

JESUS FREES A WOMAN

Luke 13:10–21

Key Verse: 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?”

Have you ever thought about doing something great? Not just life-changing, but world-changing? Some people dream of making a great medical breakthrough, or of inventing some genius new technology. Some want to find a way to eradicate evil social structures and injustice. It’s inspiring. The problem is, with grandiose ambitions, we might be ignoring the real people around us, with real problems. In these chapters in Luke, Jesus is slowly working his way to Jerusalem, to undergo a special baptism: death on the cross. It’s to accomplish the greatest thing ever done: the salvation of the whole world. Only Jesus can do it. And there are so many forces working against him. Just recently, he confessed that he’s greatly distressed until his world-changing mission is accomplished (12:50). But here, Jesus stops to heal one person. What does this event mean to us? How can we apply it to our lives? May God open our hearts and speak to us through his living words today.

To understand today’s event we need to look at its context. Right after it, Jesus tells two parables about the kingdom of God (13:18–21). And in Luke, the kingdom of God is a major theme. It’s the “big picture” of what’s going on. Jesus proclaims this kingdom (4:43; 8:1). And in his parables he illustrates what it’s like. What’s the nature of this kingdom? He says it’s both “in the midst of you” (17:21b) and “not yet” (13:28). At the beginning of Luke, the angel predicted: “...of his kingdom there will be no end” (1:33b), meaning it’s eternal. Early on, Jesus told his disciples that in this kingdom, worldly values are turned upside down, and those who suffer now will be most blessed (6:20–23). Later in chapter 13 he predicts this kingdom is going to be very diverse (13:29), and in fact, it’s for broken people (14:21b). And yet Jesus says this kingdom is not divided (11:17,23). He describes it as a kingdom of humility (14:11; 18:14), a kingdom only for those like a child (18:16–17), and a kingdom with very few rich people in it (18:24–25). Right now, it’s not even a kingdom we can see with our physical eyes (17:20–21a).

But this kingdom has a King. And he’s unlike any other that has ever walked the earth. Luke repeatedly calls him “the Lord.” God sent him (9:48; 10:16), whether we want him to reign over us or not (19:27). But he’s not a king sitting on a throne, plotting and manipulating. Luke depicts him out among the people, visiting diligently (4:43–44; 8:1a; 13:22). He’s not crushing and using; he’s serving and healing (4:40; 5:15; 6:18–19; 7:21; 9:11). He’s the King who calls and trains disciples (6:13,17,20; 9:1–2; 10:1), who commands our first priority and radical commitment (9:23–24,57–62; 14:25–27,33). He’s

the King who both prays in private and teaches how to pray. He's the King who fights against hypocrisy (12:1), self righteousness (18:9–14) and seeking one's own honor (14:7–11). He's the King who challenges us all to have an unworthy spirit (17:7–11). He's the King who helps rich people repent and use their resources for the needy (12:33; 18:22). He's the King who suffers and dies for the sins of the world (9:22; 17:25). But he's also the Risen King (24:6–7,39–43) who comes again in glory (9:26) as Judge (Ac10:42; 17:31). This great King of the eternal kingdom of God stops to touch outcasts (5:13; 8:45–46; 18:40). Luke portrays him as the King of compassion (7:13; 10:33; 15:20) and tender mercy (1:78; cf. 10:37; 17:13; 18:38–39) who brings sinners God's forgiveness (5:20–24; 7:47–48; 11:4; 23:34; 24:47).

In today's context, he's the King fighting against Satan (10:18; 11:21–22). He's fighting this battle on several fronts. He rebukes evil spirits (4:35,39,41; 9:42) and drives out demons by the finger of God (11:20). With the power of the Spirit (4:14), he challenges those who are proud (10:25), materialistic (12:13–21; 16:19–25; 18:18–25), legalistic (13:14–16; 14:1–6) and unrepentant (10:13; 11:32; 13:3,5; 15:7,10), all those oppressed by the devil (Ac10:38). At the same time, he fights by training his disciples as laborers for his kingdom (10:1–2). He gives them “authority over all the power of the enemy” (10:19). He tells them to heal the sick and say, “The kingdom of God has come near to you” (10:9; cf. 9:11).

On this journey to Jerusalem, Jesus heals only five times (11:14; 13:12–13; 14:1–4; 17:11–16; 18:35–43). Each time, he's being very intentional. What's he teaching this time? Look at verses 10–11. “Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath. 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.” Throughout his ministry Jesus is always diligently teaching the word of God (4:31; 5:17; 6:6; 10:39; 13:22; 19:47; 20:1; 21:37). This time, it's a Sabbath. And in this particular synagogue, a woman happens to be there. How is she described? It says she's had a problem “for eighteen years.” Specifically, she was bent over and could not fully straighten herself. Many of us are familiar with back problems. It's tough. But this lady's problem is not just physical; it's spiritual. It's being caused by a “disabling spirit.” This spirit hasn't fully taken over her life, but it's disabling her. The devil is always working to disfigure human beings, God's most beloved creations. How this happened to this woman isn't clear. But one thing is: she's had a hard life. It's difficult for most of us to imagine what it would be like to be constantly bent over. All that quiet pain and discomfort, all that struggle just to function somewhat normally and get through the day, all that humiliation. But here she is, on a Sabbath, in the synagogue. Why? She doesn't seem to be asking for Jesus' help. It seems she's there just to hear God's word. Her condition hasn't crippled her spirit. She's not bitter and wallowing in self-pity. She's not seeking any attention. She's just seeking God through his word. It puts healthy people like us to shame.

What happens? Read verse 12. “When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said to her, ‘Woman, you are freed from your disability.’” Most people probably didn’t even notice her. But Jesus saw her. And when he did, he warmly wanted to meet her. This one suffering woman mattered to him. He told her, “...you are freed from your disability.” Jesus gave this poor, suffering woman freedom. It reminds us of his original mission statement. In 4:18–19 he said: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (cf. Isa61:1–2a). Kingdom work is giving people liberty, setting them free. It’s important for each individual person. Jesus wasn’t too busy with his greater mission to stop and help this woman; in fact, she was an essential part of his mission from God.

And Luke the medical doctor adds more. Read verse 13a. “And he laid his hands on her...” His words “you are freed from your disability” were enough to heal her. But like a doctor or loving father, he uses his hands to touch her pain-racked body. In his holy love he wants her to feel his compassion in his hands. Luke told us that Jesus “laid his hands” on every sick person and healed them (4:40). He stretched out his hand and touched the man with leprosy (5:13). Now he lays his tender hands on this suffering woman. Jesus wants his servants not to be afraid to show people such personal compassion (cf. Ac5:12; 9:41; 14:3; 19:11; 28:8).

What happens? Read verse 13b. “...and immediately she was made straight, and she glorified God.” In describing Jesus’ healings, Luke loves to use this word “immediately” (4:39; 5:13,25; 8:44,47; 18:43). We can just imagine the beautiful smile that grew on this woman’s face, and the tears that began to stream down her cheeks. She could straighten up at last! No pain! No restriction! And no more shame! No more funny looks from people! She felt God’s strength in her body. Praises to God gushed from her soul. She experienced the mercy of God deeply. She saw the living God in Jesus. In this Gospel, Luke often records people responding like this (1:64; 5:25–26; 7:15–16; 17:18; 18:43; 19:37; 24:52–53). Blessing and glorifying and praising God is the essence of what it means to be living in the kingdom.

But somebody isn’t happy. Look at verse 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.’” This guy’s got some strongly fixed ideas: healing is work, and absolutely no work should be done on the Sabbath, as God clearly commanded. The man is so extreme. He seems so zealous for God’s holy Sabbath law. But he’s spiritually blind to what God has just done. It’s doubtful that on any other day anybody was ever getting healed in his synagogue anyway; it only happened because Jesus happened to be

there that day. Jesus repeatedly fights against this legalistic religious interpretation in his day (6:1–9; 14:1–5). There's no comparison between religious legalism and kingdom work. Kingdom work is pouring the new wine of God's grace into new wineskins (5:37–38).

How does Jesus respond? Read verse 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?'" It wasn't just ordinary people who did this. Rabbis at that time were sticklers for taking good care of animals, and they made many Sabbath law exceptions for it. People tried to follow all these rules. There seem to be other folks there secretly in agreement with this synagogue ruler. So Jesus says, "You hypocrites!"

Why is he saying they're hypocrites? Read verse 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?" They're hypocrites because in the name of Sabbath law, they're actually taking care of animals better than human beings. It's a flagrant violation of the basic creation order God wants us to live by. More importantly, in his words we see how much Jesus values this woman. He calls her "a daughter of Abraham." Nobody saw this woman with such respect, so precious. But Jesus did. He's going to say the same thing about another most unlikely person: Zacchaeus the chief tax collector (19:9). Being children of Abraham may seem to have nothing to do with us. But it does. We may not be his physical descendants, but through faith in Jesus, we all belong to God like Abraham did; we're all his spiritual sons and daughters (Gal3:6–9,14). Galatians 3:29 says, "And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise." Heirs of God's kingdom, and precious people of God. What amazing grace!

In response, all his adversaries were put to shame, but all the people rejoiced at all the glorious things done by Jesus (17). Then he goes on to give two parables. Read verses 18–19. "He said therefore, 'What is the kingdom of God like? And to what shall I compare it? It is like a grain of mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his garden, and it grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air made nests in its branches.'" How is this parable connected with this woman's healing? Jesus is saying her healing is as small as a grain of mustard seed. But it's how the kingdom of God grows. God's heavenly kingdom comes not with big events, loud, crashing noises and yelling, or epic programs, but with small interactions, personal compassion for a suffering person, deep inner healing and being loosed from Satan's bonds. Such things grow into a big tree where many other sick and suffering people can find the shade and shelter of God's healing grace. Read verses 20–21. "And again he said, 'To what shall I compare the kingdom of God? It is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, until it was all leavened.'" Here, "three measures of flour" is basically a 50 pound bag. In

contrast, the “leaven” is just a tiny little bit of yeast. Earlier Jesus used this image of leaven to refer to hypocrisy (12:1b); even a slight amount of it is a pernicious influence. Here, Jesus is using leaven to describe a really good influence, how the kingdom of God grows in our fallen world, heavy with sin and death and curse. Even the seemingly most insignificant things done in love and mercy, for Jesus’ sake, are what kingdom work is all about.

So in light of today’s passage, what should we do? We should see the real people around us. We should learn to see their value before God, each and every one. We should learn to see especially suffering people with Jesus’ heart of compassion. We should care enough to stop for them. We should give them the good news that Jesus can set them free! Any kind of bondage, any oppression. Satan is always working to oppress us, cripple us, make us bitter and crooked. But Jesus, the stronger man (11:22), sets us free from all his bonds, of our sin and all its debilitating effects. Jesus sets us free from all our crooked ways of thinking. Jesus can set us free from even our most chronic problems. Jesus cares. It’s not just about us, but about others. Disciples of Jesus all need to be like Jesus for others. What can we do for someone who’s suffering? We shouldn’t be cold and indifferent, just pressing on with our busy religious activities. We need to stop and see them, and in their pain we need to lay our hands on them to help them know his compassion. It may seem like nothing, but it has kingdom power in it.

Praise God for our compassionate King Jesus and the good news of his kingdom! May God help us experience that Jesus sets us free. May God help us be like Jesus, to stop and notice, and show his compassion for even one suffering person, as the best way to advance his kingdom.