

## **The Freedom of Christ**

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Glory to Jesus Christ!

In today's Gospel reading we heard of how the Lord healed a woman who had been bent over in infirmity for some eighteen years.

This healing was one of the many which the Lord performed on the Sabbath day. And just as for the others, the Jewish leaders were angry and spoke out against the Lord. Yet the crowds were able to see what should have been so apparent to the Pharisees, that Christ had performed a great miracle in their midst.

Now, as we know, the Pharisees spoke out against Christ healing on the Sabbath not because they cared about the fulfilling of the Law as they claimed. The Pharisees spoke out against Christ because they were envious of Him.

And it was this same envy which would later lead the Pharisees to call the Sanhedrin together in order to do away with Christ. Remember just a short while before seeking the Lord's crucifixion, the Jewish leaders gathered together and said, "What can we do? For this man does many miracles. If we let him alone this way, all will believe on him. And the Romans will come and take away both our place and nation."

The whole world was going after and following this Jesus of Nazareth and they did not know what to do. All they knew was that they could not let this happen because if it did then not only would they lose their influence among the Jewish people but they would also lose their place of honor from the Roman authorities. And so the Pharisees sought to undermine the work of the Lord by calling Him a transgressor of the Law, by accusing Him as one who taught contrary to the great Prophet Moses.

Yet, the Lord quickly exposed this deceit and proved the Pharisees to be hypocrites when He asked them one simple question. He said, "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 has bound-think of it-for eighteen years, be loosed from this bond on the Sabbath?"

With these words the Pharisees were put to shame and the crowds glorified God. Yet, we mustn't think that it was just the infirm woman who was released from her bond on that Sabbath day. The people themselves were being freed. The people themselves were being freed from the bond of having to fulfill the Law of Moses in a legalistic way.

Now to be sure, the Lord never required that His Law be fulfilled in a legalistic sense, and so He was never the One who had put this burden on His people. Rather, it was the Pharisees who had done this, those self-proclaimed leaders who "bind heavy and hard-to-carry burdens and lay them on men's shoulders, but will not move them with one of their fingers."

These words are just one example of how the Lord continually upbraided the Pharisees throughout his earthly ministry for how they had distorted the Law.

Now St. Paul, who himself was a Pharisee before being enlightened by Christ, also spoke about the Law. And he tells us that the Law was given to the Hebrew people for two primary reasons.

First the Law was given as a spiritual tutor, as a means to instruct the people in the ways of God, to teach them how to live, how to act, how to speak, how to care for one another, how to respect what is holy and sacred, and ultimately how to love God and one's neighbor. This was the first purpose of the Law, to serve as a guide to righteousness – to point the way to go, to point the way to God.

Now this leads to the second purpose for the Law. St. Paul tells us that in as much as the Law indicated the way to go, the way to return to God, it also pointed out how far the Hebrew people were from their Creator. The Law revealed their distance from God, it revealed their spiritual brokenness and sinfulness. And ultimately the Law revealed the need for the Messiah, who alone could fulfill the Law and lead His people back to God. And so the second thing the Law did was it revealed mankind's sinfulness and the need for a Savior.

However, for the Pharisees the Law served different purposes. For the Pharisees, the Law became the means by which they could distinguish themselves as morally and spiritually superior to their brethren. Remember, the word "Pharisee" literally means one who has separated himself from others. And so the Law became the means by which the Pharisees could separate themselves from the rest of the people, the means by which they could raise themselves above the crowds, above those who they oppressed and reviled as accursed because they did not know the teachings of Moses.

And so the Pharisees used the legalistic fulfillment of the Law of Moses not only as a means to their own self-righteousness, as a means to lift themselves head and shoulders above the rest of the people, but also as a means to push the rest of the people down and to bind them to the earth, to keep them much like the woman in today's Gospel who could no so much as lift her eyes up to heaven.

This was the state in which the Lord found His people as He entered the Synagogue that day – they were spiritually beaten and they were oppressed. Yet when He left things were very different. Those who had exalted themselves – the Pharisees – were cast down. The woman who was humbled by sickness was lifted up. And the people who were bound by the legalistic fulfillment of the Law were freed.

If we think about it, what the Lord did that Sabbath was the same thing the Apostle Paul told the Ephesians to do in his Epistle today. We'll look at just three things examples of this, three things which St. Paul says the follower of Jesus Christ should do, three things which we ourselves should try and put into practice:

First, St. Paul says “have no fellowship with the works of darkness but rather expose them and bring them to the light for it is shameful even to speak of those things which are done in secrecy”, those things which are done in hypocrisy. This the Lord did when He exposed the hypocrisy of the Pharisees, He brought their intentions to the light and He revealed the duplicity of the words.

Second, St. Paul says to “redeem the time for the days are evil”. This the Lord did when He restored the meaning of the Sabbath by changing it from the day of legalistic obligation, which it had deteriorated into, into a day of freedom and recreation, a day when the people of God could rest from their worldly labors in order to enjoy the good things of God. By healing the woman of her infirmity and by delivering the people from bondage to the Law, the Lord had reaffirmed that the Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath.

And finally, St. Paul says to “sing and make melody in your heart to the Lord”. Just imagine the joy and relief which the people felt leaving the Synagogue that day after having witnessed not only the Lord’s miraculous healing but also His words which came as a breath of fresh air, as the gentle breeze of spiritual freedom. Their bonds had been broken and they were free once again to raise their eyes to heaven. They had exchanged the heavy burden of the Law for the light and easy yoke of Christ. And for this they offered to the Lord psalms and hymns and spiritual songs.

And so, brothers and sisters, let us be assured by the lessons of today’s Epistle and Gospel readings that nothing we do in the Christian life should be done under compulsion or in a legalistic way. God doesn’t desire this – it isn’t pleasing to Him, and He has sent His own Son to convince us of this, to free us from the burden of the Law, and to raised us up and offer us a better way.

This is why as we gather each Sunday to lay aside our worldly cares and to offer praise to God, we do so willingly and without compulsion. This is why we willingly choose to pray and to fast, to repent and confess our sins, to offer our time, talent, and treasure, this is why we choose to care for the poor, to forgive those who have offended us, to give up those things which we know are displeasing in the sight of God. All of these things we do not as some soft of obligation of our Christian faith, not as some sort of legalistic requirement, but rather we do these things as a way to freely show and express our love for God and His ways.

May the Lord grant us to experience this freedom, this joy, and this love not just on the Sabbath Day, not just on the Lord’s Day, but all the days of our life.

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