

In America, politicians are often looked down upon for running negative advertisements. They are seen as divisive and inflammatory by voters who wish to have only nice things said. While it is true that if nice things can be said, they should, there is also a time for negative talking. If a certain candidate's ideas are dangerous, they should be called dangerous, but only after careful consideration. Careless rhetoric never helped anyone, but clear warnings are often beneficial. Sometimes people think that Christians should never be negative. Many churches stop talking about Hell and God's wrath. They don't want people to be uncomfortable or offended by talk about judgment and sin. While it is true that negative talk is sometimes abused, it is sometimes needed as well.

Consider this: Let's say you went into your doctor's office and he examined you. Let us say that while he was running various tests on you, he discovered something very serious that needed an important operation. What would you think of your doctor if he came into the consultation room and told you that you should eat the right foods and get more exercise? You would say that he was doing you a disservice. If your doctor thinks you have a serious disease, you would much rather him tell you that you will die without the serious surgery required. It may be negative, but it may be the only thing that gets your attention and allows him to operate on you and save your life.

There are those who say that preachers and teachers should not be negative and loud in their pulpits. They should never talk bad about anyone else. I will say first of all that the Old Testament is full of people whose message was very negative. God told Isaiah: "Cry aloud, spare not, lift up thy voice like a trumpet, and shew my people their transgression, and the house of Jacob their sins." He told Jeremiah to tell the people: "Your iniquities have turned away these things, and your sins have withholden good things from you." The Old Testament prophets used fiery, negative speaking to get their points across. "Well," someone may say, "that doesn't mean that New Testament preachers should. Jesus and Paul would never have talked that way."

The second thing I would like to say is that Paul did in fact use very harsh language when he needed to. Consider these examples. He told the Corinthian church: "And I, brethren, could not speak unto you as unto spiritual, but as unto carnal, even as unto babes in Christ. I have fed you with milk, and not with meat: for hitherto ye were not able to bear it, neither yet now are ye able. For ye are yet carnal: for whereas there is among you envying, and strife, and divisions, are ye not carnal, and walk as men?" He asked the Galatian churches in Galatians 3:1: "O foolish Galatians, who hath bewitched you, that ye should not obey the truth, before whose eyes Jesus Christ hath been evidently set forth, crucified among you?" He called out people's names, as in 1 Timothy 1:19-20, where he says: "Holding faith, and a good conscience; which some having put away concerning faith have made shipwreck: of whom is Hymenaeus and Alexander; whom I have delivered unto Satan, that they may learn not to blaspheme."

Paul was not afraid to say what needed to be said, even if it was negative and may have hurt someone. The intention was never really to hurt anyone, but to try to get people to see the error of their ways. If Paul could put things in such stark terms that they saw their need for repentance and did so, then he would use whatever means necessary. The American church suffers sometimes from too much sensitivity. We need more straight talk about our sinfulness. But this straight-talk should always point us to Christ-likeness. Paul says as much in 2 Corinthians 7:8-10. He says to the church there: "For though I made you sorry with a letter, I do not repent, though I did repent: for I perceive that the same epistle hath made you sorry, though it were but for a season. Now I rejoice, not that ye were made sorry, but that ye sorrowed to repentance: for ye were made sorry after a godly manner, that ye might receive damage by us in nothing. For godly sorrow worketh repentance to salvation not to be repented of: but the sorrow of the world worketh death."

But what about Jesus? Did He ever use brutal language? That will be the subject of our discussion this morning. Some say that Jesus was never confrontational or negative. He never made anyone feel bad. People who say this

have probably never read the Gospel accounts very carefully. Again, consider these few examples before we look at our passage. In Matthew 23:33, Jesus said: “Ye serpents, ye generation of vipers, how can ye escape the damnation of hell?” It says in Luke 13:31-32: “The same day there came certain of the Pharisees, saying unto him, Get thee out, and depart hence: for Herod will kill thee. And he said unto them, Go ye, and tell that fox, Behold, I cast out devils, and I do cures to day and to tomorrow, and the third day I shall be perfected.” Jesus was not one to hold back when it came to calling out others, and we will see this in our passage today.

Luke 11:37-44 says “And as he spake, a certain Pharisee besought him to dine with him: and he went in, and sat down to meat. And when the Pharisee saw it, he marvelled that he had not first washed before dinner. And the Lord said unto him, Now do ye Pharisees make clean the outside of the cup and the platter; but your inward part is full of ravening and wickedness. Ye fools, did not he that made that which is without make that which is within also? But rather give alms of such things as ye have; and, behold, all things are clean unto you. But woe unto you, Pharisees! for ye tithe mint and rue and all manner of herbs, and pass over judgment and the love of God: these ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone. Woe unto you, Pharisees! for ye love the uppermost seats in the synagogues, and greetings in the markets. Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye are as graves which appear not, and the men that walk over them are not aware of them.”

We have talked about the Pharisees in the past in detail, so I will not take long to talk about them this morning, but I will say that they were a group of religious leaders who believed the Old Testament was authoritative and that God wanted to be obeyed. The problem is that they had over the centuries added to the Old Testament, so that it became more important to obey the Jewish rabbinic traditions, rather than the text of the Old Testament. Not every Pharisee was unfriendly to Christ and the Christian message. When Jesus died, two Pharisees named Joseph and Nicodemus helped take his body down from the cross. Acts 15:5 says that some of the Pharisees became believers, though they didn't have a full understanding. The apostle Paul himself was a Pharisee who became a believer in Jesus. But the most vocal of them in Jesus' day opposed him, as we see here.

This Pharisee asks Jesus to dine with him, which was a great honor. However, he notices that Jesus does not wash his hands. This is more than a faux pas on Jesus' part; it was a contradiction of the Jewish traditions. This idea of washing the hands came from an elaborate and drawn-out understanding of the Torah. There is no doubt that the Old Testament law was concerned with purity. The word “unclean” appears 138 times in Exodus through Deuteronomy, and the word “clean” appears 66 times. There were all kinds of things in the Law that could defile a person and break their fellowship with God. This was clear in the Bible, but there were many things that were not clear. To address these issues, the rabbis began to surmise what God might have said if he had addressed the specific instance. For example: “Should you wash your hands before you eat?”

In Exodus 30 the priests are commanded to wash their hands before performing their duty in the tabernacle. Some then said that a man's house should be treated as sanctified to God as the tabernacle and temple were sanctified to God, and so hands should be washed. But, said another, the things in one's house are not sanctified to God as the things in the Temple. Someone else then pointed out that the Bible said in Psalm 24:1: “The earth is the LORD'S, and the fulness thereof; the world, and they that dwell therein.” This means that everything you eat is sanctified to the Lord. Therefore, said the rabbis, hands needed to be washed before eating food.

A blessing was also to be said. For this, the rabbis endlessly disputed among themselves what constituted fruit and what constituted bread, and which blessings should be said for each kind of food. It was also determined when the blessing should be said. The Pharisees said that a blessing could be said over the bread at the beginning of the meal that was good for the entire meal unless something else was brought in, at which time a blessing was needed for that food as well. They would wash one hand, say the blessing over the wine, wash both hands, and then say the blessing over their bread.

But how should they be washed? For this question, the rabbinic traditions became very specific, even down to how much water was to be used, what kind of vessels could be used, and in what order their fingers should be

washed. Oddly enough, the Pharisees even said that hand-washing was all that was needed when the Bible commanded the entire body to be washed, as in Leviticus 13-14. By doing this, the Pharisees had made laws that became burdensome to everyday life, but also circumvented God's Law. We see how seriously these Pharisees took these laws in Mark 7, which says: "For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, except they wash their hands oft, eat not, holding the tradition of the elders. And when they come from the market, except they wash, they eat not. And many other things there be, which they have received to hold, as the washing of cups, and pots, brasen vessels, and of tables."

Jesus had disregarded these man-made laws at times, to the consternation of the religious leaders. They do not call Jesus out publicly, but judge Jesus and "marvel" that he doesn't keep their traditions. In response to this, Jesus confronts the Pharisees and then puts forward six different woes to them. What is a woe? A woe is a condemnation. This was a word found often in the prophetic writings of the Old Testament. Isaiah uses the word 21 times, Jeremiah 12, and Ezekiel 9 times. It is the same word as "Curse." It is both an announcement that the people have sinned and displeased God, and that God will soon do something about it. Let us look at these condemnations Jesus hurls at his detractors.

First Jesus calls out the Pharisees and some of their practices. He accuses them of trying to wash the outside of their bodies, literally, but not washing their insides, spiritually. Jesus uses the analogy of washing cups, and says that it is more important that the inside of the cup is clean than that the outside is clean. This is true, isn't it? If you had a choice between drinking water from a cup that was dirty on the outside but clean on the inside and one that was dirty on the inside but clean on the outside, you would no doubt pick the one that was clean on the inside. Why? Because the filthiness that was inside the cup would get into the water you drank and pollute you as well, whereas you may be able to avoid filthiness on the outside of the cup.

The Pharisees were obviously polluted on the inside. They appeared to care about God and obeying His laws, but they were more interested in obeying their own man-made commandments and laws. It was easier for them to look the part of a good person than to actually obey the word of the Lord and do right. He says that inside of these Pharisees is "ravening and wickedness." That word "ravening" means "to pillage," and means that the Pharisees were guilty of extortion and greed.

Jesus points out that they should not think of the body as an inside and an outside, since the entire thing is made by God and should be taken in whole. It is true, if you think about it. It is impossible for a potter to make the inside of a cup without making the outside of the cup. You cannot buy just the outside of a cup. It comes with the inside. These religious leaders were thinking of the body as two parts: one people could see and one people could not see. Instead, says Jesus, the Pharisees should give what they have to the poor, and everything about them would be clean. Giving to the poor is both a good thing to do that comes from a good heart, and it looks like a moral act. The only problem for the Pharisees with giving to the poor is that it did not afford the opportunity to look pious with little personal loss.

It is for this reason that Jesus launches into his six woes against them. We will look at the first three in the passage we have already read. The first is found in verse 42: "But woe unto you, Pharisees! for ye tithe mint and rue and all manner of herbs, and pass over judgment and the love of God: these ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone." One of the religious practices they performed was tithing. What is tithing? The root of the word "tithe" is "tenth." Tithing is giving a tenth of what you have to God. This practice has its roots early in the Bible. The first instance is when Abraham came back from recovering his nephew Lot. Genesis 14:18-20 says "And Melchizedek king of Salem brought forth bread and wine: and he was the priest of the most high God... And he gave him tithes of all." Another instance is when Abraham's grandson Jacob runs away from home. He swears to God in Genesis 28:22: "of all that thou shalt give me I will surely give the tenth unto thee."

This idea of tithing was carried into the Law. God said in Leviticus 27:30 “And all the tithes of the land, whether of the seed of the land, or of the fruit of the tree, is the LORD'S: it is holy unto the LORD.” He said in Deuteronomy 14:22: “Thou shalt truly tithe all the increase of thy seed, that the field bringeth forth year by year.” This idea of tithing is still practiced by many Christians as well. The New Testament never commands Christians to tithe. It says: “Every man according as he purposeth in his heart, so let him give; not grudgingly, or of necessity: for God loveth a cheerful giver.” However, when a Christian thinks about how much of all that he has he should give back to God, a tithe is a good place to start. Many people give more than a tithe in order to see God's work go forward. Giving of one's resources is the very least that can be done by a Christian.

These Pharisees tithed as well. However, they took great pains to tithe of everything they had. The law commanded them to tithe of their fruit and flocks, but the Pharisees, in typical Pharisaic fashion, meticulously tithed of everything they had. The examples that Jesus provides are mint and rue. The Mishna, or the oral tradition, had carefully prescribed everything that had to be tithed. Interestingly enough, rue, which is a plant used for medicine as well as cooking, was omitted from the rabbinic list. Jesus was not saying that they should not have done this. His fault-finding lies in the fact that they were so careful in counting out mint leaves that they had passed over the really important moral acts, namely judgment and the love of God.

Too many times Christians get too preoccupied with causes and pet projects that they forget showing the perfect attributes of what a Christian should be. It is good for churches to have choirs, and it is nice to have good singers in those choirs, but sometimes people who want to simply serve and “make a joyful noise” are excluded because their voice isn't as nice. This is omitting the important things in the Christian life, like love and mercy, in favor of good music. The Pharisees existed, not to bring honor to themselves, but to honor God and help others to serve God as well.

The second woe is found in verse 43: “Woe unto you, Pharisees! for ye love the uppermost seats in the synagogues, and greetings in the markets.” This was a denunciation of the Pharisees self-importance. The synagogue was like a modern day church. When you go to church, probably you can sit wherever you want, usually in the very back, and no one pays much attention. However, in Jesus' day the seating was important. Only those who were the most pious and well-respected were allowed to sit at the front, where the teaching went. This was partly because the Jewish synagogue had much more conversation involved in the teaching, rather than listening. There was much back-and-forth, and so the most intelligent wanted to be in the front of the synagogue. As well, it was customary to greet those who were well-respected in your community. These were nice side effects of being a religious leader, but the Pharisees had come to rely on and expect them.

They loved the greetings they received in the markets, because it spotlighted their own significance. Even more than that, it highlighted their importance over those who were not being greeted. I will say this: there is nothing wrong with being recognized for something good done. Proverbs 27:2 says “Let another man praise thee, and not thine own mouth; a stranger, and not thine own lips.” When someone praises you, this cannot be helped. However, Jesus is angry with them because they love the prominence they are getting with the position God has given them. Jesus said in Luke 10:27 that what they are supposed to love is God with all of their heart, soul, mind, and strength. They have given up the love of God for the love of the position.

The third woe is found in verse 44: “Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye are as graves which appear not, and the men that walk over them are not aware of them.” This was a denunciation against a subtle danger. As stated previously, there were hundreds of things in the Law that could make a man unclean and defiled. One of these things, found in Numbers 5:2, was touching a dead body. However, the rabbis and elders had, once again, expanded this to mean a tomb or sepulcher as well. It was for this reason that there was usually a marker that told everyone that there was a grave there. Jesus is comparing them to graves that are not marked, so that someone taking a simple walk has defiled himself without even knowing. These Pharisees had created laws that prevented people from keeping the Law while appearing to help them keep it. Jesus calls them “hypocrites” for doing this.

At this point, those at the supper table are getting agitated at what Jesus is saying. There are others at the table who are guilty of these same sins. They now address Jesus and Luke 11:45-52 records this: “Then answered one of the lawyers, and said unto him, Master, thus saying thou reproachest us also. And he said, Woe unto you also, ye lawyers! for ye lade men with burdens grievous to be borne, and ye yourselves touch not the burdens with one of your fingers. Woe unto you! for ye build the sepulchres of the prophets, and your fathers killed them. Truly ye bear witness that ye allow the deeds of your fathers: for they indeed killed them, and ye build their sepulchres. Therefore also said the wisdom of God, I will send them prophets and apostles, and some of them they shall slay and persecute: that the blood of all the prophets, which was shed from the foundation of the world, may be required of this generation; from the blood of Abel unto the blood of Zacharias, which perished between the altar and the temple: verily I say unto you, It shall be required of this generation. Woe unto you, lawyers! for ye have taken away the key of knowledge: ye entered not in yourselves, and them that were entering in ye hindered.”

Jesus is reproached by the lawyers sitting at the table. These were not civil lawyers like you might be thinking, but experts in the Mosaic Law. They were people who knew the Bible and oral traditions well. They also were the ones who would have been in charge of teaching it to the younger generations. They were the Torah-teachers. Their complaint is that the things that Jesus is saying to the Pharisees might implicate them as well. True to form, they expected that they might be exempt from such scathing language. However, Jesus intends these woes for them as well. The first one is found in verse 46: “Woe unto you also, ye lawyers! for ye lade men with burdens grievous to be borne, and ye yourselves touch not the burdens with one of your fingers.”

The elders had counted 365 prohibitions and 248 commandments in the Mosaic Law. These 613 laws of God were to be obeyed precisely. To many, this was a burden that was hard to bear. Paul even speaks of this in his epistle. He says, “For I was alive without the law once: but when the commandment came, sin revived, and I died. And the commandment, which was ordained to life, I found to be unto death. For sin, taking occasion by the commandment, deceived me, and by it slew me. Wherefore the law is holy, and the commandment holy, and just, and good.” The Law was made so that mankind could see how far short we all fall. There is no way that anyone can keep God’s moral law perfectly. Romans 3:10-12 says: “As it is written, There is none righteous, no, not one: there is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God. They are all gone out of the way, they are together become unprofitable; there is none that doeth good, no, not one.”

As hard as this Law was to do, however, God had two solutions. The first was mercy. God knows that we cannot keep His Law fully, and so offers mercy to those who love God, though imperfectly. Psalm 103:14 says “For he knoweth our frame; he remembereth that we are dust.” The second was the prophets and other godly men to help teach the Law. God’s commands are not meant to be kept by ourselves alone. This is another good reason for church. It is hard to obey God’s Law when we are living all by ourselves trying to do right. The pressures from the world, Satan, and our sinful desires often prove too difficult. However, those who are connected with other believers have help to overcome these temptations. Jesus Himself said this in Matthew 11:28-30: “Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

However, these lawyers and Pharisees were not helpful, but had made more burdens for Israel. Now, not only did the people of Jesus day have to worry about tithing, but they had to worry about tithing of every single thing that they owned. Not only did they have to worry about not working on the Sabbath, but they had to worry about not doing anything on the Sabbath. Jesus accuses these lawyers of not only not helping people keep God’s Law, but actually making it more difficult for them to do so. He says, “ye yourselves touch not the burdens with one of your fingers.” Is this true of you? Do you sit in condemnation for those who fail to keep God’s law though they try? I am not talking about excusing sin and saying that Christians may do whatever they want without consequences, but sometimes we can be so harsh on those who are really trying to do what is right. We ought to be a help, not a hindrance to people growing more like Christ.

The fifth woe is found in verse 47: “Woe unto you! for ye build the sepulchres of the prophets, and your fathers killed them.” Then, as now, graves are often marked. However, if someone was very important, his grave became like a shrine. This is intimated in Acts 2:29-30, where Peter points out David’s grave. They were national monuments to people like Isaiah, Jeremiah, David, and Elisha. Yet, Jesus says, it is ironic that they honor these former godly men, since it was people just like them who killed or tried to kill them. Jesus is not saying that the literal fathers of these lawyers had killed anyone, but that had Isaiah lived among them, these lawyers would have done what the ancients had done unto him. They would have put him inside a log and sawed him in half, which is what tradition says happened to Isaiah. The proof that Jesus is telling the truth about this is that just a little while later they put to death a greater than Isaiah: Jesus.

These Pharisees had contradictory statements. By decorating the graves of the prophets, they said that they approved their message. Yet Jesus’ message was the same message, and they were seeking to kill Him. Therefore, they were really against the Old Testament prophets. He says something very interesting in verses 50-51: “That the blood of all the prophets, which was shed from the foundation of the world, may be required of this generation; from the blood of Abel unto the blood of Zacharias, which perished between the altar and the temple: verily I say unto you, It shall be required of this generation.” What is Jesus saying here?

Jesus is first saying that he is the culmination of all of the prophets in the Old Testament. He is the figurehead and the representation. Tacit approval of him means approval of all the prophets. Rejection of Jesus means rejection of the prophets, no matter what the lawyers might say about them. Second, Jesus is saying that since this generation is rejecting Him, all the sins and murders committed in the past will be put on their record as well. He says that all the blood shed will be required of that generation. They will come under the greatest condemnation because of their rejection of Jesus. Third, he says how far-sweeping this blood-accountability will go. He names two people: Abel and Zacharias. It is interesting that in English this is A-Z because this is the same idea. The Jewish Bible began with Genesis and ended with 2 Chronicles. Genesis 4 records the first murder ever, Abel, and 2 Chronicles 24:20-22 talks about the last murder: that of Zacharias. Therefore, Jesus is saying that every murder of every prophet in the Bible will come upon that generation for their rejection of Him.

The sixth woe is found in verse 52, and we must hurry: “Woe unto you, lawyers! for ye have taken away the key of knowledge: ye entered not in yourselves, and them that were entering in ye hindered.” God has a way that He wants for man to live. There is one way for mankind to get into heaven. These Pharisees and lawyers should have known what God wanted and encouraged others to enter in. But instead they took away the key, as it were, and prevented others from going in, all the while refusing to go in themselves. They were guilty of rejecting the only means God provided for salvation. Jesus Christ is our only way as well. The proof that they had rejected Jesus is found in the last two verses, found in Luke 11:53-54: “And as he said these things unto them, the scribes and the Pharisees began to urge him vehemently, and to provoke him to speak of many things: laying wait for him, and seeking to catch something out of his mouth, that they might accuse him.”

Friend, don’t commit the same sins that these lawyers and Pharisees committed. You have heard this morning the fact that God wants us to come to Him for forgiveness and restoration. This can only come through Jesus Christ. Acts 4:12 says “Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved.” Trust that Jesus died for you sins and believe that He alone is the only way to God. You can accept Him this morning. If you have any questions about what I have said this morning, please don’t hesitate to contact us.

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