

Compassion vs. hypocrisy

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 15 November 2020

Preacher: Benjamin Wilks

- [0 : 0 0] Luke chapter 13, starting at verse 10. On a Sabbath, Jesus was teaching in one of the synagogues, and a woman was there who had been crippled by a spirit for 18 years.
- She was bent over and could not straighten up at all. When Jesus saw her, he called her forward and said to her, Woman, you are set free from your infirmity.
- Then he put his hands on her, and immediately she straightened up and praised God. Indignant because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath, the synagogue leader said to the people, There are six days for work, so come and be healed on those days, not on the Sabbath.
- The Lord answered him, You hypocrites! Doesn't each of you on the Sabbath untie your ox or donkey from the store and lead it out to give it water? Then should not this woman, a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan has kept bound for 18 long years, be set free on the Sabbath day from what bound her?
- When he said this, all his opponents were humiliated, but the people were delighted with all the wonderful things he was doing. Well, what, I wonder, do you think Christians look like?
- [1 : 2 1] My suspicion is that in most people's minds that there are two versions of Christians, two caricatures, if you like. Either on the one hand, you have the Ned Flanders Christianity, somewhat limp and irrelevant to daily life, or you have a version perhaps more like the synagogue leader in today's passage, a much more judgmental person, someone who wants everybody to follow their rules and who gets angry when people don't.
- There's a perception, an idea, that Christians are those who think themselves holier than thou, even though the reality is that they aren't actually any better, any more holy than anyone else.
- Now, folks, I hope we would want to disagree, to challenge both of those caricatures, to say that Christians are neither meant to be limp and ineffective, nor angry, judgmental and hypocritical.
- We shouldn't be wet blankets and we shouldn't be attacking other people. But if we want to counter those narratives, those caricatures, then we need to first stop and check what truth there might be in them.
- And this passage in Luke's Gospel particularly addresses the second of these wrong steps, these unfortunate caricatures.
- [2 : 5 0] So I hope you've still got it open in front of you, Luke chapter 13 from verse 10. And this passage sets out two alternatives. On the one hand in this passage, we see the hypocrisy of the synagogue leader.
- And in comparison to his hypocrisy, we see the compassion of Jesus. Jesus comes first in the flow of the narrative. So we'll look there first.
- The setting, the setting for these events is quite straightforward. Jesus is continuing on this journey down to Jerusalem. And he's paused on one particular Sabbath day.

He's stopped travelling for the day and he's teaching in the synagogue. This is very ordinary to invite the travelling rabbi, the itinerant teacher, to invite him to address the congregation in the synagogue.

This is a normal thing to do. This is perfectly acceptable. But Jesus doesn't stop there, does he? Jesus doesn't only teach. No, verse 11 tells us that he saw this poor woman.

[3 : 54] Jesus sees her and he takes the initiative. Jesus knows the severity of her need. In fact, Jesus talks about her need in much stronger terms than I guess we would naturally be inclined to use.

There's a hint of this here in verse 11. It says she's been crippled by a spirit. And it comes through more strongly still in verse 16, when Jesus says that this woman has been kept bound by Satan for 18 years.

What does he mean by this phrasing, by this idea of being bound by Satan? Well, we don't have any indication that she was notoriously wicked.

We don't have any sense that she was violent, you know, like Legion, the guy with the hundreds and hundreds of demons that went into the herd of pigs. She's not, you know, off living in the tombs or anything.

So this probably isn't demonic possession in an ordinary sense, in the way that we encounter at other places through Luke's Gospel. And therefore, some commentators, they say that talking here about being crippled by a spirit or talking about having a spirit of infirmity, that this is basically just a way of saying that she had an illness that the people at the time didn't understand.

[5 : 20] Apparently, there's a good chance that the illness in question was spondylitis ankylopoietica, which is a fusion of the spinal bones.

The different vertebrae kind of join together and therefore can't come together and separate as they should. And so you end up with this curved stature unable to straighten up.

And by the way, there's still no cure for this today. Treatments can reduce some of the symptoms and they can prevent them getting worse. But there is still no cure today any more than there was in Jesus' day.

So then, now that we understand this, do we say, well, this language, you know, of being bound by Satan, we can do away with that. It made sense 2,000 years ago, but now we know better this is a natural disease.

My suspicion is that the answer to that question is both yes and no. So yes, yes, it seems reasonable to say that there is a physical ailment involved, that there is a disease.

[6 : 25] But we shouldn't use that to dismiss the language of a spirit or of Satan keeping her bound. Rather, this kind of language used to refer to a physical ailment, this reminds us of the power of Satan.

This reminds us of the far-reaching consequences of his authority as the ruler of the kingdom of the air. Ever since Adam and Eve's first sin back in the Garden of Eden, ever since those early days, the human race has been subject to illness and to disease.

And these things are within Satan's power to inflict. So the idea that Satan caused this woman to be unable to stand up straight, I think this is entirely reasonable and entirely compatible with saying that it is a physical disease.

Satan is able to work through that illness and pain. In fact, Satan delights to cause pain and suffering, doesn't he?

Satan delights when we inflict pain and suffering on one another, and he delights when he can use the natural world to cause it. He delights in pain. Satan delights in it.

[7 : 42] And Jesus looks at this woman's pain and says, this is not how it's supposed to be. Jesus looks at this woman and he loves her. Jesus sees her.

Jesus has compassion on her. And this healing, this is not something that the woman is asking for. I think essentially she's reconciled to her situation at this point, isn't she?

Nobody knows any possible means by which it could be changed. This is just the way things are for her. Even if she had heard about some of the miraculous healings that Jesus had already done, there's nothing here in Luke 13 that suggests that she had any expectations of that for herself.

Nothing to suggest that she comes and approaches Jesus. No, verse 12 says, He called her forwards. He saw her and he took the initiative. And friends, friends, God's character doesn't change.

Jesus isn't different today to how he was then. Jesus is every bit as loving and every bit as compassionate as he has ever been.

[8 : 51] Jesus' attitude to you is the same as his attitude was to her. Tom Wright says that what Jesus is doing for this poor woman is what he's longing to do for Israel as a whole.

I think he's thinking too small. I don't think this is only what Jesus longs to do for Israel. This is what Jesus intends for the whole world.

And what he intends on a far grander scale and at a far greater cost than the healing of this woman. See, Jesus had compassion on a world languishing in bondage to Satan.

Jesus loves a people who don't deserve it. Jesus sees me and Jesus sees you. And Jesus takes action to set us free. Far more serious than any physical ailment.

Jesus sees the burden that we're under. He sees the situation that we are in. He sees the circumstances of our life. But more than that, he sees the debt that we owe for our wrongdoing.

[10 : 02] He sees our sins. He knows what we are like. And he loves us. He takes action. He left the comfort of heaven.

He came to seek and to save the lost. He chose the agony of the cross. He came to set us free from a far greater infirmity than this woman suffered. Friends, friends, this account reminds us of the compassion of our Savior.

However, however, this incident also warns us of the danger. The danger of hypocrisy in religion. See, whilst verse 17 tells us that on the whole, people were delighted with the wonderful things that Jesus was doing.

Delighted by what was happening in their midst. That was what happened on the whole, but clearly not universally. Because in between, we have the attack from the synagogue leader, don't we?

In between, we have him coming and objecting to what Jesus is doing. And it's worth thinking about what's going on with this synagogue leader. Both to recognize what we may face from others if we follow in Jesus' footsteps.

[11 : 15] But also because we should look for these attitudes lurking in our own hearts. Verse 14, we learn that this man was indignant.

Indignant because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath. And perhaps too scared to confront Jesus directly. He sees Jesus over there and kind of turns to the rest of the crowd.

And chooses to address the people instead. Arguing, there are six days for work. So come and be healed on those days, not on the Sabbath. Now, on one level.

On the face of it, to an extent, this seems a reasonable question, doesn't it? A reasonable suggestion. I mean, it's true there are six other perfectly good days in a week. So why does it have to be today?

If we want to answer that question, then we have to stop and consider what's actually being suggested. Because to say to someone, come back tomorrow, is to say that it doesn't matter if they continue to suffer.

[12 : 22] Now, how much do you have to disdain your fellow villagers to wish another day of suffering upon them? And so Jesus' response in verse 15, it argues from the lesser to the greater.

You wouldn't keep your animal tied up so it can't drink. So why would you keep this woman tied up? She's a daughter of Abraham. She's part of God's people.

She is beloved to God. And she has been entrapped by Satan. Who would be willing to see that continue one moment longer? And so Jesus calls this man, and those who think like him, calls them hypocrites.

Why? Well, because this synagogue ruler interprets God's commands in a way that's convenient to himself and inconvenient to others. He has double standards. He's a hypocrite because he doesn't understand God's purpose.

He doesn't understand God's word. He can echo the wording of the fourth commandment, sure. But he doesn't know how to apply it, does he? He doesn't understand what it means.

[13 : 32] What a ridiculous attitude he has. Come back another day? As if God's power lay asleep on the Sabbath day. As if that weren't the day above all others when God intends to save his people.

What is the point of gathering at the synagogue if not to ask for God's help? Well, John Calvin says this ungodly hypocrite talks as if the lawful observation of the Sabbath interrupted the course of God's favours, hindered men from calling upon him, and took away from them all feeling of his kindness.

What nonsense! And see, it's not only that it's permissible that this woman be healed on the Sabbath. Verse 16 asks, Should not she be set free?

And in fact, should not is the least forceful reasonable translation of the Greek that Luke wrote his account in. In most other cases in the Bible, in most other cases, the same verb would be translated not should, but is necessary.

It is necessary that this woman be healed. This ought to happen. This is what needs to happen. Because God has compassion on his people.

[14 : 48] This is part of God's plan. This is Jesus fulfilling what he was sent to earth to do. Jesus stood there in a different synagogue at the start of his ministry, and he quoted from the prophet Isaiah, saying that amongst other things he had been sent to set the oppressed free.

Well, here he is doing just that. And the synagogue ruler stands opposed. As the commentator Alfred Plummer wrote at the close of the 19th century, What a nonsense to think that God is honoured by refusing to do good.

Where then does that leave you and me? Well, folks, given that we know God's compassion for us, given that we know the love that he has shown to us, then isn't our desire to mirror that compassion ourselves?

Isn't our desire to avoid the hypocrisy of this synagogue ruler? And in doing that, well, we could do worse than consider our attitude to God's Sabbath, couldn't we?

Nowadays, we take our Sabbath on Sundays, not on Saturdays. We mark the resurrection of our Lord Jesus on a Sunday by shifting by a day, as it were.

[16 : 23] But beyond that difference, is there any good reason why our attitude to the Sabbath day should be different to Christ's own? I suggest not.

Folks, the fourth commandment is no more repealed than are the other nine. So, so then if we're to have a Sabbath, what is our attitude to it?

And the danger is still one of hypocrisy. The danger, the danger is that some who were sat in front of me in person live this morning look down on those who were not.

Those who were sat at home trying to connect those of you who are sat listening now. The danger that they look down and think, well, they couldn't be bothered. It wasn't important enough to them to book a place.

How can they consider themselves to be serious Christians? There's a danger that they look down on you. But there's also a danger for you listening now, isn't there?

[17 : 28] A danger that you look down on those who won't watch live but will watch later in the day or on another day. Of those who will not watch at all.

There's a danger that we look down on one another. That we set our standards. In this, in this as in so many things, there's this danger, isn't there, that we take our attitudes and our inclinations and we treat them as if they were God's own attitudes and inclinations and requirements.

And we say, if you're not doing it my way, then you are a sinner. Folks, if you are, on this Sabbath day, doing a good thing and that is somehow unacceptable to me because you should be doing the thing I say instead, well then the problem is with me, not with you, isn't it?

Jesus is very clear that it is right to do good on the Sabbath. And Jesus seems to be saying that the definition of what is right and proper what good might be done on the Sabbath is perhaps broader than many might be inclined to think.

Jesus seems to say that taking your interpretation of God's rules and using them to beat other people over the head, that that is not really the idea at all.

[18 : 54] Jesus seems to say when somebody needs help, then that is what you do. So do you say to the nurse, do you say, well you should avoid Sunday shifts at least if you can.

You know, it might be necessary from time to time, but come on, trade if at all possible. You know, Sundays are important. Make sure that you avoid Sunday shifts so you can come to church.

Do you say that to the nurse? No. No, you say, thank you for giving up your time to help others. We don't leave people suffering without care, not even for one extra day.

Do you say, do you say to the person suffering from domestic abuse, do you say, well, I'll be glad to come and help you move your things out on Monday, but I'm sorry, I'll be busy on Sunday.

No. No, you say, what time do you want me to come and how many people should I bring with me? How many of my fellow churchgoers shall I say, we're doing this instead?

[19 : 56] This is important. Friends, you don't leave people in danger, not even one extra day. It was necessary for this woman to be set free on the Sabbath day.

Let's not join the hypocrisy of the synagogue leader. Let's delight to do good on the Lord's day. Let's delight to serve others, to help those who are in need. Bishop Ryle, Bishop Ryle is always worth listening to, and he reminds us that the Sabbath day was always meant to be a blessing to God's people, not a burden.

That it was meant to be a delight, not something that we dread. He says the Sabbath was appointed to promote man's best and highest interests, and not to debar him of anything that is really for his good.

It requires nothing but what is reasonable and wise. It forbids nothing that is really necessary to man's comfort. Friends, friends, I hope and pray that the Lord's day is a joy to you.

I hope you experience it to be a blessing, to be freed from labour for one day a week. I hope you delight to serve others. I hope you delight to share the compassionate heart of Jesus.

[21 : 15] I hope you have been blessed by worshipping God today, whether you did that this morning, or whether you are doing that right here, right now. I hope it is a delight.

It should be. I hope you know. I hope you know Jesus' compassion for yourself. I hope you know his love for you.

And I hope you're keen to show that compassion to others in place of hypocritical judgmentalism. Let's pray. Lord God, we are, we are sorry when we, when we do not follow your ways, when we do not share your attitudes, when we do not have the compassion that Jesus had, that Jesus has upon us right now.

We are sorry when we are tempted to judge others for not doing things the way that we think they should, even though our standards go far beyond those which you have set down.

We are sorry when we have prioritized what turns out to be for our own benefit rather than caring for others. Lord Jesus, forgive us for these wrongdoings as for so many other ways that we have hurt and wounded you, that we have turned away from you.

[22 : 43] We are sorry and we ask for your forgiveness. thank you that knowing your compassion we can be confident that you will indeed forgive us, that you have paid the price for these our misdeeds.

Thank you that we can stand before you washed clean and that we can know that you are at work in our hearts, that through your Holy Spirit at work within us you are transforming us to share more and more your heart of compassion.

Turn us increasingly away from hypocrisy and judgmentalism. Turn us towards love and compassion. Amen.