

“Straighten Up”

The Joy of Jesus – part #4

Luke 13:10-17

[50] (Words of welcome. Prayer.)

[51] Do you remember the game Family Feud? I didn’t actually do a survey, but let’s pretend one hundred people were asked this question: Name a situation where you would put your hands in the air. Let’s hear some answers.

(Positive – cheering at a game, dancing, celebrating, working out, catching a ball. Negative – in a hold up or an arrest, protecting yourself from falling objects.)

[52] These were my answers. Notice some occur in very positive situations. Others are much more negative.

[53] Now think about putting up your hands in church. How would that feel? Let’s try it and see.

Does this feel more like celebration or surrender? Maybe a little of both? When we lift our hands to praise God, that is certainly a good thing. I didn’t grow up in a Pentecostal church, so I can’t say it was ever expected that we would raise our hands in worship. I wonder, has anyone ever told you, you can’t raise your hands in church? Maybe, maybe not.

The past few weeks we have been talking about joy, expectations, and Jesus. Today I want to focus on one simple question: what is the purpose of praise?

[54] Praise, in and of itself, is natural. I praise my dog when she obeys a command. Why? To encourage and reward her. When we praise people, we also look for the good in them. Positive words are the strongest encouragement we can give someone, especially who is younger, or struggling, or both.

[55] In the church, raising hands is synonymous with praising God. Yet, why do we praise God? God doesn’t need our praise or encouragement. God isn’t having a bad day and needs a greeting card. God is all-powerful and self-sufficient. So why do we praise God? Simple: because we were created to worship.

[56] Psalm 100 begins with these words:

“Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth!
Serve the Lord with gladness!
Come into his presence with singing!
Know that the Lord, he is God!
It is he who made us, and we are his;
we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.” (Psalm 100:1-2, NIV)

In this and many other scriptures, the Bible tells us we were created to worship and praise God. And yet, maybe we don't always do that. Maybe we feel uncomfortable. Maybe our arm muscles are weak. Whatever the case, we restrict our praise, verbally & physically. We mumble “Amen” under our breath, or just nod and smile.

What if God wants us to do more? What if Jesus set us free to praise? Could we make this a more natural reaction? I think we can, and our scripture today can help identify some obstacles to our praise.

[57] In Luke 13:10-17, we find that Jesus is invited to speak at a synagogue, a Jewish house of worship. Sometimes when I am preaching at Painesdale or on vacation, and I ask a guest speaker to offer the message. We have many talented people who help in our worship, and I know this congregation receives them well and with respect. It appears, however, that Jesus was not offered that same courtesy.

There were others who were marginalized and excluded from fully participating in this house of worship. Jesus sees a woman suffering terribly. Even with just a short description in the story, my heart goes out to her. “...A woman was there who had been crippled by a spirit for eighteen years. She was bent over and could not straighten up at all.” (Luke 13:11, NIV)

[58] I've had some minor back aches over the years, but I cannot imagine being bent over double for 18 years. Have you ever met someone with osteoporosis or multiple sclerosis? I knew a gentleman who once fell off a ladder and partially broke his neck. When I saw him at the hospital, he was on a rotating bed for months. He told me, he had expected to die, but instead, he survived and

learned to walk with a cane. To this day, he believes that was a miracle of God’s grace.

Jesus knows this woman’s pain. Never forget this truth: Jesus knows your pain. It doesn’t matter what you’re going through, physically or emotionally. Jesus never forgots, and he never wastes that pain, either.

The tension in this story arises between Jesus, who wants to help her, and the synagogue leaders who don’t. The Jewish leaders are very concerned with their human-made rules of what is allowed on the Sabbath and what is not. The Sabbath, you may recall, is the day of rest mandated by God. (Exodus 20:8-11) In order to carefully keep this law, the Jewish teachers put demanding, legalistic rules as a hedge around Sabbath, so that the people would never even be tempted to work.

Jesus always pushes those human boundaries. In fact, this story is not his first Sabbath healing, nor is it his last. Those in power want to know, “Jesus, are you going to follow our rules?”

[59] Clearly the answer is, no. Jesus tells the woman to come to him, and then he touches her (which is another major taboo) and heals her. This is the woman’s reaction: “...immediately she straightened up and praised God.” (Luke 13:13) You know she was raising her hands and her voice in praise.

[60] Indignant, the worship leader rudely talks over Jesus, saying to the people, “There are six days for work. So come and be healed on those days, not on the Sabbath.” (Luke 13:14) Let me say, thank you for never treating any of our guest speakers like that!

Imagine breaking your arm, but your doctor says, “I’m sorry, I only fix broken arms on Mondays, Wednesdays, and sometimes Fridays.” Ridiculous!

Jesus points out this terrible hypocrisy. “You hypocrites! Doesn’t each of you on the Sabbath untie your ox or donkey from the stall and lead it out to give it water? Then should not this woman, a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan has kept bound for eighteen long years, be set free on the Sabbath day from what bound her?” (Luke 13:15-16) Jesus in effect, says, “Look, you take care of your own animals on the Sabbath. You unbind them from their harness to get them

food and water. This dear woman bound by Satan deserves even more to be free!”

[61] This story makes me ask two questions. First, do we have our priorities straight? My friend John and I were talking on Friday, and he had already seen social media posts complaining that the war in Ukraine would make our gas prices go up. Seriously? People are dying, and we are worried about our wallets. When it comes to raising our hands, or singing out loud, or any other worship gesture in church, are we more concerned about our image or about worshiping the Living God? Raising or not raising hands, why does it matter? What matters is, do you experience the love and healing of God? If you have, not even seatbelts in the pews will stop you from expressing that joy. And when you see someone else praising God, you will find ways to encourage them. It is a natural reaction to an internal transformation.

I like the play on words, “immediately she straightened up and praised God.” Has a parent ever told you, “Straighten up or else!”? Thankfully, that’s not how God works. God does not threaten us. God does not force us to worship him, yet I believe God longs for us to “straighten up” and praise him. Colossians 3:16, for instance, says, “Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts.”

Put gratitude in your heart, and your hands, arms, legs, and voice will follow suit. “Taste and see that the Lord is good,” (Psalm 34:8), and forget about what you think others are thinking. Chances are, they were waiting for someone else to start the wave.

[62] After considering our priorities, there is a second question: Do we overlook people we should help by making lame excuses? I think the Christian Church always faces the threat of legalism. For example: Friday is my chosen Sabbath day, and I try hard to protect it. But there are times when I work for the church on Fridays, like at weddings and funerals. Last week, someone called the church for a ride. I honestly wrestled with my response. I decided to help them. It cost me time, but I felt it was the right thing to do. And God did not punish me for breaking my Sabbath.

Jesus freed the woman to praise God. Are we also free to praise God? Or are we still bound by our expectations, by discouragement, and by our sin? Have words, arguments, and things in the past robbed us of the joy Jesus has for us? Do we say things like, “I’ll get serious about Jesus when...if...” Jesus wants to heal your body, mind and soul now. Would you trust him with your deepest burden and be set free?

We can be a church of healing. We can praise God, not because we have to, but because we want to.

[63] For eighteen years, this woman never gave up on God. And after her healing, she praised God with full abandon, raising her hands in the air. Do you know God that way? Would you love him, trust him, and experience forgiveness from your sins so that you can put your hands in the air and praise him?

The true joy of praising God is greater than anything else we can ever experience in this world. Let’s straighten up, open our hearts, and experience God’s grace.

Please pray with me.

Memory Verse: Psalm 30:2 (NIV)

"Lord my God, I called to you for help, and you healed me."

Reflection Questions:

1. When have you felt rejected by systems and authorities?
2. When have you desired God to heal you?
3. Why is Jesus’ word more powerful than the religious leaders’?
4. Do you delight in the way God heals you, physically, spiritually, and emotionally? Have you praised God in gratitude?
5. Whom do you know that needs healing of body and soul? How can you share Jesus’ message of hope with them?
6. Start a joy journal, daily recording at least three things God is doing in your life.