



Central Peninsula Church

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Luke 13:10-17
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The Best Day of the Week

SERIES: *A Savior for All People*

A 12-year-old Ethiopian girl's world turned into a nightmare when seven violent men abducted her, intending to force her into marriage. This is common in Ethiopia, as several men band together to abduct young girls for the purpose of securing a bride. In this particular instance, there was not a human being within earshot to hear the cries of this girl. But her cries were heard.

The unlikely heroes were three Ethiopian lions. In response to her cries, three lions leapt from the brush and chased her captors away and formed a protective perimeter around her. A half-day later, when the police arrived, the guardian lions simply stood up and walked away. A policeman said, "They stood guard until we found her, and then they just left her like a gift and went back into the forest." For whatever reason, the predator served as protector. One wildlife expert suggested the girl's whimpering could have sounded like a lion cub. Everyone believed it was some kind of miracle. This 12-year-old girl was helpless, powerless to change her circumstances. Her deliverance had to come from a power greater than, and outside of, herself.

A somewhat similar story takes place in Luke 13:10-17, only the lion in question is Jesus, the Lion of Judah. Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem. It's the Sabbath and he goes to the synagogue for worship. In Luke's gospel this would be his last such visit. Never again is he found in one of Israel's synagogues. And so he goes to the synagogue and is asked to read and teach from the Scripture. As he was teaching, he noticed a woman. She, too, had been held captive and was powerless to change her circumstances. Let's pick up the story in v. 10.

I. Jesus sets an oppressed woman free on the Sabbath.

"And He was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath. And there was a woman who for eighteen years had had a sickness caused by a spirit; and she was bent double, and could not straighten up at all" (vv. 10-11). Remember that Luke was a physician and so he likes to describe people's physical problems in some detail. Modern opinion is that this woman suffered from *spondylitis deformans*, which caused the bones of her spine to fuse into a rigid mass. She wasn't demon possessed, but she had come under the attack of an evil spirit 18 years earlier that bound her up like a hobbled slave. She lived in a posture of forced humility, her face always bent toward the ground, unless she wrenched

sideways and looked up like an awkward animal. I'm sure she sunk lower and lower as the weight of the years pressed upon her. Her gait was most likely a lunging shuffle. One writer says, "She walked about as if she were searching for a grave." At times, I'm sure she wished she could be in one! It's amazing that she would even bring herself to be in the synagogue. Imagine the effort it took just to get there. And I really doubt she was greeted with open arms by her fellow worshippers. Most Jews would have thought her problem was caused by sin. But just her presence at the synagogue tells us that though she could hardly lift her head, her spiritual focus was upward.

Do you ever wonder why God doesn't seem to answer some of your prayers? Eighteen years—that's a long time! Eighteen years ago this church met at Bowditch Middle School. Eighteen years ago Ronald Reagan was President. Eighteen years ago *Full House* was our favorite TV program. Eighteen years ago none of us used e-mail. I have no doubt this woman prayed to be freed from her disease every day of every one of those 18 years. Perhaps loved ones prayed for her as well. Eighteen long years of begging God, searching her own heart for some unconfessed sin, monitoring her own progress and regress. Sometimes it's hard to understand how God works, isn't it? Adding to the mystery of this is the fact that her sickness was caused by an evil spirit. Not all sickness is caused by evil spirits, but apparently some are, which is why prayer is often the best medicine a person can use. But, after 18 years, even prayer didn't seem to be working.

Until Jesus saw her. Look what happens next. **"When Jesus saw her, He called her over and said to her, 'Woman, you are freed from your sickness.' And He laid His hands on her; and immediately she was made erect again and began glorifying God"** (vv. 12-13). One of the unique things about this miracle is that Jesus took the initiative. She didn't approach him for help; he found her; he took the initiative. Notice he says to her that she is "freed" from her sickness. She isn't cured or healed; she's freed. Something had held her captive. She was its slave. But it seems those words can't convince her that anything has changed. And so he also lays his hands on her. I wonder when the last time was that someone touched her? Sometimes Jesus did that when he healed, and sometimes he didn't. Jesus didn't follow a formula in these things. Every person, every situation was different. But this woman he touched, and I imagine his

firm and gentle hands urged her upward until her spine was straight and she stood erect.

Then Luke tells us that she began glorifying God. That's interesting because you would think she would be thanking Jesus. But she knew that somehow God was at work through Jesus. I think she knew that this was her answer. And her praise reveals hers was a heart that had always looked towards God for her help. Thanksgiving naturally erupts from a previously prayerful heart.

Now you would think that this would be a great moment for everyone in the synagogue that day. You would think they would all be praising God. I mean, how often do you go to church and get to see a real miracle? But "every party has a pooper." Look what happens next. **"But the synagogue official, indignant because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath, began saying to the crowd in response, 'There are six days in which work should be done; so come during them and get healed, and not on the Sabbath day'"** (v. 14). So now we have another Sabbath controversy. The Jews had all kinds of rules and regulations about what you could and could not do on the Sabbath. I won't bore you with the details, but this act of deliverance was viewed by this synagogue official as work, and therefore off limits. Notice also that he doesn't address Jesus; he addresses the crowd with his complaint. He's clearly concerned with popular opinion. I love what he says; it strikes me as kind of funny: "We have six good days for this kind of thing and you people still come here on the Sabbath. I mean, is THIS why we come to church?" Spiritually, this guy is a slab of ecclesiastical granite! Consider what he's managed to ignore. He ignores the fact that this poor woman has been freed from 18 years of suffering. He ignores what this miracle might say about Jesus. And he ignores the fact that this woman is praising God, which might just be the most fitting thing of all to do on the Sabbath! This is like someone here at CPC getting healed. She's praising God but I'm upset that she interrupted the order of service! "I mean, you have six good days to get healed and praise God, why in the world do you have to come to church to do that?"

And then Jesus speaks up. Look what he says.

"But the Lord answered him and said, 'You hypocrites, does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the stall and lead him away to water him? And this woman, a daughter of Abraham as she is, whom Satan has bound for eighteen long years, should she not have been released from this bond on the Sabbath day?' As He said this, all His opponents were being humiliated; and the entire crowd was rejoicing over all the glorious things being

done by Him" (vv. 15–17).

His reasoning here is pretty simple. In their little rule book on the Sabbath, one of the things they allowed was for a person to take care of his animals. So Jesus says, "You take your ox and you untie him and lead him to water on the Sabbath, but I come along and free this precious, faithful daughter of Abraham from Satan's grip, and you complain?" The cold hearted legalism of these people had led them into absurdity. A donkey became more important than a daughter of Abraham! To be a daughter of Abraham is not just to be Jewish, but to be a person of faith, a friend of God, as Abraham was. Jesus is saying that releasing a woman like that from her bondage is really what the Sabbath is all about; it's actually the most appropriate day out of seven to do a thing like that. Why is that?

II. Jesus fulfills the Sabbath by setting us free.

Let's go back for a few minutes and look at what this Sabbath thing is all about. Let's go back first to the book of Exodus, chapter 20. You know the story of the Ten Commandments. Charlton Heston goes up on that mountain... No, I guess it was Moses. Moses goes up there and God writes the Ten Commandments on two stone tablets. Each tablet had five commands. The fourth command went like this.

"Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath of the LORD your God; in it you shall not do any work, you or your son or your daughter, your male or your female servant or your cattle or your sojourner who stays with you. For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and made it holy" (Ex. 20:8–11).

God says to his people that this is a holy day and you're to set this day apart by not doing any work on it. You're to rest, your servants are to rest, your animals are to rest and your visitors are to rest. And the idea here, of course, is that this is a good thing. It's not a burden; it's a gift. Last Friday it was Veterans Day. How many of you had that day off? How many of you would like to have had that day off? That's why later on Jesus said, "The Sabbath was made for man; not man for the Sabbath." We need to stop. We need to rest. Now notice the reason given for the Sabbath is that this is in keeping with God's example. When he created the world he worked for seven days and then he rested on the seventh day. Why did God rest? Because he was worn out? NO! He rested as an example for us. He rested to ordain a sacred rhythm of work and rest.

But there is another reason given for the Sabbath found in the book of Deuteronomy, chapter 5. Deuteronomy is the "second law;" Moses goes over the law again 40 years later before Israel entered the Promised land. In vv. 12-14

he repeats the command to observe the Sabbath in pretty much the same terms as in Exodus. But he gives a new reason for it in v. 15. **“You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out of there by a mighty hand and by an outstretched arm; therefore the LORD your God commanded you to observe the sabbath day”** (Deut. 5:15). So now the reason is not God’s act of creation but rather God’s act of redemption. You were slaves in the land of Egypt; you were in bondage, but God brought you out, God freed you; God delivered you. The idea seems to be that in Egypt they never got a Sabbath; in Egypt they were simply viewed as machines; they were only good for what they could do. But God freed them from that. And so, besides just resting on the Sabbath you’re to take that day and remember and celebrate that wonderful deliverance.

Now can you see why what Jesus does here is exactly the kind of thing that ought to take place on the Sabbath? Can you see what he’s getting at when he describes this woman as one who **“Satan has bound for 18 long years”** and who he himself had **“released from this bond on the Sabbath day”**? Do you get it? Jesus is the One who has brought her out “with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm” just as God had done with the Israelites, which they were to recall on the Sabbath day. And this miracle is telling us that Jesus has come to set his people free from another kind of slavery; a spiritual slavery; slavery to sin and death and the devil. And so, he’s fulfilling the Sabbath. He’s doing the work of redemption that is what the Sabbath is all about. The Sabbath is the perfect day to set someone free because that’s what we’re celebrating in the Sabbath. We’re no longer slaves; we can now rest.

What happens here takes place in the shadow of the cross and resurrection, because that’s where the work of setting us free took place. That’s why followers of Jesus celebrate the Sabbath on the first day of the week rather than the seventh day of the week. We remember that work which was completed on Sunday. On that day, we were freed from our bondage to sin. In dying on the cross, Jesus canceled out our debt; he paid it in full. We were also freed from our bondage to Satan, because we lived under his dominion. And we were freed from our bondage to our own sinful nature because it was crucified with him. And so, now we can enjoy the glorious freedom of the children of God and we can rest. We’re not slaves any longer. We can stop working for our salvation. He delivered us from the penalty of sin and he continues to deliver us from the power of sin and the day will come when we enter into the final rest and he has delivered us from the presence of sin. Hallelujah!

III. We are to live as those who have been set free.

A. Have you been set free or are you still enslaved? So where do you find yourself in this story? First, let me ask you, have you been set free or are you still enslaved? Some of you can identify with this woman.

You’re in bondage. There is something in your life that has kept you enslaved. It might be an addiction. It might be a relationship. It might be anger or self pity or depression. Whatever the cause, there is always a spiritual dimension to that. Scripture says that apart from Christ, whether we know it or not, we’re slaves. Jesus said, **“Everyone who commits sin is the slave of sin”** (Jn.8:34). That means all of us. But how do you get out of that? How do you get free from that? We try different things. Self help books. Counseling. New Year’s resolutions. Spirituality. But there is only way to freedom. Jesus said, **“If the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed”** (Jn.8:36). Jesus can do for you what he did for this woman. He can set you free. All you have to do is say yes to him. “Yes, I believe that you alone are the Savior of the world. I believe you died and rose again to set me free. I turn from my sin and place my trust in you.” When you do that, he sets you free and he begins a work in you to make you more like his Son.

B. Are you keeping the Sabbath or killing the Sabbath? Second, let me ask you, are you keeping the Sabbath or killing the Sabbath? Some of you can identify with this synagogue official. It’s hard to admit, but that’s where you’re at. You’re so focused on keeping all the rules that without knowing it your religion has become absurd. You treat donkeys better than people.

So what is our obligation to the Sabbath today? Christians are all over the map on this issue. Some would say that the sabbath should still be a day when we cease from our work and worship the Lord with God’s people. Others would say that this is the only one of the Commandments that isn’t really repeated in the NT, so we really aren’t obligated to set apart one day in seven as a day of rest and worship. On the one hand I would remind you that Jesus didn’t ignore the Sabbath; that’s why he was in the synagogue. Neither did the early church. That’s why Luke writes in Acts 20:7, **“And on the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread...”** and in 1 Cor.16:2 when Paul writes about the church offering, **“On the first day of every week let each one of you put aside and save, as he may prosper, that no collections be made when I come.”** But on the other hand, I think this is an issue that each of us has to work out before the Lord. That’s why in Col. 2:16-17 Paul says, **“Therefore let no one act as your judge in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day — things which are a mere shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ,”** and in Rom.14:5, **“One man regards one day above another, another regards every day alike. Let each man be fully convinced in his own mind.”**

So I’m not going to tell you exactly what you should do with the Sabbath day. But one thing I know is that if our Sabbath keeping gets in the way of God’s

work of redemption, something is terribly wrong. This is a day to participate with God in the work he is doing. Are you keeping the Sabbath or are you killing the Sabbath?

It reminds me of an incident that took place in my life years ago. Lynn and I were college students at Cal Poly. One Sunday morning we were driving back from the Bay Area to San Luis Obispo when her car broke down. It was a Plymouth Valiant. Somehow we managed to get the car to a gas station that had a mechanic on duty in the city of Prunedale. So we left the car there and had a few hours to kill. We noticed a church nearby. It was Sunday morning and we had skipped church so we decided to attend church there. It was a Pentecostal church so it was a bit different than we were used to. But we still were glad to be there and after the service someone came up to us and welcomed us. We explained why we were there and then he invited us over for lunch. So we went to his house, had lunch, got to know his family, and then he drove us back to the gas station when our car was ready. Then we drove the rest of the way back to school. End of story.

As I think about that experience it strikes me that there are several ironies as it pertains to the Sabbath. First of all, some people would want to point out that Lynn and I were wrong to be traveling on the Sabbath instead of going to church. They would also say that that is probably why our car broke down—so we could go to church as we should have in the first place! Second, those same people would certainly be critical of a gas station that would have a mechanic on duty on the Sabbath, while Lynn and I were thanking God for that very same man! But the real lesson in this story is derived from the man and his family who were willing, on their one sacred day of rest, to host and cart around a couple of complete strangers. It seems to me, that's Sabbath keeping at its best!

C. Are you rejoicing or refraining? Finally, let me ask you, are you rejoicing or refraining? Some of you can identify with the crowd. It says "the entire crowd was rejoicing over all the glorious things being done by him." There is a strong note of joy in this story. The woman is bubbling with joy as she glorifies God. The crowd is ecstatic. It reminds us that joy is the mark of a Christian. When Jesus sets you free, that brings joy. When you see him doing that in the lives of others, that brings joy. Is your Christian life marked with joy? Is your Sabbath marked with joy?

CONCLUSION

Frederick Douglass grew up as a slave in Maryland in the early 19th century and experienced slavery's brutality. He was taken from his mother when he was only an infant. For years as a child, all he had to eat was runny corn meal dumped in a trough that kids fought to scoop out with oyster shells. He worked in the hot fields from before sunup until after sundown. He was whipped many times with a cowhide whip until blood ran down his back, kicked and beaten by his master until he almost died, and attacked with a spike by a gang of whites.

But even so, when Frederick considered trying to escape to freedom, he struggled with the decision. He feared leaving behind friends. He feared getting caught. But on September 3, 1838, he remembers: "I left my chains, and succeeded in reaching New York without the slightest interruption of any kind. I have been frequently asked how I felt when I found myself in a free State. It was a moment of the highest excitement I ever experienced. I felt like one who had escaped a den of hungry lions."

That's how people feel when they are set free. And that's what the Sabbath is really all about. It's about being set free from the tyranny of your work into the joyful freedom of the children of God.

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