

Jesus was having lunch with a bunch of Pharisees, but He was having trouble getting them to engage in conversation with Him. He was really trying to get the Pharisees to think beyond the familiar routines of their religious practices. He wanted them to think about their relationship with God.

He started by trying to engage them on their favourite topic – the Law, “Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath or not?” - but they wouldn’t answer.

How would you answer? No doubt you would say, “Of course!” because you know that Jesus did so frequently. But what if we asked, “Is it lawful to play cards on a Sunday”? It is not so long ago that many Christians would have said, “No!” and no doubt there are some who would still say “No!” What about Sunday trading? Why should something be permissible on one day of the week and not on another? This series of parables provoke us to think twice before we answer. Why are most present-day Christians far more relaxed about these issues than Christians were a century ago? Have we simply become permissive and lost our respect for holy living? In the end it all boils down to “What is the purpose of the Law? What has it to do with our relationship with God?”

“Is it lawful...” is a searching question, the answer to which goes to the very heart of the Christian faith. The New Testament answers this question in an astonishing way. The Holy Spirit tells us through the scriptures that the Law was never meant to make us holy. Its purpose was to show us our need for salvation. We have died to the Law in Christ’s crucifixion and now live new lives in the resurrection power and righteousness of Jesus.

Jesus healed the man with dropsy and then tried to engage them with another question - “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?” But still they would not answer.

How would you answer? No doubt you would say, “Of course!” But Jesus’ question probes deeper. Not just, “What does the law say?” but “how do you apply the Law to your own circumstances?” It is very easy to point the finger at others and avoid examining our own hearts. It is also very easy to set the standard for others to our own level of obedience. For instance, what you think people should do about observing speed limits will very likely be determined by your own behaviour. Jesus wants to provoke a discussion here. What do you do about this law? Why do you do that? What does God think about it? Do you have different standards for yourself than you hold

others to? Who should be setting the standards? You or God? How does God view infringements of the law?

This question, “How do you apply the law” is another searching question which goes to the heart of the Christian faith. It takes us to our relationship with God. How do you live out your faith? It moves us away from rules and rituals into everyday life. What does it mean for you to be a Christian? Is it a matter of trying to keep the rules, or are you living in relationship with God? How do you live your faith so that you are a witness to the grace and love of Christ?

When Jesus saw that the Pharisees wouldn’t engage with Him over the Law, He tried a softer approach through the Wisdom scriptures. He took the proverb from our first reading and wove it into a story applying it to the very situation they were in. On the face of it, it doesn’t appear to have anything to do with God; it is simply a piece of wisdom about social behaviour in a shame-based culture. It seems very innocuous and indeed rather surprising from Jesus’ lips. The conclusion, “Then you will be honoured in the presence of all the other guests” is the kind of thing we would expect Jesus to condemn; seeking the honour of men instead of God. For example, Jesus said, “How can you believe since you accept glory from one another but do not seek the glory that comes from the only God?”

So why does Jesus give them this piece of home-spun advice for increasing their honour before one another? Well, He adds an intriguing concluding principal not found in the proverb: “For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.” These words would immediately turn the thoughts of the hearers to God, for it was a favourite theme of the Jews that God would exalt the downtrodden people of Israel over the arrogant and wicked Gentiles. Mary’s song was typical “He has put down the mighty from their seat and has exalted the humble and meek.”

Jesus masterfully takes this ordinary everyday situation of a community meal and turns it into an object lesson in living out our faith before God. All of life is played out before God and every act, however simple, has within it the opportunity to invest in eternity. When we seek only the honour of men we miss out on that opportunity, for as Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, “When you give to the needy ... to be honoured by others, I tell you, you have received your reward in full.”

In this story, Jesus takes us beyond rules and religious observance to living out our daily lives in relationship with God. Whereas we are naturally materially and socially conscious, Jesus urges us to nurture eternal consciousness. When you know that you are deeply loved by God and will be glorified with Jesus when we die, it frees us from the need to seek honour from men. So many people are slaves to a deep and unmet longing for the approval of others. It drives children to obsessive school work, teenagers to smoking, sex and drugs. It drives adults to workaholicism and other destructive and addictive behaviour. Living for the honour of men instead of the honour of God enslaves us. Living in the knowledge of God's grace and love frees us to be who we are and discover who God has made us to be.

The effect of this security in God is demonstrated by Jesus in this incident. We probably do not flinch at Jesus' first two questions, "What does the Law say" and "How do you apply the Law", but this story about seeking the best place is very pointed; "When he noticed how the guests picked the places of honour at the table, he told them this parable..."

Jesus is not the least embarrassed to tell this story that will discomfort the guests. For Jesus, there is something far more important than the guest's comfort at stake here. How often do we shrink back from speaking God's word in a situation because we don't want to feel awkward or make others feel awkward? Perhaps someone starts to gossip to us, but rather than say "Let's talk about this person's good qualities rather than their bad" we just let it go on. Or someone shares a problem with us, and instead of offering to pray with them we say "Oh, I'm sure it will all work out..." We are surrounded by people with desperate spiritual needs that we could help with, but for the fear of embarrassment we keep quiet. Jesus was so secure in His Father's love and approval that He was free to bring the Word of Life into whatever situation He found Himself in.

Jesus' first story about the wedding guests was not directed at any one in particular; each person could apply it to themselves. But the next story Jesus tells is far more pointed. Perhaps the host had been amused at the squirming of his guests during the first story and so Jesus now gives the host an opportunity to squirm!

"When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or sisters, your relatives, or your rich neighbours; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be

blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”

Did you notice that the man with dropsy that Jesus healed was not a dinner guest? He was just a plant to see what Jesus would do. After he was healed, we are told, he left. So Jesus turns to His host and says, “When you give a luncheon or dinner... invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed.” Jesus directs this story directly at the host and it is a story about what the host has just done, inviting his well-to-do friends to a dinner party. Jesus so wants His host to lift his eyes to a bigger picture of God’s purpose for his life that He is prepared to offend him.

Jesus urges us to live out our everyday lives before God, looking to His reward and approval rather than to men. This story also has strong echoes in the Jewish scriptures; the next line from Mary’s song is typical, “He has filled the hungry with good things and the rich he has sent empty away.” Inviting the poor is not just inviting God’s approval; it is imitating God’s nature.

Conclusion

So we see in this little sequence at a lunch party Jesus wanting to move his Pharisee friends from their rather small minded religious observance towards a living relationship with God, where their actions are motivated not simply by religious expectations but by the loving presence of God. Religion offers rules to obey but Jesus offers us a relationship with God. Religion brings judgement and condemnation for our failures but Jesus offers us the prospect of being so transformed by His Spirit that we become more like God Himself.

Religion offers us a way of judging ourselves to be better than others. Jesus offers us adoption as God’s beloved children.

Religion makes us slaves of men’s approval; Jesus sets us free to bring God’s life-giving presence wherever we go. Jesus can sometimes be an uncomfortable companion, but the more we look to God, the more we are transformed into His likeness.