

# The Clash of Cultures

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[ 0 : 00 ] Among Maasai tribesmen in Kenya, I'm led to believe that it's considered polite to greet someone by spitting at them. Here in Scotland, to spit at someone is highly offensive.

In certain parts of the Far East, it is considered the height of etiquette to belch loudly after a meal to show one's satisfaction with the food. Here in Scotland, to belch loudly is a sign of rudeness. In Albania, nodding one's head means yes, and shaking one's head means...

Sorry, that's wrong. Nodding one's head means no, and shaking one's head means yes. Yes. Depending upon where you are and what people you are among, standards change. What's a no-no in our culture is a yes-yes in another. Now, common to every human religion, there are certain beliefs which mark someone out as being faithful. It might be what one wears. It might be what one does or does not eat. It might be what day of the week one keeps special. It might be what holy book one reads, whether one worships in a temple or a mosque or a church, or to whom we look for spiritual guidance.

This is the culture of human religion. There are things we do which mark us out as being faithful. However, as we read through the Gospels, we encounter a Jesus whose beliefs and standards were very different from the religious people of his day. What was right to them was wrong to him, and what was wrong to them was right for him. In fact, the more we read the Bible, the more we realize how different the culture of the kingdom of God is from the kingdom of man's religion. What we might think pleases God actually disgusts him. In this passage in Luke 14, two cultures are colliding. The culture of human religion with all its rules, and the culture of Jesus filled with goodness, healing, and grace. Make no mistake, these cultures cannot coexist. The culture of human religion, epitomized by these Jewish religious leaders who were with Jesus that day, and the culture of Jesus are opposites. They have nothing in common.

[ 2 : 56 ] From this passage today, I want us to see the clash between these two cultures. First, human religious culture in verses 1 and 2, and secondly, Jesus' gracious culture between verses 3 and 6.

The question we have to ask ourselves is, of the two of them, which best describes our personal approach to God? Is it all about the rules of men, or is it about the grace of Jesus Christ?

First of all then, human religious culture in verses 1 and 2. This and the following passages take place in the house of a ruler of the Pharisees.

He was a senior figure among the religious elite of Israel, the custodian of their religious practices. And he's invited Jesus for a meal. But make no mistake, this was no friendly gesture on the part of this man. He has packed the house with other religious leaders. From verse 1, we read, they were watching him, that is Jesus, carefully. The verb Luke uses to describe what they were doing isn't simply using their eyes. They were lying in wait for Jesus. Natural history programs can fill us with joy, but there are also programs which can terrify us. Consider one I watched recently. It was showing how a rattlesnake hides itself among the rocks in the desert and waits for an unsuspecting mouse to scramble past. The moment the rattlesnake sees the mouse, its eyes fix on its prey. The suspense builds until the rattlesnake strikes and the mouse is fatally wounded. Jesus has gone into a den of rattlesnakes who are watching him like a predator waits for its prey. Their eyes are fixed on him and the wheels of their minds are quitting as they plot Jesus' destruction. They don't have to wait long because purely by chance, it would seem, a man with dropsy enters the house. Dropsy is an illness. Purely by chance? Not a chance.

This was a setup from the beginning. The Pharisees had arranged for this unfortunate man to turn up. They wanted to trap Jesus and in a cynical manipulation of circumstances, they rolled out this poor man to see what Jesus would do with him. Nothing about this dinner was by chance. It was all a setup.

[ 5 : 56 ] The ruler of the Pharisees had invited Jesus to dinner on his territory. He invited a house full of his cronies to join him and then wheeled out a disabled man to test Jesus. Here's a setup. The culture of human religion puts the religion of Christ to the test. Now, this is taking place on a Jewish Sabbath.

And so, when Jesus sees this man with dropsy, no doubt aware of the Pharisees' plot against him, he asks the question, is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath? The way a person observed the Sabbath was one of the distinctive marks of one's Jewishness. Even today, religious Jewish families mark the Sabbath according to the traditions of their people. Nothing which could be classed as work is done, and certain rituals are very carefully observed. The vast majority of the regulations surrounded the way in which the Jews of Jesus' day observed the Sabbath were drawn not from the Bible, but from the teaching of the rabbis, the religious teachers. In the Talmud, the Jewish equivalent of the Bible, there were 24 whole chapters devoted to Sabbath laws, what one could and could not do on a Sabbath.

The Pharisees had taken God's gracious provision of the Sabbath, and they had twisted it into a man-made set of religious laws one had to observe to earn salvation. The Sabbath stopped being God's gracious gift to us and became our legalistic gift to God. Religion for these Pharisees was all about laws and rules, traditions, traditions, and regulations we must observe if we want to earn God's salvation. Religion stopped being about what God has done for us and started being about what we do for God. That's the culture of religion in a nutshell. It is about what we do for God. It is about reaching up to God by our good works and our religious duties. Let me say that again. Human religion is all about what we do for God to earn his salvation. It's humanity reaching up to God. I take it you're familiar with Leonardo da Vinci's famous painting, The Creation of Adam, picturing God from heaven and Adam from earth reaching out to touch each other's fingertips. That's human religion. We reach up to God by our good works, observance of moral laws, religious ceremonies. The further we reach, the closer we get to God until finally we touch Him and experience salvation, or so we think. The Pharisees were trying to reach up to God by their strict religious obedience to the laws of the rabbis in the Talmud.

Whether it was what they ate, what they wore, or how they observed the Sabbath, they were devoted to a legalistic salvation by works. They are trying to earn salvation, reach up to God, so that on the day of judgment, God will justify them on the basis of what they have done. This is human religion.

It is always trying to reach up to God, whatever God it follows, and believes it can earn salvation on the basis of good works and religious ceremonies. Now, lest we think this is a problem outside Christianity, it only belongs to Muslims and to Hindus and to Jews, we need to think again.

[ 10 : 05 ] Nearly a century ago, the Christian scholar Gresham Machen, who some of you may have heard of, saw the problem Christianity faced with this acutely. He wrote a book called Christianity and Liberalism, in which he critiqued the liberal theology he saw infecting the church of his day. Liberal theology rejects the authority of the Bible, the divinity of Jesus, and forgiveness through the death of Jesus on the cross. Liberal theology sows the seed of human religion in the heart of Christianity.

It emphasizes good works, religious observance, and following Jesus' example as being the way to salvation. Liberal Christianity is human religion dressed up in holy robes. Thankfully, liberal Christianity is rapidly declining, as people realize it has nothing to offer. But over the last hundred years, it has caused havoc in the church, forcing evangelical Christians out of national churches and becoming little more than a pathetic reflection of society. In the name of tolerance, it refused to tolerate any other view but its own. Gresham Machen a hundred years ago, alarmed at how many churches in the western world were preaching liberal theology, caused a storm when he announced that the religion of the liberal church was the diametric opposite of biblical Christianity, but the two have nothing in common.

Liberal Christianity was the religion in Scotland of social respectability and the cultural elite. But at base, it was the rebirth of the religion of the Pharisees, with its message being, you can reach up to God by your good works and religious ceremonies. You can earn your salvation by following the example of Jesus, rather than entrusting in the death of Jesus. But never mind what's going on in the world outside.

What's the attitude of our hearts? If we think that anything we can do, good works, church attendance, or observing religious laws, can earn God's favor and eternal life, we are following in

the footsteps of the Pharisees who tried to trap Jesus. Human religion may impress others, but it disgusts God.

Spitting may be polite among the Maasai, but it's offensive to us. Trying to reach up to God by one's good works may be respectable on earth, but it's offensive to God. But this is human religion. It's a culture a million miles away from that of Jesus. What is your approach to God? The religious culture of men?

[ 13 : 24 ] Or the gracious culture of Jesus? Human religious culture. Second, from verse 3 to 6, Jesus' gracious culture. Jesus' gracious culture. We all know how hard it is to be the sole voice of opposition in a room full of people. As a Christian, we might be among a group of people who are laughing about something that's immoral or wrong. We find ourselves out on a limb, and rather than speaking out, we keep silent or even join with the laughter. Imagine you were in Jesus' shoes that day. He's been set up by the Pharisees. They've caught him in a trap and are just waiting for the trap to snap shut. What will Jesus do?

Well, he asks them a question. Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath or not? Is it lawful? Well, it depends upon which law Jesus and the Pharisees are referring. The Pharisees, they were thinking of the laws of the rabbis in the Talmud, which made it unlawful to heal on the Sabbath unless there was a threat to life.

Jesus was thinking about the laws of Moses in the Bible, which allowed all kinds of healing on the Sabbath. For the Pharisees, depending upon the man-made religion of the rabbis, to heal this man of his dropsy was unlawful, given that his medical condition was no threat to life. For Jesus, relying upon the gracious love of God to heal the man with dropsy was not merely lawful, it was necessary. With this question, far from trapping Jesus, Jesus has trapped the Pharisees. Because if they say, yes, it is lawful to heal on the Sabbath, then like a man caught in a trap he himself has made, they would be caught in their own trap. But if they say, no, it is not lawful to heal on the Sabbath, they would be denying the laws of Moses in the Bible, and again, they'd be caught in their own trap. With just one short question, Jesus turns the table on his enemies and traps them. You see, Jesus was always one step ahead of his enemies. He was never caught unawares. Nothing they did surprised him. That's still the case. There's no breaking news in heaven. The Lord Jesus is always one step ahead of anything taking place on earth. He knows what hard circumstances you're going through right now. And he prepares you for them. But the point here is that Jesus, with just one short question, shows the inconsistency of human religion. Every man-made religion which tries to reach up to God doesn't work. Before the gracious wisdom of Jesus, the Pharisees are silent.

[ 16 : 41 ] Jesus then heals the man with dropsy. The Pharisees cruelly used this man, healed him out. Jesus heals him from the prison of his illness. That's what Jesus does. He never uses us. Rather, he gently, lovingly, and powerfully frees us from whatever it is which holds us prisoner.

Now, dropsy is the retention of fluid in the body. And it's always caused by a deeper illness, be it heart failure or whatever. By healing this man, Jesus is also healing the deeper illness.

That's what Jesus always does. He heals the deeper illness of sin and guilt in our hearts.

Man-made religion doesn't heal sin and guilt. It just makes it worse, or it covers it up with a coat of respectable paint. But the gracious culture of Jesus goes deep and gets rid of all the stains of sin and guilt in the heart of a man. Jesus then asks, 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? More literally that word, well is the word pit. To be thrown into a pit is not nice, but it's not fatal. So, a Pharisee has got a son or an ox which has fallen into a pit on a Sabbath. Their rescue isn't urgent. It can wait till the next day. They're not going to die if they stay in that pit all night, right? But human nature being what it is, of course, when one of our children or one of our animals falls into a pit, we'll do everything we can to pull them out. Sabbath or not, fatal or not, they're in pain, they're in discomfort, they're afraid, they're panicking. Of course we'll get them out.

To add to this, an ox is one thing. In Jesus' day, livestock was valuable, but a son is on a higher level. Which of us, if we saw our child in discomfort, wouldn't do whatever we could to make them well? One of my fellow ministers in the North was recently told that his kidneys had failed.

His loving wife promptly volunteered to give him one of her healthy kidneys. He and she are now both well. That's what love does. Love goes the extra mile and sacrifices itself for the good of another.

[ 19 : 21 ] That's the scenario Jesus is painting here. The man with drops, he was in a pit. He was in pain. He was disfigured. He was afraid. Just because it was the Sabbath, should he be left to

suffer? Just because man made religion forbids intervention on that day? Should the children of Jehovah Witnesses, be left to die because their legalistic parents with their man-made cultish religion, refuse to allow them to have a blood transfusion? Should the aged and infirm be pressured into committing suicide because a legalistic society with its man-made laws deems it to be in their best interest?

No. Love, compassion, and tenderness is the gracious culture of Jesus. A man fell into a pit. He's afraid and he's in pain. He's crying out. The Pharisees stand at the top of the pit. They close their ears to this man's cry because of their religious rules. They refuse to look down. They turn their noses up. They're too pure. They're too proud to get their hands dirty. But Jesus stands at the top of the pit and he listens to that man's cry and he hears his fear. He looks down into the pit. He is filled with compassion for this man. He reaches down into the pit to pull this man to safety. He tends to the man's wounds. He calms his fears. Who knows why this man fell into the pit in the first place? He may not have known there was a pit there before him. He may not have been watching where he was going. He may have, by his own stupid decisions, got himself into that pit. But Jesus hears his cries for help. Jesus sees him in fear. Jesus is filled with tender compassion and he reaches down to pull the poor man out. Who knows why people in our society fall into moral, spiritual, and emotional pits. It may be ignorance because they've never heard the gospel before.

It may be carelessness because they weren't thinking about where their lives were going. Well, it may have been by their own stupid choices. We see people like this all the time on our streets and painfully even in our families. People who have made a mess of their lives. But from that mess, they are crying out for help. Now, man-made religion looks down its nose at people like this.

It's nothing to offer them. And it doesn't want to offer them anything anyway because the mess is of their own making and man-made religion is far too proud to stoop down to help.

Its message to them is this, get yourself sorted out. When you're respectable enough, then you can join our religious club. But that's as stupid as saying to the sun or to the ox which has fallen to that pit, get yourself out. The gracious culture of Jesus is the opposite. If anything, I've not pushed the picture far enough. Jesus does not merely hear their cries for help.

[ 22 : 47 ] He does not merely look down with great compassion. He doesn't merely stoop to pull the man out. He gets down into the pit and pushes the man out from underneath him. In sovereign love, the King of kings and Lord of lords gets down into the mud and gets just as dirty as that poor man so that he can save him. We've just passed the Christmas season. Isn't that the message of Christmas?

That Jesus has become one of us? Human religion reaches up to God. The grace of Jesus reaches down to us to save us from the pit of our sin, guilt, lostness, despair, and fear. Human religion is all about trying to reach up to God by our good works and our religious ceremonies. True biblical Christianity, that taught by Paul and by Gresham Machen, it's all about God reaching down to us through Jesus Christ. The Word made flesh dwelling among us.

The God who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried. What is the cross of Jesus if it is not him lowering himself down into the pit of our human sin, suffering, and pain? God covered himself with the muck and the mire of the mess we have made of our lives because of the sin of our hearts. He became the lowest of the low, dying at the hands of man-made religious zealots like these. His gracious culture disgusted them, but even now he loves them. Because Jesus in that meal, he sees the Pharisees' emptiness and pride and hypocrisy. The Pharisees didn't realize that they were just as deep down in that pit as the man with dropsy walls. They just didn't know how much they needed the very Jesus they were trying to trap.

In Jesus Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself. He reached down to us. He reaches down to us today, whoever you are. You may have made a mess of your life. God is reaching down to you in Christ. You may be religiously respectable. God is reaching down to you in Christ. He reached down to us in the cross of his Son, and he calls upon us to do one thing, one thing, to believe and trust in Jesus Christ. You want to know more about that? Ask me afterwards over coffee.

I want to close with a tragic episode from my pastoral past. I spent a lot of time with an older lady from St. Vincent Street as she was dying. She had spent her entire life listening to gospel preaching, which stressed how God has reached down to us in the cross of Christ by better preachers than me.

[ 26 : 36 ] But as she was dying, I asked her what her hope for salvation was. She replied, I have been a good person, and I have gone to church my whole life.  
When she said this, I wept on the inside.