

Sabbath

Are Christians supposed to live differently one day out of the week as compared to the other six days? If so, what should that “Sabbath” observation look like? Aren’t Christians supposed to go to church on Sunday, their Sabbath? Why do some people say Saturday is the Sabbath? This essay attempts to clarify some popular misunderstandings about what the Sabbath is, and what God expects from His people.

Terms to know

SABBATH & DISPENSATIONS

Sabbath comes from Genesis 2, from the Hebrew word which in English reads “shabath”: to cease, to rest. Genesis 2:1-2, **“Thus the heavens and the earth were completed, and all their hosts. By the seventh day God completed His work which He had done, and He rested on the seventh day from all His work which He had done.”** When God “rested” it didn’t mean that He needed to sleep or regain strength. God is omnipotent, which means all powerful, so He can’t lose strength and He doesn’t need sleep. Rest here simply means that He ceased creating. The universe was complete, nothing more would need to come into existence at the command of His voice.

A dispensation is a specific arrangement, time period, or system, by which something is dispensed. Throughout human history, during different stretches of time, or dispensations, God chose to reveal Himself differently and dispense His knowledge and blessings in certain ways, while requiring certain expectations of people. This doesn’t mean that God’s character or nature changed throughout time, but what He expected of people and how He engaged them did change. This essay focuses on two dispensations in the Bible; the Old Covenant dispensation, known also as the time of the Law, and the New Covenant dispensation, known also as the gospel dispensation (gospel: good news). During the time of the Law (Old Covenant), the Lord gave the Israelites over six-hundred laws to abide by. In these were the noted ten commandments, in which number four said, ***“Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath of the LORD your God; in it you shall not do any work, you or your son or your daughter, your male or your female servant or your cattle or your sojourner who stays with you. For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and made it holy,”*** Exodus 20:8-11.

The calendar week begins on a Sunday, and according to the Jewish calendar, the start of a new day began at nighttime, not the morning. Therefore, the seventh-day, began Friday sundown until Saturday sundown. Thus, Saturday, the seventh-day, was marked from Friday night until Saturday night; the time appointed by the Law of God to be a day of rest.

PHARISEES - The Jewish rabbis/religious leaders in Jerusalem.

SYNAGOGUE – The Jewish house of worship, where Jews would gather to hear the Scriptures read.

HERODIANS - Jewish political party that sided with Roman rule in issues of policy and government.

SANHEDRIN – Jewish body of 72 judges which served as the governing authority over Jewish affairs that didn’t interfere with Roman rule.

Unpacking Mark 2:23-28 & Mark 3:1-6

During Jesus’ ministry, the Jews lived under the dispensation of the Law (the written Law given by God through Moses). The Law had provided commands about resting on the Sabbath. However, over time, the Pharisees added numerous other laws on top of the written Law of God. These additional laws were called “oral law.” The oral law was still something that the Sanhedrin held Jewish citizens to, but the oral law should not have existed at all as it added unnecessary burden and was not in keeping with the spirit of God’s written Law.

Mark 2:23-28 – ***“And it happened that He (Jesus) was passing through the grainfields on the Sabbath, and His disciples began to make their way along while picking the heads of grain. The Pharisees were saying to Him, “Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?” And He said to them, “Have you never read what David did when he was in need and he and his companions became hungry; how he entered the house of God in the time of Abiathar the high priest, and ate the consecrated bread, which is not lawful for anyone to eat except the priests, and he also gave it to those who were with him?” Jesus said to them, “The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath.”***

Summary – Jesus and His disciples passed through grain fields, picking grain to eat as they went. Deuteronomy 23:25 permits gathering grain in another’s field so long as you weren’t harvesting beyond what you can eat yourself. Pharisees accuse the disciples of violating the Sabbath by harvesting, i.e. working, on that day. Typically, the Jews gathered food ahead of time and set it aside for Sabbath consumption. The Pharisees failed again to correctly interpret the Scriptures, nor capture the heart of the Law. For the Pharisees, life was all about rules, whereas Jesus taught that mercy was greater than law and that ritual observances must give way to moral duties. Jesus uses the Scriptures to correct their thinking by citing 1 Samuel 21:1-6, reminding them that despite David lying to the priest, which God didn’t condone, David and his companions eating the consecrated bread was acceptable. In David’s case, the priest had show-bread, 12 loaves, which sat a week on the golden table in the sanctuary, which at that time would then be taken and eaten by the priest and his family. The bread is now in a common manner anyway as it has served its place on the table and was removed for fresh/hot bread. What Jesus is approving is that the priest overlooked the Law for mercy. Jesus shows that the Sabbath was made for man, meaning, for our rest, for benefit not drudgery; it’s not meant to restrain us from doing what is fitting. Jesus continues by saying, ***“The Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath.”*** ***“Son of Man”*** was Jesus’ most commonly used name for Himself, which came from the prophecy of Daniel, showing the name of the Messiah to come. In saying this, Jesus claims that He made the institution of the Sabbath, all institutions for that matter, and that He is bound by nothing. Jesus had the ability to do away with the Sabbath, govern it; whatever He willed. Therefore, there was no just reason to condemn His disciples for whatever He allowed them to do on the Sabbath.

Mark 3:1-6 - ***“He (Jesus) entered again into a synagogue; and a man was there whose hand was withered. They (Pharisees) were watching Him to see if He would heal him on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse Him. He said to the man with the withered hand, “Get up and come forward!” And He said to them, “Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save a life or to kill?” But they kept silent. After looking around at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart, He said to the man, “Stretch out your hand.” And he stretched it out, and his hand was restored. The Pharisees went out and immediately began conspiring with the Herodians against Him, as to how they might destroy Him.”***

Summary – The Pharisees, out of jealousy for Jesus’ authority, watched for an opportunity to catch Jesus breaking the laws of the Sabbath, so that they’d have some reason to arrest Him. They knew Jesus could heal, so the logical question then should be, *“Is Jesus God?”* not, *“Can we catch Jesus breaking the Sabbath?”* However, Jesus never broke the written Law pertaining to the Sabbath, but on more than one occasion He broke the oral law, demonstrating those laws shouldn’t have been established in the first place. The oral law had rules about tending to the ill; doctors weren’t allowed to conduct minor healing on the Sabbath, only saving a life was permitted. Anything else was unnecessary work and could wait until tomorrow. Here, the Pharisees imply that a withered hand could wait. Jesus did not violate the Sabbath by doing unnecessary “work;” meaning that He prepared no ointment, nor lifted anything; He only spoke the healing into reality. Therefore, one can only assume that if the healing was not in accordance with God’s will, then it wouldn’t have happened, since no medical technique was applied. Jesus shows that it is God’s will to heal on the Sabbath.

Big picture – Jesus showed the spirit of the Law regarding the Sabbath; that it should be a day to do good, not a day to simply be still. Why should the man wait a day when God’s power can be demonstrated in His life now! Control and power over the people are what drove the Pharisees to create burdensome oral law, and this same jealous control is what kept their eyes from seeing the obvious reality that Jesus was God in the flesh.

New Covenant Teaching

The ceremonial laws, including the Sabbath, were completed, or done away with at the moment of Jesus’ death. This was demonstrated in more than one way, but not least of all by the supernatural tearing from top to bottom of the curtain leading into the Holy of Holies. Jesus’ death marked the beginning of the new covenant gospel dispensation where only the moral law remains, as it has from the time of Adam. With regards to keeping the Sabbath, the New Testament emphasizes that Christians are to live every day the same; in all things living for the Lord. Christians understand Sabbath to be a type of rest, a type of freedom, that is constant for the people of God. This includes, but is not limited to, resting in God’s glory, resting in the peace we receive from the Holy Spirit amidst the turmoil of life, resting in the security of our salvation, etc.

First century Christians struggled with the ceasing of ceremonial law. For example, Jewish converts to Christianity were struggling to let go of their rigid rites and ceremonies that they lived under prior to coming to faith in Jesus. In this way, Jewish converts were insisting that Gentile converts to Christianity need to be circumcised and keep to Sabbatical laws, etc. Paul reminds the Church that there are “weaker brothers” that don’t yet enjoy the freedom from such ceremonial things. Romans 14:1 says, ***“Now accept the one who is weak in faith, but not for the purpose of passing judgment on his opinions.”*** In these cases, Paul continues to say that Christians who are still feeling a desire to adhere to certain ceremonies and rituals are to be allowed to do so without it being a point of contention. Paul says in Romans 14:5, ***“One person regards one day above another, another regards every day alike. Each person must be fully convinced in his own mind.”*** With respect to the appropriateness or non-appropriateness of keeping festivals and Sabbaths, let every man act from the complete conviction of his own mind; sufficient freedom is allowed.

Colossians 2:16-17, ***“No one is to act as your judge in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day - things which are a mere shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ.”***

Colossians 3:17, ***“Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father.”***

1 Corinthians 10:31, ***“Whether then you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.”***

Bottom Line – No matter the day, the deed, the spoken word, or the attitude, believers in Jesus are to do all things for the glory of God. Believers aren’t to live differently under any circumstances, regardless of day.

THE LORD’S DAY – In the Bible, Sunday became known as the “*Lord’s Day*,” a term adopted by Christians to mark the day Jesus rose from the grave. For this reason, Sunday became the preferred day of the week for corporate worship/teaching/gathering; John 20:1, Acts 20:7, 1 Corinthians 16:2, Revelation 1:10. This tradition has largely carried over through the centuries and in the United States, Sunday remains the primary day of the week that Christians continue to gather corporately. There is no instruction that this must be the case, it’s just a tradition. During this gospel dispensation that we live under today, the Sabbath is a minor issue, meaning that it shouldn’t result in disfellowship amongst believers.