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Luke 13:10-21

47th Message

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# THE KINGDOM OF GOD – SABBATH, MUSTARD SEEDS, AND LEAVEN

*SERIES: THE GOSPEL OF LUKE*

The gospels tell us that Jesus offers the life of God, and our hearts yearn for this life. The gospels also tell us that Jesus offers us entrance into God's kingdom, but this kingdom operates contrary to our natural ways of thinking and living. Jesus came and preached the good news of God's kingdom, but not too many who heard really understood. We still have a hard time understanding this today. Hopefully our study in Luke today will give us some perspective. Here is our text.

Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath. And, 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?" 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.

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.

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." (Luke 13:10-21 ESV)

At first reading it would appear that there are two separate, unrelated sections to our text – a healing followed by two kingdom parables. But before we begin I would point out the little word "therefore" that we find in verse 18. Jesus heals a woman and then says, "Therefore, what is the kingdom of God like?" It seems these verses are connected and that the entire text is related to the kingdom of God.

We begin with a Sabbath healing. The setting of Jesus teaching in a synagogue breaks a long discourse that began in chapter 12, verse 1 with Jesus speaking to the crowds, the disciples, and the Pharisees. This is the first healing since chapter 11 (14-23) and the first miracle account since chapter 9 (37-43). This will be the last time we encounter Jesus in a synagogue on the Sabbath and the third of four Sabbath healings in Luke. Jesus cast out a demon in chapter 4

(4:31-37) and healed a man with a withered hand in chapter 6 (6-11). In the next chapter Jesus heals a man with dropsy.

There is a woman present in the synagogue who has a disabling spirit. She has suffered with this weakened condition for 18 years, meaning that this severe condition has lasted for a long time. Specifically the woman was bent over, bent double, and she could not stand up completely straight. Most of us have a picture in our mind of someone who has a very curved back.

Perhaps this woman had some sort of back issue like scoliosis, but it seems that even though she was not demon possessed there was some sort of demonic influence. In verse 16 Jesus says that Satan had bound her in chains. Perhaps the woman is a picture of the human condition, of being weighed down and bent toward earth with the weight of sin, powerless against Satan's control.

The number 18 is interesting, since we saw it in our text last week. There were 18 people who were killed by a falling tower in Siloam. The connection might indicate that the woman's condition was not punishment for her sin as the Jews might have presumed. As we heard last week tragic events happen to both good and bad people, but all people are in equal need of repentance, even those whose life appears to be blessed.

Jesus shows great compassion towards the woman. His touching of her is remarkable in a culture where men typically looked down upon women. Jesus proclaimed the woman to be free, released from her disability. She was healed immediately as we have often seen in Luke (1:64; 4:39; 5:25; 8:44, 47, 55; 18:43, 19:11; 22:60). She glorified God, another common response to the works of Jesus (2:20; 4:15; 5:25-26; 7:16, 17:15; 18:43). She was made straight, a passive verb, indicating that her healing came from God and that Jesus did no work. The word "straight" or "upright" is a picture of moral integrity and implies that she was restored by God's grace to his image.

As we would expect, Jesus' actions are met with a hostile reaction. The ruler of the synagogue becomes very angry and expresses his intense displeasure indirectly to Jesus by giving the people a lesson on Torah. He views the healing as work (even though Jesus did no work) and therefore a violation of Sabbath. He uses the opportunity to teach the correct view from his understanding of Deuteronomy 5 and Exodus 20.

Jesus responds with his own rebuke. He addresses the man as a hypocrite, but uses the plural indicating the man is not alone. Jesus then appeals to common practice employed by "each of you" in untying a donkey or an ox and leading it to water on the Sabbath. The Mishnah allows for cattle to be lead as long as they don't carry a load and to be tied up so they don't wander. It also designates wells where cattle can drink on the Sabbath.

Jesus likens the loosing of the woman from Satan's chains to the untying of an ox or donkey. The two verbs, loose and untie, are the same in Greek and correspond to the verb "freed" used in

verse 12. Jesus' basic logic is that if the Pharisees show compassion to their animals on the Sabbath, how much more should they show compassion to a daughter of Abraham. Even today some people treat their pets better than they treat people.

The Old Testament gives two different reasons for Sabbath observance. In Exodus 20 Israel was to keep Sabbath because after creating the heavens and earth in six days, God rested on the seventh. But in Deuteronomy keeping Sabbath was connected to Israel's slavery in Egypt:

**"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. 5:15).**

The woman was enslaved, a captive both to sin and to Satan. Jesus freed her from her slavery in the way God freed Israel from Egypt. Therefore Sabbath is the perfect day for the woman to be healed, to enter into freedom and God's rest. There is no mention of the woman's faith or of seeking help. The point is Jesus' authority over Satan and the presence of the kingdom of God. Jesus is "Lord of the Sabbath" as he said in chapter 6 (6:5) and the gateway to the kingdom.

The response to Jesus' logic is divided: "all his adversaries were put to shame, and all the people rejoiced at all the glorious things that were done by him." Notice that the word "all" occurs three times. As we talked about a couple of weeks ago, Jesus forces a division and no one can stay neutral. All must take a side. Being noncommittal is choosing a side by silence.

Jesus labels the Pharisees as hypocrites. They act one way towards their animals and another way towards people. Their religious activity was a pretense, a fantasy religion. They lived in denial rather than reality. They held to external symbols and pretended that in doing so they were obtaining a favored status with God. Jesus exposes their religious idolatry. Despite all the warnings that Jesus had been giving about unfaithful servants and fruitless fig trees, the Pharisees were unchanged. Their hearts were hardened in cement and closed even to the very one they pretended to serve. This is what always happens when the form of religion takes priority over the essence of religion.

Now, we can succumb to the same temptation of trusting in external religious activity in place of a vital relationship with God. But we have covered that territory before in our studies in Luke. The question on my mind has been, why are Sabbath episodes so prevalent in the gospels? Given that we are not Jews living under Sabbath laws, what can be the meaning for us today? What I have concluded is that the reality of Sabbath is still essential to life in God's kingdom.

Sabbath was given to the people of God as a gift. There was a Sabbath day each week, several feast days through the year, and an entire year every fifty years, called the year of Jubilee. These were times of not working, times of rest, times to be reminded of God's protection, his provision, and his work of redemption. Sabbath was a day for life and joy, a day to stand up straight and turn one's gaze from the earth to heaven. The Pharisees had made Sabbath a day of burden, slavery, prohibition, and death. They had ruined a precious gift from God. They were missing the essence of Sabbath and even though it would look different, we can be in danger of the same fate. Man was not made for the Sabbath, but the Sabbath was made for man.

Suppose that upon graduation from college you wanted to give your child a new car. You had worked hard and saved your money. You were overjoyed to give your child this precious gift. You handed over the keys but you also gave wise instructions as to how to care for the car – changing the oil, rotating the tires, checking the water and coolant, etc. Your goal was for your child to have many years of enjoyment with the car.

Well, what if your child didn't take care of the car, didn't change the oil, and ran it into the ground in very short order. Or what if your child added so many more guidelines to taking care of the car that all they did was to take care of it. Instead of driving it, the car just sat in the garage. How would you feel as a parent? In either case, most of us would be heartbroken and sad that the gift was not enjoyed and used as intended. This is what was happening with the Jews.

Isaiah writes:

**"If you turn back your foot from the Sabbath,  
from doing your pleasure on my holy day,  
and call the Sabbath a delight  
and the holy day of the LORD honorable;  
if you honor it, not going your own ways,  
or seeking your own pleasure, or talking idly;  
then you shall take delight in the LORD,  
and I will make you ride on the heights of the earth;  
I will feed you with the heritage of Jacob your father,  
for the mouth of the lord has spoken." (Is. 58:13-14)**

The point of the story is not the healing but what it points to, what it says about Jesus. Jesus is the Lord of the Sabbath, he fulfills Sabbath, and he recaptures the essence of Sabbath. The essence of Sabbath is life, healing, freedom, and delight in the Lord. The essence is to stop and turn away from your own ways and own pleasure, from self-effort and self-interest. The essence is to turn towards God and trust in his work and faithfulness. In Christ we enter into Sabbath rest.

When I grew up, Sunday was a different day. My parents didn't work on the weekends. Church was certainly a big part of Sunday. There was a big meal in the middle of the day. We would often visit family and friends. We would take naps. Sometimes my dad and I would play golf. Many stores were closed on Sunday. When I went to college in Lincoln, Nebraska you could not buy alcohol on Sunday, much to the dismay of college students. Times have changed greatly in the last 50 years.

I am not saying that you have to keep a Sabbath day, but I am not opposed to it either. We know that in Christ all days are holy. We are not under law but under grace. We live in freedom. We just need to be careful not to justify working all the time because of that freedom.

I can become very task-orientated. I make my list of things to do in the morning and work very hard at accomplishing my list. For me it is a game. I want to see how many things I can do and how efficiently I can do them. Only when I have checked off everything on my list am I willing to rest. Living in this way is contrary to life in the kingdom of God.

We live in a culture that is hurried, harried, and chaotic. Technology takes up more of our time, not less. We tend to treat all days the same. We validate our lives through what we accomplish. But no matter how hard and long we work there will always be things to do. And no matter how much we accomplish, it will never

be enough to validate our lives. We can easily become enslaved while at the same time espousing freedom in Christ.

The main issue with Sabbath is being able to trust in God, believing that God is working on my behalf and that I can stop living like everything depends on me. “Sabbath [is about trust]. Sabbath is turning over to God all those things - our money, our work, our status, our reputations, our plans, our projects – that we’re otherwise tempted to hold tight in our own closed fists, hold onto for dear life”<sup>1</sup>

The truth is we need a rhythm of work and rest. If we don’t have rest, Sabbath will be forced upon us due to illness. As my friend Gary says, we need “do nothing days,” days or parts of days where we don’t have an agenda. Play is part of Sabbath as long as our play is not as intense as our work. True rest is different than numbing ourselves with television, video games, or other addictions. True rest is holy leisure, a way of living in the kingdom of God. We live our lives evening and then morning. We begin our day by going to sleep and waking ready to participate in what God is doing. As the psalmist writes:

**“It is in vain that you rise up early  
and go late to rest,  
eating the bread of anxious toil;  
for he gives to his beloved sleep.”**  
(Psalm 127:2)

Let’s return to our text. Having healed the woman and rebuked the Pharisees, Jesus asks, therefore, “What is the kingdom of God like? And to what shall I compare it?” In other word, the woman illustrates the kingdom of God. I was very interested to find that Luke uses the phrase “kingdom of God” 31 times, 10 more times than all the other gospels combined. Jesus came to preach the kingdom of God and he sent out the disciples to do the same thing. In chapter 10 where Jesus sends out the 72, he tells them to “heal the sick ... and say to them, ‘The kingdom of God has come near to you’” (Luke 10:9).

Jesus gives two parables. The first parable compares the kingdom to “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.” Mark says that the mustard seed is the smallest of all the seeds on the earth (Mark 4:31) Jesus is probably referring to black mustard whose seed is 1 to 3 mm. There were smaller seeds known to his audience but mustard seed might have been the smallest seed that was commonly sown in the ground.

A man takes this seed and sows it in his garden. Matthew has the seed sown in a field and Mark has it sown in the ground. The seed grows into a tree and thus becomes larger than anything else in the garden. The black mustard is an herb that could grow to a size of 10 feet. We would consider it a shrub, but the stem would become dry and wood-like, giving it the aspect of a tree. Mustard plants usually grew very rapidly.

Jesus says that the mustard tree grows and becomes a shelter for birds. Since birds often have a negative connotation in Scripture some think that the birds represent false teachers who will infiltrate the church. But birds and trees are used very positively in Ezekiel 17 where God talks about the restoration of the Davidic kingdom through the planting of a tender twig of a cedar:

**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. 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. 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.” (Ezekiel 17:22-24)**

Based on this text in Ezekiel we might have expected Jesus to refer to a cedar instead of a mustard tree, but the point is that the kingdom might start very small, but will grow rapidly and become the largest tree in the garden. Later Jesus will say: “If you had faith like a grain of mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ and it would obey you” (Luke 17:6). A little faith can have dramatic results. A little seed can grow into a large tree.

The second parable likens the kingdom of God to “leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, until it was all leavened.” A leavening agent, such as yeast, is the driving force behind fermentation, the process that is used in the making of bread, beer, and wine. We are much more familiar with yeast than we are mustard seeds.

One website describes how yeast works in baking bread: “The essentials of any bread dough are flour, water, and of course yeast. As soon as these ingredients are stirred together, enzymes in the yeast and the flour cause large starch molecules to break down into simple sugars. The yeast metabolizes these simple sugars and exudes a liquid that releases carbon dioxide and ethyl alcohol into existing air bubbles in the dough. If the dough has a strong and elastic gluten network, the carbon dioxide is held within the bubble and will begin to inflate it, just like someone blowing up bubble gum.”<sup>2</sup>

The interesting thing is that yeast is nothing more than a single-celled fungus. The woman hides the leaven in the dough. And yet a small amount of leaven, not visible to the eye, has the ability to affect the entire lump of dough. In the parable three measures of flour would weigh at least 50 pounds. A small amount of leaven has the ability to permeate and transform the entire amount of dough.

The point is that the kingdom of God may be invisible and hidden, but it is transformational and will affect the entire world. The leaven of the Pharisees is negative but not so with the kingdom of God.

The Jews anticipated the kingdom of God. They looked for a dramatic, visible invasion of this kingdom that included the overthrow of the Romans. Even in the book of Acts the disciples were confused and asked Jesus if now was the time for the kingdom to be restored to Israel. Jesus told them that they would be his witnesses, his mustard seeds, to the entire world through the leaven of the Holy Spirit.

The point of the parables is that the kingdom of God might start small, might be hidden, but it will grow and extend to all the nations and reach the entire world. The woman illustrates how the kingdom grows and spreads. Small beginnings can have great results. Jesus was a seed that fell to the ground and died and yet he changed everything. A small band of disciples likewise gave birth to the church. This is how the kingdom works. Jesus said in chapter 4 that he fulfilled Isaiah 61:

**“The Spirit of the LORD GOD is upon me, .....  
to bring good news to the poor;  
to bind up the brokenhearted,  
to proclaim liberty to the captives .....  
that they may be called oaks of righteousness,  
the planting of the LORD,  
that he may be glorified.” (Is. 61:1-3)**

In our story Jesus set the woman free and she became an oak of righteousness. What is the takeaway for us? The kingdom of God is upside-down. It simply is not the way we would draw it up. God works in small, hidden, undetectable ways to build his kingdom. “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God” (Luke 6:20). “Let the children come to me .... for to such belongs the kingdom of God” (Luke 18:16).

Like the Jews, we tend to want the dramatic, exciting, visible kingdom. But the kingdom is not an institution. It is God’s presence among his people. We may think we have to do big things for God. We think we should be working harder for God. Jesus reminds us that first we need to find our rest in him, to trust him, and realize that it is his working and not our efforts that are important. He reminds us that doing small things like loving a disabled woman can have greater results than we can imagine. He reminds us that he might be using us in ways that are hidden even to us. And so we go forth, resting in the work of Christ, doing the small things that God can use to influence and change the world.

Around the auditorium this morning you see photographs taken by Don Burgess, our missionary to the Tarahumara Indians in Mexico. Don is a quiet man and reminds me of a mustard seed. Many years ago Don gave his life to Christ and began a work to translate the Bible into the language of the Tarahumara. His life has consisted of taking trips to out of the way places and slowly working to give very poor people the Scriptures. Don is not on CNN or on the front page of the Wall Street journal. And yet through God’s grace he has affected an entire people group. We will have the privilege of hearing from Don next Sunday. Nothing is too small or insignificant for God to use.

Now may the God who has freed us from slavery continue to work in us and through us in small and hidden ways to advance his kingdom, until every nation and every tribe has heard the good news of the gospel.

1. Marc Buchanan quoted by Alan Fadling, *An Unhurried Life*, IVP, Downers Grove, IL, 2013, 114.

2. <http://www.finecooking.com/articles/yeast-role-bread-baking.aspx>.

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