

## How to lose friends and diminish influence (Luke 11:27-54)



Luke's gospel delivers a deathblow to the sentimental picture of Jesus as a 'nice person', who always looks for the good in people and never says anything hurtful to anyone. If Jesus were such a sweet person, why on earth would anyone want to crucify Him? But Jesus upset many people on His way to the cross. His way is a manual on 'How to lose friends and diminish influence.'

In this passage, Jesus takes on powerful people head-on and mercilessly exposes their folly and double standards.

1. The crowd was now wondering if Jesus was the Messiah they had been waiting for. Jesus never made a public claim to be the Messiah among the Jews. He did so to the gentiles only, e.g. the Samaritan woman. But the Jews were asking among themselves, "*Could this be the Son of David?*" (c.f. Matt 12:23) because signs, wonders, and miracles were following Jesus' ministry everywhere He went.
2. The Pharisees and the scribes reacted to this highly offensive suggestion by immediately leading a charge against Jesus that 'he is casting out demons by Beelzebub, the ruler of demons.' (11:15) On the other hand, the crowd wanted a test for Jesus, asking for a 'sign from heaven' (11:16) to prove that He is the Messiah.

Jesus' teaching on the two invisible kingdoms was His response to the Pharisees and Scribes' blasphemous charge. Now in His response to the crowd's demand for a sign from heaven, Jesus confronts the three groups of people – the Jews, the Pharisees, and the lawyers.

### A. Jesus exposes the Jews (Luke 11:29-32)

***"This is an evil generation. It seeks a sign, and no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah the prophet."*** (11:29) An evil generation! This was Jesus' consistent view of the people of His days. C.f. *'You then being evil know how to give good gifts to your children...'* (11:12) But what have they done to deserve the title, 'evil generation'?

1. Unbelieving heart - Jesus already performed countless signs, wonders, and mighty works in their midst. Haven't they seen enough signs? Healing the sick, raising the dead, casting out demons, and demonstrating the power of God? Yet they say, 'One more. Then I will believe.' But the truth is, people believe what they want to believe, and do not believe what they don't want to believe. E.g. Many people including those in the church, believe in heaven but they refuse to believe in hell. But the same person who taught about heaven, also taught about hell, and that is Jesus.

Let's note the following: (1) Jesus never did any miracle to prove anything. They are always directed towards saving people. (2) It is the height of irreverence for creatures, devil or human, to demand that God prove Himself. (3) Finally, Jesus' generation witnessed far more miracles than any other generation in Israel. To demand more signs beyond what they had already seen is simply a sign of unbelief - an attitude that refuses to believe. Jesus points to this attitude of unbelief as evil.

God will give the sign, but on His terms, not theirs. The sign for the Ninevites that Jonah was from God, was the prophet's reappearance from the fish's stomach after three days and three nights. The sign for the Israelites that Jesus was from God, would be his reappearance from the grave on the third day. (Jn 2:19) Just as rejecting Jonah's message would have brought God's judgment on Nineveh, so will rejecting Jesus invite God's judgment on Israel. Remember Jesus never appeared to the unbelieving Jews after His resurrection to prove His messiahship.

2. Lack of repentance at the hearing of the Word – The outstandingly wicked gentile city of Nineveh, modern Iraq, repented at Jonah's preaching. But the Jews of Jesus' days showed no sign of repentance at the preaching of the One far greater Jonah, who was accompanied by countless miracles.
3. Lack of interest in hearing the Word of God - The Queen of Sheba was from Southern Arabia, modern Yemen. This gentile queen came halfway around the then-known world just to hear the wisdom of Solomon. She believed in Yahweh, the God of Israel at hearing of Solomon's words without any signs and miracles. Yet the Jews of Jesus' generation sought more '*sign from heaven*' after seeing so many. They wanted to 'see' the spectacular, but they had little interest in hearing the word of God. Those uninterested in hearing God's word, cannot repent and believe. This was Jesus' definition of 'evil generation'.

4. Then Jesus turns their attention to the future. There is coming a day of reckoning, when the ‘men of Nineveh’ from the far north and the ‘Queen of the South’ from the far south, whom the Jews of His generation despised as primitive gentiles, will rise up to condemn them. These ‘wicked and underprivileged gentiles’ showed interest in hearing God’s word and the will to repent and believe in the God of Israel. In contrast, the Jews who were asking for yet another sign, only demonstrated their unbelieving heart, unrepentant will, and uninterested ears to hear the word of God.

Jesus would have lost many friends by this point. How about our generation? How about our heart, our will, and our ears?

5. Jesus gives one last illustration - ‘spiritual eyesight’. When our eyes are in good condition, we are blessed with the light that floods every part of our life, but if our eyes are in bad condition then our whole life is subject to darkness. In the same way when our ‘spiritual sight’ is bad, then our whole life is subject to spiritual darkness. Jesus says, “Take heed that light which is in you is not darkness!” I.e. If what we receive as ‘light’ in our lives to enlighten our understanding and show us the way, is actually ‘darkness’, how much darker would be the deepest darkness in our hearts! Interestingly the Greek word for ‘good eye’ is literally ‘single-eye’, and the ‘bad eye’ is literally ‘evil-eye.’ (C.f. Hebrew pun for ‘greedy eye’)

Apostle Paul prays, “*that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory may give you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him, the eyes of your understanding (heart) may be enlightened; that you may know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, and what is the exceeding greatness of His power toward us who believe...*” (Eph 1:17-19)

How do we get good spiritual eyesight? Through spiritual ear gates, by hearing and believing the word of God. Consider how much we sin with our eyes. The word of God talks about the ‘lust of the eyes.’

*David Pawson once shared a story of a lady who was blind for 40 years. She was so bitter and resentful, and it kept her from finding God. When David preached from Jesus’ words that it is better to lose our eyes and go to heaven than to have our eyes and be thrown into hell. Then he asked the lady, “Would you pray for us who have the eyesight and are in danger of hellfire?” For the first time she had compassion for the people with good eyesight, and she prayed for their soul, and she thanked God for her condition. At that point, she met the Lord and was saved. About a week later she was called home.*

## B. Jesus exposes the Pharisees (Luke 11:27-28)

Jesus shocked the Pharisee who invited Him to dinner. Jesus did not wash his hands before the meal! Knowing what the Pharisee was thinking Jesus denounced them three times, “Woe to you Pharisees!”

1. ‘You are so bothered about external.’ For the Pharisees, washing hands had nothing to do with hygiene. It was an elaborate regulation made for ceremonial purity. They washed their hands not only before a meal but also in between courses, from the elbow down, to remove the defilement from the sinful world. The exact quantity and the manner of washing were prescribed in minute detail in the *Mishnah* (Yadayim 1:1ff). Jesus calls them ‘foolish ones.’ They kept the meticulous rules of cleansing and yet were full of ‘greed’ and ‘wickedness’ inwardly. No amount of water can wash away the wickedness on the inside. Jesus was pointing out the huge gap between their concern for outward cleanliness and the sheer lack of inward purity.
2. ‘You are so concerned with petty details.’ They tithed with exactitude, including their backyard garden herbs. They planted the herbs with little gaps after every tenth row, so they do not accidentally withhold the tithe of herbs. Although tithing was a requirement under the law of Moses, this level of detail was never required (C.f. Lev 27:30; Deut. 14:22). Even their *Mishnah* said rue, small herbal shrub, was exempt. (Shebiith 9:1) The Pharisees were going way beyond even their own tradition. Jesus clearly endorsed tithing, ‘These you ought to have done without leaving the others undone.’ The Pharisees’ problem was focusing on the trivial detail to bolster their self-righteousness while glaringly neglecting the very heart of their religion – God’s justice and His love, i.e. love God with all your heart and live justly with one another.
3. ‘You love so much receiving public honour.’ ‘*For you love the best seats in the synagogues,*’ i.e. front seats facing the congregation, ‘*and the salutations in the market-places,*’ i.e. they chased ‘vainglory’ through their religion. This must have cut them very deeply. Jesus went on to say, “*Woe unto 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.” (11:44) The Pharisees who were so concerned with outward purity were like the deceptive ‘unmarked graves’ hiding decomposing corpses, so the people who unknowingly pass by them could contract real defilement. You can hardly imagine more insulting words from a dinner guest!

### C. Jesus exposes the Lawyers (Luke 11:27-28)

Lawyers and scribes were the teachers who trained the Pharisees in the law. They began objecting to Jesus, “Teacher, by saying these things You insult us also.” (11:45) And Jesus turned around to denounce them also three times, “Woe to you also, lawyers!”

1. “For you load men with burdens hard to bear, and you yourselves do not touch the burdens with one of your fingers” (11:46). They built an entire system of complicated rules and regulations of their own on top of the law of Moses, which made it impossible for the ordinary people to bear. Their *Mishnah* states, *it is more important to observe the scribal interpretations than the Law itself (Sanhedrin 11:3)*. But they themselves got out of it scot-free because they could scheme around the loopholes that allowed them to evade the Law whenever it suited them.

Jesus set the highest standard of all, but He invites us, “Come to Me, all you who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light.” (Matt 11:28-30). A yoke harnesses a pair of oxen together to pull the plough. When we put on Jesus’ yoke and plough with Him, we will have a fruitful harvest in our lives. Why? Because we learn from Jesus as He pulls with us. It is both a privilege and a delight to be yoked with Jesus.

2. ‘Your elaborate building projects for the tombs of the prophets prove that you are of the same spirit as your ancestors who killed the prophets’ (11:47-51). There is a strange phenomenon in human nature. When someone who is alive speaks the truth, we hate him for it, but when he is dead, suddenly we love him and build a monument in his honour. ‘We cane the living and canonise the dead.’ They honoured the dead saints but killed the living ones. Martin Luther King was hated and murdered for his message. Now we admire him. The list goes on with the reformers, Wesley, Spurgeon, William Seymour, etc. Why is it that we hate the living but admire the dead? Because they no longer can harass us with the truth. Jesus pointed to the lawyers as those standing in the murderous line of their ancestors who murdered the righteous Abel and every other righteous voice all the way to the prophet Zachariah.
3. ‘You have taken away the key of knowledge and you did not enter into it and did not let anybody else enter in’ (11:52). Jesus’ last denouncement summed up their most serious sin. Why was Jesus so merciless to these lawyers? It is because they made the Scriptures so complicated and difficult to understand, and furthermore impossible to live by, that the word of God became inaccessible to the ordinary people. These lawyers wallowed in their own spiritual prowess while missing the entire point of the Scriptures.

They were given the ‘true religion’ from God. They were given ‘the key of knowledge’. Key to what? The key to knowing God. But they used their religion to bolster their own self-righteousness. They were hyper-religious, but they had no relationship with God. Moreover, some people were on their way to knowing God until these lawyers turned them away from Him.

Jesus said, “You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me. But you are not willing to come to Me that you may have life.” (Jn 5:39-40)

*Do we encounter Christ the living Word through the written Word of God by the power of the Holy Spirit? Or do we use our knowledge of the Scriptures as a badge of our spiritual prowess?*

### D. Who are the Truly Blessed? (Luke 11:27-28)

1. When Jesus finished preaching in the previous passage a mother in the crowd cried out, ‘Blessed is the womb that bore you, and the breasts which nursed you!’ She was saying, “I wish I were your mother! I wish you were my son!” But Jesus replied, “More than that, blessed are those who hear the word of God and keep it!” (11:28). In other words, ‘You can have a blessing greater than my own mother. Blessed are those who hear and obey the word of God.’ There is one simple but sure way to God’s blessing over our lives. Hear the word of God and keep it – obey it and live by it.

2. Who is more blessed? Bearing Jesus in the womb for nine months? Or truly knowing Jesus intimately and walking with Him throughout eternity? Who is Jesus' family? Those who know God and love Him and do His will – they are Jesus' family, His brothers, and His bride. Jesus is saying, "I go for relationship, not relatives."  
The invitation to truly know God is open to each one of us.