



## **Honoring the Sabbath Isaiah 58:9b-14; Luke 13:10-17 Reverend Giuseppe Mattei (August 21, 2022)**

Many impoverished urban neighborhoods around the country are getting a face-lift. Old homes are modernized, and, prior to the covid-induced online shopping explosion, retail shops have offered local shoppers the opportunity to meet, socialize, and support local business. This phenomenon is called gentrification.

Gentrification happens when a lower-income neighborhood undergoes a process of economic change through real estate development. This process typically results in middle to upper class “gentry” moving into poor and working-class inner-city neighborhoods followed by more profitable businesses, resulting in a change in demographic and income level. The immediate result is a property values increase, pricing out lower-income families and small businesses. While some urban planning professionals say the effects of gentrification are purely beneficial, others argue that it often results in harmful social consequences, such as racial displacement and loss of cultural diversity.

There was rebuilding in Jerusalem in the middle of the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE, but it wasn't gentrification. Thanks to Cyrus, king of Persia, the people of Israel, captive in Babylon<sup>1</sup> for about two to three generations, were allowed to return home if they wanted to (Ezra 1:1–2).<sup>2</sup>

Scripture states that 42,360 people returned to Judah, accompanied by 7,337 slaves and two hundred singers (Ezra 2:64–65), including members of the ten northern tribes taken into captivity by Assyria in 722 BCE<sup>3</sup> even though no edict for their release was ever reported (Ezra 2:70). Still, they were only a small remnant.

Why wouldn't the opportunity to return to the Promised Land cause a massive exodus from Babylon? Because the Jewish people were not slaves in Babylon but were full and active members of Babylonian society. Many prospered. It is easy to imagine that many second and third generation Jewish Babylonians had no interest in leaving. Those who left found a country in shambles.

The third section of Isaiah took shape probably after 490 BCE, after the return from the exile, with today's chapter written before the city walls were rebuilt in 445 (v. 12).

Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;  
you shall raise up the foundations of many generations;  
you shall be called the repairer of the breach,  
the restorer of streets to live in. (Isaiah 58:12)

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<sup>1</sup> <https://israelmyglory.org/article/the-babylonian-captivity/>

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.conformingtojesus.com/charts-maps/en/assyrian-babylonian\\_captivity\\_map.htm](https://www.conformingtojesus.com/charts-maps/en/assyrian-babylonian_captivity_map.htm)

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/the-ten-lost-tribes>

The prophet promises that God will establish Jerusalem as a kind of paradise (v. 11), but only if the people live justly and observe the sabbath rightly.

What is the Sabbath and what does it mean to honor it? What does the Bible has to say about it?

“Six days shall work be done, but *the seventh day is a Sabbath of complete rest*, a holy convocation; *you shall do no work*: it is a Sabbath to the Lord throughout your settlements. (Leviticus 23:3)

“Observe my Sabbaths and have reverence for my sanctuary. I am the Lord.” (Leviticus 26:2)

“I the Lord am *your* God; follow my statutes, be careful to observe my ordinances, and hallow my *Sabbaths* that they may be a *sign between me and you*, so that you may know that I the Lord am your God.” (Ezekiel 20:19-20)

The Sabbath is a day of rest and as such is remembered in the Creation story: God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done. (Genesis 2:3)<sup>4</sup>

If God made it holy, the people are commanded to remember the Sabbath and keep it holy. This commandment is one of ten codified in the tablets of the Law that Moses received on Mount Horeb and passed on to the Israelites in the desert (Exodus 20:1-17 and Deuteronomy 5:6-21).

But what does it mean to keep it holy? How did God do it? We have a clue at the end of Genesis 1: on day six of creation, God looked around and saw and was pleased because all was “very good.”

The inner and fundamental goodness of creation is the harmony and justice with which God has created it. The wisdom of God moves God to make things “perfectly” in their right relationship and inner purpose. Creation is intended for harmony and the proliferation of life, and justice happens when the intent of God is respected and applied to life in righteous relationships.

Living in the presence of God, honoring God’s will, gives us rest.<sup>5</sup> Rest in the Lord refers to a spiritual rest from confusion, worry, stress, strife, and a break from all internal, external, and spiritual enemies. The Hebrew word translated as “rest” means “to be at peace,” “to be still,” “to be quiet, silent, or calm.” It suggests “to let go and let God.”

It conveys the idea of surrendering to God. It indicates who is in charge and the full trust that I am in the hands of God, fully surrounded by God’s presence, protected, and delivered from evil.

**But God laments the lack of right relationships in Isaiah 58.** God is upset. The people claim to be seeking the Lord and to desire knowledge of the ways of the Lord while at the same time, they insult God by abandoning God’s ways. They fast and sacrifice, cry out to God and stand in worship, but their piety is emptied by the way they mistreat their workers, cheat and lie, fight one another, and keep the poor and homeless in the dust. True rebuilding starts with righteous living and the mending of relationships. If the people want to find favor in the eyes of God, they must engage in massive social reform. To serve God authentically is “to unlock the fetters of wickedness and to untie the cords of the yoke.”

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<sup>4</sup> Also check Hebrews 4:9-11 among many other passages.

<sup>5</sup> Exodus 33:14; Psalm 37:7; Jeremiah 30:10; Isaiah 32:17; Philippians 4:6-7

A true observation of the Sabbath, one that really honors God, restores the right relationships among people, God, and creation. “Whoever oppresses the poor shows contempt for their Maker, but whoever is kind to the needy honors God. (Proverbs 14:31).

Jesus took many breaks from people and ministry for the purpose of restoring himself and recentering his faith. In his times away to pray, he sought refreshment of body and soul.

Every Christian ought to look at his example and know that what we do during the week needs to be done in the name of God, giving God the glory. Whatever we do, we are called to do it for the purpose of honoring and enhancing life for ourselves, our neighbor, and for the rest of creation.

What the leaders of the synagogue in today’s gospel lesson did not remember is the need of a connection with God in what we do. If there is a disconnect, then all becomes an inconvenience.

The question on the meaning and legality of work on the Sabbath day was answered in two different occasions in chapter 6 of the gospel of Luke. Because “the Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath,” the work done by Jesus on a Sabbath is intended for the purpose of putting things into perspective:

1. **All God’s creatures are important to God, who provides abundantly for their sustenance.** The Sabbath is the time when God looked with joy and satisfaction on all that God had created and proclaimed them good. What does it say about how God wants us to relate to one another and to God’s creation? Recuperating a sense of awe and gratitude might change our attitude towards others and the world God so loves. (Luke 6:1-5)
2. **God restores back to life that which is broken.** There is no better day to honor life than on a Sabbath day. Honoring life is to honor the Giver, Sustainer, and Restorer of Life, and to put oneself at the service of life. Restoration means giving rest and respite to people experiencing all sorts of hardships in life. (See for example, Luke 6:6-11 and a repeat of the concept in the similar story encountered today) How can we be in solidarity with those who suffer and show them compassion and understanding? Jesus sees the suffering all around him. Do we?
3. **The Sabbath calls us to rest in God and restore our relationship with God and the rest of creation.** If we do not do the work of the Sabbath, we can never do the work of the rest of the week. Why wait for another day to do the work that needs to be done on the Sabbath? Do we make space for God and see what God is up to in our midst, coming to the rescue of those who encounter hardship in life? Sabbath is the sacred time to realign ourselves with God’s will and renew our baptismal vows. The leader of the synagogue experiences indignation at what God is doing to bring life to those who suffer (see vv. 14 and 17). Is Jesus’ action challenging the Pharisees’ concept of order, their idea of what is proper, their position of privilege in relation to those whose reality is burdensome and crippling? Is he inviting *us* to see, *really see* those who suffer in our midst and to intervene with decisive and concrete actions of grace and healing?

Jesus heals the woman, but by doing so he also reveals the way the opinions of the religious elites were deformed and life-negating. God's healing work realized in the world often sheds light on what is truly out of shape. How many bent-over people benefit in the story? Will the Pharisees see how they themselves may benefit from Jesus’ intervention? Will we? May our actions honor God and show sensitivity and compassion for those who suffer. Amen.