

Luke 11:37-54

Jesus is not very polite

*Tim Anderson 7/5/17*

Being polite is a cornerstone of success in the modern world.  
From the time our children learn to talk,  
we impress upon them the necessity to say 'please' and 'thank you'.  
Mind your ps and qs.  
They need to learn how to eat with a knife and fork.  
Not to talk with their mouths full.  
They shouldn't pick their noses.  
These are all symbolic and trivial politenesses.  
In the scheme of things, they don't matter all that much.  
But in seeking to develop an attitude that respects other people  
they are important.  
But there is further learning to come.  
They have to learn that just putting please on the end of a request  
doesn't make it polite  
nor does it guarantee you will get what you asked for.  
"Will you get out of here while I'm doing my homework, please?"  
Is not polite,  
the use of the word please notwithstanding.  
"Could you give me some quietness to do my homework?"  
is actually more polite even though the magic word has been forgotten.

And then we move into the realm of the adult world.  
Politeness is a key to success in the workplace.  
Work colleagues are people you have to get along with.  
And sometimes they are people  
who you wouldn't choose to spend time with.  
So you have to learn not just the formal conventions of politeness,  
but also how to use the tone of your voice to make it real.  
It's about conveying respect to them,  
so that in turn they will make an effort to get along with you.  
Then you will be seen as a team player,  
and the workplace will go well for you.

And the truth is that many people are faking it.  
If you heard what they said to their partner  
when they got home from work,  
you would understand what they really think.  
You would understand that the politeness  
is just a tool to make the workplace bearable.  
It doesn't reflect honestly on how they feel about the people there.

Politeness is so crucial to living in our modern world,  
that we instinctively think it must be a Christian value.  
But Jesus doesn't seem to have read,  
"The gentleman's book of etiquette and manual of politeness"  
by Cecil B Hartley.  
Not surprising really.  
Hartley wrote it in 1860, many centuries after Jesus.  
But whatever the first century equivalent was,  
Jesus doesn't seem to have read it either.

Look at his behaviour in our reading today.  
He's invited around to a Pharisee's place for dinner.  
The gentleman's book of etiquette  
has an entire chapter on table etiquette.  
I'm guessing that doesn't involve insulting your host,  
telling your host that he's neglected justice and he doesn't love God,  
that he's a pompous seeker after status,  
that he's a contagious source of impurity,  
and telling your host's friends  
that they are heartless and without compassion,  
that they are so displeasing to God  
that the sin of previous generations will be held against them,  
that not only do they fail to know God,  
but they are also a significant roadblock to other people knowing God.  
I don't think that would be regarded as polite.  
But that is exactly what Jesus does.

Why is Jesus so unconcerned about politeness?

We have to acknowledge  
that this is not the only instance of Jesus being rude to the Pharisees.  
Jesus is often rude to the Pharisees.

We'll look at the detail of what Jesus said in a minute.

But first some general observations about politeness.

Firstly, politeness can serve to obscure the truth.

If you hide to the truth to avoid offending,

that may be polite,

but it doesn't place a high value of truth.

But Jesus is the truth.

He values truth.

And he warns people by telling them the truth,

even when it would be painful for them to hear it.

Secondly, politeness can be used as a tool to manipulate people.

It's possible to be polite not from a desire to respect people,

but from a desire to get them to do what you want.

Jesus is not into manipulating people.

But let's move to considering the details of what Jesus said.

It starts with a dinner invitation.

Jesus doesn't wash his hands before the meal.

His host is surprised.

Now bear in mind that this had nothing to do with hygiene.

Hygiene wouldn't be discovered until the days of Florence Nightingale.

This was all about ritual purity before God.

The Old Testament told the Jews

about numerous things they were not to touch.

That was how they were to remain ritually pure before God.

So the Pharisees instituted rules about washing hands,

just in case

they might have touched something ritually unclean down at the market.

And Jesus chose to ignore the convention.

Now it's basic politeness when you are invited to someone's house,

that you fit in with their practice.

Even if it's not what you normally do at home.

When I was in Austria,

I always took off my shoes at the door and put on slippers,  
whenever I visited someone else's house.

But Jesus doesn't follow the convention of politeness.

Is there something wrong with washing your hands?

Not at all.

But Jesus is looking for an opportunity to confront his hosts.

And declining to wash his hands gives him the opportunity.

Notice that the Pharisee keeps it polite.

The Pharisee was surprised

when he noticed that Jesus didn't wash his hands.

But it doesn't say he took Jesus to task about it,

just that he was surprised.

Jesus on the other hand no qualms about taking the Pharisee to task.

"You Pharisees clean the outside of the cup and dish,

but inside you are full of greed and wickedness."

Cleaning the outside of the eating utensils

was for the same purposes as washing the hands.

It was about ritual purity.

Ritual purity was meant to be a pointer for God's people,

guiding them towards purity of the heart.

If ritual purity doesn't guide you towards purity of the heart,

it is completely valueless.

And Jesus says the Pharisees' hearts are full of greed and wickedness.

Hearts jam packed full of impurity,

which completely invalidates their ritual purity.

What is the core problem of the Pharisees?

Well wickedness is a general term that could apply to many things,

but greed is specific.

It's a love of money.

Trampling over the poor to get wealthy.

And what is the solution that Jesus offers to them?

"Be generous to the poor;

and everything will be clean for you."

The problem with their hearts

is a callous lack of compassion and generosity towards the poor.

If they fix that problem,

they won't need to be concerned about ritual impurity.  
Jesus follows up this first accusation with three woes to the Pharisees.  
Woe is not a commonly used word today.  
But when Jesus says,  
"Woe to you because ..."  
He means this is why God's judgement is going to fall on you.  
The first woe.  
God's judgement will fall on the Pharisees  
because they tithe the herbs from their garden,  
but neglect justice and the love of God.  
Tithing was a practice God instituted in Israel  
to enable justice in the land,  
because the priests and Levites who were paid from the tithes  
were the judges in the courts.  
The priests and Levites also taught the people to love God.  
The Pharisees were diligent about observing the tithing law,  
but neglecting the reasons for which God had established it.  
They are majoring on minors and forgetting about the important stuff.  
The second woe.  
"Woe to you Pharisees  
because you love the most important seats in the synagogues."  
God's judgement will fall on the Pharisees,  
because they love the positions of respect in the community.  
They want people to think well of them.  
They have forgotten  
to behave in such a way as God will think well of them.  
The third woe.  
"Woe to you Pharisees because you are like unmarked graves,  
which people walk over without knowing it."  
God's judgement will fall on the Pharisees,  
because they are a contagious source of impurity.  
People are becoming defiled in God's sight  
by their contact with the Pharisees,  
and the people don't even realise the problem.  
Because the Pharisees are well respected,  
the people can't imagine

that their teaching is leading their hearers on the path to destruction.

Now if you were to do a course on managing conflict in the workplace, the advice you would be given is the opposite of what Jesus does here.

You would be told to appreciate everything you can about the other person,

so that when you criticise they know you appreciate them.

You would be told to couch your language with 'i's not 'you's.

"I believe in generosity to the poor"

Not "You are full of greed and wickedness".

You would be told to moderate your use of language to remove emotive descriptions.

I think calling people 'unmarked graves' probably comes under the heading of emotive.

Jesus is actually not trying the softly, softly approach here.

Though Jesus is talking to the Pharisees,

he knows the his real audience are the ones who are listening in, the ones who are being mislead by the Pharisees,

and the ones like us who will read Luke's gospel.

Jesus wants the people of his own generation and he wants us

to know how utterly unacceptable the Pharisee's conduct is.

If Jesus had taken the softly, softly approach,

we might not have realised the magnitude of the problem.

Exposing problems that will lead people to hell

is actually more important than maintaining a polite facade.

But Jesus continues.

The Pharisee wasn't alone at dinner with Jesus.

He'd invited some of his mates for a dinner party.

And one was a teacher of the law.

It was his job to teach the people the word of God.

He said to Jesus,

"Teacher, when you say these things, you insult us also."

He was under no illusions that Jesus was being impolite,

he just wanted to make sure it wasn't directed towards him.

He was quickly disappointed on that score.  
Jesus had three woes for the teachers of the law too.  
The first woe.

"Woe to you because you load people down  
with burdens they can hardly carry;  
and you yourselves will not lift one finger to help them."

The teachers of the law had considerable latitude  
in applying the law of Moses.

They could make it easier or they could make it next to impossible.

They chose to make it next to impossible.

And they gave themselves escape clauses  
so the burdensome bits didn't apply to them.

They made life tough for God's people  
and so his judgement would fall on them.

The second woe.

"Woe to you because you build tombs for the prophets,  
and it was your ancestors who killed them."

This is a harder one to understand.

Just because your ancestors did the wrong thing,  
does that make it wrong for you  
to celebrate the lives of God's messengers?

No it doesn't.

The problem for the teachers of the law  
is that they make a great parade of honouring the prophets  
by building fine tombs for them.

But then they reject Jesus,  
the one who continued the ministry of the prophets in their generation.  
Their supposed act of honour is just a cover for doing the opposite.  
The only prophet they honour is a dead prophet  
because he is not around to question their behaviour.

Jesus, in fact stands at the end of a long line of prophets sent by God.  
Jesus is the great prophet.

And if you reject Jesus,  
then you are rejecting the message  
of all the prophets who came before him

and pointed towards him.

And so Jesus says that generation  
would be held responsible for the blood of all of the prophets.  
They've rejected Jesus, they've rejected them all.  
When they crucify Jesus, they are crucifying them all.  
Building them fancy tombs won't atone for rejecting their message.

The third woe.

"Woe to you experts in the law,  
because you have taken away the key to knowledge.  
You yourselves have not entered,  
and you have hindered those who were entering."  
This is a devastating accusation for the experts in the law.  
They prided themselves as instructors and protectors of the truth.  
Jesus says they haven't found it themselves,  
and they are stopping others from finding it.

If you want to drill down to the core  
of why Jesus saw no need to be polite  
with the Pharisees or the experts in the law,  
this is it.

These guys were keeping other people away  
from a true relationship with God.  
The Pharisees are unmarked graves,  
they spread their impurity to others who come into contact with them.  
They are contagious sources of impurity.  
The teachers of the law have become a hindrance  
to people entering the kingdom of God.

Jesus needs us to know,  
like he needed his contemporaries to know,  
that this is a serious problem.  
There is no more serious problem  
than keeping people out of the kingdom of God.  
And to warn people about others who will keep them out of heaven,  
Jesus is quite happy to shed customary politeness.



In fact Jesus thinks it is necessary to shed customary politeness.

Jesus is not very polite.

The message of this passage is not about politeness.

I could try to draw distinctions for you

about when it's good to be polite and when it's not.

But that would be missing the point of the passage.

The point of the passage is why Jesus is not very polite.

When people lead others away from the kingdom of God,  
that is incredibly serious.

There is nothing more serious than that.

And it needs to be called out,

without getting overly fussed

about offending people's genteel sensibilities.

We need to ask God to help us to make his kingdom accessible  
seeking it ourselves and making the way open to it for others,  
the great priority for us.

And we need to pray that when there are those

who are a roadblock to others in finding God's kingdom,

that we would have the courage to speak boldly.