

Getting Priorities Right

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[0 : 0 0] Keep Sunday special. Save our Sundays. Over the past few decades, many Christians in different parts of the Western world have argued against Sunday trading using slogans like that.

Keep Sunday special. Sunday, they say, should be a special day, a day set apart from Monday to Saturday as a day for family, a day for rest, for community building, for worship.

Shopping and trading and all but the essentials should be left to the other six days. Their cries have been heard differently in different places.

In Western Australia, for example, a referendum held only last year decided that Sunday trading would remain restricted. But in Victoria, of course, we've officially had Sunday shopping for over 10 years and these days, shops can be open every day except for Anzac Day morning, Good Friday and Christmas Day.

It's amazing. Well, earlier in Christian history, before the days of Colesmire and 7-Eleven, the issues of what could or couldn't be done on Sundays were different.

[1 : 3 0] Should entertainment be performed on Sunday? Should cinemas be open? Should sport be played? Many of you would remember the film Chariots of Fire based on the true story of Eric Little, a devout Christian athlete who eventually became a missionary to China.

In his early 20s, Little was selected to run for Great Britain in the 100-metre sprint in the 1924 Olympics. But his initial heat for that event was scheduled for a Sunday.

And so sometime before, he withdrew from that event and he instead decided to compete for the 400 metres, which he won.

And his story made front-page news. Of course, today many Christians see the idea of a Sabbath as a principle to be integrated into all of life rather than a required religious observance.

Yet so many questions still abound, don't they? What does it mean to cease from work and to rest? Is washing the dishes work?

[2 : 4 6] What about internet banking? Is cooking Father's Day lunch work? Ought children to do their homework on the day of worship? I'm sure they'd say no.

And what happens if you're a minister who, contrary to popular opinion, works five days a week plus on a Sunday? What then?

Well, questions about what constitutes true Sabbath observance have occupied the people of God for literally thousands and thousands of years. work on the Sabbath.

Although working on the Sabbath was clearly prohibited in the fourth commandment, which we have heard read from Deuteronomy chapter 5 today, from about the fourth century BC, Jewish legal scholars began to seek earnestly to define exactly what work meant.

The scripture itself provided them with some guidelines. In Exodus 35, for example, we learned that fires were not to be lit on the Sabbath. In Jeremiah chapter 17, we learned that burdens were not to be carried.

[3 : 57] Though for the religious experts, now the term burden needed to be legally defined. What things were you actually allowed to pick up and carry between Friday sundown and Saturday sundown?

Well, by the time of Jesus' day, a significant tradition had grown up which outlined what type of activities could and couldn't be done on the Sabbath and what circumstances permitted the breaking of Sabbath law.

Saving human life was clearly established as a valid situation in which the Sabbath could be broken, setting priorities, as was service in the temple and the performing of a circumcision.

The well-being of animals was considered reason to labour on the Sabbath. And not simply in emergencies. Animals could be untied, walked to a watering spot and re-tethered so long as the animal carried no load.

Only certain knots were used in retying the animal and the bucket wasn't held while the animal drank and the well was less than a certain distance away.

[5 : 15] But the Sabbath wasn't just a you-shall-not day. It was to be a day of joy, a day of worship, a holy day. Jews met in synagogues on the Sabbath day for prayer, scripture readings and teaching.

And this is exactly what we find Jesus doing as our passage from Luke chapter 13 begins. If you want to have that open in front of you, you might find that helpful.

Page 848. We'll just start by having a look at this first verse, verse 10. Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath.

Well, as I've said, this is an ordinary practice for a Jew to go to the synagogue on the Sabbath. But, as readers of Luke's gospel, when we hear that Jesus is in this place on this day and he is teaching our ears or to prick up.

You see, Luke has already recorded two events that have taken place on the Sabbath in the synagogue and these events give us two good reasons to sit up and take notice right from the very start of our passage today.

[6 : 40] Firstly, there's the event recorded in Luke chapter 4. Jesus is in the synagogue on the Sabbath in Nazareth and he's handed the scroll of the prophet Isaiah.

He unrolls the scroll and he stands to read and this is what he reads. The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind to let the oppressed go free to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.

And then Jesus rolls up the scroll, hands it back to the attendant, sits down to teach and he says these amazing words. Today, this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.

Luke chapter 4 is the foundational statement for Jesus' ministry. Jesus has taken these prophets' words about the promised Messiah written centuries earlier and he has said this is speaking about me.

[8 : 05] This is my mission statement. In my teaching, my healing, my exorcisms, my friendships, my conflicts, my prayers, my obedience and ultimately in my death and resurrection says Jesus I am about the work of release, the work of freedom, the work of liberty from all that binds humanity and indeed all that oppresses God's creation.

Humanity is under the power of sin, Satan and ultimately eternal death. And Jesus says what I will accomplish on the cross will mean that freedom and release is available for all who believe.

Release is the mission of the Messiah. And so by having us see this teaching of Jesus in the synagogue, Luke wants us to see that all that will happen in the rest of his biography of Jesus' life needs to be seen through this lens.

And particularly when we see Jesus teaching again in a synagogue on the Sabbath, we know that we're to expect to see more of Jesus' releasing, saving work, his Messiah work.

And so we prick up our ears. Secondly, as readers of Luke's gospel, let's imagine that we've been sitting together and reading this whole biography together from start to end.

[10 : 03] When we get to chapter 13, actually we have already read in chapter 6 that Jesus has already healed someone on the Sabbath day in a synagogue.

Jesus is being closely watched by the Pharisees and teachers of the law in this event recorded in chapter 6 to see whether he would heal on the Sabbath. And there is a man with a crippled hand and Jesus does heal him.

His hand is fully restored. And this event is a time of significant conflict with the Jewish leaders and Jesus says to them, I ask you, which is lawful on the Sabbath, to do good or to do evil, to save life or destroy it.

And with these stark contrasts, the leaders cannot answer him. But instead we read in chapter 6 verse 11, they were filled with fury and discussed with one another what they might do to Jesus.

So, knowing that this is what resulted when a man with a withered hand was healed, healed. When we come to read the words of Luke chapter 13 verse 11, we realise that there is the potential for a kind of mirror miracle to take place here.

[11 : 31] A woman with a spirit that had crippled her for 18 years is there. She's in a terrible condition, bent over, completely unable to stand up straight.

If Jesus heals her as he did with the man with the crippled hand, we the readers will have an opportunity to see whether reactions and responses have changed since that first healing on the Sabbath.

Since that time, Jesus has revealed so much more of his mission, so much more of his power. He's fed the 5,000, he's calmed a storm, he's raised a dead girl to life.

yet will the Jewish leaders still reject him if he has compassion on this woman and heals her on the Sabbath? Will they still plot against him this second time?

Well, in fact, Jesus has just been speaking a parable earlier in chapter 13. You might want to just quickly have a glance at verse 6, the parable of the barren fig tree.

[12 : 41] This parable speaks of a tree, a fig tree that has not been bearing fruit for some years. And the owner of the fig tree comes and says, oh, cut it down.

It's just wasting space. It's not doing what it's supposed to do. It is not bearing fruit. The gardener says, let me just try a little harder.

Let me just dig around the tree, fertilize the tree, and next year. We'll see if it bears figs. If it doesn't, then we'll cut it down.

And Jesus is clearly talking about the nation of Israel, particularly their leaders here. And it's a parable of very serious warning, impending judgment, punishment, unless change is seen, unless repentance is seen, unless fruit is seen.

And so when we get to this story of the healing of the crippled woman on the Sabbath, we the readers ought to be on tenterhooks. Will there be any change in the fig tree?

[13 : 58] Will we start to see some fruit now in this second healing on the Sabbath day in a synagogue? How will the Jewish leaders respond this time?

Well, it doesn't take long to find out because another miracle of healing does take place on the Sabbath. Let's have a look at verses 12 and 13. When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, Woman, you are set free from your ailment.

when he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. Imagine the suffering that this woman had endured over the last two decades.

Perhaps every year she'd become more and more incapacitated as perhaps her spine hardened all the more, her vertebrae fused more and more.

Certainly she would have been less and less able to do even the simplest tasks of everyday life and always aware of the stares of those around her and very conscious of being on the margins of the worshipping community.

[15 : 27] Already as a woman, at that time, she was on the margins of the worshipping community, but as a disabled woman. Oh, very ostracised indeed.

And yet, at the touch of Jesus Christ, she is completely and instantly healed. Those 18 years undone in a second.

she is free to stand up straight, to stretch, to breathe. And as she stands up tall for the first time in so many years, she knows that such a gift could only come from God.

And so she praises him. this woman who has barely been able to look people in the face because of her disability, because of how bent over she was, now looks and sees Jesus for who he really is, the image of the invisible God.

And so she praises him. But has Jesus just healed her of a sickness? Or has he delivered her of an evil spirit?

[16 : 57] It's a very good question, I think. Elsewhere in the gospel accounts, we see Jesus either clearly doing one or the other, casting out demons or healing sickness.

Yet in this account, it seems to be a kind of combination of both. Her deformity is attributed to a spirit of infirmity, or in our English translation here, a spirit that had her crippled.

And her illness is described by Jesus later on in the passage as her having been bound by Satan for 18 long years. But despite this, Jesus does not confront any evil spirits directly in this account.

He doesn't speak to any spirits. He lays hands on the woman, which he doesn't do in other exorcisms. And he simply says to her, woman, you are free from your ailment, not you are free from demonic possession.

There's no kind of record here of something leaving her. So, what is going on in this event?

[18 : 16] What is going on in Luke's account? Well, I think essentially Luke, the doctor, understands that sickness in the world is wrapped up with the work of the devil.

Luke, when he records Jesus healing Simon Peter's mother-in-law, says that Jesus rebukes her fever, a word that is commonly used to talk about exorcisms.

But there's no sense in that account, in that record, that Simon's mother-in-law was possessed. But it seems she is still experiencing the work of the evil one in her sickness.

In the book of Acts, the second volume of Luke's work, Luke records Peter preaching about Jesus in these words, in Acts chapter 10 38, God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power.

He went about doing good and healing all who are oppressed by the devil. for God was with him, healing all who are oppressed by the devil. Peter is not making a distinction here between exorcisms or medical healings.

[19 : 43] He's simply saying that every healing that Jesus did was a healing in some way of those oppressed by Satan. At an individual level, sure, distinction can and was made.

Illness was clearly not always a result of a direct attack of Satan. And Satan's attack wasn't always in the form of illness.

But it seems to me that illness is certainly one way in which Satan exercises his power in this world and still continues to do so today.

Sickness is certainly a part of our fallen, broken world, a consequence of humanity's sin. But it seems also to be a way in which Satan might exercise bondage over humanity and a way in which Satan may indeed try to destroy us, keep us from the grace of God.

Of course we know that the kingdom has broken into this world through Jesus. And we have seen what heaven will be like when all evil is destroyed. No affliction by evil spirits, no illness.

[21 : 14] But that day in its fullness is still to come. And until Jesus returns, evil will be manifest in many ways, including through sickness.

This woman may have been personally oppressed by an evil spirit, but she may not have been because of the differences in this account that we've spoken about.

But certainly as one who was far from whole, she stood under Satan's bondage and Jesus' work sets her free.

Well, if this is all that had occurred that day, we could go home just being amazed, couldn't we? We'd go home today rejoicing with that woman, that Jesus is such a God, such a saviour for us.

He's a God of compassion, of healing, of power, a saviour who sees those on the margins, who reaches out, who calls a woman, a disabled woman, and restores her to wholeness of life.

[22 : 27] What a wonderful saviour, what a wonderful Lord. And we'd be asking ourselves as we left here today, as we had our cup of tea together, how can I praise him?

How can I glorify this living Lord Jesus? Jesus. But because this work has taken place in the synagogue on the Sabbath, the response of this woman at the margins, our response of praise, is thrown into sharp contrast with the response of those at the centre of religious life in Israel, the Jewish leaders.

Take a look at verse 14. But 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. So we see the leader not even willing to confront Jesus, but speaking directly to the crowd, trying to reassert his own authority, teaching them what we had heard in Deuteronomy chapter 5.

There are six days on which work ought to be done. Come on those days to be miraculously healed. Well, of course, I added in the word miraculously, but that is essentially what he is saying, isn't he?

[24 : 00] And it's just so absurd, so perverse. It's like someone pulling up outside my house with a brand new Lexus wrapped in a big red bow and comes to me, hands me the keys and says, this is a free gift to you.

And me saying, now you know that's a loading zone, you can't park that there, you'll really have to move it. This, it's craziness, it's blindness, something wonderful has happened in this synagogue on the Sabbath, yet this leader will only talk about rules and regulations.

He can't, or in fact he won't, see that the work that has taken place here is the ministry of the Messiah, God's priorities, the work of release, the right work for the Sabbath day.

And so we read Jesus' response to him, verses 15 and 16. 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 manger and lead it away to give it water?

And 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? Jesus speaks to the synagogue leader and all who think like him and calls them hypocrites.

[25 : 42] And we feel the sting of it even more, don't we, knowing that this is the second chance they've had to respond to a healing on the Sabbath.

And you can feel the frustration and disappointment I think in Jesus' answer. The fig tree has not borne fruit, not even after being fertilized with miracles and teaching and the presence of the Son of God.

And yet the leaders are not simply mean spirited, they're self-contradictory. the synagogue leader in what he affirmed was happy to uphold the tradition of laboring to ensure the welfare of animals on the Sabbath, as we heard earlier.

But Jesus points out the absurd contradictions of his position so clearly. It's like he's saying, you untie an ox or a donkey, yet not a person made in God's image.

You care for an animal, yet not a daughter of Abraham, part of the people of God. You won't even leave an ox tethered without water for one day, yet you are willing to let this woman be bound for 18 long years.

[27 : 17] You lose bonds of an animal on the Sabbath as well as the other six days of the week. Yet you don't see the rightness, the necessity for God to release this woman from bondage on his day.

You see, that's what Jesus' action is really about. We often, or I often, read about the Sabbath miracles and I say, ah, yes, Jesus has rejected the legalism of the Jews and brought liberty, liberty from rules.

That's what I like about Christianity. It's none of that obeying the rules bit. It's about compassion. But that's not what Jesus is saying here. He's not saying to the Jewish leaders, forget the Sabbath, you can do whatever you like.

He is saying, yes, Jewish leaders, remember the Sabbath. And when you remember why you practice it, 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, understand that freedom is what the Sabbath is all about.

Not freedom from rules, but freedom from bondage, including and especially spiritual bondage to sin and Satan.

[28 : 44] These are God's priorities, freedom from bondage. You observe this holy day for many reasons. Because God rested on the seventh day, because God has set you apart as a distinctive people, because God has released you from slavery and asks that you, your animals and your own slaves, celebrate that release every week.

But Jesus says in the same way, I have come to release the captives, to free the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.

All holy work, Sabbath work, God's work. The God who has entered his rest since creation, yes, but who also works constantly, upholding all things, who never slumbers or sleeps, who works even now, Jesus says in John chapter 5, preparing salvation for his people.

What better day to experience God's gracious work of salvation than on the day dedicated to God? God. You see, the tragedy of the Jewish leaders is that they were so focused on protecting the ritual, their priorities were so focused on what could and couldn't be done, defining terms, ensuring a hedge around the law, that they were blind to the work of God in their midst.

Jesus wasn't asking them here to leave their obedience to the law. He was asking them to recognize him as the Messiah, the one who has God's authority to interpret the law because he is the one doing God's work, as it had been written centuries earlier, setting prisoners free, especially prisoners to Satan.

[30 : 58] And we see in verse 15 that Luke calls Jesus Lord and that is indeed who he is. And he simply longs for the leaders here to recognize him as the Lord and to enter into the year of the Lord's favor in him, which would ultimately come about in his death and resurrection.

And friends, doesn't he long for us to do the same? Well, as the scene comes to a close, we're left with exactly this challenge.

Where will we stand after seeing this miracle? Will we bear fruit of repentance and faith?

As believers, will we bear fruit of greater praise, consistent repentance, deeper faith?

Will we like the crowds in verse 17, rejoice at all that Jesus has done and continues to do in our midst? or will we in various ways reject the wonderful gifts of God out of blindness, out of pride, out of hypocrisy?

[32 : 26] There can be no fence sitting after a miracle like this and especially not a second time. Jesus is the healer, the releaser, the one who brings freedom.

we can allow him to touch our spirits, free us for a relationship with God, continue to free us from the different issues that bind us, or we can turn away and be put to shame.

We can refuse to open our eyes to his goodness. When life is tough, we can refuse to turn to him, to his power, his grace, even on this day of worship.

Or we can say, I will. Let him help me stand up straight, look him in the eye, know that he is the Messiah, the Son of God, the bringer of release for the captives, sight to the blind, and the year of the Lord's favour, seven days a week.

S muita he is the right. Thank you.