

Luke 14:1-14

Conflict on the Sabbath, Redux

It was an all too familiar scene. Jesus preaching the kingdom of God and the Pharisees out to get Him. If it did not tend so painfully, one might think of Wile E. Coyote always trying to catch the Road Runner only to have his Acme equipment blow up in his face. They had tried challenging His disciples about picking grain on the Sabbath (Luke 6:1-5). They had accused Jesus of being in league with Satan (Luke 11:14-23). They had tried manipulating Jesus into changing His plans and going to Jerusalem so they might bring Him before the Sanhedrin (Luke 13:31-35). In this passage, they again challenge Jesus, this time resorting to the often used accusation of breaking the Mosaic Law regarding the Sabbath.

The Context

In his narrative, Luke begins simply with “it happened” (v. 1). This offers the reader no help regarding the timing or location, but from the context we can infer that Jesus was still making His way to Jerusalem during the final few months of His life. Therefore, He was still likely in Perea. It was the Sabbath and Jesus, being a good rabbi, no doubt had attended a service in the local synagogue, though by now it seemed He had stopped taking a leading role in teaching during the service. After the service, Jesus “went into the house of one of the leaders of the Pharisees on the Sabbath to eat bread” (v. 1).

This man was one of the leaders of the local synagogue. The meal taken was the midday meal after the service. This was the all-important Sabbath day dinner. All of the preparation had been done the day before in accordance with Jewish Law. From verse 12 we can conclude that this was the home of a person of some affluence in the community, since Jesus assumed he could invite many people and some of those would be rich. Therefore, we can expect that there were many other well-known and prominent Pharisees and religious leaders present as well.

That means that Jesus was among the elite of whatever little village Jesus was in at the time. Wealth was much less evenly distributed in the ancient world. Only a handful of people would have been able to feed the dozens or so it seems were present. The masses would have been outside, hoping for scraps from the table, or perhaps eying the crowd to see who was attending.

One application we can make as we enter the passage is that Jesus accepted hospitality from those who were not His own. Like Jesus, we are not called to be ascetics and monks, and we can never minister to the needs of unbelievers if we are not with them. But we must also remember that when Jesus did socially mingle with unbelievers, He was always about His Father’s business. He was neither merely indulging his need for recreation nor was He taking the opportunity to relax and be out of the public eye for a time. Jesus always had a purpose in going into the homes of those who did not yet follow Him. He was always God-honoring in His behavior and language. He was never contentious or fault-seeking. He was always active in ministry.

The Conspiracy

But one may wonder why Jesus was in such elite company? After all, the Pharisees had never been fond of Him and had challenged Him at every turn. How was it that this heretical rabbi merited an invitation to a meal with the elite Jewish leaders of the community? As to why Jesus accepted the invitation is obvious; He was there to preach the kingdom of God. He knew the hearts of all men, and He knew that those present needed to hear the truth. That Jesus would accept the invitation is easy to comprehend, but as to why it was offered in the first place, that is more difficult.

A clue is given by Luke, himself. During their time together the Pharisees “were watching Him closely” (v. 1). The words used suggest the act of observing someone carefully, and clearly this was the plan of those responsible for inviting Jesus. They wanted to see if they could catch Jesus in some misstep that might be used against Him. These Pharisees were very serious about the Law, and especially about laws regarding the Sabbath. Their malicious motivation was to entrap Jesus into violating the Sabbath.

That also explains the presence of another person in the room. In addition to Jesus and the honored guests, “there in front of Him was a man suffering from dropsy” (v. 2). Dropsy, also called edema, is the swelling of usually the heart, though it could also be either the kidneys or liver. It is the result of the body retaining fluids. It is not in itself a disease, but the symptom of some larger medical problem and usually resulted in cardiac arrest as it progressed. In the ancient world it was invariably fatal.

It is possible that the wretched man had simply wandered in off the streets. It had happened before, ³⁷and there was a woman in the city who was a sinner; and when she learned that He was reclining at the table in the Pharisee’s house, she brought an alabaster vial of perfume, ³⁸and standing behind Him at His feet, weeping, she began to wet His feet with her tears, and kept wiping them with the hair of her head, and kissing His feet and anointing them with the perfume” (Luke 7:37-38). But it is more likely, I think, that the man was there as bait.

To the Pharisees, such a physical illness was a punishment from God of sin. It was a sign of being unclean. It is very unlikely that the man’s presence would have been tolerated at such a feast if he was not there for sinister purposes. The Pharisees allowed the man into their party, and invited Jesus to the meal, to see what Jesus would do.

With their malicious intent, they were hoping that this itinerant rabbi would break the Sabbath by healing the wretched man. This had happened before, ⁶“on another Sabbath He entered the synagogue and was teaching; and there was a man there whose right hand was withered. ⁷The scribes and the Pharisees were watching Him closely to see if He healed on the Sabbath, so that they might find reason to accuse Him” (Luke 6:6-7), and ¹⁰“and He was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath. ¹¹And there was a woman who for eighteen years had had a sickness caused by a spirit; and she was bent double, and could not straighten up at all” (Luke 13:10-11). In both cases, Jesus had chosen to heal the afflicted person, despite the potential of conflict with the Pharisees that might result.

Amazingly, the Pharisees never doubted that Jesus could, in fact, perform a miraculous healing. Their hearts were so hardened that despite the fact that Jesus could demonstrate His power over disease, they would not accept Him as the Messiah. Far from doubting His ability, they counted on it. Twisted as they

had become, they took Jesus' power to heal not as proof that He was who He claimed to be, but rather that because He healed on the Sabbath, that He could not be Who He said He was. It was a depravity that ran deep. Consider the testimony Jesus gave recorded in John 10:25, "Jesus answered them, 'I told you, and you do not believe; the works that I do in My Father's name, these testify of Me'" (John 10:25). But the Pharisees were unpersuaded, "therefore some of the Pharisees were saying, 'this man is not from God, because He does not keep the Sabbath'" (John 9:16).

As another point of commentary, we must be reminded that if we call ourselves by the name of Christians, we ought to expect to be watched. There will always be those who want to catch us in some sin, be it real or imagined. Yet if we live a godly life, it will not matter how closely we are watched. "Then the commissioners and satraps began trying to find a ground of accusation against Daniel in regard to government affairs; but they could find no ground of accusation or evidence of corruption, inasmuch as he was faithful, and no negligence or corruption was to be found in him. Then these men said, 'we will not find any ground of accusation against this Daniel unless we find it against him with regard to the law of his God'" (Daniel 6:4-5).

The Confrontation

Jesus took the initiative. Rather than healing the man, then waiting for the Pharisees to confront Him, Jesus initiated the confrontation. Looking about the room, "Jesus answered and spoke to the lawyers and Pharisees, saying, 'is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath, or not?'" (v. 3). Here was indeed a good question. The tradition that had evolved regarding Sabbath regulations insisted that any medical attention given to a sick person on the Sabbath was a sin, unless that person's life was endangered. Only if it was expected that the person would die before the next day, could someone offer assistance on the Sabbath.

But the question Jesus asked put the Pharisees in an awkward position. If they answered that it was acceptable in the sight of God to heal on the Sabbath, then Jesus was free to do so without breaking the Law. If they said healing on the Sabbath was a violation, then He might choose not to do so, and they would lose their opportunity to accuse Him of wrongdoing. With such a choice before them, it is no wonder "they kept silent" (v. 4).

Looking around the room, Jesus no doubt saw their frustration. Having dispensed with His adversaries for the moment, Jesus "took hold of him and healed him, and sent him away" (v. 4). Jesus literally grabbed him as what the wording states. This rabbi touched a person unclean. Jesus demonstrated His willingness not only to heal but to restore the man to society. No longer would he be ill. No longer would he be an outcast. Jesus restored the man physically and socially.

After being healed, we hear no more of the man. Jesus sent him away, no doubt to spread the news of his restoration to his family and friends. After this, the man disappears into history. His response to Jesus and his attitude toward his Savior are lost to us. Scripture makes no mention of them because in the greater narrative they are unimportant. This was not about a miracle of healing, Jesus had a larger point to make.

At this point, the Pharisees must have thought their plan had worked out. Jesus had healed on the Sabbath. He had violated their interpretation of the Mosaic Law. Jesus had no intention of giving them

the advantage, though. Continuing the confrontation, Jesus looked them squarely in the eye and asked “Which one of you will have a son or an ox fall into a well, and will not immediately pull him out on a Sabbath day?” (v. 5).

The answer was obvious. No father would allow his son to suffer simply because it was the Sabbath. Neither would any sensible man, in the harsh times of the ancient world, risk as valuable an animal as an ox because it was the Sabbath. These Pharisees were experts in manipulating the Law to their advantage. Jesus knew this and used their hypocrisy to His advantage. If they could take care of their ox, surely Jesus could take care of a man.

Interestingly, the Qumran community did have regulations regarding assisting animals on the Sabbath, “let not a man help an animal to give birth on the Sabbath day, and if she lets her young fall into a cistern or ditch, let him not lift it out on the sabbath” (Damascus Document XIII). But the Essenes, the Jewish set that inhabited the caves at Qumran, were seen by the Pharisees as eccentric and overly ascetic. They were not to be imitated. They were fanatics who had removed themselves from society. The Pharisees would no more have followed their teachings than accepted Jesus as the Messiah. So again, the Pharisees “could make no reply to this” (v. 6).

The Lesson to the Guests

Continuing to hold the attention of the room, Jesus “began speaking a parable to the invited guests” (v. 7). He was going to use the attempt of the Pharisees to entrap Him as a teachable moment. As the men had gathered around the tables set for the meal, Jesus had “noticed how they had been picking out the places of honor at the table” (v. 7). The arrangement would have been a U-shaped set of tables with each table seating three persons. At the apex of the “U” would be the host, with the most highly honored guest seated to his left, and second most to his right. This proceeded with the couch to the left, and then with the couch to the right. And so on as one moved farther away from the center. It is not as though there was some sign on the table, but rather this was a public event in which people sized up one another and took their seats, always, of course at the discretion of the host.

This behavior was typical of the Pharisees who sought to be honored in the sight of men. As Jesus commented, “they love the place of honor at banquets and the chief seats in the synagogues” (Matthew 23:6). The pre-meal jockeying for seats was an event of self-promotion as the men eyed each other and vied for the best spots they thought they merited.

As an illustration, Jesus chose a most special feast, that to celebrate a wedding. Chastising the guest, Jesus said “when you are invited by someone to a wedding feast, do not take the place of honor” (v. 8). Why not? Because you may think too much of yourself and “someone more distinguished than you may have been invited by him” (v.8). In this awkward situation, “he who invited you both will come and say to you, ‘give your place to this man,’ and then in disgrace you proceed to occupy the last place” (v. 9). Why would the person have to take the last place? Perhaps first, not to have the embarrassment repeated. But also, that may by then have been the only place left to sit - all higher and better positions being taken.

Instead, Jesus suggested, “when you are invited, go and recline at the last place, so that when the one who has invited you comes, he may say to you, ‘Friend, move up higher’; then you will have honor in the sight of all who are at the table with you” (v. 10). This was not new information. Proverbs 25:6-7,

“⁶Do not claim honor in the presence of the king,
And do not stand in the place of great men;
⁷For it is better that it be said to you, come up here,”
Than for you to be placed lower in the presence of the prince,
Whom your eyes have seen.”

This was not merely a lesson in social etiquette. Jesus had a larger point in mind. This was about the kingdom of God. This was about righteous living. The Pharisees sin of self-righteousness and pride was their downfall. Jesus warned against that with the principle that “everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted” (v. 11).

“Humility is the chief Christian virtue, for without it we persist in all our faults” (La Rochefoucauld, *Maxims*). Humility is right knowledge. First of ourselves, “it is a trustworthy statement, deserving full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost of all” (1 Timothy 1:15). Scripture is replete with examples of the virtue of humility and the vice of pride.

Consider the consequences of those who exalted themselves:

Nabal - 1 Samuel 25
Jezebel - 1 Kings 21
Nebuchadnezzar - Daniel 4
Herod Agrippa - Acts 12

And those who humbles themselves:

Hannah - 1 Samuel 1
Mary - Luke 1

The Lesson to the Host

Then Jesus turned His attention to the host. “He also went on to say to the one who had invited Him, ‘when you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, otherwise they may also invite you in return and that will be your repayment’” (v. 12). This sense of reciprocity was embedded in the social structure of the Pharisees. Invitation were issued to people who could respond in kind. There was no sense of being unselfish or kind. The entire process was self-serving.

Jesus challenged this thinking. Instead, He argued, “when you give a reception, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind” (v. 13). This was absurd. These people could not possibly repay in kind. But that was exactly the point Jesus was making. If the Pharisees did this “you will be blessed, since they do not have the means to repay you; for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous” (v. 14). It is an axiom of following Jesus, “humble yourselves in the presence of the Lord, and He will exalt you” (James 4:10).

We must not assume that this was meant to be prescriptive. We are allowed to have friends over and enjoy the company of others. But if all of our free time is self-indulgent, we miss out on fulfilling our duty to others.

It is commanded of all believers to be “contributing to the needs of the saints, practicing hospitality” (Romans 12:13).

It is to be done enthusiastically, “be hospitable to one another without complaint” (1 Peter 4:9).

It is a requirement for church leadership, “an overseer, then, must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, temperate, prudent, respectable, hospitable, able to teach” (1 Timothy 3:2).

We are to care of others as we have been blessed by God to do so. No more, but certainly no less.

Takeaways

Let us remember who we are and Who our God is. In doing so, we will be more motivated to consider others more important than ourselves.