

Let's have a little recap:

Last week Jesus gave us the image of a fruitless Fig tree (*best kind of fig tree, I reckon, because I don't like figs*).... But Jesus obviously does like figs, so let's assume that a fruitless fig tree is a bad thing...

And the judgment of God says "It's time to cut it down. I've been coming here year after year (looking for fruit) and there's no fruit to be found." ... So, the judgment of God wants to cut it down (and it would be entirely just, for Him to do so).

But the Vinedresser, is a picture of the **Mercy** of God, and He says, "Give it another year. I'm going to dig around it; I'm going to fertilise it; And let's give this tree, one last chance to bear fruit."...

And of course, the message was, "The people of Israel, have been fruitless". "God has been looking for the fruit of repentance (in His people). He would come looking for it (year after year) but they continued to reject Him. And now they reject His own Son... And so God would be quite within His rights – He would be entirely just, to cut that tree down...

But God (in His Mercy), was giving "more time".

So, that was last week.

Today, we see Jesus (the Vinedresser) at work. Jesus is digging – He's loosening up the soil, and He's fertilising the people of Israel, to draw them to God.

He was:

- healing;
- doing miracles;
- winning victory over Satan;
- shaming His adversaries; **AND**
- exposing the hypocritical, loveless attitudes of the religious leaders...

And, it all takes place at a Synagogue.

On any given Saturday, it was quite common for Jesus to be found, teaching in one of the Synagogues. You see, there was **one** temple (and that was in the religious capital of Jerusalem). But across the many towns and cities of Israel, the local places of worship, were the “Synagogues”.

And Jesus was teaching at one of these Synagogues, when He saw a woman, who, for 18 years, had been bent over. She had a condition that for 18 years, caused her to be unable to straighten herself up.

Robyn’s grandmother (Nanny) (103) is like that. When she’s standing, her view, is her feet. And for many years now, if she wants to look at you, she has to stand side on, and turn her head sideways to see you.

And from the time she was in her 80’s, I remember Robyn’s Uncle Bruce, trying to get his Mum to stand straight, and she just couldn’t...

And so, I don’t have any trouble at all, picturing this poor woman, who’s doubled over, and cannot straighten up.

And many bible teachers have made many assumptions about “what particular medical condition this woman suffered, that caused her to be all bent over”. But you know what? There’s no point to that, because we would only be guessing, and it doesn’t matter anyway...

What we **do** know, is Luke here describes it as a spiritual condition – He said she had a disabling spirit for eighteen years. She was bent over and could not fully straighten herself.

And **Jesus** didn’t use the word “healed”, He used the word “freed”. ¹² When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said to her, “**Woman, you are freed from your disability [weakness/infirmity].” ¹³ And he laid his hands on her, and immediately she was made straight, and she glorified God.**

So, what did Jesus do for her? He **freed** her. And that is an amazing thing. This woman, has been bound by Satan for 18 years. And when Jesus laid His hands on her, **immediately** she was made straight again, and glorified God. **That’s amazing!**

Jesus the Vinedresser, was tending to the Fig tree, digging around the tree, loosening the bondage that Satan had over God’s people... Now, if you saw that miracle happen in this church today, you would give glory to God (Wouldn’t you???)

Well, the woman who had been bound – she **definitely** gave glory to God...

But not everyone was so happy... – especially the bloke in charge of the synagogue....

The Leader of the Synagogue was indignant... The Greek word is ἀγανακτῶν (aganaktōn), which is related to our word “agony”. He was agonised by this – he was filled with grief, that Jesus would dare to do something so outlandish in his synagogue...

What was the problem? Well, the day for worship at the Synagogue was Saturday (the Sabbath). And he was so “**Ohh!!!** How **dare** you do this on the Sabbath!!!”

And he took it out on 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.”

And Jesus turned on this one man, but He uses the plural, when He said “**You hypocrites!**”... So, I believe that at this point, this man represents the whole religious hierarchy/establishment that had been rejecting, and would continue to reject the work of God, in the Son of God, and would continue to keep the people of God, bound.

And Jesus absolutely canes him... “**You hypocrites!**”...

Have you ever wondered what Jesus thinks of hypocrites in His church??? All you have to do is read the Gospels, and you will very quickly find out...

Many Christians are proud of their wit, when someone says, *“The church – it’s just full of hypocrites...”* and they respond: *“Oh yes, but there’s room for one more.”*

Or they respond by saying *“Christians aren’t perfect – we’re just forgiven”...*

And of course, there’s truth in that – we are only saved by Grace – nobody deserves to be saved... And when we come to Jesus, we come, **not** as the holy – we come as the profane, and He **makes** us holy... There is nothing in your past that Jesus cannot wash away with His blood and make you holy.

But the problem is: Way too many, take the grace of God for granted, and they continue to live by the flesh (in all of their hypocrisy), rather than living by the Spirit: Being changed and renewed, into a new creature of righteousness... There is no place for hypocrisy in the church... That is something we must repent of.

But, let’s come back to the Synagogue.

God’s command for the Sabbath, was to keep the day holy, and so, to do no work on the Sabbath... But the way the

hierarchy interpreted that, meant they treated their own animals better than they did, people.

And Jesus uses the language of tying and untying, or binding and unbinding...

“Don’t every one of you (on the Sabbath), untie your ox or your donkey, and take it to water???” (It would be cruelty if you didn’t).

this woman, a daughter of Abraham (That’s a way of saying

- “She’s one of you
- She’s one of God’s chosen people
- this lady, is someone God cares about;
- she is a child of the covenant
 - the very covenant that you’re trying to judge her by)

...And, if it’s OK for you to untie your **donkey**, to take it to water on the Sabbath, isn’t it **more** right for this woman who has been **bound** by Satan for 18 years, to be unbound by **God**, on the Sabbath???

How could they answer that? How could they possibly justify their position/their condemnation / rejection of Jesus???

- you untie your donkey on the Sabbath;
- you untie your ox on the Sabbath;
- And you get up this woman because God untied her on the Sabbath

How could they justify that???

They couldn't...

And so, all his adversaries were put to shame
... and all the people rejoiced...

You see, what Jesus had done, was glorious.

- It was a physical healing;
- It was a spiritual healing;
- Jesus had won a victory over Satan;
- Jesus had set somebody free who had been bound for so long...

But I suspect: A second reason they were rejoicing, is because it is glorious when:

- God exposes hypocrisy;
- God exposes (and when God shames) religious leaders, for their loveless condemnation... “Loveless condemnation”, is the work of the devil – not the work of God...

You see, if the top-dog at the Synagogue had **his** way, that woman would have remained bound by Satan, and she would have remained disabled and bent up...

...Utter hypocrisy...

You see, the Kingdom of God: – It's not a matter of rule-keeping. And the Kingdom of God would become something very different to what they were expecting....

Jesus said: **“What is the kingdom of God like? And to what shall I compare it?”**

The Kingdom of God is something that starts small, and grows big... And He used the image of a Mustard Seed...

Now, if I was wanting an example of something that starts small and grows big, I wouldn't choose a mustard seed – I'd go for a Eucalypt tree. Have you ever seen a Eucalypt seed? Tiny; Miniscule... But they become massive trees...

...

But the thing is:

I've heard this passage preached on a lot (over the years), and I've read many commentaries on it, and the Bible teachers all seem to grapple with the one problem.... They don't seem to know what plant Jesus is talking about... Because a mustard seed does **not** grow into a tree...

And I want you to forget all of the explanations you've heard (over the years), of a mustard seed growing into a tree. I'm going to talk to you today as someone who actually knows a little bit about agronomy. I don't know much, but I do know a little bit about farming.

Every agronomist/horticulturalist/farmer, knows that a mustard seed does not grow into a tree.

A mustard plant is a brassica – they usually grow to about waist height, or if the crop is sparse, they might grow to chest-height or head-height at most...

And so, all these bible teachers are trying to make sense of this, and they come up with these suggestions:

- Maybe the locals refer to a particular tree as “a mustard plant”?; or
- Is it the particular type of mustard that grows into a shrub that is big enough for birds to nest in?

And in the past, I’ve sort of assumed the latter (because that’s what I’ve heard regurgitated over and over again) – it’s referring to something that grows into a small shrub...

But now I’m convinced, that this is the very point that Jesus is making: Something little, that grows into something big — It grows into something **unexpectedly** big.....

The point is, the Kingdom of God is something that starts small, and those who were watching, probably never expected it to go anywhere... But it grows **big** (and unexpectedly big)... And we’re given the image of a tree. **and the birds of the air made nests in its branches.**

The product of the Kingdom of God, is an image of:

- peace;
- security;
- place of shelter;
- place of welcome, where you will feel you are home...

But at its beginnings, it was small / seemingly insignificant, and expected to come to nothing,, but it grew...

You see, the messianic expectations of the day, was that the Messiah would turn up, and the Kingdom of God would **instantly** be there (in all of its glory and grandeur), and they'd give the Romans a flogging, and they'd have military victory and political reign....

Jesus turned all that on its head...

- peace;
- security;
- shelter;
- welcome;
- belonging;
- starts small;
- grows unexpectedly big...

You see, the woman came bound. And she was set free. And when you come to Jesus, you may come bound, but in the Lord Jesus – in the Kingdom of God, we find:

- peace;
- security;
- freedom;
- release;
- shelter;
- welcome;
- belonging;
- starts small;
- grows unexpectedly big...

And if that hasn't been your experience, then you haven't yet experienced the Kingdom of God...

And Jesus gave a second image:

"To what shall I compare the kingdom of God? ²¹ It is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, until it was all leavened."

Now, what do you picture as you read that... I've always pictured a lady making bread, and she takes about 3 cups of flour, and puts it into her kitchen bowl, and kneads in the leaven, and it rises into bread (ready to be baked)...

Is that the image you have??? It's a pretty big loaf of bread – 3 cups of flour...

But are we agreed, that's the image we all have???

The problem is, it's **not** 3 cups of flour...

The Greek word is *σάτα* (*sata*), which refers to the Hebrew measure of "seah". And a "seah" is a volume measurement that in Jesus' day, equalled 12 litresⁱ....

Does that blow your image of a housewife kneading a bit of bread for the family's breakfast... **3** "measures" of flour, is 36 litres of flour...

- We're not talking 3 cups – we're talking 144 cups...
- We're not talking about a third of a packet of flour from the supermarket –

we're talking a third of a 3-bushel bag that a strong man **used** to be able to carry on his shoulder, but isn't allowed to anymore because OH&S says it's too heavy...

- We're **not** talking about enough bread for family to invite a guest to dinner –
we're talking about a feast for the multitudes...

That is the image of the Kingdom of God....

No wonder the mustard plant grew unexpectedly big... Jesus is **talking** about the unexpectedly big... You weren't expecting a lady to be mixing enough dough to feed hundreds of hungry people...

"To what shall I compare the kingdom of God? ²¹ It is like leaven that a woman took and hid in [36 litres] of flour [144 cups / 1 bushel], until it was all leavened."

Imagine how big that lump of dough would be, once it had risen...

I think what Jesus is saying, is "The Kingdom of God, is much bigger than this one fig tree."

The Kingdom of God, began with Israel, but like leaven – it can work its way through a **massive** lump of dough...

It was much bigger than:

- their religious expectations;

- their rules;
- their loveless application of the covenant / God’s Law;
- their nation...

Jesus came, to loosen the bonds of those who are bound...

What are you bound by? Some of us are bound by:

- our past – things that we have done, or things that have been done to us...
Living with regret (perhaps)...

God’s word to you, is “That doesn’t have to define you anymore. His Kingdom is unexpectedly big, and He can set you free of things you feared you could never be set free of...”

And so, we repent of our past – turn away from it, and turn to Jesus, and He will set you free.

- Some are bound by: Physical disability

God’s word to you, is “Do not despair. God always heals.”

Sometimes in His mercy, The Lord grants physical healing in this life. So, be bold enough to ask for that. But in faith, we know that pain and debilitation, are temporary. And at the resurrection, we will have new bodies – no more chronic pain – no arthritis – no cancer – lack of mobility – fear/anxiety.

Some are bound by

- Satan.

In the Kingdom of God, there is victory over Satan. In the Lord Jesus Christ, Satan has no hold over you.

- bound by Pride.

God's word is, there is no room for pride in the Kingdom of God. Repent of self-sufficiency, and turn to God. We know we need Him.

- bound by the hypocrisy of loveless rule-keeping...

God's word to you today, is "There's no room for hypocrisy in the Kingdom of God". And as we repent of loveless rule-keeping/hypocrisy, we experience the Kingdom of God as it truly is.

A Kingdom of:

- hope;
- peace;
- security;
- shelter;
- welcome;
- belonging;
- starts small;
- grows unexpectedly big...

Let's pray:

Lord Jesus Christ,

We thank You,
for the presence of the Kingdom of God;
For the Kingdom that started out small;
and insignificant;
and has grown and is continuing to grow
into something unexpectedly large.

We thank You, that in Your Kingdom, there is

- hope;
- peace;
- security;
- shelter;
- welcome;
- belonging;

And what a joy it is,
to be together as a people,
who experience this as “a community”,
for that is what Your Kingdom is –
A community...

And Lord,
we pray that You would set us free from what binds us.

We repent of what binds us.

We repent of sin,
for it is sin that prevents us from turning to You.

And we thank You for Your forgiveness.

We thank You, that You set us free.

Free, to live by faith;

Free, to live by the Spirit of God;

Free, to live as citizens of the Kingdom of God.

What a Joy.

Praise the Name of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen.

ⁱ a seah, a capacity measure of approximately 6 liters (preexilic), or 12 liters (postexilic)
VanGemeren, W. (ed.) (1997) *New international dictionary of Old Testament theology & exegesis*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.