

*Rediscovering Jesus in the Jewish Gospels*

**Jesus, Sabbath Law, and Rabbinic Tradition**

Lesson 24 Part 1 Matthew 12:1-13

**SEMANTICS OR SABBATH VIOLATION? Matthew 12:1-13**

**Biblical Prohibitions and Penalties**

Observance of the sabbath is one of the major aspects of standard Jewish practice. “The general requirement to keep the Sabbath as a day of rest is one of the ten commandments (Exodus 20:8-11; Deuteronomy 5: 12-15). Both lists apply the commandment not only to Israelites but also to children, servants, foreigners, and animals. Short forms of the sabbath requirement appear in Exodus 34:21 and Leviticus 9:13. There is a lengthy reiteration in Exodus 31:12-17 which stipulates “cutting off” as the penalty for transgression. Numbers 15:32-36 introduces as a law previously unknown, the penalty of stoning for deliberate transgression. Most passages in the Pentateuch (Torah) simply prohibit “work” but there are some specifications. Exodus 34:21 explicitly requires that the day of rest be kept during plowing time and harvest. Gathering food, cooking, and making a fire are prohibited in Exodus 16:35.2f. On the other hand, one form of work is required: the sabbath offerings (Numbers 28:9). Jeremiah opposed bearing a burden through the gates of Jerusalem or even carrying it out of one’s own house on the sabbath (Jeremiah 17:19-27). According to Nehemiah 10:31, the Israelites pledged themselves not to buy things from the Gentiles on the Sabbath. Nehemiah 13:15-22 narrates the governor’s strong measures to prevent trading on the Sabbath, both by Jews and Gentiles. To do this he shut the gates of Jerusalem and posted Levites as guards.”<sup>i</sup>

**1<sup>st</sup> Century and 21<sup>st</sup> Century Rabbinic prohibitions and military readiness**

The death penalty for violating a basic Torah Law still sparks debates on its modern application in different cultures and with technological advancements. What happens when observing the Sabbath results in numerous military and civilian deaths? Josephus stated that during the Roman period, “Sabbath observance was generally observed very strictly and that the resolution to fight only in self-defense characterized not only the specifically pious, but most Jews.” Josephus explained that during the Roman siege of Jerusalem in 63 BC Pompey took advantage of the Jewish adherence to the law by raising earthworks and positioning battering rams on the Sabbath but not hurling projectiles knowing full well that the Jews would not attack his staging efforts. This rabbinic ruling was exposed as a fatal vulnerability in the 1973 Yom Kippur War in which Israel’s Arab neighbors launched an attack while the nation mourned and fasted on the Day of Atonement. Ignoring reports of impending war because of a false sense of indestructibility after the 6-Day War, coupled with the high Sabbath religious prohibitions, Israel found itself near defeat by the third day of attack. During the 1967 war, Israel was preemptive and soundly victorious while in the 1973 war, Israel only first responded defensively and had the greatest loss in their modern history resulting in the loss of over 2,300 soldiers. After 3500 years of rabbinic debates and revisions, the religious equation for strict Shabbat observance adapted to the priority of national survival militarily.

**The Shabbat “Manna” Precedent**

Food gathering and preparation were to cease before the Sabbath began.

“And he said unto them, This *is that* which the LORD hath said, Tomorrow *is the rest* of the holy sabbath unto the LORD: bake that which ye will bake to day, and seethe that ye will seethe; and that which remaineth over lay up for you to be kept until the morning. And Moses said, Eat that to day; for to day *is a sabbath* unto the LORD: to day ye shall not find it in the field. Six days ye shall gather it; but on the seventh day, which is the sabbath, in it there shall be none. And it came to pass, *that* there went out *some* of the people on the seventh day for to gather, and they found none. And the LORD said unto Moses, How long refuse ye to keep my commandments and my laws?

### **Shabbat was a gift for man's benefit.**

"See, for that the LORD hath given you the sabbath, therefore he giveth you on the sixth day the bread of two days; abide ye every man in his place, let no man go out of his place on the seventh day. So the people rested on the seventh day." Exodus 16:23,25-30

### **Shabbat was a sign of covenant with Israel and perpetual sanctification practice.**

Ezekiel 20:12 "I gave them my sabbaths, to be a sign between me and them, that they might know that I *am* the LORD that sanctify them."

Ezekiel 20:13,16, 20, 21, 24 "they polluted my Sabbaths"

The context: idolatrous worship, immorality. They were to remove the "idols of their eyes" so that they would not "defile themselves." (Ezekiel 20:7,8) The Sabbath was a way for them to be set apart unto God. By taking a daylong break from the world's pollution and idolizing the work of their hands along with any financial profit they could refocus on the spiritual.

### **Death Penalty for Violation**

"Ye shall keep the sabbath therefore; for it *is* holy unto you: every one that defileth it shall surely be put to death: for whosoever doeth *any* work therein, that soul shall be cut off from among his people. Six days may work be done; but in the seventh *is* the sabbath of rest, holy to the LORD: whosoever doeth *any* work in the sabbath day, he shall surely be put to death. Wherefore the children of Israel shall keep the sabbath, to observe the sabbath throughout their generations, *for* a perpetual covenant." Exodus 31:14-16

### **The Local Laws of Rabbinic TRADITION** Which traditional interpretation did the Pharisees follow?

- The Essene sect of the Dead Sea followed the Qumran Community Rule (iQS)
- The Covenant of Damascus (CD) very stringent school of tradition held widespread influence. <sup>ii</sup>
- The Hillel school of tradition apparently followed by these Pharisees was more lenient.
- The House of Shammai code was much stricter than Hillel but not as strict as (CD).
- The Pharisees were more lenient as seen in their position on punishment for transgression of the Sabbath. The strict (CD) code of punishment stated "But everyone who goes astray so as to profane the Sabbath and the appointed times shall not be put to death, for it falls to men to guard him; and if he is healed from it, they shall guard him for a period of seven years, and afterwards he shall come into the assembly. (CD 12.3-6) This was not imprisonment but exclusion from the synagogue for 7 years. If one was warned by two witnesses willing to testify against him and continued to violate the Sabbath then he was liable to death by stoning, though the death penalty was the exclusive purview of Rome. Unwitting Sabbath violation required a sin offering. The Pharisees were inclined to leniency according to Josephus (Antiquities 13.294). The Pharisaic rule found in Mishna.Shabbat 7.1 gives an example of someone who "committed many acts of one main class" in other words, all the acts of labor on one project, "he is liable only to one Sin-Offering." <sup>iii</sup> If Jesus and the disciples were hungry with a good cause, rather than as a result of laziness the previous day, when food should have been prepared, then few would have thought them guilty of a grievous offense. Nevertheless, they were called out but not condemned to death by the more lenient among the first-century Jewish Houses of tradition.

### **Hunger on the Sabbath 12:1**

- The Pharisees accused them of breaking the Torah because they were "plucking" grain.
- They were being led by Jesus near or across a ripened field. (Just prior to spring Barley Harvest – April/May)
- They were prohibited from fasting on the Sabbath as it was to be a day of rejuvenating rest. (Exodus 16:23)
- Jesus and his disciples were an itinerant ministry (common among other rabbinic disciples) that necessitated their traveling about Galilee sometimes unable to arrive home before Sabbath.
- They were hungry and there was no food available for purchase in nearby towns because of the sabbath.
- They were not violating "a sabbath day's journey" because the Pharisees/*prusim* who were following them did not abandon this Sabbath walk. (A sabbath day's journey limit was approximately 1000 yards/3000 feet/915 meters, almost 6/10's of a mile)

### **A Davidic Precedent**

When a non-priest ate priestly bread, "which was not lawful for him to eat" (12:4). "*The bread is in a manner common, yea, though it were sanctified this day in the vessel. So the priest gave him hallowed bread: for there was no bread there but the shewbread, that was taken from before the LORD, to put hot bread in the day when it was taken away*" (1 Samuel 21:5,6). He answered the Pharisees' question with this anecdote, like David's men, they ate because they were hungry. Jesus added that the Sabbath was made for the rest and refreshment of humans and that humans were not made to be burdened with enslaving traditions and deprivation in order to serve the Sabbath. Jesus made the point that David was allowed to eat the day-old showbread reserved for the Priests on their Sabbath. The matter was then dropped by the Shabbot examiners, but not by Jesus.

### **A Levitical Exception**

Jesus points to the mandated duties of trimming and refilling the lamps, carrying water, keeping the fire on the altar going etc. The priest did all these duties on the Sabbath and yet was blameless of breaking the "thou shalt not work" command. This answer obviously sufficed because the Pharisees gave no rebuttal. "Since the Houses debated offerings on festive days, they must have agreed that on the sabbath individuals could not bring sacrifices. The absence of debates in rabbinic literature regarding this reveals consensus; sacrificing is work...except for the priests. It is noteworthy that in Matthew 12:5 Jesus' defense of plucking grain on the sabbath is that priests work on the sabbath not individuals who bring offerings." <sup>iv</sup>

### **When the Lord of the Sabbath is here in the flesh**

He could have just rebutted the Pharisees toothless arguments and left them divided over their inter sectarian Sabbath rules. He then "doubled down" on the issue, giving them exactly what they were looking for: the claim that He was Lord of the Sabbath, "the son of man" who is "greater than the Temple" itself. This gave them reason to overlook their Sabbath differences and unite to "destroy Him" (12:6-8,14) The Pharisees went forth, and "straightway took counsel with the Herodians against him, how they might destroy him" (Mark 3:5-6 3:6). The enemy of my enemy is my friend.

### **Relief for the disabled that never get a Sabbath rest.**

Luke says this was the following Sabbath after the kerfuffle over "plucking." "Jesus then immediately entered the Synagogue on the next Sabbath (Luke 6:6) and saw a man with a withered hand. And he saith unto the man which had the withered hand, Stand forth. And he saith unto them, Is it lawful to do good on the sabbath days, or to do evil? to save life, or to kill? But they held their peace." According to Mark's account, Jesus apparently was repeating the question back to them that they had first posed in Matthew's account. Knowing that Jesus had healed many people in the Capernaum Synagogue, "they watched him, whether he would heal him on the sabbath day; that they might accuse him." (Mark 3:2). Their use of a severely disabled man as bait for entrapment, sparked His righteous indignation. "And when he had looked round about on them with anger, being grieved for the hardness of their hearts, he saith unto the man, Stretch forth thine hand. And he stretched *it* out: and his hand was restored whole as the other. Their intra-sectarian disputes would not rise to the attention of Roman Courts. They knew that for Rome to get involved with imprisonment or the death penalty, a perceived threat to Caesar would have to be established. It is not a recent modern legal strategy for lawyers to throw a barrage of accusations to see which one will stick. Their stipulations was the least of Rome's concern, yet they played this Sabbath card continually to the masses whom they controlled.

### **Sheep in a pit Standard (12:11,12)**

Jesus referenced how it was lawful to pull one's sheep out of a pit on the Sabbath and shamed them with the rhetorical question about a man being much more valuable than a sheep. (12:12) Jesus concluded that it would be unlawful to refuse to do good on the Sabbath implying, that to him that "knoweth to good and doeth it not, to him it is sin." Hiding behind Sabbath work restrictions when it comes to assisting one in need is clearly forbidden.

## SUMMARY ON THE SABBATH

### Commanded for Israel/Jews

Exodus 31:12-18 "And the LORD spake unto Moses, saying, Speak thou also unto the children of Israel, saying, Verily my sabbaths ye shall keep: for it is a sign between me and you throughout your generations." Also see Ezekiel 20:12

### Sabbath (and the Law) fulfilled in Messiah

"The Mosaic law, which includes the Sabbath, was done away in Jesus and is not for the Jewish or Gentile believer (in the New Covenant Church era). There are several scriptures that teach us this – 2 Corinthians 3:7-13; Colossians 2:14, 16-17; John 1:17; Romans 6:14-15; 7:4; Ephesians 2:15; Galatians 2:19; 3:23-25; and Hebrews 8. Believers, both Jew and Gentile, are under the law of Christ, Romans 6:14, Galatians 6:2, James 2:8, not the law of Moses. Hebrew 4 uses the Sabbath rest as a picture of salvation. Stop working and rest (trust) in the Lord to be saved. Actually, for the believer today, Lord's Day (Sunday) worship, rather than Sabbath (Saturday) worship, is a better picture of salvation. In grace, we trust (rest) in the Lord to be saved and then we work (serve) Him the rest of our lives. We don't work and then rest. We rest (in the Lord - salvation) and then work for Him. The Mosaic Sabbath was given solely to the Jewish people as a "sign" between them and God. Sabbath worship is not for Christians or any other people. The Mosaic Sabbath was part of the Law which was done away in Messiah. Today, Jew and Gentile who are saved are under grace and, generally, worship on the Lord's Day (Sunday), but have the freedom to corporately worship on any day" (Rom. 14). v

If believers in Jesus are under one law, then we are under all the Law for it is a unit, not a smorgasbord from which we can choose that which agrees with us. We, both Jew and Gentile, are under the Law of Messiah/Christ called the perfect Law of Liberty (James 1:25). There are 627 imperative commands found in 497 verses in the New Testament that apply to believers in the Dispensation of the New Covenant. Not once is keeping the Sabbath commanded by Jesus or Paul.

On the other hand, genuine believers who are left without instruction in keeping the law of Christ, easily fall back on a few Mosaic prohibitions and are susceptible to the appeal of highly controlling legalistic influence. This is the result of a failure to contextually contrast the teachings of Jesus while He lived under the law, with the laws of Christ under the dispensation of grace in Acts through the Epistles. This critical misunderstanding can leave unlearned believers open to the teachings of law-focused cults like Jehovah's Witnesses, Seventh Day Adventists, and more recently, the "Torah Observant" movement emphasis within the Messianic movement. Paul had a harsh response to those who were influencing saved Jews and Gentiles to retain law-keeping as a means of salvation. Scripture emphatically states that "*by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified*" (Romans 3:20) He reminded them, "*Tell me, ye that desire to be under the law, do ye not hear the law?*" "*For as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse: for it is written, Cursed is every one that continueth not in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them... Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us*" (Galatians 4:21).

Paul strongly rebuked Peter when Peter changed his behavior to observe Mosaic kosher laws while Jerusalem believers visited his ministry among the Gentiles. The only prevention of the leaven of legalism, or of the looseness of license, is grounding believers through the systematic foundational teaching of the superiority of grace over law, coupled with discipleship in the Spirit-empowered voluntary, love-based observance of the new law of Christ.

The differences between law and grace are instructive. "In the very nature of Law there is no grace, because a holy God is completely offended by our sin and our depraved hearts. Law is the prosecuting attorney with no one to defend us as we stand before a holy God while the Law correctly accuses man as a sinner. The best the law can provide is probation until judgment. The merit of Messiah's work on the cross of Calvary is the foundation of grace. The blood of Messiah

satisfies all the holy, righteous demands of God and thereby gives us, the walking dead men, new life and eternal fellowship with Him. The grace of God cancels out the law of the Mosaic system.

The writer of Hebrews presents Moses as a servant in the house of Messiah Jesus. The law provided the rules for servants in God's dispensational household of Israel. Moses, as a servant and not the ruler of this House,<sup>28</sup> could be likened to a chief butler who communicates the rules of the LORD of the house. Moses was "*faithful in all his house,*" but Jesus is God's heir apparent "*over his own house.*" He has more glory than the house and the servants within it. We are no longer under the servant's code of the house. Both Jew and Gentile believers are now related by redemption in Messiah Jesus. We are in the household of grace and truth called the church. The phrase "*Whose house are we*" is consistent with our spiritual pedigree. "*And if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ*" Romans 8:16,17). We are in a new dispensation or house order of the New Covenant in Christ called grace. The law signed over the deed of the house to grace and we are under new management."<sup>vi</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> Jewish Law From Jesus to the Mishna, E.P Sanders, Trinity Press International, Philadelphia pp 9-11

<sup>ii</sup>Ibid, P 12

<sup>iii</sup>Ibid, P 19

<sup>iv</sup>Ibid, p 11

<sup>v</sup>What about the Sabbath, Mark Robinson, Israel's Messenger, Jewish Awareness Ministries, Spring 2020,

<sup>vi</sup>Law and Grace, Ken Overby, Israel's Messenger, Jewish Awareness Ministries, Spring 2020

#### **Appendix - Doug Friedman Study of American Messianic Adherence to the Torah**

It is impossible to observe over half (58%) of the 613 commandments today (related to priesthood, Temple sacrifices etc...) Among those who label themselves Messianic Torah positive they fail to keep about 8% (50) of the commands they could observe. Friedman concludes based on the data in his survey of hundreds of Messianic Congregations and Messianic and Quasi Messianic Believers that "whoever claims to be Torah-observant is not telling the truth" about his religious practices and belief. They have deceived themselves."

- Doug Friedman, The Mosaic Law, A New perspective, PP 8-11, Ariel Magazine, Winter 2016, Ariel Ministries, [AM Winter 2016 \(ariel.org\)](http://ariel.org)