

## **Series Gospel of Luke**

### **This Message #21 Compassion or Legalism, What really Matters?**

#### **Scripture Luke 13:10-17**

In the middle chapters of this gospel account, Luke has been giving us a manual for discipleship. Jesus is the Teacher. His immediate instructions were for the specific benefit of the Twelve Apostles because He was preparing them to be leaders of the Church, but He is eager for all of His followers to understand the characteristics of discipleship. I'm glad that we have a written record of His teaching to help us today. What we have been thinking about for several weeks is for all those who are called into God's family. They are called to live under the rules of God's kingdom.

There is another theme which emerges in the middle chapters of this Gospel. This is the growing opposition by the religious leaders of Israel to the ministry activities of Jesus. I have not talked much about this opposition. I have only referred to incidents which provide context for Jesus' teaching. However, opposition to Jesus increased greatly in the last months of His time on earth. This opposition and hostility eventually led to His crucifixion, so we will talk more about this subject in the coming weeks.

The religious leaders objected whenever Jesus forgave sins. In their opinion, only God could forgive sins and they did not believe that Jesus was God. When Jesus cast out demons, they accused Him of doing it with Satan's power. When Jesus healed people on the Sabbath, He was accused of breaking the law. Whenever Jesus revealed His godly authority and power to do good, the religious leaders became more and more convinced that He was doing bad things. In their opinion, He was breaking the law, at least as they understand the law.

Back in chapter 11, after Jesus was accused of casting out a demon by the power of Satan, Jesus strongly condemned the Pharisees and teachers of the law because of their wickedness. Because of their beliefs and behavior, and the fact that they stood in the way of people being able to find God, Jesus pronounced woes on them.

Following these encounters, “the Pharisees and teacher of the law began to oppose him fiercely and to besiege him with questions, waiting to catch him in something he might say,” in order that they might arrest and convict Him on religious charges.

Jesus used the encounters with the religious leaders as opportunities to warn His disciples about hypocrisy and greed and worry. We focused on these subjects the past two weeks. The passage today calls attention once again to the increasing tension between Jesus and the Jewish religious leaders.

### **Read Luke 13:10-17**

Jesus was given opportunities to speak in many synagogues in Galilee and Judea. It was His custom to visit a synagogue every Sabbath and, because He was well known, He was always extended the courtesy to speak. Very often there were people in the synagogue services who were sick or physically disabled or demon possessed. Some dramatic miracles occurred during Sabbath services.

Such was the case in this passage. As Jesus was teaching, He noticed a crippled woman. Luke described her condition. She had been crippled for eighteen years. She was bent over and could not straighten up. Evidently a demon was responsible for the woman’s suffering.

This woman, because of her disability, may not have been welcome to attend the synagogue. There was a common perception in Jewish society that people with long term illnesses or medical problems were suffering the consequences of some kind of personal sin.

There is an illustration of this commonly held opinion in the Gospel of John. When Jesus’ disciples one day saw a man who had been born blind, they asked Jesus, “Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” (*John 9:1*). Jesus explained that neither the man nor his parents were responsible for the blindness. The people in the synagogue undoubtedly were of the same mind toward the crippled woman as the disciples were to the blind man.

Jesus actions in regard to the woman were unusual in several ways. When He saw the woman, He called her forward. This, in itself, would have upset the protocol and decorum of synagogue worship. Women were expected to be inconspicuous in the synagogues. They had their own isolated section separate from where the men would sit. Women in general were not allowed to participate in activities in the synagogues, certainly not be the center of attention, but Jesus not only made her the center of attention, but He did more — He addressed her directly and announced that “she was set free from her infirmity.” And, in a final action which would have brought gasps of shock from many who were present, Jesus put His hands on her. From a cultural standpoint, and especially in a synagogue service, this was inappropriate behavior.

Luke wrote that she “immediately straightened up and praised God.” The spirit had been cast out, and the woman was freed from the bond of Satan and her physical handicap. She praised God, and we can assume that this was not the silent unemotional kind of praise that was expected of women. I envision her as praising God with raised hands, a loud voice, and lots of jumping up and down. The verb here indicates that her praise was on going in nature. She just kept on lifting up her voice in praise to God. In other words, because of her joy, she made a real spectacle of herself.

And why not? Nothing like this had ever happened in this synagogue. I say this based on the information in verse 14. The synagogue ruler was indignant because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath, and in his synagogue to boot. This man did not speak to Jesus directly. His complaints were directed to the people. "There are six days for work," he said. "So come and be healed on those days, not on the Sabbath."

This synagogue ruler had no appreciation for what had just happened. He did not rejoice over the liberation of the woman from her painful condition. He totally ignored the release of power through Jesus that made the miracle possible. There was no acknowledgment that God had supernaturally worked in his place of worship. It was his conviction that the Sabbath was more important than the needs of the people!

This is an example of how the religious leaders of Israel valued their rules over relationships. In their opinion, healing was a work, and according to their interpretation of the Law, there was to be absolutely no work on the Sabbath, even if it was supernatural work. The Jews had rules upon rules upon rules about what a person could do on the Sabbath. The focus of their criticism against Jesus was His conduct on the Sabbath.

I was curious enough about Sabbath rules to do a search on Wikipedia. I discovered that there are 39 categories of rules, and that each category can have an endless number of prohibitions depending on circumstances. The Sabbath laws valued by the Pharisees in Jesus' day were quite extensive: how far a person could walk, how much weight could be carried, how food was to be prepared, etc., only about 600 such rules(!), but the number of those laws were insignificant compared to the number now required in modern times. Modern technology has made the life of the orthodox Jew very complicated. For example, in the first century, an orthodox Jew could not light a fire. After electricity became available, the laws had to be reinterpreted so that today an orthodox Jew is not permitted to flip on a light switch, or switch on a TV, or light a burner on the stove, or start a car engine.

I'm not going to provide a list of examples from each of the 39 categories. I only want to convey a sense of how comprehensive the Sabbath rules are. According to the interpretation of the Law, which began with the Pharisees, work is defined as any activity that is creative, or that exercises control or dominion over one's environment. Causing a change in an existing circumstance is prohibited.

By that definition, the miracles of Jesus fell into the category of work because His miracles were acts of creativity. He brought health and completeness and happiness out of pain, chaos, and misery. Furthermore, the miracles of Jesus were a display of control or domination because they overcame natural forces of sickness, infirmity, and the forces of evil. Jesus had the power to change the physical and spiritual conditions in which many people lived. This was exactly what the kingdom of God was to accomplish among sinful, helpless humanity. You can understand how the laws as interpreted by the Pharisees were actually opposed to the ways of God.

The definition and prohibition of work goes back to the time of creation. Scripture states that God finished His creation work in six days and that he rested and did no work on the seventh day. When God gave the Law to Moses and the nation of Israel, He used His creative work of the six days and His rest on the seventh day as the basis of the Sabbath. The Hebrew people therefore determined that Sabbath work was any activity that was creative or demonstrated influence over or changed something about one's living environment.

Jesus rebuked the synagogue ruler for his statement to the people, and then pointed out the inconsistency and hypocritical behavior of the religious leaders. They demanded one thing when it affected people in the synagogue but practiced another kind of behavior when it affected their animals at home. As Jesus pointed out, they valued their animals over people, and, for that matter, they even valued their animals over the Law because they felt free to untie their ox or donkey and lead it to water on the Sabbath, but they didn't want a woman who had been tied up by Satan for many years to be healed and released from her bondage.

Jesus' point was simple: If the Jewish leaders could break the Sabbath rules in order that their animals could receive basic care, how much more do human beings deserve special attention, especially, as Jesus pointed out, someone who was a daughter of Abraham, a child of God's covenant promise.

In effect, Jesus was asking, What is a more appropriate day to release her than the Sabbath? What better day to reveal God's power over Satan? What better day to bring glory to God and to praise Him? The synagogue leader's views on proper religious practices differed greatly from those of Jesus.

Jesus' action caused a double reaction. Luke summarizes this episode by noting that the religious leaders were put to shame by his words, but that the people in the synagogue "were delighted with all the wonderful things he was doing." Being "put to shame" is not the same as saying that the synagogue leaders agreed with Jesus. In fact, their embarrassment usually caused them to "dig in their heels" and more stubbornly hang on to their opinions. Thus the presence and activity of Jesus caused a division among the people of Israel. Some people became more angry at, others more excited about, Jesus.

The goal of Jesus' ministry was to demonstrate that God was at work. Miracles were proof that Jesus was from God, that He was the Messiah, and that the promised and long awaited kingdom of God was being revealed. People were being delivered from Satan's power and God was being glorified. In spite of all that Jesus did, the opposition to Jesus grew stronger and stronger. As I said earlier, this episode is an illustration of the great divide which had opened up between the religious leaders of Israel and Jesus. The hostility between them would continue to grow.

### **A Couple of Things to Think About**

Many people today are like the Pharisees. They make up their own rules and reasons to oppose and reject Jesus. Our excitement about, and interest in, Jesus should increase the more we know about Him.

Non-believers value material things more than people, and they are inclined to use people to obtain material possessions for themselves. Believers are to use their resources and material things as the means to bring people into relationship with Jesus.