

## **A Seed and Leaven** **Luke 13:10-21**

I don't know about you, but I've been feeling pretty overwhelmed for a long time by the way things are going in our world. I remember being pretty carefree and happy when I was younger, but that's been slowly pressed out of me over the years and replaced with a heaviness and burden as I see sin and darkness and foolishness and self-indulgence and godlessness seeming to just grow and grow and grow.

Along with that I see all kinds of problems – brokenness and dysfunction in families, desperation in our schools, manipulation and division in government, vulgarity in media, skyrocketing costs for healthcare, housing, transportation, food. There are so many problems that are so deeply rooted, I just expect things to get worse.

It feels like we're in a sinking ship (Picture), and the holes keep getting bigger. There's this dark cloud overhead that won't go away. As much as I wish I could just ignore what's happening and try to live a happy life, I realize these things aren't going to go away and they're having a real effect on me, my family, and friends.

I know that many of you are feeling it too and the question I think we ask ourselves is: Is there anything we can do? Is there anything that can actually turn things around? If you look around, you can see we're not the only ones feeling this way. Most people see major problems in our world and throughout society people are doing all kinds of things to try to make a difference.

Many think government is the answer – if we can just get the right people into office and change public policy things will get better. Others try to make a difference by forming community organizations to address a particular problems. Efforts are being made, but the ship is still sinking. Changes in elected leaders and public policy only turns things around for a few years for one side or the other, but the weight of darkness keeps moving in and the ship keeps sinking. Community organizations are doing great things to address particular problems and provide support and relief, but there are always new and bigger holes forming, and the ship keeps sinking.

If the power of government and efforts of thousands of organizations can't turn things around, is there anything we can do? Is there anything that will work, or should we throw our hands up and gut it out the best we can?

The passage we're going to study today really encouraged me this week. I was actually just going to skip over it and move on in our study, but when I came back to it one more time, a light turned on and I saw something in it that gave me hope and I'm hoping it will do the same for you.

I think the people Jesus was ministering to probably felt even worse than we do when it came to the condition of their society. They were under an oppressive world power, a corrupt local authority, manipulative religious leaders, higher taxes, fewer opportunities, harsher consequences, worse health care, and more. They were discouraged and overwhelmed. But Jesus was making a difference and did something one day that brought hope and showed them things could change. I want to look at what he did and some parables he taught to refresh our hope and renew our spirit and give us a direction to go that will make a real impact.

This is the last recorded incident of this phase of Jesus' ministry in Judea. After what we study today, he makes a brief trip to Jerusalem and then heads to the region of Perea, east of the Jordan River, where he ministered for the final months leading up to his death. In this incident he is at a synagogue, teaching on the Sabbath, when he sees a woman who was bent over and deformed. And that's where things get started.

Read Luke 13:10-17.

*<sup>10</sup> Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath. <sup>11</sup> 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. <sup>12</sup> When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said to her, "Woman, you are freed from your disability." <sup>13</sup> And he laid his hands on her, and immediately she was made straight, and she glorified God. <sup>14</sup> 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." <sup>15</sup> 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? <sup>16</sup> And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen years, be loosed from this bond on the Sabbath day?" <sup>17</sup> 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.*

This would have been a great situation to be part of. Not only was a woman healed, but when the religious leaders tried to condemn it, Jesus got in their faces and put them in their place.

I want us to notice a few things in these verses. First we see two examples of major problems in that society. One was physical suffering. They didn't have doctors, hospitals, and medicine like we have today, so there were all kinds of physical maladies and major health problems that went untreated. One of the primary things Jesus did during his years of ministry was to bring healing to alleviate all the suffering. He spent many long days healing people as crowds flocked to him to find relief. The woman in this story is just one example.

Another major problem was the oppression of the religious leaders. We've seen enough stories throughout our Luke series to know that the corruption and manipulation of the religious leaders was widespread. There weren't just a few synagogues that had some bad apples – the whole system was corrupt and leading people astray. And because religion was so central to their society, this was an overwhelming problem.

These problems are a little different than we have, but they show us that there was a cloud hanging over people's heads that was similar to what many of us feel today.

But there's another thing this story brings to light. Notice what Jesus identified as the real problem behind the woman's physical deformity – it was a disabling spirit. He said that Satan had bound her for 18 years. I don't know how common that was and I don't think every health problem was caused by an evil spirit, but I do know that a huge portion of Jesus' ministry included both healing diseases and casting out demons and I assume there were many situations where they were tied together.

I also believe there was spiritual darkness at work behind the corruption of the religious leaders. Jesus doesn't say that directly in this passage, but there are other passages that teach of a spiritual root behind the evil actions of men. On one occasion Jesus said to the scribes and Pharisees: *"You are of your father the*

*devil, and your will is to do your father's desires"* (John 8:44). It says in 1 John 3:8: *"Whoever makes a practice of sinning is of the devil, for the devil has been sinning from the beginning."* And Ephesians 2:2 tells us that it is the spirit of the prince of the power of the air that is now at work in the sons of disobedience.

So what I'm seeing in this story is not just the physical and visible problems, but the spiritual problem behind them as well. Jesus wasn't just dealing with a disease or some corrupt religious leaders, he was dealing with spiritual forces of evil in the kingdom of darkness. I don't believe there's a demon behind every bush or that every problem in our world is directly related to an evil spirit, but I do believe that there is a spiritual kingdom of darkness at work in our world and in our nation that is the primary root behind the corruption and sin and foolishness and greed that is leading to the overwhelming problems we can see. Paul teaches us in Ephesians 6:12: *"For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places."*

This means that if there is a spiritual root behind the problems in our world, the answer to solving them isn't going to be through addressing just the visible or physical issues. The solution can't ultimately come from government or community organizations. There has to be a spiritual solution to the spiritual problems. And that's another thing we see in the story we looked at.

The solution to those problems was the power of God demonstrated through the ministry of Jesus. When he laid hands on the woman who was disabled for 18 years, she was immediately healed. And when he spoke truth and exposed the evil and corruption of the religious leaders, they were put to shame. The power of God defeated the kingdom of darkness and then there was real hope and real change. The people rejoiced because they saw a power at work that could actually overcome the problems in their world.

After these things happened, Jesus told two parables to explain what was going on.

Read Luke 13:18-19.

*He said therefore, "What is the kingdom of God like? And to what shall I compare it?"<sup>19</sup> It is like a grain of mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his garden,*

*and it grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air made nests in its branches.”*

What Jesus just did and what the people just saw and experienced was the kingdom of God at work through the ministry of Jesus. Here, Jesus compares that kingdom to a mustard seed that starts really small but grows into a tree – a tree that the birds, which, according to Leon Morris, often represent the nations of the earth, could nest in. The kingdom of God on earth would start small through the ministry of Jesus, but it would continue to grow until it included people from every nation. It would grow through the power God’s Spirit in God’s people as they continued the ministry of Jesus throughout the world.

So the hope that the people felt on that day wasn’t just a temporary hope that would soon disappear, it was a hope that rested on the assurance that what they saw would continue and it would grow throughout the world.

The second parable is similar but highlights something different. Not only will the kingdom of God grow throughout the earth, but it will have an influence on society wherever it grows.

Read Luke 13:20-21.

*And again he said, “To what shall I compare the kingdom of God? <sup>21</sup> It is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, until it was all leavened.”*

In the same way that leaven has an influence in whatever batch of dough that it’s planted in, the kingdom of God will have an influence in whatever community it takes root in. As God’s Spirit works in and through God’s people, his goodness and righteousness shines forth. The power of God overcomes the power of Satan and the darkness is pushed back. People’s lives change, families are influenced, and that has an effect on the whole community. Not that everyone becomes a follower of Christ, but the light of Christ makes a difference.

Studying these verses gave me hope this week and I wanted to share them with you. I do believe we can make a real difference in our world and should never give up. But change isn’t going to ultimately come through government or community organizations. Those are important and can be helpful, but there is a spiritual

problem that has to be dealt with. Real change can only come as the kingdom of God pushes back the kingdom of darkness.

Therefore, our primary focus must be on the kingdom of God. As Paul was describing his ministry in a hostile spiritual environment, he wrote this in 2 Corinthians 10:3-5: *“For though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh. <sup>4</sup>For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. <sup>5</sup>We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ.”*

We need God’s power to defeat the real enemy. We need to be filled with his Spirit. Therefore we must start by trusting the Lord in prayer – relying on his strength instead of our own. That’s what Jesus did first, long before he went out to do ministry. He humbled himself before his heavenly Father, listened, and obeyed. He only did what his Father told him to do. That’s remarkable and that’s what we need to do.

It’s when we’re dependent on our heavenly Father and filled with the Holy Spirit that we then go into the world to do the things that Jesus did – care for the hurting, minister to the poor, pray for the suffering, and share the hope of the gospel. That’s how we make a difference, by bringing the kingdom of God here on earth, like Jesus did. In that we plant the mustard seed and the leaven that will grow in our community and influence our society.

I truly believe that if we, as God’s people, and citizens of his kingdom, will trust the Lord, pray, and live out our calling, the light of the kingdom of God will shine through us and push back the darkness. That is where we will make a real and lasting impact on our world. That is where we will find hope and be able to turn things around. It’s happened many times before in different pockets of society and it can happen again right here.