

## The Sabbath

Matt. 12:1-14

The Sabbath was the Jewish day of rest. The rationale for the Sabbath is found in the Genesis account of creation where God worked for six days and then rested on the seventh day. The seventh day of the week is Saturday and so the Sabbath is celebrated on Saturday. Jewish Synagogues have their services on Saturdays as do Seventh Day Adventists and other Seventh Day groups. Early Jewish Christian leaders such as the Apostle Paul took advantage of the Jewish celebration of the Sabbath to meet with the Jews in the synagogues in order to preach the resurrection of Christ in fulfillment of the Old Testament Scriptures. The Sabbath became a witnessing day for them and they would then meet with the Christian believers on the first day of the week, Sunday, the day of Jesus' resurrection. The first day of the week became the day of worship for Christians in honor of Jesus' resurrection.

In the history of the people of Israel, the first commandment to be cast aside during times of spiritual backsliding was the Sabbath. The temple was far removed from most of the population, the synagogues were a later development, the temple was also often compromised by idolatry and there was an economic incentive to forsake the Sabbath for if you are resting someone else will be out there making money. During the period of the renewal of Jewish temple worship that began with the rebuilding of the temple by the captives who returned from Babylon and reached its peak during the life of Jesus in the first century there was a high degree of zeal for the observation of the Sabbath. A synagogue for Sabbath worship was to be found in every community with even a marginal Jewish population throughout the Roman Empire. And the Jewish authorities had incorporated very strict rules for the observation of the Sabbath that were considered mandatory for all in the community. To keep these rules was to be assured of eternal life and to break them was a sure way to find oneself condemned to an eternal damnation as well as completely cut off from the Jewish community.

When the Pharisees accused the disciples of breaking the Sabbath they levied a serious charge. Sabbath observance was a cornerstone of the faith and to treat it lightly was to threaten the spiritual values of the community. It was also perceived to be a domino that should it fall would do much damage. Suppose one person's business were to gain advantage by conducting business on the Sabbath, how much pressure would be felt by competitors to do the same? All of this was in the air when the Pharisees questioned the right of the disciples to pluck the heads of grain and to eat them on the Sabbath.

Given the likely familiarity of the disciples with the rules for Sabbath observance it would seem unlikely that they would have felt free to pluck the grain and to eat them

unless they had been freed by Jesus to do so. Jesus then purposefully and deliberately challenged the status quo - it must have been very important to Him to do so. Jesus took up something of a crusade against the "accepted" practice of Sabbath Day observance.

What were His reasons for taking what was such a radical position for His times?

1) The faith had been reduced down to simply keeping the Sabbath and other ceremonial rules. Thus the observance of the rules of the Sabbath did not promote humility but pride and served to distance the people from God rather than bringing them close to Him.

2) Keeping the rules of the Sabbath was entirely an outward observance that required no transformation of the inner man. You could keep the Sabbath and otherwise be an entirely cruel and selfish person. This was a false measure of spiritual devotion. The population was religious but the leaders and people did not know God.

3) There were specific exceptions to the rules that were spelled out. Jesus gave one example asking, "What man is there among you who has one sheep, and if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will not lay hold of it and lift it out?" And yet, it was a clear violation of the rules to pluck the head off of a stem of grain and eat it. Which would require more effort, plucking the grain or lifting a sheep by whatever means out of a pit? These exceptions clearly favored the rich and

powerful rather than the poor and the oppressed. You could even make the point that these rules had become a means of the oppression of the poor.

4) In all of this, the principle value of the Sabbath had been entirely lost. Sabbath observance mimicked the rest of God after the six days of labor. Rest was valued in the Sabbath as a balance to the six days of work. It represented God's care for man and an acknowledgement that man needs both work and rest. Part of the experience of rest was worship and the recognition of our need to be in right relationship with our Creator. Jesus' objections and His Sabbath observance brought these principles back into play.

So we might ask, was does any of this have to do with me? Not too long ago, people thought of Sunday as the Christian Sabbath. A hundred years ago, it was normal for Christian families to observe the Sabbath on Sundays and refrain from any non-essential work. Children might not be allowed to play after Sunday dinner but instead take a nap. And many businesses would be closed on Sundays in observance of this Sabbath. There were some places where there were virtually no businesses that were

allowed to be open on Sundays (except churches). Are we better off or worse off with things as they are today?

If rest has no place in our lives and culture and we fail to practice the values of both work and rest then we miss our Creator's intent for our lives. He demonstrated the practice of a balance needed for healthy living. If we would impose a rigid standard of observation of Sabbath rules then we would only repeat the mistakes of the past. For example, in the past, labor was nearly entirely physical. Many jobs are no longer physically demanding. Rest for some might require time as a couch potato. Rest for others might require intense physical exercise. No set of rules can cover these things. We must accept the principle of the necessity of the balance between work and rest and practice the liberty we have in Christ to make the principle a priority in our individual lives.

But the commandment to observe the Sabbath is not an isolated case. Every commandment and expression of devotion must first be subjected to the question of God's original intent. Jesus did this with the Sabbath. He asked, "Was man made for the Sabbath or was the Sabbath made for man?" The answer then

leads to the practice of a Sabbath observance that brings a blessing to those who observe it rather than placing the observer in chains of one sort or another.

It was with this spirit that Jesus healed the man with the withered hand, making the case that it was right for Him to do so. In fact, to choose to not heal when He could, would have represented an injury to the man - this was Jesus' argument.

What issues have these sort of dynamics today? If we pay attention to Paul's word in 1 Corinthians 6:12 then the list is long rather than short. Paul argued that we are not saved or lost by keeping the commandments by God's grace when we receive the Lord. "All things are lawful," means that a particular practice whether it is prohibited by the Law or not will not get me into heaven or keep me out of it. It is Jesus who saves those who believe in His name. At the same time, if a practice is a hindrance to me or if it is enslaving of me then it does not belong in my life, it will bring problems to me rather than a blessing. Freedom in Christ is not license but the power and opportunity to choose what is best and to consequently serve Christ most effectively.