

The Kingdom and the Sabbath

M. W. Bassford, 5-4-14

As we've discussed on any number of occasions, the kingdom of Christ is not defined by lines on a map. Instead, it is found within human hearts, whenever men and women resolve to submit their lives to Him. Those who are part of the kingdom of Christ are those who obey the authority of Christ.

The day will come when every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. All of mankind will acknowledge Him as King, whether they like it or not. Until then, though, we all decide whether we will be a part of His kingdom or not, whether we follow His authority or someone else's.

Even when He was still on earth, our Lord confronted people with this decision, and all too often, they made the wrong decision. They decided they cared more about their convictions and their traditions than they did about Jesus. For the Pharisees especially, the flashpoint was often the Sabbath. They rejected His authority when He violated their human doctrines. Let's look this morning, then, at a passage in Luke that explores the tensions that arose around the kingdom and the Sabbath.

Healing and the Kingdom

The first portion of this passage concerns the effect that Jesus' healing had on His kingdom. The text will be our visual aid this morning, so let's turn in our Bibles to Luke 13:10-21. The first subsection of this reading addresses **THE MIRACLE** itself. The first thing that we see here is an interesting reminder of why Jesus so often healed on the Sabbath—because the Sabbath was the day that the Jews devoted to religious observance. If you're a subsistence farmer, as most of the Jews were, you work all day, every day that God allows you to work. If you don't, you may well literally starve. The Sabbath, though, was a day of enforced idleness. Because they had this day of free time, the Jews were able to gather. They were able to assemble at the local synagogue to hear religious teaching; they were able to host and attend weddings and fancy dinners. Jesus taught and healed on the Sabbath for the same reason—that's when He had an audience.

In any event, Jesus is teaching in the synagogue on the Sabbath, as Jewish men were customarily allowed to do, when He notices someone at the back—a woman bent double by an evil spirit. Many of the illnesses that Jesus healed are familiar to us, but because we do not live in an age of demonic possession, this one is not. However, it's quite clear that the woman is not a ringer and does not have an imaginary illness. Apparently, the poor soul has been staggering through life bent double for 18 years. Most, if not all, of the people gathered in the synagogue would have been familiar with her illness and known its validity.

Once Jesus has called her to Him, he does what he always does to demons. He casts hers out, she stands up for the first time in 18 years, and unsurprisingly, she begins to glorify God. Imagine how miserable it must have been for her to go through life bent double! Imagine the relief of being able to stand tall!

Of course, this same feeling of relief is not limited to this one woman. Jesus is a lifter of spiritual as well as physical burdens. Without Him, we too would stagger through life, bent double by our load of sin, guilt, fear, and shame. Because of His mercy, Jesus took that burden away from us, even at the cost of His own life. Like the woman, we have been freed from our afflictions, and we should glorify God for it.

However, not everybody is happy. Unbelievably, the official of the synagogue begins to offer **CRITICISM** of what has just happened. The gospels rarely offer descriptions of what its characters looked like, but for some reason, I imagine this official as stout and red-faced, with a pompous demeanor. Spluttering with indignation, he elbows his way into center stage and starts trying to shoo all the hopeful sick people away. He criticizes them for seeking healing on the Sabbath, and by implication, Jesus for offering it.

This is too much for the Lord to tolerate. Who does this self-important man think he is, trying to dictate proper religious observance to people in the presence of the very Son of God? He's telling them that the woman did wrong to seek healing, even though the obvious fact that she received healing should have been more than enough evidence that she did right. He was so fixated on human tradition that he overlooked the truth that was right in front of him. As a religious leader, the man was a disgrace.

In response, Jesus does something that I have never done and probably will never do. He calls him out, publicly and to his face, as a hypocrite. Of course, Jesus would never say such a thing if He couldn't back it up, and back it up, He does. This official was perfectly willing to untie his livestock and lead them to

water on the Sabbath, even though a hostile observer might say that he was working. However, when he sees Jesus free this poor woman from the clutches of Satan, oh, no, we can't have that! That's work! In other words, the man had more compassion on an animal that belonged to him than on a woman who didn't.

Today, friends, we must be careful not to limit our compassion to ourselves and those who are closest to us. It's too easy for Christians, when we're the ones struggling with sin, or we see a loved one struggling, to judge the situation as worthy of patience and understanding. However, when we see a brother who isn't close to us going through similar struggles, we're tempted to get our spiritual stomping boots on and land on him with both feet. When we behave in this way, we're no less hypocritical than the synagogue official. In our dealings with others, we must always take care to temper justice with mercy.

Finally, Jesus discusses the meaning of this incident for **THE KINGDOM**. Here, I think we see a reminder to be careful not just of chapter and verse numbers, but of section headings too. In my Bible, the account of the humiliation of the synagogue official in v. 17 is separated by a section heading from the two parables of the kingdom in vs. 18-21. That's a mistake. Instead, we need to read this all as one event. It is Jesus' observation of the humiliation of His opponents and the rejoicing of the crowds that leads Him to offer the two parables. It is these contextual clues that tell us what the parables mean. We're tempted to abstract those parables out and make them about the church or something, but they're really the Lord's commentary on the events that have just taken place.

The first parable concerns the outward growth of the kingdom. It started out small and insignificant, like a mustard seed, but it develops into something that everybody could see, like a mustard tree. Remember, in Luke's account, this story appears in the context of the extended narrative of His last journey to Jerusalem. This synagogue is not in Capernaum or Cana or someplace else that Jesus has been teaching for years. In fact, this event may well mark the first time that Jesus has ever been here. Before He showed up, He probably didn't have many disciples in this city, if any. However, now that He has worked such an impressive sign and slapped down a self-righteous Pharisee, many are glorifying God because of Him.

The second parable concerns not the kingdom's size, but its influence. I don't have much experience with mustard trees, but I know a bit more about leaven. My mother was of the opinion that before I left home, I needed to know how to bake bread from scratch using nothing more than my hands, and so I learned how to bake bread. When you knead leaven into bread dough, you can't see the yeast working, but a couple of hours later, the bread has risen. The yeast is invisible, but in time, its effects are obvious.

Jesus knew that the growth of the kingdom was the same way. Everyone could see the crowd glorifying God, but nobody but God could tell what was going on in the hearts of the multitude. Some of those people would forget what they had seen in a week or two, but some would become disciples. The effects of what Jesus had done weren't immediately apparent, but in time, they would become obvious.

Before the Lord's Supper, let's reflect on all of these things. Let's remember first of all Christ, our healer, who has rescued us no less than he rescued the woman with the evil spirit. Second, though, let's ask if His work in us is so obvious that others around us glorify God and accept His dominion.

The Door of the Kingdom

In the next section of Luke 13, we see Jesus do some teaching about the door of the kingdom. Let's read from Luke 13:22-30. First, Jesus warns of the existence of **THE NARROW DOOR**. Note first of all that Jesus' walking tour of the Jewish nation is continuing. It sounds like He's taking a roundabout route to Jerusalem, but He's headed there nonetheless, and He isn't coming back without dying first. However, this isn't territory where He is completely unknown, for someone asks Him a question that shows acquaintance with His teachings. They want to know if only a few are going to be saved.

What's interesting to me about Jesus' reply is that He doesn't directly answer the question. Maybe He knows that the questioner is trying to trap Him; maybe the answer to the question doesn't seem particularly relevant. Regardless, the content of the original question concerned mankind generally, but Jesus' answer addresses what the questioner, and indeed what all of us, ought to do about it. It doesn't really matter whether few or many are going to be saved. What matters is whether each one of us is going to do what we have to do to be saved. First, Jesus observes that salvation requires striving. Nobody is going to be able to stroll into heaven. We're all going to have to work at it. Second, we will only be able to enter salvation

through a narrow door. It's not going to be convenient for us. It's not going to be an easy target for everyone to hit. Finally, many people are going to seek entrance yet not be able to find it.

In the next part of His answer, Jesus presents this failure of many as the result of **SHUTTING THE DOOR**. These people are going to fail not because they tried to get through the door while it was still open, but because they tried after it had been shut. They waited too long. Then, Jesus presents an imaginary dialogue between Himself and those who tried to come too late. They think they ought to be let in, but He is going to deny knowing them. They'll talk about how they were acquainted with Him physically, how they heard Him teach and ate with Him, but He will deny that any spiritual relationship exists.

In context, this obviously refers to the Jews of Jesus' day who witnessed His ministry but did not become His disciples. However, His words are still sadly relevant today. Jesus might not be here in the flesh, but we still have His word, and through that word, He is still making His appeal. He still wants us for His disciples, but we only have one life in which to follow Him, and if we don't by its end, we will be too late.

Jesus won't care that we sat in the pews of the Joliet church of Christ for years or even decades, if all that time, we never obeyed the gospel. He won't care if our parents and grandparents and great-grandparents were Christians, if we ourselves never gave our lives to Him. For that matter, He doesn't care if we have paid Him lip service and gotten dunked if we don't live like disciples thereafter. If we fall into those categories, we have no hope. We'll call out to Him on the Day of Judgment, and He'll say, "Who are you?" to us too. If the Lord shuts the door to heaven in our faces, we will only have ourselves to blame.

The final section of this ominous teaching concerns **THE FIRST AND THE LAST**. He begins by describing the future anguish of the Jews who reject Him. The Jews were people who placed great pride in their ancestry. They boasted of being the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Jesus points out, though, that those who never accept His authority will see those honored ancestors welcomed into the kingdom while they themselves are ejected, which will prove that they aren't Abraham's true children at all.

Note that the word "kingdom" takes on a slightly different meaning here. Throughout Scripture, we really can't define it more specifically than as the dominion of God, or else our definition doesn't fit all the uses of the word. In this case, "kingdom" is used to refer to heaven itself, where God will have dominion over all His people for all time. Even though Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were never members of the Lord's church, because of their faith, they will still be a part of that eternal dominion.

The Jews of Jesus' day would expect that of the patriarchs. However, Jesus next reveals something that they would not expect. While those who belong genetically to God's chosen people are getting refused entrance to heaven, all kinds of others who aren't Jews at all are going to be invited in. The Jews looked down their noses at all the races of the Gentiles. They sneered at them because they didn't belong to the holy nation of the Jews. Jesus points out, though, that God was going to turn that evaluation upside down.

So too it is today. I was blessed to be raised by godly parents, and three of my four grandparents were Christians too. I benefit immeasurably from that, but my salvation is up to me and me alone. Despite all the advantages I've been given, I can still live in such a way that God will reject me. This is true for all of us. There aren't any family passes into heaven. If we're going to go, we're going to go by ourselves.

On the other hand, there aren't any family passes into hell either. I came from a good family, but I know there are people here who come from rotten families. That can cause difficulty for us in a number of ways, but no matter what our backgrounds may be, our souls are still our own, to save or lose as we see fit. It doesn't matter if Daddy was an adulterer, a drunk, or an out-and-out felon. We can still serve God. If we faithfully follow Jesus, He will welcome us with open arms, no matter where we came from.

Enemies of the Kingdom

Sadly, the last segment of Luke that we're going to look at this morning concerns the enemies of the kingdom. Read with me from Luke 13:31-14:6. Now that Jesus has thrown down the gauntlet concerning who will be received into God's heavenly kingdom, we see how the Pharisees and other groups react.

The first enemy to declare himself is **HEROD**. As always, the tendency of New Testament writers to call several different men by their family name only is somewhat confusing here. This particular Herod is Herod Antipas. He is the same guy who executed John the Baptist, and not very far from this point in time, he is going to participate in the show trial of Jesus. Both Biblical and extrabiblical accounts of him paint the same picture. He is a scheming, amoral weasel who cares only about power and pleasure.

Herod Antipas himself does not appear in this story, but his fingerprints are all over it. Almost certainly, these Pharisees who show up and warn Jesus that Herod wants to kill him are not good, decent folk who are only concerned about the well-being of the Lord. Instead, they are Herod's mouthpieces. Herod doesn't actually want to kill Jesus. He is simultaneously fascinated by the Galilean prophet and worried that He is John the Baptist returned from the dead. However, Jesus has been stirring up trouble for Herod, and Herod wants Him to go away. Rather than sending a direct message or a goon squad to escort Jesus off the premises, Herod concocts this death threat and sends some of his pets to deliver it.

Of course, Jesus doesn't buy any of it. He sends Herod's pets back to their master with a message of His own. First of all, He calls Herod a fox, by which He means about the same thing I did when I called Herod a weasel. Second, He tells Herod that He is going to continue journeying toward His goal and doing good along the way, regardless of what Herod says or does about it.

Third, though, Jesus does something shocking. He identifies His goal as dying in Jerusalem, because that's what happens to prophets. From beginning to end of His ministry, Jesus never forgets His true purpose in coming to earth, which is to die on the cross for the sins of mankind. He takes every step of this extended journey toward Jerusalem fully aware of what will happen to Him once He arrives.

Indeed, the next of the enemies of the kingdom that we encounter is **JERUSALEM** herself. Here, Jesus' words reveal a more than merely human perspective. After all, during His ministry, Jesus hasn't gone to Jerusalem more than a few times for the various religious festivals. In His words, though, we hear a thousand years' worth of frustration. He's remembering not only the way that His own words have been rejected, but also the way that the people of Jerusalem rejected Isaiah, Jeremiah, and all the other prophets who were sent to the city to warn it to repent. Instead of honoring prophets, Jerusalem kills them.

However, Jesus makes clear that the city and its inhabitants have run out of chances. They will see Him once more, on the day of the Triumphal Entry, and then never again. After that, the city would be desolated, a clear reference to the coming Roman destruction of the Jewish nation. One of the great ironies of the coming of the Messiah was that the Jews themselves, who had been God's chosen people for 1500 years, would reject Him despite all the prophecies that foretold Him. Jesus here makes clear that although He deplores this outcome, He will in no way be surprised by it.

Finally, **THE PHARISEES** make a last appearance in our story today. Jesus has continued His progress toward Jerusalem, He has come to another village, and He has been invited to share a meal with one of the local Pharisee bigwigs. This Pharisee and his cohorts, however, are considerably less clueless than the synagogue official we saw back in Luke 13. In fact, from all appearances, they have conspired to trap Jesus. From somewhere in the community, they have dredged up a man with dropsy, and even though he is apparently not invited to the feast himself, he is brought into the house as a test. The Pharisees have heard that Jesus heals on the Sabbath, and they watch closely to see whether He will heal on *this* Sabbath.

Note that the Pharisees are not being straightforward about this. They don't go to Jesus and say, "So, Jesus, we've heard that You heal on the Sabbath. Why don't You tell us about this?" Jesus even tries to get a conversation started by asking them whether it's lawful to heal on the Sabbath. Once again, let me point out the absurdity of such a conversation. If God lends His healing power to a prophet on the Sabbath, clearly He's OK with healing on the Sabbath! However, the Pharisees don't want to ruin the little test that they've set up. They're not concerned with the man's illness; they only want to see what Jesus will do.

Jesus, of course, heals the man and sends him away. The Lord doesn't want the poor guy to become the focus of abuse like the woman with the demon in Luke 13. Rather than waiting for the Pharisees to say something, Jesus asks a question, similar to the one that He asked the synagogue official. Of all of these pious Jews who are sooo determined to keep the Sabbath holy, would any of them not rescue their son or even their animal from a well on the Sabbath, despite the great exertion involved in the rescue? Once again, the Pharisees have a great gift for making up rules that apply to others, but not to them.

This isn't only a problem for the Pharisees. It can easily be a problem for us too. For some reason, it seems like the devil loves to tempt the righteous to become judges. When we fall into this trap, we make up our own little rules that we bind on others. Then, we watch vigilantly for those who violate these rules. These rules could have to do with dress, the role of women, or any other topic where the Bible doesn't say much but people say a lot. In such cases, we must be careful not to be so busy criticizing others that we forget to examine ourselves.