

Luke 13:10-17, Luke 14:1-11

Freed

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We are in Luke 13 today, beginning in verse 10.

There will be important truths in this passage for everyone today.

If you're new to Christianity, or maybe don't believe and are exploring the claims of Christianity, what might surprise you is how much Jesus and his ways didn't fit within the religious system of his day. You might see Christianity as the religious system and to follow Jesus is to sign up to be conformed to strict set of manmade guidelines for living. But Jesus exploded the manmade guidelines and introduced a different way altogether.

If you've been a Christian for awhile, you might be surprised at your own drift toward manmade religion, stuffiness, and preference for rules and religion over love and redemption.

So all of us need what we will see in Jesus today.

The setting here is a synagogue. This will be the last time Jesus is recorded being in a synagogue. It was his custom to gather with God's people on the sabbath day, Saturday, the day of rest. They'd gather to hear the word of God taught, to pray, and Jesus was regularly in attendance and often He would read and teach there.

If you remember back in Luke 6, Jesus was teaching in a synagogue and some controversy arose because he healed a man with a withered right hand on the sabbath day. That occurred toward the beginning of Jesus' ministry. But in today's passage, we'll see a similar occurrence, but it will happen toward the end of his earthly ministry before going to the cross.

Repeatedly in the Luke, Jesus unashamedly uses the sabbath day, which was given to us for restoration, to restore. And the Pharisees and religious leaders use His work on

the sabbath to accuse Him, condemn Him, and prove (in their minds) that Jesus is not the Holy One from God that He claimed to be because he violated their version of faithful sabbath-keeping.

And by bookending Jesus's teaching ministry with really similar incidents on the sabbath, Luke is showing us that the religious leaders remained unchanged. And so did Jesus. Jesus remained who Jesus was, not bowing down to popular political and religious trends, and they remained who they were, dead-set against Jesus.

And remember not to read the scriptures like we are the heroes of the story. We can read these accounts thinking we would be on team Jesus, but almost everybody was on the side of the Pharisees. So it's better to read the narrative like I would be just like one of them. I would probably, by nature, be like one of the people who opposed Jesus.

So today I want to dig into two passages in Luke 13 and 14 to try to show the heart of the Pharisees, to show the ways that we are like them, the ways our culture still embraces their mindset, and hopefully to move us onto the right side of the narrative.

Luke 13:10 Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath. 11 And behold, there was a woman who had had a disabling spirit for eighteen years. She was bent over and could not fully straighten herself. 12 When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said to her, "Woman, you are freed from your disability." 13 And he laid his hands on her, and immediately she was made straight, and she glorified God.

So Jesus sees this woman. She is bent over, disabled, something is wrong with her back it seems, there's something demonic involved (it's a disabling spirit) and for 18 years she couldn't stand up straight.

She is likely outside the synagogue because she probably wouldn't have been allowed in because of her disability. The gathering of God's people was for those who are well and favored by God, they thought. She wasn't well, so they thought, somehow on the outs with God. That was how they looked at conditions like this: you must have done something to deserve it. And you are unclean if you have the condition.

But Jesus came not for the healthy but for the sick. So He sees her, calls her in, and heals her.

Imagine this, after 18 years. 18 years of a crippling disability, 18 years of some kind of spiritual malady, and suddenly she is well. What a huge relief. Jesus says, "You are free" - as if he is releasing her from prison.

So she, of course, is praising God. She has been restored and healed.

So on the sabbath, God's word was taught. A prisoner was set free and healed. God is worshipped. And the Lord of the Sabbath is overseeing the whole thing. What happens here is good, all the way to the bottom. A day that was supposed to be used for worship and rest and restoration is used for all of those things on steroids. This is the best sabbath ever.

So all of the purposes of the Sabbath were fulfilled right there in their synagogue.

Luke 13:14 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."

So the ruler of the synagogue becomes indignant. He's offended by this. He's grieving.

Jesus broke their rule. Why couldn't this have waited? She could come back tomorrow and be healed and then Jesus wouldn't be doing work like this on the sabbath. He's so concerned that Jesus at least appeared to be working that he is grieving while this woman worships God.

So what was going on with this ruler of the synagogue? What's wrong with this guy?

The Pharisees were definitely strict in their religious observance, but they weren't the most strict. There were religious orders that were far more strict than they were. They followed the rules for the sabbath, and they had a whole code for sabbath keeping they had written, but they had reasonable exceptions to the rules. So Jesus mentions one:

Luke 13:15 Then the Lord answered him, "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?"

Jesus says, "None of you think it's OK to work on the sabbath. But certain things are important enough to cause you to say this must be an exception. You still do the work of leading your farm animals to water on the sabbath. You consider that essential work because your animals need it.

And if you're willing to make an exception for your donkey, certainly it wouldn't be wrong to make an exception for this woman:

Luke 13: 16 And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen years, be loosed from this bond on the Sabbath day?" 17 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.

So Jesus puts his adversaries to shame. Their shame is exposed.

They wanted everyone to think they were motivated by holiness, by obedience, by following the letter of the law to be fully conformed to God's commands.

But Jesus exposes that that's not what is going on in their hearts, because they were inconsistent and made exceptions for themselves that they would never allow for this woman.

They weren't motivated by pleasing the Lord, there was a darker sinister motive. There's something else underneath what looks like their religious zeal and their opposition to Jesus. They just weren't real, and Jesus here melts their facade and allows the people to see them for who they really are.

We like to see this, we kind of enjoy when religious hypocrites are exposed. But again, let's not assume we are the people rejoicing at the glorious things being done by Jesus. We could very well be the Pharisees in this story.

So we need to realize that sometimes what looks like religious zeal and a desire to do right is not true zeal for righteousness. So we should want to know what's going on here, because we are religious people. We want to live righteous lives, we want to do right, we want to stand for what's right. But we could be Pharisees, and our zeal could just be a front for something much darker, and maybe we can't easily see it.

Skip down to chapter 14, verse 1.

Luke 14:1-6 "One Sabbath, when he went to dine at the house of a ruler of the Pharisees, they were watching him carefully. 2 And behold, there was a man before him who had dropsy. 3 And Jesus responded to the lawyers and Pharisees, saying, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath, or not?" 4 But they remained silent. Then he took him

and healed him and sent him away. 5 And he said to them, “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?” 6 And they could not reply to these things.

So this time, Jesus is not at the synagogue but is at the house of a ruler of the Pharisees. The Pharisees have a dinner party, they invite Jesus and a man with dropsy. This was edema, a condition that causes swelling and can come with heart and liver and kidney problems and could easily be fatal in their day.

But this isn't a party thrown together to celebrate and get to know each other.

This is a set-up. For them to have a sick man at a dinner party would have been rare, so they probably invited Jesus and this man on the sabbath to trap Jesus into healing on the sabbath again. That's what's implied in verse 1 when it says they were watching Him carefully.

They were going to try to catch Jesus breaking their code.

But Jesus wasn't trying to be sneaky - He was willing to clearly display what He was up to. He never pretended that he signed up to follow their rules or that He was trying to work his way to the top of their ladder.

So he makes clear that He's about to heal on the sabbath. He heals the man.

And again, he exposes their double standard: They would rescue their ox if it fell in the well on a sabbath. And certainly if they had a son who was in a well, they would do the hard work of rescuing him on the sabbath. And if they'd be willing to do an incredible amount of work to save a life on the sabbath, certainly Jesus could too.

So Jesus exposes their phony righteousness and shows there's something else going on. While it looked like they were acting out of a love for God and holiness, when Jesus exposes them, their mouths are shut.¹

¹ Isaiah 52:14- 15 “As many were astonished at you— his appearance was so marred, beyond human semblance, and his form beyond that of the children of mankind—
15 so shall he sprinkle many nations. Kings shall shut their mouths because of him, for that which has not been told them they see, and that which they have not heard they understand.

So what does Jesus see in their form of religion that, when exposed, makes them ashamed? And remember, we are looking for these things in ourselves. What was it about their faith that made it just phony religion? Not the kind of faith to aspire to but the kind of religion to be on guard against?

1) Phony Religion is Rife with Double Standards

Jesus said, “I healed a person on the sabbath and you freaked out. You’d help an animal on the sabbath and call your work legitimate.” The double-standard was clear.

And when we tell someone the right thing to do, but don’t do the right thing ourselves, we are revealing that we don’t really care about right. *We just want to control someone.*

And there are countless examples: Pastors who rightly call for sexual purity but then are caught in an affair. They didn’t really care about purity like they should have. They just wanted to control. Or the call for people to tithe their income, but don’t do so themselves. They just want to control others and gain from them without making sacrifices themselves.

A sign that our faith has devolved into phony religion is that we make demands on others that we don’t try to keep ourselves.

You’ll see the Pharisees in this chapter living out what Jesus had said was true of them back in Luke 11. Cody walked us through this passage a number of weeks ago:

Remember **Luke 11:46 “And he said, “Woe to you lawyers also! For you load people with burdens hard to bear, and you yourselves do not touch the burdens with one of your fingers”**

Phony religion has a double standard. Rules for the leaders and a different set of rules for the people they are trying to control.

2) Phony Religion Adds Demands to the Word of God

Now it is right to say that we are all called to obey God’s commands. It isn’t the mark of phony religion to say God has given a law and we should obey it. That’s just true. But we can often make our extrapolations of those laws equivalent with the law of God in our mind.

God had commanded His people not to work on the sabbath. This was for their good. It was commanded to be a day of rejuvenation and ultimately to point to the rest we have in Jesus and the rejuvenation we have in Him.

But the Pharisees had added demands. Their own rules. Don't heal a person on the sabbath. Their sabbath law had become so long and meticulous and had so many rules and regulations that any attempt to keep it well would be exhausting.

Only religious people can turn a day of rest into a ton of work.

Which was so contrary to the ways of Jesus.

Jesus said

Matthew 11:28 “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.”

But the Pharisees had built a manmade religion that was anything but restful. You just couldn't ever do enough. It put you on a treadmill.

The Christian life does require hard work and sacrifice for the good of our neighbors, for sure. But if your Christian life doesn't feel like peace and joy and rest in Jesus, you may have slipped into this joyless phony religion.

If you feel like you're always on the treadmill of always having to prove yourself to people.

Or you feel like you're on the treadmill of always having to keep up an image.

You are on the treadmill where you run and run and run to work hard at obeying a ton of rules that you can't find in the Bible to please the people who say you should keep them, then you aren't living in light of the Gospel and the ways of Jesus.

There is another way to live. You can be free.

3) Phony Religion Is Lacking in Love and Mercy

Luke 11:42 “But woe to you Pharisees! For you tithe mint and rue and every herb, and neglect justice and the love of God. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others.

Cody said a few weeks ago that a characteristic of a religious hypocrite is they elevate law over love. They are willing to follow some small rules but are guilty of not loving and being merciful. Jesus said elsewhere that they strain at a gnat and swallow a camel.

Sometimes we can focus on the small things and be very meticulous about the details, but completely miss the big things. Or we can become so focused on the small things that we ignore the big issues. So we complain about a tiny problem with a song lyric in church, while failing to live lives of love and mercy and service. But focusing on that lyric gives us the feeling of caring about holiness.

Or we take stands on social media. Which is not wrong to do. But anyone can take an online stand for something or against something. And that can make us appear holy and righteous and wise. And can feel satisfying, even at times when we aren't living lives of mercy and love ourselves.

So look at yourself honestly. You do religious things, you know religious facts, you take religious stands. Which can all be fine. But can you see in your life recent times when you've served others: by encouragement, by deeds, by helping with practical needs, by bringing the good news of Jesus to soul that needs him?

Or is your faith about doing the meticulous things and noticing the small problems alone, or do those things just happen sometimes in a life of robust love and service and building people up?

Jesus was less concerned about taking a stand for the manmade rules than He was for making a person whole.

4) Phony Religion is Opposed to Jesus

Ultimately, the Pharisees were out to trap Jesus so they could discredit him. They were working very hard to *cancel Jesus* to maintain their place in society.

This is so important to see.

Sometimes our way of evaluating people is this: We come to know Jesus by grace, and to grow and mature as a Christian is to have more rules and standards that we obey.

Now part of our growth as Christians is we grow more sensitive to sin, which makes us more humble and makes us love Jesus more and appreciate His cross more. We do change how we live as we see God's commands and trust they're for our good and strive to obey them.

But we sometimes assume that the really holy people are the ones who go far beyond that and live lives with tons of rules, little enjoyment, where they're avoiding pleasure, they are always dour and serious, and very religious and pompous.

We can sometimes believe that mature Christians live like religious perfectionists.

But religious perfectionism, as it was with the Pharisees, can be a way of avoiding Jesus. For them to accept that Jesus was who He said He was would have meant accepting that they weren't righteous, that they (even the leaders of Israel) needed a Savior to pay for their sins. But by being religious perfectionists they could convince themselves that they just didn't need Jesus.

So don't aspire to dour religious perfectionism, beware of it. It isn't the normal response to coming to know Jesus. The normal response to coming to know Him is to become more like Him:

When Jesus describes His Father, He describes Him as someone who runs to greet the prodigal son. He is thrilled and eager to restore, rejoices scandalously at the return of a son who wasted so much and did so much wrong, and then throws a lavish party (without worrying about the waste.)

Zephaniah 3:17 says :

“The LORD your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save; he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love; he will exult over you with loud singing.”

God is described as a lover enthralled with His bride in Song of Solomon. A God who is honored when king David drops his religious dignity and dances before Him. A God who commands his people to be joyful (Philippians 4:4) and wants us to know it is a deadly serious sin to be lacking in joy. A God of grace and mercy.

Nobody sees a reflection of that God when they see a Pharisee on facebook blowing everybody up. They see Pharisees parading their knowledge and their meticulous rule-keeping, and furthering their cancel-culture to make sure everyone knows they have the chops to be listened to.

And so often, that kind of religion is something we embrace as our way of avoiding Jesus while looking like we're living for him. As a way of fooling others and fooling ourselves into thinking we don't need a Savior.

The Bible says that our hearts are desperately wicked. And it is much easier for me to convince myself that I'm OK spiritually so I can avoid repenting or changing, and worst of all, so I can avoid Christ.

RELIGION says I am good and valuable because of what I do. I can work my way to salvation with the good things I do. Every major world religion teaches this, including most of what calls itself Christianity.

Religions say do good things to earn salvation: whether that salvation is heaven or nirvana or a better reincarnation. Do good stuff to be a good person and be saved.

THE GOSPEL says, "I am more sinful than I could ever see or imagine." So God TOOK THE INITIATIVE, and came to me to save me. Freely by his grace I'm saved, not by anything I do.

Religion is the big way that many who call themselves Christians avoid having to deal with their sin and change and trust God. Instead of dealing with the reality that they need a shower, they just spread on another layer of deodorant and call it good. But that just makes them more disgusting, it definitely doesn't make them clean.

Religion is a way to feel like we're drawing close to God but being far from him in our hearts.

There is more going on:

Luke 14:7 Now he told a parable to those who were invited, when he noticed how they chose the places of honor, saying to them, 8 "When you are invited by someone to a wedding feast, do not sit down in a place of honor, lest someone more distinguished than you be invited by him, 9 and he who invited you both will come and say to you,

‘Give your place to this person,’ and then you will begin with shame to take the lowest place. 10 But when you are invited, go and sit in the lowest place, so that when your host comes he may say to you, ‘Friend, move up higher.’ Then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at table with you. 11 For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

5) Phony Religion is about posturing and self-exaltation

Jesus, at the same banquet, gives this instruction. If you want to really live a holy life, when someone invites you to a banquet, move straight to the lowest seats and let them call you to a higher one.

Now why would Jesus say that now at this banquet?

He’s taking a clear shot at the Pharisees and saying, “They’re posturing and trying to get the best seats.”

Their religion was an attempt to be well-known, to get prominence, to get attention. They wanted to be celebrated and known.

What motivated so much of their apparent zeal for righteousness was really just a zeal for themselves. They wanted to act like they cared about holiness so they could be prominent in the community and well-thought of.

And they opposed Jesus because He threatened that.

We can do the right religious things on the surface because we have a hunger for praise from people, but the Gospel causes us to praise God and live to serve others while being relatively free from their opinions.

Jesus calls his followers to live very differently - to serve others’ interests before our own, to pray in secret, to do good in secret, to not try to do good so we can tweet about it and use our good works as a tool to get us the best seats, but do good to serve others.

And sure, we will sometimes get called to higher seats by the Lord. But the way up is down, the way to the top is by going straight to the bottom.

The way of Jesus is so different from the way of phony, Pharisaical, stuffy, strutting religion. He has called us to go to the lowest seat by admitting our sin and failure, by acknowledging our great need for a Savior, by repenting and crying out to Him, and to, there, be called up to the highest seats by the Lord.

He has called us away from Pharisaical religion and toward belief in the Gospel and living out its implications in our lives.

But I also know many people, who understandably, have had enough. They're had so many brushes with the religious phonies that they are checking out on church life and maybe on Christianity. So to get away from all the phony religion we retreat to the secular life that our culture offers.

But I'd encourage you to evaluate it more closely. Because I want to admit that church culture is way too prone to devolving into a phony religious club that is oppressive and exhausting and all about posturing and strutting and boasting and exalting. We get our eyes off of Jesus and turn into that inevitably.

But our non-Christian culture in the world around us has also come to have all the marks of a depleting, legalistic, demanding, inconsistent religion.

Leaving the church and leaving Christianity provides no escape from this.

1) Secular Life is Rife with Double Standards

Outrage mobs work overtime to express rage at you while giving myself a pass on similar violations.

People love to pretend they're horribly offended at your wrong all while coddling the same wrong in my life.

2) Secular Life Piles on Demands

Political correctness has run amok, and it would be as impossible to know how to speak and how to to speak as it would have been to try to keep the Pharisees sabbath law.

Secular culture has old-school blasphemy codes now, speech that can never be forgiven.

It is considered virtuous to be unreasonable and say nothing is ever enough - no amount of contrition, no amount of action, no amount of sensitivity, no amount of effort - you must act just right according to my unspoken expectations and any failure and you're gone.

3) Secular Life Is Lacking in Love and Mercy

You see this clearly in the cancel culture, where somebody sins against what we now believe to be true and is permanently removed from having any voice in the public square.

One Australian musician responded to a fan's post about cancel culture by saying this:

Mercy is a value that should be at the heart of any functioning and tolerant society. Mercy ultimately acknowledges that we are all imperfect and in doing so allows us the oxygen to breathe – to feel protected within a society, through our mutual fallibility. Without mercy a society loses its soul, and devours itself.

Mercy allows us the ability to engage openly in free-ranging conversation – an expansion of collective discovery toward a common good. If mercy is our guide we have a safety net of mutual consideration, and we can, to quote Oscar Wilde, “play gracefully with ideas.”

...As far as I can see, cancel culture is mercy's antithesis. Political correctness has grown to become the unhappiest religion in the world. Its once honourable attempt to reimagine our society in a more equitable way now embodies all the worst aspects that religion has to offer (and none of the beauty) – moral certainty and self-righteousness shorn even of the capacity for redemption. It has become quite literally, bad religion run amuck.

Someone breaks the rules, or even legitimately sins, and we cancel them. We hyper-scrutinize even sincere apologies and then say it isn't enough. You thought church people were bad, this is a legalistic exhausting religion with no opportunity for grace and forgiveness

4) This secular Religion is about posturing and self-exaltation

We strive to be more woke than each other online on the left, we strive to “totally

destroy the leftists” on the right. We look down on people that just don’t get it. And it’s all an attempt to get the highest seats.

5) And is a common way to stand opposed to Jesus.

The way of Jesus demands that we all avoid phony religion, in its church forms and in its secular forms. He isn’t calling irreligious people to become religious. He isn’t calling them to exchange secular legalistic religion for a christian seeming version of legalistic religion.

He is calling all people, everywhere, to repent. Everywhere: in church and out of church. He calls us to leave behind the phony religiosity. To repent of all of our attempts to posture and get high seats with how religious or how woke or how much we know better than everyone. He is calling us to repent of double standards and using inconsistent rules to control or to look good.

He calls us to embrace something much better than manmade rule-keeping, whether its the secular or church kind.

He’s calling us to embrace the Gospel.

This is the message that I am more sinful than I could ever imagine. But that Jesus came and gave His life for my sin.

He went to the lowest seat at the table and died on a sinner’s cross. There he paid the price for my sin.

And if we will repent of trusting our religion and trust in His finished work for us on the cross, we will be forgiven and set free.

Free from the demands of religion. Free from the need to please a crowd, a church crowd or a twitter crowd. Free from having to fear the wrath of God for all eternity that we deserved (because He paid for it.) Free from our sin and guilt and shame. Because He took our sin, He took the place of the guilty, He was naked and ashamed for us, so we can be free.

And believing in Him does not put us on a treadmill of rule-keeping, but frees us to love God and neighbor.

Sermon Notes and Discussion Questions

Luke 13:10-17, Luke 14:1-11

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I. Phony Religion Is Rife With Double-Standards

In both of today's passages, Jesus exposed the religious leaders' willingness to have one standard for Jesus and a much lower standard for themselves. This shows that they weren't concerned with the standard itself, but with discrediting Jesus.

Are there ways you hold others to a higher standard than you strive to keep?

II. Phony Religion Adds Demands to the Word of God

What demands do we sometimes add to the word of God? Are there rules we force on others that are not commanded by scripture?

III. Phony Religion is Lacking in Love and Mercy

In Luke 11:42, Jesus warned against ignoring weighty issues but focusing on small ones. How do we sometimes do that?

IV. Phony Religion is Opposed to Jesus

The most religious people in His day opposed the work of Jesus. So this must be a possibility for us. How can being religious, even the Christian kind of being religious, work against real faith in Jesus.

V. Phony Religion is About Posturing and Self-Exaltation

What are the "benefits" of religious life that we could live for, other than pleasing God?

How is the gospel a clear alternative to secular and church-based forms of religious living?