

## The Sabbath and the Son of God

John 5:16-18

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*And this was why the Jews were persecuting Jesus, because he was doing these things on the Sabbath. <sup>17</sup> But Jesus answered them, "My Father is working until now, and I am working."*

*<sup>18</sup> This was why the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God. – John 5:16-18, ESV*

### Introduction

Have you ever had someone use something you gave them for a very different purpose than what you intended when you gave it to them? My kids like to use some of my favorite books for very different purposes than they were intended. We may have subconsciously started them on this trend years ago when we used our copy of *The Book of Virtues* to prop up one end of Andrew's bassinet when he was having acid reflux. Most commonly, Jeremiah and Kathryn will borrow old books of mine and use them as props in their imaginative play. This has mostly been fine, except for the one time when Kathryn left my copy of the Oxford Book of English Verse, edited by Arthur Quiller-Couch, outside in the back yard and it rained. They also sometimes like to use my biggest books to anchor the sheets and blankets for their forts or to press leaves.

The mis-use of books is one thing, but God gave His people a wonderful gift, the Sabbath, which they continually found new ways to misuse, either through neglect or through distortion.

### A. The Sabbath, vv. 16-17

*And this was why the Jews were persecuting Jesus, because he was doing these things on the Sabbath. <sup>17</sup> But Jesus answered them, "My Father is working until now, and I am working."*

Did you ever notice that Jesus repeatedly had confrontations with the Jewish religious leaders over the Sabbath? He seemed to intentionally, repeatedly seek out such confrontations. Jesus performed this miraculous sign on the Sabbath Day near the Temple, where He knew that religious leaders would see the healed man carrying his mat, just as Jesus commanded him to do. So it seems that part of what Jesus was trying to accomplish by healing this man in this way was to provoke a confrontation with the religious leaders over the Sabbath.

Why was the Sabbath such an issue for Jesus? Some people read the repeat stories of Jesus healing on the Sabbath or the disciples picking heads of grain on the Sabbath and they conclude that Jesus must have been intending to nullify or overthrow the Sabbath. But such a view is incorrect, given three things we know about Jesus:

1. Jesus is fully God, co-equal and co-eternal with the Father. Thus, He was the One who gave the Ten Commandments, including the Fourth Commandment on the Sabbath to the people of God.
2. Jesus is the embodiment and fulfillment of the Law, being the incarnation of the Word and the embodiment of the perfect righteousness of God.

3. Jesus Himself said that He did not come to abolish the Law. In Matthew 5:17-20, He said:

*Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. <sup>18</sup> For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. <sup>19</sup> Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. <sup>20</sup> For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. (ESV)*

So, we need a way of understanding Jesus' actions that does not characterize Him as trying to undermine or overthrow the Law which He Himself gave, which He Himself embodied and which He Himself said He came not to abolish but to fulfill.

### **1. The Religious Leaders & the Sabbath**

Jesus rebukes the religious leaders not because they were seeking to remember the Sabbath and so obey God's Law, but because they were dishonoring God's Sabbath rest for His people and His whole law. Dr. David Murray, Professor of Old Testament at Puritan Reformed Seminary, describes the difference between the religious leaders' view of the Sabbath and Jesus' view of the Sabbath as the difference between a miserable Sabbath and a merciful Sabbath.

The religious leaders practiced a miserable Sabbath centered around negativity. They forbid people from carrying any physical burden – even keeping a newly healed invalid from carrying his mat – but they laid on the people such an overwhelming religious burden that no one could lift it. Their Sabbath was framed in terms of the negatives, all the things you were not allowed to do. These lists were so comprehensive and so technical as to be completely miserable. Ironically, the Sabbath command is one of two of the Ten Commandments that was expressed primarily in positive terms: “Remember the Sabbath Day to keep it holy.” The other is “Honor your father and mother.” But they took this positive command of remember and keep and made it a negative day of misery.

The religious leaders furthered the misery of their Sabbath by adding such weight and importance to the Sabbath. Clearly, God had repeatedly and passionately called His people to repent of their violations of the Sabbath, both the Sabbath day and the Sabbath years, when they were supposed to give their land rest. But the religious leaders took this past pattern of Sabbath neglect and pushed an extreme version of the Sabbath in the opposite direction. Many rabbis taught that if the people of God would keep a single Sabbath perfectly - truly perfectly – then God would send the Messiah and rescue His people. So, a Sabbath violation became not just a personal sin issue but a national betrayal, preventing God's people from receiving their Messiah and the Messianic deliverance.

### **2. Jesus & the Sabbath**

Jesus, on the other hand, practiced a merciful Sabbath. He did intentionally take the Sabbath as a prime time to heal, to restore, to bless. He saw the Sabbath for what it was, as a gift from God. He taught that the Sabbath was made for man and not man for the Sabbath. Creationally, Jesus was reflecting the fact that God made man first and then rested on the seventh day, creating the Sabbath and making it holy and inviting His people to

enter His rest. So, God was the first one to create and keep the Sabbath, and He is the one who truly made it holy.

Jesus came to bring the kingdom of God, to bring the blessings of salvation to God's people. One of the key things He did was to reclaim the Sabbath day from the burdensome day of misery that the religious leaders had made it to be the merciful day of rest and blessing that God always intended it to be.

The religious leaders thought that obeying the Sabbath rules was a way to earn God's favor and blessing. Jesus showed that the Sabbath is itself a gift of God's favor and blessing. The religious leaders taught that if the people of God would give God perfect Sabbath obedience, Messiah would come and deliver them. Jesus taught that He came as Messiah to fulfill perfect obedience for His people and to bring them the blessing and deliverance that the Sabbath was always intended to embody as a promise.

The Sabbath has always been about resting in God's finished work, not seeking to establish our own. The seventh-day Saturday Sabbath was an invitation by God to enter into His rest from the finished work of creation. When Jesus had finished the work of redemption, He rose again on the first day of the week, and the focus of the Christian Sabbath shifts from entering into creation rest to entering into redemption rest. It is the finished work of redemption that we enter into, rest in and enjoy as a blessing from God.

At the same time, we look forward to the new heavens and the new earth, the new creation that Jesus inaugurated in His own resurrected body. That's why the Christian Sabbath is called the Lord's Day, an expression used by the apostle John in Revelation I, when he said he was in the Spirit on the Lord's Day when God gave him the visions of that book. The Lord's Day both commemorates the Lord's resurrection, His day of victory, and looks forward to the Day of the Lord, the day of final consummation.

## **B. The Son of God, vv. 17-18**

### **I. Jesus Doing the Work of His Father, v. 17**

So, what does Jesus mean when He says, *"My Father is working until now, and I am working."*? Well, Jesus is pointing out the well-known and accepted fact that, while God rested from His work of Creation on the seventh day, He has never stopped His work of providence, working to govern, preserve and uphold His creation. God is always, continually, taking care of His creation, tending and caring for His world. But more importantly, Jesus very pointedly refers to God here as "my father" and says that He, too, is working, just as God is. Jesus' healing of the invalid is an expression of His care of His creation, the same kind of work of providence as His Father does.

Thus, Jesus' statement in verse 17 doesn't directly tell us what we should do, since He is speaking here as the unique Son of God. However, we can reasonably conclude that, if Jesus thought the Sabbath day was a great day to clearly demonstrate His care and concern for His creation in exercising mercy and healing, we can imitate Him and do likewise.

We cannot do the works of God in the same authoritative and miraculous way as Jesus, but we can take advantage of the Sabbath day of rest to show forth God's loving care for His creation. We do this by deeds of mercy and love, reaching out and seeking to care, heal, restore, preserve and uphold God's good creation, especially people, who are made in His image.

## 2. Jesus Claiming Equality with the Father, v. 18

The more important significance of Jesus' statement is something that was not lost on the religious leaders: Jesus was claiming to be equal with God. Thus, verse 18 says, *"This was why the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God."*

When Jesus called God "my Father" and said that He was working just as His Father was working, Jesus was equating Himself with God and His work with God's work. John's language in verses 17-18 emphasize this truth: Jesus said "My Father" and "I Myself am also working" and then John observes that Jesus was calling God "his own" Father. Jesus was clear in His language and the religious leaders grasped it clearly, too.

## 3. The Religious Leaders' Understanding & Reaction

The religious leaders understood what Jesus was claiming, but they were unwilling to consider that He might be telling the truth. For them, the very claim He made was a non-starter, an impossible contradiction. Jesus was essentially claiming to be doing the works of God as One who is equal with God. A sensible response to such a claim might be to ask the One making the claim to prove it, to substantiate his claim with some evident demonstration of divine power. The religious leaders couldn't do this, though, because Jesus had already provided such proof. He gave the demonstration of His divine power before He made His claim to divine nature.

The religious leaders rejected Jesus, not because He was wrong, but because He was a threat to them. This man making these bold claims and supporting His claims with public, undeniable demonstrations of divine authority is the same man who drove the money-changers and animal-sellers out of the Temple and who told the man He healed to carry his mat on Sabbath. In other words, the real problem with Jesus wasn't His claim to divine nature or His demonstration of divine power, but it was His confrontation of their corrupt, legalistic, self-serving religious system.

Why do people reject Jesus today? Is it because they don't have any proof of His divine nature or His divine power? No! Scripture provides a clear record of Jesus' public miracles, claims to divine nature and authority, and especially of His resurrection from the dead. Multiple accounts of the same miracles provide us with the confidence of numerous eye-witnesses to Jesus' public miracles with corroborating accounts. People reject Jesus today for the same reasons the religious leaders rejected Him in His day: He is a threat.

Jesus brings healing and forgiveness, deliverance from sin and the curse of the fall. However, He also turns over the tables of the money-changers and animal-sellers and challenges all our attempts to establish our own righteousness or earn favor from God. In other words, Jesus comes in to establish His kingdom, to take away our sin and our idols, to heal all our diseases, beginning with the disease of self-righteousness.

As C.S Lewis explains in *Mere Christianity*, Jesus says to us, "Give me all of you! I don't want so much of your time, so much of your talents and money, and so much of your work. I want YOU! ALL OF YOU! I have not come to torment or frustrate the natural man or woman, but to KILL IT! No half measures will do. I don't want to only prune a branch here and a branch there; rather I want the whole tree out! Hand it over to me, the whole outfit, all of your desires, all of your wants and wishes and dreams. Turn them ALL over to me, give

yourself to me and I will make of you a new self---in my image. Give me yourself and in exchange I will give you Myself. My will, shall become your will. My heart, shall become your heart.”

This is what the religious leaders in Jesus’ day could not accept. They wouldn’t have minded so much if Jesus was willing to sign on to their cause, support their religious enterprise, help to establish their kingdom, expand the power and rule of their nation. They always imagined that Messiah would come and usher them into glory in a way that would affirm and strengthen their rule. They weren’t ready for Him to overthrow it. And so they missed their Messiah, rejected His merciful, saving rule and ended up trying to kill the Lord of Glory.

What about you? Are you placing limits on Jesus, marking out the boundaries of where He is allowed to assert His nature and power and where He is not? Do you want a tame, domesticated Savior, one who gives you a happier life filled with a greater sense of purpose and peace but a life still very much under your control? Jesus won’t give you that. He is the Lord, after all.

As C.S. Lewis also says in *Mere Christianity*, “Imagine yourself as a living house. God comes in to rebuild that house. At first, perhaps, you can understand what He is doing. He is getting the drains right and stopping the leaks in the roof and so on; you knew that those jobs needed doing and so you are not surprised. But presently He starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts abominably and does not seem to make any sense. What on earth is He up to? The explanation is that He is building quite a different house from the one you thought of – throwing out a new wing here, putting on an extra floor there, running up towers, making courtyards. You thought you were being made into a decent little cottage: but He is building a palace. He intends to come and live in it Himself.”

### **From Sabbath to Lord’s Day**

I believe this is ultimately what it means to make the transition from the religious leaders’ Sabbath Day to the Lord’s Day. In the mindset of a religiously self-righteous person, a Sabbath is something we give to God to show Him how good we are at managing our time and giving Him an appropriate slice of the pie. We give God His 1/7<sup>th</sup> of our time and His 1/10<sup>th</sup> of our money and He leaves us alone. We get to keep the other 6/7<sup>th</sup> of our time and the other 9/10<sup>th</sup> of our money.

The Lord’s Day, as Jesus established it, confesses and demonstrates that we belong to the Lord. It is the first day of the week and commemorates the new life that Jesus brought into being with His own resurrection. We are not giving a day to the Lord to satisfy some legalistic requirement and check off the appropriate box on our righteousness check-list. We are confessing that we belong to the Lord by beginning our week in worship. We are giving thanks because He has redeemed us and we are His- all of us!

In the words of the first question of the Heidelberg Catechism, my only comfort in life and death is . . .

**That I am not my own, but belong -body and soul, in life and in death—to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ. He has fully paid for all my sins with His precious blood, and has set me free from the tyranny of the devil.**

**He also watches over me in such a way that not a hair can fall from my head without the will of my Father in heaven; in fact, all things must work together for my salvation.**

**Because I belong to Him, Christ, by his Holy Spirit, assures me of eternal life and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for Him.**