
Prayers

To God

Weekly theme - dedication to the Lord God

Dedicate your feelings to the Lord. Let Him be the judge of what feelings you must put to one side, and what you must take account of and use.

For myself

I thank you Lord Jesus Christ for all the privileges and enjoy this life. I may feel very poor, but I am rich in You; I may feel insignificant, but You use my words and deeds for Your Kingdom; I may feel powerless, but You have granted me your Holy Spirit who does wondrous things in my life. Thank you Lord Jesus Christ for the privilege of salvation and the future with You in eternal life: **ALLELUIA!**

For others

Pray in thanksgiving for friends you have appreciated in past years; people who may have now passed out of your life, but have contributed to it in important ways.

Meditation

Come to the River of Life;
and wash in the pure clear water of Christ's salvation
which prepares you for your life in God's Kingdom.

Come and stand on the Rock;
and be confident that whatever happens to you
the ground of faith beneath your feet cannot be shaken.

Come to the Light of the World;
and rejoice in the truth that sets you free and transforms all,
giving hope for the future, and a certain hope of life eternal.

Come to feed at Christ's Banquet;
and taste the food He gives to feed and nourish your soul,
eat and relish the flavours of repentance, forgiveness and love.

Come and speak the Gospel Word;
and feel the witness of your heart well up within your being,
ready to be spoken, and by the Holy Spirit find a ready ear.

Bible Passage

Luke 14:1-6

¹ On one occasion, as He was going on the Sabbath day to have a meal in the house of a prominent Pharisee, they were watching Jesus carefully.

² Just then, a man suffering from dropsy was thrust in front of Him, ³ so in response to this, Jesus asked the Pharisees and experts in the law,

“Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath or not?”

⁴ But they were silent. So Jesus took hold of the man, healed him and sent him on his way.

⁵ Then he turned to them and asked,

“If one of you has a son or an ox that falls into a well on the Sabbath day, will you not immediately pull him out?”

⁶ And they had nothing to say.

Review

This is a beautiful little story, describing the healing by Jesus of a man with the disease of ‘dropsy’. The story line is very similar to that of the healing of a man with a withered arm found in the other Gospels (e.g. Matthew 12:9f., Mark 3:1f.). The story found in Matthew is full of arguments between Jesus and the Pharisees, and the difference between this and our story today is that here, the Pharisees have nothing to say when Jesus heals the man and argues with them about the Law! Luke’s story is certainly short, but as we read it, we will find that it does not lack interest.

Luke 14 begins with a series of four stories of Jesus, all of them taking place at the meal table, or at a banquet (Luke 14:1f. 7f. 12f. 16f.). He may have had a purpose in grouping these stories together, but this is not clear as yet. All we know from the general story of Luke’s Gospel is that Jesus is now on his way to Jerusalem, determined to do God’s will and confront the religious and state powers of the day. The very fact that these themes now arise in a series of incidents at the meal table indicates that for Jesus, there was nowhere to hide. He could not even have a meal in peace, for His mission consumed Him utterly. Nearly every incident of His life involved some confrontation with the Pharisees, and the religious authorities ‘*were watching Jesus carefully*’, as we read here (14:1).

The Pharisees had a plan to trap Jesus, involving tempting Him to heal someone on the Sabbath. This would enable them to accuse Jesus of working on the Sabbath and denounce Him as a ‘lawbreaker’. Such an accusation was second only to that of blasphemy; Jesus was not having dinner with friends!

The Pharisees were certainly not interested in the state of health of the man they thrust into the room in front of Jesus, as he came for the meal. The sick man was a pawn in their game. To Jesus however, the man standing before him was a person in need, he was suffering, he was being exploited, and he needed help. He had dropsy, a condition called ‘oedema’ today, which involves the retention of fluid and swelling, symptoms that could relate to a number of

serious diseases. But the man also needed help; he was being 'used' in a stark and unfriendly environment, and he was in need of Jesus' compassion.

Jesus dealt with the situation by asking a question which went to the heart of the matter, *'is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath or not?'* (14:3). Now the Pharisees were advocates of rabbinic laws that identified every minute form of work possible, in order to forbid it as an affront to God on a Sabbath day. The laws of Moses said that the Sabbath day should be one of rest from which everyone should abstain from work (Deuteronomy 5:14), so in their simple logic, it was necessary to define every aspect of work so that it could be banned.

The zeal with which the Pharisees pursued this in the previous centuries was relentless. In Jesus' day, the debate over what was work and what was not work had degenerated into farce. Ancient documents show that arguments raged over whether a donkey stuck in a pit on the Sabbath day should be thrown straw to help it get a foothold to escape! Rabbinical law said a man was not allowed to get the donkey out by himself, for that would be work, so the argument was over whether 'work' was done in throwing the animal assistance! How extraordinary! So to make sure our own discussion of this does not descend to such depths, we will take a broader look at what was going on.

When Jesus asks His question (14:3) it is uncertain whether He is talking about the law as written in the Old Testament, or rabbinical law as practised by the Pharisees. There is an important difference; one is given by God and the other is a human interpretation of that law. Indeed, nowhere in the Old Testament do we read that healing people is a form of work and therefore forbidden; such an instruction cannot be found. But the Pharisees were consumed with concern not for God's Old Testament Law but the rabbinical law, constructed to explain God's law and apply it in practice, and they had made an idol of these rules and regulations even though they were not in Scripture. Jesus' question therefore begs the question, 'what is God's law' and before this, the Pharisees were silenced. An answer of 'yes' would contradict their own rabbinical law, and an answer of 'no' would lead them into an argument with Jesus about the validity of their rules before God.

So Jesus, using the dramatic pause created by his insightful question, promptly healed the man and led him to leave the tense religious atmosphere developing in the house (14:4). In the midst of this awkward situation, Jesus shows His humanity and His remarkable ability to perform a complete healing miracle without fuss. We want to know more, as so often, but Jesus's ministry is always about so much more than the healings he performs. Everything He does tells us something about God's love and mercy, and His Kingdom rule.

Jesus has one more thing to say to the Pharisees, and in verse 5 we read His challenge to their affront in trying to trick Him and their silence. He says, *'if one of you has a son or an ox that falls into a well on the Sabbath day, will you not immediately pull him out?'* It sounds as if Jesus is entering the thorny theological debate about the Sabbath, but if you think about this carefully, you will see that He is saying something different and rather subtle. Jesus appeals to the natural human response in any crisis, which is to try and get around rules or regulations in order to help those in desperate need. Is it not true, He asks, that everyone will do what is necessary in a crisis? Few would dare contradict Jesus for fear of denying their humanity, and again, the Pharisees remain silent (14:6).

The difference between Jesus and the Pharisees is obvious to us now, for Jesus is focussed on the compassion of the Father for the individual, and the Pharisees are focussed on their laws for controlling people's religious behaviour. Thank God that Jesus consistently showed His Father as on the side of the needy individual and cautious about the the rules and regulations of human institutions.

Going Deeper

Notes on the text and translation

V2 **'a man suffering from dropsy was thrust in front of Him'**

Other translations:

'there in front of Him was a man suffering from dropsy' (NIV)

'just then, in front of Him, there was a man who had dropsy' (NRSV)

You can tell from the other translations that there is a certain un-natural feel to the original Greek here. This is because it reads as if the man suddenly appeared before Jesus, with no apparent reason or explanation. The best way to interpret the Greek is to think of this man as being put before Jesus just to see how he would react; he was 'thrust' before Him. To gain a further understanding of what was going on, see the review.

V3 **'so in response to this, Jesus asked ...'**

Other translations:

'Jesus asked ...' (NIV)

'Jesus responded ... saying ...' (ESV)

The intrigue of this passage comes because in the Greek, the sentence reads, *'and answering, Jesus said ...'* But when we look at the passage, no one has yet asked Jesus anything that He should now give an answer! Some translations use the word *'responded'* (ESV), as if Jesus is responding to a question that Luke has not reported. That is awkward, so I suggest that Jesus is *'answering'* the provocation of having a man thrust in front of Him by challenging His hosts with a question. This is true to the basis of Luke's story here, as well as the Greek used in this Scripture.

V5 **'a son or an ox'**

Other translations:

"a child or an ox (NRSV)

"an ass or an ox (King James)

It is certainly rather odd to find that some translations say here *'a son or ox'*, or something similar, while others, notably the King James version, say, *'an ass or an ox'*! What is the reason for the difference? Unfortunately, this is a rare case of the most ancient manuscripts available to us disagreeing on the actual word used at this point; quite literally, some say *'son'* (or *'child'*), and some say *'ass'* (or *'donkey'*). As these are our earliest manuscripts, we possess nothing more to say which is closest to the 'original'. Most modern scholars suggest that it is best to translate *'son'* simply because this fits with the original law about the Sabbath day given by Moses in Deuteronomy 5:14, where the word *'son'* is mentioned in the sentence before the word *'ox'*. It also makes a great deal of sense in the context of this story of Jesus.

Further Comments

Meals in the Gospels

The review points out the concentration of stories in Luke 14 around meals, and this is something we will pick up in the next two studies. But it is worth recalling that many of the great stories of Jesus' life are focussed around meals; all the instances listed below are to be found in Luke's Gospel.

- Levi threw a great banquet for Jesus when he was saved (5:29)
- A sinful woman anointed Jesus' feet while He was reclined at table with Pharisees (7:36f.)
- The feeding of the five thousand was an extreme form of a meal shared with Jesus' disciples (9:16)
- Jesus taught Martha something important as she waited on Jesus at Bethany (10:39)
- The Pharisees disputed with Jesus after noticing that He had not washed His hands (ritually) before eating with them (11:37)
- The most famous meal Jesus ate was the 'Last Supper', a Passover meal celebrated just before He died (24:30).

In other Gospels, we find more stories of Jesus containing food, for example, the parable of the wedding banquet (Matthew 22:2f.), and John's other great story of the wedding in Cana (John 2:1f.).

Extensive study has been done on these stories and the importance of sharing food and eating meals to the Gospel story. No wonder then, that the principle 'sacrament' shared by all Christians is the 'Lord's Supper', a meal at which people celebrate the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Also, it should be of little surprise to us that the most successful evangelism campaign in some parts of the world today (certainly in England) is that of the programme 'Alpha', which introduces people to Jesus in group meetings containing a meal.

The laws of the Sabbath day

It is worth recalling the words of Scripture that define the instruction for abstaining from work on the Sabbath day: from Exodus,

⁸ "Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. ⁹ Six days you shall labour and do all your work, ¹⁰ but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates.

From Deuteronomy, the words of this command are virtually the same, but they include a last sentence repeating the sentiment that the Israelites must treat servants in the same way as everyone else.

The remarkable force of this command is its universality, for Israel is commanded both to stop work and also require no work of others. This is a fundamentally humanitarian command, putting all things on the same plane before God, the Maker of all things. Indeed, the report of this command in the book of Exodus goes on to state that the reason for doing this is to honour the God who made the world and who 'rested' on the seventh day.

Discipleship

Application

Rules about things in church

In the light of this and other related passages of Scripture, there can be no doubt that God's Church must be careful about its own rules and regulations. Surely, we must not do what God's people of the Old Covenant did, which is to allow interpretations of God's Word to command absolute obedience from people. We must not repeat the sins of our fathers, and when the Church appears to be concerned to control what people do on the Sabbath or how they worship Him on Sunday, then it has surely succumbed to this trap.

The message of this passage is surely that while God's people today should honour God's Law including His Sabbath instruction to rest, they should not place restrictions on the core Gospel message, its delivery or application. The world is full of people who are hurting whether physically or mentally or spiritually, and if we are to follow Jesus, we must stand ready to help, heal and deliver those who suffer, in His name.

Simple healing

There is no difficulty in this healing, no drama, no faith on the part of the sick person, and no awe on the part of those who saw the miracle. It was a side-show to Jesus' confrontation with the Pharisees. Nevertheless, Jesus shows humanity to the man and deals with his condition. Whatever he experienced or whatever his disease, it was surely a great relief, both to be healed and also to be led away by Jesus from being used a human bait in the disputes of the powerful.

We come across people who need help or healing in a variety of circumstances. In all of them, the duty of the Christian is to minister Christ's healing in appropriate ways, perhaps through sensitive prayer or counsel, and always through love and care. We may meet people only briefly, just as Jesus met this man only briefly at the meal He attended, but we must show the same compassion as our Lord to all who are in need, whatever the circumstances.

Helping those who fall into pits

A primary opportunity for the delivery of the Gospel is trouble and disaster. We like to think that we can live our lives as far away as possible from tragedy and distress, but they are the occasions when God can work powerfully to bless and save. For example, many a minister or pastor has discovered that evangelism begins when people who have been bereaved are visited regularly after the tragedy of their loss. Also, the church has long been aware that ministry to people in prison can yield a harvest of souls; those who have fallen into the 'pits' of life know they need salvation.

Ideas for what to do

- Keep your eyes open all around you for people at work or in your locality who are going through testing times. These are the occasions when your Lord may call on you to bear witness to the love of the Saviour.
- Write down a list of what you think should or should not be done on a Sabbath day. What does God say about the Sabbath day in the Bible, and what is your interpretation?

Questions (for use in groups)

1. What does this passage tell us about Jesus' healing ministry, how it is done, and to whom it is done.
2. Put yourself into the position of the man who has been brought to the meal, and discuss his feelings.
3. How can we best help people who are in crisis? Share any experiences you have of helping people in the midst of crises, and any testimony of receiving help in a time of personal crisis.

Final Prayer

Lord God, my Saviour and my Master, hear my prayer at the close of this day. Bless the work that I have done, use the words that I have said, and give me the grace to leave all things in Your hands as I sleep this night. Make me worthy of Your call I pray, and when I awake, may I be willing to be Your servant again, for each new day. **AMEN**
