

Christians and Working on the Sabbath

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Jesus made an interesting statement to the religious leaders of His time in regards to the sabbath.

He asked them, in essence, if it was a sin to do good on the sabbath; a good work, versus doing evil. The answer should be obvious. However, if any of us were to ask the same question, we might find ourselves being accused of asking a loaded question.

When the sabbath was instituted with Israel, the sabbath, in Leviticus chapter 23, was defined as being a “holy convocation” in relation to being or remaining in one's dwelling on that day. During the duration of that day, the Israelite was perceived as being in the presence of God, and commanded to refrain from doing “any” work on that day. That day was to be a day of complete rest from work. The Israelite was not to be doing any work while perceived to be in the presence of God on that day.

When Adam and Eve sinned against God, they were cast out of the Garden of Eden and out of the presence of God. God does not allow sinful beings to be in His presence. One who sins is cut off from God, and spiritually dead – separated from God (Colossians 2:13; Isaiah 59:2).

When Christ took on the sins of the world, and Christ was hanging on the cross, He called out, “Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?” which is, being interpreted, My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? (Mark 15:34b)

God wants it understood that sin cannot abide in the presence of God.

Jesus stated that it was not a sin to do good on the sabbath. The people had been taught that it was perfectly alright to pull an animal out of a pit on the sabbath, or to take an animal out to feed or drink, even though these things were defined as work.

And when he was departed thence, he went into their synagogue: And, behold, there was a man which had his hand withered. And they asked him, saying, Is it lawful to heal on the sabbath days? that they might accuse him. And he said unto them, What man shall there be among you, that shall have one sheep, and if it fall into a pit on the sabbath day, will he not lay hold on it, and lift it out? How much then is a man better than a sheep? Wherefore it is lawful to do well on the sabbath days. Then saith he to the man, Stretch forth thine hand. And he stretched it forth; and it was restored whole, like as the other. Then the Pharisees went out, and held a council against him, how they might destroy him. — Matthew 12:9-14

And he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath. And, behold, there was a woman which had a spirit of infirmity eighteen years, and was bowed together, and could in no wise lift up herself. And when Jesus saw her, he called her to him, and said unto her, Woman, thou art loosed from thine infirmity. And he laid his hands on her: and immediately she was made straight, and glorified God. And the ruler of the synagogue answered with indignation, because that Jesus had healed on the sabbath day, and said unto the people, There are six days in which men ought to work: in them therefore come and be healed, and not on the sabbath day. The Lord then answered him, and said, Thou hypocrite, doth not each one of you on the sabbath loose his ox or his ass from the stall, and lead him away to watering? And ought not this woman, being a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan hath bound, lo, these eighteen years, be loosed from this bond on the sabbath day? And when he had said these things, all his adversaries were ashamed: and all the people rejoiced for all the glorious things that were done by him. — Luke 13:10-17

And the scribes and Pharisees watched him, whether he would heal on the sabbath day; that they might find an accusation against him. But he knew their thoughts, and said to the man which had the withered hand, Rise up, and stand forth in the midst. And he arose and stood forth. Then said Jesus unto them, I will ask you one thing; Is it lawful on the sabbath days to do good, or to do evil? to save life, or to destroy it? And looking round about upon them all, he said unto the man, Stretch forth thy hand. And he did so: and his hand was restored whole as the other. And they were filled with madness; and communed one with another what they might do to Jesus. — Luke 6:7-11

Jesus makes it plain that it is not a sin to do good on the sabbath. These religious leaders were “filled with madness” over Christ's interpretation of the sabbath and work. The hardness of their hearts blinded them to this truth; this spiritual truth.

And he entered again into the synagogue; and there was a man there which had a withered hand. And they watched him, whether he would heal him on the sabbath day; that they might accuse him. 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. **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. And the Pharisees went forth, and straightway took counsel with the Herodians against him, how they might destroy him. — Mark 3:1-6

Sabbath keepers insist the sabbath, due to its association with the other 9 commandments of the “Ten”, is a “moral” law, even though it can be demonstrated how Jesus treated the sabbath in association with “ceremonial” laws. But what needs to be examined carefully is that the ten commandments are not “moral” laws per se, but rather laws that deal with man's **immorality**. If, for example, you refrain from committing adultery today, this does not prove you to be a moral person. If you refrain from murder today, or tomorrow, or never commit a murder, this too does not prove you to be a moral person. Have you ever thought about committing adultery with another woman (assuming you are a married man)? Have you ever hated another person? Have you ever desired anything belonging to another? Your heart condemns you, regardless of whether you have broken the letter of the law here or not.

Man's works, devoid of God and His sphere of influence, are seen by God as evil.

And this is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For every one that doeth evil hateth the light, neither cometh to the light, lest his deeds should be reprov'd. But he that doeth truth cometh to the light, that his deeds may be made manifest, **that they are wrought in God**. — John 3:19-21

But the one doing truth comes to the light, in order that his works may become-visible — **that they have been worked in God**. — John 3:21, Transline Translation

In this the children of God are manifest, and the children of the devil: whosoever doeth not righteousness is not of God, neither he that loveth not his brother. For this is the message that ye heard from the beginning, that we should love one another. Not as Cain, who was of that wicked one, and slew his brother. And wherefore slew he him? Because his own works were evil, and his brother's righteous. — 1 John 3:10-12

Then came the word of the LORD unto Jeremiah, saying, Behold, I am the LORD, the God of all flesh: is there any thing too hard for me? Therefore thus saith the LORD; Behold, I will give this city into the hand of the Chaldeans, and into the hand of Nebuchadrezzar king of Babylon, and he shall take it: And the Chaldeans, that fight against this city, shall come and set fire on this city, and burn it with the houses, upon whose roofs they have offered incense unto Baal, and poured out drink offerings unto other gods, to provoke me to anger. **For the children of Israel and the children of Judah have only done evil before me from their youth: for the children of Israel have only provoked me to anger with the work of their hands, saith the LORD**. For this city hath been to me as a provocation of mine anger and of my fury from the day that they built it even unto this day; that I should remove it from before my face, Because of all the evil of the children of Israel and of the children of Judah, which they have done to provoke me to anger, they, their kings, their princes, their priests, and their prophets, and the men of Judah, and the inhabitants of Jerusalem. And they have turned unto me the back, and not the face: though I taught them, rising up early and teaching them, yet they have not hearkened to receive instruction. But they set their abominations in the house, which is called by my name, to defile it. And they built the high places of Baal, which are in the valley of the son of Hinnom, to cause their sons and their daughters to pass through the fire unto Molech; which I commanded them not, neither came it into my mind, that they should do this abomination, to cause Judah to sin. — Jeremiah 32:26-35

The sabbath keeper looks at the sabbath and insists it is a “moral” law and that we are commanded to rest on that day; that it is immoral to work on that day, but somehow, not immoral to work on the other days of the week. When it comes to what is called a “moral” law, there can never be an excuse for transgressing it. It is never excusable to murder, or commit adultery, or bear false witness. This cannot be claimed for the sabbath commandment.

God looks at the sabbath in the context of being commanded of Israel, where the Israelites were to rest on the sabbath because it was a holy convocation, with them seen or perceived as being in the presence of God on that day, and that they could not therefore be performing their evil works before Him. They could do “good” acts on that day; works that were merciful or acts of kindness for the benefit of animals, for example, and Jesus points out that a human being is of greater value than an animal. The Israelites seemed to have had no problem being compassionate to their animals, and seeing to their needs on the sabbath, but due to the hardness of their hearts, they could not be compassionate regarding their fellow man in their hearts. Hence, their “works” were evil, even as Cain's works and sacrifices were evil, seeing as he hated his brother.

Jesus made it clear to the people of His time that if one had an issue with his brother, he was to postpone any offerings at the Temple, reconcile with his brother first, then give his offering. Else, he was wasting his time, seeing as God was not going to accept him and his offering.

In the theology of the New Covenant, Paul points out that love “fulfills” the law; all of it, including the sabbath:

Owe no man any thing, but to love one another: for he that loveth another hath fulfilled the law. For this, Thou shalt not commit adultery, Thou shalt not kill, Thou shalt not steal, Thou shalt not bear false witness, Thou shalt not covet; **and if there be any other commandment**, it is briefly comprehended in this saying, namely, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. **Love worketh no ill to his neighbour**: therefore love is the fulfilling of the law. — Romans 13:8-10

Jesus healed a man who was lame for 38 years, and as usual, does this on a sabbath, escalating the conflict between himself and the religious leaders of the time who were big on the law and sabbath. The narrative is found in John chapter 5. From verse 16 we read:

And for this reason, the Jews were persecuting Jesus – because He was doing these *things* on a Sabbath. But Jesus answered them, “My Father is working until now, and I am working.” Therefore, for this reason the Jews were seeking more to kill Him— because He was not only breaking the Sabbath but He was also calling God *His* own Father, making Himself equal *to* God! — John 5:16-18, Transline Translation

Sabbatarians are quick to claim that Jesus didn't really break the sabbath, but that John was writing from the perspective of the Jews.

This claim is typical of sabbatarians who are quick to defend the sabbath, resorting to any conceivable explanation in order to preserve the sabbath and prevent the appearance of Jesus sinning, for in the eyes of the sabbatarian, “sin is the transgression of the law” citing I John 3:4 which is actually a mistranslation and a misinterpretation of the Greek¹. The KJV proffers this interpretive translation into English as such, following the translation of the earlier Geneva Bible. No modern English Bible makes this translation, as such a translation does not follow the meaning of the Greek.

What is important to understand is that the Greek word used here in John 5:18, translated “breaking” is the Greek word “elyon” or “eluen”, rendering the understanding of Jesus having “loosed” the sabbath command; having nullified its authority. The sabbath command was not relevant to works done from a righteous perspective, where one does good, and not evil works, selfish in nature, devoid of God's involvement in one's life. With this understanding of the Greek, it can hardly be claimed that John was writing what he did from the perspective of the Jews, for the Jews did indeed believe Jesus was breaking the law, and would never claim or admit that Jesus had the right to “dismiss” or nullify the sabbath command! Yet even sabbatarians are quick to point out that Jesus is the “Lord of the sabbath!”

Jesus did not transgress the sabbath law like a man would; He nullified it. He rendered it irrelevant. He set it aside. He showed that it truly was *not* a sin to do good on the sabbath, when one's works are in unison with God's will and His influence in one's life.

Jesus even went out of His way to call what He did on sabbaths, healing people, “work.” Note again the citation above, where Jesus says, in relation to the sabbath, that He works, and that even the Father in Heaven works.

Did not Moses give you the law, and yet none of you keepeth the law? Why go ye about to kill me? The people answered and said, Thou hast a devil: who goeth about to kill thee? Jesus answered and said unto them, **I have done one work**, and ye all marvel. Moses therefore gave unto you circumcision; (not because it is of Moses, but of the fathers;) and ye on the sabbath day circumcise a man. If a man on the sabbath day receive circumcision, that the law of Moses should not be broken; **are ye angry at me, because I have made a man every whit whole on the sabbath day?** Judge not according to the appearance, but judge righteous judgment. — John 7:19-24

Jesus here again refers to His healing on the sabbath, “work.” He also tells us several other important things. These religious leaders and people who were big on the law and sabbath didn't really keep that law. This makes them hypocrites. Jesus also points out that circumcision was more important than sabbath keeping, and that circumcision takes precedence over the sabbath. Why then don't sabbatarians insist on practicing circumcision? It's too easily demonstrated as not required of Christians, whereas it is easier to obfuscate the facts and evidence when it comes to the sabbath.

Finally, Jesus states that one should not judge according to appearance, but to judge righteous judgment. Yet judging Christians and Christianity regarding the sabbath is all about appearance, for not even the sabbatarian truly keeps the sabbath, any more than those hypocrites of Jesus' time kept the law, given to them, according to Christ, by Moses, and not God.

Likewise, I have never heard a sabbatarian refer to the law as the “law of Moses.”

¹ I Jn 3:4: "its use here so soon after the references to the antichrists may be significant. The writer probably intended it to be a strongly pejorative description of sin. It seems likely, in view of I John 3:7, that the antichrists had a softened view of sin which John wished to refute." (Excerpted from The Bible Knowledge Commentary on I Jn. 3:4)

When we read the next verse it says: And ye know that he was manifested to take away our sins; and in him is no sin." So since that's the case, we are no longer seen as "transgressing the law", i.e., committing lawlessness, wickedness, etc. The works of the law are dead works and can never bring life:

Christianity is not about “keeping” the old covenant law of the letter, where one was commanded to rest on the sabbath. Resting was just part of the issue. One sinned by *working* on that day; works that were *not* good in the sight of God.

Christianity is about “fulfilling” the law through love, and the apostle declares, as cited above, that this includes all the commandments, including the sabbath commandment. Why? How? Because our works are pleasing to God, for God is involved in our lives. Christian works are good works every day, even on the sabbath, even as Christ did. A Christian, in possession of the Holy Spirit, is in the presence of God always, and a Christian's works are not seen by God as being evil works. Our works are our fruit. Our works are a reflection of who and what we are: Christians.

How much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without spot to God, purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God? — Heb 9:14

As sabbatarians are fond of saying, “shouldn't we be following Christ and His example?”