

Did Jesus Break the Sabbath?

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It's been asserted that Jesus broke the Sabbath, and hence we are free to disregard it as well. But did Jesus break the Sabbath?

The basis for the idea that Jesus broke the Sabbath is the accusations made by Jesus' enemies among the Pharisees and scribes. Because Jesus performed miracles of healing on the Sabbath, the Pharisees accused him of breaking the Sabbath (Matthew 12:10; Mark 3:2, John 9:14-16). John records a healing that Jesus performed at one of the festivals in Jerusalem. Because of this the Jews sought to kill him. John records that in a confrontation following the healing Jesus said to his enemies, "My Father has been working until now, and I have been working." Then it 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" (John 5:17-18). Hence the argument is made that Jesus worked on the Sabbath and broke the Sabbath, leaving Christians free to do so.

The Scriptures also record an incident when the disciples of Jesus plucked heads of grain from a field as they were walking and ate them on the Sabbath. And some of the Pharisees charged them with the question, "Why are you doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath?" (Luke 6:2). This Scripture is also used by some to assert that Jesus and his disciples did not honor the Sabbath.

In order to understand what is at issue in these accounts it is helpful to understand something of the rabbinical tradition which lay behind the charges laid against Jesus and his disciples for their conduct on the Sabbath. The pharisaic tradition, by the time of Jesus, had developed (one might say degenerated) into an array of petty rules having to do with the minutiae of the law. It focused on physical works which had little to do with the spirit and intent of the law, and which in fact often violated the law (Matthew 15:1-9; Mark 7:1-13; John 7:19; Galatians 6:13).

The scribes among the Pharisees created and transmitted the pharisaic rabbinical traditions. The body of authoritative traditional law which they formulated, called the *Halakah* (which is the subject of and preserved in the *Mishnah*), is extra-biblical. Although authoritative for Jews who followed pharisaic tradition, much of the Halakah was not supported by Scripture, but was intended as a "hedge" about

the law, to prevent any possibility of its being broken. Yet, in doing this very thing they were breaking the law, for God had said, “You shall not add to the word which I command you, nor take anything from it, that you may keep the commandments of the LORD your God which I command you” (Deuteronomy 4:2; also Deuteronomy 12:32). In adding the weight of their tradition to the law of God they bound “heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on men’s shoulders” (Matthew 23:4).

They placed the authority of their traditions above that of Scripture itself, thus blaspheming the word of God. Joachim Jeremias is a late German scholar who authored an encyclopedic study of economic and social conditions during the New Testament period. He points out that the oral tradition was “above the Torah,” and that the esoteric writings containing scribal teachings were regarded as inspired and surpassing the canonical books “in value and sanctity” (*Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus*, 1.3). Alfred Edersheim also points out that traditional law was of “even greater obligation than Scripture itself” (*The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, 1.8; also see his footnote).

What was the nature of these traditional ordinances? Alfred Edersheim, born a Jew but later converted to Protestant Christianity, was a 19th century scholar who wrote extensively on Jewish doctrines and practices before and during the time of Christ. He summarizes the character of the traditional law as follows: “The Halakah indicated with the most minute and painful punctiliousness every legal ordinance as to outward observance.... But beyond this it left the inner man, the spring of actions, untouched.”

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“Israel had made void the Law by its traditions. Under a load of outward ordinances and observances its spirit had been crushed” (1.8). The rules of Sabbath observance are a good illustration of the absurdities and contradictions of the traditional law. Again summarizing, Edersheim writes concerning the rules of Sabbath observance, “On no other subject is Rabbinic teaching more painfully minute and more manifestly incongruous to its professed object.” He charges the scribes with “terribly exaggerated views on the Sabbath” and “endless burdensome rules with which they encumbered everything connected with its sanctity” (3.35). “In not less than twenty-four chapters [of the Mishna], matters are seriously discussed [regarding Sabbath observance] as of vital religious importance, which one would scarcely imagine a sane intellect would seriously entertain” (6.16). Yet one would look in vain in these rules for a spiritually meaningful understanding of the Sabbath: “...in all these wearisome details there is not a single trace of anything spiritual — not a word even to suggest higher thoughts on God’s holy day and its observance” (6.16).

I’ll list a few details to give you the flavor of what he’s talking about. *The Life and*

Times of Jesus the Messiah provides a more detailed discussion of traditional Sabbath law in an appendix. The law included detailed regulations regarding what constituted carrying a “burden”: Of wine, of milk, of honey, of water, of other fluids. Of dry materials: Pieces of paper, horses hairs, wax, a piece of broken earthenware, animal food. Generally a burden was anything heavy as a dried fig, or a quantity sufficient to be of any practical use (a scrap of paper, for example, of enough size to be converted into a note or a wrapper). It prescribed what might or might not be saved if one’s house caught on fire. Only clothes absolutely necessary, for example, could be saved. But one could put on a dress, save it, go back and put on another, and so on. One could not ask a Gentile to extinguish the flames. But if he did so voluntarily, he should not be hindered. One could eat food on the Sabbath lawfully only if it had been specifically prepared for the Sabbath on a weekday. If a laying hen laid an egg on the Sabbath, it could not be eaten. But if the hen had been kept for fattening and not laying, the egg could be eaten, being considered a part of the hen that had fallen off! The study of the Mishna on the Sabbath was more important than that of the Bible. The *Hagiographa* (the Old Testament “Writings”) were not to be read on the Sabbath except in the evening. And on and on it goes in like fashion.

Of special interest to us are the laws regarding harvesting and healing on the Sabbath. Even the slightest activity involving picking grain, removing the husks, rubbing the heads, cleaning or bruising the ears, or throwing them up in the hand was forbidden. Yet if a man wanted to move a sheaf on his field, he had only to lay a spoon on it, then, in order to remove the spoon he might also remove the sheaf on which it lay! It should be noted that most of the Jews paid little attention to these petty rules, though the Pharisees (whose numbers were relatively few compared to the general population) did.

When the Pharisees took Jesus’ disciples to task for plucking heads of grain from a ripe field and eating them on the Sabbath, Jesus (as he often did) turned the contradictions in their own traditional laws against them. He pointed out how David and his followers, famished and fleeing for their lives, had, when no other food was available, eaten the shewbread, which ordinarily only the priests were allowed to eat (Matthew 12:3-4; Mark 2:25-26; Luke 6:3-4; 1 Samuel 21:1-6). Jewish tradition vindicated his conduct, on the premise that danger to life superseded Sabbath law, and all related laws (*The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, 3.35). Jesus simply said, “Yet I say to you that in this place there is One greater than the temple. But if you had known what this means, ‘I desire mercy and not sacrifice,’ you would not have condemned the guiltless. For the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath” (Matthew 12:6-8).

Of course the Sabbath command is in a separate category from the sacrificial ordinances, yet if the work of feeding and watering animals could be done on the Sabbath (permitted by Jewish law), to relieve unnecessary suffering, logic would apply the same principle to humans, the disciples, who were partaking of the only

food readily available at the time. None of this controversy would have occurred to begin with, however, except for the Pharisees terribly exaggerated views concerning what was or was not permitted on the Sabbath. The priests in the temple work on the Sabbath and are guiltless (Matthew 12:5). This the Scribes also knew, but apparently did not clearly understand why. Somehow they missed the point that the Sabbath was instituted not only to rest from one's own physical labors, but also to devote the time to God by doing his works and service. As Edersheim observes, the disciples actions were "clearly not a breach of the Biblical, but of the Rabbinic Law" (3.35). Jesus said that the Pharisees — not understanding the law — had "condemned the guiltless" (Matthew 12:7). Clearly the disciples were not guilty of breaking the Sabbath as charged, and were falsely accused.

Healing, inasmuch as it might entail work, pharisaic law permitted on the Sabbath only if necessary to save life or to prevent death. Thus a plaster might be applied to a wound if the object was to prevent it from getting worse, but not to heal it. Wadding to promote healing could not be put in the ear on the Sabbath, but could be worn if placed in the ear before the Sabbath. Yet, contrarily, a splinter might be removed from the eye, or a thorn from the body, though no immediate danger to life was perceived. Furthermore, an animal might be removed from a pit, or taken to water on the Sabbath. As we shall see, when Jesus was accused of violating the law by healing on the Sabbath, he used the Pharisees own contradictory rules to convict them of hypocrisy.

First let's deal with Jesus' statement that he had been working. The Sabbath law is, in part: "Six days shall you labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the LORD your God. In it you shall do no work..." (Exodus 20:9-10). Notice that the work forbidden by the Sabbath law is "your work," the work of the people. The law does not forbid works of service towards God. Indeed, the very reason we are commanded to cease from our own works on the Sabbath is so we may devote the time to the work of honoring and serving God. Notice the words of Isaiah: "If you turn your foot from the Sabbath, from doing your pleasure on My holy day, and call the Sabbath a delight, the holy day of the LORD honorable, and shall honor Him, not doing your own ways, nor finding your own pleasure, nor speaking your own words..." (Isaiah 58:13). Here it is clear that it is our own works, the course of our everyday business, that we are to avoid on the Sabbath. On the other hand, we are to honor God on the Sabbath. Giving honor to God often entails work. As *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words* points out, often "'giving honor' refers to doing something" (p. 115, Old Testament Section). For example, one way in which children honor their parents is by obeying them (Ephesians 6:1).

A careful reading of Scripture reveals that we are to cease and rest from common or profane work on the Sabbath so that the time may be devoted to God's holy purpose. But implicit in the Sabbath command is work necessary to fulfill the

spiritual aim and meaning of the Sabbath. On the first Sabbath, God ceased and rested from his work of physical creation, but he did the work of creating the Sabbath, blessing and sanctifying it (Genesis 2:2-3; Mark 2:27). The weekly Sabbaths and the annual Sabbaths were days proclaimed to be “holy convocations,” or commanded assemblies for the purpose of gathering to hear God’s word taught and for congregational worship (Leviticus 23:2,4). Here is implied the work necessary to travel to the place of assembly and of listening and learning and participating in the worship service. Those commissioned to teach did the work of reading and explaining God’s word. And on such occasions the people customarily ate and drank, sharing and rejoicing in the holy day and in the truth of God’s word (Nehemiah 8:1-12). And other work implicit in the command was done, too. Even on the most solemn day of the year, the Day of Atonement, the priests did the work of slaying animals and offering sacrifices before God according to the requirements of the law (Leviticus 16).

The work of honoring and worshiping God is not forbidden on the Sabbath. Indeed it is the object of the Sabbath. That’s why the priests could work on the Sabbath and not be guilty. Their work was a necessary part of the congregational Sabbath duty of honoring and serving God. It was, in that sense, not their work but God’s work that was being done. Early in his ministry Jesus, on a Sabbath day, announced in summary form the work he had been sent to perform. His work was preaching the gospel, healing [both physical and spiritual implied], and liberating from oppression (Luke 4:18-19). The works Jesus did were not his works, but God’s works, that he had been sent to perform (John 4:34; 9:4; 17:4). Healing was an integral part of Christ’s ministry. In perfect harmony with what the Sabbath rest pictures and with the gospel message, it typified the physical and spiritual healing that Christ will perform during the Millennium when the Kingdom of God is established on the earth (see Isaiah 35:5-6, 57:16-20; Ezekiel 47:8-10).

When Jesus healed on the Sabbath he was not breaking the Sabbath, but fulfilling it, because when one is afflicted, oppressed and bound by disease or infirmity, he is not at rest. As many Scriptures show, God delights in redeeming and restoring the afflicted, and giving them the rest exemplified by truly keeping the Sabbath according to God’s will. “...he [God] heard [or hears] the cry of the afflicted. When he giveth quietness [or rest], who then can condemn?” (Job 34:28-29, ASV). But the Jewish leaders, bound by their false tradition, did condemn the Messiah for giving the souls that he healed rest from their afflictions. Instead, they should have offered praise: Speaking of ones afflicted and at death’s door, a psalmist wrote, “Then they cried out to the LORD in their trouble, and He saved them out of their distresses. He sent His word and healed them, and delivered them from their destructions. Oh, that men would give thanks to the LORD for His goodness, and for His wonderful works to the children of men! Let them sacrifice the sacrifices of thanksgiving, and declare His works with rejoicing” (Psalm 107:19-22).

Notice how the Millennial rest — typified by the Sabbath — and healing are placed together by the prophet Jeremiah. God speaks through the prophet of the yet future deliverance and restoration of Israel, “For behold, I will save you from afar, and your seed from the land of their captivity. Jacob shall return and have rest and be quiet, and no one shall make him afraid” (Jeremiah 30:10). The prophet continues, “‘For I will restore health to you and heal you of your wounds,’ says the LORD...” (Jeremiah 30:17). This prophecy for “the latter days” (Jeremiah 30:24) continues, “‘At the same time,’ says the LORD, ‘I will be the God of all the families of Israel, and they shall be My people.’ Thus says the LORD: ‘The people who survived the sword found grace in the wilderness — Israel, when I went to give him rest’” (Jeremiah 31:1-2). The prophet goes on to describe the even greater yet future blessings of Israel when God gathers them “from the ends of the earth, among them the blind and the lame...” (Jeremiah 31:8). It’s in this same setting that Isaiah wrote, “Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped. Then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the dumb sing” (Isaiah 35:5-6).

Jesus answered those who accused him of breaking the Sabbath, “If a man receives circumcision on the Sabbath, so that the law of Moses should not be broken, are you angry with Me because I made a man completely well on the Sabbath? Do not judge according to appearance, but judge righteous judgment” (John 7:23-24).

How was it breaking the Sabbath to heal on the Sabbath? Even the scribes recognized that certain kinds of work were necessary on the Sabbath. That of the priesthood for example. I’ve mentioned how work necessary to alleviate or prevent suffering, such as taking animals to water, was permissible according to Jewish law. Work necessary to save life, or even killing in time of war, was permitted by Jewish law. Healing, except as necessary to save life, however, was forbidden on the Sabbath by their law. Yet, there were exceptions to this prohibition as well, as discussed earlier. The laws the Jews added to God’s commandments were their laws, not God’s. Violating the traditional laws of the Jews was not sin. Sin is the transgression of God’s law (Romans 3:20; 7:7; 1 John 3:4). Jesus asked the scribes and Pharisees, “Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?” (Luke 14:3). He, Jesus Christ, God, the one who delivered the Sabbath law to Israel on Mount Sinai, pointed out the hypocrisy and error in the Jewish traditional law which permitted necessary work to relieve the suffering of animals on the Sabbath, and even to kill in time of war, but forbade the relief of human suffering due to disease or debilitating infirmity (Matthew 12:11-13; Mark 3:4; Luke 13:15; 14:5).

When John wrote that Jesus “broke the Sabbath” (John 5:18), he was writing in the context of how the Jewish leaders viewed Jesus’ action of healing on the Sabbath (compare John 9:14-16). Those who say Jesus did actually break the Sabbath are agreeing with Christ’s enemies, his accusers, that Jesus’ miraculous works of

healing were a breach of the Sabbath law. They are agreeing with Jesus' accusers that he was a Sabbath breaker. To be consistent, they must also agree with the Pharisees when they said of Christ, "We know that this man is a sinner" (John 9:24). The blind man who had been healed knew better than that, saying, "we know that God does not hear sinners; but if anyone is a worshiper of God and does His will, He hears him" (John 9:31).

When Jesus healed on the Sabbath he was not violating the law of God. In the context of this controversy of healing on the Sabbath, Jesus said, "...it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath" (Matthew 12:12). He only broke the Sabbath in the sense of violating a man made rule regarding its observance. Had he actually broken the Sabbath he would have been sinning. But the Scripture says he "committed no sin" (1 Peter 2:22). Had he sinned he could not be our savior. But he, being undefiled and separate from sinners, offered himself without spot and without blemish to God for our redemption (Hebrews 7:26; 9:14; 1 Peter 1:18-19). No, Jesus didn't break the Sabbath. He spent the Sabbaths preaching, teaching, healing, honoring God, doing the good work of his ministry, the work of God.

The record of Scripture is that Jesus kept the Sabbath faithfully, as it was intended to be kept from the beginning. In doing so he set us an example. "He who says he abides in Him ought himself also to walk just as He walked" (1 John 2:6).

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For more discussion of the Sabbath read our article "Why Christians Should Keep the Sabbath," available at www.cogmessenger.org