

Freeing the Captive

Luke 13:10-17

At first glance, this passage appears to have little relevance to us today: an argument between Jesus and a synagogue ruler over the proper celebration of the Sabbath, and the sorts of activities one can – and cannot – engage in on Friday-Saturday (or Sunday, as the case may be).

There was a time in contemporary society when this issue mattered deeply. The 1981 film *Chariots of Fire* recounts the story of Olympian Eric Liddell, and his refusal to run the 100 meters at the 1924 Paris games, because the heats were scheduled for Sunday. While many movie-goers admired his firmness of conviction, few actually embraced that particular conviction. For us, keeping ‘a’ regular sabbath (any day will do, not only ‘the’ Sabbath) is less likely to be a matter of religious conviction, than a matter of perceived pragmatic, stress-reducing benefits.

This is not to advocate keeping the Sabbath. It is just to point out how distant this text is from our experience. Nonetheless, as we shall see, even for those who do not keep the Sabbath, Jesus’ affirmation of its true purpose applies to other Christian activities which we still practice today.

Day 1: Luke 13:10-13 “You are set free from your ailment”

The focus of this narrative is the quarrel between Jesus and the synagogue ruler over the proper observance of the Sabbath. The healing is not the main point of the story; it simply provides the setting and presenting occasion for the dispute. Yet even though it is not the main setting, the healing bears brief reflection, not least because it ties in with our longings.

Two features of the healing incident are compelling: (a) Jesus provides physical healing; and, (b) the healing is both immediate and total. This is the lesson that we naturally long to bring from this story: Jesus heals our physical ailments, immediately and totally. Of course, when we are not suffering any particular physical ailment, we are realistic enough to recognize that for some reason or another, God rarely heals this way now. But let cancer or debilitating illness strike someone we love, and desperation drives wishful thinking and fervent pleading. And where desperation exists, charlatans thrive.

So how do we approach physical illness? First, as Scripture invites, we ask

God for healing (James 5:14-15). Secondly, we resist magical formulae and guilt-inducing claims, such as, “If you have enough faith, God will heal you;” or, “Claim your healing and testify to it, then God will grant it.” I spent two of my earliest years as a Christian in one of the most famous faith-healing movements in history; I can tell you from direct observation that immediate, instant, total, physical healing is rare. Anyone who claims otherwise is either deluded or a liar. Thirdly, we humbly acknowledge that God has given us so much more than the rest of the world, so our lives are properly characterized not by resentment over the remaining difficulties that we face, but by gratitude, even when life does not go our way.

Day 2: Luke 13:10-16 “You are set free from Satan”

This woman’s condition was not simply physical; it was also spiritual (13:11), an instrument of Satan to plague her life and enslave her spirit (13:16). So when Jesus healed her body, he also freed her from the tormenting spirits.

Given the connection of her illness with spiritual oppression, it is arguably legitimate to extend the application to other forms of debility which Satan uses to oppress us: such as, anxiety or depression, loneliness or meaninglessness, childhood trauma or abuse, and chemical or sexual addiction. Jesus comes to free Satan’s captives, whatever the nature of their bonds. Fundamentally, the most crippling bond of all is the hold sin has over us. The word of Jesus to this woman is also his word to us: “You are set free from your ailment... Be set free from this bondage” (13:12,16).

Again we note that our freedom more often will come not immediately, instantly, and totally, but through slow, deliberate, sometimes even painful, progress. It may come not from Jesus directed, but mediated through his people. Still, Jesus’ hand is no less in it. So, like this cured woman, we worship Jesus for his healing, whether spiritual or physical, instant or prolonged, total or partial, direct from Jesus or mediated through his community. Most of all, we worship Jesus for our deliverance from sin.

Day 3: Luke 13:14-16 The synagogue leader’s mistake #1: Who decides what God requires? The actual focus of this account, though, is not the healing, but the controversy between the synagogue leader and Jesus. The NIV translation obscures the point of contention. (This is not the fault of the NIV translators, but more likely, of its editors: the last people to touch a Bible translation are not the experts in the original languages, but the

editors tasked with improving the flow of the English.) The dispute was over God's intention for the Sabbath.

The synagogue overseer rebukes: "There are six days on which *it is necessary* to work" (10:14). This is not just human fiat: "it is necessary" is circumlocution designed to avoid the use of "God". (First-century Jews, mindful of the 3rd of the Ten Commandments – not to take the name of the Lord in vain – generally referred to God indirectly, in order to avoid using his name at all.) The synagogue leader's point is that the prohibition against working on the Sabbath is not Jewish law, it is God's command.

In rebuttal, Jesus picks up this same language in his reply: "*Was it not necessary* to free this woman from her bonds on the day of Sabbath?" The healing of this woman – and doing so on the Sabbath – was neither arbitrary nor optional. Both were the divine will. Reinforcing the point, Luke introduces Jesus' rebuttal with, "The *Lord* answered him" (13:15). So the question is, "Who is authorized to declare God's will?" Luke's answer is, of course, God himself, so, in this instance, the Lord Jesus. As Jesus said earlier in this Gospel, "The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath," so he – and Luke – implicitly repeat that claim here. So we worship him as God-incarnate, and look to him for direction, not only in Sabbath-keeping but also in all matters.

Day 4: Luke 13:12-16 The synagogue leader's mistake #2: You treat your own animals better than you treat other human beings! To highlight the illogic – even the hypocrisy – of the synagogue elder, Jesus notes the fundamental inconsistency in contemporary application of Sabbath law. Using the same terms, he observes how rabbinic interpretation permits *untying* an animal in order to give it a drink. At the same time, it prohibits *untying* this woman from her disability. This is sheer casuistry, and gross insensitivity. The same logic that permits care for an animal, should all the more permit care for a human being.

Update this from farm animals to pets, and we have some startling contemporary parallels. On the beaches of Florida, it is illegal to destroy turtle embryos, but in the hospitals of Florida, it is not illegal to destroy human embryos. In homes across America, vast sums are spent on pet food, but not on contributions to feed the world's poor. At least the synagogue leader could claim some (even if misguided) authority from Scripture, if not for treating animals better than humans, at least for

denying non-emergency care to humans on the Sabbath. We cannot claim even a pretense of support for contemporary neglect of humans in need.

Day 5: Luke 13:14-17 The synagogue leader's mistake #3: Confusing means and end. It is simplistic for us to dismiss the synagogue elder as legalistic. That misconstrues the issue here, as well as first-century Judaism. Where the elder went wrong was not in prioritizing careful and faithful obedience to God, but in confusing means and end. Sabbath observance was a means, not an end. It was not a regulation to be rigidly observed for its own sake, or simply because God arbitrarily insists. It was a celebration of God's work of creation, and provided needed restoration for the tired laborer. So when Jesus healed the crippled woman, he was fulfilling – not violating – the Sabbath: her healing was an act of recreation and restoration, returning her to health and bringing praise to God (13:13). And in overlooking both outcomes, the synagogue elder missed not only the purpose of the Sabbath, but also the power and mercy of Jesus.

What this text says about the Sabbath could be said about other dimensions of our spiritual lives, including corporate worship, personal devotions, Scripture memory, virtuous living, and generous giving. These are not obligations to be rigidly obeyed, rules to be imposed, or arbitrary demands from God. They are means to an end, the end being the glory of God and the restoration of our souls. So we use them toward that end, and celebrate when those ends are achieved, even when the process is somewhat flexible or idiosyncratic.

Day 6: Luke 13:10-16 Caring for the disabled

We do not want to spiritualize this passage, and make it all about spiritual disability. It is primarily about physical disability, and only by extension about spiritual disability. Obviously Jesus did more than just care for the disabled woman; he healed her. As noted in the first day's reflection, we see little immediate, instantaneous, and total healing of the disabled today. We can ask that God might pour out his power in this way today. At the same time, we also rightly care for the disabled, whether the disability be physical, mental, or emotional. Those who are primarily responsible for care of the disabled often find it an overwhelming task. We rightly apply the example of Jesus by actively supporting the disabled, and their caregivers.