

December 4, 2016

I Want to Know Jesus

"I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead."

Philippians 3:10-11

"Now then, you Pharisees clean the outside of the cup and the dish, but inside you are full of greed and wickedness...Woe to you...because you give God a tenth...but neglect justice and the love of God...Woe to you...because you love the most important seats...Woe to you because you are like unmarked graves...woe to you because you load people down with burdens they can hardly carry...Woe to you because you build tombs...Woe to you...because you have taken away the key to knowledge...and hindered those who were entering."

Luke 11:37-53

We have talked before about the religious/political situation in Israel in Jesus' day. The politics of that day was intimately connected to the religious beliefs of the Jews. The leading political factions included the Pharisees, the Sadducees, and other less popular groups like the Essenes. The Pharisees held sway in the high court of the Jews, the Sanhedrin, and so exerted a lot of power over the religious practices of the day. And, of course, they led the opposition to Jesus almost from the beginning of his ministry.

Eventually Jesus spoke out strongly against these religious leaders, boldly condemning their actions and attitudes. In fact these leaders were the only people that Jesus actively condemned. So, what was it they were doing wrong and are we in danger of doing the same things?

Luke records six specific woes that Jesus pronounced against the actions and attitudes of these leaders.

- *"You clean the outside of the cup..."* This really doesn't have a lot to do with dishes. Because God, in the Law of Moses, had warned the people about using tainted dishes the Jewish leaders had developed a whole set of rules and regulations to guide the process of washing something the 'right' way. At the center of Jesus' condemnation of these leaders was this exact problem. They created rules and regulations to guide others in doing things the 'right' way and ended up lost in those rules.
- *"...You give a tenth..."* Similarly, the Law of Moses commanded God's people to contribute a tenth of all that they had to the Temple each year. The Jewish elite were careful to keep this command even giving a tenth of household spices. But, they would, at the same time, prevent justice and encourage hatred.
- *"...you love the most important seats..."* Because they desired the prestige of their position these religious leaders created opportunities to be the center of attention. They loved the praise of others even when many of their actions were hardly praiseworthy.
- *"...like unmarked graves..."* This condemnation is a bit more difficult to understand. I believe that Jesus is condemning these religious elite because much of what they teach others to do and be ends up causing them to sin. What looks and sounds good was, in fact, evil.
- *"...you load people down..."* In creating our own rules and regulations for every spiritual function we are adding to the burden of obedience that being a disciple demands. God wants us to obey his commands which *"...are never burdensome..."* Too often our rules and regulations make obedience impossible.

- “...*you build tombs...*” This reference is also a bit obscure, but I am convinced that this is also referring to the way our surface actions can hide the truth about who we really are and what we really believe and condon.
- “...*you have taken away the key to knowledge...*” Frankly, this one scares me the most of these six woes. I have come to believe that the simplicity of the good news of God's plan to rescue us from sin's consequences by his grace may well be hidden by our focus on 'right church.' Rather than showing the lost the way to God's grace we have hidden that way in all of the rules and regulations that make up our view of 'right church' and this is what we teach.

These woes pronounced by our Lord stand as solemn warnings to each of us not to get caught up in religious practices that take us away from God's simple plan for us. Trying to create righteousness through adherence to our own rules will never save us.