

Series Gospel of Luke

This Message #23 Doing the Better Thing

Scripture Luke 14:1-14

During the last six months of His life on earth, Jesus had more and more confrontations with the Pharisees and other Jewish experts in the Law. The most frequent issue was over His healing activities on the Sabbath. The Pharisees were furious about these miracles actions. In their opinion, Jesus was undermining the Law of Moses. In actuality, Jesus was only undermining the traditions of the elders. Through the centuries, religious leaders had added to the Law originally given to Moses, thus changing the common understanding and practices of the Sabbath Day. From Jesus' standpoint, the traditions of the elders were in fact undermining the Law.

The religious leaders often argued with Jesus. On occasion they tried to trap Him with trick questions, and, according to today's passage, they may have even deliberately set up a situation in order to put Jesus to a test of His obedience to their law. Our passage today describes the fifth miracle performed by Jesus on a Sabbath day (*Other Sabbath miracles are in Luke 4:31-36; 38; 6:6-11; 13:10-16*).

Read Luke 14:1-14

Jesus was not intimidated by His Pharisee critics in spite of their constant surveillance of His activities and their obvious hostility toward Him. He did not shy away from contact with them, in part because He wanted to teach them that their extreme interpretations of the law were not what God intended, and to convincingly demonstrate to them that He was the promised Messiah. In every encounter that Jesus had with the Pharisees, they were humiliated — shown up to be unreasonable in their logic, inconsistent in their behavior, and just generally out of touch with the spirit of the Old Testament Law.

From the context of the verses we just read, it seems that the Pharisees intentionally arranged the gathering at the home of a “prominent” or “high ranking” Pharisee. Sabbath day services were typically held at the synagogue from 9 AM to about noon, after which some of the worshippers would assemble in a private home, and the meal, which would have been prepared the previous day, would be served. Normally the Jews had two meals each day, morning and evening, but on the Sabbath day there was an special extra meal to which friends were invited.

Jesus was among those invited to this particular meal. Luke mentions that Jesus “was being carefully watched.” The words here imply sinister motives. There was an ominous and covert reason behind their observation. The guests were hoping to catch Him in some fault.

The words in verse 2 suggest that Jesus’ encounter with the “man suffering from dropsy” was unexpected and surprising. The disease known as “dropsy” occurs when there is an abnormal accumulation of fluid beneath the skin. A person with dropsy could have a grotesque appearance. Most Jews associated this condition with uncleanness and immorality. Pharisees would have avoided such a person, so the fact that this man was present in the house of a Pharisee was unusual, and a clue that it was a “set up.” (If you are into detective stories, this would be called a “sting operation” to incriminate Jesus.)

Verses 12-13 describe the normal behavior of the Pharisees. They would be inclined to dine with their friends, family members, and rich neighbors, but never the poor, suffering, diseased, and incapacitated members of society. Luke doesn’t report that the man with “dropsy” was placed there for malicious reasons, but this seems obvious. I think the religious leaders knew what Jesus would do. They were, in fact, hoping to catch Him in a violation of their law.

It seems that Jesus immediately saw through their ploy. Instead of being put on the defensive, He took the initiative and directed a question to the Pharisees and experts of the law who were present, “Is it lawful,” He asked, “to heal on the Sabbath or not?” The question put them in a quandary. What were they to say? Their rabbinical traditions, their teachings, clearly forbade such healing. The Law of Moses, however, did not specifically forbid healing on the Sabbath.

They knew what Jesus would say — that the Sabbath was made for man, for his benefit and blessing. They knew that Jesus would put the well-being of people ahead of legal principles. They did not want to get drawn into a discussion with Jesus about the Law because they knew that questions about their mercy and compassion would arise, so their response was no response. They remained silent.

After disarming His critics, Jesus healed the man and sent him away. He had just been a tool used by the Pharisees to raise the Sabbath healing issue. With the man gone, Jesus directed a second question to the Pharisees in order to expose the hypocrisy and inconsistency in their rabbinical beliefs. What would they do in case of an emergency; for example, if one of them had a son or an ox which fell into a well? Everyone knew that there would be no hesitation about going to the rescue. In that kind of situation, the religious leaders would set aside the ceremonial laws of the Sabbath and do whatever they could to restore the child or animal to safety.

By His question, Jesus called attention to the hypocritical and inconsistent thinking of the leaders. When they censured Him for healing and saving those who were in physical and spiritual crisis, they were overlooking the desperate circumstances of ordinary people. From Jesus' standpoint, any condition of suffering and distress demanded that there should be no delay in effecting a cure. For Jesus, being merciful and helping others was more important than any legal principles.

Jesus had backed the Pharisees into a corner in which they, again, could say nothing to defend themselves. Sadly, despite the demonstrations of divine power and the irrefutable logic of Jesus, the position of the Pharisees did not change. God's grace and truth had been manifested in their presence, but the spiritual eyes of the Pharisees were closed to the Messiah and the truth of God's kingdom.

In verse 7 Jesus continued to stay on the initiative. Noticing how the guests were jockeying for their places at the table, He began to teach a lesson about humility. I have previously stated several times that one of the themes in our study of the Gospel of Luke is learning how to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. The behavior of the Pharisees as they prepared to eat was a perfect example of how a disciple was not supposed to act.

Banquets in Israel 2000 years ago were handled much differently than what we are familiar with today. There were no tables and chairs or eating utensils or plates. Meals were eaten on the floor. This might seem strange to us, but this custom actually continues today. Suzanne and I had this experience a number of times in our years in the Middle East, and I occasionally eat meals like this on my trips to Central Asia. A nice cloth will be spread out in the center of the room. Guests will recline on pallets around the edge of the room. They will support themselves with a cushion and keep their right hand free to dip food with their fingers or perhaps with a piece of bread. Several bowls of food will be within reach. The host will typically be on the side of the room opposite the door. The most important places, the places of honor, will be those closest to the host.

Jesus noticed how the individual guests were trying to secure these places of honor. Each guest wanted to be recognized as very important. As a group, the Pharisees saw themselves as the elite of Jewish society. However, among themselves there was fierce competition for personal status and influence. Jesus' parable was a rebuke to those who wanted personal recognition, and also a lesson about the eternal truth of humility and considering others more important than oneself.

In His parable, Jesus pointed out the potential embarrassment of a person who claimed one of the seats of honor on his own volition. If another guest more distinguished walked in, the host would be obligated to ask the one occupying the seat of honor to move. When this happened, the presumptuous guest would usually have to take the seat closest to the door since all the places in between would be occupied. The Greek words emphasize the person's humiliation and shame.

Jesus called attention to a better form of etiquette. He said that each guest should humbly take the lowest seats when entering the banquet room. Then, if a guest was truly important, the host would invite him to move up to a higher place, thus honoring him before everyone. The discipleship principle is clearly stated in verse 11: "Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

The point is that the privilege to occupy a seat of honor does not depend on a person's self-assertive attitude but on the discretion of the host. This principle, when applied to the kingdom of God, means that the believer must not have an inflated opinion about himself/herself. What is important is God's righteous evaluation of the believer. In God's Kingdom, honor cannot be seized by an ambitious individual; it is awarded by God in recognition of faithful service. God can demote the ambitious person who thinks too highly of himself, and promote those who are worthy of honor. God honors the humble and faithful servant. The servant is not in a position to demand special blessings or privileges, but faithful service will be recognized.

Jesus is the perfect example of this attribute. He said that "He came to serve, not to be served." He humbled Himself by leaving heaven's glories to become a man, and He humbled Himself still further by allowing people to nail Him to the cross. Afterward, we are informed, the Father elevated Him to the highest position, at His right hand. (See Philippians 2:8-11) That's the correct attitude of a disciple.

After Jesus admonished the guests at the meal about their attitudes and behavior, He turned to the host and gave instructions to him about his attitude. The host had apparently invited only prominent people to his table, probably people of his own social rank. These would be the people most likely to return some favor — do some good in return. The one who hosted a festive meal one week would expect to be placed on the invitation list for future meals in the homes of his guests. This is a selfish kind of generosity.

Back in chapter 6 Jesus had spoken these words, "If you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners do that. And if you lend to those from whom you expect payment, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, expecting to be repaid in full. But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful."

The host of the meal needed to apply these words to his life. According to Jesus, "payback" hospitality has no merit. The best hospitality is given out of an attitude of mercy and generosity, not merely an exchange in a kind of unspoken social contract. Jesus was trying to broaden the host's understanding of love and mercy and unselfish service, attitudes that were unknown among the Pharisees. True hospitality is an openness to everyone, including those who cannot repay or reciprocate.

The point is that merit and recognition among fellow humans should not be the goal. Rather the goal is to please and honor God by showing compassion to people who have physical and spiritual needs. Blessings and honor will come from God if we put the needs of others ahead of our personal concerns. The Pharisees needed to understand that God blesses those who are merciful and gracious to the disenfranchised and helpless. The blessings may not come in this life, but God has promised that they will come at the end of the age to those who practice humility, generosity, and hospitality.

The Pharisees thought too much about themselves — their ways, their positions in society, their influence and control over Jewish society. They were not very concerned about matters of mercy and compassion. They did not put the needs of others ahead of their own concerns. They were more concerned about what others thought of them than what God thought. As a result, they were not true followers of God.

As I said last week, we can't do anything to obtain our own salvation, but the proof of our salvation is in what we do, in how we live. True disciples are expected to be living breathing examples of the spiritual changes that God has made in their lives.

Let me summarize the lessons in this passage, and show how these lessons apply to our description of a disciple. Disciples must:

Be true to the Word of God. We must not add to or impose our own interpretations on Scripture like the Pharisees did with their interpretation of the Law.

Be sympathetic toward suffering and needy people. We must not unmercifully use others as tools to achieve our own goals. People are more important than projects and principles.

Be humble, willing to let others have a better or higher position. Selfishness and worldly ambitions must not be part of our lives.

Be generous, extending hospitality and compassion to those less fortunate than ourselves without expectation of personal glory or pay back.