**THE GOSPEL OF LUKE**

**THE ONLY WAY TO GOD**

**Luke 11:29-54**

**INTRODUCTION**

Last Thursday and Friday, the Supreme Court of Canada heard submissions in the Trinity Western University v. Law Society of Upper Canada case. I listened in for a couple hours on Thursday as counsel for the Law Society argued that the beliefs of evangelical Christians regarding sexuality and marriage – beliefs that are held by Trinity Western and by us as a church– are deeply discriminatory. As a result of this alleged discrimination, he argued that the Law Society cannot accredit Trinity Western’s proposed law school.

It was fascinating to listen to the Law Society’s lawyer talk about our faith in front of our country’s top court. Here is an extremely bright, educated, articulate, non-Christian lawyer trying to wrap his mind around what we believe, and how that impacts other people, and as he tried to describe Christians, one word kept coming up: exclusive. Christians are exclusive. Is this true?

On one level, you could say that we’re not exclusive. Indeed, Christianity is pre-eminently *inclusive*,because anyone who turns to Christ in repentance and faith can be forgiven and reconciled to God, regardless of their age, race, gender, language, nationality, education, gender, beauty, intellect, or vocation. You don’t need to be from the right family. You don’t need to do enough good deeds. To be a Christian, all you need is to need Christ. On that level, Christianity is wonderfully inclusive.

But on another level, it’s accurate to say that Christianity is exclusive. Christianity doesn’t say, for example, that all religions are the same, or that all religions lead people to God. It’s quite popular in our culture for people to take this view, but that’s not Christianity. Christianity claims to set forth the only way that we can come into a relationship with God, a claim that, by necessity, excludes other ways of coming to God.

But where does the exclusive nature of Christianity come from? It comes from none other than Jesus himself. These days people like to say that Jesus was the paradigm of inclusivity. After all, he welcomed notorious sinners to eat with him and follow him. While that’s true (and we thank God that it’s true!) Jesus did that without every abandoning the claim that he was the only way to God. And if he was the only way to God, then all other ways to God must be wrong.

In our text today, we’re going to see Jesus show us just how exclusive he could be as he takes on the ruling religious elites of his time: the Pharisees. He’s going to call them out with some very strong language. His purpose in doing this, however, wasn’t merely so that they would feel bad about themselves. His purpose was to warn others, including us, not to follow their ways as the way to God, but to follow him instead.

The title of this message is **The Only Way to God**, and my aim today is to show you that **Jesus Makes us Righteous Before God After He Makes us Right with God.**

The best way I believe I can explain this text is by breaking it down into three purposes:

1. It has a **historical purpose** in explaining why the Jewish religious elites of the time didn’t get along with Jesus;
2. It has a **moral purpose** in warning us about the kinds of living that don’t find favour with God; and
3. It has a **theological purpose** in showing us how we can return to a right relationship with God.

(1) **THE HISTORICAL PURPOSE**

Our text today begins in verse 29 with an indication that Jesus’ popularity is growing. Luke tells us that “the crowds were increasing”. Most people these days would see that as a sign of success. The metric we use to measure success is the number of people who are interested in what we’re offering. If lots of people are interested, we must be doing something right. If not a lot of people are interested, we must be doing something wrong.

So if we were in Jesus’ position, we may have been impressed by the increasing crowds and thought to ourselves, “Look! What we’re doing is really working!” But that’s not what Jesus did. Jesus didn’t look at the numbers to measure his success. He looked deeper and examined the heart, and when he did, he wasn’t very impressed. “This generation is an evil generation”, Jesus said, for “It seeks for a sign.”

From Jesus’ perspective, the crowds may have been increasing, but they were increasing for the wrong reasons. Jesus had just said in verse 28,

“Blessed is the one who *hears* the word of God and keeps it”.

Jesus doesn’t just want people to come to him. He wants people to *listen* to his words as the very words of God and *keep* them. That’s what the truly blessed life looks like. But these crowds didn’t want to listen. They wanted to watch. They didn’t want to obey. They wanted to observe.

And what did they want to observe? *Signs*. They wanted to see Jesus do more miracles. But how could that be? As we’ve seen throughout Luke’s Gospel, Jesus has done many miracles already. He healed people of chronic diseases. He defeated a legion of demons. He even raised two dead people to life. But none of this was enough. The crowds wanted more. They wanted miracles that were more miraculous than the miracles of the past.

This was wrong, because Jesus didn’t come to entertain people. He didn’t come to “wow” people with amazing miracles just so that they could go home and talk about what he did and then go on living exactly the same way they had lived in the past. Jesus did his miracles *so that* people would follow him, and in following him, they would find their way back to God.

This is why Jesus says “no sign will be given to it” in verse 29. He refuses to dance to the tune of the crowds, and he refuses to give them what they want. But his refusal has an exception. He says “no sign will be given to it *except the sign of Jonah*.”

Scholars disagree on what the sign of Jonah is in our text. Some say it refers to Jesus’ resurrection, because in the parallel account in Matthew 12, it’s quite clear that the “sign of Jonah” is the resurrection. Matthew records Jesus as saying that, just as Jonah spent three days and nights in the belly of the great fish, he also would spend three days and nights in the heart of the earth, a clear reference to his death and resurrection.

We don’t see that in Luke’s record of the sign of Jonah. Now it’s without question that both Luke and Matthew agree that Jesus did in fact rise from the dead, and they agree that this was a powerful confirmation that Jesus was in fact the Son of God. But for several reasons, I don’t believe that, in the Lucan text, Jesus is talking about his resurrection when he refers to the “sign of Jonah”. Instead, I believe that he’s talking about his teaching. Let me give you three reasons why:

* First, Jesus compares how he would be a sign to his audience with how Jonah was a sign to the Ninevites. He says in verse 30 that, “For as Jonah became a sign to the people of Nineveh, so will the Son of Man be to this generation.” So the key question here is, how was Jonah a sign to the Ninevites? What did he do to prove that he was sent by God to carry God’s message? If the sign was the fact that he had just spent three days in the belly of a fish and survived, then it would make sense to conclude that Jesus’ sign was the three days he would spend “in the heart of the earth” before his resurrection. But here’s the problem. The book of Jonah doesn’t say that Jonah told the Ninevites that he spent three days and nights in the belly of the fish. Instead, it only tells us that Jonah preached to the Ninevites and called them to repent of their sins and return to God. Jonah’s *message* was the sign that he was God’s prophet, and if Jesus is going to give his audience the same sign as the prophet Jonah, then it follows that his message was his sign as well.
* Second, Jesus goes on in verses 31-32 to do two other comparisons that have nothing to do with miracles and everything to do with *teaching*. In verse 31, Jesus refers to “the wisdom of Solomon” and says “behold, something greater than Solomon is here.” Solomon was known for his wisdom, which was so great that the Queen of Sheba, referred to as “the queen of the south” in verse 31, travelled across the world just to hear him speak. But as great as Solomon was, Jesus was greater, not because of the miracles he would do, but because of the power of his teaching. Likewise, in verse 32, Jesus refers again to Jonah, saying that the men of Nineveh “repented at the preaching of Jonah.” Once again, Jesus is greater than Jonah, not because of his superior miracles, but because of his superior *preaching*.
* Third, Luke is very clear about the limitations of miraculous signs. To him, even the greatest of miracles weren’t sufficient to convince people that Jesus was the Son of God. Instead, Luke believed that the only thing that was sufficient was the teaching of the Word of God. As he would record Jesus saying later in Luke 16:31,

“If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.”

This is ultimately why Jesus says that the Queen of the South and the men of Nineveh will condemn this generation on the Day of Judgment. It’s not because the crowds rejected Jesus’ miracles. It’s because they rejected his teaching, teaching that was vastly superior than the greatest teaching that came before him. Jesus’ teaching is the ultimate sign, and the only sign anyone needed to know that he was indeed the Messiah, the Chosen One of God.

Let’s not miss the significance of what Jesus is saying. He’s saying that, on the Day of Judgment, the one thing that will determine their eternal fate will be how they responded to Jesus. Did they recognize his divine wisdom and seek to obey it? Did they repent at his preaching and believe in him? If they did, then they will be pronounced “not guilty”. They will be justified, declared righteous, and welcomed into God’s Kingdom. But if they didn’t repent and believe, then they will be pronounced “guilty”. They will be condemned and cast away from God’s presence forever. Jesus couldn’t be clearer in declaring that he is the only way for people to enter a right relationship with God.

The rest of our text shows us how Jesus’ claim as the only way to God played out as he criticized the religious elites for teaching a different way to return to God. Jesus pronounces a series of “woes” on them, which was an exclamation of pain and pity for the misfortune that awaited someone. It would be like hearing that someone had a terminal illness and saying, “I am so sorry.”

Jesus pronounces these woes on both the Pharisees and the lawyers for both moral failures, and theological failures. Their moral failure was that they were outwardly righteous, but inwardly corrupt. Their theological failure was that they claimed to follow Moses, but in reality they had rejected his words and the words of all the prophets who followed him.

By announcing woes on the religious elites of the time, Jesus was doing something very significant. He was setting himself up as a greater authority than they were. If the Pharisees and religious lawyers were the greatest authority, then Jesus would be compelled to accept their interpretation of the Scriptures. But they weren’t the greatest authority. Jesus was. So Jesus calls them out and rebukes them.

This is why the Pharisees and religious authorities hated Jesus so much. He was undermining the power structures that they had set up to serve themselves. And so, verses 53-54 show us that the Pharisees’ skepticism and uncertainty about Jesus turned into outright hostility as they sought to trap him and find a reason to kill him.

This is the first purpose of our text. Luke wants to give us historical context to understand why the Jewish religious leaders rejected Jesus, and why they would ultimately crucify him. Luke wants us to understand why Christianity, which came from Judaism, had so few Jewish followers. His answer is that Jesus brought powerful rebukes to the Jewish leaders, and rather than respond with repentance, the vast majority of them responded with hatred instead.

(2) **THE MORAL PURPOSE**

Our text today, however, isn’t just meant to give us a history lesson. It’s meant to speak directly into our lives as well. The Bible doesn’t just convey information. It calls us to change. There are moral lessons here about how we are to live if we are to follow Jesus. This leads to our second point: the moral purpose of our text.

Jesus has several criticisms for the Pharisees and religious lawyers in our text, but before we look at them and apply them to ourselves, we need the context, starting at verses 37-38: “While Jesus was speaking, a Pharisee asked him to dine with him, so he went in and reclined at table. The Pharisee was astonished to see that he did not first wash before dinner.” My wife is astonished when she sees that I don’t wash before dinner as well, but her concern is very different. She’s concerned about germs making me sick. The Pharisee’s concerned about ritual impurity making Jesus, and everyone else present, disqualified from religious life.

But here’s the thing: there’s nothing in the Old Testament that says that one must wash before eating. What the Pharisees had done was they had taken these Old Testament commands and turned them into *other,* man-made commands. For example, there were rules about not touching unclean animals or the things those animals had touched. The Pharisees figured that people could have touched things that unclean animals could have touched, so they required everyone to wash their hands before meals. They also required every dish to be thoroughly cleansed before use, as Jesus mentions in verse 39, because they were concerned about flies which could have had contact with unclean things and then transferred that uncleanness to plates and cups.

In essence, what the Pharisees had done was they they had imposed religious burdens on people that were heavier than the burdens God put on his people through the Law. The same is true of the religious lawyers in verse 46, where Jesus rebukes them for loading people “with burdens hard to bear”. Both the Pharisees and the lawyers put heavy burdens on people and left them to bear that weight by themselves. Why? Because they didn’t want anyone else to succeed in keeping all the rules except themselves, so that they could maintain their position in society as the most righteous people of all.

This sets the tone for all of Jesus’ rebuke of the Pharisees and lawyers, starting in verse 39 when he says, “Now you Pharisees cleanse the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside you are full of greed and wickedness.” Jesus’ first rebuke for the Pharisees was that they were so caught up with ritual purity that they had completely neglected personal purity. They may have been ritually clean on the outside, but they were completely unclean on the inside.

It wasn’t that their concern for religious purity was wrong. After all, it was God himself who had commanded them to care about such things. Their problem wasn’t that they cared too much about religious purity. Their problem was that they cared too little about the internal purity that religious purity was meant to point to! Jesus says it this way in verse 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*.”

They ought to have cared about purity, but they should have done so without neglecting justice. They ought to have cared about tithing, but they should have done so without neglecting love for God. God cares about external righteousness, but only so far as it is done as an expression of internal righteousness. This is what Jesus says in verses 40-41, when he tells the Pharisees that they ought to have offered “those things that are within”. If they had done so, then they would have been completely clean, regardless of how many flies had touched their cups.

We may not be concerned about religious purity like the Pharisees were, but we can fall into the same trap of prioritizing external over internal righteousness. When you go to church, or when you read your Bible, or when you give your offerings, are you offering to God “those things that are within”, or are you just going through the motions? Are you participating in external righteousness while neglecting internal righteousness?

Let’s not forget that, when we go to church, we’re not just going because it’s the right thing to do. We’re going *to cultivate our love for God*. When we sit down and read our Bibles, we’re not just doing it because everyone says we need to read our Bibles. We’re reading our Bibles in order *to know God’s love for us, and to grow in our love for him and for other people*. The acts of external righteousness are not ends in themselves. They are means to the greater end of becoming the people God wants us to be.

So the next time you’re sitting down to read your Bible, spend some time consciously thinking and praying about the fact that you’re coming to God’s Word to be changed. You’re not just coming to God’s Word to be changed in what you know. You’re coming to be changed in *who you are*. Similarly, when you’re on your way to church, spend some time telling God that you’re not going just because that’s what “good Christians” are expected to do. You’re going because you believe and expect God to work in the deepest recesses of your heart to make you who he wants you to be.

Jesus goes on in verse 43 to rebuke the Pharisees for how they “love the best seat in the synagogues and greetings in the marketplaces.” The Pharisees were consumed with living out their lives in such a way that they occupied the place of honour in society. They wanted to be given the lifetime accomplishment awards. They wanted to be the guest speaker at the conference, not because they wanted to serve others, but because they wanted to serve themselves.

This really is the natural consequences of living only for external righteousness while completely neglecting internal righteousness. External righteousness is meant to strengthen and express internal righteousness, but when internal righteousness is neglected, external righteousness becomes corrupted. The very actions that are meant to cultivate and serve personal holiness become twisted to serve selfish goals. For example, prayer is meant to be a humble acknowledgment of our need for God, but without internal righteousness, it becomes a way of showing off to other people. Giving our money away is meant to be a loving way of showing mercy to others, but without internal righteousness, it becomes a way of attracting the applause of other people.

We need to check our hearts and ask ourselves why we do what we do. Do we do it because we love God? Or do we do it because we love ourselves? If we do things for the applause and recognition of others, then we’re no better than the Pharisees. God wants us to care less about doing righteous things and care more about becoming righteous people.

Jesus has one more rebuke for the Pharisees and religious lawyers, and it is for how they lead others astray. The Pharisees were like unmarked graves in verse 44. They were leading people to fall to their deaths without them even knowing it. Similarly, in verse 52, the lawyers had “hindered those who were entering” by taking away the key of knowledge and replacing it with the burdens of legalism.

How did that happen? It happened because of what Jesus says in verses 47-51. They had abandoned the teachings of God’s prophets, and in so doing, *they had abandoned the Word of God*. If you reject one of God’s prophets, you reject all of God’s prophets. Kill one, and you have killed them all, as Jesus says in verse 50. The implication, of course, is that if they kill Jesus and refuse to recognize him as God’s Chosen One, then they have signaled their decisive departure from the God they thought they were following.

God expects us to lead other people down the paths of true righteousness, not fake righteousness, and not showy righteousness, but the kind of righteousness that comes from a righteous heart. That begins with trusting and believing all of God’s Word without exception.

(3) **THE THEOLOGICAL PURPOSE**

We’ve looked at the historical purpose of the text, which was providing explanation for why the Jewish religious leaders rejected Jesus, and we’ve looked at the moral purpose of the text, which was to show us the kind of lives God wants us to live. Now we get to the most important purpose of the text today, the theological purpose, which provides the key to understanding this entire portion of Scripture.

We find the theological purpose in verses 33-36, the four verses we have not yet addressed today.

Jesus says in verse 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.” Jesus here is referring to his teaching, which he was just speaking about in the preceding verses about the sign of Jonah. He’s saying that his teaching had been disseminated so far and wide that people everywhere had the chance to hear it. On Judgment Day, when people are judged for how they responded to Jesus’ teaching, no one will be able to say that they never heard Jesus’ teaching, because it shone in the world like a lamp on its stand.

Then in verse 34, Jesus shifts the analogy slightly by saying, “Your eye is the lamp of your body.” This shift is a little confusing at first because when we combine it with verse 33, it seems that now our eyes are on a stand, shining light for everyone to see. That makes no sense, and that’s not what Jesus is saying. The light Jesus is talking about in verse 34 is still the light of Jesus’ teaching. The difference between verses 33 and 34 is the lamp. Two lamps, shining one light. In verse 33, the lamp is Jesus himself, shining the light of his teaching for everyone to see. In verse 34, the lamp is our eyes, which I believe we can say are the eyes of our hearts. If our eyes are working properly, our eyes reflect the light of Christ into our lives. If they’re not working properly, they reflect only darkness.

So if the eyes of your heart are healthy, then the light of Christ’s teaching completely changes who you are. “Your whole body is full of light” as verse 34 says, and “it will be wholly bright, as when a lamp with its rays gives you light”, as verse 36 says. A body full of light is a life full of God’s truth. God’s truth abides in you, changing who you are, making you less like the Pharisees and more like Jesus himself.

But before the light changes us, we need one thing. We need healthy eyes. We need healthy eyes to see Jesus as he truly is and to believe that his words are true, so that the truth of his words can transform us into people who please and honour God. But if we don’t have healthy eyes, then the light of Christ will fail to penetrate our lives, and our bodies will be left in darkness.

So here’s the key question: how do we get healthy eyes? I think that there’s two answers to this question. The first answer is found in verse 35 when Jesus says, “Therefore *be careful* lest the light in you be darkness.” We need to watch our hearts carefully to examine how we are responding to Jesus and his words. Are we coming to him like the crowds were, interested only in being entertained by him? Or are we coming to him so that he can change the way we live? Are we coming to him only to listen to his words with detached interest, or are we listening in order to obey? We need to be careful in how we’re responding to Jesus and his words, because if we’re not, then light won’t fill our lives. Darkness will, and we will live just like the Pharisees lived.

The second answer requires us to flip back to Chapter 10, where Jesus speaks these remarkable words in verse 22:

“All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows who the Son is except the Father, or who the Father is except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.”

In other words, if we want healthy eyes, we need God to give us healthy eyes. We will only know God and Jesus Christ the eternal Son of God if God reveals that to us. If your eyes don’t work, there’s nothing you can do to make them work. A blind man can put on the strongest glasses in the world and they’ll do absolutely nothing to help him see. We are spiritually blind. Our eyes are unhealthy to the point that we are utterly unable to see Jesus as the eternal Son of God. We need God to do a miracle in us first to make our eyes work, and only then can we take steps to keep our eyes healthy.

But the good news is that this is exactly what Jesus came to do. When Jesus began his ministry in Luke 4, he proclaimed that the Spirit of the Lord was upon him to proclaim the recovery of sight to the blind. When disciples of John the Baptist asked Jesus if he was the Messiah, Jesus said, “Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight.” The eyes of our hearts are so sick that we can’t see Jesus as he truly is, but Jesus came into the world to heal our blinded eyes so that we can. And when we finally see Jesus as he truly is, beholding him in the light of his glory, we are made more and more like him.

**CONCLUSION**

So do you want to be more like Jesus and less like the Pharisees? Do you want to be full of compassion rather than full of pride? Then you need to work at it with the power that God supplies. You need to be careful, lest the light in you be darkness, but you also need God to heal your blind eyes so that you can behold the light of Christ and be changed.

So today, if you are a Christian who is born again by the grace of God, then take comfort in knowing that you are no longer what you once were. You were once filled with darkness, but now you are filled with the light of Christ. Jesus has changed you into a new person, giving you the capacity to joyfully respond to the truth of his words. You may struggle with sin, and you may wrestle with doubts, but you will never be lost, because the light that is in you belongs not to you, but to Christ. He will sustain you, and he will finish what he started. Jesus will make you righteous before God, because he has already made you right with God.

But if you have never put your faith in Christ, but you find yourself wanting to become more like Jesus and less like the Pharisees, then ask God today to change your heart. Ask him to give you healthy eyes to see Jesus as he truly is, and to be changed in the light of his glory. You need God to do a miracle in you, and he will, if only you would ask.