

Jim Gill

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"Straighten Up"

Jeremiah 1:4-10 Luke 13:10-17 Hebrews 12:18-29

INTRODUCTION TO JEREMIAH 1:4-10

Jeremiah's call is as a young man. Like Moses before him, he tries to disqualify himself because he says he doesn't know how to speak. God qualifies him saying I'll give you the words.

INTRODUCTION TO LUKE 13:10-17

Luke is the only Gospel writer who records this event in the life of Christ. But Luke, being a physician, would have been drawn to a story like this. It is a story of hope and healing and of expanding the family circle to include those who have been left out. Will you please stand for the reading of the word of the Lord from Luke 13:10-17.

Let's pray. Dear Lord, thank you for this your word. Open us up to hear its message and to apply it to our lives. Thank you that we are a part of a kingdom that cannot be shaken. Stir us up to good works so that other may see them and glorify our God in heaven. Amen

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Straighten up! Don't slouch! Sit up straight! Growing up, those were words that I heard often. Can you think of some people today who need to hear those words?

More and more people are getting hunched backs from constantly looking down at screens or down at iPhone. Some are so intently gazing down on what's in their hands that they are walking into poles, into traffic and in one case falling into a canyon. I recently decided to raise my computer monitors so that I'm looking up more than down.

For 18 years this woman had been looking down. The implication is that she had not been born with it. Perhaps it was a calcium deficiency, a spinal injury, scoliosis, or some extreme case of osteoporosis. Whatever the cause, she was permanently stooped over. What Luke is saying here though is that this was not an emergency case. It could have waited till the next day. If Jesus had healed say a child who was burning up with fever and in imminent danger of dying, it would have made perfect sense even to the synagogue ruler. But that kind of healing would have undermined the point Jesus was making. Jesus was purposely and flagrantly breaking scribal law to make a point, and that point was: people are more important than people's rules.

This world gives us rules to live by and tell us that we are moral people so long as we live by those rules, and we will contently live out our lives in meager

existence. But when Jesus comes along and straightens us out and points our heads toward the heavens, suddenly we realize we too are sons and daughters of Abraham. We are a part of a kingdom that is cannot be shaken, but needs to be stirred. We need to be stirred up to straighten up!

This synagogue ruler did not see it that way because he had dehumanized this woman. Once you dehumanize someone, and label them, you can easily dismiss them. Two things happen when you have a legalistic spirit. 1. Your rules rule you and 2. Your rules supersede the wellbeing of others.

Nothing can choke the heart and soul of our walk with God like legalism. When we become rigid in our beliefs it is a definite sign that the Disciplines of the Christian life have crippled US! Does this mean that we do not have to have rules? No. But it does suggest that we must be careful and not let our rules rule us.

Jesus said: The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. Jesus comes to us as the restorer of humanity. God sees each of us as a unique individual precious to him.

Verse 12 says, "Jesus saw her." Lots of people had laid eyes on her. They would step aside so as not to bump into her on the street, but because of her condition they didn't even have to speak to her. She became for them like an object, rather than a person. To them, even though they saw her, she was invisible.

Have you ever been at a reception, talking with someone, and you become aware that he is glancing over your shoulder, scanning the crowd, not really giving his attention to you? It hurts to be ignored, to be treated as second-class. Oh, she's just a waitress. He is just a parking lot attendant. He is of a different race, or status so I don't even have to acknowledge him.

Jesus saw her. He saw this woman doubled over by her infirmity, but he really saw her. He identified with her; he empathized with her pain, her downcast disposition. He said to himself, "Ah, here is my sister, utterly precious in God's sight. What a shame it would be if she suffers even one additional moment if a cure can take place.

Notice in verse 12 and 13 that Jesus announces her liberation before he touches her. He announces she is free while she is still bent over. Notice next that Jesus touched the woman and she was able to straighten up.

God may fix your bad back. Or, God may change your spirit so that even your bad back brings him glory. Remember, St. Paul begged the Lord three times to remove the thorn in his flesh, whatever it was. The Lord's response was, "No, your thorn will not be taken away, but my grace will be sufficient for you... My power will shine forth even more brightly through your weakness."

I can't think of a better example of this kind of attitude than our own Josh Higginbotham. Josh is paralyzed from the waist down. He has lost a leg to diabetes. He has been in and out of the hospital for the last 3 years. When I visited him on Friday he has been transferred from the hospital in Tomball where he had his most recent surgery to a Care Facility that is the nicest Nursing Home I have ever seen. Still, it is a nursing home. Josh has spent more time in hospitals than most of us. His attitude is amazing. His 3 days there around people who do not have all their mental faculties has made him even more grateful for the abilities he still has more than what he does not have. Josh is straightened up.

When I prayed with Josh and Barbara and the Nurse's Aide that was in the room she walked out of the room with me. In the hallway she asked me, "Pastor, the man across the hall is dying and he really needs a prayer, but I don't know how to do that. Would you give him a prayer?" I agreed and she took me into the room and said, "This here is a pastor who has come to give you a prayer." I took a few moments to find out his name. I asked him if he had a church and he said he was Presbyterian. I said, "So am I!" He said that he was a member of Windwood Presbyterian. I prayed with him and we closed in the Lord's Prayer. That's when I knew he was a faithful Presbyterian because he prayed, "forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors."

On the way back home I called Windwood and left a message for their pastor about him. Before I got home I got a call from the pastor thanking me for alerting them. They were aware that he was in the facility, but not that he was in that condition.

That Nurse's Aide "saw" the man in the room across the hall. She saw that he needed a prayer. In a facility of hurting people he could have been just another number, but he was not invisible to her.

Never count people out. If they are sick, pray for them. If they are down on their luck, assist them. If they are not up to a task, teach them. If they have a burden, lift it. If they have failed, encourage them.

Jesus provided for this bent over woman what no one else could have.. He healed her. There is no way the synagogue ruler could have healed this woman's back, but the very least he could have done was show her some respect and provide her some dignity. That I think is the lesson Jesus would have us learn. We may not all be healers but we can treat one another with respect.

It was not only the physical condition of this woman that was restored on that Sabbath day. Many scholars point to this text as the place where Jesus restored the dignity of all women. Jesus argues that this crippled woman is of more importance to God than livestock because she is a daughter of Abraham. If you

care enough about your ox and donkey to lead them to water on the Sabbath, how much more should you care about a daughter of Abraham who had been ill for 18 years! With the touch of his hand, Jesus not only restores her health,... but her place in the community.

What Jesus is saying is that restrictions, laws, rules, and institutions can, if we are not careful, keep us from rising to the heights of charity to which we are called.

Philip Yancey, in his book Reaching for the Invisible God, tells of his father-in-law, who was a Bible teacher and a committed Christian. The older man's faith troubled him in his final years. A degenerative nerve disease confined him to bed, preventing him from sharing in most of the activities he enjoyed. In addition to his own illness, his 39-year-old daughter battled a debilitating form of diabetes.

During the most severe crisis, he composed a Christmas letter and mailed it to family members and friends. He expressed his uneasy feelings about many things he had once taught. What could he believe with certainty? The old Bible teacher staked his faith on three realities. Here is his list: "Life is difficult. God is merciful. Heaven is sure." Those three things, he concluded, he could count on without reservation! When his daughter died of diabetic complications the week after he sent out this letter, he clung even more closely to those truths.

There are spirits at work in this world. Which spirit is at work within you? Is it a crippling spirit? Is it a legalistic spirit? Or, is it a spirit of joy? Whichever it is, will make all the difference in your life and in the life of others?

If we really want to be healed, we have to be honest about our condition, and it's hard to be straight with ourselves, especially when, like the leader of the synagogue, we're pretty satisfied with things the way they are. But sometimes, by the grace of God, we are presented with a challenge that calls forth our best. What we discover is that by giving our best we become our best.

A few years ago a doctor published this personal testimony, this confession, in a noted medical journal:

"I considered myself one of the best and the brightest. Having just left a prestigious residency and fellowship program, I thought I was honed to a fine medical edge. My first law of medical practice was soon declared: "A wheelchair outside the treatment room door means trouble and should be avoided at all cost because it means that your skills may not keep things under control.

Nevertheless, I violated that law one day, and after taking a deep breath I stepped over a wheelchair, opened a door and met John. He was a referral from a colleague, and I was silently furious because John, age 14, had cerebral palsy, was painfully deformed and was extremely ill. He had been abandoned by his

parents at an early age, knew few friends and lived in a foster home. And there he was now in my treatment room.

John also had widespread cancer. During the next year, numerous and prolonged hospitalization were required to keep him partially comfortable. He never complained and showed uncommon courage; nonetheless, his care became an increasing ordeal.

Finally, after a particularly frustrating day for the two of us, John grabbed my arm and said, "I'm sorry to be such a burden to you." That night he died.

I've never forgotten John and the lesson he taught me. He taught me that there was more to me than I gave myself credit for being. He taught me that giving my best is to become my best. He taught me that life is full of opportunities to become more. And to think I almost missed it."¹

What is it that God is calling you to do? Again, if you want to know what God expects of your tomorrows, look at what God has done with your yesterdays. God grant us eyes to see how we have been prepared, ears to hear the task that is proposed, and then the faith to realize that God will preserve us for the completion of that task. Jeremiah thought he was too young. He thought he couldn't speak well. But God said, "I'll give you the words."

You may not have a bad back, but we all have some sign of brokenness. We've all got a bad something. All of us have some sign of being fallen, of being sinners in need of God's grace. It could be whining, complaining, fault-finding, a tendency to count problems instead of blessings, a habit of manipulating family members rather than just loving them. God can even cure a fixation with your rear-view mirror; that is, always looking back on some dream that got derailed rather than keeping your eyes open for a new dream God wants to show you. It could be a tendency to depression or an inability to get along with people. It might be having a spirit of resentment, a pessimistic attitude, a selfish streak, or a manipulative manner with other people. In our natural state, all of us have some kind of "bent" no matter how straight we may stand.

God wants us to straighten up. Jesus Christ came into this world so that we might have life and have it more abundantly. Bring your bent self to him today, whatever it is. Whatever is bent in your life, bring it to the Lord and let him help you ... straighten up.

1 Straighten Up by Michael D. Powell