

Rio Rancho Presbyterian

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Rio Rancho, NM

August 24, 2025

FREED AND HEALED

Luke 13: 10-17

When I was in elementary school in the 1950's, Oral Roberts came to my hometown of Tyler, Texas. He rented an old coliseum sometimes used as a professional wrestling venue for a revival and healing service. Back then Oral Roberts did not have a university in Tulsa or a television show. He was a traveling evangelist and healer and quite the celebrity across the Bible Belt. An advertising blitz on the radio invited all those with infirmities to come and be healed.

Well, the Oral Roberts buzz caused quite a stir in my little town. Indeed, people from all over East Texas flocked to the old coliseum to be healed by this famous preacher. Several of my classmates went and reported how Oral Roberts laid his hands on all kinds of people-even those with polio. Some dramatically took off their braces and walked off stage under their own power or so it seemed. Oh my! Now that was sensational news, especially in those years

right after Dr. Jonas Salk had introduced his polio vaccine against that dread disease.

Now I never saw Oral Roberts in person, but I remember vividly the controversy his healing service generated at my school. There was a small but vocal pro-Oral Roberts faction who considered him a gift of God. But the majority, the anti-Oral Roberts faction, considered him a charlatan. Now this was pretty heady theological stuff for a young boy at Birdwell Elementary School in the 1950's.

I suspect Jesus generated similar controversy when he came to the small towns of Israel. His reputation often preceded him. Now people lined up either for or against this traveling preacher and healer from Nazareth. Some questioned his power to heal. Some even charged that he was in league with Satan to do such wonders. Others may have thought of him as Asklepios, the Greek God of healing. Some may have considered him like Pharoah's magicians who replicated Moses' first three miracles in Exodus 7 and 8. And many just weren't sure what to make of him.

So when Jesus goes to a synagogue on the Sabbath, there must have been quite a buzz. Luke tells us that Jesus was teaching when he observed a woman bent over. Perhaps she suffered from curvature of the spine, that is, scoliosis. That debilitating condition

had afflicted this daughter of Israel for eighteen years. Jesus must have felt compassion for her. So he calls out to her, “Woman, you are freed from your infirmity.” Then Jesus lays his hands upon her and immediately her back is healed. She stands up straight for the first time in eighteen years. What a moment!

Now people who have endured such a condition can only imagine how wonderful that felt. Or anyone suffering from any kind of back issue could only wish to be so healed. To stand erect again, without pain! This woman freed and healed does exactly what you would expect. She rejoiced and praised God. I suspect she was leaping for joy. And so was everyone else in the synagogue.

Except for the leader of the synagogue. Instead, he became indignant. And why? Because Jesus dared to heal on the Sabbath. This leader considered Jesus’ miracle to be work on the Sabbath, something strictly forbidden in the Law of Moses. The four Gospels report that Jesus performed seven different healing miracles on the Sabbath. Those healed suffered from various infirmities: withered hand, unclean spirits, fever, swelling of the feet, paralysis, blindness, plus the woman’s curvature of the spine in our text.

Now the issue for the leader of the synagogue is working on the Sabbath, the seventh day of rest. He rebukes Jesus with words that

reflect the Fourth Commandment: “There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, but not on the Sabbath day.” He was not opposed to healing, just healing on the Sabbath.

I remember driving around West Jerusalem with an Arab Christian one Saturday in 1994. He pointed out to us entire neighborhoods blocked off to traffic by Orthodox Jews. These deeply religious folks felt that driving a car was a violation of the Sabbath law. Our driver told us that driving a car on the Sabbath in those neighborhoods put your life at risk. People would throw stones at your car, showing how serious this was to Orthodox Jews in Jerusalem.

The issue of doing work on the Sabbath was a very serious matter in the early church as well. Should they abide by the Sabbath regulations or were they freed from such injunctions? Surely the stories of Jesus healing on the Sabbath were intended to exempt the early church from those regulations. Especially since Jesus insisted that the Mosaic Law allows people to untie farm animals on the Sabbath to lead them to water. That is, work was permissible when life was at stake.

Thus Jesus did his work of healing to give life to this woman in need, even on the Sabbath. In an earlier controversy, Jesus insisted that the Sabbath was made for humans, not humans for the Sabbath. In other words, the Sabbath should be life affirming, not simply a legalistic requirement.

The most amazing thing about this story is that Jesus frees and heals this hurting woman. The second most amazing thing is this- Jesus honors the Sabbath by affirming life on this sacred day. And the people in the synagogue who saw it rejoiced at what happened to this woman. And I can imagine they all shouted out, “Le chayim”. Which means in Hebrew: “To life!”

So a woman is healed in the synagogue on the Sabbath. She comes to worship God, and her life is fundamentally changed for the better. And isn't that what we all hope for when we come to worship? That our lives will be fundamentally changed for the better? In truth, every Sunday morning we pray for healing in this place of worship. Healing of every kind of infirmity. Healing of body, mind, and spirit.

Over the years some of the suffering folk you have prayed for have indeed been healed, by the grace of God. And others, sadly, have not. Some infirmities and conditions have lingered on for

years-not unlike Paul's thorn in the flesh. And not unlike that cup which Jesus prayed would be removed from him in the Garden of Gethsemane. How well we know that sometimes our prayers are not answered as we had hoped.

Some of you know what it is like to be bent over for eighteen years in persistent pain. Sometimes in the providence of God we are healed. Surely all of us have gone through hard times and have come through it all. All of us want to be whole in body, mind and spirit. But we are sometimes reluctant to pray for healing, as though such a prayer would be an imposition upon God. Sometimes we have theological reservations about the whole idea of God healing a particular person. I remember those heady theological debates in elementary school about Oral Roberts.

When I was serving University Presbyterian Church in Austin during the 1980's, I had a doctoral student in philosophy who was a member of that congregation. One Sunday that student named Richard Baker was asked to lead a church school class for which he was woefully unprepared. This was quite unlike Richard who was an excellent teacher even then and later was an outstanding college teacher himself.

Well, who showed up for that church school class but Dr. Alan Lewis, a brilliant professor of theology at Austin Seminary. Richard was in fact taking a class from Dr. Lewis at the time. So Richard was really in a bind, totally unprepared and facing his theology professor.

Now Dr. Lewis had been diagnosed with lung cancer. Already one cancerous lung had been removed, but he was bravely continuing to teach despite his weakened condition. Richard began by asking the class their opinion of intercessory prayer. (By the way, that is what some teachers do when they have nothing prepared!)

Dr. Lewis raised his hand and said to the entire class: “You know, Richard, I never pray to God to cure my cancer. I pray that God will give me strength to endure it. I also pray that God will give that same strength to my wife and family. But I never pray for physical healing. God’s will is God’s will.”

When Dr. Lewis finished speaking, Richard told me later that he was thinking to himself, “This is beautiful. This is profound. I have absolutely nothing more to say in response.” Thankfully, for Richard, a moment of appreciative silence followed Dr. Lewis’ remarks.

Then a voice rang out from the other side of the classroom. “You’re just wrong about that, Alan, just wrong!” It was Jane Spragens, a beloved pillar of that church. She had taught at the

University of Texas for many years and was the widow of a seminary professor.

After people got over their shock, Jane explained what she meant. “If God can affect you spiritually, then surely God can affect you physically as well. And, Alan, I want you to know that although you may not be praying for God to cure your cancer, I sure am. And I know a lot of other folks here and at the seminary are also praying for you.” That was one of the most amazing moments in a church school class I have ever seen. Where people of great faith and great intelligence expressed deeply divergent views, all in love.

Now here is the rest of the story. Jane Spragens and many others who loved Dr. Lewis prayed for him faithfully, even to the very day he died. And people continued to pray for the Lewis family long after Alan was gone. And that family was helped and encouraged immensely in their grief by a loving seminary and church community.

Friends in Christ, amazing things happen when people gather to worship the living God. A woman bent over for eighteen years encounters Jesus and she walks away freed and healed. Some are upset but most rejoice. Others come to worship and end up in a classroom where strongly held convictions about God are

expressed. And through it all, we continue to pray for each other and love each other.

Now I admired and loved Alan Lewis, one of the best theologians I have ever heard. Nevertheless, I think Jane Spragens was right. If God affects us spiritually, certainly God can affect us physically. Surely God is the God of healing, the Holy One who cares about our body, our mind, and our spirit. And by the grace of God, we are at times healed of our infirmities and our diseases. And for that, we can only thank God with grateful hearts.

It happened long ago. It still happens. And it will happen yet again. People come to worship and they are freed and healed. In body, mind, and spirit. All by the grace of God. That's the wonder of it all. The sheer blessed mystery of it all. Thanks be to God. Amen.