

When the Kingdom Comes Close: Freedom on the Sabbath

Luke 13:10–17

Big Idea

Jesus confronts legalistic religion by demonstrating that the Kingdom of God brings liberation, restoration, and joyful freedom to those bent beneath the weight of sin, suffering, and oppression.

Anchor Truth

The Kingdom comes close wherever Jesus sets people free.

READ TEXT

Bent Beneath the Weight

If you've ever visited New York City, you may have stood at Rockefeller Plaza and seen the massive bronze statue of Atlas. Installed in the 1930s, it depicts the ancient Titan straining beneath the weight of the heavens themselves. His muscles tighten, his legs bend, his entire body bows under a burden almost too heavy to carry.

It is a powerful image because, deep down, we know what it feels like to live bent beneath weight.

I think about that every time I pick my kids up from school. They come dragging themselves to the car with backpacks overloaded with books, tablets, folders — their whole school life strapped to their backs. You can actually watch the relief wash over them when they finally throw those bags into the seat and collapse into the car.

Some days they fall asleep within minutes because they didn't realize how exhausted they were until they finally stopped moving.

And the truth is, many people walk through life exactly like that spiritually.

Some are carrying grief. Some shame. Some anxiety. Some fear. Some bitterness. Some chronic pain. Some disappointment. Some secret exhaustion nobody else can see.

And after enough years of carrying those burdens, people stop remembering what it even feels like to stand up straight.

That is exactly where we meet this woman in Luke 13. Bent beneath the weight of suffering for eighteen long years. And into her burdened world, Jesus brings freedom.

Luke introduces us to a woman who had lived bent over for eighteen years. Not eighteen minutes. Not eighteen days. Eighteen years.

The Sabbath

Sabbath was originally God's gift to his people. It was both a declaration that Israel was no longer enslaved in Egypt, and a reminder that human worth is not measured by endless production. But by Jesus' day, religion had turned Sabbath into another burden.

Jesus enters this synagogue and restores Sabbath to what it was always meant to be. Release, restoration, and freedom.

I. BENT BUT STILL PRESENT (vv. 10–11)

“She Had a Disabling Spirit” The woman is completely bent over. Luke says that she was unable to straighten herself. Luke's emphasis is total inability.

This woman becomes a picture of humanity under sin and the fall. Many Sundays I share a brief description of the gospel in six sentences. The second sentence is “our sin separated us from God.” In Genesis 3, we read about that separation. When we talk about sin, we understand there are two different definitions. Sins are thoughts, words, or actions that go against God. But Sin is also a corrosive, evil power that has distorted God's creation, this good earth and every creature on it.

This woman reminds us of the destructive and distorting and disabling power that Sin has. Sin bends people. It bends them downward in embarrassment. It bends them inward with guilt. Sin bends them toward shame and fear. Sin holds us in bondage and in despair.

Some of you here today are bent by guilt, addiction, bitterness, abuse, anxiety, grief, legalism, and chronic disappointment. If that is you, if you feel like you're carrying a life's worth of pain, guilt, disappointment, or shame on you and its bending you under the weight of that freight, Luke includes this story for you. Listen closely to the Spirit speaking to you through the text. Listen for the hope of healing in the hands of the Lord Jesus.

Satanic Bondage

Jesus later says, "whom Satan bound for eighteen years."

This is not necessarily demonic possession. The woman does not seem to be inhabited by demons like the man in Luke 8 who was possessed and lived among the tombs sans clothing. This does not appear to be that sort of possession. Rather, this is another reminder of the power of Sin manifested through spiritual oppression within a fallen world.

This is not a healing of demonic exorcism. This miracle is a victory over spiritual warfare. The Kingdom of God is invading the kingdom of darkness. Jesus enters the woman's world and brings light into darkness.

"But She Was Still There"

Can you imagine her world for just a moment. Put yourself in her sandals for a second. Have you ever tweaked your back or slept weirdly on your neck or shoulder? For the next day or three, you do those odd whole torso turns to look at someone because your neck is all higgledy piggledy. You've had to stop swinging wildly into the backseat at the children because your range of motion is too limited. You don't want to do something stupid like sneeze. That stuff really cramps your style for a few days.

This woman has been bent over, hunched over staring only at feet and earth for almost two decades. She hasn't really been able to look up at anyone's face. She hasn't really been able to look up and see the sky. Her world was limited – in scope, in sight, in capacity. There is a lot you simply cannot do if you cannot straighten up.

And yet, despite all of that disability, Luke provides one of the most beautiful details: she still came to the synagogue.

Despite the pain, the humiliation, the exhaustion, the unanswered prayers. This lady, body bent because of spiritual warfare – she was literally a walking target of the enemy. And she didn't miss church.

Admit it, Christian. This morning, this rainy, gloomy, cloudy day, you might've thought, "Oh, this is a perfect 'sleep-in' day." You might've even said it out loud. It doesn't take much for a lot of people to bail out on the weekly opportunity to receive the promised presence of the Risen Lord and Savior Jesus Christ ("where two or more are gathered..." Matt. 18:20). But this woman reminds us of a serious core truth: People, especially bent people, need to show up to worship.

Why? There are people in church every week carrying invisible pain. Not everyone standing upright is standing strong. On the outside, it can look like you're standing on the promises when you're bent and buckling under the weight of something nobody sees.

The church must learn to see hurting people the way Jesus does.

II. JESUS SEES WHAT OTHERS IGNORE (vv. 12–13)

“When Jesus Saw Her”

She never asks for healing. She doesn't interrupt. She doesn't cry out. She does not draw attention to herself. There is no plan to get close and touch the hem of his garment. She probably couldn't see him anyway. She certainly couldn't identify him by just his sandals. No, Jesus notices her first.

In a crowded synagogue where religious people saw routine, Jesus saw suffering. Oh that the Holy Spirit would, each week, sensitize our hearts and eyes and ears to notice people suffering and hurting, bending under the weight of their worlds. Because the Kingdom of God comes close when unseen people become seen.

“He Called Her Over”

Jesus brings hidden suffering into the light. Healing often begins when people stop hiding. And then Jesus speaks healing, but his words point to something deeper than mere physical healing. Remember, this isn't just a bent spine. This is spiritual oppression from the enemy of Jesus. Jesus tells the woman, “Woman, you are set free from your infirmity.”

Not merely healed. Freed. This is liberation language. Because the Kingdom is about release from bondage. It is about Jesus taking the weight of whatever it is that you've been carrying that is making you buckle underneath its weight and Jesus lifting it off of your back.

Jesus does this for you himself. In Luke 13, the Lord laid his hands on her. This was a personal, kind, compassionate touch. Jesus's heart and hands are tender and compassionate. Jesus is not afraid of brokenness.

“Immediately She Was Made Straight”

The healing was liberation language. This is restoration language. She was made straight, made right. Jesus straightens what sin has bent and distorted. Only Jesus can do this.

Humanity cannot straighten itself. But Jesus sees what has been distorted. He calls the broken and bent person to life. His love and grace touches and frees and then restores that broken and bent life.

III. RELIGION WITHOUT MERCY MISSES THE KINGDOM (vv. 14–16)

And right on cue, instead of rejoicing the synagogue leader is angry. Why? Because grace interrupted his categories and his particulars. Because if God doesn't work in a way they've seen or are comfortable with, they would rather God not work at all.

Religion had become so burdened with rules that when freedom walked into the synagogue, they called it unlawful. The Sabbath meant for rest had become another instrument of slavery. **Jesus Exposes the Hypocrisy**

Jesus makes an interesting point. He says, “You untie your ox on the Sabbath...” If animals receive compassion, how much a daughter of Abraham?

This is a tremendously important phrase. In calling her a daughter of Abraham, Jesus restores her dignity. She is not an interruption. She is not a problem. She is not an inconvenience. She belongs in the covenant family.

The church must never value systems or traditions above people.

IV. THE KINGDOM LOOSES WHAT SATAN HAS BOUND (vv. 16–17)

“Ought Not This Woman Be Loosed?” The word “ought” matters. Jesus sees liberation as fitting in God’s Kingdom. Freedom is not an exception to Sabbath. It is the fulfillment of Sabbath.

Sabbath Fulfillment

When the Sabbath was instituted, it meant liberation from Egypt. It meant freedom from slavery. It meant rest from endless labor. Jesus fulfills Sabbath by setting captives free.

Cosmic Victory

Not all the defeated enemies were visible. The ruler was shamed. But Satan was shamed even more. With a word, a touch, and compassion, Jesus overthrows almost two decades of bondage.

This miracle points forward to final restoration. One day every bent thing will be made straight, every burden removed, every tear wiped away.

It reminds us of this broken world bent under the weight and power of Sin. Suffering is not strange. People all across this room, this city, this county, this state, this country and this world are suffering. Suffering is not strange. You know what is strange? When suffering is defeated.

In that synagogue, Jesus did more than heal a woman’s back. He lifted a burden eighteen years in the making.

With a word and a touch, Christ broke the weight of spiritual oppression that had bent her low for nearly two decades. The synagogue ruler leaves angry. But the woman leaves standing straight.

That is what Jesus does. Where Christ reigns shame loses power, bondage breaks, bent people rise, and joy erupts. The Kingdom has come close.

Years ago, workers placed that great bronze statue of Atlas in front of Rockefeller Center in New York City. Atlas stands bent beneath the crushing weight of the heavens, straining under a burden too great to carry.

But if you stand at just the right angle, you can look past Atlas and see something remarkable. Straight through the burdened figure, you can see the cross atop the altar at St. Patrick's Cathedral across the street from Rockefeller Center.

And that is the Gospel. Humanity is bent beneath a weight we were never meant to carry: sin, shame, grief, fear, condemnation, suffering, death itself.

We strain beneath it. We stagger beneath it. And after enough years, we forget what it feels like to stand upright. But behind the burden stands the cross.

The cross where Jesus carried the weight of sin. The cross where Christ disarmed the powers of darkness. The cross where Satan's chains were broken. The cross where mercy triumphed over condemnation.

And because of that cross, bent people can stand again. That woman walked into the synagogue bent over beneath eighteen years of suffering. She walked out standing straight.

That is what happens when the Kingdom comes close. What sin has bent, Christ restores.