

Isaiah 58:9b-14
Hebrews 12:18-29
Luke 13:10-17

Luke 13:10-17

¹⁰Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath. ¹¹And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight. ¹²When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment." ¹³When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. ¹⁴But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, "There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day." ¹⁵But the Lord answered him and said, "You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water?" ¹⁶And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?" ¹⁷When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing.

It's surprising that the bad guys in this morning's Gospel story are the ones who are insisting on doing the right thing. At the time of this story, God's people were living in occupied territory under an oppressive government that did not care about their religion or their God. If their faith was going to survive they had to be alert to any infringement upon the Law that God had given them. Jesus – in the synagogue itself – did work on the sabbath in violation of the third commandment. The religious leaders (the ones who were in conflict with Jesus) were standing up for the Law of God.

Of course, there is more to the story. From our vantage point, we see the situation as a conflict between the Law on the one hand and, on the other hand, the opportunity to heal a poor woman who had been bent and crippled for eighteen years. We side with Jesus right away. Jesus is in charge, not some law that would keep people from the healing grace of God. We like to think we would not have obeyed their silly rules either. (It is easy to stand with Jesus when he appears to have moved over to our side.)

It was James Sanders who said that anytime we read a given passage of Scripture and find ourselves right away on Jesus' side, **we have probably misread the passage.**

By most of what we know of ourselves, we ought to be on the side of the religious authorities, the ones who were insisting on doing the right thing. When we are at our best – that’s how we like to think of ourselves. The fact is – **we like rules**. At least we usually think that rules are what the church does best.

The general consensus is that “doing good” is the reason for the church. We look to the church to build a better community, with less crime and higher moral standards. We think of the church as an inspiration to do good things. We join churches so our children will learn moral behavior and will know right from wrong. These are widely held opinions by church-going people – and I am not inclined to discourage such thinking.

So when I read Luke’s story about religious leaders who were trying to uphold God-given rules **and they find themselves in conflict with Jesus** I know I should probably take a closer look at the story. More importantly, I should take a closer look at my understanding of the part **rules** play in the life of a Christian.

Rules tell people how to behave (which is a wonderful service to provide.) But how we behave is not what makes us Christian. What makes us Christian is our relationship with God. Christ came into our lives to *give* us a relationship with God.

When people look for the benefits of Christianity, the moral standards and good behavior, we are usually looking for nothing more than help at exercising self-control. We want God to give us an extra ration of strength to be able to accomplish what we know is right. We’re looking for help to keep the rules (at least the rules that make sense to us). That would be a benefit of a relationship with God that the religious leaders could have understood perfectly.

It’s hard to find fault with exercising self-control and behaving the way we know we should...but if we look at good behavior and keeping the rules as self-generated effort **then we will have abandoned the grace of God**.

William Backus is a pastor up in Minnesota. He told a story about a man he called Ernie. He said when he met Ernie, there was nothing unusual about his appearance. Pastor Backus said he was average height, went to an average church, and lived in an average house with his wife and children. Backus asked Ernie about his religious life because of some of the things Ernie had said in a class. During their conversation Ernie said that he had nearly given up his faith in despair at one time. Ernie had always gone to church, but he hadn't thought much about God. Then a combination of experiences and sermons and discussions caused Ernie to become very excited about his faith. He asked God to fill him with the Holy Spirit and God answered his prayer. Ernie felt renewed. He read his Bible, not as a duty, but as a delight. Ernie prayed to give up several bad habits and he did. Ernie stopped spending time with people who still had bad habits. His temper did not leave him as quickly as the other bad habits but he continued to pray about that. Ernie felt it was his duty to drive sin from his house, which was unsettling to his wife, Rose. Apparently it looked to Ernie like Rose was a significant source of the sin he was trying to get rid of. He found some Bible passages that he thought would help Rose with her smoking and her weight. **And all the time he realized that he had not overcome all of his own sins.**

All the power of the Holy Spirit was in his life – and yet he knew he was a failure because he still sinned. A friend from church talked with Ernie and, later, he recalled the words, “You’re trying to walk with the Lord, Ernie, but *your* efforts have made you proud and unloving.” Ernie said he didn’t realize the significance of those words when he heard them: “***your*** efforts have made you proud and unloving.” Ernie responded to his friend’s admonishment as the religious leaders in this morning’s Gospel story would have encouraged him to respond. **He said, “I’ve got to try harder.”** And he did. And he failed. He thought he could conquer sin for God and he kept struggling for more will-power. He told Pastor Backus how a friend had explained that countless Christians, including Paul, Augustine, and Luther have found that the righteousness

we need to live our lives in the presence of God is not something we can achieve. It is a gift of God. (Maybe the religious leaders in the synagogue eventually found it out, too. We don't know how their story turned out.)

Ernie told Pastor Backus about finding peace. The peace he found is the only way we will make any real progress in our righteousness. It is the understanding that life with God is not a do-it-yourself venture. It is a gift of grace.

When we try to *achieve* righteousness we come under the law. We find ourselves standing with the religious leaders in the synagogue unable to see the grace of God coming from Jesus himself into the life of a person who needs grace. All we can see is whether or not the law is safe. The rules were the best thing the leaders had going for them. Jesus broke the rules.

I thank God for the law and for the rules he has given us. We need God's law and rules to give us guidance and to remind us how we were created to live.

But, as Jesus stood in the synagogue with the woman who had been bent and crippled for eighteen years – now standing upright and whole, and the leaders of the synagogue stepped forward to defend their rules...Jesus knew that this was not a dispute about the rules. **It was a dispute about *who* rules.** Jesus' claim is that **he** is the authority, not the rules. (The distinction makes more difference than we imagine.)

Rules give us direction. We can (and should) follow that direction for as far as our own strength will carry us. But our strength will never carry us to a relationship with God. And if we think it will, we have made an idol, a false god, of our own strength of character.

In the synagogue that day the religious leaders were self-possessed, knowledgeable about the law, confident of their holiness, **and insecure in the presence of Jesus.** They were threatened by a man who did not see the rules as the final authority. Someone else was in the synagogue that day – a woman who needed God in her life. She didn't make any claims about

her own abilities or her strength of will. The only qualifications that are mentioned in the Bible are that she needed help and Jesus saw her.

I pray that we will all have the qualifications of the crippled woman. That we will all be able to proclaim with certainty that we need God's grace and we can't achieve righteousness on our own. God has so much for us to do – far more than we could possibly do on our own. Self-generated morality will never be more than a shadow of the righteousness that God offers us. We can live as nothing less than sinners redeemed by the grace of God.