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The Lord of the Sabbath

John 5:10-16

Intro: Jesus has just miraculously healed a lame man who He found laying beside the Pool of Bethesda. What should have been a glorious event; something to cause the common people to rejoice and the religious leaders to praise God, has suddenly turned dark and ominous. If the miracle had occurred on any other day of the week, it may have turned out in a positive way. In fact, this miracle would have caused no problem at all except that it happened on the Sabbath day. Now, Jesus could have certainly arrived a day earlier or He could have waited another day to heal this man. He'd already been lying there 38 yrs; another day wouldn't have hurt him right? But no, Jesus healed this man on the Sabbath day and not by accident. He wanted to get the attention of the Jews, the religious leaders.

Why did Jesus do this? Why was He constantly poking that sleeping bear with a stick? Our study today is going to focus on this issue. We will look at the individual verses of our passage at a later time but today we need to address the issue of the Jewish strict observance of the Sabbath and why Jesus was constantly offending them in this area.

By and large, the Jewish population regarded the Sabbath as a joyful day and had done so for quite some time. But, by the time Jesus appeared on the scene, the religious establishment had piled an enormous multitude of restrictions upon the Sabbath that the observance of it had become burdensome to all. Work of any kind was prohibited on the Sabbath and their attempts to accurately define work, to be sure what was not allowed, bordered on the ridiculous. Jesus persistently maintained that it was always lawful to do good on the Sabbath, something He both preached and practiced. He ignored the mass of scribal regulations and this inevitably brought Him into conflict with the authorities.

This "offense" doesn't seem so serious to us because the observance or nonobservance of the Sabbath is not a big issue in our time. But this issue was serious in Jesus' day and it will only become a bigger issue as His ministry progresses. As vs16 tells us, it's on the grounds of this very issue that "the Jews" eventually plot to destroy Him. Still, there is a sense in

which this issue is important today as well, even though most people today do not struggle with the question of how to worship God on Saturday. The importance of the issue is revealed when we ask some basic questions: Why do Christians worship on Sunday rather than the Sabbath? Does God prefer worship on one day over the other? Why don't we observe both? Why do we observe either? Does a particular day of the week have anything to do with true worship? These questions lie at the heart of the Sabbath-Sunday issue. As we address the rising conflict between Jesus and "the Jews," we'll also take some time to look at the history and purpose of the Jewish Sabbath, why Christians worship on Sunday and how we as Christians should celebrate the Lord's Day.

Let's start by identifying the primary significance of the Sabbath issue: Is the Christian life supposed to be ruled by grace or are we under regulations? It all comes down to a distinction between a reign of Law or a reign of grace and no where is this seen better than in the question of observing the Sabbath or Sunday because both these days are symbolic of the dispensations they're related to (OT or NT). This question persists to this day because few people fully comprehend the true character and principle of grace. Many think Christianity is nothing more than a system of human works by which one accrues merit and observing a Sabbath day is a great opportunity to earn that merit. This was exactly the situation in Christ's day. God had commanded a Sabbath for the Jewish people, but the leaders had perverted it by transforming it into a system by which they thought they were earning grace by doing good works.

Observing the Sabbath is in the 10 Commandments. (**Ex 20:8-10**). This basic principle was further developed in other OT books and applied to nearly all areas of Jewish life, even to the way they treated their fields. Eventually, Jeremiah warns that the failure of the people of his day to properly observe the Sabbath would result in the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians (**Jer 17:21-22,27**). This was God's teaching for Israel concerning the Sabbath and it was taken so seriously by Him that we even read that the people remained captive in Babylon for 70 years until all the broken Sabbaths on the land had been paid for (**2 Chron 36:21**).

The problem with all this is that the religious leaders of Israel added man's regulations to God's law which reduced the observance of the Sabbath to the worst form of legalism. For instance, the law said that a man was not to

travel on the Sabbath day (Ex 16:29). “But what is traveling?” asked the scribes. To answer this question they developed the concept of a Sabbath day’s journey; about 1000 yards. So, one could walk that far on the Sabbath, but any more than that was sin. But, if a rope was tied across the end of a street, then the whole street technically became one house; you could walk 1000 yards beyond the rope. Or if you left enough food for a meal at any given place on Friday night, on the next day you could walk to it, eat a meal (thereby technically establishing a home), and then walk 1000 yards more. If you were clever enough finding the loopholes, you could walk halfway across Palestine.

Or, take the issue of carrying a burden. The text in Jeremiah prohibits this. But what is a burden? Is a handkerchief a burden? The answer was yes if it was carried, but no if it was worn as clothing. So, in order to move a handkerchief from one place to another, you had to make sure you wore it and didn’t actually carry it in your hand.

All this was abhorrent to Jesus. He was determined to rescue Israel from her enslavement to man-made Sabbath regulations and to restore a proper balance by showing that the Sabbath was made for man rather than man for the Sabbath. In this way He paved the way for a fuller revelation of God’s grace in his coming death and resurrection. That’s why He kept pressing this issue. If Jesus’ power to heal miraculously meant nothing to the religious leaders in comparison to a supposed violation of the Law, then His death and resurrection would also mean nothing to them.

Jesus expressed His displeasure with Sabbath legalism in fuller form in **Matt 12:1-8**. The Pharisees were incensed that His disciples would “harvest” on the Sabbath. In His reply, Jesus provides 3 important principles.

1st) Example of King David (**I Sam 21**) – When David fled from Saul’s presence the final time, he left in a hurry. No time to gather equipment or supplies, he high-tailed it to the tabernacle in Nob and asked the priest for bread. Of course, there was no common bread, just showbread: consecrated bread only priests could eat. David took it. Oddly enough, God did not strike him dead for eating it. Why? God considered the anointing of David to be more important than the law about the bread. It would’ve been useless and hypocritical for the priest to pretend to serve God through the

minute laws of the tabernacle worship while rejecting God's king. It's insulting to God to act out religious ritual if the heart is far from Him. This also applied to the situation in Christ's day. It was also useless and hypocritical for the Pharisees to insist on their little Sabbath rules while actually turning their back on God's anointed Messiah. He was right there, One greater than the temple! If they rejected Him, even the Sabbath, backed by all the OT laws, was meaningless.

2nd) Legalism blinds to real needs. It hardens people in their relationship to others (**vs7**). On one hand, the religious leaders were fastidiously observing the minute details of their own interpretations of God's law while on the other; they were determined to kill Jesus because He wouldn't obey their regulations. Yet, they would still try to keep their own regulations while they did it. They had to go thru all sorts of legal contortions, rule bending and justifiable law breaking to get it all done in a timely manner so that everyone involved could then go and worship Jehovah. They marched right along the little path of their own regulations. When it was necessary they stepped out just enough to murder God. Then they stepped back in and went on with their legalism.

This should show us how terrible it is to have a religion of rules and ceremonies when the heart is far from Jesus. No horror is so great that it has not been practiced by someone at some time in the name of religion. And nothing is so bad as the tendency of the human heart to seize on some outward, useless, and hypocritical ceremony and follow it to the letter without turning at all to God. In contrast to the deadly legalism of the Jewish leaders, Jesus showed by His actions that people were far more important than rules and that showing mercy is a far greater responsibility on a follower of God than regulations. Thus, after Jesus' discussion with the leaders in Matt 12, He simply healed a man with a withered hand, while in John he provoked the same issue by curing the disabled man (**John 5**). The Jews wanted to use these men to trap Jesus. But Jesus, out of His great compassion, just wanted to heal them.

3rd) Lord of the Sabbath. Whatever their rules and regulations might be, Jesus was the Lord of the Sabbath, not them. He established the Sabbath. He was God. This was His claim. Thus, He could alter the Sabbath, suspend it, or even eliminate it. Today, Jesus makes a claim to be the Lord of your Sabbaths, your habits, aspirations, abilities, life. We're faced with the

same fact of human nature the Pharisees faced: it's nicer to try to pile up a collection of human credits than allow Jesus to manifest His lordship in our lives. That's true Christianity. Everything else is just religion.

Many Christians will agree with all that's been said so far, but will also still insist that the Sabbath is an important day. In fact, there's a large denomination that says Saturday is the only acceptable day to worship. Obviously, the Sabbath was important in the OT but how are we as NT believers suppose to look at it today? Without going into too much detail, I would like to lay out 2 basic facts about Sabbath observance and then make 1 concluding statement.

1) No Sabbath before Moses. Some like to point to Gen 2:2-3 as proof of Saturday worship and if this was the only passage concerning it, they might have a point but that's not what the passage says. It says God blessed the 7th day since that's when His work of creation ended. It does not say when He sanctified it; that could have occurred later. Nor is there any record anywhere of any actual Sabbath observance by anyone before the time of Moses. There is offering of sacrifices, prayer and circumcision by Jewish people before Moses' day—but not Sabbath keeping. Also, there's no evidence that any other nation ever kept the Sabbath at any time, either before Moses' day or currently.

2) Sabbath was for Jews only. Keeping the Sabbath was established when the Law was given at Sinai. It was not known or observed before that time. In [Ex 31](#), the Sabbath is described as a sign between Jehovah and Israel. [Ezek 20:10-12](#) reiterates that the Sabbath was made known by God at Sinai and was exclusively a sign for Israel.

Ultimately, the practice of Sabbath observance changed completely and abruptly with the coming of the gospel of Christ. Some still object to this stating that Jesus observed the Sabbath Himself, which is true. But insisting on the observance of Saturday simply because Jesus observed it comes from a failure to realize that the reign of law gave way to the reign of grace at His death. Jesus was born a Jew, born under the law. During His life, He did keep the Sabbath, but He did it in the way God intended it to be kept, not in the way the scribes and Pharisees dictated. He was a Jew. Yet at His death, the law as a system binding upon God's people passed away ([Col 2:14](#)).

In Acts, sabbath is found only 9 times and not once is it spoken of as a day observed by Christians. Nowhere in the NT is it ever suggested that God's people met on the 7th day or regarded it with any special affection or attention.

Finally, in the epistles we are told explicitly that believers in the Lord Jesus Christ are freed from all such observances (**Col 2:16-17**) (**Gal 4:9-11**). So, it's significant that in all the Epistles, where ever the believer's obligation under grace is declared or described, the only use of "Sabbath" always concerns an absolute prohibition of its observance. It's always held to be in direct conflict with the most vital and superseding elements of grace.

Was the Sabbath instituted by God? Yes. Was it important? Yes – for Israel in the OT. What releases us as God's people from the responsibility and regulation of Sabbath observances today? Nothing but the cross of Jesus Christ!

Col 2:14 tells us that in Christ, we are freed from all the requirements of the Law – not just the Sabbath observance but the Feast days, the required sacrifices, everything... it was all made defunct by the cross. And not just that – **Col 2:8** implies that we are not only freed from the traditions of men but that we are no longer bound by the basic principles of this world! The way this world works doesn't necessarily apply to us anymore. But wait; that's not all!

Because of the cross of Christ, we are no longer in bondage to those things that plague all of mankind – the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes and the pride of life. How can this be – these are integral parts of human nature. Yes, but Paul tells us in **II Cor 5:17** that "if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new." We're free to live in Him and for Him if we chose to do so. The cross has the final word.

That is both the purpose and the joy of God's grace. Believers are no longer obligated to the ritual observance of a particular day and because of this, the Lord can possess all our days, weeks, months and years because He has bought us and He possesses our hearts in simple grace! 😊