

“Not Commanded but Invited”

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio
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Luke 13:10-17 (Common English Bible)

¹⁰ Jesus was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath. ¹¹ A woman was there who had been disabled by a spirit for eighteen years. She was bent over and couldn't stand up straight. ¹² When he saw her, Jesus called her to him and said, "Woman, you are set free from your sickness." ¹³ He placed his hands on her and she straightened up at once and praised God.

¹⁴ The synagogue leader, incensed that Jesus had healed on the Sabbath, responded, "There are six days during which work is permitted. Come and be healed on those days, not on the Sabbath day."

¹⁵ The Lord replied, "Hypocrites! Don't each of you on the Sabbath untie your ox or donkey from its stall and lead it out to get a drink?"

¹⁶ Then isn't it necessary that this woman, a daughter of Abraham, bound by Satan for eighteen long years, be set free from her bondage on the Sabbath day?" ¹⁷ When he said these things, all his opponents were put to shame, but all those in the crowd rejoiced at all the extraordinary things he was doing.

It's possible that word "Sabbath" might be unfamiliar to some. It comes from a Hebrew word "*Shabot*" that means "to cease, to abstain." We hear this word in the Bible as one of the Ten Commandments. In Exodus Chapter 20 God instructed Moses to tell the faithful, "Observe the Sabbath and keep it holy. You have six days in which to do your work, but the seventh day is a day of rest dedicated to me."²

From my visits to Jerusalem I've been able to experience Sabbath in modern day Israel/Palestine. For Jews the day of Sabbath begins not with the dawn of a new morn but with sunset. As the afternoon progressed toward sunset which would signal the beginning of *Shabot*—Sabbath—the city slowed to a stop. By sunset there was no traffic, no noise, shops and offices closed and dark, only pedestrians walking to their synagogues. For the Jews, Sabbath is both serious and joyful. They take seriously the commandment to rest from their labors as God rested after six days of Creation. They rest and reflect on the goodness of God in their lives. And it is a joyful time.

Of course, there was a time in the history of Judaism that Sabbath was known because of its enforcement. We heard an example in today's reading from the Gospel of Luke, in which Jesus was in a synagogue on a Sabbath day. He was teaching when he saw a woman approach. She caught his eye because she was severely stooped over.

For eighteen years, Luke tells us, this woman had suffered from what may have been scoliosis. Luke does not say that the women came to the synagogue that day in hopes of being healed; Luke simply says that Jesus saw her and called out, "Woman, you are free from your sickness!" Then he went to her, placed his hands on her, and at once she straightened herself up. What did she do next? What you and I would do, I hope: praised God!

¹ Based on my sermon "Refreshed, Recommitted, Reconnected" originally preached August 26, 2007

² v. 8-10a

This story is what is called in the Bible a “healing narrative” because of the action of Jesus. But just as important to the story as the healing is what happened next. There was a segment of the Jewish population that embraced strict, to-the-letter observance of Jewish law as even more important than the worship in the Temple or the teaching in the synagogues. It reminds me of a line in the musical “My Fair Lady” where the stuffy Brit Henry Higgins makes a snide comment about the French, saying, “The French don't care what they do actually, as long as they pronounce it properly.”³ Well, the Jews who were part of the Pharisee party had that reputation when it came to how Jews were to live their lives: it didn't matter so much how you felt in your heart, as long as you strictly followed the rules and properly observed the customs.

That's the background for why anyone would object to anyone else being healed of a disease or disfigurement. When Jesus healed the woman *in the synagogue* and *on the Sabbath*, the synagogue official's argument was that Jesus had violated the commandment to “Remember the Sabbath” by ceasing or abstaining from doing any work on the Sabbath—even healing. To the synagogue official, Jesus was breaking the rules.

We don't have nearly as many rules in our practice of religion today as Jesus had to deal with. For instance, to us it doesn't matter what kind of cookware we use to prepare our meals, as long as we feed our children, nor does it matter how we go about cleaning those pots and utensils just as long as they're sanitary. The Jews of antiquity had rules about such things, though, and Orthodox Jews still observe such “cleanliness codes.”

In previous centuries when our nation was less religiously diverse and Christianity was the overwhelmingly prevalent religion, many states enforced “Blue Laws.” “Blue Laws” originated in seventeenth-century Connecticut where the Puritans wanted to regulate moral behavior, especially when it came to what one could or could not do on Sundays—the Sabbath day for Christians. Blue Laws specified punishments for moral offenses such as swearing, lying, intoxication, playing games like dice, cards or shuffleboard, and yes, even failing to attend church services on the Sabbath.

By the twentieth century, Blue Laws became a crazy quilt of incongruous state or local rules: in one area, for instance, you couldn't trade a horse but *could* buy a car on a Sunday; in another locality, you couldn't buy alcohol in a liquor store but *could* in a grocery store on a Sunday. You can still see a remnant of Ohio's Blue Laws: stores post signs stating that beer can be purchased anytime, but wine cannot be sold until after 1 p.m. on Sundays. Explain the logic of that!

Now Blue Laws are pretty much a thing of the past. Society realizes that it is unrealistic to try to regulate morality externally through laws that are unenforceable, with consequences and punishments that are unreasonable and, in truth, non-existent.

Within their own organizations, though, some Christian groups have more rules than others. Our Roman Catholic neighbors, for instance, still have a moral obligation to

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<https://www.quotes.net/mquote/65707#:~:text=Professor%20Henry%20Higgins%3A%20The%20French%20don%27t%20care%20what,Audrey%20Hepburn%2C%20Rex%20Harrison%2C%20Stanley%20Holloway%2C%20Wilfrid%20Hyde-White> accessed 8/24/2022

attend Mass every Sunday (now, of course, that could include a Saturday evening Mass). The weekly obligation is part of the Roman Catholic canon law or church law. Just because it is a “law,” does that mean that every Roman Catholic fulfills that obligation? Not now, and in truth they never did. But before you start to feel smug, ask yourself, “Do we Presbyterians have such a law mandating weekly church attendance?” A law? No. A sense of legal obligation? ...Well, no. A foggy impression that, perhaps, it might be beneficial for us and for fellow Christians if we attended worship each week? Perhaps.

A preacher named Dick Donovan asks the question of the day:

What does it mean to keep the Sabbath holy? Christians today tend to treat the matter of holy observance casually. For most Christians today, such observance involves, at best, an hour of public worship each week. Outside that hour, we feel free to engage in work, recreation, and shopping. We would do well to recover a sense of holy time — time to honor God. Being set free from the law does not free us from responsibility. If the ruler of the synagogue erred by being too legalistic about the Sabbath, we are more likely to err by being too casual about the ways and times that we honor God.⁴

There is a short verse about the relationship we have with worship, work, and play that might speak more truth than we are comfortable hearing. The verse says:

Most middle-class Americans tend to:

worship their work;
work at their play; and
play at their worship.

That which we worship, we serve,

and that which we serve we will give our all
— heart, soul, mind and body.⁵

Everyone worships someone... or something. So the question we are challenged to ask ourselves is, “What is the focus of our worship?” In the story of Jesus and the stooped-over woman, the ruler of the synagogue worshiped obedience to rules rather than the God who those rules were supposed to serve. He was far too rigid in his approach to Sabbath. If his house caught fire on the Sabbath, would he draw water from the well to quench the flames, even though drawing water was considered “work?” If we are to believe what he said, he would watch until the flames died to embers.

On the other hand, for many today, the approach to the Sabbath is anything but rigid. With our schedules where we’re trying to cram 25 hours’ worth of action into 24-hours of available time, we look at Sunday as a bonus day in which to do the household chores that our frantic weekday pace won’t permit. Sunday is a chance to move some papers off our office desk before Monday morning’s onslaught of more paperwork. Sunday is that opportunity for our daughter to gain the exposure on the field of play that might qualify her for varsity next year. *Worship? Well, if there’s nothing urgent on the schedule. Church? Sure, if it’s raining so I can’t do lawn work anyway, but of course, if it’s*

⁴ Dick Donovan, Sermonwriter.com 8/26/2007

⁵ Gordon Dahl, from Work, Play and Worship in a Leisure-Oriented Society. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1972

snowing then I don't want to risk the roads... unless it's to go to a store or restaurant at Crocker Park. Far from having a rigid attitude toward Sabbath, we've become so laid back that the command to keep the Sabbath as a time to worship — a time to refresh, reconnect and recommit — that commandment has lost its starch.

But we need the break. God knows that. We need to connect. Jesus shows that. We need to look away from the world that swamps us with its demands and diversions, and instead look up to see the One who helps us make sense of our lives.

Some folks are so practical by nature that it's not enough for them merely to know that God commanded Sabbath observance for our physical and spiritual well-being. They need to see a clear, practical benefit. Maybe this story will help.

There is a story told of a wagon train on its way from St. Louis to Oregon. Its members were devout Christians, so the whole group observed the habit of stopping for the Sabbath day. Winter was approaching quickly, however, and some among the group began to panic in fear that they wouldn't reach their destination before the heavy snows. Consequently, several members proposed to the rest of the group that they should quit their practice of stopping for the Sabbath and continue driving onward seven days a week.

This proposal triggered a lot of contention in the community, so finally it was suggested that the wagon train should split into two groups — those who wanted to observe the Sabbath and those who preferred to travel on that day. The proposal was accepted, and both groups set out and traveled together until the next Sabbath day, when one group continued while the other remained at rest.

Guess which group got to Oregon first?

You're right. The ones who kept the Sabbath reached their destination first. Both the people and the horses were so rested by their Sabbath observance that they could travel much more vigorously and effectively the other six days of the week.⁶

By God's grace we are freed from legalistic commandments that demand conformity but offer little understanding. On the other hand, by God's grace we are invited to discover how "remembering the Sabbath, to keep it holy" enables us to become refreshed, reconnected with one another, and recommitted to serving the God who is sovereign over all.

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⁶(James Love, "Sabbath," in illustrations@clergy.net)