

Text: Matthew 12:1-14

Title: The Right Understanding of the Sabbath

Truth: God made Sabbath to bless mankind, not burden them.

Date/Location: November 10 and 14, 2021 at FBC

Introduction

These two episodes recorded here concern a debate about what constitutes sinful “work” on the Sabbath. The Pharisees had constructed increasingly elaborate “fences” around the Sabbath that became more and more burdensome to the Jewish people. Miniscule activities were declared illegal violations of the Sabbath commandment. Legalistic zeal had driven them far from the original intention of the Sabbath command and its interconnection with the rest of the Law.

Jesus certainly was teaching differently than the Pharisees, but He was not offering a *new* view of the Sabbath regulation in this passage. That is, what He says here is not at all in competition with the Law given in Exodus. Rather, He was demonstrating the *correct* understanding of the Sabbath law in the Decalogue which was based on mercy and compassion and common sense, not on legalism.

I. Sabbath Regulation in the Old Testament

- A. The first mention of the Sabbath in chronological order of the Scriptures is Exodus 16:22-29. In this historical narrative, the text describes the gathering of manna for food on the sixth day, and holding some of it back for the seventh day so that no gathering would be necessary on the day of rest. Work was to be done ahead of time so that a day could be taken off for rest. It was a day also of worship, because the day was set apart as holy. It was a day of remembering the Lord’s creation and His own rest from that work, and thus following the 6-day-work plus 1-day-rest pattern.
- B. The second mention of the Sabbath is in the 10 Commandments, what is called the Decalogue. It is found in Exodus 20:8-11 and Deuteronomy 5:12-15.

- C. Leviticus 23:2-3 teach that the seventh day was required to be a Sabbath of thorough rest. The Hebrew text uses a superlative construction to get across the idea of complete or solemn rest. It is also a day of “sacred assembly” or “holy convocation.” This pair of words is somewhat challenging to understand, because it can mean either a holy assembly (Exodus 12:16) or a public reading of Scripture (Neh. 8:8, last word). A public reading of Scripture would be considered as a holy meeting anyway, so the difference is not that important. In either case, this supports what I said above that worship was a key part of this day of rest.
- D. Numbers 15:30-36 concerns a man who was gathering sticks on the Sabbath. We do not know his purpose, but we can surmise that it was done presumptuously as the prior context discusses. We can also surmise, based on what we see in Matthew 12:1-13, that it was not done as a mercy or help to someone in desperate need. The man just wanted to do what he wanted to do, without regard for the law, and he evidently thought he could get away with it.

II. Sabbath in the Grain Fields, 12:1-8

- A. The Lord and his followers were walking from one place to another on the Sabbath. Because the Lord was doing it, this was not a sin, by definition.
- B. The disciples began to be hungry, so they plucked some heads of grain as they went along and munched on them. The Lord did not rebuke them for doing this, which I would think He would have done if in fact they were sinning. They were not. They were just living life. There was no prohibition against *eating* on the Sabbath, and what they were doing could hardly be called “harvesting.” In fact, the original passage on the Sabbath in Exodus 16 was about eating left-overs stored the prior day.
- C. The Pharisees complained to the Lord, criticizing that the disciples were breaking the Law on the Sabbath. But they were bearing false witness about this, perhaps because they were self-deceived about the nature of the Sabbath. Why self-deceived? Their teaching traditions had been around for so long that they did not understand how far they had strayed from the original text of

Scripture written by Moses. This is a danger in any system of religion that emphasizes traditional teaching.

D. Jesus gives four responses to their nonsense:

1. King David and his men at the showbread in the tabernacle when they were famished. This was not “lawful” because only the priests were allowed to eat it. See 1 Samuel 21:1-6. But as an aspect of the ceremonial law, it was not morally prohibited for that bread to be used to relieve starving men in need.
2. The Sabbath is ‘profaned’ by the priests every week as they carry out the work of the temple. That is, they must trim the lamps and offer the sacrifices and whatever other necessities there were, even on Saturday. There was no rest from that work. This was commonly understood as right and good, although not spelled out in specifics in the written code. Even today, churches that have a strong “Christian Sabbath” doctrine do not flinch when their pastor finishes his sermons on Saturday and exerts much energy in ministry and preaching on Sunday. He works while they learn and enjoy, but no one thinks to charge him with sin. He just has to take some time off on Monday or some other day of the week.
3. Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath (12:8, Mark 2:28). He is “over” it, not “under” it. He is greater than David; greater than Abiathar the high priest; greater than Ahimelech the priest at Nob; and greater even than the temple that sanctified the bread of presence, the priests, and all the sacred functions done there. The Pharisees would not dare speak in their criticizing, condescending tone if they knew who it was to whom they were speaking. The Son of Man, the Messiah, is in charge. As King, He could “violate” the Sabbath if He pleased. Yet He was not violating it at all.
4. God desires mercy, not sacrifice. If I could paraphrase this in longer form, I would say this: God wants your heart to be inclined to be merciful and compassionate toward others, not hung up on the letter of the law without regard for people. Hosea 6:6 is the source of this quotation. God tells the people of Israel that He is sick of empty, faithless ritual. Some were

offering imperfect animals on the altar. Some were “sniffing” at the whole enterprise of sacrifice. Some sinned without regard for the sacrifice. Some carried on idolatry at the same time as they did sacrifice. God wanted true religion, not fake religion.

The same concept is quoted in Matt 9:13 where the Lord was eating with sinners and tax collectors. It is those kind of people who need salvation, so the Lord was working with them. The Pharisees criticized him for that, another instance of them demonstrating that they knew not the love and mercy of God. They were harsh against sinners, not compassionate toward them. They exhibited the *exact opposite of a godly attitude*.

Had the Pharisees understood this very basic principle, they would not have condemned the guiltless. They were disallowed from condemning the innocent (Deut. 25:1). They missed that little principle in the Law as well.

5. There is a fifth reason, not given in Matthew’s account, but in Mark 2:27. There, the text records Jesus additionally saying, “The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath.” This is a very helpful play on word order. The word *for* in both cases means “on account of” or “for the benefit of.” The reason for the Sabbath was to benefit man; it is not that the reason for man was to benefit the Sabbath.

E. The focus of worship is not supposed to be laws or days or “touch not, taste not, handle not” (Col. 2:21). The focus of worship is to be on God and His Son, Jesus Christ. The Pharisees were criticizing God the Son, whom they should have been bowing down to worship. Bad move! Of all people in Israel, they should have thoughtfully recognized the Messiah instead of hating him and, as 12:14 says, plotting to kill him.

III. Sabbath in the Synagogue, 12:9-13

A. The Pharisees cause a second controversy when the Lord encountered a man in the synagogue whose hand was withered. They did not like that the Lord would heal on the Sabbath, because they thought that was breaking the Law.

B. The “withered” hand could have been a birth defect, or the result of a stroke, or something else. It could have been “claw hand” which is a condition that is either congenital or caused by nerve damage in the hand, arm, or spine; severe scars such as from burns; or bacterial disease such as leprosy.¹ Obviously leprosy is unlikely in *this* case because the man probably would not be in a public space such as a synagogue. But the leprosy damages nerves, similar to other causes of claw hand. Some cases are mild and rest or physical therapy is all that is required; other cases are more severe and require surgery.

C. Verse 10b records that “they” asked Jesus a question to test Him. “They” relates to “their” synagogue in verse 9, which refers back to the Pharisees of the previous section, 12:2. They asked him a question that they felt would box him into a corner and he would answer “wrong.” I believe they knew that He would be inclined to heal the man in need, but they waited for a situation like this when such a healing would actually be, in their minds, illegal. This way, they could have a reason to claim that Jesus was worthy of blame.

Rotten people, weren’t they? It is only a sick mind that thinks a miracle-worker healing a man on the Sabbath is breaking the Law of God because it is doing “work” when no actual exertion is demonstrated. Jesus healed with no effort, only the power of words.

You would like to think they might come up to Jesus and ask Him, “Jesus, could you help this man with a bad hand? It would be a blessing if you could, and from what we have seen, we know you can do it.”

D. Jesus illustrates his answer to them with a story of a sheep which fell into a pit on Saturday (Sabbath). Would you let it be stuck there until late Saturday night when Sabbath ends, or early Sunday when Sabbath is past? Obviously not. Your care for the animal (animal!) clearly overrides the Sabbath command against labor. This is rescue, and although it is exertion of energy, it is not “labor” forbidden on the Sabbath.

¹ <https://www.healthline.com/health/claw-hand>

What if a building collapsed on its inhabitants on Friday night? You'd probably rest up on Saturday and attend to it on Sunday morning, no? Obviously, that is beyond ridiculous.

- E. The principle of lesser to greater—that an animal is of less consequence than a human being—is at the core of our Lord's logical statement here. "Of how much more value then is a man than a sheep?" For all our animal loving friends out there, continue on being compassionate to animals. But realize this: people are of far more value than animals. For example, there is no prohibition against killing animals, say for food or because of bad behavior. But there is plenty of Law around slaying of humans.
- F. Conclusion: "It is lawful to do good on the Sabbath." The Lord directly answers their dumb question with a sensible answer. In all the legalities about Sabbath keeping that people may continue to observe today, this principle at minimum must be kept in mind: doing good on the Sabbath is not a violation of it.
- G. The action concludes in verse 13 with the Lord telling the man to simply move his hand outward. As he did, the hand was healed instantly. Again, this is an example of a healing where no surgery, PT, OT, or recovery was necessary. It was immediate, as only Jesus can do.

Conclusion

Verse 14 transitions to the next section by saying that the Pharisees became enraged at Jesus because of His miracle. They could not "trap" him and it was obvious to the onlookers that Jesus was absolutely right. Instead of humbly taking defeat and changing their thinking, they went out and figured out how to destroy Jesus. That is a typical tyrannical approach at work.

So what is the right understanding of the Sabbath? It was not a harsh condemnation of all activity on Saturdays design by God to be slavishly followed. It was a day of rest designed for man to refresh himself and spend time in worship. It was a day to do good as needs presented themselves. It was not a prohibition against all "doing" but a time to set aside normal labor.