

September 10 Lesson: Jesus Silences Critics

**Fall Quarter 2023: God's Law Is Love
Unit 1: Love Completes; Law Falls Short**

**Sunday School Lesson for the week of September 10, 2023
By Craig Rikard**

**Devotional Reading: Hebrews 4:1-10
Background Scripture: Luke 14: 1-6**

Lesson Aims

1. To recognize the role of the Retribution Principle in our perceptions of suffering and blessing.
2. To recognize those moments when what seem to be righteous actions conflict with the higher law of love.
3. To learn from Jesus' encounter with the Pharisee as to how we respond to such moments.
4. To learn the importance of the "Law of Laws."
5. To recognize the damaging perspective of the Pharisees in contrast to the life affirming teaching of Jesus.

Supplement to the Sunday School Lesson in the Teacher's Manual

Context of Luke 14:1-6 (*please read September 3rd Sunday School commentary for background information on Luke and the Pharisees*)

Background

As stated last week, one of the major contributions of Luke's Gospel is that he reveals the tension between grace and law and the inner moral life in contrast to the outer legalism. Luke includes dialogues between Jesus and the Pharisees to reveal the stark contrast of the legalism of the Pharisees and grace and love revealed in Jesus. Our text is the second such dialogue in Luke's Gospel. We often fail to realize the author of most biblical books have a particular message God has inspired them to convey. This message or messages serve as threads that run throughout the book. The thread of compassionate grace versus legalism runs throughout Luke.

The Pharisees were learned men in the Mosaic Law or Torah, the first five books of the Old Testament. They strongly believe and teach that obeying the Torah is the only way to gain God's favor and approval. Since most of the masses had no access to the scrolls of Torah, they were dependent upon the lessons of Rabbis and Pharisees (also referred to as Rabbis) to hear and understand the Torah. This was very difficult and most often left them feeling "less than" in contrast to the religious leaders of Israel, and more seriously, as out of favor with God. Their lack of scrolls and dependence upon the Rabbis and Pharisees endowed the Pharisees with tremendous power. With that power the religious leaders possessed status, position, and wealth.

It is important to understand the nature of the Retribution Principle. This is an academic title assigned to the basic Old Testament understanding of how one's life is judged by God. The Jewish people believed, and were led to believe, that if one keeps the Torah they are blessed by God with health, success, and wealth. However, the opposite was also believed. If a person suffered or was poor and suffering, they deserved it because of their disobedience. In some cases, it was believed that if their parents were disobedient the negative judgement of God was passed to the children. Remember the Disciples question to Jesus, "Is this man blind because of his sin or the sin of his mother and father?" (John 5:1-9)

Jesus turned the Retribution Principle upon its head! He taught that God loved the poor, brokenhearted, and suffering. It wasn't their obedience to Torah that gained God's favor. God's grace and love for all was a gift, and life is a response to that gift.

It was customary for Pharisees to invite noted teachers into their home to dine. There was a certain social status associated with entertaining someone the crowds admired, especially one who claimed to possess knowledge from God. From several narratives in the Gospels, Jesus was often invited in order to ensnare him in a violation of Mosaic Law. Certainly, a Pharisee would consider himself smarter than a Galilean itinerant preacher and could entrap him in an infraction concerning the Torah. Our text is certainly one of those moments.

In what way does knowing Luke the physician and the context of the recorded events and teachings help you in understanding Luke's intent in writing it? In what ways does the Retribution Principle help us understand both Old and New Testament theology? How does it help us understand the social/political/economic structure of Israel in Jesus' day? How does the Retribution Principle help you understand how Jesus challenged this understanding? How does Jesus' ministry to the sick, poor, and suffering challenge the Retribution Principle? Why do you think Jesus' challenge to the Retribution Principle created a backlash against him?

Walking Through the Text

The Sabbath

No day was more sacred to the Jewish people than the Sabbath. Historical accounts exist of Jewish soldiers laying down their weapons rather than fight on the Sabbath, even if it meant their death. Violation of the Sabbath in Exodus 31:15 called for death. The Sabbath in Jesus' day continued to be a sacred day, set apart for worship and spiritual rest. Even those who farmed were asked to let the land rest on the seventh year. Faithful observance to the Sabbath was paramount to the Jewish people. The Sabbath was never meant to be a legalistic observance to help us stay in the good favor of God.

God's people were required to rest on the Sabbath Day. The Sabbath was observed from Friday evening to Saturday evening. One of the key requirements on the Sabbath was that no work be done. No one in the household was allowed to work, not even the livestock.

When my spouse Gail and I visited Israel, our tour led us to stand before the wailing wall just as the Sabbath began. The sun was lowing in the sky and the sense of the sacred overwhelmed us and left us speechless. From an upper room near the Wailing Wall was the equivalent of the theology school or Seminary, and the students would come dancing from the upper room on the Sabbath. I noticed many in our tour group had cameras ready. The students sent word down they were not coming out. Why? Cameras cause light and sparks, and in terms of Sabbath law created fire and light. The creation of fire while taking photos meant the violation of the Sabbath. This incident instilled in me the importance of the Jewish Sabbath.

Though unchurched as a young boy, I was aware of sacred law. I was taught certain behaviors were not allowed on the Sabbath. Many of you will remember the Sunday sales laws. Every business shut down and refused to sell. Today that strong sense of remaining true to the Sabbath has all but dissipated in American life. I also recall such leisure activities like fishing, sports, and other activities being forbidden on the Sabbath. Again, today such prohibitions no longer possess great weight. However, in Jesus' day, maintaining the rules about the Sabbath was paramount with serious consequences. Consequently, to trap Jesus violating the Sabbath Day was a serious matter. A violation of the Sabbath would discredit Jesus in the eyes of the Pharisee, and more importantly, in the eyes of the masses.

Many of the attempts by the religious leaders to discredit Jesus involved catching Jesus in a violation of the Sabbath. You may remember Jesus' disciples were charged with violating the Sabbath for picking corn on the Sabbath (Mat. 12:1-3). It is interesting to notice the events surrounding that moment at the cornfield. First, the question is raised, "What are they doing standing at a cornfield?" This is a place we would hardly ever see the Pharisees standing. However, their jealousy and desire to discredit Jesus was so important to them that they are standing in a place they would usually never stand. Always remember, jealousy, dislike, and especially hatred can make us stand in places we would never otherwise stand. Secondly, Jesus knows they are watching, and he knows why they are watching. Jesus could have easily asked that all stop picking and eating the grains of corn for it was the Sabbath. However, he chose to keep picking corn. Why? In such moments Jesus recognizes an attempt to create chaos and damage on the part of Pharisees so he chose to transform their desire to entrap him into a teachable moment. Our text is one of those moments. Our narrative reveals the true nature of the Sabbath and exposes the errancy of the Pharisees and legal experts.

Can you share our culture's understanding of the Sabbath in your childhood? What were some of the behaviors and activities you recall that were forbidden on the Sabbath? In the Creation hymn in Gen. 1 and 2 we are given a poetic understanding of God's activity in creation. What makes the seventh day, the Sabbath, different? Can you share some of the ways in our present culture we can celebrate the Sabbath? In what ways does the Sabbath itself help us in worshipping God? How can we remain obedient to the Sabbath today? What are some ways we can keep the Sabbath so that God is worshiped?

The Pharisee

The Pharisee is a "prominent Pharisee," which conveys he is a man of well-respected religious authority and wealth. The guests were other Pharisees and experts in the Law. Most likely they were people of high social status in attendance. As revealed in last week's lesson, ritual

cleansing and purification were highly important to the Pharisees. Therefore, no “unclean” person should be found dining with them. However, in the text we are presented with a man suffering from bodily swelling. Remember, the Pharisees and other Jews would have judged this man unclean, and to touch him would result in becoming unclean or defiled. We are not told how the man appears during the meal. He could have subtly entered in an attempt to see the one known as a healer, much like the woman with the issue of blood crawling through the crowd just to touch Jesus’ garment. We are given few clues as to why he is there at all.

Yet, there is one possibility that certainly is in harmony with the prominent Pharisee’s intent. The Pharisee could have intentionally allowed this unclean man to enter for the purpose of trapping Jesus. The man could place Jesus in a very difficult position. If he did not help the man he would be perceived as being uncaring. If he helped the man, he would be defiling himself and violating the Sabbath.

Can you articulate how needing to know the Law, in order to be favored by God, empowered the Pharisees? In what ways did the Pharisees have hold, influence, and power over the masses of people? For what reason do you think the prominent Pharisee invited Jesus to his banquet? For what reason would the prominent Pharisee allow the swollen man into the banquet to be seen by Jesus? How would the swollen man be used by the Pharisee to entrap Jesus? How does it being the Sabbath Day create the opportunity to trap Jesus? How could the suffering man be used to catch Jesus in a violation of the Sabbath?

The Suffering Man

There is no description of the man’s illness other than him being swollen. He could have suffered from kidney or cardiac disease, both of which can create swelling in the body. However, all we can do is guess. Knowing the nature of the disease was not the reason Luke, the physician, recorded this event. There is little or no debate that Luke recorded this narrative to call attention to the tense conversation surrounding Jesus healing the man on the Sabbath. The dialogue allows us to contrast the Pharisees perspective of Jewish religious life with the life Jesus offers. The Pharisees represent the legal perspective that understands the events in life as they relate to the Torah and the Mosaic Law. Jesus offers a liberating, life-affirming perspective that sees all people as precious to God, and our behavior is to be grounded in God’s love for us and our response to God’s love. The experiences of life are to teach us to seek such love in order to share it.

Whatever the man’s illness, *it was noticeable*. Undoubtedly a person could recognize the man’s swelling. According to Jewish religious thought, the man was swelling abnormally because of his sin or the sin of his parents. In relation to the Pharisees teaching, the man was not to be touched unless ritual purification followed, for he was “unclean.”

As stated above, I believe this man was used by the prominent Pharisee to create a trap that might ensnare Jesus in a violation of the Torah as it related to the Sabbath. Again, there is no commentary on how the man happened to be at the banquet. Most Jewish people who have been judged as a sinner and unclean would rarely burst into the home of a prominent Pharisee without invitation; serious consequences could follow. However, the Gospels do reveal moments when

the poor, suffering, and sinful person found a way to be present. In Luke 7:36-50 we are introduced to a “sinful” woman who cried at Jesus feet and washed them with the tears and dried them with her hair. Most likely the costly perfume she carried helped her enter the banquet. It is an expensive gift, and if she claimed to have brought the gift for Jesus she could most likely enter.

Still, such moments were most likely rare. Many Jews feared the religious leaders, especially those whom society deemed sinful. The Pharisees did not make the life of the suffering easier. Their perspective of suffering people proved to be a heavy yoke about their neck. Again, they were judged to have deserved their illness or poverty as a result of their sin. Again, I believe the man suffering from being swollen was allowed to enter or even *invited* to set up the conflict. In the story of the woman with perfume in Luke 7, the Pharisees remarked, “If he were a prophet he would know who touches him.” They conclude that the Messiah would immediately recognize the sinful and the unclean present. He would know what defiles people. The narrative goes on to reveal that Jesus did know the woman was considered a sinner. However, his response was to recognize her as a child of God and in need of grace like all people. Whereas the Pharisees judge her as deserving her plight, Jesus judged she was deserving of grace, mercy, and forgiveness.

In our text, we have the same dynamics at work. A sinful man, a man with noticeable illness, is near Jesus. Our passage, however, does not ask whether the man should be removed from the banquet because his presence can render all present unclean. Instead, the focus is upon the Sabbath and the laws surrounding it. This is a high, holy day in Judaism. The Pharisees believe the prohibitions in the Torah, combined with the prohibitions in the Mishna are clear. How will Jesus respond to this sinful man on the Sabbath? The Mishna, written in the years between the Old and New Testaments, contained specific regulations and requirements concerning the Sabbath. The masses could not remember the many laws and interpretations. Many of the prohibitions in the Mishna transformed the Sabbath from a joyful celebration into a burden.

How did the Pharisees and legal experts see the suffering man? Why did they believe he was sinner? Why did the Pharisees and legal scholars believe touching a sick individual make them unclean? What do you think would have usually happened in a banquet on the Sabbath when someone sick was found to be present? Consequently, the Pharisees said nothing. Why do you think they remained silent? After the man stood or lie down in the presence of Jesus what could have been the reason for their choice to remain silent? Remember, Pharisees were teachers who enjoyed showing off their knowledge of the Law while judging the “sinful.” How does this fact possibly help us to understand that the encounter was an intentional set up? How would remaining silent help them catch Jesus in a violation of the Sabbath?

He Was Carefully Watched

Why were the Pharisees so determined to discredit Jesus and remove him from Jewish life? Again, Jewish society in Jesus’ day was structured in an unjust manner. The Pharisees gained their respect, power, and wealth by memorizing, teaching, and knowing the Torah. There eventually were 612 Jewish laws. The laws the Israelites observed prior to the giving of the Mosaic Law ordered their society. The laws that preceded the Ten Commandments were incorporated into the Mosaic Law as long as they did not contradict the decalogue. Then,

interpretations of the laws were required. If they weren't supposed to work on the Sabbath, they had to ask, "How do we define work?" Thus, the law was expanding outward from the decalogue as other laws were incorporated through interpretations. The Jewish people were dependent upon the Pharisees and Rabbis to know what God expected. Yet, they always felt as though they displeased God. Without fail they violated the teachings of the Pharisees and struggled to fully know and understand the 600 plus laws. This was the "heavy yoke" of which Jesus spoke of in Matthew 11.

Then, Jesus arrives preaching, especially to the masses. His authority did not come from a religious education provided by the religious leaders of Israel. However, he assuredly was taken to Synagogue and the Temple during childhood and as a young man. Without doubt, attending Synagogue and observing the feasts and festivals greatly informed Jesus. However, he understood the Synagogue lessons more deeply and broadly than others, even his Rabbis. His authority came from God, thus explaining the response of those listening to Jesus. They claimed their hearts "burned within them" while he spoke. Therefore, the people referred to him as "Rabbi." Jesus created shaking, quaking ground beneath the legalistic system of the Pharisees. Jesus taught, "You do not need to determine how worthy you are to God based upon keeping the law." "I bring you God's good news, especially for you, and for those in prison, those who are brokenhearted, and the poor." Jesus proclaimed God's love for all and revealed God's intimate identification with those suffering.

How did Jesus' ministry threaten the power of the Pharisees? How would the plan of the Pharisee help in maintaining their power? How would discrediting Jesus help them maintain their status and position? How would healing the sick man on the Sabbath be used to discredit Jesus?

Furthermore, Jesus received tremendous backlash by reinterpreting, or offering, the proper interpretation of sacred texts. Jesus taught there exists only one law, found in Deut. 6, that you need to know and obey. This law is not written on tablets of wood and stone, instead being written on the heart. This is an "internal law." Deut. 6 reads, "Thou shalt love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and your neighbor as yourself." Jesus taught if one keeps the one law, they will keep all laws. Thus, Mosaic Law was not being abolished but fulfilled in the deepest sense. Jesus claimed, "I did not come to abolish the Law or prophets, but rather fulfill it (Matthew 5:17)." He further taught if we fall short of the Law of Laws, forgiveness is offered to the one genuinely seeking forgiveness and who desires to continue their journey in this law of righteous love. This one law was perfectly revealed in Jesus. Those who follow Jesus will be walking in this one law of love. It is not a law that ties a stone around the neck of the masses but rather offers grace and forgiveness and empowerment to follow him. The love required in this law is *not subjective*. We receive, embody, and share *the love of God as* understood in and through Jesus.

In what way does the Law of Laws (also the Shema, the One Law) challenge the legalistic system of the Pharisees and legal experts? In what way was Jesus the incarnation of the Shema? What is the connection between Jeremiah's prophesy of the inner covenant, written on the heart, and Jesus' proclamation that we need to obey only the Shema? In what manner does keeping the Shema help us keep all laws? Can you offer examples from

the Gospels that reveal Jesus as the incarnation of the Shema? Search for examples of Jesus placing the godly love of the Shema over the legalistic interpretation of the Pharisees. What do you think was meant when Jesus said he did “not come to abolish the Law and prophets, I came to fulfill them”?

This teaching of Jesus had the power to challenge and lessen the power and hold the Pharisees employed over the masses, especially the masses in Galilee. Historically, when leaders have challenged and shaken power structures, and the vehicles that provided wealth and power to those leaders, there is strong backlash, even plots to kill. Jesus is, again, shaking the foundation of Jewish society with liberation, grace, love, and truth. The Pharisees are threatened and respond with attempts to catch this assumed “uneducated” Galilean in a violation of Torah and thus reveal that he can’t possibly be a messenger from God. When such attempts fail, the attacks grow in intensity and desperation, finally leading to Jesus’ trial, crucifixion, and death.

Consequently, the Pharisees were “carefully watching” Jesus for any opportunity to accuse and strip him of religious authority. Perhaps the crowning moment that illustrates their frustration after failing to damage Jesus’ popularity occurs during the Triumphant Entry. The crowd ran to him with shouts of “Hallelujah, Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, Hosanna in the Highest!” The religious leaders’ response reveals the intensification of their fear, anger, and desire to remove him from their society. They said in frustration, “Look the whole world has gone out to him.” If they were going out to Jesus, it meant they were not seeking the Pharisees. Jesus’ ministry was bringing hope to all and threatening the social/political/economic structure of Israel.

How do you think Jesus’s actions, preaching, and teaching are connected to the Sanhedrin’s plan to crucify him?

The Question

We arrive at the climactic moment in the narrative. The phrase “there in front of him” regarding the ill man seems to imply the man had made his way to a place Jesus could see him, or maybe he was brought there. Perhaps this was a moment in which he was *brought* into the presence of Jesus. The careful watching of Jesus, along with the tense atmosphere at the banquet, seem to negate the idea he slipped into the banquet unnoticed. We have no mention of any attempt to remove him once he is there, even though his presence threatens them with defilement on the Sabbath. There is no accusation that the man is an uninvited guest, an intruder, from the prominent Pharisee or the legal experts attending the banquet. This seems to grant some validity to those who argue the man was intentionally brought to the banquet and used as a means of entrapment.

Instead of calling for the man to be removed, the Pharisees and legal experts sit quietly. Again, an odd response to a suffering man standing or lying in front of their invited guest, Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus knows the intent of the Pharisees. It is Jesus himself who speaks first. Using silence is a great technique to prompt someone to speak. When there is silence at a meeting someone will eventually break it. The silence only increases tension until it becomes uncomfortable. It almost seems as though the religious leaders are sitting quietly thinking, “Let’s see what he says to this!” Jesus obliged them. “Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath or not?” It is a

simple question, but also a loaded question. Jesus commonly used questions to turn the tables on those seeking to trap him. He has certainly done so in this moment. If they answer it is unlawful to heal on the Sabbath, they will have been obedient to the Torah and Mishna but will appear cold-hearted. If they answer it is lawful to heal on the Sabbath, they violate the very law that endows them with status and power. They are the ones entrapped, snared by the wisdom of Jesus.

Have you witnessed the use of silence as a means of “getting someone to speak”? Can you share it with your class? What was the hope of the Pharisee in remaining silent? Why do you believe Jesus’ method of answering a question with a question is effective? How do you believe the Pharisees and legal experts felt when Jesus asked the question? In what ways would the question entrap the Pharisees and other religious leaders?

This is not just an attempt to escape a trap for Jesus. He is asking a question the Pharisees and legal experts need to answer for themselves. Either they love the Law more than the man or the man above the Law. Jesus wants them to understand they do not have to choose between the man and the Law. The One Law allows them to be faithful to the Law and the prophets by loving the man. However, they cannot yet see the truth or the light within Jesus’ teaching. They have eyes to see and do not see, ears to hear but do not hear. The text reads, “They remained silent.”

Jesus now shines a greater light, a glaring light upon the situation before them. This light is inescapable. Either this light will open their hearts to Jesus and his teaching, or they will reject it. They would be rejecting the obvious. Jesus “takes hold of the man.” A Jewish person would never attempt to touch an unclean thing or person, especially on the Sabbath. In touching them they become defiled. They could not participate in religious rites, festivals, and rituals unless they purified themselves. Yet, *Jesus touches him!* Jesus touched the sick all of his ministry. Perhaps there was no more remarkable moment to illustrate God’s love for all, and the nature of the real Law that should dwell in the heart than when He touched a leper. The man was instantly healed. The text reads he was healed and then sent on his way. The intent of Jesus was for the Pharisees and religious leaders to “see” the healing. Now would they rejoice the man is well, or would they condemn Jesus?

What do think would be the normal reaction of the Pharisees and other religious leaders when Jesus touched the sick man? Yet, though stunned, they remained quiet. Do you think they remained silent because they were shocked and could not think of what to say? This was the moment Jesus, in their thinking and belief, violated the Sabbath Day. So, again, why do think they remained quiet? They had him! Do you think Jesus asking his next question immediately after healing the man “beat them to the punch”?

If the religious leaders and prominent Pharisee said anything it is not recorded. They most likely remained silent for Jesus then adds to the glare of truth: “If one of you has a child or an ox that falls into a ditch, will you not immediately pull him out?” Notice the word “immediately.” In case one argued that perhaps the man could be treated later, just not on the Sabbath, this man’s healing challenges such reasoning. Jesus did not wait for another day, another moment. Yes, it is the Sabbath, and he is going to reveal the true meaning of the Sabbath. Immediately he healed the man. As the teacher’s manual informs us, there were two streams of understanding regarding

helping an animal from the ditch or well. First, strict interpretation of the Torah meant that you could feed the animal but could not free it. Feeding the animal did not violate the law but liberating the animal did. It required work to free the donkey from the ditch. Others allowed the donkey to be freed even on the Sabbath.

How did Jesus' next question leave them speechless? How do you think Jesus related the healing of the sick man to the Pharisees treatment of a donkey in a well or ditch?

Naturally, the Law allowed work on the Sabbath if freeing a child. Compassion and love were granted the greater power when a child was endangered. Notice, Jesus used the phrase, "If one of you has a child..." It is greater importance when it's our own child. We have the deepest interest and most powerful motivation when attempting to free our own child. Jesus' next question intensifies that radiant glaring light for which there are only two responses: accept or reject.

How did Jesus relate his healing of the swollen man to rescuing a child from the ditch or well? What would be a father's (or mother's) response if their child was endangered from being in a well? How would the parents in Jesus' question represent God? How do they represent Jesus' ministry? How did Jesus using the law concerning a donkey in a ditch and a child in the ditch set up the contrast between legalism and living by the Shema?

The Pharisees and legal experts are willing to treat the sick, poor, and suffering as animals. They show little compassion and minimal desire to liberate them. Spiritually, emotionally, and even physically the suffering are "in a ditch." They face circumstances that bind and imprison them. However, they are God's children! It is God's desire that they be treated as such. Compassion must motivate us. We must be willing to do all necessary because they are God's child and our brother and sister. If the Pharisees and the others received this truth, they would celebrate the man's healing. The man's healing is equivalent to freeing a child from the well or ditch. Jesus loved the suffering man. Meeting the man's need did not violate the Sabbath, instead it revealed the true nature of the Sabbath. One of the highest means of worshiping God is to love one another as God loves us. It is an act of worship to liberate, heal a broken heart, and heal the broken.

How do you believe healing the man on the Sabbath fulfilled the Law according to Jesus? Why do think the healing of the man was an act of worship?

Sadly, our narrative doesn't end on a joyous note. The religious leaders remained silent. Not only are they silent, "they have nothing to say." They reject Jesus' teaching yet have no answer to the relevant and necessary questions Jesus asked.

Prayer

Almighty God, we ask your forgiveness for the many times we allowed excuses and our own legalism to get in the way of our God-given compassion. We thank you for everyone you use to pull us from the ditch. We thank you for the circumstances that taught us true righteousness through the Law of Laws. We pray for the wisdom to not only receive your light but to live in that light. In the name of Jesus, Amen.