

SHOULD WE KEEP THE SABBATH? (Part 4)

Jesus and the Sabbath

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THE PROMISE OF A NEW COVENANT

We concluded our last study by pointing out the basic failure of Israel was her repeated failure to keep the Sinaitic Covenant. However, although Israel broke the terms of the Ten Commandments and the Deuteronomic Law all was not lost. God's love never quits and works on! He remembers His covenant with Abraham! Israel will inherit her land, and the nations will be blessed through his seed. God will not rest until we enter His rest.

What then will the LORD God do to rescue this tragic breach of the covenant broken after Sinai? Ah, He promises a new covenant, "Behold, days are coming," declares the LORD, "when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, not like the covenant which I made with their fathers in the day I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, though I was a husband to them," declares the LORD (Jeremiah 31: 31-32; see also Ezekiel 37: 26f)

A new and a better covenant comes, not like the covenant which I made with their fathers in the day I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt. So, the Sinaitic Covenant will become obsolete and old! But when will this new covenant begin? And what will it look like? And has it already begun?

JESUS ANNOUNCES THE JUBILEE SABBATH

Do you remember the first sermon our Lord Jesus preached in the synagogue of his hometown? It created quite a stir! After his baptism and wilderness temptation Jesus,

Returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit ... And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up; and as was his custom, he entered the synagogue on the Sabbath, and stood up to read. And the book of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. And he opened the book, and found the place where it was written,

"The Spirit of the LORD is upon me, because He anointed me to preach the Gospel to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are downtrodden, to proclaim the favourable year of the LORD"

And he closed the book, and gave it back to the attendant, and sat down; and the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed upon him. And he began to say to them, "Today, this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4: 14,16-21).

What was so arresting in Jesus' actions? Let's picture the scene: Jesus has just read Isaiah's prophecy to his own family and hometown crowd. Isaiah predicted that when he arrives the Messiah will proclaim the Year of Jubilee.

Now the Jubilee was the final year in a cycle of 50 years, consisting of seven **Sabbatical year periods**, or 49 years plus the fiftieth year. The specific name, "Jubilee Year" literally means "the year of the Ram's Horn" because when that special horn was blown, a proclamation went through all Israel announcing **liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants (Lev. 25: 9-10)**. This unique fiftieth year effected the automatic emancipation of all Israelites who may have been in debt or slavery, or who had lost their family estates. Jubilee announced freedom for every Jew. At the heart of the Jubilee was the proclamation of *release*.

And now, in his hometown synagogue, in effect Jesus blows the ram's horn! He proclaims Jubilee to Israel! He announces, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing!" It is important to see that Jesus not only quoted the Messianic prophecy about Jubilee from **Isaiah 61**, but he also quoted a phrase from **Isaiah 42:7**,

To open the eyes of the blind, to bring out prisoners from the dungeon, and those who dwell in darkness from prison.

As Ratzlaff observes,

The context of this second passage must not escape our attention. This is a prophecy of the coming messiah, set forth in terms of “My Servant” with overtones of the Jubilee.¹

No wonder all eyes in the synagogue were firmly gazing at this self-proclaimed Messiah! No wonder all eyes were burning with anger and hostility at him!² This was outrageous --- unless true.

Three points must be noted. First, he who had grown up in their town and was known by all, claims to be Israel’s long-promised Messiah. Second, Jesus announces the Jubilee has come in his person. Third, as their Messiah, Jesus’ mission will be to forgive sins, and to set the captives free, to bring in the Kingdom of God.

Behold, My Servant, whom I uphold; My chosen one in whom My soul delights. I have put My Spirit upon him; He will bring justice to the nations ... I am the LORD, I have called you [i.e. Messiah, My Chosen Servant] in righteousness, I will also hold you by the hand and watch over you, and **I will appoint you as a covenant to the people**, as a light to the nations. To open blind eyes, to bring out prisoners from the dungeon, and those who dwell in darkness from the prison ... Behold, the former things have come to pass, now I declare new things. Sing to the LORD a new song (Is. 42: 1,6,7,9,10).

Critical to our study is what is said about the nature and work of the “Servant” whom God has chosen for this mission. The Messiah is God’s **Chosen one, God’s Elect (v. 1)**. God’s Spirit is **upon him (v.1)**. The scope of his mission is to **bring justice to the nations (v. 1)** (and not just to Israel). Critically, He himself is **a covenant to the people (v.6)**. His work is to free the captives **(v. 7)**, to **open blind eyes, set prisoners free**, and to **declare new things (v.9)**. This will result in a **new song** of praise to the Redeemer God.

This ministry cannot fit within the framework of the old covenant. The Messiah is now *the elect One*. Through the long centuries from the day when God told Abraham, “in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed,” God had slowly been narrowing His elect.³

After many long centuries of waiting and watching for their elect One, you can imagine the joy of the disciples who exulted, **“We have found the Messiah!” (John 1:41)**. They knew that from this specially anointed Servant of God, there would flow out the joyful proclamation of forgiveness of sins, freedom from bondage and darkness, justice for Israel and all nations. This Servant would bring liberation. He would declare the Jubilee of God to have begun. He will announce the Kingdom was at hand.

But notice these critical words. The Messiah would be **appointed as a covenant to the people (Is. 42: 6)**. The New Testament announces that **Jesus himself is the [new] covenant!** No longer is the covenant engraved on tablets of stone, limited to Israel. From now on, **forgiveness of sins will be proclaimed in His name to all the nations (Lk. 24:47)**.

Later, just before his crucifixion, our Lord would invite his disciples to drink of the cup of communion saying, **“This is my blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many” (Mk 14:24)**. Clearly our Lord believed that his death would fulfill all the terms and conditions of the first Mosaic covenant from Sinai, and that the promised new covenant would begin with himself. The Gospels record many stories of Jesus proclaiming Jubilee freedom and release, and notably and very often on the Sabbath day. But we are again getting ahead of ourselves.

¹ *Ibid* p 123 I acknowledge freely Dale Ratzlaff’s book and my adaption of many of his ideas in this series.

² Although many translations say in v. 22 the people were **speaking well of him**, the Greek “Dative of Disadvantage” construction is better interpreted as meaning they **were speaking against him**.

³ *Ibid* p 125

JESUS HEALED MANY ON THE SABBATH.

No sooner had Jesus announced his Jubilee ministry by proclaiming the year of God's favour had arrived, than he immediately took authority over the kingdom of darkness. He began to cast out demons, rebuke fevers, cleanse lepers, forgive sins, open blind eyes, free the outcasts, and preach the Gospel of the Kingdom (e.g. Mk 1: 21-34; Lk 4: 31-44).

Critical to his actions was his teaching and behaviour on the Sabbath. Keep in mind that Sabbath keeping was **the sign of the old covenant**. And many of Jesus' liberating miracles were performed on the Sabbath day. A clash with the old covenant law was inevitable, for new wine can't be contained by old wineskins (Mk 2:22)! Jesus was going to demonstrate that a new covenant was breaking in. The prophet had said God would **appoint Messiah as the messenger of a new covenant** (Is. 42:6).

THE DAUGHTER OF ABRAHAM BENT OVER DOUBLE

The Gospel of Luke records one such significant test case ... the healing of the bent-over woman, on the Sabbath day, in front of the synagogue officials,

And behold, [pay attention!] there was a woman who for eighteen years had had a sickness caused by a spirit [a demon]; and she was bent double, and could not straighten up at all. And when Jesus saw her, he called her over and said to her, 'Woman, you are freed from your sickness.' And he laid his hands upon her; and immediately she was made erect again, and began glorifying God.

And the [chief] synagogue official, indignant because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath, began saying to the multitude in response, 'There are six days in which work should be done; therefore come during them and get healed, and not on the Sabbath day.'

But the Lord answered him and said, 'You hypocrites, does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the stall, and lead him away to water it? And this woman, a daughter of Abraham as she is, whom Satan has bound for eighteen long years, should she not have been released from this bond on the Sabbath day?' (Lk. 13: 10-16)

We are told that when Jesus' actions and words brought **humiliation** to the custodians of the Law, **the entire multitude was rejoicing over all the glorious things done by him** (v. 17). So, why did Jesus choose to heal this captive woman on the Sabbath day? She had suffered this condition for **eighteen long years**. One more day would not have made any difference to a non life-threatening sickness. The answer of course, is that Jesus was making a point.

Jesus calls the woman **a daughter of Abraham**. She was a member of the covenant people, a believing Israelite. But she was bent over double. Evidently her physical condition reflected two enslaving powers. The unseen spiritual realm of Satan was the direct cause of her sickness, but the unsympathetic legalism of the custodians of the old Law also oppressed her (and by inference the people), and needed breaking. Prisoners must be set free.

True to his Jubilee mission, Jesus drives back Satan's kingdom and in the process gives her rest from her affliction, thus fulfilling the Sabbath's significance ... redemptive liberation. No wonder the people all **began glorifying God**. In stark contrast however, were the leaders who were enslaved under the letter of the old Sabbath Law for failing to see that a new covenant life was being inaugurated. They are here termed Jesus' **hostile opponents** (v. 17).

We must ask: How could these Jewish leaders and upholders of the Law of God completely miss the whole point to which the Sabbath Law pointed --- redemptive freedom from bondage and joyful fellowship with God? Ah ha! I can hear the answer in the form of an objection ...

BUT JESUS WAS ONLY CORRECTING THE LEGALISTIC APPLICATION OF THE SABBATH

We may be tempted to think all this story proves is that Jesus was upholding the true spirit of the Sabbath, giving it back to the people with its original intent and purpose. We know the Law was **holy, and righteous and**

good (Rom. 7:12). And certainly, this story shows how the legal custodians of the old covenant were hypocritical and blind. And yes, agreed, it was the literalistic interpretations that Jesus corrected, not the spirit of the Sabbath itself which was intended to be a blessing. All true. But it misses the point! How so?

To answer this, we will look at another critical Sabbath encounter Jesus had with the Pharisees.

JESUS TOOK AUTHORITY OVER THE OLD SABBATH LAW!

This encounter is recorded in all the Synoptic Gospels. Jesus has just said, 'No one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is lost, and the skins as well; but one puts new wine into fresh wineskins' (Mk. 2: 22). It appears obvious Jesus is contrasting the old covenant Law of Israel with the new order he is introducing. Jesus is giving fair warning that his new covenant gospel will not be restricted by the old Law binding Judaism. Remember how we said earlier that the prophet Isaiah had predicted that God would appoint the Messiah as the Messenger of a new covenant to the people (Is. 42: 6)?

Let's see how this new wine of the new covenant began to be worked out in practice. It's not by accident that Mark and Luke both now tell us about this critical Sabbath encounter,

And it came about that he was passing through the grainfields on the Sabbath, and his disciples began to make their way along while picking the heads of grain.

And the Pharisees were saying to him, 'See here, 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 became hungry, he and his companions; how he entered into 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 gave it also to those who were with him?'

And he was saying to them, 'The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath. Consequently, the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath' (Mk.2: 23-28; cp. Luke 5: 36-6: 1ff).

Most of us think of the Pharisees as narrow-minded, legalistic keepers of the Law. We think of them as the "baddies", right? Well, just for a moment, let's try to see why they challenged Jesus on this occasion as his disciples were plucking corn on the Sabbath.

The Pharisees knew the Sabbath required complete rest (with the death penalty for anyone who does any work on the sabbath day (Ex. 31:15). They knew that you shall not do any work on the Sabbath, with complete rest for all family members, including slaves and animals (Ex. 20: 10). Also, all ploughing and harvesting was to stop on the Sabbath (Ex. 34: 21). Indeed, everyone was to remain in his place; let no man go out of his place on the seventh day (Ex. 16: 29).

The Pharisees also knew the Law taught that food was to be prepared on the day before the Sabbath. There was to be no baking or boiling of food on the Sabbath. That was to be done the day before, so that the Sabbath-rest be observed (Ex. 16: 23-26).

So, if you were a Pharisee wouldn't you have felt justified in challenging Jesus about his disciples harvesting and threshing corn on the Sabbath? They had not prepared their food the day before. This was work under the old law definition surely? The disciples and Jesus were not resting as the Law required.

Jesus stoutly defends his and the disciples' behaviour with a multi-pronged answer;-

1. The first principle Jesus lays down is that human need always triumphs over the rules of ritual law --- even God's Sabbatical law under the old covenant! David and his men were in need and hungry, and that's what mattered. Jesus never considered ritual law took precedence over human suffering and need.

2. The second principle is a theological one. Jesus says David was exempted from the law because he was the king in waiting. David was the anointed and appointed king of Israel. And since David's men ate the bread with him --- being his companions in the work of the coming kingdom --- they also were above the ritual law of Israel! As Dale Ratzlaff cogently points out,

Correspondingly, Jesus was arguing that His disciples were innocent, not so much because they were hungry (Because that is covered under principle one!) but because they were involved with Him in His work, which took precedence over ritual, Sabbath law. Jesus was the anointed of God, the coming King of Israel; therefore, they were free from condemnation by virtue of their association with Christ. This offers a preview of the coming redemption of the new covenant gospel: you are complete in Him. ⁴

The Gospel of Matthew puts Jesus' argument this way: 'Or have you not read in the Law, that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple break the Sabbath, and are innocent' (Matt. 12:5)? In other words, technically speaking, the priests by doing work on the Sabbath were breaking the holy day. And Jesus goes on to say, "But I say to you, that something greater than the Temple is here' (Matt. 12:6)!

Jesus is referring to himself and the kingdom he is bringing in, as being greater than even the Temple. Wow! That is a staggering claim. If I may again quote Ratzlaff,

It was God's presence which made the tabernacle service important enough to allow priests to violate the letter of *ritual* Sabbath law and yet be innocent. The presence of Jesus tabernacling (Jn. 1:14) in the temple of His body (Mt. 26: 61) took precedence over ritual Sabbath law. Therefore, just as the priests could violate the *letter* of Sabbath law to fulfill the more important services of the temple, so the disciples of Jesus could violate the letter of ritual Sabbath law because they were engaged in the more important service of One who is greater than the temple. ⁵

Professor Anthony Buzzard agrees, adding; It was not a sin for those priests to break the Sabbath. As Jesus pointed out, he and his followers represent the new spiritual temple (Matt. 12:4-5) and he himself is the new High Priest. There is more than a hint here that Sabbath-keeping is part of the old order. We may well say that the law, by exempting the priests from the Sabbath commandment when they worked in the Temple, foreshadowed the Christian's freedom from the Sabbath law while they now carry out God's work every day of the week. Just as the Sabbath of the Old Testament was a shadow of Christ (Col. 2:17), so were the sacrifices (Heb. 10:1). And the priests' exemption from Sabbath observance pointed to a time when those who obey God would do so by complying with principles different from those given to Israel. ⁶

3. The third principle Jesus lays down is that the very heart of the covenant law is that God Himself is more concerned with the attitude of our hearts than He is with how punctiliously we keep ritual law,

'But if you had known what this means, "I desire compassion, and not a sacrifice," you would not have condemned the innocent (Matt. 12:7). Even though they may have broken the letter of the Sabbatical Law, Jesus says that because of their heart loyalty to him, the disciples are innocent. The poke at the the Pharisees is that even though they were meticulous about the Sabbatical laws, they knew nothing about God's compassionate heart. Adherence even to God-ordained ritual can make a man blind. Ouch!

4. The fourth principle is a biggie. Jesus says, "The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath. Consequently, the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath (Mk. 2: 27-28). It must be said that the meaning of this statement is hotly debated. Some commentators say that Jesus teaches here that the Sabbath has been instituted for all mankind from the first creation week. However, as we have proved, this cannot be. We have shown that the Sabbath was only revealed and given to Israel at Sinai, being completely unknown before then (Deut. 5:3; Neh. 9:13-14). Jewish commentary has always understood the Sabbath was given as the sign of covenant loyalty to Israel, and not to the nations. We have demonstrated that the seventh day after creation was *God's rest* and was not identical to Israel's Sabbath rest.

⁴ Dale Ratzlaff, *Op Cit.* p 140

⁵ *Ibid*, p 141

⁶ Sir Anthony F. Buzzard, *The Law, The Sabbath and New Covenant Christianity: Christian Freedom Under the Teaching of Jesus.* Restoration Fellowship, Atlanta, USA. 2005. p 27

So, was Jesus only saying the Sabbath was made for the benefit of man, and that we should not be controlled by its restrictive and literalistic interpretations? Those who think that is the extent of the saying, suggest that the qualifying phrase, **Consequently, the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath**, is only adding emphasis to the point that mankind is to keep the Sabbath appropriately.

However, this explanation fails at the critical climax of Jesus' defence before these bastions of Mosaic law. It ought to be obvious that everywhere else in the Gospels, Jesus' favourite description of himself was to call himself by the messianic title, **"The Son of man"**. It is highly unlikely that all of a sudden, Jesus suddenly applies this messianic term to all mankind!

We all know the expression **"the Son of man"** comes from **Daniel 7:13** where it is used in connection with the end-time ---eschatological --- kingdom of God. Thus, when Jesus says that as **the Son of Man** he himself has authority over the Sabbath, he is announcing his God-given authority to bring in the new covenant reign of the end-time Kingdom of God! Jesus is claiming authority over the old covenant law! He is fulfilling the prophetic outline that God has **appointed you as a covenant to the people, as a light to the nations** (Is. 42:65).

We miss the revolutionary and eschatological impact of Jesus' argument here, if all we think he was doing was to insist on correct interpretation(s) of Sabbath observance under the old covenant for all mankind. No, no, no! It is far more radical than that. When Jesus says that as **the Son of man he is Lord even of the Sabbath**, he is teaching that the Sabbath is a ritual shadow that was passing away because it is fulfilled in himself. Now that is a jaw-stopper!

Jesus unashamedly announces that as the Son of man his mission under God is to bring in the end-time Kingdom of God! Therefore, he is above the ritual of Sabbath law. How do I know this is the correct interpretation? Easy! By taking full account of the context ... Jesus is not going to put new wine into the old covenant wineskins, as both Mark and Luke tell us.

MATTHEW CLINCHES THE DEAL!

Moreover, Matthew gives another complementary contextual setting to the story of plucking grain on the Sabbath. Matthew sets the story straight after his famous saying, **'Come to me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart; and you shall find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my load is light'** (Matt. 11: 28-30).

There were no chapter breaks in the original texts, so Matthew simply carries on by saying, ***At that time Jesus went on the Sabbath through the grainfields ...***(Matt. 12: 1) Bearing this immediate context in mind, surely Matthew also expects us to make the connection, that Jesus himself brings the Sabbath-rest to its fullness! Jesus boldly says that he himself is the new Sabbath-rest! If we were to put that into a Hebrew sentence, Jesus announced, ***"Come unto me and I will give you Shabbat!"***

The logical and contextual corollary is that the old covenant sabbath was a shadow --- pointing to the fulness of Shabbat-rest that Messiah himself will bring. The old Law points to Christ himself who by God's decree has become the new covenant fulfilment. He himself is made greater than the Temple, greater than the Sabbath, because the new is superior to the old Law!

THE GENERAL IMPLICATION FOR TODAY

Let's be very practical now. Let's apply this to our question. What is the attitude of those who wish to follow Christ Jesus to be towards the Sabbath (bearing in mind that we have not yet finished the series and so our findings may be provisional).

Let me answer by appealing to what may at first glance appear to be a rather strange source. Turn to a little-noticed miracle of Jesus. It's a fishy story!?! Turn to **Matthew 17: 24-27**,

And when they had come to Capernaum, those who collected the two-drachma tax came to Peter, and said, 'Does your teacher not pay the two-drachma tax?'

And he said, 'Yes'. And when he came into the house, Jesus spoke to him first, saying, 'What do you think, Simon? From whom do the kings of the earth collect customs or poll-tax, from their sons or from strangers?'

And upon his saying, 'From strangers,' Jesus said to him, 'Consequently the sons are exempt. But, lest we give them offense, go to the sea, and throw in a hook, and take the first fish that comes up; and when you open its mouth, you will find a stater. ⁷ Take that and give it to them for you and me.'

Before we can understand what is going on here, we need to know that under the Law of Moses, **the sons of Israel ... from twenty years old and over, shall give a contribution to the LORD** in the amount of half a shekel. This was called the tabernacle (or temple) tax, to be paid equally whether one was rich or poor. Essentially it was a tax to help towards the running expenses of the temple. The tax by the way, also pointed to redemption! ⁸

The noteworthy truth in our fishy (!) miracle story here, is that Jesus did not consider it binding on **the sons** to pay this temple tax. Thereby Jesus is claiming authority over this old covenant law also! As the Lord Messiah, Jesus is again laying down the same principle of exemption by which he defended his disciples who plucked corn in those grainfields. Those associated with God's Messiah are free to break the old law!

Repeat:- The principle is that the sons of the Kingdom (those under the new Messianic covenant), are free from the old legislation once binding on Israel --- whether that included Sabbath law (including touching the unclean leper on the Sabbath!) or temple tax, or many other old covenant dictates (as we shall see later that included circumcision, dietary laws, animal sacrifices, and so forth).

The timeless principle Jesus himself lays down in the miracle of the coin in the fish's mouth, is that the sons and daughters of the Kingdom of Messiah, are above the old law because they are free indeed! Jesus Christ did not come to just deliver us from the old Sabbath restrictions and literalistic and legalistic abuses. *He came to do away altogether with the shadows that pointed to himself as their fulfillment.*

Just like David's companions were free with him to *break* the law and to eat the holy bread, so too we who serve the Anointed King whom God has appointed as the new covenant are exempt from the ritual law(s) of Israel. Christ himself is greater than the Levitical priesthood, greater than the temple taxes and the sacrifices and all other ritual laws once binding upon Israel under the old covenant, including Sabbath-observance.

Christ himself is our Shabbat! He gives rest indeed, for unlike the **yoke** of the old law that was **heavy**, Jesus is **gentle and tender**. ⁹

The new covenant has broken in. We can drink the new wine now. And Jesus always saves the best to last (**John 2: 10**)! As free sons and daughters of the **Lord of the Sabbath** let us raise our glasses to the King, knowing that one day we shall drink with him in the Kingdom!

That deserves a new song of praise to our King as the prophet predicted (**Is. 42:10**)! The captives are free. The eyes are opened. Our sins are completely forgiven. All who were bent and doubled over and in darkness can stand straight and tall as new creations in His Name. In Messiah Jesus the Year of Jubilee is fulfilled.

(To be continued ...)

⁷ A stater coin was worth about four drachmas.

⁸ See **Exodus 30: 11-16** for more details.

⁹ Scripture often uses the word **yoke** for the old testament law. For instance, at the Jerusalem Council in **Acts 15** the apostle Peter would later say that to require Gentiles to keep **the Law of Moses** was to place **a yoke around the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear (v. 10)**. In similar fashion here, Jesus says the yoke of the old covenant is heavy. Compare the apostle Paul's similar association of the **yoke of slavery** with trying to keep the old covenant law (**Gal. 5:1**)!