

Better than Rules

Matthew 12:1-14

26 February 2017 | Grace Bible Church Corinda | Ben Shannon

Big Question: What is the meaning of the Sabbath for Christians?

Big Idea: The Sabbath is for meeting needs, not keeping rules.

Introduction

On Thursday, the Fair Work Commission handed down an important decision.

If you work in the retail, hospitality and fast food industries, and you work on a Sunday, your penalty rates will be cut.

The big end of town says it's good news because they'll be able to employ more people.

The unions say that it's bad because the lowest paid workers will be taking home less money.

Prime Minister Turnbull said that it's inevitable as we become a 'seven day economy'.

I think what's interesting is that there are penalty rates for working on a Sunday at all.

Many of us probably take it for granted that it's because of our Christian heritage that Sunday is considered a special day.

In a pluralist society, that doesn't carry much weight though.

Even amongst Christians, there has been a great deal of disagreement over whether Sunday is a special day at all.

Christians have disagreed – strongly – over whether Christians should recognise the Sabbath on Saturday, Sunday as the Christian Sabbath or Lord's Day, or both of them as any regular day.

This isn't something new.

In fact, this debate about the Sabbath goes all the way back to the time of Jesus as we're going to see that this morning as Jesus clashes with the Pharisees over the meaning of the Sabbath.

Outline

We're slowly working our way through the gospel of Matthew.

We're in a section that's all about how people respond to Jesus.

Will Jesus be accepted as God's long awaited king – Messiah – or will they reject him?

Last week, we saw that sadly, most people will reject Jesus and they will be responsible for the consequences of that decision.

Yet Jesus reveals his father to some, and they will find rest with him.

At the beginning of chapter 12, Jesus shows what the Sabbath is all about.

The Sabbath is for meeting needs, not keeping rules.

We'll look at the passage under the following points:

- Sabbath Misunderstood
- The Point of the Sabbath
- Sabbath Misused

1. The Sabbath Misunderstood

The events that happened on that Saturday morning show us how much the Pharisees misunderstood the Sabbath.

Matthew was probably there along with the other disciples, walking through the paddocks with Jesus.

We don't know exactly why they're there, only that some of them are hungry.

There isn't a Maccas nearby (and it would've been closed anyway), so they pick some of the grain and have a munch.

It just so happened that there are some Pharisees watching Jesus and his disciples.

When they see what's going on, their faces start to go red.

The steam begins to pour out of their ears.

What caused them to flip their lids?

You'd be forgiven for thinking it's because they are witnessing the disciples stealing.

They aren't stealing though, because according to Deuteronomy, an Israelite can pick their neighbour's grain as long it's done with your hands and for personal use.¹

That stopped anyone from harvesting the grain and selling it at the local market, which would be stealing.

What upset the Pharisees is that the disciples were picking the grain with their hands on the Sabbath.

It wasn't what the disciples were doing, but when they were doing it.

They come to Jesus and explode, verse 2:

Matthew 12:2 (NIV)² When the Pharisees saw this, they said to him, "Look! Your disciples are doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath."

By eating the grain, the Pharisees believed that the disciples were reaping , threshing and winnowing on the Sabbath.

The Sabbath was a special day of the week – different from all the others – that went from sundown on Friday through to sundown on Saturday.

The Sabbath was meant to be a day of rest from ordinary work, even in the middle of the busy harvest season.

Other ancient cultures also worshipped in temples, offered sacrifices and practiced circumcision, but only the Jewish people had a Sabbath.

The Sabbath rest set them apart from everyone else.

They took it very seriously.

The fourth and longest of the commandments is all about the Sabbath.

Exodus 31:14 clearly says that anyone who doesn't treat the Sabbath with respect shall be put to death.

About 150 years before Jesus, some Israelites were attacked on the Sabbath and they refused to defend themselves.²

Over 1,000 people were slaughtered.

Soon after they changed their minds and decided that they probably could fight on the Sabbath.

The problem is that when you look at what God said about the Sabbath, he's actually been really, really vague.

Listen to what God actually said in Exodus 20:8-11:

Exodus 20:8–11 (NIV)⁸ “Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy.⁹ Six days you shall labor and do all your work,¹⁰ but the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns.¹¹ For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.

It’s as plain as day that an Israelite, anyone in their household – or even their animals – aren’t meant to work on the Sabbath.

Here’s the tricky bit though: What is work?

Work in the ancient world wasn’t just something you went off and did for 36¼ or 40 hours in the week before coming home.

Work was all of life and didn’t fit into a neat little compartment.

Elsewhere, the Scriptures are equally light on detail about the Sabbath and the Israelites didn’t have much to go on.

Apart from Exodus 20, the Old Testament says that you can’t kindle a fire, gather manna, sell goods or bear burdens.

But that’s about it.

They had to work out what this looked like in the nitty-gritty of everyday life though, so the Pharisees come up with lots of rules to fill in the gaps.

They had 39 categories which covered all the things that you weren’t allowed to do on the Sabbath.

And you guessed it, preparing food was one of them.

They also decided that you weren’t allowed to walk more 1000 cubits, or about 1,100 metres.

You can’t carry anything outside your house and that made it hard to take children to the synagogue.

However they reasoned that if you left a food drop a kilometre away on Friday, that was part of your house and so you could start your 1000 cubits from there.

I read about some orthodox Jews today who got their local council to call their part of the city ‘a house’ so that they can move about freely in it on the Sabbath.

But you can't actually find any of those rules anywhere in the Scriptures.

It was all open to interpretation.

Even the Mishnah – the oral law – said that many of these rules were on shaky ground.

It says:

The Laws concerning the Sabbath, festal-offerings, acts of trespass are as mountains hanging by a hair, for they have scant scriptural basis but many laws.³

On that Sabbath morning, the Pharisees probably think that it's fortunate that they're there.

Picking grain on the Sabbath? These disciples are out of control, doing the wrong thing.

According to whom? According to the Pharisees.

Hadn't Jesus noticed, or worse, doesn't he care?

Jesus shows them that actually they've misunderstood the Sabbath when they simply say, "You can't work on the Sabbath."

In the words of Inigo Montoya:

"You keep using that word. I do not think it means what you think it means."

To show them this, Jesus answers them – as he often does – by taking them to the Scriptures.

He asks them, "Haven't you read?" in a way that expects a "Yes" answer.

Remember who the Pharisees were.

They were a group of people who were experts in God's Law, priding themselves on the way that they followed the law.

It was their life's mission to live according to God's rules.

To a Pharisee, this question is the ultimate smack-down.

It's humiliating to be asked if they know the Scriptures.

Know the Scriptures? Of course they know the Scriptures!

Jesus gives them two examples from Scripture that shows that their approach to the Sabbath was wrong.

Firstly, David in verse 3:

Matthew 12:3 (NIV)³ He answered, "Haven't you read what David did when he and his companions were hungry?"

Jesus was talking about what happened in 1 Samuel 21.

About a millennium earlier, David was on the run from King Saul.

He comes to a place called Nob and to the priest called Ahimelek on the Sabbath.

David outright lies, saying that he's on a secret mission for King Saul when really he's on the run from him.

David's also hungry – though not on death's door – so he asks for five loaves of bread to eat.

The priest doesn't have any bread and being the Sabbath he can't make any.

However, he does have the twelve loaves of the show bread that've been displayed in the temple for the last week.

However, only the priests were allowed to eat that bread.⁴

What's Ahimelek meant to do?

He gave out the bread and David and his men went on their way.

What's really surprising about this event is that the ground didn't open up and swallow David.

Lightning didn't come down from heaven and strike him.

On the Sabbath, he travelled further than the Pharisees allowed, he lied and he ate the bread that only the priests were allowed to eat.

The Pharisees would've hanged, drawn and quartered the man who'd go on to be Great King David – the man after God's own heart – but the Scriptures don't say anything against him.

The second example Jesus gives is of the priests in the temple.

On the Sabbath, they're allowed to work.

In fact, they actually had to do more work – double the number of sacrifices on the Sabbath.⁵

According to the Pharisees' understanding of the Sabbath, the priests broke the Sabbath each and every week.

Yet the priests were also considered to be innocent in this respect.

The Pharisees' understanding of the work that the Sabbath prohibited clashed with what the Scriptures say.

They wanted to make things tighter and more restrictive than what God ever intended them to be.

They went beyond the Scriptures and misunderstood the Sabbath.

2. The Point of the Sabbath

Jesus goes on to explain what the Sabbath is really about – the real point of the Sabbath (pun intended).

The whole point of the Sabbath rest was to point to the rest in Jesus.

The reason the Pharisees misunderstood the Sabbath is that they were working with the wrong categories.

They framed the question the wrong way.

In verse 7, Jesus quotes from Hosea 6:6:

Matthew 12:7 (NIV)⁷ If you had known what these words mean, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the innocent.

Hosea wasn't saying that God doesn't demand any sacrifices in the temple, but that more important than just keeping the rules is showing mercy.

For the Pharisees, the Sabbath was all about the keeping rules as much as possible.

Avoiding anything that even smelt like work.

But that didn't leave room for mercy.

They excluded anyone from doing the very thing that God allowed.

It might sound like Jesus is selling out when he says this.

It's easy to read these verses and think that Jesus is getting rid of the Sabbath.

Is Jesus being too loose and flexible?

If he relaxes the Sabbath, what else can be relaxed too?

Leave a finger in chapter 12 and turn back with me to the Sermon on the Mount in chapter 5.

How can it be that Jesus is getting rid of the Sabbath when he's the one who said in chapter 5:

Matthew 5:18–19 (NIV) ¹⁸ For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. ¹⁹ Therefore anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

Keep that page open for a moment.

If we think that Jesus is getting rid of the Sabbath, then we have two choices: either Jesus was wrong OR we've misunderstood him.

I'm going to suggest that it's the second one: we've misunderstood Jesus if we think he's relaxing or removing the Sabbath requirement.

In the verse before that in chapter 5, Jesus says:

Matthew 5:17 (NIV) ¹⁷ "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.

Jesus wasn't getting rid of the Sabbath, he was fulfilling it.

Yes, the Sabbath changed with Jesus, but not because he was getting rid of it.

In verse 5, Jesus used the example of the priests who were allowed to work on the Sabbath.

He used that to say that the Pharisees' very strict, man-made understanding of "no work" was too tight.

I've divided the thought up, but Jesus actually continues his argument in verse 6:

Matthew 12:6 (NIV) ⁶ I tell you that something greater than the temple is here.

"Hold onto your phylacteries..."⁶ Jesus is talking about himself.

He's the one who's greater than the temple.

Jesus isn't bound by the Pharisees' poxy understanding of the Sabbath.

He is the Lord of the Sabbath, verse 8:

Matthew 12:8 (NIV)⁸ For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath."

He has mastery over the Sabbath.

He's the one in control over the Sabbath – it's not in control over him.

Don't misunderstand – the Pharisees loved the Sabbath.

They didn't think it was a burden. It gave them clear rules to follow.

They loved the way that they could feel good because they were keeping all the rules.

But their understanding of the Sabbath wasn't true rest.

No one can keep all of the rules all of the time they were always falling short.

The Pharisees tried hard and they were pretty good.

In fact, they were the best. Yet even they weren't good enough.

Matthew 5:20 (NIV)²⁰ For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.

Their understanding of the Sabbath was a heavy burden that meant they were always trying to match up to perfection.

Jesus was showing that the weekly Sabbath was meant to point to a greater rest.

The Sabbath was meant to point away from the Pharisees and to himself.

The Sabbath day points to Jesus and the ultimate rest he's provided.

Do you remember how back in chapter 11:

Matthew 11:13 (NIV)¹³ For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John.

Jesus came to provide the rest that the Sabbath pointed to, by doing the work we couldn't do.

He lived a perfect life and died the perfect death on the cross to take away our burden of sin.

He has reconciled us to God so that we can rest with him forever.

The Sabbath points to God's grace, not what we can do.

STOP relying on your own works!

Grace is getting something that you don't deserve.

Someone doing for you what you can't do for yourself.

All the work's been done by him so that we can enjoy his rest.

I was going to say the "real" – but "ultimate" is better – the ultimate Sabbath is release from the bondage to sin.

As followers of Jesus, we can rest in what he's achieved.

He's provided spiritual rest, like he promised in 11:28.

That's why his yoke is easy, 11:29 unlike the heavy yoke of the Pharisees' approach to the Sabbath.

As Christians, do we need to keep the Sabbath?

The answer is, "Sort of."

Jesus fulfilled the Sabbath – that's why his disciples were able to eat grain on that Saturday morning.

We keep the Sabbath – not when we refuse to work on Saturday – but when we celebrate the rest we find in him.

The point of the Sabbath was to point to the ultimate rest we find in Jesus.

3. The Sabbath Misused

The last point in our passage this morning is 'The Sabbath Misused.'

We learn about a second interaction between Jesus and the Pharisees when he went to the synagogue in verse 9.

You'll notice though that it wasn't just any old synagogue – this was their synagogue.

This is the home turf of the Pharisees and leaders.

There was a man there with a shrivelled hand.

That was a significant disability in those.

It meant that he probably wouldn't have been able to work.

Even everyday life would've been hard for him without the kind of modern aids that we have.

Yet the Pharisees couldn't give two hoots about him.

However, they did see him as a pawn in their game, an excuse to trap Jesus.

They were looking for a reason to bring charges against Jesus, verse 10.

So, they ask in verse 10:

"Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?"

It's strange that they would've even asked this when they would've known about Jesus' ministry, by reputation at the very least.

They would've known that Jesus didn't even need to work to heal.

He wasn't just a physician.

All he needed to do was say the word and it'd happen.

Jesus gives another masterful response.

He uses the analogy of a bloke who's only got one sheep.

He was a poor man and this sheep was valuable to him.

But then it falls into a pit on the Sabbath. What do you do?

According to the very strict "no work" policy of the Pharisees, you'd think the answer would be "nothing".

You'd have to take your chances and leave it until Sunday rather than break the fourth commandment.

There were some fanatics who would do that, though they acknowledged that you could throw it some food.

Most of us think we're consistent, but really we're often not.

The Pharisees were no different.

Jesus basically says, "Come on, let's be real.

"None of you would actually leave it though, would you?"

Jesus shows them how messed up their approach is.

They'd rescue an animal, but they're trying to trap him for healing a man.

How much more should you rescue a fellow human being, created in God's image?

Verse 12:

Matthew 12:12 (NIV)¹² How much more valuable is a person than a sheep! Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath."

The command to not do work on the Sabbath was never meant to stop you from doing good.

Jesus clarifies that it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.

Not only is it lawful to do good, it should be positively encouraged.

That's what the Sabbath is all about.

And so he reaches out and heals the poor man.

On the first read through, I was thinking, "Go Jesus, you stick it to them."

"Of course people are more important."

But I'm actually really sympathetic to what the Pharisees were thinking.

And I'll tell you why.

In Luke's gospel, he records that there were some who said, "Couldn't you do it the next day?"

I have sympathy with that.

This man wasn't in mortal danger. It wasn't urgent that he be healed.

Couldn't Jesus have done both – kept the Sabbath as holy as possible and still look after the man by healing him the next day?

Jesus could've, but although that sounds like a good compromise, it would've got the priorities wrong.

Mercy over rules.

The Pharisees should've known that Jesus was in the right because you can't just make up a true miracle like this.

It showed that he was from God.

The fact the miracle worked showed that God approved what he was doing.

No, their problem wasn't just with mercy, it was with Jesus.

Now, I reckon that most of you came this morning thinking you were going to get a sermon on the Sabbath.

You probably thought that meant that at some point we'd get to the question of what Christians can and can't do on a Sunday.

But that's not what this passage is about.

This passage is about the Sabbath, but probably not how you expected.

So, I'll make a deal with you.

I'll address that topic quickly – under the title 'Sabbath misused' – but I want you to realise that this passage isn't about what you can and can't do on Sunday.

It's about Jesus, as we'll see in a second.

Okay, let me make some comments that probably won't satisfy you.

We obviously don't practice the Sabbath because we're meeting on a Sunday and the Sabbath was a Saturday.

Christians have debated at length whether Sunday should be a Christian Sabbath, the Lord's Day or something else.

Very few Christians practice the Sabbath.

And amongst those who do, many of them are completely legalistic about it to the point that they ruin the gospel.

They add keeping the Sabbath to the gospel and therefore they're not really Christians at all.

Because the gospel plus anything is nothing.

The tide of thought about this has ebbed and flowed over time.

The early church seem to have met every Sunday.

We only know that from a handful of verses though – like Revelation 1:10 where Sunday is called the ‘Lord’s Day’ – the first day of the week when they gathered.

They met on the day Jesus rose to remember and celebrate the true rest that Jesus had given them.

Interestingly, the early Protestant Reformers were against the idea of a Christian Sabbath – even Calvin.

The idea of Sunday being a special day was more common in later times than the early reformers.

I was reading this week that some ministers of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church in America were actually disciplined for holding Calvin’s view because it didn’t line up with the Westminster Confession.

It’s not as if a less restrictive view of what you’re free to do on Sunday is only a modern thing.

Is there any carry-over from the Old Testament that means we should have a Christian Sabbath?

I think the answer is “no”.

Covenants have signs.

The Noaic Covenant had a rainbow.

The Abrahamic Covenant had circumcision.

The Mosaic Covenant had the sign of the Sabbath.

We’re not under the Mosaic Covenant, so we don’t need to keep the sign.

What about the pattern of creation?

God made the world in six days and then he rested. Isn’t that a creation mandate to make Sunday special?

After all, how God created the world is used as the reason for the Sabbath in the fourth commandment.

Although the New Testament does appeal to creation sometimes (like Paul does in 1 Timothy 2), no appeal is made to this for Sunday to be established as a special day.

So, what does that mean?

Even though it's not mandated, we ignore the Maker's Manual at our peril.

We need rest. It's unwise to work all the time.

Having one in days off seems to make good sense.

I believe that it could be any day of the week though.

We're fortunate that in our culture it lines up with the day that the early disciples met.

In the Muslim-majority world, many churches meet on a Friday because that's the day that everyone has off.

But it's really a political question.

What's important though is that we do meet.

If our government gives us the opportunity to have a day off together which allows us to come and worship, we'd be foolish not to take advantage of it.

I think there's one very important point to add to the discussion though.

So much discussion about the Sabbath and Sunday centres around what you can and can't do – what are my rights and how can I protect them?

That's the Pharisees question, but it's often how we think about the Sabbath.

However we think about what we do on Sunday, there should be a strong emphasis on doing good and showing mercy.

A helpful to ask might be, "How does Sunday look different to Saturday?"

Our world is obsessed with me, the individual.

We're constantly encouraged to serve the God of entertainment.

If you're going to choose to set aside a day in the week, is what you do driven by rules or showing mercy to others?

Is what you do motivated by how much or little you're allowed to do, or how you can be kind and serve your neighbour.

That totally changes the discussion.

Let's come back and finish off this passage.

I said that the emphasis here isn't about what you can and can't do.

But it is about Jesus.

More specifically, it's about how people respond to Jesus in light of this.

Verse 14 is far from just a concluding remark.

It marks a significant change.

Jesus has given very good answers to their questions, but the Pharisees aren't having a bar of it.

They might've been puzzled and unsure about Jesus before.

Now they openly reject him.

Don't miss the irony.

Jesus has shown them that the Sabbath is meant to be about mercy.

They've just had their understanding of the Sabbath blown out of the water and they're there working out how to kill him.

The bigger thing going on in this passage is that they have a real problem with Jesus.

If you're not a Christian, how are you going to respond to Jesus?

Jesus challenges all of us.

He challenges us by telling us that we can't make ourselves right with God.

We need him to give us the rest that we need.

You can accept that or you can respond by saying that Jesus is wrong, thank you very much.

But you must respond.

If you are a Christian, then beware that the tendency towards the same spirit of false, legalistic religion is in us all.

We can so easily forget grace and slip into self-righteous religion.

And when this is pointed out to us, we become bitter and capricious.

Blaise Pascal said,

“Men never do evil so completely and cheerfully as when they do it from religious conviction.”

The Pharisees made themselves feel better by trying to point out the flaws of others.

This idea that our worth is based on how well we follow the rules slips in so easily when we compare ourselves to others.

I’m a much better parent than them.

I wouldn’t ever use that word.

I can’t believe that they got caught speeding, again.

And it fills us with pride that clouds the grace we’ve experienced in Christ which should extend generosity towards others.

May we think of the Sabbath and think of the amazing work that Jesus has done in giving us rest and new life.

Conclusion

The Pharisees had boxed in the Sabbath so that they didn’t allow for mercy, necessity and piety.

More importantly, they’d turned against Jesus.

May we be different, asking the Lord that he would give us the grace we need to rest under his light yoke.

¹ Deuteronomy 23:25

² 1 Maccabees 2:31-38

³ m.Hagigah 1.8

⁴ Leviticus 24:5-9

⁵ Numbers 28:9-10

⁶ A line shamelessly stolen from Douglas O’Donnell

Better than Rules

Matthew 12:1-14

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Big Question: What is the meaning of the Sabbath for Christians?

Big Idea: The Sabbath is for meeting needs, not keeping rules.

Discussion Questions

1. Can you give some examples you've experienced of how different Christians understand what can be done on Sundays?
2. Were the Pharisees right when they said that what the disciples were doing is unlawful?
3. Why does Jesus use the examples of David (1 Samuel 21) and the priests? What does this prove?
4. If Jesus is 'Lord of the Sabbath', does that mean he can get rid of all the rules about the Sabbath?
5. Why did Jesus heal the man with the withered hand, even though it wasn't an emergency situation?
6. As Christians, do you think we should keep the Sabbath? Why or why not?
7. What principles from this passage should guide the way we think about Sundays as Christians?
8. Why were these events a reason for the Pharisees to plot to kill Jesus?