

**08<sup>th</sup> November 2017.**

## **UNDERSTANDING THE SABBATH AS THE LORD'S.**

### **Matthew 12:1-14.**

Against the backdrop of Our Lord Jesus Christ's famous invitation in Matthew 11:28,29.....

Do we find Matthew's account of that confrontation that marked a milestone in Jesus' ministry here in chapter 12, as we see the mounting, growing unbelief of Israel clearly becoming rejection in this chapter, with plots to kill Him being hatched hence forth.

The Law of the Sabbath was the bone of contention, by which the Pharisees sought to challenge His authority as a teacher in Israel. Everything in their legalistic system ultimately focused in on that one day, and when He violated their rabbinical traditions on the Sabbath, He was striking a blow at the heart of their system. If they can show that He violates the Law, then He is discredited. But in the process, they are discredited.

The word 'Sabbath' is a very simple word, sabbaton. It basically means 'to cease,' and when there is a double beta (bb), or a double b, there is an intensifying of the word, so it means 'a complete cessation,' the stopping of something. Their Sabbath, then, was the day they stopped doing what they did on the other days. You'll remember when God created the world, it says, "On the seventh day, He rested." He ordained that that day would be a day of ceasing for Israel. In Exodus 20, God said to them, "Take the seventh day, the Sabbath, the day of ceasing, and keep it holy." We also know that the Lord instituted the Sabbath year, in which the land would have to be rested and all tilling upon it ceased for the whole year.

Although God rested on the seventh day, God did not command men prior to the Mosaic Law to rest on the seventh day; it was in the Mosaic Law that the requirement was first articulated. Then it became, in the Mosaic Law, a special, covenantal sign between God and Israel. Let's take note that The Sabbath commandment is one of the Ten Commandments given to Moses on Sinai, as of Exodus 20; it is the only commandment that is a non-moral one, the only one that is a ceremonial command. It is the one of the Ten Commandments that was uniquely between God and Israel as a ceremonial rule; all the other nine are moral absolutes.

The reason we know this for sure is because when you get to the New Testament, every other command is repeated. Every one of the Ten Commandments is repeated except the one regarding the Sabbath. It is not repeated in the New Testament because it was a unique covenantal sign, much like circumcision was, between God and Israel.

At the time of Jesus and His disciples, the Sabbath was in fact the ceremonial law of God. It is not a binding law for the church, but it was for Israel. So the Lord would honor the Sabbath, as would His disciples, insofar as God intended it to be honored. But the Pharisees had added so many ridiculous things to the Sabbath that they would not honor. Even in truly honoring the Sabbath, they were in violation of some Pharisaic traditions, and this they could not tolerate. The Sabbath was the focus of all their religious activity and they had added so much stuff to it, that instead of it being a day of ceasing and a day of rest, it was a day of incredible burden. Back in chapter 11, when Jesus says, "Come to Me, all you who are weary and heavy-laden," the clearest illustration of that would have been the Sabbath observance. When they came to the seventh day of the week, or Saturday, as we know it, the laws, rules, and routines that they had to keep made it more difficult to rest than it was to work the other six days. There was more work trying to rest than there was work trying to work.

In one section of the Talmud, and there are at least two such sections, but in one of them, there are 24 chapters listing all the Sabbath laws. One rabbi spent two and a half years trying to understand one of those chapters!

Here are 39 things that were commonly forbidden: sewing, plowing, reaping, binding sheaves, threshing, winnowing, sifting, grinding, sifting with a sieve, kneading, baking; shearing wool, washing wool, beating wool, dying wool, spinning wool, putting it in the weaver's loom; making two threads, weaving two threads, separating two threads, making a knot or undoing it, sewing two stitches, tearing in order to sew two stitches; catching deer or killing, skinning, salting it, preparing its skin, scraping off its hair, cutting it up; writing two letters, scraping in order to write two letters, building, pulling down, extinguishing or lighting fire, beating with a hammer, carrying a possession, and it goes on and on.

To that extent was the Law of God for the Sabbath day adulterated by the Pharisees that it lost its true meaning and instead of inspiring rest, inspired burdensome toil. Matthew's text in study today is recounted in Mark 2:23 – 3:6 as well as Luke 6:1-11 with literal exactness, with John's gospel chapter 5 giving us a like-some event.

Let's read Matthew 12:1-8.....

Stalking Jesus like scavengers, seeking any offence they would get to discredit Him, The Pharisees took Jesus' disciples' actions as "violation" of the Law and accused the disciples of working on the Sabbath. According to the Pharisees, plucking wheat from its stem is reaping, rubbing the wheat heads between one's palms is threshing, and blowing away the chaff is winnowing! All of which as we noted were forbidden on the Sabbath! Howbeit that the Lord had given provision for all that were in such a scenario as the disciples were, in Deut. 23:25, therefore it was only a violation of the law as they interpreted it—not as God had written it. Jesus' answer would get to the spirit of the Law, which they had completely missed in their effort to make legal clarifications.

Jesus disputed the Pharisees' claim, using three illustrations. First, he cited an event in the life of King David. As he fled from Saul, David was given the consecrated bread (Show Bread), which had been removed from the tabernacle (1Sam21:1-6), and was normally reserved for the priests alone (Lev.24:9). David believed that preserving his life and his men's lives was more important than observing a technicality. And God didn't judge them against that.

Second, the priests in the temple were involved in work on the Sabbath, yet they were considered blameless. As they had to make the sacrifices and all...

Third, Jesus argued that He Himself was greater than the temple, for He is Lord of the Sabbath. That is, He controls what can be done on it, the temple represented the presence of God with His people; but the presence of Jesus meant that God was with them in mortal flesh, and He did not condemn the disciples for their action. To refer to Himself as the LORD of the Sabbath means that He can handle the Sabbath laws any way that He wants, or can supercede them in the same way that the temple service of priests superceded Sabbath observance. As LORD of the Sabbath, Jesus is the Son of Man, the divine Creator, the covenant God. And as LORD of the Sabbath Jesus the Messiah has authority over the temple too.

The Pharisees were splitting hairs with their technicalities about reaping, threshing, and winnowing. They failed to understand compassion for people's basic needs (in this case, the disciples' hunger,) but were intense in their concern for the sacrifices. Jesus reminded them of the words in Hos.6:6, I desire mercy, not sacrifice, that is, inner spiritual vitality, not mere external formality.

In response to the challenge from the Pharisees, Jesus healed on the Sabbath and demonstrated the importance of mercy (9-14).

The second part could be taken as a separate Bible study, but since it overlaps so much, the two can be taken together. Luke 6:6-11 indicates it was on another Sabbath; but Matthew has combined the two to make his point. Let's read verses 9-14.....

Luke tells us that the scribes and Pharisees were there to watch Him so that they might find some charge against Him (Luk.6:6-7).

Their question was whether it was lawful to heal on the Sabbath; and Jesus argued that it was lawful, not that it was required. According to Jewish teaching while healing was permitted in some cases on the Sabbath, the patient had to be dying, or the situation life threatening. And that does not seem to be the case here. But Jesus makes the analogy that if they had a sheep that fell into a pit they would lift it out on a Sabbath day--how much more a human in trouble. Neither the man with the withered hand, nor the sheep in the pit, were in danger of losing their life. So it was a matter of doing a good deed on the holy day. He knew that in principle they practiced that, but now were simply trying to accuse Him of violating their law.

Our Lord reminded them that a man is of greater value than a sheep. If it is right to show mercy to an animal, how much more justified is it to do good to a man on the Sabbath!

Then Jesus healed the man. The healing comes after Jesus' bold words about Himself and about His authority over the Sabbath day. But the miracle authenticates His powerful words, and in Matthew's presentation of the order it also authenticates His prior claim of being LORD of the Sabbath.

All of this being similar to the story of Jesus' healing of the paralytic at Bethesda on a Sabbath as told in John 5, had the Jews so incensed to kill Him, but in vs. 17 it says that He answered them, "My Father has been working until now, and I have been working." Which was the 'coffin nailer', as vs. 18 says; "Therefore the Jews sought all the more to kill Him, because He not only broke the Sabbath, but also said that God was His Father, making Himself equal with God."!

The point that the passage is making is best expressed by Jesus' own claim that He is the LORD of the Sabbath. That means that He is the one who instituted it and He is the one who rules over it. He of all people would then know what the intent of the Sabbath day was, - mercy, and not simply a day to avoid work. He never intended it to be subjected to hundreds of legalistic rulings. It was a day for celebration and refreshment and communion with the LORD.

But as LORD of the Sabbath Jesus had authority over all creation, including all people. He demonstrated that authority with His claims, and authenticated it with His mighty works, here the healing of the man with the withered hand. They understand His claim; they saw His mighty works. They either had to submit to His authority, or try to get rid of Him. Unfortunately for them they pursued the latter. Here are a few major applications for us to consider:

1. Commitment to the authority of Christ. These passages are all designed to reveal the person and work of Jesus, here as Lord of Sabbath, i.e., the sovereign creator and sustainer of life. When studying these kinds of passages the believer should renew his or her own faith in Christ. It should be an inspiration to greater allegiance and greater faith, that is, to praise and adoration of Him, and to obedience and prayer to Him.

2. Avoidance of legalism. Legalism is not simply keeping laws, but is a self-righteous attitude. The legalist thinks he is righteous, and so anyone who does not conform with his idea of what righteousness is must be a guilty sinner. Legalism usually plays out with interpretations of Scripture, not actual Scripture. For example, some legalists today define what worldliness is, although they list things that the Bible does not mention; and whoever does not abide by their understanding is in sin.

3. Doing acts of mercy. What a contrast: the Pharisees are there criticizing and challenging Jesus, and eventually plotting to kill Him. That is obviously a terrible religious state to be in, for it opposes what is good and merciful. The point that Jesus makes is that that attitude nullifies any sacrifice or ritual they had made. His instruction is from Hosea: God desires mercy. People should be looking for objects of mercy, not objects to criticize. If they were busy with that, the Church would be a much better place.

In summary, we have it from Jesus that the Sabbath law was never intended to restrict needs of necessity. Secondly, it was never meant to restrict service to God. Thirdly, it was never meant to restrict acts of mercy. The Sabbath was to bring rest, not hardship; to reflect what the other nine commandments reflected: love toward God and toward your fellow man.

Do you know why we don't keep the Sabbath anymore? Because Jesus fulfilled it. Hebrews 4 says that because of Christ, we have entered into rest. What does that mean?

The Sabbath was a figure, a picture, a shadow of rest, saying, "This is how it will be - a day of rest." God, through the Sabbath, was saying, "There is coming a rest." The Pharisees ruined that illustration, because if the Kingdom of God was like the Sabbath they had invented, who wants it?

They had destroyed it, so the Lord came along and said, "Come over here to My side if you're laboring and heavy-laden; My yoke is easy and My burden is light. You will find rest!" It's a time of mercy, meeting needs, and serving God. Jesus came and fulfilled that Sabbath, and that's why there is no more need for a shadow, an illustration, because we've entered the reality. That is why the New Testament says nothing about keeping the Sabbath.

Romans 14 says, "Some people want to keep the Sabbath and some don't. It's no big deal; if they want to, it's because they are doing it traditionally from their Judaism, don't offend them, let them go. If you don't want to do it, don't worry about it." That's why Paul says in Galatians 4 and Colossians 2, "Don't let anyone impose upon you days or Sabbaths." We have the reality; the shadow is gone. Christ fulfilled it.

Let's read Romans 14:5-6.....; Colossians 2:16-18.....

That's why He rose on the first day of the week. The disciples met together on the first day of the week (Acts 2:1), regularly breaking bread on the first day of the week (Acts 20:7), and they were to collect their offerings when they came together on the first day of the week (I Corinthians 16:1). Why? Because that was the day that commemorated and celebrated the resurrection. That's why we meet on Sunday, because it's resurrection day! It's the new covenant.

So, are we to keep the Sabbath day as a law or as a requirement?

How then are we to keep the Sabbath? Is it a day?