

## Rhythm & Ritual: Traps or Freedom

*Luke 13:10-21*

**Introduction:** The best traps are those that are sprung when the victim is ignorant or unaware of its existence. Hunters will camouflage the source so that unsuspecting prey will trip the jaws or noose, causing their capture before they knew what happened. Though most of us do not hunt (and even those of us that do usually do catch anything - you know who you are), we are all potential victims of traps, the trappings of a culture and human nature colliding. We face the trappings of advertisers preying on our weakness - that's why we don't grocery shop on an empty stomach or ever go to Target for just one thing. But there are greater trappings among us, and that has to do with our pursuit of the Lord in worship, both in private and public, personal and corporate.

Rhythm's in worship are helpful and can give structure to distraction and helps us differentiate between what is most important (good and best). Some of the rhythm's in our lives are personal study and disciplines, structures for service, and corporate worship. These are all helpful in our pursuit of our love of Christ and love for each other, but each of these can **become traps** when they move from **rhythms** to **rituals**, and the focus moves from an upward gaze to a selfish, man-centered look, and we major on the rhythm itself rather than what it points to.

This section of Luke is Jesus' last record of entering in to teach in a synagogue. This creates a bookend of sorts to Jesus' public ministry as He began announcing His messiahship by preaching in a synagogue (Luke 4:16-21), where He experienced the rejection to the truth from His hometown. Now He enters a synagogue to preach before His final march on Jerusalem, where He'll evade capture and arrest to arrive in Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. This is a "seal the deal" type of event, where He puts the leader of the synagogue to open shame, which in this culture would have been the most appalling and egregious offense. He was pressing the nation, the leaders, and the crowds to **make a decision**: *follow Jesus or continue to trust in the false system of Judaism that had been set up*. A choice to follow Jesus would put them at odds with both the religious and social community around them. One of the chief things they had to turn from was **ritualistic worship that had become hypocritical** - *it feigned a focus on God but had at its source "self"*. This is a hugely important section for us because:

- 1) We don't want to miss the gospel of salvation in all that we do** - In Jesus day of ministry, He interacted with many religious people who were committed to worship, were faithful to all they were supposed to do, and totally missed the truth and reality of salvation in Jesus alone. This is such a huge trap in our church culture: looking at attendance of a church, a knowledge of God, and a semblance of good works as the basis of salvation. This will mean many "moral" and "good" people will be left out of the kingdom.
- 2) We don't want to waste our time - our job is too massive and requires true worship to accomplish** - We recognize that there are important rhythm's God has given us, but we know they can devolve into formal traditions learned by rote without any power to change. The only power we have to love God and others, to sacrifice our lives for each other, and to reach the community with the gospel requires a type of worship that springs from truthful, passionate commitment to Christ which means repentance and dying to self each day. We are not looking to build a church - we are looking to make disciples - and that comes at a cost

So we turn to Jesus' interaction in a synagogue, where His teaching and action culminate in exposing the trappings of ritualistic and hypocritical worship.

I. **Setting Examined: Traps Are Set (10-13)**

A. **The Scene (10)**

Jesus was doing a customary task for any teacher of God’s Word. On the Sabbath day, He was teaching the people who were gathered there. This is something He regularly did in His ministry (Luke 4:16-19), so there was nothing extraordinary about this scene. There were common elements in these services, including the teaching of the Word, prayer, and the reading of the Scripture.

B. **The Woman (11)**

There was a woman who entered in who apparently had worshipped there for quite some time, since her presence did not create a stir at all. This woman had been affected by demonic forces (16) eighteen years prior and she was left in a condition that did not allow her to straighten her body fully (most likely a condition called “*spondylitis ankylopoietica*”, which is the fusion of spinal bones together). She was left with an existence that consisted of staring at the ground, and since she had been affected by demons, was a woman, and now was paralyzed, she was a **marginalized** and **invisible** member of the community there. She had nothing great to offer, so she largely went unnoticed and unappreciated.

C. **The Miracle (12)**

In the midst of this service of worship and all that went along with it, Jesus took notice of this woman. The text is clear that **He approached her**, He called her over, and was willing to interact with her. This woman did not express to Him the need to be healed, did not necessarily exhibit an act of faith (other than faithfully worshipping God in this condition throughout the years), and did not do anything to draw special attention to herself. Yet, Jesus did **two remarkable things**: He laid His hands on her, which showed His great compassion for the hurting and marginalized, and healed her. When Jesus uttered the words, “Woman, you are freed from your disability”, He used the perfect tense, which meant she would be loosed from this condition permanently. This act showed Jesus had power over the demonic realm and power as Lord.

D. **The Glory (13)**

Not only was Jesus action remarkable and unexpected, but this woman demonstrated that she knew exactly what had happened: God Himself healed her! Her immediate response was to give glory to God. Her immediate response was to worship. For the first time in 18 years she could lift her head up, she could view those around her, and she could raise her chin in praise to God. This was a **very worshipful scene**, one that would be expected to be received with cheers, prayer, rejoicing, not to mention a call to the local papers and a picture on Instagram. However, this is not at all what happened. Instead of rejoicing, this miracle was met with **anger and an indignant attitude**.

II. **Hypocrisy Exposed: Trap Is Sprung (14-17)**

The ruler of the synagogue is mentioned here, and his role was that of a layman who was in charge of maintaining the reading and faithful teaching of the law. This man took his job very seriously, and he was not going to let anything disrupt the traditional way that the service was supposed to be conducted. He was **angry** that someone dared change the way that normal operating procedures called for. He clearly showed his frustration by saying, “*There are six days in which work ought to be done. Come on those days and be healed, and not on the Sabbath day.*” Notice that there was not a hint of sarcasm in his statement. He was as serious as he was angry. He also made this into a public debate, since he did not talk to Jesus in private or bring the woman over to talk, but made a public statement for all to hear. This important narrative shows what happens when our **form gets in the way of substance**, when **how**

we do things gets in the way of **why**, and gives us valuable lessons to learn about the trappings of engaging in proper things for an extended period of time.

### A. The traps that religious people sprung (14)

#### 1. *Focus on love of the law over loving people*

The religious leaders were so focused on keeping the law of the Sabbath (Exodus 20:9; Deut. 5:13-14) that they went out of their way to make many other rules and laws so as not to violate “doing work” on the Sabbath, including how many steps their livestock could walk to graze and how far someone was allowed to travel on the Sabbath day. It was not so much that they tried their best to faithfully observe a command of God (for we all strive to do that), but they went to such an extreme that they forgot about God’s purpose of life and obedience. God wants obedience, but not to the exclusion of people.

They were so focused on the artificial minutiae of tradition and manmade rules, that when someone with real needs was right in front of them, they completely missed an opportunity and the point of worship. What they failed to see is the law which ruled them all was the greatest: to love the Lord their God with all their heart, soul and mind, and to love their neighbor as themselves. All the Law and Prophets depend on these two (Matt. 22:34-40). In others words, all the law was to build into these two, not distract from it. The Jewish nation was stuck in the **trap of tradition** over true worship, elevating the rules of man over the Rule of the LORD.

Do we do the same thing? Are we more passionate about our forms, structures, decorations, seating arrangements, and other traditional things that we miss opportunities to minister to the marginalized and invisible who may sit on the other side of the room?

#### 2. *Pursuit of Scripture over the pursuit of Jesus (Jn. 5:38-42)*

This group understood and studied the Scriptures, knew them, observed them, searched them, but when Jesus presented Himself as the fulfillment of these Scriptures, they refused to believe in Him. “*You search the Scriptures because you think that **in them** you have eternal life; and it is they that **bear witness of me**, yet you **refuse** to come to me that you may have life.*” In other words, they knew their stuff, could argue doctrine and finer points of theology, and yet they did not pursue Jesus Himself. This works both ways. I've met those who have a "I just want to focus on Jesus" without the Scripture, which is impossible. Our love of Jesus pushes us to the Scripture, and the Scripture drives us to Christ. To say we can have one without the other is equivalent of saying: I love my wife, but don't like to listen to her, or I will read letters from my wife, but don't really want to be with her. Our love for Scripture and Jesus should absolutely work hand in hand.

Has all of our study helped us know, long for, and magnify Christ, or have we simply known more about the Bible?

#### 3. *Value of tradition over compassion*

This group of people loved the way that their worship was conducted, they had thought hard about how to do it, how to fine tune the process, and what the best way fulfill OT law was. They liked that every week they would have the same routine, they knew where the next reading of Scripture would come from, and when the next special Day was approaching. However, they got caught up in these traditions as ends in themselves and missed the opportunity for compassion. Jesus demonstrated the difference.

He was able to function in the midst of form, and yet He was always looking for ways to exhibit compassion with people. Again, He noticed this woman, He was proactive, and He was willing to break from tradition to show love in action.

This is important to remember when evaluating our life and busyness. Are we so busy pursuing structures and studies that we miss actually interacting with people. To love people takes time, presses into our margins, and is often by nature not efficient. Do we have to freedom and wisdom to be committed to rhythm's but a willingness to move away from those when people are in need, without causing this to be a habit or pattern of neglecting the most important things (**see Hebrews 10:24-25**)

Do we value our traditions more than reaching out to people? Do we love the way we do things more than demonstrating a willingness to go outside of our own "comfort zone"?

#### 4. *Familiar, formal worship over the heart of worship*

How could someone get to a point and be so heartless that they recommend someone be healed from an 18 year old infirmity the next day, instead of rejoicing in the healing today? Unfortunately the answer to this is all too easy. This group allowed their form to overtake their substance. They got caught into the routine of life and instead of taking a step back to understand why they were doing the things they were, they let repetition and familiarity to overtake the heart behind their worship.

Do you remember why you are here? Do you have joy in the midst of familiarity? Are you bored by the opportunity you have to worship the God of the universe? I have met far too few people who are driven to do everything in life out of a Biblical reason or conviction. Before we are able to live passionately, we must understand why we do what we do. Why do we work? Why is attending corporate worship imperative? Are we aware that this place is not about me?

#### 5. *Prideful knowledge over softhearted humility*

Finally, this group allowed their study of God's Word to produce prideful puffing up. They allowed the Truth of Scripture to become knowledge instead of living sustenance and valuable nuggets to be unearthed by persistent searching. The study of God's Word, the hearing of messages, the living out of a community should produce softhearted devotion to God as we remember that He called us to Himself while we were yet sinners, and that He saved us through His Son Jesus Christ, and that we are recipients of His grace poured out on us. We worship from an overflow of grace and mercy, understanding our desperate condition before Him.

Has all that you have participated in during your Christian experience caused you to become more humble, or has your heart only been hardened?

#### These lead us to:

**We lack love in all that we do**

**Operating out of fear** *instead of fearless confidence that fears God over people*

**We fear change** *desiring to keep our traditions or admitting we need to change in order to love*

**Identifying with anything except Christ** - *with a position or ministry instead of Christ alone*

**Reveals our idols** *even good things that become ultimate things*

**We hide behind structures instead of getting messy with people**

**We create a "check the box" type of life**

#### **B. The traps uncovered (15-16)**

Jesus responded to the public challenge by getting to heart behind the attack. He argued from lesser to greater in the fact that he reminded all in opposition that they had provisions in their man made rules for oxen and donkey's to allow them to drink on the Sabbath. How much more would a woman, who was a daughter of Abraham (calling to mind the Abrahamic Covenant – Gen 12:1-3; 13:14-17; 15:7-16;

17:1-14) who had been bound by the power of Satan for 18 years. The obvious answer was clear to the crowd. This woman had much more value than mere livestock, and should be treated as such.

### C. The traps turned to joyful worship (17)

This led to two distinct responses: Those who were opposed to Jesus were put to shame, knowing that they were clearly in the wrong, while the rest of the people rejoiced in what was done in their midst. This gave Jesus opportunity to explain the true nature of His Kingdom.

## III. Kingdom Explained: *Trap Is Released* (18-21)

Having just performed a miracle that seemed out of place and left the audience with questions, Jesus answered perceived questions concerning His Kingdom. Instead of using grandiose language about royalty and authority normally associated with a royal Kingdom, He instead employed two pictures from everyday existence that the crowd not only could relate to, it also confirmed the categorical difference that Jesus taught relative to the crowd's perception.

### A. The Kingdom is like a mustard seed

the picture is simple and the comparison is clear, but the meaning is hard to see at first glance. The mustard seed, though not the smallest in the world, is most likely the smallest used in any garden.

However, this incredibly small seed had the ability to grow into a tree/bush that could be between 8 -12 feet high, and tall enough and leafy enough to house nests for birds. The significance of the Kingdom is then two-fold. The Kingdom is:

#### 1. Immense

In other words, the Kingdom at this time, observing both the bearer of the message and the level of action that He took, was underwhelming. There had been no great coups. There had been no assassinations. There had been no vindication. Jesus Kingdom seemed like it was going nowhere fast, especially in light of the fact that he was going to die in a few months time. However, **what seemed so insignificant would become magnificent.** This Kingdom would grow into a world-wide following where normal, everyday, run of the mill people would do courageous things, and would begin to live for an unseen Savior and would love and serve and die for Him. His Kingdom would be tremendous.

#### 2. Open

The second point is that the birds of the air would make their nests there. In Ezekiel 17:22-24 and 31:6, the cedars trees are said to be shade for the birds, and under its shadow lived the nations. In other words, this is at least an indirect pointing to the fact that the nations would be brought into this Kingdom. In the context, Jesus had stressed to the nation that the time to repent was coming to a close (Luke 13:1-9), and the Gentile world (meaning you and me) would be the beneficiaries of God expanding His Kingdom from not only the Jewish nation but to all nations. All who would seek to find rest in the Lord will find it in Christ (Matthew 11:28-29)

### B. The Kingdom is like leaven in bread

The second picture is also simple and to the point. Leaven is much like yeast in that it makes ordinary flour and water expand to the point where bread is able to be made with light and airy texture as opposed to a wafer like texture. Typically leaven is used in negative ways (Luke 12:1, 1 Cor. 5:7), but here, Jesus uses it in a positive way to show the nature of the Kingdom.

#### 1. Is Unseen

If you put leaven in a lump of dough and leave it there overnight, an amazing phenomenon happens. In a short amount of time a small lump becomes a large, usable lump ready for bread making (in this case, enough to feed 150 people). What happens is tangible and observable, but we do not get to see what actually goes on. In the same way, Christ's Kingdom works in unseen, glorious ways, **from the inside out** in man. There is no forced confession, no coercion, and no manipulating servants by the Master. The work happens in the heart of man, and when the heart is changed, anything is possible.

## 2. Is unstoppable

Once leaven gets mixed into dough, there is no stopping it. The same is true about the Kingdom. There is no stopping or thwarting the work of Christ on the earth. In our economy of time and results, it does not always seem that way. However, Jesus never worked along the time-lines man would place on Him. The truth is, Jesus' Kingdom is rumbling to its inevitable conclusion, which is His return, where He will draw His last precious follower into the fold, and then will establish His Kingdom on earth.

These both give us two great, ironic principles of living in light of His Kingdom today:

- Our problem is not that we have come to grips with the truth of the Kingdom and are left wanting, left with boredom, frustration, and small prayers. Our problem is that we have yet to come to grips with the **greatness and nature of His Kingdom**. Its like being content with the pep rally before the game. If all I experienced was people shouting with no action, I would leave and wonder what all the fuss was about, but I would miss the game! We view God's Kingdom in too small of ways, which limits our hope and fervor in living in it.

We must remember that we are living out part of God's Kingdom right now when we live together in a community of believers. What we have now is NOT the fullest expression of the Kingdom, and yet we have been given free access to the King. This means we must make some **hard, clear, decisive, and resolved decisions** individually and as a community. We must decide moving forward how we are going to live in this Kingdom. Are we going to be the grandiose talkers, one week runners, or are we going to commit and discipline ourselves for the long haul.

### Questions for Discussion:

We must remember **why** we do what we do in order to avoid the trappings of hypocrisy and traditionalism.

- What are some of the rhythm's that you participate in individually and corporately as you pursue Christ? How are these helpful? How can these devolve into ritual?
- How do we avoid these traps? What must we do individually to make sure we are truly engaged with Christ properly? Corporately?
- Are you clear about *why* you do the things you do individually, as a family, and as a church? Why is it so important to understand "why" we would do anything? What happens when we are unclear about these things?