Beneath the Surface

Cormac Parker Jr. · Luke · Luke 11:37-41; Luke 11:42-44; Luke 11:45-52; Luke 11:53-54

AT A GLANCE

Preaching from Luke 11:37-54 in the church's ongoing series through Luke, Cormac Parker Jr. shows how Jesus turns a Pharisee's dinner invitation into an inspection report on the heart, exposing how meticulous religious performance can coexist with neglected justice, love, and mercy. His question—how do we know when we've missed God's heart?—reframes faithfulness as inward transformation, not outward curb appeal, resolved only by turning to the Jesus who both diagnoses and heals.

- Religious diligence in small duties—tithing herbs, ceremonial washing—can mask a heart that neglects justice, mercy, and love of people.
- Adding rules without lifting a finger to help turns spiritual leadership into a burden rather than a bridge toward God.
- Jesus never reveals a flaw in the heart he is unwilling or unable to repair, so the only response is repentance, not self-improvement.

> *"I'm so glad that Jesus never inspects what he is not willing and able to fix."*

EXPOSITION

Scripture engaged

Luke 11:37-41 — [37]After Jesus had finished speaking, a Pharisee asked Jesus to eat with him. So he went and took a place at the table. [38]But the Pharisee was surprised when he saw that Jesus did not wash his hands first before the meal. [39]The Lord said to him, "The washing you Pharisees do is like cleaning only the outside of a cup or a dish. But what is inside you? You want only to cheat and hurt people. [40]You are foolish! The same one who made what is outside also made what is inside. [41]So pay attention to what is inside. Give to the people who need help. Then you will be fully clean." (ERV)

Luke 11:42-44 — [42]"But it will be bad for you Pharisees! You give God a tenth of the food you get, even your mint, your rue, and every other little plant in your garden. But you forget to be fair to others and to love God. These are the things you should do. And you should also continue to do those other things. [43]It will be bad for you Pharisees because you love to have the most important seats in the synagogues. And you love for people to show respect to you in the marketplaces. [44]It will be bad for you, because you are like hidden graves. People walk on them without knowing it." (ERV)

> Luke 11:45-52 — [45]One of the experts in the law said to Jesus, “Teacher, when you say these things about the Pharisees, you are criticizing our group too.” [46]Jesus answered, “It will be bad for you, you experts in the law! You make strict rules that are very hard for people to obey. You try to force others to obey your rules. But you yourselves don’t even try to follow any of those rules. [47]It will be bad for you, because you build tombs for the prophets. But these are the same prophets your ancestors killed! [48]And now you show all people that you agree with what your ancestors did. They killed the prophets, and you build tombs for the prophets! [49]This is why God in his wisdom said, ‘I will send prophets and apostles to them. Some of my prophets and apostles will be killed by evil men. Others will be treated badly.’ [50]So you people who live now will be punished for the deaths of all the prophets who were killed since the beginning of the world. [51]You will be punished for the killing of Abel. And you will be punished for the killing of Zechariah, who was killed between the altar and the Temple. Yes, I tell you that you people will be punished for them all. [52]It will be bad for you, you experts in the law! You have taken away the key to learning about God. You yourselves would not learn, and you stopped others from learning too.” (ERV)
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> Luke 11:53-54 — [53]When Jesus went out, the teachers of the law and the Pharisees began to give him much trouble. They tried to make him answer questions about many things. [54]They were trying to find a way to catch Jesus saying something wrong. (ERV)

The argument

The Inspection Report Beneath the Curb Appeal — why unwashed hands became a scandal at the table

When Jesus reclines at a Pharisee's table without the ritual hand-washing, his host is not annoyed but astonished — Cormac Parker Jr. notes the rabbinic severity behind it: 'to eat bread with unwashed hands is likened to lying with a harlot.' Jesus does not defend the omission; he redirects it: 'Now you Pharisees cleanse the outside of the cup and of the dish, but the inside you are full of greed and wickedness. You fools.' Parker points out that 'fool' in wisdom literature marks not a lack of intellect but a life that rejects God, and that Jesus is collapsing any line between public performance and private heart — 'there's no separating the inside from the outside.' His remedy is almsgiving: generosity as 'a weapon against the greed in us.'

> **Insight —** *Cleansing what is visible means nothing if it leaves the greed and wickedness beneath it untouched.*

Meticulous Religion Can Still Neglect Justice — the first sign of a heart that has missed God

The Pharisees, Cormac Parker Jr. observes, were 'scrupulous… meticulous about their tithing,' carrying it down to garden herbs, yet Jesus indicts what that precision conceals: 'you neglect justice and the love of God.' Parker's gloss is blunt — 'you can't tithe your way out of loving people… the least, the last, the vulnerable, the marginalized.' The second woe exposes a craving for the best seats and public greetings, the opposite of walking humbly before God; the

third calls them unmarked graves, contaminating others without their own knowledge. From this Parker names the first sign of a heart that has missed God: 'when external appearances matter more than internal transformation… the question is not, do I look like a Christian? The question is, am I becoming like Christ?'

> **Insight** — *Precision in minor religious duties is no substitute for justice and love toward people.*

Legalism Piles Burdens It Refuses to Help Carry — how honoring dead truth-tellers can mask resistance to a living one

Jesus turns next to the lawyers, whose calling was to make God's law legible, and instead they 'load people with burdens hard to bear' while refusing to 'touch the burdens with one of your fingers' — piling rule upon rule with no encouragement alongside. Parker presses the point personally: 'what would it look like to just show up and activate your ministry of presence, instead of burdening down people?' He then names the deeper irony of the tomb-building woe: these men honored dead prophets their fathers had killed while plotting against the living truth at their table — 'the spirit that you're walking in is no different than your fathers who killed them.' Finally, they have 'taken away the key of knowledge,' neither entering God's truth themselves nor letting others in.

> **Insight** — *Adding requirements without offering help turns spiritual guidance into a weight instead of a gift.*

Becoming a Barrier Instead of a Bridge — the plot against Jesus proves the charge against them

As the meal ends, the scribes and Pharisees 'begin to press him hard… lying in wait for him,' and Cormac Parker Jr. notes they thereby prove Jesus's charge with their own actions: men who memorialize dead prophets while ambushing the living one. From this he names a third sign of a heart that has missed God — 'when we become barriers instead of bridges' to people encountering him. Parker turns this outward: people often stay distant from faith 'not because they've done a deep dive of faith… but because they've encountered us.' The question he presses is not whether we look religious but 'what kind of picture of God do others see… are we barriers, or are we bridges to who God is?'

> **Insight** — *How we treat people either opens or closes the way for them to see God clearly.*

An Inspector Who Only Exposes What He Intends to Repair — why repentance, not self-improvement, answers the report

Parker turns from diagnosis to hope through his own house-inspection story: overwhelmed by a report full of hidden defects, he heard his contractor say, 'this is not my first rodeo… you leave the key in the lockbox, I'll handle it.' That, he says, is the gospel answer to Luke 11's inspection report of the heart: 'I'm so glad that Jesus never inspects what he is not willing and

able to fix.' The fitting response is not resolving to try harder — 'well, I'll just do better' — but repentance, turning toward the one who 'accepts us as is… but will not leave us as is,' so that justice, mercy, and love of neighbor take root where performance once stood.

Insight — *Every hard truth Jesus exposes about the heart comes paired with his willingness to heal it.*

Cross-references

- Micah 6:8 — quoted to define justice, mercy, and humility as the standard the Pharisees' tithing bypassed
- Isaiah 29:13 — referenced via Matthew's Gospel to show worship offered with the lips while the heart stays far away

DEVOTIONAL

Picture the report itself: page after page of close-up photographs, a pipe in the crawl space you never knew existed, cracks behind a fresh coat of paint. The house still looks, from the curb, like the one you fell in love with. That is the trouble with curb appeal — it was never built to lie, only to stop looking. Luke's dinner table works the same way. Hands go unwashed, a host gasps, and within moments Jesus is holding up snapshots of a heart no one invited him to inspect: tithed herbs and neglected justice, best seats and a stranger contaminated by contact, tombstones polished for prophets whose voices are safely dead. None of it is manufactured evidence. It was there all along, beneath paint anyone could see. What keeps this from becoming despair is the report's origin. An inspector who found what he could not fix would only be cruel. But the one holding this report is also the contractor — the one who says, leave the key in the lockbox, this is not my first rodeo, I will go into the crawl space myself. He does not inspect to condemn; he inspects to repair. So the question this text leaves is not whether the walls are painted well, whether the tithe is exact, whether the seat is prominent. It is whether, once shown the crack, we hand over the key — whether we let justice, mercy, and the slow work of becoming like Christ replace the appearance we had mistaken for the whole house.

Reflection

- Where in your life has the outward practice of faith continued smoothly while a specific act of justice or mercy toward someone has quietly gone undone?
- Who in your life experiences you as a burden added without a hand offered to help carry it, and what would presence, instead of more instruction, look like for them?
- If Jesus handed you today's inspection report of your heart, what is the one room you have kept him from entering, and what would it mean to leave him the key?

Closing prayer

God, thank you for your word, and for loving us enough to tell us the truth about where we've drifted. Thank you that you don't leave us as we are — that by your Spirit you clean our hearts and our hands, not with ceremony but with what only you can do. Have your way, Jesus. Make us people who love like you, who don't miss your heart for justice, mercy, and people while performing empty practices. We confess and surrender to your will and your way, for your glory. Amen.

FORMATION

One thing to remember

Jesus inspects hearts not to condemn them but to repair them — let him find what you've kept hidden beneath the paint.

This week

This week, identify one person or need you could quietly give to or serve without expecting anything back, and ask God in prayer to search your heart for the greed almsgiving is meant to answer.

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