

No One Like Jesus: Sabbath, Sacrifice, and Mercy
By Jason Huff
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Exodus 31:12-17; Colossians 2:13-17; Matthew 12:1-14

Friends, our final Scripture reading comes from Matthew 12:1-14. May God add His blessing on the reading of His holy Word. “At that time 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.” He answered, “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. Or 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. 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.” 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?” He said to them, “If any of you has a sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will you not take hold of it and lift it out? How much more valuable is a man than a sheep! Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.” Then he said to the man, “Stretch out your hand.” So he stretched it out and it was completely restored, just as sound as the other. But the Pharisees went out and plotted how they might kill Jesus.”

If you want to talk about controversy, Christianity, and politics, you don't have to look any further than the Ten Commandments. Once, they were displayed on public property as the foundation of Western law. Now we fight over whether or not it's appropriate for a judge to have a copy up in their courtroom. We could debate the separation of church and state all day long.

But what's fascinating is that Christians have never kept the fourth commandment. We have never kept the Sabbath. We've reinterpreted it as the Lord's Day, Sunday, the day on which Jesus rose from the grave. But that's a huge change. The Sabbath was a “lasting ordinance” because God rested on the seventh day from His labors of creating the universe. Sunday is the first day of the week, not the last. Due to Jewish concepts of days and time, Sabbath begins on Friday evening and ends on Saturday evening. Christians have never kept the Sabbath proper.

That doesn't mean that we haven't kept the spirit of the Sabbath on Sundays. Ultimately, what Jesus teaches us about the Sabbath is that it was never meant to be just another law to follow. Instead, it was about building a relationship with our eternal King. God intended for us to have time to enjoy His grace and rest, and He still offers that to us today.

Before we start, we need to know the fourth commandment: “Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy [set apart]. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath [literally a “cease and desist day”] to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates. For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day.”

The Sabbath was a day to delight in God. It was holy – it was designated by God, for God, to be about God, set apart for Him. It was a time to focus on the one relationship that always matters...our relationship with God. It was for enjoying the blessing of the world God created. And it was made for everyone...people from every nation, even the animals the Israelites owned, observed it. On that day, master and servant were alike and received rest.

The Sabbath law said to do no work, but God gave very few clues as to what that entailed. Two are mentioned in the books of Moses – the first five books of the Bible. God says not to light a fire in your dwellings on the Sabbath. A man gathering firewood is convicted by God of breaking the Sabbath. That's it. Later, the prophets speak for God, saying not to carry a load, buy, sell, or go about labors of buying and selling (like treading grapes to make wine to sell.) God warns not to “do as you please” on the Sabbath. But that's the whole of it.

The religious leaders of Israel, in their quest to fulfill the law, decided they needed to create a set of rules that would keep them from ever breaking the Sabbath. Walking is part of working, right? Can't travel more than a mile from your home. Can't cook on the Sabbath, and definitely no harvesting or threshing (like what they accused Jesus' disciples of doing).

As the years progressed, the list of forbidden works grew. That's why orthodox Jews today pull the light bulb from their refrigerators on Friday afternoon – so if they open it on the Sabbath, they haven't lit a fire. In New York City, elevators in Jewish neighborhoods stop at every floor on Friday nights and Saturdays so no one does work by pushing the button. These are the modern outgrowths of the Pharisee's expansion of the Law.

These are the kinds of rules the Pharisees accuse Jesus' disciples of breaking. They're going through a grain field and the disciples pick some. This is perfectly legal. God told the Israelites not to harvest several times but to leave what was left behind for the poor, the stranger, and the widow who might pass through. They aren't stealing. Instead, the Pharisees charge them with harvesting (the picking of the grain itself) and threshing (getting the chaff off so it's edible). This was serious business. A rabbi who trained his disciples to disregard the law of God was a heretic, a danger to society. The Pharisees saw their rules as a natural extension of God's law.

Jesus thinks otherwise. He points out a key example from history where the letter of the Sabbath was broken but God was not displeased. When David's small army fled the wrath of the insane King Saul, they were given ceremonial bread to eat by a priest. It was technically forbidden, but it wasn't condemned. Why? The priest acted out of mercy. The ceremonial law was not given so that people would starve to death. That priest broke the ceremonial law to serve the higher moral law – the law of mercy.

Jesus then brings up the priests, who always work on the Sabbath. It's their *job*! By the letter of the law, they are guilty, but they are held innocent. Under the old covenant, the priestly sacrifices were necessary to bring the people back into a right relationship with God. The priests' work was integral to the purpose of the Sabbath – giving the people a day to renew their relationship with God and find their rest in Him. Without their sacrifices, there could be no reconciliation. They were innocent because the moral purpose of the Sabbath – getting right with God – could only be fulfilled by their working on the Sabbath.

The most important thing Jesus says is this: “One greater than the temple is here. For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.” The temple was the greatest place in all Israel, the literal house of God amongst His people. How can a person be greater than the temple? If *He* is the true temple. Colossians 2:9 says, “In Jesus all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form.” Jesus is God taking on human flesh as His temple. Jesus is the new temple, He is the Lord of the Sabbath, and He declares mercy and good works proper for the Sabbath.

If we have any question about Jesus' divinity, those questions go away in light of these verses. Who can be Lord of the Sabbath? Who can say what is appropriate and inappropriate for that day? Only God Himself. Jesus is divine, the Son of the Father, one person of the triune God. He shows it by declaring Himself Lord of the Sabbath.

He shows His Lordship by what happens next. The Pharisees set a trap. Jesus goes to the synagogue where a man with a shriveled hand worships. The man hasn't asked for healing; he isn't trying to start anything. But the Pharisees ask, “Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?” They held that healing someone who wasn't in immediate danger of dying was work.

But they miss the point. Is it merciful to prolong suffering? They wouldn't make a sheep wait who had fallen into a pit. Why condemn a man to another day of misery? Of course it's lawful, Jesus says. Mercy is the moral law. It trumps the sacrificial and ceremonial law. To do good on the Sabbath to others fulfills the purpose of the Sabbath – to draw nearer to God.

The Pharisees didn't understand the point of the law. The law meant to teach them mercy actually made them merciless. The law that was to bring them closer to the God of compassion made them have less compassion. Their rules and regulations were worthless. What good is a day set aside for God if it makes you less like Him? It says a lot about the Pharisees that they plotted to kill Jesus after He'd healed the man.

Jesus does good works on the Sabbath to teach us about who God is, who we are, and why the Sabbath exists. Here's the first thing I learned as I read this week: *Rules are no substitute for relationship*. The Pharisees didn't get it. They thought following the rules earned God's favor. They called themselves righteous by keeping to a tight list of rules they made up.

Rules give relationships boundaries. Rules protect relationships. The moral law of God still stands to this day. But a rule is no substitute for relationship. What the Pharisees had wrong is that God does not first and foremost want us to be law-keepers. He wants us to be mercy-keepers, grace-keepers, children who act like their father. We've heard the phrase, “Rules were made to be broken.” Drive ten minutes on 696 and you'll know it's true. God's rules prove our inability to be like Him and our need for Him to rescue us from our own inadequacy. God saves us through His Son as we believe in Him and forge a relationship with Him.

Even the best man-made rules are arbitrary, made up, and they fail. Arbitrary rules lead us to say, “There's nothing I can do,” when someone just needs a little grace. Arbitrary rules are why many young people can't make something of their lives after a few minor mess-ups before they're out of their teens. Arbitrary rules are why two young men who committed the same terrible crime have very different sentences, with a public outcry that the rules are broken.

In a fallen world, rules are necessary. They keep us from destroying ourselves and others. God gave us some rules, even controversial ones, so we might have a relationship with Him. Sexual impurity, greed, envy, malice, and hatred drive a wedge between us and God between us and other people. These moral laws stand because when we break them, we break others and break who we were made to be. God requires us to be set apart for His work and purposes, and we can't be if we are deliberately defying Him.

But in our attempt to be moral, we messed up...we made a whole new law just like the Pharisees. What have churches banned over the years? Smoking, drinking, card playing, dancing, co-ed swimming, attending movies, seeing plays, reading books, listening to rock music, doing anything on Sundays but worshipping, eating, and sleeping...the list goes on.

Some things aren't good for your body; others can be good or bad depending on what you choose to do. Philippians 4:8 teaches us to focus on what is pure, good, right, true, admirable. That's a beautiful list. But to make it into a list of things to ban? Not good. It makes us think we're righteous when we're really just good rule followers. And many people who aren't good rule followers think they can't be Christians because they do something on the manmade list. When we substitute rules for relationship, we rule out a relationship with God.

This leads to the second point: *The worship of God isn't about a day and a place so much as it is about a Person and a lifestyle.* We need times and places to worship God. We'll circle around to that in a minute. But the proper worship of God is about the Son, Jesus, through whom we know the Father, and proper worship springs from a lifestyle of the daily pursuit of God.

If you go to the Mount Clemens YMCA at 6am on a Monday, Wednesday, or Friday, you'll find me in the racquetball court. That's what I do for exercise. I get a kick out of playing, and I'd play more if I could. I enjoy the company of the guys I play with. But I don't invest in high-end racquets, subscribe to the Tennis Channel to watch racquetball tournaments, or take lessons. It's a lot of fun, but it keeps me a bit healthier than I'd be without it. That's it.

In the same way, just attending a church service doesn't mean much. Many regular churchgoers aren't true Christians. Some of you here *were* those churchgoers at one point in time. You punched the clock, pleased your families, made social and business connections. You felt better about yourself for doing your spiritual duty. Many people go to church one hour a week and are heathens the other 167. Keeping the Lord's Day didn't make you holy.

That's because true worship, as Jesus defines it for us, is worship in spirit and in truth. True worship is centered around God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – and His Kingdom. True worship springs out of devotion to Him, wanting to know Him and be known by Him. True worship is genuine. True worship is truthful about our unfaithfulness and our need for salvation. True worship happens any place, any time, and anywhere.

The true worshipper constantly praises God, but at the same time loves to be in corporate worship with others because we grow together, as iron sharpens iron (Proverbs 27:17). And true worship is not just about the praise and admiration of God with our mouths but with our service. That's why Jesus could heal a man on the Sabbath with impunity. To do good deeds that reflect the goodness of our God is a spiritual act of worship, and they can be done any time.

All of this means we are not locked into a regulation any more. Jesus set us free from not only man-made rules, but from the ceremonial and ritual laws that set Israel apart from the other nations. Those laws no longer bind us because we have the Holy Spirit, who gives us the freedom to follow the moral law which directs us closer to God and His perfection.

Our final point, though, reminds us that what God has done in the past is still good for us in the present if we understand it correctly: *We are made to rest in God on a regular, weekly basis*. Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath; because of His example, we are free from any man-made restrictions on our day of worship. We even worship on a different day than the Sabbath to honor Christ's resurrection. But the moral principle behind the Sabbath day law still exists. We need time explicitly set aside every week to worship God and be near Him.

We need explicit weekly time with God because the world distracts us. There are constant things vying for our attention every day, just like first-century Israel. The Roman world didn't have the concept of a day off during the week. They worshipped when they needed something from their gods. First-century Israel was deeply influenced by Roman culture, and they had plenty of work to do on the Sabbath. Not Little League baseball games and shopping malls, but they still had to choose to make time for God. And that time is vital.

Worship is not an obligation in the same way that we aren't obligated to eat or to breathe. You can try to force someone to eat or breathe, but it usually doesn't go very well. Will you die if you don't eventually eat or breathe? Yes. But God doesn't tell us to do them. We do them because they are a natural part of staying alive. When we completely lose our appetite or our desire to breathe, something's wrong. Worship sustains us as believers. Setting aside a day each week to rest, to eat and drink and breathe in our Lord and Savior, is a must. It keeps our souls alive. Stop worshipping, stop setting aside time for God, and you will eventually die spiritually.

In Mark 2:27, Jesus said, "The sabbath was made for man, not man for the sabbath." Which came first, man or the sabbath? Man. The sabbath was given to us so that we would be spiritually healthy. We weren't made in order to be sabbath-keepers. The sabbath was given to us as a gift to remind us we need to stop and spend time with God. We misunderstood the gift, Jew and Christian alike. We turned the law into an obligation, and turned people off to it. But it was meant to give us life, to give us time for God, to make sure we never lost sight of Him.

My encouragement today is, don't obsess about churchgoing as a ritual we must keep to make God happy. Instead, commit to corporate worship every possible week, setting aside other things. Not because we have a duty to perform, but because we get the weekly chance to come together and meet the God of the universe. We get the opportunity to be renewed and spiritually fed. May we come together every week, rest in the love of our Savior, and be refreshed to go into the world, children of God ready to represent Him with mercy to those around us.