

Getting Jesus clear... on his work

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[0 : 00] And he told this parable, A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it, and found none. And he said to the vinedresser, Look, for three years now I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and I find none. Cut it down. Why should it use up the ground? And he answered him, Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and put on manure. Then if it should bear fruit next year, well and good, but if not, you can cut it down.

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. When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said to her, Woman, you are freed from your disability. And he laid his hands on her, and immediately she was made straight, and she glorified God. 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. 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? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan bound for eighteen years, be loosed from this bond on the Sabbath day? And he said these things, 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.

Marcus, thanks very much for reading. Do please keep Luke open, Luke chapter 13. Just to say, for those who didn't make the day away, yesterday is a terrific morning. The quiz was also terrific. It's always interesting that people's characters, you know, competitive or otherwise always come out on these things. That was fun. And yesterday morning, a great talk with Question Time, Haggai, chapter one. If you missed it, do listen online. Personally, I found it really helpful just in terms of getting things clear, getting my sense of perspective clear when there's so much else going on all around. Well, why don't I pray for us before we look at Luke chapter 13. And just a reminder as to why Luke writes his gospel, as he says at the very beginning, that you may have certainty concerning the things you've been taught. Heavenly Father, we thank you very much indeed for Luke's gospel. And we pray now, please would you help us to be attentive, conscious of all the other things going on in our lives at the moment. Help us to focus. And we pray, Heavenly Father, please would you grant us certainty, both certainty about why Jesus came and the work that he came to do, and also certainty about the nature of the times in which we are living. And we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.

Well, this is the fourth in our series of five talks on getting Jesus clear. It's so helpful, I think, isn't it, at the end of the summer months, as we kind of look ahead to refocus and reset our priorities for the year ahead. I think it's helpful for us to do that as individuals. Certainly, I found that really helpful. But I think it's also helpful for us to do that as a church as well. Let me recap. So far, getting Jesus clear on his return. Chapter 12, verse 40, he's coming soon. You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect. Secondly, getting Jesus clear on following him. In other words, the mark of someone who's ready for Jesus to return is that we're actively waiting, not passively waiting, actively waiting, serving him. Verse 43, blessed is that servant whom his master will find so doing when he comes. Thirdly, last week, getting Jesus clear on his message, his message to the world. Remember chapter 13, verse 5, no, I tell you, unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. In other words, what has Jesus been doing over these last few weeks?

[4 : 56] He's been giving us a lens through which to see life. If I take my glasses off, everyone is kind of blurry and things are rather unclear. You could doze off, for all I knew. I wouldn't notice at all. But put them on again and life looks very different. And suddenly I can see things with a great clarity. Well, how much more important is that we look at life, that we look at the world through the lens of Jesus Christ, Jesus shaping our worldview. And of course, that in turn is going to determine,

isn't it, and shape what is important to us, what is not important to us as well, what we strive after, what we use our money for, the way in which we spend our resources and energy and so on and time. Well, today, getting Jesus clear on the work he's come to do. To some, of course, the very idea that Jesus came to do something comes as a bit of a surprise. They think of him perhaps just as an example to follow or as someone who just talks of nice morality tales, that kind of thing. For others, perhaps, we might think of a whole variety of things that Jesus came to do. Healing the sick, challenging the religious establishment, promoting injustice and so on. And yet today, Jesus is going to show us the very heart of the work that he came to do. Just something on the structure of the passage.

The structure works a bit like a sandwich. So in the middle, the filling, so to speak, there's the healing of this woman. And then either side, the bread, Luke shows us the way in which people responded to Jesus. So let's look at the healing first. Hopefully the outline is up on the screen. The work of Jesus. And have a look again at verses 10 to 13.

Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath. And there was a woman who had had a disabling spirit for 18 years. She was bent over and couldn't fully straighten herself. When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said to her, woman, you are freed from your disability. And he laid his hands on her and immediately she was made straight and she glorified God. Now I think it's all too easy to slightly skate over a miracle at this stage in Luke's gospel and to think, well, it's just another miracle. As if Luke was sitting at his desk at that slightly tricky time to concentrate, you know, 2.30 on a Monday afternoon. Scratching his head, you know, what shall I say in it? Ah, yes, there was that miracle. Let's put that in as a bit of a filler until I get some more inspiration. And yet, as I reminded us earlier, Luke tells us he's written an orderly account. And therefore nothing appears by accident, by chance.

[8 : 06] Strikingly, we've had no mention of any miracles in Luke since chapter 11, verse 14, when it was literally half a verse. So this is the first miracle, really, in the second half of Luke's gospel, which in terms of the way in which Luke tells us what happened, actually he gives significant time to. It's also the last time we are in the synagogue, or Jesus is in the synagogue in Luke as well. In other words, this is a very significant miracle. We're meant to sit up and take notice. It's a significant healing, clearly of enormous significance personally for this woman. The poor woman has been affected 18 years. Perhaps we imagine someone sort of hunched over her shuffling gait, you know, the pain in her spine. Perhaps as she walks along, she's only ever able to just look at the floor. She can't sit up and actually look ahead.

The daily inconvenience, most likely her spine, her fused together. That Jesus heals her, of course, shows his enormous compassion, and all the more so in a culture where rabbis would have had little to do with women in public. But notice how Luke makes it plain that her condition is not simply a physical one. There's also a spiritual dimension to it. In verse 11, she's described as having a disabling spirit. In verse 16, we're told it's Satan the devil who has bound her. In other words, here is Luke the doctor, and, you know, imagine his case notes. In one column, he's scribbled down her physical symptoms, but he doesn't just want us to know her physical symptoms. In the other column, he's scribbled down her spiritual symptoms.

As such, it picks up on what we saw last week, that sickness and suffering point to the fact that we live in a broken world, a world where there is disease and deformity and disaster and death. And behind all of those things stands Satan, who is busy trying to wreak havoc in human lives, seeking to dehumanise us, so to speak, at every level. After all, it was Satan in the Garden of Eden who persuaded Adam and Eve to doubt God's words, to believe that actually God didn't have their best interests at heart, to believe that his plan for their life, God's plan for their life, wasn't nearly as good as Satan's plan for their life. Indeed, later in the New Testament, in Ephesians, the Apostle Paul says, actually, this is a description of each one of us before we put our trust in Jesus Christ. All of us, by nature, follow Satan. He is at work in each one of us. By which, of course, we're not to think in terms of some sort of cheap and rather tacky horror movie, but actually this is describing spiritual reality. Because in the spiritual realm, there are only two sides we can be on. We can be on the side of Jesus Christ. If we're not on his side, then there's only one alternative. So this is a very significant healing. It is a signpost pointing to the work that Jesus came to do. Remember, he's on his way to Jerusalem, where he'll be crucified. His death on the cross brings the forgiveness of sins for those who put their trust in him, brings people to peace with God, and frees us from the power of Satan. In other words, as this woman is physically healed, as her bones

are straightened, as her ligaments and muscles and joints and sinews are all put back together again so that they function properly, it is a picture of what happens in the spiritual realm as we put our trust in Jesus. We are restored to be the people we are meant to be.

[12:40] It's a significant healing. But it's a significant healing on a significant day. I wonder if you noticed, as Marcus read this, that the repeated emphasis that all this took place was on the Sabbath. In verse 10, it's how Luke sets the scene, isn't it? As he simply says, it was the Sabbath day. In verse 14, the synagogue ruler is indignant because Jesus heals on the Sabbath.

A reminder, of course, that man-made religion is always opposed to the work of Jesus. Yes, verse 14, the Sabbath day was a day of rest, and yet they'd added on top of that their own man-made rules and regulations. But then in verse 16, Jesus explains the necessity of the healing precisely because it is the Sabbath. Verse 16, And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan bound for 18 years, be loosed from this bond on the Sabbath day?

Did you notice that word ought? In other words, there's something very specific about the Sabbath that means it's entirely appropriate, entirely right for Jesus to heal her on that day.

Just to keep a finger in Luke chapter 13 and turn back to Genesis chapter 2, to the very first Sabbath day. Genesis chapter 2. The word Sabbath, of course, simply means rest, and here is the first day of rest in the Bible. Genesis 2, verses 1 to 3.

Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them. And on the seventh day God finished his work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it God rested from all his work that he had done in creation. After God finishes his creation, he rests.

[14:55] He has a Sabbath day. Not, of course, rest in the sense of, you know, putting your feet up in front of the telly doing absolutely nothing, but rest as the goal of creation. God enjoying all that he has made.

And we see something of the wonder of everything he's made in the next section, in verses 5 to 14. You might like to look at those verses later, where we see the perfection of his creation, the blessing that it is, the sheer abundance of the creation. It is very much life as it's meant to be. And yet all that is lost in Genesis chapter 3, when Satan tempts Adam and Eve to doubt God's word and to live life his way instead. In turn they are driven out of the Garden of Eden to live in a world spoilt by the consequences of sin, not only in terms of their own lives, but also in terms of the environment.

And yet God promised that one day the effects of their rebellion would be reversed. He promises blessing where there was curse, the defeat of Satan, a whole new creation where the consequences of sin will be no more. No more suffering, no evil, no sin.

Indeed, throughout the Old Testament, God's purpose for the Sabbath was precisely for his people to look forward to that promised world. And that is why it's so very appropriate that on the Sabbath, Jesus heals this woman. It's a visual aid, if you like, in microcosm of what that whole new creation is going to look like.

[16:49] We've just had our hallway decorated. And as you do, in preparation, a couple of months ago, we went off to the DIY shop, we got various kind of colour paint samples to help us to choose what colour it was going to be.

Now, if you'd said to me a couple of months ago, you know, what's your hall going to look like? Well, I guess I could have said, well, you'll just have to wait and see. But I could have said, actually, come round and look at the sample. And I could have pointed you to this little sample and left it to your imagination, having seen the little sample, to imagine what the whole of the hall was going to look like once the work was finished.

Paint samples are a preview, a foretaste of something far, far bigger. Just a sample. Well, in a far greater way, when Jesus heals people, when he drives out evil spirits as he does here, we're not simply to think, wow, isn't that amazing? Rather, each one is a preview, a foretaste of a whole new creation to come, a new heavens and a new earth, free from sin, free from evil and its effects. Well, what are the implications?

Well, I hope you can see it brings great clarity about the work that Jesus came to do. There are so many causes that get harnessed in the name of Jesus.

But he didn't come primarily as a social worker or an eco-warrior or to bring social justice in this world.

[18 : 35] Rather, he came to die on the cross for forgiveness of sins, to bring peace with God, no longer facing the judgment of God, to bring those who trust in him to a new heavens and a new earth.

It may well be that actually you look at your life and you feel rather insignificant, perhaps as this woman did here in Luke chapter 13.

Or, like this woman, you may look at your life and you may be acutely aware of the way in which you bear the scars of living in a fallen world.

No doubt there were lots of people in that synagogue that Jesus could have singled out and helped. And yet, he heals her.

It points, doesn't it, to his enormous compassion. It shows that anyone can come to him. Anyone can receive the forgiveness of sins and be at peace with God and be assured of a place in the new creation.

[19 : 40] Please don't leave here this morning thinking you are in some way beyond the compassion of Jesus. But I wonder too whether for some of us there might be a danger that we forget that Jesus can do this.

Perhaps we think of a friend and we just say to ourselves, I can't really imagine in a million years how they'd ever be really interested in the Christian faith or ever want to investigate the Christian faith.

Or perhaps you look at colleagues and you think, well, they all look so sorted. You know, they're the kinds of people who just seem to kind of breeze through life without any cares in the world. You know, consumed by their career or whatever it is.

You know, I can't imagine them ever wanting to think about Jesus for themselves. I must say I often find myself challenged when I'm listening to someone's testimony about how they came to follow Jesus.

Perhaps someone from a completely different culture. Or perhaps someone from a very kind of unpromising background. Or perhaps someone so sort of high profile in terms of the work and career.

[20 : 48] And yet, wonderfully, they've put their trust in Jesus. And I often think to myself, how extraordinary that they should do that. Let's not forget that Jesus is continuing to do this work today.

Let's be expectant here in Dulwich that he would continue to do his work today and pray that he would do so. So, the work of Jesus.

Secondly, the work of Jesus demands an urgent response. Let's have a look at verses 6 to 9. And he told this parable. A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard.

And he came seeking fruit on it and found none. And he said to the vine dresser, Look, for three years now I've come seeking fruit on this fig tree. And I find none.

Cut it down. Why should it use up the ground? And he answered him, Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig round it and put on the manure. Then, if it should bear fruit next year, well and good.

[21 : 54] But if not, you can cut it down. Now this imagery of the vineyard would have been very familiar to Jesus' listeners. You can look up Isaiah chapter 5, verses 1 to 7, later on in the Old Testament.

It's a love song. A love song sung by God himself to his beloved vineyard, his people. They've had the most extraordinary privileges as those counted amongst the people of God.

They're given the law as an expression of God's love. They've been given a land to live in as an expression of his generosity. They've been given the profit so they could hear God's words.

And they've been given the temple as a symbol of God living amongst them with his people. And yet, despite God's loving, tender care for them, for his vineyards, there's no fruit.

In judgment, God says he'll send them into exile, away from the temple, away from the land. It's actually a very moving song.

[23 : 04] And so you see, when Jesus tells this parable about a vineyard, it's very hard to miss the parallel.

A man plants a vineyard, no fruit is found even after three years. The obvious answer is to cut it down, to replace it with something more productive. But there's a reprieve.

As the farm manager says, give it one more year. I'll add some manure. Let's see what happens. In other words, the fig tree has been put on final notice.

When we say, who is Jesus addressing? Well, certainly the religious leaders, people like the synagogue ruler, are here in verse 14, who is indignant, who's completely failed to see the significance of who Jesus is and why he's come.

He's completely failed to see the fact that Jesus is both judge and saviour. Far more concerned with his religious traditions, more concerned to preserve his own power than he is with the significance and understanding the significance of Jesus' work.

[24 : 17] And yet Jesus is also addressing the crowds. We saw this last week, didn't we? Do you remember how we said in verse 54 that up to that point Jesus has been talking to his disciples and now he completely turns around and he starts addressing the crowds.

They're experts at reading the signs, whether it's the weather or the stock market or predicting the sports results, that they fail to read the signs when it comes to Jesus, that he's judge and saviour. Indeed, last week we saw, didn't we, Jesus calling on us to demonstrate the fruit of repentance before it's too late. Last week I mentioned the American award-winning author Mitch Albion.

One of his short stories is called Five People You'll Meet in Heaven. And it begins with Eddie. And the first thing we're told about Eddie is that he just has 40 minutes to live.

Not that he knows that as he goes about his daily routine as a retired 83-year-old. So he goes for a short walk along the pier as he does every day to enjoy the sea view.

[25 : 36] 32 minutes. He sits down on a park bench to rest. 27 minutes. He enjoys watching a group of children playing in the park.

21 minutes. Because for Eddie, of course, it's just an ordinary day. He's just going about the same kinds of things he always does.

As the reader, of course, you're wanting to shout, Eddie, there's only 15 minutes to go. Are you really going to spend your last 15 minutes just doing what you always do every other day?

Time is running out. He gets distracted by a dog. Nine minutes. Eddie, the clock's ticking. You're on borrowed time.

Now I'm going to cut the illustration there because I don't want to spoil the rest of the story. You have to read it for yourself. But it's that sense of time running out that Jesus is so clearly wanting to impress on us.

[26 : 38] He died for the forgiveness of sins. He rose three days later, never to die again. He ascended to heaven. He is Lord and God.

He will come again at the end. He has told us he is going to come suddenly. He could come at any time. Although we do need to build in a delay.

Back to Isaiah. God warned his Old Testament people of the judgment to come. And it did. In 587 BC, the Babylonian army invaded and took them into exile.

Just as Jesus warns us of the final judgment to come. Repent. You're on borrowed time. That's why the responses to the healing are so important.

Verse 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.

[27 : 40] Do you remember how back in chapter 12, verses 52 and 53, Jesus spoke about the division within families. As some follow him, others reject him. Here we see a nation being divided by Jesus.

2,000 years later, of course, we can see actually the whole world divided by Jesus. Those who follow him. Those who don't. There's no middle ground.

Perhaps you've heard this before. Perhaps you regard yourself as someone who is sitting on the fence. But the reality is there is no fence to sit on.

Perhaps you've heard this before and actually you've done nothing about it. Can you hear the urgency with which Jesus speaks? Do chat to me afterwards about how you might put your trust in him.

Well, I guess as a church, it raises all sorts of questions, doesn't it, for us? About how we see our world. Do we kind of look at our world as if there's plenty of time?

[28 : 51] Or do we look at our world as if time is running out? The implications of that, in terms of our priorities, in terms of the things we value, are enormous.

Our priorities and things we value as individuals, but also as a church, as a whole. Thank you.