

A faded, grayscale illustration of Jesus, with long hair and a beard, wearing a white robe, standing in a field and gesturing towards a group of people. The people are dressed in traditional robes and some are pointing towards Jesus. The background shows a landscape with trees and a bright sky.

# **Jesus: Authoritative Interpreter of Biblical Law in the Gospels**

**Jesus and Biblical Law Part 3**

# How Do We Apply Biblical Law Faithfully?

- **הַלְּכָה** (the way to go/walk) - The disciplined, communal, and authoritative process by which Israel interprets the biblical law, through discernment and debate, in order to determine how God's wisdom is faithfully obeyed in concrete, everyday situations and practice.

# The Historical Jesus: A Jewish Rabbi

- Jesus saw the Biblical Law as expressing faithfulness, love, fidelity, and loyalty to God
- The Hebrew Bible was Jesus's Bible
- The Synoptic Gospels portray Jesus as a Jewish rabbi participating in Halakha, with authority from God to interpret biblical law definitively
- Jesus does NOT see biblical law (or any specific biblical laws) as a burden or irrelevant due to his heralding of the kingdom
- Jesus does NOT reject biblical law (or any specific biblical laws) as the way Israel is meant to relate to God
- Jesus sees continuity between the mission of Israel in the Hebrew Bible and his mission

# The Historical Pharisee

- *Φαρισαῖος* (Separate/Observant Ones) - Social, political, religious group that encouraged Israel to return to faithfulness to the biblical law
- All evidence suggests they were well-liked by most of the Jewish communities they served
- Would have been most theologically similar and sympathetic to the Jesus movement in the 1st century
- Known for adapting biblical law through halakha for the convenience of the average 1st century Judean person
- Different Pharisee camps interpreted and applied the wisdom of biblical law differently

# Pharisees Were NOT

- Uniform
- Legalists/Moralists
- Ethnocentric exclusivists
- Sadducees



# Jesus vs. Pharisees?

- Many Jesus followers were Pharisees
- Jesus did criticize *some* Pharisees for 3 specific reasons (none of them legalism)
- Jesus and *some* Pharisees engage in halakhic debate
  - Not framed as the strict Pharisees vs. the lax Jesus
  - Framed as 2 approaches to applying the wisdom of God's loving, life-giving, practical biblical law



# **1. Biblical Law in the Sermon on the Mount**

**Matthew 5 as Royal Restorationist Exposition**

# The ~~Antitheses~~

- Jesus's description of how those in the restoration of God's kingdom General pattern:
  - Jesus quotes a command from biblical law
  - He elaborates on the wisdom from which the command derives also from biblical law
  - He uses biblical law to interpret the wisdom principles of biblical law to determine the application's purpose
  - It's not innovation, its clarification

# Murder and Hatred

- Application: Do not murder (*Exodus 20:13*)
- Wisdom Principle: Do not hate a neighbor (*Leviticus 19:17-18*)
- Reconciliation and atonement: Reconcile with your neighbor before purifying the temple with an offering ()

# Cheating and Coveting

- Application: Do not commit adultery (*Exodus 20:14*)
- Wisdom Principle: Do not covet/desire or objectify your neighbor's spouse (*Exodus 20:17*)

# Divorce Halakha

- Halakha in action
- Deuteronomy 24:1-2 “Suppose a man enters into marriage with a woman but she does not please him because he finds something **objectionable** about her, so he writes her a certificate of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house; she then leaves his house and goes off to become another man’s wife...”
- Rabbi Shammai vs. Rabbi Hillel in the Mishnah
- “Do not divorce your wife except in cases of sexual immorality.”
- Exodus 21:7-11 addresses neglect, etc.

# Oaths and Manipulation

- Application: Honor vows, do not swear falsely (*Numbers 30:2; Deuteronomy 23:21*)
- Wisdom Principle: Do not swear at all, just be true to what you say (*Deuteronomy 23:22*)

# Retaliation and Enemy-Love

- An eye for an eye (*Exodus 22:24, context of releasing slaves*)
- Turn other cheek, lend, love ones enemies (*Deuteronomy 15:1-2, 7-8*)
- Love your neighbor ~~hate your enemy~~ (*Leviticus 19:18*)
- Love your enemies (*Exodus 23:4-5; Leviticus 19:18*)
- Restorationist liberation view we'll discuss next week

# Love God and Neighbor

## On This the Whole Biblical Law Hangs

- Why these laws specifically?
- Jesus gives interpretive framework by citing most important commands as the Shema and love of neighbor
- Biblical law exposition in the Sermon on the Mount is exposition on what it means to love one's neighbor in the restoration of Israel

# Abolishing vs. Fulfilling Biblical Law

- *Matthew 5:17-19* — “Do not think that I have come to **abolish** biblical law or the prophets; I have not come to **abolish** them but to **fulfill** them. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from biblical law until everything reaches its goal. Therefore anyone who sets aside one of the least of these instructions and teaches others accordingly will be called least in the reign of the restoration, but whoever practices and teaches these instructions will be called great in the reign of restoration.”
- Abolish (*καταλύω*) — Destroy/Tear down
- Fulfill (*πληρόω*) — To do/Accomplish
- Jesus warns against diminishing biblical law

# Jesus's Critique of Pharisees

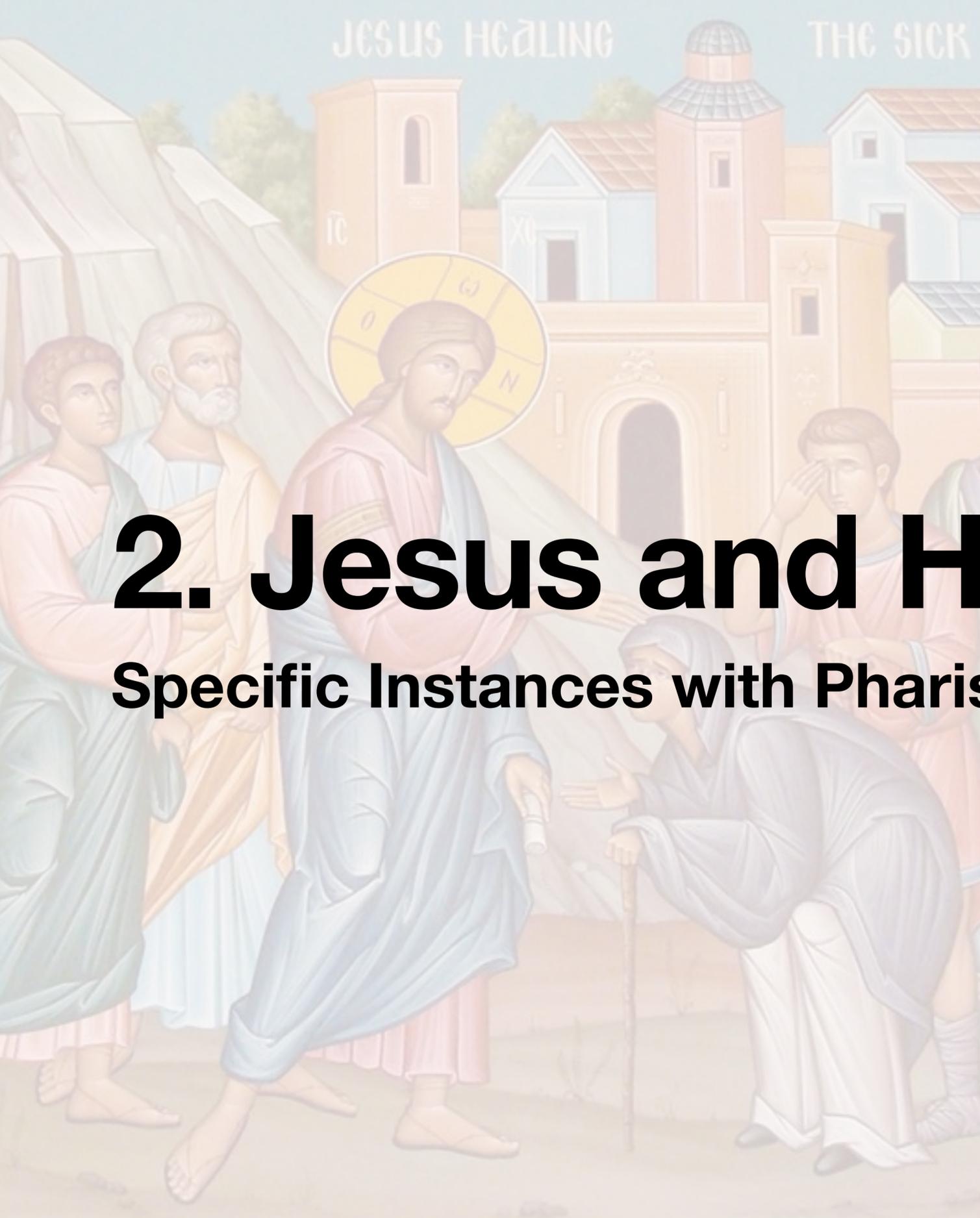
- The main critique of Pharisees in the Sermon on the Mount is *performativeness* (ὑποκριταί)
- Righteousness (Justice, right relationships with God and neighbor) performed in prayer, fasting, and giving to the poor (Matt. 6)
- Other critiques are greed and misinterpreting biblical law (halakhic debates)

# The Righteousness of the Pharisees

- *Matthew 5:20* — “For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.”
- Jesus is not naming an impossible standard, but the fact that he sees praise from performance as antithetical to the Reign of God he intends to bring

# Jesus Was Not Confronting Legalism, but Unrighteousness

- If anything, Jesus is most often stricter than most common Pharisaical interpretations
- Jesus is not a legalist either, because biblical law is not modern legal code, and moralism was not the main dilemma in 1st century Judaism (*it was the dilemma of Luther's Medieval Catholicism*)
- Jesus simply corrects injustice (unfaithfulness and disloyalty to God and neighbor) that comes from misinterpreting biblical law



# **2. Jesus and Halakhic Debates**

**Specific Instances with Pharisees in the Synoptic Gospels**

# History of Sabbath Halakha

- What counts as work?
- ***Generally agreed:*** Positive Commands (like Circumcision), the Life-Saving Principle, and Priestly Work override Sabbath
- Other debatable circumstances
- Sabbath foreshadows rest of restoration in the land

# Sabbath and the Man with Dropsy

- *Luke 14:1-6* — “On one occasion when Jesus<sup>[a]</sup> was going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the Sabbath, they were watching him closely. Just then, in front of him, there was a man who had edema. And Jesus asked the experts in the law and Pharisees, “Is it lawful to cure people on the Sabbath or not?” But they were silent. So Jesus<sup>[b]</sup> took him and healed him and sent him away. Then he said to them, “If one of you has a child<sup>[c]</sup> or an ox that has fallen into a well, will you not immediately pull it out on a Sabbath day?” And they could not reply to this.”
- Parallel with woman bent double in *Luke 13:10-17*
- *Edema — Family or livestock stuck in well*
- *Bound by an evil spirit/satan (unable to stand up straight) — Livestock tied up and can't reach water*

# Wash the Inside, then the Outside

- *Luke 11:38-41* — “The Pharisee was amazed to see that he did not first wash his hands before dinner. Then the Lord said to him, “Now you Pharisees clean the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside you are full of greed and injustice. You fools! Did not the one who made the outside make the inside also? So give as alms those things that are within and then all will be purified for you.”
- Extensive lecture on ritual purity later, but Jesus does not reject ritual impurity understanding
- Jesus compares Pharisees to an ritually impure cup, parallel critique in Mark 7

# All Foods Clean???

- *Mark 7:6-13* — “So the Pharisees and teachers of biblical law asked Jesus, “Why don’t your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders instead of eating their food with defiled hands?” He replied, “Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written: “These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules.’ You have let go of the instruction of God and are holding on to human traditions.” And he continued, “You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions! For Moses said, ‘Honor your father and mother,’ and, ‘Anyone who curses their father or mother is to be put to death.’ But you say that if anyone declares that what might have been used to help their father or mother is *Corban* (that is, devoted to God)—then you no longer let them do anything for their father or mother. Thus you nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And you do many things like that.””
- Jesus reinterprets the priorities of the command to point out wrong legal method

# All Foods Clean???

- 14-23 — “Again Jesus called the crowd to him and said, “Listen to me, everyone, and understand this. Nothing outside a person can defile them by going into them. Rather, it is what comes out of a person that defiles them...Don’t you see that nothing that enters a person from the outside can defile them? For it doesn’t go into their heart but into their stomach, and then out of the body into the sewer.” (In saying this, Jesus declared all foods clean.)
- *Morally* unclean foods (non-kosher) vs. clean food made ritually impure
- ὅτι οὐκ εἰσπορεύεται αὐτοῦ εἰς τὴν καρδίαν ἀλλ' εἰς τὴν κοιλίαν,καὶ εἰς τὸν ἀφεδρῶνα ἐκπορεύεται καθαρίζων πάντα τὰ βρώματα.
- = For it doesn’t go into their heart but into their stomach, and then out of the body into the sewer, it makes all foods clean.”
- He went on: “What comes out of a person is what defiles them. For it is from within, out of a person’s heart, that evil thoughts come—sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and defile a person.”

# CONCLUSIONS

- Jesus took biblical law SERIOUSLY
- He viewed it as a gift and expression of faithfulness to God
- He expected his followers to follow it
- He corrected misunderstandings and misapplications of biblical law among the leaders he felt misrepresented biblical law
- He viewed following it as integral to participating in the life of his reign and the restoration of Israel (Mark 10:17-27)
- How do we experience life of the age to come (of the restoration)? Fidelity to God (cultivating biblical law); not merit-based salvation or earning to God, but expression of restored relationship

# CONCLUSIONS

- Epistles see Jesus's interpretation of biblical law as authoritative for what his followers live into:
  - Galatians 6:2 — The law of Christ (love your neighbor as yourself)
  - James 2:8 — The “royal” law
  - James 1 and 2 — The law that brings liberation

# Recommended Reading

- *Jesus and the Law of Moses: The Gospels and the Restoration of Israel within First-Century Judaism* by **Paul T. Sloan**
- *The Stomach Purifies All Foods: Jesus' Anatomical Argument in Mark 7:18–19* by **Logan Williams**
- *Jesus for Everyone* by **Amy-Jill Levine**

# Reading for Next Time

- Readings on National Life and Death and the Resurrection/Restoration of Israel as God's Kingdom:
  - ***Deuteronomy 28-32***
  - ***Jeremiah 29-33***
  - ***Ezekiel 36-37***

# Discussion Questions

- How have you seen Pharisees misrepresented?
- How should we think of Jesus's disgust with performative acts of justice?
- Have you ever heard a sermon about the “royal law” of Christ in church?
- How could churches engage in halakha today, the way Jesus does, thinking through engaging with the world in God's wisdom?