

## 16C 2022

Jesus consistently attempted to free people from their bonds so that they could be closer to God.

His prioritizing relationship over all else led him into repeated clashes with those who had other priorities.

When he encounters the woman in the synagogue who is unable to stand upright, he recognizes that her ailment severely hinders her, diverts her attention from God.

Jesus set her free so that she could more readily focus, but he did this on the sabbath, which contradicts the law of the sabbath.

The leader of the synagogue assails him for it.

He and his supporters are indignant, in agony (the Greek implies) over the mercy Jesus has shown.

Jesus deftly points out the ultimate implications of their priorities.

They would not hesitate to lead an ox or a donkey to water on the sabbath, he tells them, but they would deny this woman her freedom.

Jesus essentially is saying, “You set animals free on the Sabbath. I set people free.”

He thereby points out the hypocrisy of their priorities and puts them to shame.

The leader of the synagogue’s rigid adherence to the law of the sabbath bound him and blinded him to the needs of others.

This is what happens when we set other things above relationship.

This is the result of prioritizing ourselves over all things—*our* rules, *our* stories, *our* needs.

The rules protected the leader of the synagogue.

He was afraid of opening his heart to others, which is one of the most frightening things we can do.

We instead use rules to keep people at a distance, to insist on our own way because we are afraid—afraid of what others might think of us if they knew our hearts, afraid of rejection.

The rules give us the power to keep people out.

They form a wall round us, but that wall is our self-made prison.

Jesus brings freedom, but freedom is frightening.

Though we continue to put other things ahead of relationship, contemporary Americans differ in terms of the particular rules on which we insist.

Specifically, we need no encouragement to work on the sabbath.

In fact, the chains that bind *us* tend to be a fascination with the works of our own hands, a fascination that keeps us working without rest.

We are so impressed with what we can do that we pay little attention to anything else.

People pride themselves on how little sleep they get, on how long it has been since they got a day off, on how many hours they work.

Oh, it is often presented as a complaint, but it is something they want everyone else to know.

Americans in particular tend to work without sabbath because we mistakenly believe that we will manufacture our own salvation.

We mistake the world within our self-made prisons for the whole universe, and within those walls, we are kings and queens.

The assumption that work is the key to well being is so woven into our story that, should someone suggest otherwise, should someone praise the benefits of doing nothing, it sounds like nonsense.

Even travel becomes twisted.

Rather than an opportunity to enlarge the spirit, a kind of pilgrimage, many see travel as nothing more than an opportunity to collect cultural capital.

It is a way of selling ourselves.

We brag about how many countries or continents we have visited.

When we return from vacation, many people now expect a list of experiences collected, not a tale of how our spirits have grown.

When people ask me what I did on vacation, I pucker up and tell them that I did nothing, which was the plan.

If they get it, we share a laugh.

If they do not, it challenges their notions of the purpose of vacation.

Doing nothing can be good for the soul.

It allows us time off from our fascination with the works of our own hands, time to be  
with God.

People have come to tell themselves that the harder one works, the more one has, and  
the more one has, the happier one is.

Except we are not.

The longest running study on happiness started at Harvard in 1938.

It has found that one of the greatest contributors to happiness and overall sense of well  
being is strong relationships with others<sup>1</sup>—the exact thing Jesus prioritized.

Right again, Jesus!

Another study, at the University of British Columbia, found that recent graduates who  
prioritized money over time were less happy than those who prioritized time over  
money.<sup>2</sup>

In other words, we need to take time to build relationships in order to experience our  
greatest well being.

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1 <https://www.health.harvard.edu/blog/the-secret-to-happiness-heres-some-advice-from-the-longest-running-study-on-happiness-2017100512543>

2 <https://hbr.org/2020/09/does-more-money-really-makes-us-more-happy>

In order to do that, we need to seek out others who share those values.

It is not that money is unnecessary.

Research at Purdue considered 1.7 million people from 164 countries.

It revealed that, once a certain financial threshold is reached, money and material possessions no longer contribute to happiness and well being.

“The study . . . found [that] once the threshold was reached,” they explain, “further increases in income tended to be associated with reduced life satisfaction and a lower level of well-being. This may be,” they hypothesize, “because money is important for meeting basic needs, purchasing conveniences, and maybe even loan repayments, but to a point. After the optimal point of needs is met, people may be driven by desires such as pursuing more material gains and engaging in social comparisons, which could, ironically, lower well-being.”<sup>3</sup>

Poverty and financial stress, constant worries about paying our mortgage, paying for food, affording our medications, in other words, certainly cause us to suffer, to be bound and distracted, just as the woman in the synagogue was bound by her physical ailment, but when we exceed the point of fulfilling our own needs and begin to compete with others, we no longer enjoy trusting relationships with them, but see them as rivals.

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3 <https://purdue.edu/newsroom/releases/2018/Q1/money-only-buys-happiness-for-a-certain-amount.html>

We start to lose sight of the thing that most contributes to well being—trusting relationships.

In order to thrive, we must distinguish between needs, those things that actually lead to well being, and desires, those things that we want simply because other people want them.

One of the many reasons for a sabbath is precisely to provide the time it takes to build human relationships.

Do you remember what people did when everything was closed on Sunday?

Many visited their relatives and friends.

In my family, that meant my grandparents and my great-grandmother.

Every Sunday, we would have a meal at my grandparents' and then would go to my great-grandmother's to spend time with her.

Sabbath also provides time to reflect, to recover our sense of self after a week of school and work and paying bills and dealing with that difficult person at the DMV.

All of our responsibilities pull us in various directions and tend to decenter us.

Sabbath helps us to recenter.

In doing so, we recover our capacity to think more clearly, to be more present, and to be creative.

All of these abilities get strained with overuse.

We lose focus.

Doing nothing helps us to recharge, to re-create ourselves.

This affects not just us, but the world around us.

Our over-reliance on our own creations has left us with a polluted world whose resources are strained.

Our story of constant growth assumes constant use of resources.

We tax ourselves and tax our world.

Taking a sabbath is good for us, good for our home.

If Jesus were here today, he would seek not to loose us from the bonds of a heartless sabbath rule, but from the bonds of overwork, from the illusion that our own efforts, our own creations will save us.

What is most significant occurs when we have time to reflect, time to relate, time to grow, and a certain amount of money is necessary for that.

Beyond that, it is relationships and time that matter most.

Jesus seeks to free us from the prisons of our own making.