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Luke 11:27-54 – Blessings, Signs, and Woes: Jesus Boldly Goes There

When the crowds were increasing, he began to say, “This generation is an evil generation. It seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah.” -- Jesus, Luke 11:29

Our lesson this week begins with an odd exclamation from the crowd—a blessing for his mother. **Read Luke 11:27-28.** Jesus had just spoken regarding the demonic activity which He came to destroy (1 John 3:8), and a lady in the crowd calls out a rather explicit blessing! Note two cultural differences: 1) it was unusual for women to speak out in a crowd like this, evidencing the good effect Jesus had; and 2) we would be shocked to hear a blessing upon reproductive parts like this, whereas they were more matter-of-fact. Jesus’ reaction is not to disavow any blessings on Mary (Luke 1:46-48), but to elevate those who hear and obey His words. Jesus pronounces a blessing on those who *keep* His word (Greek: *phylassō*), which means guarding and protecting. Standing up for God’s word, even if countercultural, carries greater blessing.

Read 11:29-36. We learn the crowds are growing, but Jesus returns to a point of criticism from verse 16--skeptics wishing to test him asked for additional signs from heaven. Having already addressed those critics who questioned His source of power (reminder, it is not Beelzebul), Jesus, knowing their evil intent, calls them out, then brings up what He terms the “sign of Jonah”, referring to the O. T. prophet. How was Jonah a “sign” to the people of Nineveh? Recall he tried to run away from the mission of warning the Ninevites about a coming judgment. He hated the mission due mainly to their being Assyrians, who had a history of attacking Israel. The sign came from Jonah having spent three days inside the belly of a fish (Jonah 1:17) and some commentators speculate the stomach secretions may have disfigured Jonah’s skin, making him stand out from the crowd. Jesus knows that after He is put onto the cross, He will also be in the tomb until the third day—but disfigured only in the sense of His crucifixion scars, since He proved obedient to God. But His sign will be in a resurrected body. The crowd wants a sign from heaven and God gives us the greatest evidence that Jesus’ atoning sacrifice accomplished its intent: by bringing Jesus back from the dead. Further, Jesus says something incredibly offensive to the Jewish crowd: Both the Gentile Queen of Sheba, who came from afar (Ethiopia?) to hear Solomon’s wisdom, and the Assyrian Ninevites will testify that someone greater than Solomon and Jonah are before them, but they are missing it. What an indictment! Michael Wilcox puts it this way:

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Our desire is to witness God’s work in transforming hearts.
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In Jesus something greater is happening. The Holy Spirit has broken into the world in power, and by means of a real death, a real burial, and a real resurrection, he is able to offer to the world a real salvation, at the deepest possible level. That which the story of Jonah illustrated and foreshadowed is made actual in the person of Jesus.¹

Jesus continues that His people have been given a great light to share but they are covering it. Further, their eye is missing the light in front of them (John 1:9-11). Absent God's light we exist in darkness; pray to have His light illumine your life.

Our last section this week is loaded. **Read 11:37-54.** Upon a dinner invitation from an unnamed Pharisee, Jesus trips a religious custom by not washing before dinner. Lest we think this was about hygiene only, we need to understand this actually speaks to ceremonial washing. But Jesus is not unclean. In fact, we have seen a sick woman touch His robe and made well (8:44), Jesus touch a dead girl and raise her (8:54-55), and many unclean spirits cast out (11:14). He is the only One who can make the unclean clean and this host is offended that Jesus does not wash? Jesus' harsh response instructs us of the impropriety of anyone suggesting the perfect Son of God is unclean. He launches into a pronouncement of six "woes", three against the Pharisees and three against the lawyers. Throughout His public ministry Jesus only speaks this harshly against those in power; especially those resting in self-righteousness and misleading others—He never uses such words against the sick, the poor, or the downtrodden. Jesus teaches, but He also provokes them intentionally.

Jesus basic concern throughout His ministry always concerned the heart of His listeners. No matter what you do, if your heart is not aligned with God it is all for naught. We, like the Pharisees, are good at showing a clean exterior, while harboring filthiness inside. Woe #1: They fastidiously monitor the tithe, down to the seeds, but neglect the heavier tasks of justice toward their fellow man and love of God; their priorities are out of order. Woe #2: They enjoy the recognition and perks of service, overly involved in each other's ranks and positions, all placed over the needs of others. Woe #3: In actuality they are "unmarked graves", and people are unwittingly being corrupted (unclean) by association, while expecting righteousness! Shocking statements.

A lawyer speaks up, and draws fire onto his own position! Jesus turns on this group, billed as experts in the Law of God: Woe #4: They load people with legal burdens but do not hold themselves to the same standard of behavior. Woe #5: They honor the prophets' tombs but actually have the same rebellious heart that caused many of God's martyrs. Jesus details from the first murder, of Abel (Gen 4), to the last prophet, Zechariah (recorded in 2 Chronicles 24:20-22, which closed the Hebrew historical books). The spilling of innocent blood evokes a strong reaction, such that Jesus repeats an accounting would occur on that generation, likely meaning the fall of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. Woe #6: Those charged with keeping God's Word and sharing its meaning were negligent. They missed the light and they kept others in darkness. Thus, they work at cross purpose with Jesus' mission as the light of the world. The chapter ends with battle lines drawn between the religious leaders and One they consider an upstart rebel. The table is being set for the cross.

1. Michael Wilcox, *The Message of Luke, The Saviour of the World*, Inter-Varsity Press, Leister, England, 1979, pg 129.

Questions To Ponder Further: *Does our religious activity in any way hamper our communion with God? How might you react to having a woe pronounced upon you in your own home? Meditate on Jeremiah 23:23-32—let God's work hammer your stony heart (v 29) until you are in synch with Him! Do not miss the light.*

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