

Things Jesus Taught Us (6)

By

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Luke 13:10-17

One of the interesting things about growing up is getting to see how the kids you hung out with when you were little turned out. **There were some kids who, when I was growing up, I thought to myself, “Well, they’ll end up in jail.”** They maybe thought the same thing about me. But they grew into really neat, responsible, caring adults. Then there were people you thought were going to be the President of the United States, but they peaked early and weren’t all that successful. **They have difficulty in their relationships, they’re highly reactive and consequently make poor choices, or they are crippled by one addiction or another.** And it’s always surprising because they showed such promise and potential when they were young.

So it’s interesting to grow older and see how people turn out. I remember this one kid, who was just a great guy. **He was good-natured and bright and everyone really liked him.** He wasn’t a jock or the homecoming king, but people were naturally drawn to him because of his fun, generous spirit. He had lots of friends. **But when he was in college something terrible happened to him.** You know, some people go away to college and start drinking or experimenting with drugs or become sexually promiscuous and it can have a devastating effect on their lives. **We’ve all seen that happen.**

Fortunately, a lot of people to whom that has happened eventually get their lives back on track and rise up and do fine. **We’ve all done things we’re not proud of, but most of learned from the experience and went on to live happy, productive, loving lives.** Some of us even became Quaker ministers. But this kid I knew, the worst possible thing happened to him that can ever happen to an earnest young person. **He got religion.**

Now by that I don’t mean he had a spiritual experience with God where he felt loved and included, deeply connected to God and humanity. **Nor do I mean that he became interested in spiritual matters and added that wonderful dimension to his life.** I mean he got religion. And the religion he got was the kind of religion that made him arrogant and judgmental and had an isolating effect. **When he came home for college break, his friends sensed he’d changed, and eventually no one wanted to be around him, and he began to believe he was too pure to be around anyone else.** I knew him well as a child. We were close, close friends. But now whenever I see him he reminds me, in ways both subtle and overt, that I am a disappointment to him and to God.

There was this man in charge of a synagogue. I suppose the closest equivalent in Christianity would be to say he was the preacher. One Sabbath morning, Jesus wandered into this man’s territory.

By then, Jesus had something of a reputation as a teacher, so the folks there began to ask him questions about God and faith and what it meant to be human. **In the congregation was a poor, stooped-over, chronically ill woman.** She didn't approach Jesus. She didn't ask him to heal her. Jesus just saw her and his heart went out to her, as our hearts go out to people who are afflicted as she was. **So he paused in his teaching and went to her side, rested his hands on her, and said, "You are free."** This little, old lady stood straight up and began thanking God. **Have you ever had something so wonderful happen to you that all you can do is walk around and say, "Thank God. Thank God."** The doctor says the cancer is gone. Your child is spared a terrible tragedy. A check comes in the mail just in time to pay a bill. Thank God!

Unfortunately, this preacher had religion, and he was indignant. **You can almost take it to the bank that whenever anyone in the church is storming around in a huff, they've got religion too.** And this man had it bad. In his warped and twisted mind, healing a person constitutes work, the Sabbath law has been violated, and he is furious. **He knows better than to go directly after Jesus, so he comes at him indirectly by going after the woman.** "There are six days to do work. You should have come on one of those days to be healed. This is the Sabbath. We're not supposed to work today."

You know, there are some religious folks that all they ever do is run around throwing water on the warming embers of goodwill. **Folks who aren't happy until they've made some wonderful act of mercy seem like a cardinal sin.** "You had six days to be healed. You should have come then." You know what I think. I think she'd shown up those other six days hoping to be healed. In fact, I think she'd been showing up for eighteen years hoping to be healed, but this man had never even noticed her. **So the compassion of Jesus stood in stark contrast to the preacher's indifference and neglect.**

So he goes after Jesus, but indirectly, by going after the woman. Now Jesus doesn't play that game. **He doesn't say to the woman, "Tell your preacher this or that...," like we do sometimes when we don't have the nerve to directly challenge someone who's being inappropriate.** We tell everyone but the person with whom we're upset. But Jesus spoke straight to the preacher, and did something rather shocking. He called the man a hypocrite. A Greek word, it meant *actor*. **This man is acting like he's all spiritual and loves God and people, but it's an act.** Jesus called him on it. "You hypocrite. You untie your oxen on the Sabbath to give it a drink. I untied this woman from a burden she's been saddled with for eighteen years. You extend a simple kindness to animals that you won't extend to a human being, then have the audacity to tell us that's how God wants it."

Everyone in the synagogue is watching this little drama unfold, and now they have to decide. **Are they going to get religion or are they going to get compassion?** Will they follow the strict letter of the Sabbath law, or will they remember that the Sabbath law was intended to bless people and when it stops being a blessing, it can be laid aside? **Jesus is talking to the preacher, but he's also asking the people to choose what kind of community they're going to be.** So he's creating a crisis, making folks think about their ultimate values. You know what he's really saying? **He's saying, "I know we've always done it this way, but that way isn't working for us anymore. It's made us hard and indifferent to human need. We have to celebrate Sabbath in a new way around this place."**

Why is that the first time a church or synagogue does something and it goes well, we have to keep doing that very same thing the very same way forever and ever? **Before long we forget why we're even doing it, but we must do it just that way.**

Our unthinking commitment to regulations and customs, our unyielding insistence that rules and procedures must be followed is so ingrained, we can't even help a stooped over woman without someone getting mad about it.

When I said my old friend got religion, what I meant is that he is utterly incapable of exercising any compassion outside his narrow view of God. **What makes his religiosity such a difficult habit to break is that he really believes his cold devotion to rules and traditions pleases God.**

This gospel story ends well. The people in the synagogue chose wisely. Luke tells us that "all the people rejoiced at the glorious things that were done by Jesus."

One day we're going to have to choose. **This crisis visits us all.** We're going to have to decide whether man was made for the Sabbath, or whether the Sabbath was made for man. We're going to have to decide whether the God we worship cares more about rules or compassion. It'll catch us by surprise. **We'll have the best of intentions, we only wanted to be faithful, but all of a sudden there's this woman who's been suffering for eighteen years and it seems we've overlooked her.** Lord, how did that happen? Well, it happened because we got religion, but didn't go that extra little bit to get compassion.

Lord, help us always to love mercy more than law.