

The Twelve | Enrolled in the School of Jesus (C)

The Leaven of the Pharisees

Luke 13.10-16

February 14, 2021

Luke 11.53 – 12.1 -- *When He left there, the scribes and the Pharisees began to be very hostile and to question Him closely on many subjects, ⁵⁴ plotting against Him to catch Him in something He might say. ^{12.1} Under these circumstances, after so many thousands of people had gathered together that they were stepping on one another, He began saying to His disciples first of all, "Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy.*

Luke 13.10-13 -- *And He was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath. ¹¹ 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. ¹² When Jesus saw her, He called her over and said to her, "Woman, you are freed from your sickness." ¹³ And He laid His hands on her; and immediately she was made erect again and began glorifying God. ¹⁴ 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." ¹⁵ 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? ¹⁶ "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?"*

Luke 14:1 -- *It happened that when He went into the house of one of the leaders of the Pharisees on the Sabbath to eat bread, they were watching Him closely. ² And there in front of Him was a man suffering from dropsy. ³ And Jesus answered and spoke to the lawyers and Pharisees, saying, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath, or not?" ⁴ But they kept silent. And He took hold of him and healed him, and sent him away. ⁵ And He said to them, "Which one of you will have a son or an ox fall into a well, and will not immediately pull him out on a Sabbath day?" ⁶ And they could make no reply to this.*

We've been looking at how Jesus Christ turned a group of young men into leaders who turned the world upside down (Acts 17.6).

Today's passages trace a recurrent theme in the training program of Jesus – He repeatedly warns His disciples that all religion tends toward an extremely harmful, highly contagious, rapidly spreading, spiritual disease. Masks won't prevent the spread of the infection He has in mind. Isolation won't help. BUT many people DO seek safety from this sickness by avoiding organized religions.

THEN they (we?) convert other pursuits (like jobs, parenting, sports/fitness, science, politics, romance, technology, social-awareness, hobbies/leisure and food) WE TURN THESE INTO "replacement religions" we learn that this contagion is found wherever religious zeal is shared. We all have a "controlling story." The human race is relentlessly religious.

The infection against which Jesus repeatedly warns His disciples is hypocrisy: “Beware the YEAST of the Pharisees which is *hypocrisy*.” (Luke 12.1)

Unchurched people often name the widespread occurrence of hypocrisy in churches as a reason for staying away. ‘Truth is: wherever communities of people gather around ardent common values and activities – THERE you’ll find a veritable petri-dish for growing the virus of hypocrisy.

Normally, I’d ask the rhetorical question at this point, “Do YOU struggle with hypocrisy?” but even if we had the courage (or felt the peer-pressure) to say, “Yes”, we’d have a hard time getting specific about our own hypocrisy because it’s VERY hard to detect in ourselves, though very easy to diagnose in others.

So, let’s just accept at the outset – that we all struggle with it and that we’d be happier people if we could discover it in ourselves and get the one vaccine that can give us heal us from it.

Let’s look at this spiritual parasite as it appears in these episodes (two points):

- 1) **Bent, Broken, Waterlogged and Thirsty**
- 2) **The One Vaccine and the Multiple Doses**

In passing I should first point out that in 12.1 you find an actual statement of what we’ve been describing in this whole series: “He began saying to His disciples FIRST.” He’s serving the crowds and even His opponents but His priority is always the Twelve. He’s always preparing them to pass on the faith with integrity NOT hypocrisy.

Then, we could note that this is a sandwich: He’s at a meal (lunch) and then in a synagogue and then again, third paragraph, at a meal. So much happens for Jesus at meals and in synagogues.

The first time we saw Jesus in a synagogue was in Luke CH 4 (17-19), in His hometown of Nazareth. And it was THERE that He issued His own mission statement as foretold by the Prophet Isaiah: *The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He has anointed Me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent Me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed...*

NOW, in HIS final synagogue appearance (in Luke), Jesus is still on that MISSION: setting captives free. And here...those things are actually happening: the “glorious things” of the Kingdom for all to see! But apparently NOT everyone does see. That’s the conflict in this first scene; there’s a bent woman held captive AND an important man who’s broken/bitter.

The woman is physically bent... and broken in many ways...probably in pain...and ostracized from her community ...kind of person people turn away from.

You may know the name, Susan Sontag; she was a very brilliant writer and social critic who died

in 2004. She was diagnosed with cancer in the late '70s and she soon realized that the cancer was bad enough but the unexpected sense of shame and guilt that came with the disease was worse.

Her book, *Illness As Metaphor* looks at words we use like “battling cancer” or “fighting” or “struggling”. Those words sometimes have the effect of keeping people away from treatment...because it looks like defeat. So, the sickness is compounded by shame. It’s even worse for people in traditional cultures.

So people dismiss this (unnamed) woman “you probably DID something to GET this terrible condition... straighten yourself out... try harder!”

And it’s called a “spirit” ...I’m not certain how to understand that...except to admit that our scientific explanations are great but not always adequate. BUT whatever the connection there’s no indication that she brought it on herself.

She can’t walk upright...she’s like a beast of burden ...looking down. She can’t easily make eye-contact with other people.

Again, in that culture, there was guilt/shame and the sense that she’d DONE something to deserve it...AND YOU ADD UP THE COST of this affliction...the physical pain/discomfort and the social/relational implications and the spiritual sense of inadequacy and the nagging idea: “maybe God IS punishing me?”

AND (vv. 11, 16)... “For 18 years She was bent double and could not straighten up at all.”

But close-by our pitiful woman there’s another kind of “bent-ness” standing up so straight, it’s ... not so easy to see/detect... but in the scope of things even worse than her condition. It’s a man with status and a position/title... a minister/pastor. And while Jesus helps the more obvious disorder, He does not (at least at THIS point) He does NOT help this synagogue official...who’s broken NOT in body but in soul...

He’s a spiritually unaware kind of person. He used religion just like the 19th C atheistic philosophers warned, used religion to dominate weak/odd people and keep them down...AND NOW...the King of the Kingdom has come onto this religious man’s turf.

This Jesus who’s powerful and yet disruptive and liberating and healing has come INTO the church service and all the leader can see is DISRUPTION!

The minister is living a life of order and control and predictability... “there’s a protocol ...there’s a right way to DO THINGS and THIS ISN’T IT!”

He gets his security/identity/significance by being “the man who keeps things on track!” And NOW the train is DEFINITELY off the track and “this is NOT gonna happen – NOT on MY watch and not in MY synagogue!”

And the MAN...to his credit... appeals NOT just to his own opinion but to the Law of Moses. “And THAT is NOT something to fool around with! The Fourth Commandment (Sabbath) ought’a be taken seriously!”

This nameless woman has been sick 18 years! This is NOT an emergency!... This WORK could be done on any other day...she’s waited THIS long...she can wait another day...NOT on the day when work is forbidden!

The minister’s indignant and nervous at the chaos so the frazzled pastor appeals directly to the people. He tries to humiliate this outsider and says, in effect, “Look! I’m the official interpreter of the Bible around here and this guy’s... just sketchy...”

But Jesus points out that THIS man is bent...he’s twisted and broken more than the woman was AND most tragically...the man is oblivious to the Kingdom of God (he just witnessed liberation). The minister can’t look up! He’s unaware that God’s at work; he can’t even see the meaning of the Sabbath!

In fact, Jesus Christ calls him a hypocrite and then points out that the man’s understanding of Moses is bent (unorthodox). This pastor thinks that barnyard animals are more important than the Children of God: “This daughter of Abraham”.

“Wait a minute!” says Jesus... “I know you people WORK to untie YOUR beasts of burden once a week on the Sabbath. So, why not release this child of God who’s been waiting a lot longer than one week?!”

The Sabbath – and if you read Deuteronomy CH 5 you’ll see it in black and white – the Sabbath was given as an expression OF mercy NOT as an obstacle TO mercy... IT WAS GIVEN TO remind us that our slavery in Egypt is OVER...and NOW instead of slaving “24/7” we get a whole day every week to rejoice/rest and celebrate our freedom!”

Jesus Christ is ALSO appealing to the Law and He’s showing that HE’S THE FINAL INTERPRETER of the Law... NOT the opinions of this synagogue leader or the Jewish rabbis. BUT now this bent and broken pastor is ashamed and humiliated (17): “As Jesus said this, all His opponents were being humiliated; but the entire crowd was rejoicing over all the glorious things being done by Him.”

So there it is...more than one kind of brokenness and bent-ness. Jesus helps the one who’s obviously bent but He humbles and breaks the one who looked straight. He brings the hypocrisy to light because if it’s undiagnosed it can’t be healed.

In the final scene, Jesus is again at a meal in the home of an important man: “a leader of the Pharisees”. Once again, it’s the Sabbath, which has become THE test of orthodoxy for the Pharisees (even though they don’t really GET it).

They seem to have a plant – an obviously sick man, seated right in front of Jesus and hard to ignore. They’re “guarding” (Gk) every word Jesus says. It sounds like a delightful affair! (“What’s for lunch?... Well, Jesus, YOU are!”)

The plant, the bait, has a condition called, “hydro-pikos”; translated as “Dropsy” but today we call it “Edema” – the accumulation of water in around the organs and in the tissue. The body can’t process water so the person becomes waterlogged and smollen BUT ALSO super-thirsty – drowning but dying of thirst. It’s like drinking sea-water.

Jesus takes the bait before it’s even offered to Him. In fact He answers their question before they ask it!: “And Jesus answered and spoke to the lawyers and Pharisees, saying, ‘Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath, or not?’ But they kept silent. And He grabbed him and healed him, and sent him away.”

And then again, Jesus uses barnyard animals but adds “a son” – “If your son or ox fell into a well... would you say, ‘Hey just tread water for 24 hours or so and we’ll get you tomorrow’? Would you let your son drown on the very Day that reminds us that God rescued us and brought us through the Sea alive and DIDN’T LET US DROWN?”

“Well, look fellas, this man is drowning – that’s why I grabbed him – on the Sabbath – it seems like an especially good Day to rescue the drowning. What d’ya think?”

“And they could make no reply.”

See, whether your thing is being a good Buddhist or Muslim or Jewish Sabbath-keeping or collecting stamps or yoga or a political party/candidate or parenting according to a defined method or Presbyterian doctrine or plumbing or family or a title (like “pastor”) – wherever there are rules of conduct, values, beliefs – there will be signals to show who’s good and who is not really measuring up.

When you try to get life from these things, they eventually TAKE YOUR LIFE. They demand and demand... until you get twisted and bent and warped. Less significant things come to take center stage ...and become super-important for the wrong reasons. And big issues like mercy and justice fade from view... Then you stop seeing needs and people and you forget how to love... you’re too busy judging and proving yourself. Exhausting.

We need rescue from outside ourselves.

But the great Cure takes the spotlight OFF of my doing (which is sometimes a source of pride for me that I advertise in all my subtle ways [people see right through it] OR ways I fail to keep the standards of our community and those ways I hide and even lie about them because the shame of failure is so painful and I can’t look people in the eye when those areas comes up).

But the basic message Jesus is to us is liberation and rescue from the pride and shame of sin and guilt and hypocrisy. He saves us from drowning in our own pride and shame.

He comes into our bent-ness and into our bloatedness. He becomes broken and isolated and stripped and shamed... He'll be bent in two carrying that cross "like one from whom men hide their face" (Isaiah 53.3) He'll be burdened and bent under the weight of MY SIN...so that I could look up...could glorify God and be free!

Jesus Christ will become entirely thirsty when hanging from the Cross. One theory says that He drowned in His own serum (the clear part of blood) and that when they pierced His side that's the "water" that came flowed out. Like the Better Jonah, Jesus Christ drowned in the waters of justice so that I could be healed. He was bowed down (John 19.30b) under the weight of my guilt so I could look up.

Our tendency is to be swollen with pride... or to be bowed down and unable to look up because of shame. And that's why religious people (and WE ARE ALL RELIGIOUS PEOPLE – even Bill Maher – every one has some sort of ultimate, top-shelf values and priorities and that IS your religion) and all religious people spend so much effort in advertising that we toe the line and then, with our swollen egos, we look down on those who don't measure up.

OR we hide the fact that we have significant failings – bent over in shame and fear that our failings will become known.

But when I get the Cure... I can't look down on anyone. The only way I could be forgiven is the only way anyone could be forgiven – Jesus Christ had to pay the bill; my penalty had to fall on Him. And the only way I could ever be called truly righteous is that God had to become human and keep the Law for me (because I've never kept one commandment with totally true motives).

And I have to take that injection every DAY. When I do, the swelling goes down and my eyes lift up. I stop obsessing on the small stuff. I feel the liberation Jesus Christ purchased for me and it enables me to move toward outsiders, people who can't add to my social capital or benefit me in some way.

Think now...you bent and burdened people and you swollen prideful people... It's Valentines' Day, so think that Jesus Christ is going to Jerusalem...to be bent and broken and thirsty ...to stand in YOUR place... And because He rose, I can raise my eyes (Rev 1.17-18; Ps 121) and be sure that God knows all about me and loves me anyway, loves YOU more than you'll ever imagine.

O How He Loves Us... The way to become LIKE HIM (in the way He loved the invisible/ignored) the way to become loving, to love the way HE LOVED...is to truly believe that He goes to Jerusalem for YOU.