the cross deeply humbles us. Religion is like trying to cover up our sick hearts, but the cross and the resurrection expose them, that we might be healed and have a new heart. We need to repent of our religion and come to Jesus. It's finished. The work has been done. God has lavishly poured out his grace upon us in sending Jesus. That's good news this morning! Let's pray.