



Text: Luke 14:1-14¹
Series: "Jesus & ..."
Title: Jesus & A Man with a Religious Spirit
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Over that last couple of weeks as we've been looking at Jesus' interaction with people in a variety of one on one situations, I've been encouraging us to consider a summer meditation. Several of the stories we've read touch on the directive he gave one day to a group of Pharisees. He said to them...

"Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.' For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners." Matthew 9:13

Here we have another story to add to our reflection on this important spiritual principle. In the story we're about to read this morning, Jesus is in close contact with a group of Pharisees who clearly desired sacrifice rather than mercy. In this story, Jesus is invited to the home a leading Pharisee, a man with a religious spirit.

The essence of the religious spirit is that it chooses sacrifice over mercy. It is something that Jesus has been dealing with in my life for many years and I'm sure He will have to continue to do so for years to come! In fact, I think that the battle against the religious spirit is one that we all must fight for all of our lives.

Today, I want to talk with Christians. What I'm about to share is especially for those who are actively involved in the Christian community. If you're not a Christian, but you're here today listening, I hope that what I'm about to say to the Christians here has some relevance for you. One of the common perceptions about people of faith among those who aren't followers of Christ is that we think we're perfect. Well, we're not perfect, but sometimes, I must confess, we fail to communicate that message to the world around us.

This message is an honest declaration that we very often have a problem with a self-exalting religious spirit and I hope it also provides us with some practical ways to deal with the problem. Let's read the story of "Jesus & A Man with a Religious Spirit" as Luke records it for us in the fourteenth chapter of his Gospel.

Read: Luke 14:1-14

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“One Sabbath, when he went to dine at the house of a ruler of the Pharisees, they were watching him carefully.” Luke 14:1

The term "Pharisee" has had a bad history. It's a stinging insult to be called a "Pharisee." One dictionary definition of the term, "pharisaical" summarizes this bad press. According to this particular reference work, someone who is "pharisaical" manifests "a hypocritical, censorious, self-righteous spirit or attitude."

What is truly sad about the negative connotations of "Pharisee" is that the Pharisees had begun as a movement of spiritual reform about one hundred and fifty years before Christ. The spiritual climate of the Jewish people in that day was one of great laxity in their attitude to God's Word. Their lives were being more and more shaped by the Greek culture that dominated their world, the culture of Alexander the Great and his descendants. Life was no longer being shaped by Biblical priorities but by secular attitudes and by a desire to be accepted and assimilated by the ruling power. The Pharisees were a kind of "Back to the Bible" movement that called the Jewish people to remember their heritage and to live it, regardless of the social and political costs they might have to pay.

The term, "Pharisee," comes from a root that means either "the separated ones" or possibly, "the particular ones." As "separated ones" who had dedicated themselves to a radical commitment to God, they in turn "separated" themselves from anyone who wasn't as "particular" in their adherence to God's Law as they were. That's why we find them constantly challenging Jesus' interaction with people they categorized as "sinners."

The Pharisees studied the Law of Moses and created commentaries on how they understood the Law to apply to their own day. Their intention was to create an additional hedge of rules around God's Word that would keep them from even appearing to break God's Law. In the New Testament, this hedge of additional rules was sometimes referred to as "the traditions of the elders" (Mark 7:3) and sometimes as the "tradition of men." (Mark 7:8)

Jesus ran into trouble with the Pharisees again and again because he opposed their additions to the Word of God and their self-imposed separation from "sinners" who didn't share their rules and their self-righteous confidence before God. Initially, the Pharisees had wondered whether Jesus might be "one of them." But once they determined that he wasn't "one of them" their curiosity migrated through animosity and ended in hostility and hatred. They became conspirators in Jesus' trial and crucifixion and persecutors of the Christian church.

The Pharisees were a movement of spiritual renewal gone wrong! Spiritual pride had corrupted their movement - instead of exalting God, they exalted



themselves. They took great pride in their righteousness and their success in keeping their man-made rules only fed their spiritual pride! Paul, a former Pharisee, confessed that before his conversion to faith in Christ ...

**If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: ... as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.”
Philippians 3:4-7**

Jesus warned his disciples to be on their guard against the teaching of the Pharisees because the religious pride that had twisted their hearts could twist the heart of anyone! (Matt 16:6) I know it can happen to anyone because it's happened to me! And I'm going to suggest this morning that it's happened to many people here.

I was raised in a Bible-believing fundamental, Baptist denomination that began as a movement of renewal. Just like the Pharisee movement, my church had a deep concern to guard the Word of God. In the 1920s, our denominational seminary began to teach things that undermined the authority of God's Word and a movement of opposition arose to the seminary. Eventually, churches left the denomination and formed another Baptist association and it was in that break-away association that I was raised.

There is no doubt in my mind that the teaching of that seminary needed to be opposed, but in the conflict that followed, an ungodly zeal crept into the battle for truth. I grew up with a definite sense that there was something seriously wrong with those other Baptists. People who attended our churches took their Bible's to church, but people who attended that other Baptist group could be seen walking into church without a Bible! We went to church twice on Sunday; they often only had morning services. We kept up our services throughout the summer; they sometimes would hold joint services with other churches because they couldn't get enough people or sometimes they would even cancel worship in the summer! The bottom line message I got as a child was that we were better Christians than they were. By being a faithful participant in our church and all of its activities, I thought I was being God's little faithful child, but all the while I was developing a great whopping spiritual pride. The Lord's been dealing with me for several years on this one, and I know He has a lot of work left to root out the pride that is very deep inside my heart!

How about you?

This morning, I want us to go "one on one" with Jesus and allow him to surface the pride that can twist our hearts, just like it did to the Pharisees 2,000 years ago because brothers and sisters, Jesus has to get it out of us. Religious pride



and the Spirit of Christ can't co-exist in the same heart. If we want to exalt Christ in our lives, we need learn as Paul did to count everything else as loss for the sake of Christ.

I want to share with you four ways in which spiritual pride surfaced in Jesus' interaction with this Pharisee. These four manifestations of a religious spirit are presented simply in the order in which they occur in the story. My purpose in surfacing them is diagnostic. As we expose the spirit of religion in the lives of these Pharisees we need to ask the simple question: *do we see the same spirit in our lives?* Then I want to briefly share five strategies for addressing the problem of religious pride in our lives.

First of all, I want us to see that...

A religious spirit is more interested in passing judgment than in experiencing real fellowship

Jesus was invited to eat at a Pharisee's home and the other guests...

“were watching him carefully.” Luke 14:1

Do you remember what it was like when you took your driver's exam? You were being "carefully watched." The examiner sat in the car with you, watching you, evaluating you, testing you. Was it comfortable? Was it natural? Was it a nice drive in the country? I remember being so nervous that I completely messed up my parallel parking. I never had a problem with it before or since but I was tense!

Jesus was being "carefully watched" - he was being examined. This had not been an invitation to share kindness and a meal. These Pharisees just wanted to get him into close range, put him under pressure and watch his reaction. Their minds were full of inquisitorial questions...

“Will he wash his hands the right way?
Will he eat the right way?
Will he say the right things?
Is he on "our side"?”

The Pharisees had become shameless evaluators of others. And get this: these men, without knowing it, had set themselves up as the judge and jury of the Son of God!

People, I can tell you from personal experience that the practice of judging others is a hard habit to try to break! There is something imbedded deeply within the spirit of human pride that longs to find others who are in some way “less” than ourselves so that we can even in some small way elevate ourselves. Jesus put



us here on earth to get into the game, he didn't ask us to keep score and especially not on other people!

We need to ask ourselves a diagnostic question: ***Do I "carefully watch" other believers or do I truly fellowship with them?***

Secondly, take notice that...

A religious spirit is more interested in religious observance than in real mercy

“And behold, there was a man before him who had dropsy. And Jesus responded to the lawyers and Pharisees, saying, ‘Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath, or not?’ But they remained silent.” Luke 14:2-4

"Dropsy" is a painful swelling of the joints due to water retention. Apparently, "dropsy" is not itself a disease but rather a symptom caused by some other disease such as the inflammation of the kidneys or the heart.

Where do you think this man came from? Why was he there "in front" of Jesus? Let me suggest that he was a plant. His presence was intended to create a problem for Jesus and the Pharisees wanted to see how he would resolve it.

The background for what happened here is found in the previous chapter in Luke. On a previous Sabbath day, perhaps only a week or two prior to this dinner in the Pharisee's home, Jesus had been teaching in a synagogue on the Sabbath. A woman attending worship there had a disease which caused a spinal curvature from which she had suffered for eighteen years. When Jesus saw her in the congregation as he was teaching from the pulpit, he called out to her...

“Woman, you are freed from your disability.” Luke 13:12

Stepping down from the pulpit, he went over and laid hands on her and immediately her back was straightened and she started to praise God for his grace and mercy. Now, you'd think that people would rejoice with her but not the Pharisees. This is what they said...

**“But the ruler of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath, said to the people, ‘There are six days in which work ought to be done. Come on those days and be healed, and not on the Sabbath day.’”
Luke 13:14**

Jesus responded to this religious leader, using a term which he unfortunately had to employ regularly with the Pharisees...



“You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger and lead it away to water it? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen years, be loosed from this bond on the Sabbath day?” As he said these things, all his adversaries were put to shame, and all the people rejoiced at all the glorious things that were done by him.” Luke 13:15-17

And now we come to this Sabbath dinner and the Pharisees, who’ve been “put to shame,” are looking for payback -- but they didn't get it!

The man with dropsy was placed before Jesus to see whether he would heal on the Sabbath, contrary to the Pharisaical rule about working on the Sabbath day. Jesus knew why he was there. This poor, sick man was being used by these hypocrites. So what should Jesus do? Jesus did what Jesus often did when his critics tried to pin him into a corner. He asked them whether God’s Law allowed for healing on the Sabbath but they wouldn’t answer. They couldn’t because no where in God’s Law is it prohibited to heal at any time.

He asked a second question...

“Which of you, having a son or an ox that has fallen into a well on a Sabbath day, will not immediately pull him out?” Luke 14:5

This question wasn’t about the Law, it was about mercy, and again they were silent, not because they didn’t know what to say, but because they knew exactly what they would say. Without question, every one of those people would have hauled their son or their ox out of the pit on the Sabbath! But they had no real interest in the man with dropsy - they didn't really care about his pain! They just used him to see if Jesus would follow their rules about what you could or couldn't do on a Sabbath day.

This rule-keeping religious attitude is so easy to develop. A couple of years ago I was standing at the door after a service and greeted a woman who attended our church. Her husband, who regularly attended with her, wasn't with her that day so I asked her: "Where's Dan?"

“Oh,” she said, “he’s skiing in Banff today.” Half-jokingly, I responded, “Oh, that pagan!” But she very graciously went on to tell me that Dan was skiing with his brother. His brother’s marriage was falling apart and Dan felt that he needed to spend some intense time with him. I felt rightly, and graciously rebuked. I had been thinking in terms of sacrifice; Dan had been thinking in terms of mercy.

Margaret Meed, a world-renowned anthropologist, was asked what she believed was the first sign of civilization. Her answer was a healed femur. The femur is a major bone in our legs. Why did she consider this a profound mark of civilization? Well, Meed said, it’s because it meant that when someone had



broken their leg, somebody else took care of them until they were able to fend for themselves again.

What might be the first sign of Christianity? Jesus said...

“By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” John 13:35

Love, not religious observance, mercy, not sacrifice, is the first sign of true Christian living. Let’s ask ourselves a diagnostic question: ***Am I more interested in maintaining religious practices or communicating mercy that meets real needs?***

Thirdly, the Pharisees show us that...

A religious spirit is more interested in religious prestige than in real humility

At the banquet in this man’s home, people sat in a u-shaped arrangement. The bend of the “u” was the head of the table and the place of honour. The host would sit at the apex of the bend and the guest of honour would sit to his right. This is probably where Jesus was placed. But then Jesus noticed that there was an unseemly scramble among the other guests for the places of honor.

In a very simple parable, Jesus pointed out to the guests how embarrassing it might be to scramble to secure a place of honour for yourself at the head of the table only to be told by the host that it was already gifted to another guest and that your place was down at the foot of the table. There may well have been some of those guests had taken the “walk of shame” back down the table. Jesus then suggested a very wise strategy. He recommended that they take the lower places first and then if, the host invited them to the head of the table, they could walk tall in front of all the other guests as they made their way to their seat.

The point of these comments, Jesus told them, was that ...

“...everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.” Luke 14:11

There was a youth leader in church in which I grew up who I very much respected. This man and his wife were very committed and generous to us as young people. They often hosted us in their home for youth meetings and events and were good friends and confidants.

But some time later he became quite vocal about his feeling that the church council needed “younger voices” and that his voice should be one of them. The respect I once held for him evaporated; the esteem in which I once held him



vanished. There is a spiritual substance in self-promotion that acts like those magic stain removers we see advertised on TV. Self-promotion completely negates the spiritual value of a person's life.

James, the brother of Jesus, reminds us of a piece of Biblical wisdom that is originally rooted in the Book of Proverbs...

“God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.” James 4:6 (cf. Proverbs 3:34)

Let's look at our own hearts: ***Am I working to gain prestige and power or am I simply doing the job the Lord has given me to do and allowing Him to choose whether or not to exalt me?***

The gather of religious leaders highlights the **fourth** aspect of a religious spirit.

A religious spirit is more interested in getting returns on religious investments than in real giving.

There is a temptation to be “political” in our associations. Sometimes we make connections with people because we believe that they can help us achieve some goal of ours: promotion at work, increased business, collecting allies against someone or something we want to oppose. The temptation is to view the things we do for others as debts they owe to us; as bonds of obligation that tie them to us. I once had a friendship that eventually crumbled because my friend viewed every kindness he showed to me as a debt that I owed him. He made a regular habit of “calling my debt” to him just like a bank can “call” the loans they make to their clients. Eventually the friendship died. His kindness proved itself to be nothing more than a form of manipulation.

Jesus challenged the Pharisees to move beyond manipulation and to give to people without the motivation of looking for a return on their investment from them. He invited them to give to others freely and look to God for repayment. Jesus said...

“when you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you. For you will be repaid at the resurrection of the just.” Luke 14:13-14

Years ago, a monk came to the aid of a needy traveler. He opened his small pouch of belongings and offered the man a precious stone worth a small fortune. The monk had previously found it and was now giving it away. The traveler was amazed at his good fortune and quickly left to sell the valuable stone. Surprisingly, the man returned a few days later with the jewel. He placed it in the monk's hand and said, "Now please give me something much more precious



than this stone. **Please give me that which enabled you to give it away."**
(*God's Vitamin "C" for the Spirit*, Kathy & Larry Miller, 1996, p.271)

The question we need to ask ourselves is this: ***Am I doing ministry to achieve "results" and "return" from people or because I'm responding to Christ's call to love those in need?***

**How do we deal with the insidious growth of a religious spirit in our lives?
How do we encourage the growth of real fellowship, real mercy, real humility and real giving in our lives?**

I'm going to suggest five ways we can address the problem of a religious spirit in our lives but please understand that these are not "five easy steps." We can turn these even these suggestions into rules and laws that feed spiritual pride. Underneath our concern to address this issue in our lives needs to be a total dependence upon God to destroy pride in our hearts so that he alone will be glorified in us.

First, Instead of judging and examining others let's develop the habit of praying for them.

Rather than "carefully watching" someone let's prayerfully intercede for them. When someone rubs you the wrong way or when a problem area keeps surfacing in your relationship with somebody else, don't just add it to the "what's wrong with you" list you're keeping on that person ... pray for them!

And don't pray that they will come to share your convictions about the things for which you judge them. Don't try to use prayer as a form of spiritual manipulation because all that will do is strengthen your own religious spirit. And it won't work anyway because the Lord won't listen to you. Rather, pray God's blessing into their lives. Pray that they will draw close to the Lord and that he will draw close to them. Release them in prayer to the grace and mercy of God.

Second, Instead of religious actions let's choose to love people with words and deeds.

If you find it difficult to love others ask God to give you love for them. When you ask for this, you will be joining with the prayer of Jesus for you and for them. As Jesus thought about you and me, he prayed to the Father...

***"that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me. ... I made known to them your name, and I will continue to make it known, that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them."* John 17:23, 26**



You can pray something like this: ***Father, fill me with the love you have for your Son. Father, as you fill me with the love you have for your Son, also fill me with the love you have for all your children.***

A man was awakened in the middle of the night by a phone call. On the other end a frantic, sobbing girl managed to get out the words, "Daddy, I'm pregnant." He was groggy and stunned but communicated his forgiveness and prayed with her. The next day he and his wife wrote their daughter two letters of counsel and love. Three days later the man received another phone call. His daughter was shocked by the letters, because she wasn't the one who had called! Some other distraught girl had dialed a wrong number. Nonetheless, the letters were not wasted. Their expressions of love and forgiveness are now a treasured possession. Here are a few excerpts: "Though I weep inside, I can't condemn you, because I sin too. Your transgression is no worse than mine. It's just different. It all comes from the same sin package you inherited through us. We're praying much. We love you more than I can say. And respect you, too, as always. Remember, God's love is in even this, maybe especially in this. This is a day of testing, but hold our ground we must. God will give us the victory. We're looking forward to your being at home. Love Dad. "

Thirdly, instead of looking for prestige positions let's choose to do the jobs no one else will do.

Jesus suggested that people should take "the lowest place" at the table. (v.10)

A friend, years ago, told me about a man who had served on the church board for many years. One year, a backlash developed against his long-standing presence, and he was ousted at the church election. The next Sunday, the man was in the foyer, hanging up the coats of those who arrived for church and picking up the bulletins on the floor. He went from chairman to doorman - he took the lowest place at the table and waited until he was called up again.

Fourthly, instead of looking for returns on our giving, let's choose to give to those who can't give back.

Charles Spurgeon and his wife raised chickens and sold the eggs they laid - they never gave them away, they sold them. Some people grumbled, "Why don't they give the eggs to the needy - they don't need the money!" It wasn't until many years later that it was discovered that the money they received from the eggs went to support a poor widow.

That's the kind of giving Jesus is talking about!

Finally, instead of looking to see how godly we are, let's ask God to show you how graced we are.



Paul wrote in Ephesians...

“In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, which he lavished upon us...” Ephesians 1:7-8

As we come to understand the depth of God's grace and mercy shown to us, we will increasingly become people who are gracious and merciful. Paul was always amazed by God's grace. But I think we can see a development in his appreciation of the depth of grace. Notice the chronology of the following quotations from his letters.

In his first letter to the believers in the city of Corinth, which was written about **55 AD**, Paul wrote...

“I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain.” 1 Corinthians 15:9-10

Then, in his letter to the believers in Ephesus, written about **60 AD**, he wrote...

“To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ...” Ephesians 3:8

And finally, writing about **65 AD** to his protégé Timothy, Paul wrote...

“though formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent. ... the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.” 1 Timothy 1:14-15

As his appreciation of the immensity of God's grace and mercy grew, Paul went from the least of the saints, to the least of the apostles to the foremost of sinners.

Pray with me...

Father, we ask you to break the spirit of religion in our lives. Where we have judged our brothers and sisters, forgive us. Where we have chosen religion over the life of the Spirit, forgive us. Where we have promoted ourselves, forgive us. Where we have been self-interested in our ministry, forgive us.

Humble us, Father, before your great mercy and grace. Place within us, Father, the love you have for Your Son. May that love change us from the inside out. Deepen our understanding of your great grace for us unworthy sinners.



In Jesus' name we ask it. Amen.

- **Invitation to Prayer Ministry**
- **Final Song:** Amazing Grace
- **Benediction**