

LUKE 13 (10-17)

Have you ever heard someone who's upset about something described as "bent out of shape"? Well, in today's Gospel, Luke 13:10-17, we are going to look at two people who were bent out of shape; one was a woman who was physically bent out of shape and the other was a religious man who was spiritually bent out of shape; one was crippled by a spirit of weakness and the other was crippled by a spirit of legalism and bitterness. Jesus was able to help one of them, but the other one stayed bent out of shape.

One Sabbath Jesus was teaching in one of the synagogues, and 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. Our Gospel says that *"When Jesus saw her, he called her forward and said to her, 'Woman, you are loosed from your infirmity.' And He laid His hands on her, and immediately she was made straight and praised God."* Now, you'd think that her friends, neighbours, and faith community would be delirious with joy over this miracle. But the Gospel goes on to say that *"the ruler of the synagogue answered with indignation, because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath; and he said to the crowd, 'There are six days on which men ought to work; therefore come and be healed on them, and not on the Sabbath day.'" You'll notice that he didn't have the guts to confront Jesus directly, but Jesus had no such hesitation. "The Lord answered him and said, 'Hypocrite! Does not each one of you on the Sabbath loose his ox or donkey from the stall and lead it away to water it? So ought not this woman, being a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan had bound---think of it---for eighteen years, be loosed from this bond on the Sabbath?'"*

So? So, firstly, the bad example of the ruler of the synagogue teaches us that in the life of Christ and His Church, rules are neither arbitrary nor ends in themselves, but are all intended to help free us from sin and draw us closer to the risen Jesus; and when they get in the way of that purpose, we must **not** obey them. In our Gospel, the ruler of the synagogue was absolutely right in saying that the commandment of Exodus 20:8-10 to *"remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy"* and refrain from all unnecessary labour was and remains crucially important to us just as human beings, both spiritually and physically. We need to worship **and** to rest and relax. So, unlike our modern society, we should observe the Lord's Day carefully. But still, as the Lord insists in Mark 2:27, *"the Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath."* So a pressing human need that must be met immediately trumps the rules about Sabbath rest. Sadly, we still have self-appointed religious experts even today, and in Holy Orthodoxy: up-tight legalists who see Orthodoxy more as a set of strict religious rules than as a liberating, joyous relationship with God. Their "Orthodoxy" has nothing in common with the teachings of the Scriptures and the Holy Fathers, and they miss the point of the Church's rules and disciplines.

Take, for example, what the legalist mind-set has done with the fast before Holy Communion. The purpose of that fast is to prepare us spiritually to receive Holy Communion repentantly and reverently, **NOT** to keep us away from Holy Communion. So sometimes, because of illness or advancing age, we cannot keep that fast strictly without doing damage to our health. Maybe we must eat a little something with our morning insulin or just to keep from passing out or whatever. The legalist says, "Keep the fast anyway." But according to Canon 9 of St. Nicephorus the Confessor, such necessary eating must not keep us from receiving Holy Communion.

What the Church actually teaches is that you should fast as best you can, but that unless you are already under penance, you must receive Holy Communion at every Liturgy. Otherwise, according to Canon 9 of the Holy Apostles and Canon 2 of the Council of Antioch, you excommunicate yourself. To stay away from Holy Communion because of an inability---not an unwillingness, not laziness, not sheer self-indulgence, but a real inability---to observe the pre-Communion fast defeats the whole purpose of the fast; and it is not Orthodox. It's a prideful attempt to be wiser than the Church, and it's silly.

The law of God was never intended to tie us down, but to set us free. In Galatians 3:24-25 Paul makes the point that *"the law [of Moses] was our tutor to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith. But after faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor."* But the legalist has a list of rules longer than God's and wants to impose that list of rules and regulations on others. As Max Lucado wrote in *Up Words*, back in 1993, *"Legalism has no pity on people. Legalism makes my opinion your burden, makes my opinion your boundary, makes my opinion your obligation. Nothing will keep a Christian more immature than trying to keep a long list of rules."* The truly Orthodox approach to all rules and disciplines in the Church's life is to look first to their purpose, because, as the Apostle says in 2 Corinthians 3:6, *"the letter [being legalistic] kills, but the Spirit gives life."*

Secondly, let's face the fact that if you and I are not bent out of shape by some problem or suffering or worry or fear today, we will be tomorrow or the next day. Life in a fallen and broken world keeps throwing at us things so heavy that they bend us over with care and concern until we feel like we're being broken in half. What, then, shall we do?

Well, let's look first at the cause of this woman's suffering. Remember that Luke, the writer of this Gospel, is a physician. And he uses interesting words to diagnose her condition. He doesn't use the Greek words that would mean "physical illness, disease, or injury." Rather, in verse 11 he says she had a *"spirit of infirmity."* In verses 12 and 18 Jesus says her *"infirmity"* is not sickness caused by disease, but a weakness arising from her having been *"bound by Satan"* for eighteen years. So what was wrong with her body was rooted in her mind, her emotions, her spirit. It was not her body, but a lying spirit, which had convinced this poor woman that she couldn't stand up. For years, people had told this woman, "Stand up!" And she'd say, "I can't!" "Look up!" "I can't!" "Lift up your eyes!" "I can't!" When asked why not, she would say, "I just can't!"

Well, how many of us have a bad case of the "can'ts?" Stop drinking! "I can't!" Stop looking at pornography! "I can't!" Stop abusing drugs! "I can't!" Stop being bitter! "I can't!" Forgive that person who hurt you! "I can't!" Or maybe you feel the weight of the burdens you have to carry has you doubled over. Maybe worry or anxiety or heartache, pain, frustration, or suffering have you bent out of shape. Maybe you've lost your job, or you've been hurt, abused, or rejected and it seems as if you can't look up. You may be trapped in some sin, or carrying around some deep, dark secret; and you feel bent out of shape. People say, "Just look up!" And your reply is "I can't!" They say, "Just shake it off!" You say, "I can't!"

And that's probably quite true...if you or I are trying to do it all in our own strength. Again and again we have to embrace the joyous truth of 2 Corinthians 12:9, where the risen Jesus tells a discouraged apostle Paul, *"My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness."* And we must give our obedience to the command in Galatians 6:2 to *"bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ."* It is always and only a lying spirit who makes us think there's something so big and so crushing in our life that not even God and us together can handle it, and/or that we can't do something God has told us to do.

That's why Ephesians 4:27 urges us, *"Do not give place to the devil; don't give him a foothold; just don't even listen to the lying snot."* Yeah, OK, we can't do it alone. So? The Good News is that we're not supposed to! Christ Jesus gives us Himself, in all His divine power, and He gives us each other empowered by the Holy Spirit to bear and to lift those burdens we as individuals find so crushing, so that, with the Apostle in Philippians 4:13, we can all shout with joy, *"I can do all things through Christ Who strengthens me."*