

Luke 11:37-52  
Identity Protection  
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I think it's pretty safe to assume that we all want to do well at life, don't we? We want to do well by others and not hurt them, and we want the best for our loved ones. Right? And if you are the type of a person that spends time in places like this, you probably even want very intently to do things that are pleasing to God. And yet, sometimes we are just so focused, frantic or frayed that our passions and priorities become disordered and dislocated.

In his little book entitled *God in the Dock*, C.S. Lewis talks about this human experience of life out of order. He talks about the principle of first and second order things. Writing: every preference of a small good (art, music, a hobby, or even a lover) to a great, a partial good to an ultimate good, involves the loss of the small or partial good for which the sacrifice is made. Apparently, the world is made that way... You can't get second things by putting them first; you can get second things only by putting first things first.

We live in a day in age that is extremely conscious of image. You know we tend to say that every generation is the greatest of worst at whatever the comparison might be, but the fact is that we as humans have always tried to create our identities and images in ways that set us apart from others. It's just that with the onset of social media and non-stop connectivity, managing our identities has taken on new levels of intensity.

So this morning I want to invite you to reflect with me on the idea that our lives are not what we are able to create by initiative and a careful public relations savvy, but they are, in fact, what we receive from God's grace and loving kindness towards us. And what happens when we lose sight of the essence or true purpose of things?

To illustrate this teaching we will look at a passage in which Jesus engages in a pretty heated conversation with two men, each of whom has misplaced priorities that serve as a cautionary tale for us as we seek to live our lives.

I want to invite you as you're able to stand with me for the reading of the Gospel.

**While Jesus<sup>[a]</sup> was speaking, a Pharisee asked him to dine with him, so he went in and reclined at table. 38 The Pharisee was astonished to see that he did not first wash before dinner. 39 And the Lord said to him, "Now you Pharisees cleanse the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside you are full of greed and wickedness.<sup>40</sup> You fools! Did not he who made the outside make the inside also? <sup>41</sup> But give as alms those things that are within, and behold, everything is clean for you.**

**<sup>42</sup> "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. <sup>43</sup> Woe to you Pharisees! For you love the best seat in the synagogues and greetings in the marketplaces. <sup>44</sup> Woe to you! For you are like unmarked graves, and people walk over them without knowing it."**

**45 One of the lawyers answered him, “Teacher, in saying these things you insult us also.” 46 And he said, “Woe to you lawyers also! For you load people with burdens hard to bear, and you yourselves do not touch the burdens with one of your fingers. 47 Woe to you! For you build the tombs of the prophets whom your fathers killed. 48 So you are witnesses and you consent to the deeds of your fathers, for they killed them, and you build their tombs. 49 Therefore also the Wisdom of God said, ‘I will send them prophets and apostles, some of whom they will kill and persecute,’ 50 so that the blood of all the prophets, shed from the foundation of the world, may be charged against this generation, 51 from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah, who perished between the altar and the sanctuary. Yes, I tell you, it will be required of this generation. 52 Woe to you lawyers! For you have taken away the key of knowledge. You did not enter yourselves, and you hindered those who were entering.”**

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

So, Jesus is invited to have dinner with a Pharisee. Now if this term Pharisee is unfamiliar to you, these were members of First Century Jewish Communities, they were laymen—they were not priests or employed in service to the Temple. They were however very serious keepers of Jewish law (Torah) and were very influential in Jewish civic and religious life.

So when he invites Jesus to come and eat with him, Luke says he is “astonished to see that he didn’t wash before dinner.” Last year I had the chance to travel to Israel. And in visiting a famous archeological site called Qumran, where the Dead Sea Scrolls (the most comprehensive and complete manuscripts of the OT we have). We learned about the community whose purpose was to copy the ancient manuscripts, they were called the Essenes. They too followed ritual purity and cleanliness laws of the OT, like the Pharisees. Learning about their day, most of their time was spent either eating, or ritualistically washing and preparing to eat. It was only after their evening meal that they actually copied the manuscripts. Cleanliness was very important to strict observant Jews.

So as you can imagine when Jesus, perhaps doesn’t even bother to wash his hands for dinner, the Pharisee was aghast. To which Jesus uses this opportunity to have a conversation about priorities, basically he dresses him down in his own house. “You spend all this time, in ceremonial acts of cleansing so as to give the appearance of being a good Jew. But you miss the deeper issue of what’s going on inside. Inside you’re full of greed and wickedness, you care only about appearances, and you make sure everyone else knows how special you are because of your religiosity.” Ouch!

Then Jesus goes on to say woe to you, it is a tragic thing that when you come to the temple to tithe you go out of your way to give over and above. According to Deuteronomy 14, the Torah said that for the grain offering at the temple, only corn and oil that were commanded for the tithe. And once a year in the presence of God the people would prepare their tithe and eat it in the presence of the Lord. By bringing mint and rue and herbs, the Pharisees were saying look at us, we’re bringing special ingredients, we’re dressing the meal up, making it a little tastier. Aren’t we special?

Again, they have missed the boat with the purpose of the act itself. Tithing, ceremonial cleansing, going to worship are all good things that every Jew should do. But by turning secondary things into primary things they completely fail to receive the gift of these activities.

Then, in an almost comedic scene one of the lawyers (read: Bible Teachers) stands up and says hey what about us. Jesus says, what about you? You weigh people down with the burdensome teaching of strict law adherence, but you yourselves don't even lift a finger on your own. You build the fancy tombs of the prophets your ancestors killed. Woe to you, you think that because you teach this stuff, it somehow makes you exempt from doing what it says. Again, ouch!

This is a pretty poignant passage with some pretty pointed critiques of people who worked very hard to be faithful to God. And my purpose in choosing this passage is not accusatory. I had a preaching professor in Seminary who cautioned us about preaching what he called *Bad dog* sermons—you know the kind where the preacher wags his finger at the congregation because we all know that you've done this too. That's not it at all, I think there is a deeper lesson in this cautionary tale. A lesson about identity.

In a wonderful little book called *Remembering* Wendell Berry tells the story of Andy Catlett, son of Wheeler Catlett and Bess Feltner of Port William Kentucky, who, we learn right away loses his hand in an accident involving a corn-picker. This accident not only dislocates him, hand from body, but Andy's sense of identity and purpose within his community is dislocated. A farmer who can't really farm, because he doesn't have full use of the tools God gave him, he believes just isn't much use.

The story finally turns when Andy, who is also a Agricultural Journalist for Scientific Farmer, remembers a story he had been given years ago, by his publisher—himself a farm kid who despised, what he called “the dungship of servitude” he thought farming was. Andy is told to go to Ohio to interview a farmer named Bill Meikelberger who was this year's premier farmer. Bill lived on a sprawling 2,000 acre farm south of Columbus—which he had acquired by buying out all of his neighbors. His children away at medical school and law school, and his wife at work, Andy and Bill were left alone to interview. Over the course of the conversation Bill polishes off a pot of coffee and follows it with a handful of antacids. Bill has an active ulcer, because he is up to his eyeballs in debt, is shorthanded, his children don't want to have anything to do with the farm, and he doesn't have a single neighbor or family member within 5 miles. He was, literally, alone in a world of his own creating. Andy knew, something was not right. But it seems this is the way of the world, this is what success and purpose looked like to Bill—and many others, acreage and mechanization.

That afternoon as Andy drove to Pittsburgh for his next day's assignment he slowed down to stop and see a man plowing a 3 horse team down the curve of a sloped field. Andy stopped, got out and approached the man. “Good morning,” he said, “You're not going to get anywhere very fast that way.” He was immediately sorry because that's what Meikleberger would have said.

“Oh, they step right along,” he said cheerfully. “But then, of course, you don't do more than you ought to.”

After taking a turn himself driving the mares, Andy asked to walk around the farm a bit. “Is this the kind of farm you're used to seeing?” It's not quite what I've been looking at, but would you mind if I asked you a few questions.

Andy and Isaac Troyer talked about farming and Andy told him about Bill Meikelberger's farm, and asked Isaac, had you ever thought of buying more land, say a neighbor's farm?

I'd have to go into debt to buy it and farm it. It would take more time and help than I've got. And I'd lose my neighbor.

So you'd rather have your neighbor?

We're supposed to love our neighbors as ourselves. We try. If you need them, it helps.

What Andy was facing was, I think, the same dichotomy that the Pharisee and Lawyer faced. Is your identity something that you receive or is it something you earn and are able to manufacture for yourself? You see when we take good things, like practicing our faith publicly or the pursuit of knowing Scripture and we put them ahead of knowing and being near to God. These secondary things become primary things, and our identity becomes disoriented. In the same way, Bill Meikelberger who began with a first love of farming, allowed the acquisition of more and more to supplant his identity as a farmer—not only that, but it also isolated and alienated him from community.

The lawyer felt the constant weight of the law bearing down on him because he was constantly trying to prove his own worth and achieve his place. The Pharisee was in a constant state of fear that his identity was somehow insufficient in and of itself, so he needed to keep up appearances while inside he was wasting away. Both have lost sight and now have a distorted view of their first love because they took that which was secondary and made it primary. They thought by keeping the law or teaching the scriptures that they could earn or cultivate their identity. But our identities are only ever received in God's love for us in Jesus Christ

Paul writes in Colossians 2 **Therefore, as you received (paralambano) Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, <sup>7</sup> rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.**

There is a gentle ease when you are in stride with the Holy Spirit. Jesus says that his yoke in walking side by side with him is gentle and his burden is light. There are all matters of distorted life that the world will want to offer—they often come with the suffix “ism” attached to them: consumerism, careerism, intellectualism, conservatism, liberalism, capitalism, communism. Every single one of them promises to offer something unique and lasting if you will just give yourself to it. And yet every single one of them, to one degree or another, is of secondary value—but given the place of primacy in your life will leave you distorted, disoriented, and dismembered.

John Calvin writes: “Ingratitude is frequently the reason why we are deprived of the light of the gospel, as well as of other divine favors.” We were created for community, we were created and given the image of the living God as part of our DNA, we were given a purpose—as the Westminster Catechism says—“Our chief end is to glorify God in all we say and do, and enjoy him forever.”

Only the Gospel of Jesus Christ promises to offer you life and purpose as you discover your inherent value and preciousness as one who is created in the image of God. You have been given your identity, and every bit of it you will ever need, and all you have to do is simply receive it and learn to live lives of gratitude for it.

You belong to Christ, you were bought with a price, in the waters of baptism you were put to death with him, and raised to new life that we receive in him. Now go live joyfully as if that were really true.