

Luke 13:10-17

Conflict in the Synagogue

It is ironic that the “Prince of Peace” has brought more conflict into the world than any other person who ever lived. Ironic, perhaps, but certainly not surprising. Even as an infant it was prophesied that Jesus would bring division. Luke records that when His parents brought Him into the temple, “Simeon blessed them and said to Mary His mother, ‘behold, this Child is appointed for the fall and rise of many in Israel, and for a sign to be opposed’” (Luke 2:34). The murder of dozens, perhaps hundreds of innocent children marked his early years, for we are told that “when Herod saw that he had been tricked by the magi, he became very enraged, and sent and slew all the male children who were in Bethlehem and all its vicinity, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had determined from the magi” (Matthew 2:16).

The conflict intensified when Jesus became a man. He began His earthly ministry with a battle with Satan, and Jesus repeatedly confronted the power of darkness when He cast out demons. Though challenged, His power was absolute, as evidenced by the affirmation of those who witnessed such miracles who proclaimed that “with authority and power He commands the unclean spirits and they come out” (Luke 4:36).

But it was not only demonic forces that struggled with Jesus. The Jews of His time confronted Him as well. From the earliest proclamation of Jesus that He was the Messiah, “those who were His own did not receive Him” (John 1:11). After His first sermon in His hometown of Nazareth, the people tried to kill Him. This rejection extended even to His own family, “for not even His brothers were believing in Him” (John 7:5). Though He occasionally received praise from the masses (as when He entered Jerusalem), eventually they turned against Him, crying out to the Roman authorities to have Him executed by crucifixion.

But perhaps no group came more into conflict with Jesus than the other religious leaders of His day. Again, this should not surprise us. As fellow religious leaders, it was their position that was most directly threatened by this new teacher. Their authority was challenged. Their legalistic hold on the people broken by what this Rabbi taught. As Jesus’ popularity increased (even if we remember that not all those who followed Him believed), the Pharisees were increasingly jealous. And what Jesus said about the Pharisees did not improve their relationship.

Jesus violently cleansed the temple when He saw that they were “making My Father’s house a place of business” (John 2:16). He frequently called them hypocrites. One example we looked at recently, “you hypocrites! You know how to analyze the appearance of the earth and the sky, but why do you not analyze this present time?” (Luke 12:56). He said they were blind guides, “let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind. And if a blind man guides a blind man, both will fall into a pit” (Matthew 15:14).

The Pharisees responded in kind. They called Him a blasphemer, “the Jews answered Him, ‘for a good work we do not stone You, but for blasphemy; and because You, being a man, make Yourself out to be God’” (John 10:33). They called Him a liar, “so the Pharisees said to Him, ‘You are testifying about Yourself; Your testimony is not true’” (John 8:13). They said He associated with sinners, “now when the

Pharisee who had invited Him saw this, he said to himself, ‘if this man were a prophet He would know who and what sort of person this woman is who is touching Him, that she is a sinner’” (Luke 7:39). They said He violated Jewish law, “but some of the Pharisees said, ‘why do you do what is not lawful on the Sabbath?’” (Luke 6:2). They said He was demon-possessed, “the scribes who came down from Jerusalem were saying, ‘He is possessed by Beelzebul’” (Mark 3:22). They even accused Him of being in alliance with Satan, “but some of them said, ‘He casts out demons by Beelzebul, the ruler of the demons’” (Luke 11:15).

Jesus knew that the His death would not end the conflict. He warned His disciples that “they will lay their hands on you and will persecute you, delivering you to the synagogues and prisons, bringing you before kings and governors for My name’s sake” (Luke 21:12). And so it was. On the day the Church was born, His disciples were accused of being drunk. After Peter preached one of his first sermons, he and John were brought before the Jewish council. Later on, they were beaten and imprisoned. Stephen suffered martyrdom. A Pharisee named Saul led a persecution against the church at Jerusalem. Herod Agrippa imprisoned Peter and executed James to try to please the Jewish religious authorities.

As the Church began to spread, so too did the conflict. The book of Acts records the reception of the Christian message throughout the Roman world. Paul argued with Jewish leaders at Antioch and Iconium. He was beaten at Lystra. He was imprisoned at Philippi. He was forced to flee for his life from Thessalonica and Berea. He was brought before a Roman proconsul at Corinth. He was beaten and led to prison in Jerusalem. He was martyred at Rome. And Paul was not alone. Although other evidence comes from historical, and not biblical, sources even secular publications agree that there is manuscript evidence indicating that the disciples suffered for their faith. Peter was martyred at Rome. Andrew was scourged and martyred at Patras in western Greece. James killed in Jerusalem. Philip was crucified at Heliopolis in Egypt. Bartholomew was skinned alive and beheaded in India. Matthew was martyred in Ethiopia. Thomas in India. James, son of Alphaeus, was beaten to death at the age of 94 in Jerusalem. Simon the zealot was crucified in England. Thaddeus in Edessa (modern Turkey). Only John died a natural death.

And the conflict continued. Beginning with Nero, who sought to deflect blame away from himself after a fire burned sections of Rome, the persecution of Christians was authorized in the city. The Roman emperor Domitian did the same about a generation later. For the first two centuries, the persecutions of Christians was localized and sporadic. The emperor Decius ordered the first empire-wide full scale persecution of Christians in 249, but he died soon after and so did his edict. Diocletian ordered a full-scale persecution in 303. This was the most focused effort to destroy Christianity, as it targeted not only believers but the destruction of churches and manuscripts. Only with Constantine’s Edict of Milan in 313 did Christianity find a place in the empire.

But that did not end the conflict. It continued to this day. In some places believers can be persecuted and killed. In others they are merely inconvenienced. But it is clear, that true believers, living out their faith in a fallen and sinful world, will be in conflict.

The specific issue about which Jesus found Himself in conflict with the Pharisees in this passage had to do with the Law. He had been there before. Though He had declared “the Son of Man is Lord of the

Sabbath” (Luke 6:5), the Pharisees, with their immovable understanding that obedience to the Law and its resulting self-righteousness was the only way to be in relationship with God, were not convinced.

Context

Jesus “was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath” (v. 10). Jesus had finished His previous talk with a parable that ended with the stern warning that “if it bears fruit next year, fine; but if not, cut it down” (Luke 13:9). From the response of the Pharisees, it is clear they refused to heed the warning.

The synagogue was the heart of Jewish culture and religion for most Jews. While sacrifices could only be performed at the temple, the synagogue had arisen in the centuries after the deportation of the Jews of the Southern Kingdom of Israel in 586 BC. The destruction of the temple at that time and the diaspora of the Jews over the next two centuries meant that small groups had to gather together informally both to hear the Scriptures and to pray corporately. Eventually it was understood that any Jewish community with at least ten adult males could form a synagogue. Synagogues were ubiquitous throughout the eastern part of the Roman world. In Galilee particularly there must have been hundreds, since records indicate at least 240 villages and towns. In Jerusalem alone there were 480 synagogues.

Most synagogues did not have a full-time rabbi, so a layman known as the *archisunagogos* was responsible for selecting those who would perform the service. This would include not only those who led prayer, but also, those who read from the Torah and those who taught. He was usually head of the elders and functioned with a very protective sense of ownership and authority.

Jesus had begun His ministry frequently teaching in synagogues. After two years, He emphasized that less, and He focused His attention on His disciples rather than the crowds. In fact, this is the last recorded account of Jesus teaching in a synagogue. While it is impossible to say that Jesus never again taught in a synagogue, clearly His ministry had turned to focusing on His disciples rather than the masses.

We are not told the subject of Jesus’ discourse on this occasion, nor are we told what Scriptures had been read and upon which He, no doubt, elaborated. But it is safe to infer from what followed, that Jesus had gained the attention of all in the room, including both the leader of the synagogue and a woman at the back of the room.

The Conflict with Satan

Luke, ever the physician, tells us that “here was a woman who for eighteen years had had a sickness caused by a spirit.” Giving more details, he continued “she was bent double,” so much so that she “could not straighten up at all” (v. 11). The exact nature of her condition is not stated by Luke. The word he used means simply weakness. But it is likely that the affliction could have been *spondylitis deformans* which is a condition whereby the bones of the spine are formed into one single and inflexible mass. One cannot imagine the pain affecting her nervous system. Even the most basic human functions - eating, bathing, moving about - must have been more difficult than we can understand.

If not demon possessed, she was at the very least under the influence of demonic forces. Satan was, and is, permitted to afflict the saints of God, “then Satan went out from the presence of the Lord and smote Job with sore boils from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head” (Job 2:7). Included in this woman’s suffering was the fact that she must have been a social pariah. Remember that to Jews of that time,

personal tragedy was a consequence of person sin. We can only imagine what the people assumed about her.

There is no reason to not take literally the statement that the woman had suffered for eighteen years. Since it is unlikely that she could have traveled from village to village, those in the synagogue had known her for years. Young adults had know her their entire lives. That she was healed after such lengthy suffering serves as a reminder that nothing is too difficult for our God. If He can heal those who have been afflicted for a long time, so can He soften a heart that has become equally hardened. Let us never despair of our God's power to save souls.

“When Jesus saw her, He called her over” (v. 12). Jesus saw the woman as an opportunity. We ought not forget how Jesus viewed people. He was genuinely compassionate. He was ever sensitive to their needs (both physical and spiritual). Jesus never saw people as obstacles to be overcome, tools to be used, or distractions to be avoided. He saw them as opportunities to serve the kingdom of God. It is worth pausing to reflect how we view people. In the busyness of our lives, people are often the last thing we consider. Though the urgency of His mission was to found a new religion in only three years, Jesus rarely ignored people, and when He did it was for a greater good, not His own personal convenience.

The woman must have been a regular attendee of the services despite her condition, or notice would have been taken of her presence. How commendable was her faith and discipline. Her example shames those who, in perfect health, use any excuse for ignoring opportunities to gather together with the saints of God in fellowship with one another and praise of their Creator. As David wrote,

“I was glad when they said to me,
‘Let us go to the house of the Lord’” (Psalm 122:1)

We must remember that heaven is nothing but a perpetual Sunday. It is a good assessment of our hearts if we are not eager for, and passionate about, our Sundays.

Still, we can wonder if she had heard Jesus was to be teaching in that particular day? Did she go there with hopes of being miraculously healed? In any event, while Jesus taught, she was likely at the back and to the side where women stayed during the teaching. Jesus saw her, and discerned her reason for being there. He called her to the front in words that must have been tender and encouraging. In full view of all, He “said to her, ‘woman, you are freed from your sickness’” (v. 12). Jesus “laid His hands on her; and immediately she was made erect again” (v. 13). She stood upright. The fact that He put His hands on her is not an indication that this was required to perform the healing. More likely, He was simply trying to help the woman stand up, something she had not done for two decades. Her healing was instantaneous and complete. Her healing was permanent. There was no need for time to recover. She was fully restored.

Luke said nothing about the woman's faith. He did not say that she asked, or expected, to be healed. Luke made no mention of her spiritual condition before, or after, the event. Her faith, or lack of it, was irrelevant with regard to the power of Jesus to heal. Luke did comment on her response however, and not surprisingly her reaction was as instantaneous as the healing she had received. She “began glorifying God” (v. 13). She praised God. Of course she did! It was a natural response. But whether it resulted in

lasting faith is not known. And, while one would expect that the entire crowd would have echoed her emotion and burst into songs of praise and rejoicing as well. Sadly, it not so.

The Conflict with Hypocrites

When the astonishment subsided, the ruler of the synagogue was the first to speak. This man was the perfect legalist, insistent upon upholding the law within his limited, but all-important-to-him, domain. The details of his religion mattered most of all. He was an excellent example to all of the error of putting second things first in matters of faith. Rather than join in the rejoicing over what had occurred, he was “indignant because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath” (v. 14). Let us not mistake the cause of his grievance. He was indignant because his authority had been challenged. In his mind, he was in charge of the Sabbath, and this rabbi had acted out of turn.

This man had little real concern for the people under his care. He was typical of the Pharisees who condescendingly thought that the “crowd which does not know the Law is accursed” (John 7:49). He clearly looked at people much differently than Jesus did. Curiously, the man did not deny that Jesus had, in fact, performed a miracle. How could he? The miracle was public and witnessed by dozens. Instead, he chose to be in conflict with Jesus even though the weight of evidence that Jesus was no ordinary rabbi was obvious. As we have seen many times, unbelief was not a matter of lack of evidence. It was never a matter of not enough proof. Jesus had already denounced “the cities in which most of His miracles were done, because they did not repent” (Matthew 11:20). Later Jesus frustratingly predicted that, “if they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be persuaded even if someone rises from the dead” (Luke 16:31).

Though angry with Jesus, the ruler of the synagogue challenged the woman. He did not confront Jesus. He did not address His disciples. Instead, he “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’” (v. 14). What an extraordinary accusation. He chose to attack the woman for being healed! And not willing to simply deal with her privately, he tried to enlist the crowd on his side in an effort to intimidate and humiliate her.

The accusation was absurd. What work had the woman done? She had simply been healed. It was Jesus who had done the healing. She had gone to the synagogue, but obviously that action was permitted. There was no sense in which she had violated the Sabbath. Jesus did not allow the woman to be attacked. Unhesitatingly, He “answered him and said, ‘you hypocrites’” (v. 15). Notice that the word hypocrites is plural, because Jesus is addressing any and all who are in agreement with the leader of the synagogue. There was no room for confusion. A line was clearly being drawn. Jesus was as indignant as the leader of the synagogue.

Jesus continued by pointing out the inconsistency of the argument. No doubt scanning the crowd to see whom the ruler of the synagogue had persuaded, Jesus asked “does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the stall and lead him away to water him?” (v. 15). Of course they all did. No one would leave their valuable animal to die of thirst just because it was the Sabbath. The Mishnah even permitted this ‘violation’ of the Sabbath rules regarding work. Taking their text from Deuteronomy 11:15, “He will give grass in your fields for your cattle, and you will eat and be satisfied” the authors of

the Mishnah argued that since the food for animals was mentioned before the food for humans, it was acceptable to feed and water your animal on the Sabbath.

Jesus thought it ridiculous to suggest that the needs of an animal were more important than the needs of a human. Again speaking to the crowd, He asked, “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?” (v. 16). There was no answer. There could not be. If ever there was a day for doing good works, it was the Sabbath.

The result of the confrontation was immediate. So effective were the arguments, and the person, of Jesus, that those who objected were silenced. Luke stated matter-of-factly that “all His opponents were being humiliated” (v. 17). The leader of the synagogue retreated, no doubt muttering to himself about how people no longer respected the old institutions. But there was more than this. Jesus had persuaded the crowd, “the entire crowd was rejoicing over all the glorious things being done by Him” (v. 17). Interestingly, no further mention is made of the woman. We can only hope that her joyful response to being healed matured into saving faith.

This narrative serves as both a true accounting of a real conflict between Jesus and unbelievers, but also as an illustration of God’s sovereign work in salvation. God passes by those who are self-righteous and chooses those whom He chooses. Those He chooses are humbled and bent over by the burden of their sins. It is they who receive healing. Those who stand erect in their own self-righteousness are left humiliated.

Takeaways

Let us rejoice in our days of worship, and let us recognize that we can demonstrate our love for God by the way we respond to the people He puts in our path.