

# Chapter 12

## Jesus and the Sabbath

**F**or many people, the most persuasive argument in support of the Sabbath is the fact that Jesus kept the Sabbath. Christians want to follow Jesus, to live like he did (1 John 2:6). Does this include the day that he kept?

The problem is that Jesus was also circumcised, and he spoke of circumcision as a valid law (John 7:23). He also spoke of sacrifices as a law that should be kept (Matthew 5:24; 8:4). As a law-abiding Jew, Jesus would have offered Passover lambs (Luke 2:41), built tree-branch shelters for the Festival of Tabernacles, kept other Jewish festivals, worn blue-threaded tassels, supported the temple (Matthew 17:27) and other old covenant customs. Jesus lived sinlessly under the old covenant requirements (Hebrews 4:15). He was born under the law, while the old covenant was still in force (Galatians 4:4).

Jesus lived in old covenant times; we do not. Because of this important difference, we can't just assume that we must do everything that Jesus did. We do not have to obey the same laws he did. Jesus went to synagogues (Luke 4:16) and kept Hanukkah (John 10:22). Let's examine the Gospels to see what Jesus actually taught about the Sabbath. There's lots of material, so we have much to examine.

The first thing we might note is that Jesus never told anyone to keep the Sabbath. Although we are told various things that he did on the Sabbath, we are never told that he rested. The example we are given is always one of activity, not of rest. He urged liberty; he never endorsed any restrictions.

### Picking grain to eat

Let's begin our study in Matthew 12: "Jesus went through the grainfields on the Sabbath. His disciples were hungry and began to pick some heads of grain and eat them. When the Pharisees saw this, they said to him, 'Look! Your disciples are doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath'"

(verses 1-2).

Jesus did not sin. He did not break the Sabbath, and presumably he did not permit his disciples to break the Sabbath, either. We must conclude that the Pharisees were wrong. However, the Pharisees could claim good scriptural support for outlawing grain-picking on the Sabbath. Exodus 16:29 told people to stay in the camp on the Sabbath and not to pick up food off the ground. Exodus 34:21 says that the Sabbath applied to harvest season.

But the Pharisees were too strict — the old covenant rules were not meant to be prohibitions of *all* activity. However, Jesus did not try to argue that his disciples were abiding by the biblical law and violating only Jewish tradition. Rather, Jesus went to the Bible to show that the biblical law itself can sometimes be *set aside*. His approach was much more sweeping than just to say that it's OK to pick a little grain when you are hungry.

### Laws can sometimes be broken

Jesus mentioned the example of David: "Haven't you read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? He entered the house of God, and he and his companions ate the consecrated bread — which was not lawful for them to do, but only for the priests" (verses 3-4, referring to 1



Samuel 21:1-6). The law said that showbread was holy and was to be eaten only by priests. And yet David did it and was counted innocent. It was not lawful according to the letter of the law, and yet it was permitted in the purpose of God's spiritual law. Jesus' point regarding the Sabbath is that the *letter* of the law is not a reliable guide to holiness. People should be judged on the heart, not on superficial actions.

However, notice that the argument doesn't work if the Sabbath is more important than showbread rules — the Pharisees could have said, "The Sabbath is more important than showbread, so we have to be more careful about it." In order for the logic of the argument to work, the showbread has to be at least as important as the Sabbath. Only then could the comparison carry any weight. Only then could the argument conclude, that if it is permissible to bend the showbread rules, then we can bend the Sabbath rules, because it is easier to bend the Sabbath because it is not as important. Jesus used a ritual law as the most appropriate point of comparison for the Sabbath.

Jesus gave another example in verses 5-6: "Haven't you read in the Law that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple desecrate the day and yet are innocent? I tell you that one greater than the temple is here." Jesus is not saying that the Sabbath law *allowed* priestly work — he says that the priests "desecrate" the Sabbath day. They were, according to the letter of the Sabbath law, doing something that was not lawful. But yet their work was permitted because it was temple work. Something was more important than the Sabbath, and that something was the temple work — the rituals.

The temple and its sacrificial rites were more important than the Sabbath. But if the sacrifices were more important than the Sabbath, and the sacrifices are now obsolete, shouldn't we be willing to consider the possibility that the Sabbath is obsolete, too?

Jesus, however, is more important than the temple and its sacrifices. The logical conclusion is that he is also more important than the Sabbath. Even before his death and resurrection, he was more important than the Sabbath. The Pharisees, instead of worrying about a little activity on a holy day, ought to have been concerned with how they were treating the Holy One of Israel, who was standing before them. They should have worshipped him instead of looking to old covenant holy places and instead of using old covenant holy times to judge the Giver of

those times. The Sabbath was holy only because God had designated it so, and here was God himself. They should have accepted without question whatever he did, and they should have followed his example!

### **Mercy more than sacrifice**

Jesus then summarized his argument about the Sabbath and about his own identity: "If you had known what these words mean, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the innocent. For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath" (verses 7-8). Again, Jesus is using a ritual law (sacrifice) as a basis for his disciples' activity on the Sabbath. Just as mercy is more important than sacrifice, mercy is also more important than Sabbath rules.

Jesus is telling the Pharisees that love for humans is more important than sticking to worship rituals. Holy bread can be given to ordinary people when they are hungry. Holy time can be used in an ordinary way when people are hungry. If the Pharisees had understood the intent of the law, they would not have been criticizing the disciples. They would have been merciful, not judgmental.

Jesus ends the discussion with his claim to be Lord of the Sabbath — someone who had more authority than the Sabbath. It is not just that Jesus claimed to have a more accurate understanding of how the day should be kept — he claimed to be more important than the day itself. This claim was so stupendous that some Pharisees thought he blasphemed and deserved to die (verse 14).

### **Healing on the Sabbath**

Jesus' next activity gives a practical demonstration not only of his authority over the Sabbath, but also the proper use for the Sabbath even in the old covenant. "Going on from that place, he went into their synagogue, and a man with a shriveled hand was there. Looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, they asked him, 'Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?'" (verses 9-10). The Pharisees seem to be baiting Jesus, confronting him with a situation to test him. Healing was one of the types of work they said was not lawful.

But Jesus again pointed out the hypocrisy in their approach. They would rescue a sheep on the Sabbath (verse 11) — thus even a sheep was more important than resting on the Sabbath — and yet they were so strict that they didn't allow human needs, whether hunger or healing, to be taken care of on the

Sabbath. Their rules were a terrible distortion of what the Sabbath should have been. “How much more valuable is a man than a sheep! Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath” (verse 12).

This is what Jesus taught about the Sabbath. Don’t worry about prohibiting work — be more concerned about doing good. So Jesus healed the man, and the Pharisees wanted to kill Jesus. They thought the holy day was more important than the One who had made it holy.

### **The Sabbath was made for humans**

**Mark 1:21-22** — “They went to Capernaum, and when the Sabbath came, Jesus went into the synagogue and began to teach. The people were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law.” This verse doesn’t tell us much about the Sabbath, merely that Jesus happened to teach on this day. Presumably he taught on other days of the week, in other locations, but this is the day on which he could teach in a synagogue. Luke 4:31-37 is a parallel account.

**Mark 2:23-3:6** is similar to Matthew 12:1-12. Mark does not include the comments about sheep and mercy, but he makes a similar point by saying, “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath” (Mark 2:27).

Let’s note what this verse says and what it does not say. First, it says that the Sabbath was made for humans. It was given to serve their needs and to benefit them. Actually, all of God’s laws, even the laws of sacrifice, were given for human good. All the old covenant laws were designed to lead people to Christ. They were made to benefit humans. But their value has been eclipsed in Christ. God has given us something better.

Jesus did not say when the Sabbath came into existence. Nothing in the context indicates that Jesus was referring to creation week. We cannot assume that something made for humans necessarily had to be made immediately after humans were. For example, we could also say that the annual festivals were made for human benefit, and the rite of circumcision was instituted for human benefit. Christ’s death was also for our benefit. Simply knowing that the Sabbath was made for human benefit does not tell us when it was made — nor does it tell us whether an even better blessing is available in the new covenant.

Jesus did *not* say that the Sabbath was made for

both Gentiles and Jews — this is not in the context. When Jesus used the word “man” in Mark 2:27, he was using it in a general sense, without any reference to Jews specifically or to Gentiles specifically. As we showed in chapter 9, most first-century Jews did not believe that Gentiles had to keep the Sabbath, and Jesus was not addressing this question.

The Pharisees were concerned about the behavior of the disciples, not the Gentiles. If Jesus responded by teaching that the Sabbath was made for Gentiles as well as Jews, it would have supported the Pharisees’ concerns instead of refuting them. The Pharisees were overestimating the importance of Sabbath restrictions. Jesus responded to them not by expanding the Sabbath, but by reducing it.

We can see what Jesus meant by looking at the next phrase: “and not man for the Sabbath.” His point was that the Sabbath was made to serve people, instead of people being created to serve the Sabbath. The Sabbath was a servant, not a master. He was addressing the relative importance of the Sabbath, not which specific people were given the Sabbath.

In a similar way, we can also say, “Circumcision was made for humans, not for angels.” This statement is true, but we should not focus on the first half as if it meant that circumcision was made for all humans. It was given to Israel only, not the rest of the world. Similarly, Jesus said that the Sabbath was made for humans, but he did not say, nor did he mean, that it was made for *all* humans.

Since the Sabbath was made for human benefit, Jesus says, then he, as the Son of Man, has authority over it (verse 28). He is more important than the Sabbath. Our relationship with God is based on faith in him, not in old covenant institutions.

In the Sabbath healing that follows, Mark is slightly different than Matthew. Particularly striking is the emotion of Jesus: “He looked around at them in anger...deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts” (Mark 3:5). Jesus was *angry* at the hypocrisy of the Pharisees, who were more concerned about the holiness of a day than about the well-being of humans. They were really more concerned with self than with God, for they were failing to do what God himself would do.

### **Jesus and the Sabbath in Luke**

**Luke 4:15-30** — “He taught in their synagogues, and everyone praised him. He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his

custom. And he stood up to read.” Jesus taught in the synagogues on the Sabbaths. Considering the historical context, there is nothing unusual about that.

What is more significant is what Jesus taught: “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (verses 18-19).

Jesus used the Sabbath, in his preaching and in his miracles, to deliver poor people from bondage. He preached the good news that the Lord’s favor was on the people. He gave physical sight to a few, but spiritual sight to many. He did not release anyone from physical prisons, but freed many from spiritual captivity (through casting out demons and through forgiving sins).

### **Liberation on the Sabbath**

**Luke 13:10-17** — Unlike Matthew and Mark, Luke includes two more stories of Sabbath healings, and these provide further information to us regarding Jesus’ attitude toward the Sabbath. “On a Sabbath Jesus was teaching in one of the synagogues, and a woman was there who had been crippled by a spirit for eighteen years. She was bent over and could not straighten up at all. When Jesus saw her, he called her forward and said to her, ‘Woman, you are set free from your infirmity.’ Then he put his hands on her, and immediately she straightened up and praised God” (verses 10-13). By using the word “set free,” Jesus was emphasizing liberation rather than healing. This also provided the context for the comparison Jesus soon made.

The synagogue ruler (most synagogues were run by Pharisees) complained that healing was a work that could be done on the other six days and was not appropriate for the Sabbath (verse 14). “The Lord answered him, ‘You hypocrites! Doesn’t each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or donkey from the stall and lead it out to give it water? Then should not this woman, a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan has kept bound for eighteen long years, be set free on the Sabbath day from what bound her?’” (verses 15-16).

Since humans are more valuable than animals, and animals can be loosed on the Sabbath — an ordinary, daily task — then humans can be loosed on the Sabbath, too. The pharisaic rules about the Sabbath were not designed to benefit humans. Instead, the rules served the self-righteous attitudes

of the Pharisees. The Pharisees would prefer to see the woman labor with her infirmity another day rather than see an effortless healing. They were putting unnecessary obligations on the people, and Jesus said that people should be “set free” on the Sabbath day. A similar point is made in the next chapter.

**Luke 14:1-6** — “One Sabbath, when Jesus went to eat in the house of a prominent Pharisee, he was being carefully watched. There in front of him was a man suffering from dropsy. Jesus asked the Pharisees and experts in the law, ‘Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath or not?’” (verses 1-3). As in previous situations, the Pharisees may have set the situation up to test Jesus. Jesus knew their thoughts and handled the situation so expertly that he left them speechless.

Jesus healed the man, then asked, “If one of you has a son or an ox that falls into a well on the Sabbath day, will you not immediately pull him out?” (verse 5). Of course, the Pharisees would rescue a child or animal on the Sabbath. Rescue was permitted, so healing ought to be permitted, too. Needs can be taken care of, whether they are emergencies like animals in a ditch, or an everyday need like untying an animal to bring it to water.

Whether alleviating minor hunger or healing major pain, Jesus pointed out that humanitarian needs took precedence over the Sabbath. The day was supposed to make life better, not to make it more difficult.

### **Jesus and the Sabbath in John**

**John 5:1-18** — The Gospel of John has some additional stories about Jesus’ Sabbath activities, and they reinforce the points we have already seen. On the Sabbath, Jesus healed a man who had been an invalid for 38 years. Then he told the man, “Get up! Pick up your mat and walk” (verse 8). The Jews accused the man of breaking the Sabbath because he was carrying his mat.

Why did Jesus tell the man to carry his mat? There was no emergency, and the man was certainly capable of coming back after the Sabbath to get his mat. Jesus could have easily said, “You can carry your mat today if you want, but to avoid offense, leave it here for now.” But Jesus was not that conservative. He wanted to emphasize human freedom — not only the man’s freedom from his infirmity, but also his freedom to do something on the Sabbath.

The Jews criticized Jesus for what he was doing

on the Sabbath, but Jesus made them even more angry by boldly saying that he was indeed working on the Sabbath and he did so because he was like the Father! (verse 17). “For this reason the Jews tried all the harder to kill him; not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God” (verse 18).

Jesus did not try to defend his work and the man’s work as permitted by the law. No doubt he could have, but instead, he boldly described his activity on the Sabbath as “work.” (We know from Hebrews 4:15 that Jesus kept the Sabbath perfectly, within the parameters of old covenant law. Just as the priests could do God’s work on the Sabbath, Jesus could, too.) If we imitate our Savior, we might conclude from this passage that at least certain kinds of “work” are allowed on the Sabbath.

In **John 7:22-23**, Jesus referred to this Sabbath healing, and the controversy it caused. He pointed out the irony that the Jews did not allow healing on the Sabbath, but they did allow circumcision. “If a child can be circumcised on the Sabbath so that the Law of Moses may not be broken, why are you angry with me for healing the whole man on the Sabbath?”

Work could be done on the Sabbath so that the

Law of Moses would not be broken. This shows that the law commanding circumcision was more important than the Sabbath restriction. The circumcision law was more important than the Sabbath law, just as the laws of temple ritual were.

The Jews probably had no answer for Jesus. They could not refute what he said, and that is one reason they tried to kill him. But the readers of John’s Gospel would understand that circumcision, temple rituals and “the Law of Moses” were not required for Gentile Christians. If important laws like those could be swept aside, what does that imply for the less-important law, the Sabbath?

#### “We must work”

**John 9** — Jesus made mud to heal a blind man (verses 1-7). “Now the day on which Jesus had made the mud and opened the man’s eyes was a Sabbath” (verse 14). The healing had a spiritual meaning: Jesus is the light of the world, enabling spiritually blind people to see the truth. On this Sabbath day, Jesus said, “As long as it is day, we must do the work of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work” (verse 4). God’s work must be done on the Sabbath, Jesus said.

#### A ritual law, or a moral law?

Jesus consistently compared the Sabbath with ritual laws, not the laws about the way we should treat our neighbors. Those ritual laws showed us how to worship God, how to express love to him. We might assume that these laws are the most important and the most permanent, but the opposite is true: The laws of worship are precisely the laws most likely to be obsolete. All those sacrifices and rituals, specifying this and that, are done away in Christ. We do not have to show love to God in exactly the same way as the Israelites did.

We find additional evidence that the Sabbath is a ritual law in that God himself does not keep the Sabbath. It is not part of his nature. He rested once, but a six-one cycle is not part of his eternal nature. Nor do we have any evidence that angels keep the Sabbath; it was not designed for them. This means that the Sabbath is not an inherent part of the way good creatures show love to God or to one another. The Sabbath is not eternal, for it did not exist before creation, and will not be relevant in the new heavens and new earth. The Sabbath is not God’s nature, nor universal, nor timeless. It is a ritual law, saying that behavior that is good on Friday is not good on Saturday. Morality does not depend on the rotation of the earth, the day of the week, etc.

Good angels always worship God, they never make idols, they never misuse God’s name. They always honor the Father, never murder, steal, commit adultery, steal or covet. (They cannot commit adultery because they are sexless, but they *would* not commit adultery even if they could.) They are in literal compliance with nine of the Ten Commandments, and will forever be in compliance with those nine, but they do not keep the Sabbath. This also shows that the Sabbath is different from the other nine commandments. It is different in quality — a ceremonial law rather than a moral law.

Jesus clearly ranked the showbread as more important than the Sabbath, and the temple sacrifices as more important than the Sabbath, and circumcision as more important than the Sabbath. Jesus said that the Sabbath had to be broken so that sacrifices and circumcision could be performed — but I can’t imagine Jesus saying that an *important* law had to be broken so a ritual could be performed! Clearly, the Sabbath law **is** a ritual law. It should be no surprise that the Sabbath command expired at the same time as those other commands.

The Jews objected to Jesus' work — and they objected to it being done on the Sabbath. Making mud or clay was against their Sabbath law, and so was healing. They judged Jesus according to their law, and they judged unrighteously. They claimed to have the correct standard, but they were spiritually blind, neglecting love, justice, mercy and faith (verse 41). They were looking at the law instead of the Lawgiver as the standard of judgment.

Jesus criticized the Pharisees' approach to various laws and rituals, including ritual handwashing (Matthew 15:2), phylacteries (Matthew 23:5) and Corban rules (Mark 7:11-13). But these criticisms were not attempts to tell his disciples how to continue these customs in a better way. In fact, Jesus' criticisms helped the early church realize that these customs were obsolete. We cannot assume that when Jesus criticized the way something was done, that he wanted the practice continued by the church in a better way. We cannot assume that Jesus was telling his disciples how to keep the Sabbath in a better way. The Gospels do not give us any evidence that he ever commanded the Sabbath at all.

Jesus sometimes criticized the way the Pharisees approached customs that were good, including almsgiving, prayer and fasting (Matthew 6:2, 5, 16). On these topics, Jesus clearly taught his disciples to continue the practice (verses 3, 6, 17). But the Gospels never show us Jesus teaching his disciples to keep the Sabbath. We are told about *work* that Jesus did on the Sabbath, but we are never told that he rested on the Sabbath. He repeatedly noted that restrictive rules were violations of the intent of the Sabbath — he taught that a focus on external details was ineffective and incorrect. Those restrictions did not transform the heart.

Jesus never broke the Sabbath, nor did he teach others to break the Sabbath. But neither did he teach against circumcision and sacrifices. He could not while the old covenant was still in force. He could point out administrative problems, and present himself as the Lord, but it was not yet time to publicly reject any particular law (see John 16:12-13). But the implications are there. When John describes Jesus as working on the Sabbath, he does not feel any need to explain that Christians cannot. Jesus' example regarding the Sabbath is liberty, not rules.

Throughout these Sabbath incidents, Jesus liberalized the standards. He repeatedly did things that could have waited until sundown. He boldly

claimed to have authority to work on the Sabbath. That is one reason why many Christians conclude that the Sabbath is no longer required. Other Christians, also committed to God, conclude that they should keep the Sabbath, although not as strictly as the Pharisees did. They are welcome to their opinions provided they do not judge others on this topic.

Every Christian should be fully convinced, living every day to the Lord (Romans 14:5), seeking to be led by the Holy Spirit. If people think that the day is required, then they should keep it. If people think that they have freedom in this matter, then Christ expects them to act responsibly with that freedom. Whatever is not done in faith is sin (Romans 14:23).

Numerous scriptures admonish us to follow the example of our Savior. In following his example, however, we must distinguish between his activities that were based on the historical situation he lived in (going to synagogues, for example) and those activities that were based on timeless laws of interpersonal conduct and worship in spirit and truth. He kept the Sabbath because he was under the old covenant law, not to set an example for us. His example is always one of work and liberty, never one of rest.

Jesus is the Word made flesh (John 1:14). He is God in the flesh, and he incorporates all of God's law. He incorporates in himself the law of circumcision, the law of sacrifices, and the law of Sabbath. It is through faith in him that we are considered circumcised (Romans 2:29), and it is through faith in Christ that we receive forgiveness, which the sacrificial laws could only picture (Hebrews 10:1, 18). All ritual laws have been superseded by faith in Christ. That includes the Sabbath, too, which we will see as we study the epistles.

## Review 12

- Jesus kept many obsolete old covenant laws.
- His example on the Sabbath is always activity, never rest.
- The Sabbath was set aside so rituals could be performed. Could important commands be set aside for rituals?
- Even obsolete laws were made for human benefit, but they are now obsolete.
- Does Jesus support the Sabbath law, or does he imply that it is not permanent?

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