

## “Jesus Silences Critics”

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

### Luke 14:1–6 (NIV)

<sup>1</sup> One Sabbath, when Jesus went to eat in the house of a prominent Pharisee, he was being carefully watched. <sup>2</sup> There in front of him was a man suffering from abnormal swelling of his body. <sup>3</sup> Jesus asked the Pharisees and experts in the law, “Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath or not?” <sup>4</sup> But they remained silent. So taking hold of the man, he healed him and sent him on his way.

<sup>5</sup> Then he asked them, “If one of you has a child or an ox that falls into a well on the Sabbath day, will you not immediately pull it out?” <sup>6</sup> And they had nothing to say.

### LESSON AIMS

- **Learning Fact:** To understand that the Sabbath was a sign of holiness between God and His people.
- **Biblical Principle:** To know that Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath and He demonstrated the true intent of the Sabbath, to remind us of God’s mercy.
- **Daily Application:** To commit to lives of mercy, following the examples of Jesus.

### INTRODUCTION

#### Loving God by Loving the Least

As attendees at the memorial service for Dorothy Day (1897–1980) listened to the sermon, they were reminded of the following quote from her writing: “You love God just as much as the one you love least.” This quote was her way of paraphrasing Jesus’ commands in Luke 10:25–37 to love God and show love and mercy to others. The minister giving the sermon went on to describe how this quote anchored Dorothy’s life and work.

Demonstrations of mercy, love, and justice have been the tenets of the Catholic Worker Movement, established by Dorothy and others in the 1930s. The movement consists of over 200 communities (“houses”) in 14 countries. Each house works to show hospitality and mercy to the most vulnerable members of their city. This work is done through their feeding of the hungry, tending to the sick, and providing stable housing for the unhoused.

God desires that His people love Him and love their neighbors. People can demonstrate such love toward others through acts of mercy. In doing so, God’s people follow Jesus’ command to “be merciful, just as your Father is merciful” (Luke 6:36). This lesson’s Scripture reveals how Jesus responded to a group of people who wanted to add boundaries and limitations to acts of mercy.

### LESSON CONTEXT

This lesson depicts the third occasion in Luke’s Gospel that Jesus shared a meal with a Pharisee (Luke 7:36–50; 11:37–53). All three interactions share a common pattern. First, a Pharisee invited Jesus to join the meal. Second, a tense moment between Jesus and the host led to a conversation regarding issues of religious observance. Third, Jesus used the opportunity to instruct those in attendance on issues regarding how to follow God. In doing so, Jesus taught His fellow diners to act mercifully in their dealings with other people.

The issue of doing work on the Sabbath is the primary concern of Luke 14:1–6. The Jewish Sabbath was established based on the day that God rested after six days of creation (see Genesis 2:2–3; Exodus 20:8–11; Deuteronomy 5:12–15). As a result, the people were to cease work on the Sabbath. Such requirements regarding that day were a sign of holiness between God and His people (see Exodus 31:12–17).

As the ancient Israelites left Egypt, they were commanded to take certain steps to prepare for Sabbath observance (example: Exodus 16:21–30). Later, as the people entered the promised land, the Law of Moses provided further descriptions regarding proper Sabbath observance (34:21; 35:1–3). Defiance of these commands brought harsh consequences to the people (examples: Numbers 15:32–36; Nehemiah 13:15–18;

Jeremiah 17:27). The Israelites understood the Sabbath to be “a delight” (Isaiah 58:13) and a day for worship (Leviticus 23:3). Even certain psalms were to be sung on that day (example: Psalm 92).

By the first century A.D., certain expectations regarding proper adherence of the Sabbath had been established by the Jewish religious leaders. In between the testaments, an oral tradition later codified as the *Mishna* (rabbinic law) attempted to define the rules regarding proper Sabbath observance. These included nuanced definitions of work, as well as complex regulations regarding what was allowed and disallowed. Such intricacies made it challenging for most first-century Jews to accurately interpret how they should observe the Sabbath.

Jesus never disputed the importance of the Sabbath. His high regard for it can be seen in His habit of teaching in synagogues on the Sabbath (examples: Mark 1:21; Luke 13:10). Further, He was willing to use the day to show mercy toward suffering people (examples: Mark 1:21–34; Luke 6:6–11; 13:10–17; John 5:1–18). As “Lord of the sabbath” (Mark 2:28), Jesus demonstrated the true intent of the Sabbath: to remind God’s people of His mercy (see Deuteronomy 5:15). The day was not to be a religious burden or an excuse to limit works of love and mercy.

### **Tense Hospitality: Luke 14:1–2**

Luke 14:1 takes place as Jesus traveled to Jerusalem (Luke 9:51–19:44). Immediately before this text, upon being warned regarding Herod’s intentions to have Jesus executed, Jesus expressed sorrow for Jerusalem (13:31–35). An unknown amount of time had passed between that teaching and this meal. Because Jesus was considered a rabbi by at least one member of the Pharisees (see John 3:2), the group likely deemed Him to be an appropriate guest for a meal. They could spend the meal discussing the law and its associated tradition and commentary.

The Pharisees rose to prominence as a sect of Judaism because of their interpretation of the Law of Moses, oral commentary, and related tradition. Their interpretative work included determining guidelines regarding Sabbath observance for first-century Jews.

As a Pharisee, the host in today’s lesson likely enjoyed some degree of wealth (compare Luke 16:14). This assumption is further bolstered by his elevated position as *a prominent Pharisee*. In addition to financial benefit, this particular Pharisee was likely held in high regard as a teacher of the law (see Matthew 23:5–7).

Additionally, the Pharisees had strong concerns regarding ritual purity and physical cleanliness. For this reason, the host likely invited only Pharisees and people who would be considered clean. Other people, such as “tax collectors and sinners” (Luke 5:30), would not have been invited. Pharisees had certain expectations regarding the cleanliness of the guests and even the dishes of the meal (compare Mark 7:3–5; Luke 11:38).

The timing of this meal (*on one Sabbath*) would have required advance planning by the host in order to observe the Sabbath day as required by the Law of Moses (see Lesson Context). This meal was likely prepared before the Sabbath and served during the 24-hour period beginning at sundown on Friday.

The Pharisees who assembled for this meal treated Jesus with suspicion. *They watched* Jesus in order to find fault with Him, just as they had done previously (Luke 6:7; 11:53–54; see also 20:20). The atmosphere of the meal had a tense edge, rather than being one of relaxation and conversation. This was not the first time that the Pharisees had presented Jesus with an issue regarding what was acceptable on the Sabbath (see 6:1–10; 13:10–17).

### **1. Why was Jesus invited to a Sabbath meal with Pharisees? What was the atmosphere like? (Luke 14:1)**

#### **What Do You Think?**

How do you behave in situations where it seems like others are observing you and your faith?

#### **Digging Deeper**

How does Jesus’ teaching regarding salt and light (Matthew 5:13–16) inform your response in these situations?

Luke does not describe whether this certain *man* was a guest of the Pharisees, an intruder, or a living “prop” brought to test Jesus. Either the man was a surprise to the entire party, or his presence was the result of the Pharisees’ cunning intentions. But Jesus knows the hearts of all people (compare John 2:23–25); He knew the true reason the ailing man was in their midst.

The man suffered *abnormal swelling*, likely in his limbs, resulting from an underlying issue regarding the heart, kidney, or liver. Older English versions of this verse (like the King James Version) use the outdated medical term *dropsy* to describe the man’s condition. Modern medicine would treat the condition with diuretics (water pills). In the first century A.D., however, no such treatment was available. The man would have continued to suffer and would have depended on the charity of others to meet his basic needs.

## **2. Who was this certain “man” next to Jesus? (Luke 14:2)**

### **Two Questions: Luke 14:3–6**

First-century lawyers were not primarily legal advocates in criminal or civil courts as modern-day lawyers are. Instead, these *experts of the law* were regarded as experts in the Torah. (The Torah, also known as the Law of Moses, is comprised of the first five books of the Old Testament.) We might compare these individuals to modern-day scholars of the Bible. These lawyers are mentioned more often in Luke’s Gospel than in any other Gospel (examples: Luke 10:25; 11:45–52; 14:3). Luke describes them alongside the Pharisees as having “rejected God’s purpose for themselves” (7:30).

Jesus’ question concerned the heart of the Law of Moses. The law was never intended to burden the people (compare Deuteronomy 30:11–14). And Jesus never abolished the Law of Moses (see Matthew 5:17–20). Instead, He wanted His audience to consider the principles of goodness and righteousness intrinsic to the Law of Moses (compare Romans 7:12; 1 Timothy 1:8). *To heal on the Sabbath* violated the Pharisees’ strict reading of the law regarding what was acceptable on that day.

This was not the first time that Jesus taught a lawyer regarding the importance of mercy (see Luke 10:25–37). God does not desire for humans to limit works of mercy, either regarding the timing or the recipient of those works.

## **3. What question did Jesus ask the Pharisees and experts of the law? (Luke 14:3)**

### **What Do You Think?**

How can you incorporate the practice of asking questions as an act of accountability or evangelism?

### **Digging Deeper**

What steps will you take to improve your question-asking skills?

The Pharisees and the lawyers were speechless and unable to answer Jesus’ question. Their silence does not mean that the religious leaders agreed with Jesus. Rather, they *remained silent* and avoided confronting Jesus at that particular moment. If the Pharisees said that nobody should be healed on the Sabbath, the people would consider them heartless; if they gave permission for healing, their associates would consider them lawless. The dilemma was now theirs, not the Lord’s, and they needed a way to escape. As they did on more than one occasion, the scribes and Pharisees evaded the issue by saying nothing.

Luke does not describe how Jesus took *hold of the man* and *healed him*. Rather than focus on the way that Jesus healed, Luke focused on the results of that healing. Jesus *sent* the sick man *on his way*, thus freeing him from his physical suffering. This healing is similar to another healing that Jesus did on the Sabbath. On that occasion, Jesus healed a woman and declared her free from her bondage (Luke 13:10–17).

Jesus’ inaugural sermon in Nazareth describes His work, in part, as one of bringing physical healing (Luke 4:14–21). The arrival of God’s kingdom would be demonstrated by such healings (9:1–2, 10–11; 10:9). These miraculous works were evidence that the rule of God’s Messiah, as promised by the prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 35:1–6; 61:1–2), had come.

#### **4. How did the Pharisees and experts of the law respond? (Luke 14:4)**

The Law of Moses required that people help lost or injured livestock of neighbors and enemies alike (Exodus 23:4–5; Deuteronomy 22:1–4). An attitude of mercy (even to livestock) was at the heart of these commands. By the first century A.D., disagreement had arisen among interpreters of the Law of Moses regarding if a person could rescue a stranded animal on the Sabbath. Strict interpretations allowed the animal’s owner to feed the animal and ensure its survival until the end of the Sabbath day. Freeing the animal, however, was not allowed. In this interpretation, the work of freeing the animal broke the command to do no work on the Sabbath (see Exodus 20:8–11). Other interpretations were more lenient and allowed for the animal’s owner to work to free the animal, even on the Sabbath.

Jesus’ question assumed a positive answer: yes, even *on the Sabbath day* would a person rescue *an ox that falls into a well*. Without assistance, the stranded animal was at risk of suffering injury or facing harm from predators. All of the people at the meal agreed that saving the life of this hypothetical animal was accepted. If there was disagreement among the guests at the meal, then it was likely regarding the *extent* that work could be done to save the animal. In short, Jesus expected that all of the guests would agree that showing mercy to an animal even on the Sabbath made sense. In that case, how much more legitimate was showing mercy to *people* on the Sabbath?

Possible endangerment of a child would also be an appropriate (necessary) reason for a person to act on the Sabbath. If a person showed effort to save livestock on the Sabbath, then that person would surely show more effort to save a child.

Jesus could have waited until the next day to heal the man. However, the opportunity for Jesus to show mercy presented itself on the Sabbath. The Sabbath served human well-being, not the other way around (see Mark 2:27). If some religious leaders considered that it was acceptable to work on the Sabbath (see Luke 13:15), then Jesus argued that His work was also acceptable, if not all the more so.

Jesus’ question in Luke 14:5 parallels another question that He asked of the Pharisees in Matthew 12:11–14. Both accounts have the same emphasis: doing good and showing mercy on the Sabbath is at the heart of the Sabbath itself.

#### **5. What was Jesus next question for the Pharisees and experts of the law? (Luke 14:5)**

##### **What Do You Think?**

How can an unhealthy focus on human traditions lead a person to fail to show mercy?

##### **Digging Deeper**

What steps do you take to overcome any tendencies to be unmerciful?

For the second time during the meal, the Pharisees were left speechless (compare Luke 14:4). Their refusal to answer might have indicated their collective humiliation and shame (compare 13:17; regarding human silence and shame in response to God’s work, see Ezekiel 16:63). This tense interaction contributed to later hostility that the Pharisees would demonstrate toward Jesus.

The Pharisees were well educated in the Law of Moses; they knew what was required of them for good. Their silence and repeated failure to see what Jesus was teaching indicated that their hearts had refused to exercise the capacity to show mercy, even on the Sabbath. The silence of the Pharisees and experts of the law did not end the meal. Instead, Jesus used their silence as an opportunity to question them and teach them (see Luke 14:7–24, not in our printed text).

#### **6. What was the reaction of the Pharisees and experts of the law to Jesus’ teaching? (Luke 14:6)**

##### **What Do You Think?**

How can a believer know whether or not silence is an appropriate response to observing God’s work?

##### **Digging Deeper**

How do Psalms 39:1–2, 9; 40:9; Ecclesiastes 3:7; Lamentations 3:28; Ezekiel 16:63; Psalms 30:11–12; and Luke 19:37–40 help you answer this question?

## **CONCLUSION**

### **Holiness in Time**

The emphasis of this story is not on the ailing man. Instead, this story at its heart is a caution against focusing on religious practices at the expense of showing mercy. Jesus was not trying to nullify the Pharisees' practice of observing Sabbath. Not only did the Sabbath require a pause on work, but it also provided time for people to consider how they could show mercy to others.

Further, the question of whether or not a person could heal on the Sabbath was an obscure point. Most people are unable to heal another person on any day of the week. Only the one who is the Lord of the Sabbath (Luke 6:5) has the ability to heal on the Sabbath. Sometimes we unintentionally limit our expectations of what God ought to do. What are some traditions that perpetuate this? God's work is not limited by human expectations. We are to trust God and His timing of His work. When we exercise faith by trusting Him in this way, we commit to lives of mercy, following the ways of our heavenly Father.

Twentieth-century Jewish scholar Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907–1972) describes the Sabbath as being an expression of holiness based in time. Although Christians today are not required to observe the Jewish Sabbath, we can still apply similar principles. The idea of observing specific time in order to show mercy to others meets a vital spiritual need for Christians. Followers of Jesus should desire to show mercy in sustained and tangible ways. Although we may sometimes get tunnel vision and focus on other parts of our (busy) lives, we must remember to keep mercy at the forefront of our minds, regardless of the situation, or time for that matter.

### **What Do You Think?**

How would you answer a person who says that this Scripture is irrelevant to modern-day Christians because they are not required to obey Sabbath laws?

### **Digging Deeper**

How would you communicate the main points of this story by using modern-day examples?

## **PRAYER**

Heavenly Father, You have shown us great mercy, just as You have shown mercy to Your people throughout history. We want to be people marked by lives of mercy. Heal us from spiritual ailments that cause us to act in unloving ways. Grant us deeper awareness of the needs of our neighbors so that we might show love and mercy. Help us be merciful, just as You are merciful. In the name of Your Son, Jesus. Amen.

## **THOUGHT TO REMEMBER**

Remember the Lord of the Sabbath and live accordingly.