

What gets this synagogue leader riled up is not Jesus healing this woman. It's that he did it on the Sabbath. So to better grasp the meaning here, let's look first at Sabbath.

The ten commandments show up in both Exodus and Deuteronomy. In both cases the prolog of the commandments is "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; "

The foundational law for the people of Israel flowed from God's mighty act to free them.

The Sabbath commandment in Exodus is grounded in creation. "For six days God created the universe, and on the 7<sup>th</sup> God rested." A time for rest is built into the fabric of creation.

It's different in Deuteronomy. There it goes like this <sup>15</sup> Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day.

In that version, Sabbath is directly grounded in the freedom to which God led them.

Observing Sabbath was very important as God's people. But the Bible was a little vague on what exactly constituted work.

Listed in the Torah are planting and harvesting, processing and cooking, traveling, building, and business transactions. That left a fair amount of room for interpretation.

In the second century the more detailed Sabbath laws that had been mostly oral were written down in what's called the Mishnah. Observant Jews still practice Sabbath and the laws have been modified as society and technology advanced.

My favorite modern Sabbath story comes from Chicago. Chicago has a significant Jewish population. My daughter lives in Chicago and her first job was as a social worker for a rehab hospital where a lot of observant Jewish people worked.

One of the modern Sabbath prohibitions is for the use of electricity. Now, lifesaving work has always been allowed by Sabbath laws. So Jewish health care workers work on the Sabbath. But in hospitals in heavily Jewish areas, like my daughter's, there were special Sabbath elevators.

On the Sabbath they would switch to automatically stop on every floor, or maybe one elevator would stop on even floors and another odd floors. That way, practitioners didn't have to do the work of operating an electricity powered means of transportation.

It might seem silly to us, but I actually have a deep admiration for those Jewish people who so faithfully stay true to Sabbath observation. It's the commandment that Christians have most readily abandoned.

Many of you may remember the days when literally nothing was open on Sunday. Now, we've become a 24/7 culture, and I don't think that's necessarily been good for us.

Because what the Sabbath law was about was freedom and rest – freedom from the Egyptians and from a culture who viewed the worth of the Israelites in terms only of what they could produce.

I'll come back to that, but let's go back to the synagogue. The question before the synagogue leader is this – does what Jesus did constitute work? It's one of those gray areas. Life-saving work is not prohibited. But this woman had lived like this for 18 years. She probably wasn't going to die that day. So in theory the healing could have waited until the next day.

Jesus never here or anywhere else abolished the Sabbath. There are two keys to his action here, and they end up becoming keys for us.

The first is the notion of freedom. The second is in Jesus' identification of Satan as the cause of this woman's condition.

Satan is a sort of problematic figure for our 21<sup>st</sup> Century minds. If you have some sort of medical background like me, you've perhaps wondered what physical disease caused this.

A rheumatologic disease called ankylosing spondylitis? Scoliosis? Osteoporosis? I can get sort of lost in the medical weeds. But Satanic influence isn't usually the first thing that comes to mind.

Nonetheless, I actually find Satan a satisfying explanation, even while I don't have a clear visual of what that might look like. If we say Satan is the power or force behind everything that opposes God and God's intent for creation, that covers a lot of ground. Including things that have a good medical explanation. Perhaps both can be true.

If Satan has this woman bound...deprived of full freedom, then defeating Satan on the Sabbath – freeing her on the very day dedicated to freedom is a perfect Sabbath activity.

Now, there's someone else here who is bound. The synagogue leader. Now, to be fair, Jewish leaders had a hard row to hoe. They are trying to maintain Israel as God's people, trying to help them keep the faith and keep God's law in a hostile empire.

We don't necessarily know that his motives were bad. But he too is bound...he's bound by an interpretation of the law that doesn't allow for mercy or compassion.

And really, mercy and compassion are incredibly powerful actions to oppose Satan. Satan will take something good and important – like the Sabbath law – and twist it into something that works in Satan's favor against God's people.

As I said, we as Christians have sort of lost sight of the importance of Sabbath and its real intent.

Sabbath rest works against a system that says that the worth of people is based on what they can produce or achieve.

When we have a 24/7 culture dictated by the bottom line or by some sort of achievement, we may not be literal slaves. But we are in some ways bound to a system that leaves people frazzled and exhausted.

Sabbath rest is a way to work against a system that binds us up.

But in this story, the synagogue leader goes further than that. He crosses into territory where the intricacies of the law become more important than the actual living, breathing human being in front of him.

Practicing mercy and compassion over rigid interpretations of the law also defeats the power of Satan.

In fact, the mere act of worshipping on Sabbath – or in our case Sunday – reminds us that it is God who leads us to freedom and God who is worthy of worship. Not the powers who draw us to worship things and people as gods.

We live in anxious troubled times. There seems to be competing narratives trying to tell us what we should or shouldn't do or believe.

There are competing forces for our loyalty. There are competing stories about the worth of different sorts of people. And we live in a culture that tries to tell us that our worth is tied to what we can produce or accomplish.

This story tells us otherwise.

This story tells us that our worth comes, not from our strength or ability to produce, but simply from being a child of God.

This story tells us that mercy and compassion trump everything and if certain laws do not in some way allow for mercy and compassion, they are unjust laws.

The story tells us that God, even now, is working to free us from our own bondage – whether to a physical condition or a mental or emotional condition.

Even now, God is working to free those whom others have deemed unworthy from judgment and oppression

Even now God is working to free those who are bound to a view of law and order that does not offer freedom and well-being to the least of these.

Whatever it is in your life that has you bound, God is working to unbind...to set you free to live and practice mercy and compassion in a world that sorely needs it.