

Is it Lawful to Heal on the Sabbath?

Lesson for September 10, 2023

Adult Topic: Doing Good Deeds at the Wrong Time

Unit I: Love Completes, Law Falls Short

Scriptural Background: Luke 14:1-6

Printed Text: Luke 14:1-6

Key verse: “Jesus asked the Pharisees and experts in the law, “Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath or not?” But they remained silent. So taking hold of the man, he healed him and sent him on his way.” (Luke 14:3-4, NIV)

"What must I forsake?" a young man asked.

"Colored clothes for one thing. Get rid of everything in your wardrobe that is not white. Stop sleeping on a soft pillow. Sell your musical instruments and don't eat any more white bread. You cannot, if you are sincere about obeying Christ, take warm baths or shave your beard. To shave is to lie against him who created us, to attempt to improve on his work."

Quaint, isn't it - this example of extrabiblical scruples? And perhaps amusing. The list has constantly shifted over the 1,800 years since this one was actually recorded.

Jim Peterson, *Living Proof*, NavPress, 1989

Key Terms

1. **Dropsy** (verse 2) – A disease produced by the accumulation of fluid in the cavity of various parts of the body that results in swelling.
2. **Healed** (verse 4) – Made free from injury or disease; made sound or whole.
3. **Lawful** (verse 3) – Permitted, legal; constituted, authorized, or established by law; rightful.
4. **Sabbath** (verse 1) – The seventh day of the week observed from Friday evening to Saturday evening as a day of rest and worship by Jews and some Christians.

Lesson Background

In Matthew Jesus is the *King*. In Mark He is the *Servant*. In Luke, *behold the Man*. Luke's first concern is the real human birth and the growth through boyhood to the perfect manhood. . . It is his special interest in our Lord's manhood which explains also why Luke's rendering of our Lord's Galilean ministry is so much shorter than in Matthew or Mark; and why, in compensation, he gives such a long, leisurely diary of the winding journey to Jerusalem.

In his short record of the Galilean ministry Luke gives about equal space to our Lord's deeds and words, so that neither is emphasized above the other, and both equally reflect back on the Wonder-Man Himself.

Jesus never shied away from controversy. He took advantage of confrontational situations to expose hypocrisy and demonstrate His love and compassion and mercy towards those who were suffering. He was particularly skillful at applying His wisdom to shut the mouths of His opponents who could offer no response to His devastating arguments or irrefutable illustrations. This just intensified the opposition on the part of the proud self-righteous religious leaders who were embarrassed by their inability to stand their ground with Jesus. They were always forced to retreat publicly and then regroup in private to try to come up with new ways to attack Jesus. When is it appropriate to show compassion and mercy towards those who are suffering? This is the question raised in this week's lesson. As Jesus had taught earlier in the Parable of the Good Samaritan, it is always our responsibility to take action when confronted personally with such suffering.

Lesson in Depth

I. An Invitation on the Sabbath (Luke 14:1)

Jesus' host was an important man. The Greek may mean a *ruler* (perhaps a member of the Sanhedrin) who was also a member of the Pharisaic party. Or it can signify "*a leading Pharisee.*" Either way he was an important figure. Dinner on the Sabbath seems often to have been a rather special meal (the food having all been prepared beforehand) and it was common to invite guests.

They were watching Him carefully: Who were they watching carefully? The man in need? No, they were watching Jesus. They were watching Jesus not out of reverence or respect. They were not watching Jesus because they were hanging on every word, and they were ready to do His bidding and every wish as His command. They were watching Him because they suspected Him. They did not trust His teaching or His practice, especially on the issue of the Sabbath Day.

He always said the right thing, at the right time, and in the right way. He never forgot, for a moment, who He was and where He was. The example of Christ in this passage deserves the close attention of all Christians, and specially of ministers of the Gospel. It throws strong light on some most difficult points, —our interaction with unconverted people, —the extent to which we should carry it,—the manner in which we should behave when we are with them. Our Lord has left us a pattern for our conduct in this chapter. It would be wise for us to endeavor to walk in His steps. We ought not to withdraw entirely from all intercourse with unconverted people. It would be cowardice and indolence to do so, even if it were possible. It would shut us out from many opportunities of doing good. But we ought to go into their society moderately, watchfully, and prayerfully, and with a firm resolution to carry our Master and our Master's business with us.

II. Jesus Heals on the Sabbath (Luke 14:2-4)

Was this trap situation staged by the Pharisees?

Dropsy, also called edema, is a swelling of the joints or the whole body, often due to a faulty heart or to diseased kidneys or liver. Jesus could have told the man, “Come back after sundown and I’ll heal you,” thus avoiding a confrontation with the Pharisees. But He didn’t do that; He healed the man and then verbally confronted His critics.

Question: Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath? The question is simplicity itself, and men like these should be able to answer it at once. Surely they knew whether it was in harmony with the law or in conflict with it to heal on the Sabbath. “*But they were quiet,*” which is stronger than just silent. Strange, indeed; no one spoke up, no one came forward to do so, there is no whispering even among themselves – all are motionless, their eyes are fixed on Jesus. The situation became dramatic as the Lord looked around and waited for a reply, waited until it was clear that he would get none.

The qualification which our Lord here puts on the requirements of the fourth commandment is evidently based on Scripture, reason, and common sense. The Sabbath was made for man, for his benefit, not for his harm – for his advantage, not for his disadvantage. Interpreting God’s law about the Sabbath was never meant to impinge on charity, kindness and the real needs of human nature. Our Lord shows that deeds of necessity and mercy do not break the observance of the Sabbath.

Why do you think they remained silent? One reason is this — they could not point to a single verse or word in the Law of Moses that forbade the healing of a person on the Sabbath. Not one verse of the Old Testament would substantiate a prohibition on Jesus, the Lord of Glory, healing someone on the Sabbath or of anyone being healed on the Sabbath. And yet, they believed that Jesus’ ministry practice compromised the Sabbath and so they were locked in on Him. And yet when He challenges them — “Is it right or not?” — nobody speaks up because they can’t quote the Bible. Now this is important because Jesus is not saying what the Bible says about the Sabbath is unimportant to the Pharisees. He is saying, “You have added to the Bible, and thus, you have diminished the authority of the Bible.” Jesus makes it clear that our place for final spiritual authority in faith and practice is found in the Bible, not in the doctrines and commandments of men, not in the additions that people come up with. However pious those ideas are, whatever the good motivations are for coming up with those extra things, we are not to burden the people of God with extra added commandments. This is one of the points of conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees.

Jesus’ dramatic action silences any possible refutation of showing compassion and mercy.

1. Took hold of him
2. Healed him
3. Sent him away

This man's infirmity had been "used" by the Pharisees. Jesus graciously healed the man, but He would not leave him there to be humiliated. But how would he be humiliated? Jesus had already drawn attention to the error of the teaching of the Pharisees as it related to healing on the Sabbath. Jesus was now about to show them their hypocrisy in terms of their own practice. Jesus did not want this man to be among those who were about to be rebuked, and perhaps even shamed for using one who was infirmed, and so He sent him away. This is an act of mercy and grace, just as the healing had been.

III. A Selfish Bending of Rules on the Sabbath (Luke 14:5-6)

"And He said to them, 'Which one of you shall have a son or an ox fall into a well, and will not immediately pull him out on a Sabbath day?'" From this it is evident that they also recognized the principle that cases of real emergency pushed the ceremonial Sabbath laws aside. So they are hypocritical if they censure Him for healing on Sabbath days the sick who are in physical or spiritual distress. Although in most cases there is no immediate peril of their lives, their suffering, and the distressing condition in which they find themselves (a condition also affecting the families of the sick people as well as the whole community) are such that love demands their being healed without delay.

Jesus implies that such a deed, whatever strenuous work it required, would be perfectly lawful. Shall the same love, which require no labor at all, be denied a fellow man?

According to Warren Wiersbe, "Jesus exposed the false piety of the Pharisees and the scribes. They claimed to be defending God's Sabbath laws, when in reality they were denying God by the way they abused people and accused the Savior. There is a big difference between protecting God's truth and promoting man's traditions."

Lesson Summary

Our text reveals three areas where Jesus confronts our sin. Before we look at these, let me point out that Jesus accepted dinner invitations from unbelievers, but He didn't just go and socialize. He went with a mission. He was always doing His Father's business. If you socialize with unbelievers, make sure that you go with the same sense of mission, prepared to speak out boldly for the Lord. Otherwise, you will end up compromising your faith or even being drawn back into the worldly behavior you once engaged in. Bible.org provides several applications for us to note from this lesson.

Jesus confronts our sin of religious hypocrisy. Luke does not say and so we can't be sure, but there is some reason to believe that the Pharisees planted this man with dropsy there in front of Jesus to see whether He would violate their rules against healing on the Sabbath. Luke says, "they were watching Him closely." The verb has the nuance of lurking or lying in wait to catch someone in something. They were out to get Him.

Jesus didn't disappoint them! He took up the challenge head-on, asking them, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath, or not?" This put them in a bind. If they said that healing is permitted, they conceded His point and they raised problems about their traditions, which had added to the Law of Moses. If they said that healing is not permitted, they came across as uncaring. Besides, if they had invited this man to be there, it cast questions on their motives for them to say, "No, healing is not permitted." So, they kept silent.

Note the simple manner Luke reports this miracle: Jesus took hold of the man, healed him, and sent him away. Normally, dropsy would take a few days to subside, but this man went from being bloated to instantly being normal. Luke doesn't say anything about the man's or the witnesses' reaction. Then, Jesus followed up the miracle by asking them a rhetorical question to underscore His point: "Which one of you shall have a son or an ox fall into a well, and will not immediately pull him out on a Sabbath day?" Some manuscripts read "donkey" instead of "son," but the evidence is clearly in favor of "son" as the original reading. Jesus is saying, "If your son, or for that matter, even your ox, falls into a well on the Sabbath, you wouldn't hesitate to pull him (or it) out. Yet you want to let this man go on in his suffering!" In other words, they cared about their animals more than about this man. Jesus was exposing their lack of love and their religious hypocrisy.

There are far more characteristics of hypocrites than those listed here, but note these five from our text:

(1) Hypocrites study the Word for ammunition against others, but they don't apply it to themselves. These men knew their Bibles. They knew the Law of Moses frontward and backward. They were the guardians of the faith, waiting to catch someone else in an error. Their aim in knowing the Word was not to confront themselves, but to have the ammo to use against others. They were watching Jesus closely, but they weren't watching themselves closely. They were waiting for Him to violate their rules, so that they could pounce on Him. But they weren't applying the Law to themselves.

(2) Hypocrites target and try to bring down anyone who confronts their sin with the Word. Why did this Pharisee invite Jesus to dinner? What was his motive? From the evidence we have, I suggest that it was not to learn from Jesus. It was not to find out if possibly he was wrong and Jesus was right. He invited Jesus to dinner to try to set Him up and bring Him down. He and his cronies were watching Jesus to try to trip Him up.

(3) Hypocrites care more about their manmade rules than about people being right before God in their hearts. These Pharisees couldn't care less about this hurting man. So, what if he was suffering? Jesus was breaking their rules! Hypocrites usually care more about external conformity than about inward righteousness. They aren't concerned about whether they please God in their thought-lives; they just want everyone to follow the rules about how you look and what you do. If Jesus had just observed their Sabbath rules, they would have been content to leave Him alone. But Jesus always dealt with heart issues, like having a pure thought life, being free from anger, and being forgiving from the heart toward those who have wronged you.

(4) *Hypocrites bend the rules for their own purposes, but they apply them rigidly to others.* These men would do what they had to do, Sabbath or no Sabbath. There were ways to get around the rules when you needed to. A Sabbath-day's journey could be extended if you knew how to do it, so that you could travel where you wanted to go. They would get their own son or ox out of a pit on the Sabbath. But, *no healing allowed on the Sabbath!* I wonder what Jesus' host would have done if Jesus had healed the host's wife or son on the Sabbath? Probably, that would have been allowed!

(5) *Hypocrites often ignore overwhelming evidence in order to persist in their sin.* Jesus powerfully and miraculously heals this man, but the Pharisees ignored that evidence. And, this wasn't the first time this sort of thing had happened! Jesus had cast a demon out of a man in the synagogue on the Sabbath, and the report of that had spread widely (4:31-37). He healed Simon's mother-in-law on the Sabbath (4:38-39). He healed the man with the withered hand on the Sabbath, but the Pharisees responded with rage (6:6-11). On the Sabbath He healed the woman bent over for 18 years, but the synagogue official was indignant (13:10-17). How much more evidence did they need to wake up and say, "Maybe we're wrong and Jesus is right?" This shows us how deeply entrenched this sin of religious hypocrisy is and how diligent we must be to root it out of ourselves when Jesus confronts it! If you're not careful, you can build a case to defend your point-of-view and ignore overwhelming biblical evidence that convicts you of your sin. (<https://bible.org/seriespage/lesson-68-jesus-confronter-luke-141-6>)