

“You Are Freed” (Luke 13:10–21)

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What is the perfect vacation? Imagine you had all the time and money you could possibly have. What would you do on vacation? Some of us would like to rest and do little. Some of us would like to see historical sites. Some of us would like to visit a busy city and shop and be entertained. Maybe some people would want to take up an adventurous hobby like hang-gliding or scuba diving. The point is that we all have a different idea of what would make the perfect vacation. And if a few of us got together to organize a group vacation, there might be a conflict because we have different values.

Now, let’s think of something more serious. What makes a perfect society? Some people might think it’s all about law and order. A perfect society is where everyone knows the rules and follows them. Other people would think the opposite. A perfect society is all about freedom. Everyone can do what they want to do. Some people might think the perfect society is one in which everyone has the same amount of money and opportunities. Other people might have different ideas about how to create a society in which people are happy or grow to be virtuous. What we value the most shapes our vision of the ideal. That’s a large reason why there’s so much conflict in our nation today. It’s a conflict of visions.

Today, as we continue to learn about Jesus from the Gospel of Luke, we’ll see that Jesus once again has a conflict with the religious leaders of his day. This conflict also is a conflict of visions. Many of the religious people of Jesus’ day had a certain vision of the kingdom of God. It was all about following rules. And there was a hope that when the anointed King, the descendant of David, the Messiah, would come, the kingdom would be a political one. They expected that the King would come with great power, that he would defeat Israel’s enemies, and reign in a certain way. Jesus shows us that these expectations weren’t quite right.

Today, we’re going to read Luke 13:10–21. We’ll start by reading verses 10–17:

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. 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.”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?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.¹

Jesus once again teaches in a synagogue, though this will be the last time that he does so in this Gospel. The first time we saw him teaching in a synagogue was back in chapter 4, when he was in his hometown of Nazareth. There, he read a portion of the prophet Isaiah, from the Old Testament. That passage, from Isaiah 61, said that the Spirit of the Lord was upon the Messiah “to proclaim good news to the poor” and “to set at liberty those who are oppressed.” Jesus said that he came to fulfill those words of the Bible (Luke 4:16–21). Now, we see Jesus free someone who had been oppressed.

In the synagogue, there was a woman who had been handicapped for eighteen years. We’re told that she had “a disabling spirit.” Later, Jesus will say that Satan had bound her. The Bible frequently speaks of events or states of affairs in two ways. It can talk of natural causes, what are sometimes called secondary causes. In this case, the woman was bent over and couldn’t stand up straight. She might have had a condition in which her vertebrae had become fused together. But the Bible also talks about supernatural causes, what are sometimes called primary causes. So, though we know how babies are made, the Bible can also say that God made us and knit us together in our mother’s womb (Psalm 139). And here, we’re told that Satan, the devil, had oppressed this woman. We see in the book of Job that Satan has power to torment people with physical ailments.

The woman had been in this state for eighteen years. Such a long time! When Jesus sees her, he has compassion on her. We’re not told that she asked for healing or had faith that Jesus could heal her. Jesus simply takes the initiative. He tells her, “Woman, you are freed from your disability.” He lays hands on her and she was able to stand up straight. As a result, she glorifies God. She praises him. She knows where her healing came from. This is a pattern in Luke’s Gospel: people who witness miracles praise God (Luke 2:20; 4:15; 5:25; 5:26; 7:16; 13:13; 17:15; 18:43; 23:47).

¹ All Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

But there's a conflict, because this was the Sabbath. The Sabbath was the seventh day, which for Jews began at sundown on Friday and ended at sundown on Saturday. This was a day of rest. But the leader of the synagogue, as many other religious leaders thought, saw this more as a day not to work. Rabbis came up with a list of thirty-nine forms of work that were forbidden on the Sabbath. In the mind of the ruler of the synagogue, healing was one of those forms of labor that one shouldn't do on the Sabbath. Though, really, Jesus hardly did any work. He said a few words and put his hands on the woman. According to David Garland, "The synagogue official sees the world only through the prism of law, and it distorts his reasoning. He does not see the woman as an individual afflicted by Satan and desperate for release but rather as a nuisance who gets in the way of his ultimate concern, namely, maintaining Sabbath restrictions."² That might be a little harsh, but certainly this man is thinking about rules and not about the woman's pain.

Of course, this was not an emergency. Jesus could have healed the woman on the following day. He could have thought about healing the woman on Saturday and the healing could have taken effect on the Sunday. But he intentionally heals on the Sabbath.

I'll say a lot more about the Sabbath in just a few weeks, when we see that Jesus once again heals someone on that holy day (Luke 14:1–6). But this will suffice: In the Old Testament, we see that God gave the Israelites two reasons for observing the Sabbath. This is because the Ten Commandments are given at two different times. The first time is in Exodus 20, where we read this:

⁸ Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. ⁹ Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, ¹⁰ but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates. ¹¹ For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy (Exod. 20:8–11).

Resting on the Sabbath, the seventh day, mirrored the pattern that God established at the beginning of the Bible. In the beginning of Genesis, we're told that God created the heavens and the earth (Gen. 1:1), out of nothing, and that it was formless and void (Gen. 1:2). There are many different views on how to interpret the beginning of Genesis, which I don't need to get into

² David E. Garland, *Luke*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 548.

today. But the Bible depicts God ordering and arranging things over six days, by creating spaces for things and then by filling those spaces. So, he makes realms of light and darkness, and then fills them with the sun and stars. He makes the sea and fills it with fish. And he makes the dry land and fills it with animals and humans. And then he rests.

Rest doesn't mean that God was really tired after six days and needed to catch up on sleep. Rest relates more to the fact that once things were ordered, there was harmony. Once God had arranged everything to function peacefully and harmoniously, he could survey his kingdom and rule over it.

Of course, that rest, at least from our perspective, was disturbed by the presence of sin that entered into the world. What God had made harmonious became dissonant, all because the first humans didn't obey God. God made them in his image and likeness, which means many things. They were made to represent God, to rule over the world by coming under his rule, to worship and obey him, and to love him the way that perfect children would love a perfect parent. That's all good. But Adam and Eve weren't content with that. They wanted to become like God, to usurp his power and authority. So, they ignored the voice of God and listened to another voice, the voice of Satan, whispering seductive things. This rebellion against God is sin, and the result of sin in the world is chaos, not rest. It's division, not peace.

So, the Sabbath, for Israel, was a way of recapturing a slice of Paradise. It was a way of looking back and remembering that God had made a world of order, where there was peace. And, if they understood the Sabbath rightly, they should have realized that the Sabbath was a way of looking ahead, when things would be reordered, when peace and harmony would come once again. The Bible says that a Sabbath rest awaits for those who put their trust in Jesus (Heb. 4:9–10). There will be a time when all God's people rest from the weariness of labor in a fallen world.

The other reason for the Sabbath is given in Deuteronomy 5, when the Ten Commandments are issued once again. This is what we read there:

¹² Observe the Sabbath day, to keep it holy, as the LORD your God commanded you. ¹³ Six days you shall labor and do all your work, ¹⁴ but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, you or your son or your daughter or your male servant or your female servant, or your ox or your donkey or any of your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates, that your male servant and your female servant may rest as well as you. ¹⁵ You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God

brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day (Deut. 5:12–15).

When God redeemed Israel, he freed them from slavery in Egypt. The Israelites had to work under harsh conditions for Pharaoh, the king of Egypt. When God released them from slavery, through a series of plagues that struck the Egyptians, he brought them into rest. Instead of slaving every day, the Israelites could enjoy a day of rest, free from work, trusting that God would provide for their needs.

Now, let's go back to Jesus. What did he do on the Sabbath? He freed the woman from bondage to a painful condition. He freed the woman from bondage to Satan. He brought wholeness back to this woman's life. Among the many consequences of sin are diseases and death. Jesus brings healing and rest to those who are united to him by faith. But instead of praising God, the ruler of the synagogue was "indignant" and complained, in a passive aggressive way, "There are six days in which work ought to be done. Come on those days and be healed, and not on the Sabbath day." He must not have been the only one to think this way, because Jesus says, "You hypocrites!" He says that they would water their animals on the Sabbath. So, how much more should they care about "a daughter of Abraham," one of their fellow people?

In other words, Jesus is showing these people how inconsistent they were. They took care of the basic needs of animals but didn't care about the basic needs of a human being. They cared more about rules than people. They were missing the whole point of the law, which was given to Israel so that they would know how to love God and love others. The whole of the law could be summarized by the command to love God and love others (Matt. 22:34–40).

When Jesus rebukes these religious hypocrites, we're told that "all his adversaries were put to shame, and all the people rejoiced at all the glorious things that were done by him." When God brings salvation to people, others are put to shame. And yet God is glorified. This is consistent throughout the Bible. When God rescued Israel out of slavery, Pharaoh and his armies were put to shame, the Israelites were delivered, and God was glorified by all of it. If the religious leaders trusted that Jesus is the Christ, the King of kings, as well as the Son of God, they would not have been ashamed; instead, they would have praised God for the wonderful thing he had done for that woman.

Note the reversal of roles: the woman who was bowed down in shame is made to stand up tall. The men who stood proudly were bowed down in shame.

I will return to that idea in a moment. But first, let's move on and look at the rest of today's passage. Let's read verses 18–21:

¹⁸ He said therefore, "What is the kingdom of God like? And to what shall I compare it? ¹⁹ 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."

²⁰ And again he said, "To what shall I compare the kingdom of God? ²¹ It is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, until it was all leavened."

Jesus takes this opportunity to teach about the kingdom of God. He provides a couple of analogies. The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed—what the Jews at that time believed was the smallest of seeds—and it grew to become a huge tree, one that could shelter many birds. Now, on one level, this is a little surprising, because, as far as I understand, the mustard tree is a small tree or even a shrub. It's not terribly impressive. But it grows large enough to provide shelter for many.

On a deeper level, however, Jesus is likely referring to something in the Old Testament, which he often does. In the book of Ezekiel, God says that Jerusalem would soon fall to Babylon because of its sin. And it did. But God promised that he would build up a kingdom. We read these words in Ezekiel 17:22–24:

²² Thus says the Lord GOD: "I myself will take a sprig from the lofty top of the cedar and will set it out. I will break off from the topmost of its young twigs a tender one, and I myself will plant it on a high and lofty mountain. ²³ On the mountain height of Israel will I plant it, that it may bear branches and produce fruit and become a noble cedar. And under it will dwell every kind of bird; in the shade of its branches birds of every sort will nest. ²⁴ And all the trees of the field shall know that I am the LORD; I bring low the high tree, and make high the low tree, dry up the green tree, and make the dry tree flourish. I am the LORD; I have spoken, and I will do it."

Clearly, God is talking about more than just trees. He's going to take the remnant of Israel, the true believers, and make something great out of them. In that tree, all kinds of birds—perhaps representing people of many different nations—will find shelter in that tree. He brings down the high tree and raises up the low tree. He causes the dead tree to flourish and the living tree to die.

What this means is that God establishes his kingdom out of small beginnings. From a small start, it grows to something big. And many people, from all different nations, those who put their trust in Jesus, will find shelter in that kingdom. But those who reject Jesus will be brought down low. Jesus is telling the religious leaders that there will be a great reversal. The proud will be humiliated, while the humble will be raised up. This is the exact kind of thing that Mary sang in her Magnificat, when she is pregnant with Jesus. She says,

“My soul magnifies the Lord,
47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
48 for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant.
For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
49 for he who is mighty has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.
50 And his mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
51 He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts;
52 he has brought down the mighty from their thrones
and exalted those of humble estate;
53 he has filled the hungry with good things,
and the rich he has sent away empty.
54 He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
55 as he spoke to our fathers,
to Abraham and to his offspring forever.” (Luke 1:46–55)

Jesus’ second analogy says that the kingdom of God is like leaven that works its way through flour. A little bit of yeast causes a great change in a whole batch of dough, but the yeast works slowly, almost imperceptibly.

What Jesus means by these little analogies is that the kingdom of God did not come to Israel through a great show of force or power. The King wasn’t born in a palace, but in a barn. He didn’t come with an army, but as a carpenter, with a ragtag group of followers. He didn’t defeat all of God’s enemies all at once. What he did was build his kingdom slowly, by bringing people into the kingdom one by one. Every time someone like this woman in the synagogue came to find wholeness and healing in Jesus, the kingdom slowly grew. One more person came under Jesus’ rule and blessing and found peace.

What are we supposed to do with this passage?

The first thing to see is that Jesus came to bring real rest, real wholeness and order and healing and peace, to all who put their trust in him. Healing may not come in this life. Many Christians will experience pain and suffering. They may have conditions and diseases that are not cured in this life. But Jesus' miracles were a sign of things to come. When he returns, all who have a right relationship with him, marked by love, trust, and obedience, will receive new, resurrected bodies that won't be marred by decay or disease. We will never die again.

But the reason why we die is because of our sin. And that's what we need healing from. Jesus came to live the righteous life that no human has ever lived, and he came to die in the place of his people. Though Jesus never sinned, he died on the cross in order to pay the penalty for the sins of everyone who puts their trust in him. Salvation from sin and condemnation is freely given to all who believe. We don't follow the rules in order to have a right relationship with God. We could never obey perfectly enough to do that. But once we have put our trust in Jesus, we will follow his rule, out of love and gratitude to him.

Another thing to see is that the kingdom of God certainly has rules. It would be wrong to walk away from a passage like this and say that the religious leaders cared about rules, but we shouldn't. It would be wrong to say that the religious leaders studied the Old Testament carefully, but we shouldn't. The point that Jesus made was that they were missing the point. In this case, they were missing the point of the Sabbath. They put their own understanding of the Sabbath above their concern for this woman.

One thing we shouldn't do is reinterpret the whole Bible through the lens of our understanding of what brings flourishing to people. We see that being done today. People think we can scrap parts of the Bible because they don't line up with people's feelings and desires. Yet the Bible clearly says that because of sin, we have a tendency to have distorted feelings and wrong desires. So, we can't do that. But we should see that the kingdom of God isn't about creating all kinds of man-made rules. It's about following God's rule, and we can't do that until we find salvation in Jesus.

Another implication of this passage is that Christians should remember how God's kingdom grows. It doesn't grow by force, or by the government and politics. The government is important, but it's limited in what it can do. Jesus never told his disciples that they had to get the right senators and the right Emperor in power to build the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God will not come by executive order, legislation, or a Supreme Court decision. It grows slowly,

almost imperceptibly, every time someone puts their faith in Jesus. So, we should focus our energies on doing what Jesus has called us to do. We should live lives of faithfulness, obeying Jesus out of love. We should tell others about Jesus and urge them to become part of God's kingdom. We should share the good news of God's grace: he gives forgiveness and blessing to people who don't deserve it. This woman did nothing to deserve healing. She didn't even ask for it. But Jesus took the initiative. That is grace. Jesus took the initiative in coming, living, dying, and rising from the grave. He provides a priceless gift that cannot be earned through obedience, but can only be received by faith.

Christian, this is how God's kingdom grows. Don't despair if the world seems like chaos. Don't despair that so many reject Jesus. Trust in God's wisdom. Find your shelter in the tree of life that Jesus gives us. He didn't come with a conquering army, so don't put your trust in human power. He came to die on the tree of life, the cross, to bring people into his kingdom. Live as if Jesus is your King, treat others as God's image bearers, and encourage others to find rest in Jesus.

And if you are not a Christian, I urge you to find shelter in Jesus. There will be a day when a great reversal will come. Those who put their ultimate trust and hope in other things will be put to shame. No other God but Jesus can save and satisfy you. But those who those trust in Jesus will never be put to shame.

I'll end my sermon today with these words, from Isaiah 45:15–17. Perhaps these words were in Luke's mind when he wrote today's passage.

- 15 Truly, you are a God who hides himself,
O God of Israel, the Savior.
- 16 All of them are put to shame and confounded;
the makers of idols go in confusion together.
- 17 But Israel is saved by the LORD
with everlasting salvation;
you shall not be put to shame or confounded
to all eternity.