

37. The Gospel of John—5:8-16

“The Sabbath Controversy” Pt.1

(7/22/18)

Last week in our study of John’s gospel, we started looking at chapter 5 which began with the story of a man who had been crippled for 38 years with some kind of infirmity.

Jesus found him laying by the Pool of Bethesda, asked him if he wanted to be healed and then told him to ‘*rise, take up his bed and walk*’—

John 5:9-15 (NKJV)

⁹ And immediately the man was made well, took up his bed, and walked. And that day was the Sabbath. ¹⁰ The Jews therefore said to him who was cured, "It is the Sabbath; it is not lawful for you to carry *your* bed." ¹¹ He answered them, "He who made me well said to me, 'Take up your bed and walk.'" ¹² Then they asked him, "Who is the Man who said to you, 'Take up your bed and walk?'" ¹³ But the one who was healed did not know who it was, for Jesus had withdrawn, a multitude being in *that* place. ¹⁴ Afterward Jesus found him in the temple, and said to him, "See, you have been made well. Sin no more, lest a worse thing come upon you." ¹⁵ The man departed and told the Jews that it was Jesus who had made him well.

As we said last time—that John makes it a point to tell us that Jesus did this healing on the Sabbath was no accident.

He is letting us know that it was Jesus’ Sabbath ‘violations’ that escalated the hatred of the Jewish leadership toward Him throughout the remainder of His earthly ministry culminating in them blackmailing Pilate to have the Lord crucified.

In this story, not only did Jesus heal this man on the Sabbath—but then had the audacity to tell him to take up his bed (a sleeping-mat or bedroll) and carry it away.

This caused the Jewish religious leaders to come unglued and turned their simmering animosity toward Jesus into a boiling, murderous hatred, something that John confirms in verse 16—

John 5:16 (NKJV)

¹⁶ For this reason the Jews persecuted Jesus, and sought to kill Him, because He had done these things on the Sabbath.

To understand what the Sabbath was and why the Jews felt so strongly about it—we need to go back into the Torah.

I. The Sabbath Law

Deuteronomy 5:13-14 (NKJV)

¹³ Six days you shall labor and do all your work, ¹⁴ but the seventh day *is* the Sabbath of the LORD your God. *In it* you shall do no work: you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your male servant, nor your female servant, nor your ox, nor your donkey, nor any of your cattle, nor your stranger who *is* within your gates, that your male servant and your female servant may rest as well as you.

When God originally gave the Sabbath law it was a very simple concept—you work your fields six days a week and on the seventh day, the Sabbath (Saturday), you were to rest.

Your animals needed rest, your servants needed to rest and so did you.

So, the principle was an easy one to understand—take the day off so that you could physically rest and recuperate—and spend some quality time with God in the process.

And as a part of the written Law of God (Ten Commandments) the Sabbath was a relatively simple, succinct law containing 60 words in the English.

However, the rabbis took a simple concept and turned it into an unbearable burden.

As they began to interpret what God *meant* when He said they were to *rest* on the Sabbath—it led to 24 chapters in the Talmud being devoted to the concept of what constituted Sabbath rest.

For example, they taught:

- *A person couldn't carry any object on the Sabbath that weighed more than a dried fig so, if you wore false teeth, you would have to take them out on the Sabbath or else you would be in violation of Sabbath law.*
- *If a person wore a wooden leg, it would have to be removed lest he or she be in violation of carrying a burden on the Sabbath.*
- *Nothing could be bought or sold, and clothing could not be dyed or washed.*
- *No fire could be lit or extinguished including fire for a lamp—although a fire already lit could be used within certain limits.*

For that reason, orthodox Jews today use automatic timers to turn on lights in their homes when the sun goes down and the Sabbath begins—otherwise they might forget to turn them on before the sun goes down and have to spend the night in the dark.

- *You couldn't look into a mirror on the Sabbath because you might see a gray hair and be tempted to pull it out, which would constitute work and therefore violate the Sabbath.*
- *You couldn't take a bath on the Sabbath because perhaps while you were in the bathtub, water would spill out, and thus the floor would be washed—a clear violation of the Sabbath.*
- *If a person became ill on the Sabbath, only enough treatment could be given to keep him alive—treatment to make him improve was declared to be work, and therefore forbidden.*

And on and on it went—page after page, chapter after chapter of what the rabbis interpreted Sabbath rest to mean.

But folks, the Sabbath had become anything but a time of rest—the scribes and Pharisees had loaded it down with so many rules and regulations the people dreaded the Sabbath—instead of being the greatest *blessing* of the week, it had become the biggest *burden*.

And yet, even though the Sabbath had become such a burden—the Jews in general and the leadership in particular still zealously embraced it, defended it, and enforced it—why?

You have to understand how sacred the Sabbath was to the Jewish people—it was the sign of the covenant that God made with Moses and the children of Israel from Mount Sinai when they first came out of Egypt.

The Sabbath was the one thing that separated the Jewish people from every other nation on the face of the earth—

Exodus 31:12-14, 16, 18 (NKJV)

¹² And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ¹³ "Speak also to the children of Israel, saying: 'Surely My Sabbaths you shall keep, for it *is* a sign between Me and you throughout your generations, that *you* may know that I *am* the LORD who sanctifies you. ¹⁴ You shall keep the Sabbath, therefore, for *it is* holy to you. Everyone who profanes it shall surely be put to death... ¹⁶ Therefore the children of Israel shall keep the Sabbath, to observe the Sabbath throughout their generations *as* a perpetual covenant... ¹⁸ And when He had made an end of speaking with him on Mount Sinai, He gave Moses two tablets of the Testimony, tablets of stone, written with the finger of God.

And so, one of the reasons the Jewish leaders hated Jesus so much and wanted to kill Him was because they believed He sought to undermine and destroy the covenant God made with them (along with their power) by violating the Sabbath and teaching others to do so—as we saw in our text this morning.

And yet, Jesus didn't come to destroy the Law of God (the Mosaic Covenant), He came to fulfill it (Matt.5:17)—as the only One who could keep the Law perfectly.

But your need to understand, Jesus never violated Sabbath law (as God intended it)—He only violated their *interpretation* of Sabbath law.

And as I said earlier, in our text Jesus violated two Sabbath laws in the minds of the Jewish leadership—He *healed* a man on the Sabbath and then told him to *carry* his bed.

First of all, God never intended for His people to rest from doing good and helping someone in need on the Sabbath—

Matthew 12:9-14 (NKJV)

⁹ Now when He had departed from there, He went into their synagogue. ¹⁰ And behold, there was a man who had a withered hand. And they asked Him, saying, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?"--that they might accuse Him. ¹¹ Then He said to them, "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? ¹² Of how much more value then is a man than a sheep? Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath." ¹³ Then He said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." And he stretched *it* out, and it was restored as whole as the other. ¹⁴ Then the Pharisees went out and plotted against Him, how they might destroy Him.

Mark 3:4-5 (NKJV)

⁴ Then He said to them, "Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?" But they kept silent. ⁵ And when He had looked around at them with anger, being grieved by the hardness of their hearts, He said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." And he stretched *it* out, and his hand was restored as whole as the other.

Again, God never intended the Sabbath to be a time where the Jews rested from helping people and doing good—so when Jesus healed on the Sabbath it was not a violation of Sabbath law.

And secondly, when it came to carrying a burden, most scholars believe that the burdens God had in mind and forbid them from carrying on the Sabbath—were burdens associated with their livelihood or occupation (Nehemiah 13:15), not false teeth!

So Jesus, during His earthly ministry, never violated or broke Sabbath Law—only their faulty man-made interpretations of what constituted Sabbath Law.

Besides, as God in human form—He was the One Who gave the Sabbath to Israel in the first place, and as such He was the One Who had the authority to suspend Sabbath law or abrogate it altogether if He chose to do so.

And that brings us to our next main point—

II. The Sabbath Lord

Mark 2:23-28 (NKJV)

²³ Now it happened that He went through the grainfields on the Sabbath; and as they went His disciples began to pluck the heads of grain. ²⁴ And the Pharisees said to Him, "Look, why do they do what is not lawful on the Sabbath?" ²⁵ But He said to them, "Have you never read what David did when he was in need and hungry, he and those with him: ²⁶ how he went into the house of God *in the days* of Abiathar the high priest, and ate the showbread, which is not lawful to eat, except for the priests, and also gave some to those who were with him?" ²⁷ And He said to them, "The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath. ²⁸ Therefore the Son of Man is also Lord of the Sabbath."

In this passage, the incident Jesus speaks of was when David and his men were fleeing from King Saul who wanted to kill David.

In their haste they forgot to take some bread with them, and so they came to Ahimelech, the priest, and asked him if he had any bread they could have.

Ahimelech told them that all he had was the Showbread from the week before.

The bread of the Presence (Showbread) was baked weekly, and each Sabbath twelve fresh loaves (representing the twelve tribes) replaced the previous ones, which God's law mandated could only be eaten by the priests.

However, on this particular occasion an exception was made on behalf of David and his men, who were weak from hunger—and God was not offended by that act, nor did He seek to discipline either Ahimelech or David.

The Lord was willing to suspend a ceremonial law when doing so was necessary to meet human need—something the scribes and Pharisees seemed oblivious to.

They should have known that the law was given to help people not hurt them—even as Jesus affirmed in Mark 2:27, **“The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath.”**

In other words, God’s original intent when He gave the Sabbath law was to benefit His people (by giving them a day of rest)—and not to hurt them or purposely make their lives difficult.

One author said,

“The scribes and Pharisees knew nothing of love for God or for men. They were legalistic functionaries, trapped in their own system of endless, futile traditions. Instead of fulfilling the law by loving their neighbors as themselves (Lev. 19:18), they attempted to fulfill it through loveless and lifeless traditions”.

That’s the problem with religion—it claims to help people draw near to God but in reality, it becomes a barrier, through all the petty rules, regulations and traditions, to keep them from God.

(Mention the Hippies in the sixties during the Jesus movement and how they were turned away from churches because their hair was too long, and they weren’t wearing 3-piece suits—the ‘traditional dress’)

Now, with regard to Him violating the Sabbath, Jesus also said something significant—

Matthew 12:5-6 (NKJV)

⁵ Or have you not read in the law that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple profane the Sabbath, and are blameless? ⁶ Yet I say to you that in this place there is *One* greater than the temple.

Jesus here is ‘showcasing’ the contradiction in the Scribes and Pharisees’ doctrinal position.

On the one hand, they condemned Jesus for working on the Sabbath by healing people as a violation of Sabbath law—but then they turned around and taught that the priests who worked on the Sabbath in the Temple, slaughtering animals, lifting the carcasses onto the altar of sacrifice, starting the fire etc. were not violating Sabbath law.

Jesus pointed out this dichotomy and used it to prove His point that serving God on the Sabbath, whether you're a priest or whether you're an average person helping someone in need—is not a violation of Sabbath law.

In fact, it's not only *acceptable* in the eyes of God—it's *mandatory* under His “*love your neighbor as yourself*” law (Lev.19:18).

In Matt. 12:6, Jesus tells them that the work He was doing in healing the sick on the Sabbath (the work of the Kingdom and New Covenant) was a greater work than the priests were doing on the Sabbath in the Temple (the work of the Old Covenant)—and therefore He was no more guilty of breaking Sabbath law than they were.

Then Jesus reminded them of this ‘bombshell’ out of the book of Hosea the prophet—

Matthew 12:7 (NKJV)

But if you had known what this means, ‘**I desire mercy and not sacrifice,**’ (Hosea 6:6) you would not have condemned the guiltless.

What Jesus is saying is that the Law (with its animal sacrifices), as important as it was to the O.T. economy, was never intended by God to supersede love and mercy towards others in need.

And therefore, the scribes and Pharisees wrongly condemned many for breaking the Sabbath who were simply showing mercy to others by helping them on the Sabbath—as they were now condemning Jesus for doing.

III. The Sabbath Lesson

As we have just seen, Jesus referred to Himself as ‘Lord of the Sabbath’ (Mark 2:28)—an inescapable claim of deity on the part of Jesus which we will look at in detail next time in John 5.

But here is an important lesson about the Sabbath that Jesus (and later Paul the apostle) taught, that—not only did Jesus, as the Lord of the Sabbath, *institute* the Sabbath—He Himself is the Sabbath!

Something He alluded to when He said, “Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” (Matt.11:28)

Let me just say this—if there is a ‘secret’ for living the Christian life with power and victory this is it!

Although, it’s not a secret (the N.T. clearly teaches it)—but it is a powerful Sabbath *lesson* for living a ‘transformed life’.

We have to stop here and pick our study up next time.