Setting Captives Free

Passage: Luke 13:10-17 | From the series: Luke
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Date: Oct 25, 2026

Good morning, church! It's great to be back with you once again. My name is Dan. I am one of the pastors here, and it is my privilege to open to the Word of God for us today.

We will be in Luke 13:10-17, where we approach the halfway point of our journey through the Gospel of Luke.

One of my favorite movies as a child was the 1993 film *Free Willy*. If you aren't familiar with the story, *Free Willy* tells the story of a bond between a young boy named Jesse and a captive Orca whale named Willy. After learning of a plot to kill the whale for insurance money, Jesse embarks on an epic journey to free Willy, returning him to his rightful home in the ocean.

This movie had such an impact on my family that we named our hamster Willy so that if he ever escaped from his cage, he could call him Free Willy.

There is something about the quest for freedom that makes for a great story. From Free Willy to Braveheart to some of the stories that have shaped our nation, we are all drawn to the hope and the promise of liberty.

Today we will see that the gospel story really is a story of liberty. At the heart of Jesus' ministry and mission is the task of setting captives free. He doesn't come first to the captive Orcas. Rather, he comes for the least and the lost, the abused and the abandoned, the physically ill and the spiritually oppressed. In our text for today, we will see that Jesus offers this freedom to us, and he invites us to extend that freedom to others as well.

We will see all of this and more as we dive into our text for today.

The Need for Freedom

Let's jump into Luke 13:10-11

Luke 13:10-11

> *10 Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath. 11 And behold, there was a woman who had had a disabling spirit for eighteen years. She was bent over and could not fully straighten herself.*

Our story, as we see, is set in the synagogue on the Sabbath. This is not the first time in Luke that we have found ourselves in the synagogue on the Sabbath. It is not the second or even the third time that we have found ourselves in the synagogue on the Sabbath. No, this is the fourth time.[1] In each of the other cases, Jesus makes quite a scene. So as we hear that Jesus is in the synagogue on the Sabbath, we are grabbing the popcorn and settling into the couch because we know we are about to watch a show.

You may remember the first time Jesus showed up in the synagogue on the Sabbath, back in Luke 4. This is the passage where Jesus defines what his ministry is really all about. Jesus enters the synagogue, picks up the scroll, and reads the words from Isaiah 61, recorded for us in Luke 4:18-19:

> *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 at liberty those who are oppressed,*
> *to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.*

Did you notice the emphasis that Jesus placed on liberty? To proclaim liberty to captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed. Bringing liberty to captives is the heart of Jesus' mission.

Why is this important for understanding our passage in Luke 13?? Because – here it is – in Luke 4, Jesus defines his mission as the Messiah. In Luke 13, Jesus is about to *demonstrate* his mission. In Luke 4, Jesus tells us that he came to proclaim liberty to the captives. In Luke 13, Jesus actually does it.

And he begins with an unlikely and unexpecting woman. This woman, we are told, had a disabling spirit for eighteen years. Later, Jesus will describe her as someone bound by Satan for eighteen years. She has been held captive by Satan for eighteen long years. We don't know exactly what this means. Perhaps she was possessed by a demon. Perhaps she was oppressed by a demon. Perhaps this is just a description of someone who lives in a fallen world ruled by the prince of this world and suffers under the consequences of sin. Whatever is the case, we are told that her spiritual captivity has a physical manifestation: she was bent over and could not fully straighten herself.

Imagine, eighteen years without being able to stand up straight. Eighteen years without being able to look someone in the eye. Eighteen years without being able to work a normal job. [1]Eighteen years of suffering under this physical condition that almost certainly would have left her without work, without money, without a husband, without social status, and without physical comfort. This woman would have been down and out in every sense of the word—captive to her physical condition, isolated from her community, oppressed by Satan.

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[1]See Luke 4:16-30; 4:31-37; 6:6-11.

She was the kind of person that the world writes off.

And she was the kind of captive that Jesus came to set free.

Let's see what happens next. Luke 13:12-13:

> *12 When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said to her, "Woman, you are freed from your disability." 13 And he laid his hands on her, and immediately she was made straight, and she glorified God.*

When Jesus saw her, he called her over. When Jesus saw her… he called her over.

A few days ago, Linzy and I got back from a trip celebrating our 15th wedding anniversary. One day, we were walking around a ritzy part of the Island of Capri off the coast of Italy. Designer shops lined the streets. People everywhere were dressed well and looked like they belonged here. But one woman stood out. While everyone around us was dressed well, she was dressed in another level of luxury. Linen dress. Fancy hat. Designer shoes. And the way she walked was hard to describe. It was half the speed of anyone else—slow, methodical, more like she was floating than actually walking. I don't know how else to describe it other than to say she walked like a princess. Indeed, after some online sleuthing, we figured out that she was in fact a princess: Princess Alexandra of Hanover, a descendant of royalty in both Britain and Monaco.

As soon as we saw her, we knew she was someone. You could just tell from the way she carried herself. She didn't go in any stores. She didn't have her phone out to take pictures or answer texts. It was as if she was there just to be seen.

Quite the contrast to the woman in the synagogue on the Sabbath. She was not there to be seen. In fact, people almost certainly looked right past her, excluding her from relationships and isolating her from community.

But not Jesus. He SAW her. We could spend the next 20 minutes right here, but instead let me just say this: There are probably people in your life that you look at every day but never truly see. Jesus sees people. He notices them. He treats them with dignity. He loves them. Let's be people who do the same.

Jesus saw this woman, and he called her over.

Jesus could have taken her to the corner of the synagogue to heal her in private and avoid making a scene. But remember why Jesus was here in the synagogue on the Sabbath? He was here to teach. And this woman was about to become his living sermon.

"Woman," he says, "you are *freed* from your disability." Notice, Jesus does not say, "Woman, you are healed." He says, "Woman, you are *freed*." Freed from what? From her disability, yes. But more than that. In this healing miracle, she is freed from all of the bonds that held her captive—her physical disability, her shame, her social isolation, and her spiritual bondage. All the pain and shame and loneliness and oppression—Jesus speaks into it all and says: Woman, you are freed.

Then Jesus touches her. And for the first time in 18 long years, she stands up straight. Immediately Jesus' words come to pass.

Now, you may not be here today after being hunched over for 18 years. But perhaps you also find yourself in bondage. Perhaps there are things in your life that are holding you captive, in chains, imprisoning you.

The power of a secret sin that you can't seem to shake. Lies about yourself, others, or God that hold your mind captive. Shame about who you are, what you've done, or that regrettable part of your past. Or the pressure of a demanding job, an overbearing boss, or a never-ending workload that weighs you down and steals your peace. You may not be suffering under a debilitating physical disability, yet the reality for all of us who live in a fallen world is that we fall captive to all of these things and more.

But Jesus came to set the captives free. He doesn't want you to walk with a limp. He doesn't want you to live bent over for 18 years. He doesn't want you to be crushed under the weight of sin and shame, lies and deception, pressure and idolatry. No. Jesus came to bring liberty to the captives.

So here is what we must do: **Look to Jesus for liberation.** In the face of whatever it is that is holding you captive, look to Jesus. It is his joy—it is his mission—to set captives free. So wherever you are in bondage, in the face of whatever is holding you captive, look to Jesus. To unload you from your burdens. To restore your life and your health. To be the person that God created you to be: someone truly free to give and receive love in relationship with God and others.

That is what Jesus wants for you. And that is what Jesus can do for you if you will look to him.

Freedom for Others

Well, as we have come to expect when Jesus shows up in the synagogue on the Sabbath and performs a miracle, not everyone is happy with the result. This time, the unhappy party is the ruler of the synagogue. Let's see what happens. Luke 13:14:

> *14 But the ruler of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath, said to the people, "There are six days in which work ought to be done. Come on those days and be healed, and not on the Sabbath day."*

After she was healed, the woman glorified God. But the ruler of the synagogue became indignant.

What is his complaint? It's not that Jesus healed the woman. It's that it happened on the Sabbath.

As we have seen before, the Pharisees had strict rules about what did and what did not constitute work on the Sabbath. In fact, they had identified 39 types of work that were prohibited on the Sabbath. Interestingly, healing people was not on the list. In fact, nothing that happens here is explicitly forbidden in the laws of the Pharisees. So what is this guy so upset about?

As one commentator put it, "The clash with authority is not over the rules but over *who* rules."[2]

You see, Jesus was establishing himself as the Lord of the Sabbath. The purpose of the Sabbath actually becomes the mission of Jesus. So what is the purpose of the Sabbath?

When the synagogue ruler responds to Jesus, he does so by quoting from Deuteronomy 5, so let's look there. As we do, notice what these verses say about what the Sabbath is for and who the [2]Sabbath is for. Deuteronomy 5:12-15:

> *12 Observe the Sabbath day, to keep it holy, as the LORD your God commanded you. 13 Six days you shall labor and do all your work, 14 but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, you or your son or your daughter or your male servant or your female servant, or your ox or your donkey or any of your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates, that your male servant and your female servant may rest as well as you. 15 You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day.*

According to these verses, what is the Sabbath for? Remembering that you were a slave and that the Lord brought you into freedom. The Sabbath, in other words, has always been about liberty! Freedom from captivity. Release from bondage. When we rest, we declare with boldness that we are not captive to our employers, to the perceptions of others, or the lies of the evil one that would have us believe that our value is tied up in what we accomplish. No, the Sabbath has always been about freedom from the tyranny of the evil one.

And who is the Sabbath for? It's for you, yes. It's for those close to you—your son and your daughters. It's for those below you—-your male servants and your female servants. It's for those you don't even know—-the sojourner within your gates. It's even for *your ox and your donkey.*

In other words, the Sabbath is about freedom for everyone – not just for the privileged and the famous. Not just for the wealthy. Not just for those on the inside. And not just for ethnic Israel. The Sabbath is about freedom for everyone for who looks to God for deliverance. And Jesus, as the Lord of the Sabbath, is the one who came to bring that freedom to its ultimate fulfillment.

So he replies in Luke 13:15:

> *15 Then the Lord answered him, "You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger and lead it away to water it?"*

Remember who the Sabbath is for? Your ox and the donkey. The Pharisees explicitly allowed people to untie their animals and lead them to water on the Sabbath because the Sabbath was meant for them as well. And basic compassion required that you allow a thirsty animal to drink on the Sabbath—that you loose it from its bonds so that it might be restored to life. So Jesus continues (Luke 13:15-17):

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[2]David Garland, Luke, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, 544.

> *16 And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen years, be loosed from this bond on the Sabbath day?" 17 As he said these things, all his adversaries were put to shame, and all the people rejoiced at all the glorious things that were done by him.*

The ruler of the synagogue was willing to show compassion for his ox and his donkey on the Sabbath, but he wasn't willing to show compassion to this woman.

Fifteen years ago, I was on a mission trip to Bolivia to work with some missionary friends, Joe and Denise Holman. We were working in some of the poorest parts of town, building homes for people living on the streets. As we were walking down one street, Joe pointed to some buildings. "Those are the brick camps," he said. "Poor kids are brought to the camps at 6, 7, 8 years old and forced to make bricks for pennies a day. They never make enough money to work their way out. This is where they spend their lives." Just one of countless examples of slavery in the modern world.

Then with genuine sadness, Joe said, "And to think that some people give their time and their money to rescuing stray dogs."

I'm not saying that it's wrong to care for animals. That's a beautiful thing. I'm not saying it wrong to give your time or your money to care for the environment. That's called stewardship, and we are commanded to do it.

But here is what I'm saying: If we care more about rescuing stray dogs or fighting climate change than we do about caring for women and men who have been bound by Satan for 18 years, then we have seriously misunderstood the heart of our Savior.

Because his mission is to set the captives free.

Children captive in the brick camps of Bolivia. Wives and husbands captive in abusive marriages. Under-resourced people captive to unjust political and economic systems. Addicts captive to drugs, alcohol or pornography. People captive to their sin and to their shame – imprisoned with no hope of escape.

Those are the people that Jesus cares for. Those are the people that he came to set free.

So what do we do? We look to Jesus for liberation, as we have already seen, but we also **Help Others Find Freedom in Christ.** We make Jesus' mission our mission. This is what the ruler of the synagogue missed. We allow his compassion to shape our compassion. We must pray that our hearts would break for the things that break his heart until we cannot help but join him in his mission of setting the captives free.

If we want to be like Jesus, we must help others find freedom in him.

So let me ask you this: Who in your life have you failed to see? Coworkers, neighbors, people on the street? Who have you failed to see?

And who is the Lord moving you toward in compassion? Don't resist his invitation. Join him in his mission.

Finding Freedom

We have heard the story from Luke 13. In our last few moments, I want to give us an opportunity to enter the story—to imagine that you are the one in bondage who walks into the synagogue on the Sabbath and has an encounter with the Lord of the Sabbath. I want to invite you to close your eyes and imagine this scene in your mind.

You are walking down a dusty road, making your way to the synagogue once again. You have made this walk at the same time every Sabbath for years. Others are walking the same path, but you give yourself extra time because you walk with a disability. You are the one bent over, unable to stand tall, crushed under the weight of sin and shame. Pain is all too familiar for you, but you have come to accept it as your fate. The addiction no one else knows about. The shame that feels crippling. The lies that lock you in fear.

You walk into the synagogue. Jesus is there. You've never met him, but you've heard the stories. Healings. Exorcisms. Resurrections. But your story is different. You have been carrying your burden for 18 long years.

You try to keep your distance. Stay in your corner, as you've learned to do. But as you keep your eyes trained on the floor, you can tell that someone is looking at you. Normally, this makes you squirm. Your body tightens reflexively, as it has learned to do after being met with insult after rejection after shameful glance.

But this look is different. No snide remark. No implicit judgment. You can tell that this look is a look of compassion, not condemnation, and you've never felt anything like it.

Jesus speaks: *Come here.*

You are anxious, but you have a strange peace as well. You hobble over to him, feeling more exposed than you have in years but also feeling strangely loved.

My child, he says. *You are freed*. Then he reaches out his hand, not in violence, but with power. He places it on your hunched back—that place of pain and shame, of bondage and oppression—and says, *Stand up straight.*

As soon as the words leave his mouth, you know that your life has changed forever. Your back straightens as your burdens melt away. For the first time in 18 years, you stand tall. For the first time in 18 years, you stand face to face with another. And the eyes that greet your eyes are the gentlest eyes you have ever seen.

Freedom. Freedom from pain. Freedom from bondage. Freedom from sin. Freedom from shame. Freedom to love and be loved. Freedom to know and be known. Freedom to be who God has truly created you to be.

Freedom in Christ.

Jesus, we confess in this moment that freedom is found only in you. Life is found only in you. Lord, we invite you into this space to do the work that only you can do. Bring healing. Bring restoration. Bring freedom. Amen.

Please stand as we come before the throne and speak the name of Jesus over anxieties, over our addictions, and over one another.