

Lord of the Sabbath
Matthew 12:1—21

Today's Jews rely on the Torah (the Law as given to Moses) and the Talmud. For many years after the Mosaic Law was given to Israel by God, The Jews would discuss and analyze the Law and would orally pass on their decisions and interpretations of the Law. At the time of the Babylonian captivity (588—538 B.C.) Israel's temple was destroyed and it was no longer possible to literally carry out the commands of the Mosaic Law. It was during this period of exile that the rabbis began to write down their oral interpretations and discussions and is now contained in what is called the Talmud. Much of the impetus for recording their oral traditions came from the many changes that were imposed on Israel because of their captivity. Since they no longer had a temple in which to worship, they needed to redefine how they would keep the Mosaic Law. After their 70-year captivity, the rabbis endeavored to keep the people from ever disobeying the Law by adding many of their own laws. They understood that their captivity was a result of carelessly disregarding the Mosaic Law so they took extreme pains to build an "impenetrable" hedge around it with their own set of laws. Today the Talmud is understood to have the same importance as the Torah and necessary for its interpretation.

The Scribes and Pharisees were the administrators of the Law. It was their duty to make sure the Law was kept perfectly. Unfortunately, they lost sight of why they were keeping the Law. It was to be done from the heart, not the head. Those who approached the Law with the right heart loved the Law and drew their nourishment from the Law (Psalm 1). The Pharisees did not approach the Law with a right heart but were focused upon performing every detail of the Law and in so doing put the Law above man. These "shepherds" forced the "sheep" to obey every aspect of the Law even to their detriment. The leaders of Israel had no compassion for the people. Christ turned this around by saying He desired mercy instead of sacrifice and the knowledge of God above burnt offerings (Hosea 6:6).

Jesus "breaks" the Law (verses 1—8)

According to the Pharisees Jesus was breaking the Sabbath when He allowed His disciples to go through the fields and pick and eat grain. Luke 6 describes this day as the second Sabbath in the KJV but the NIV and NASB both just say "a Sabbath." A literal Greek interpretation would say the second first Sabbath. It's very possible that this was the Passover season when there would have been a regular Sabbath followed by a second Sabbath marking the beginning of the Feast of Unleavened Bread. Pentecost would be seven Sabbaths plus one day latter (50 days).

You have to realize that Jesus only broke their interpretation of the Law but He never in His entire life broke any part of the Law. He was the only one who was able to completely fulfill the Law (Matthew 5:17). The Pharisees continually put the Sabbath over man while Christ puts man over the Sabbath (Mark 2:27). Christ tries teaching the Pharisees this concept by pointing them to two Old Testament passages.

This first one was about David as he was running from King Saul. He needed food for himself and his men (1 Samuel 21). The only food available was the showbread that was consecrated (set aside) to the Lord. There were 12 loaves in the temple that were replaced every Sabbath. When the new loaves were replaced, the old loaves were made available to the priests but no one else (Leviticus 24:9). David asked for, and received five of those old loaves because his physical need outweighed the strict keeping of the Law. David was Israel's future king who was on the run. Christ was in a similar situation, so by comparing Himself to David He was claiming to be their future King.

Jesus then points them to the duties of the priesthood. The priests were probably most active on the Sabbath with their required obligations. They could not take the Sabbath off but yet were innocent of

violating the Sabbath. Only priests were allowed to work on the Sabbath so when Christ asserted His innocence of working on the Sabbath He was declaring His right to the priesthood.

The leaders of Israel were talking to and arguing with the ruler of the Sabbath. It was Christ who created and then rested giving Israel the picture of their future rest. When Christ told them how they should observe the Sabbath they should have listened because He was the author of the Sabbath.

The man with the withered hand (verses 9—14)

The second recorded incident in Matthew concerning the Sabbath affirms Jesus as Lord of the Sabbath while emphasizing its main purpose. The Scribes and Pharisees primary focus was on the doing of the Law while Christ focused on the needs of men. When Jesus entered the synagogue he met a man with a withered hand. The Pharisees were also there to catch and accuse Him of breaking their interpretation of the Law. The temple leaders were watching for Jesus to do something wrong so they could accuse Him, but Christ knew exactly what they were thinking. He purposefully healed the man to demonstrate that compassion is more important than keeping the minute details of the Law. To love your neighbor was to keep the spirit of the Law (Matthew 7:12; 22:36—40; Galatians 5:14). Jesus pointed out that these hypocrites would pull an animal out of a pit on the Sabbath but became aggravated when He showed compassion on a man who had been suffering for many years. When Jesus pointed out their inconsistent reasoning they self-righteously become angry towards Jesus and desired to kill Him.

The restoration of this man is a foretaste of the restoration that will be experienced in the Kingdom. Peter talks of this restoration in Acts 3:21 and prophesied in Isaiah 49:8 and Jeremiah 31:25. Those who go into the Kingdom will be healed, given a new heart, given the Spirit and be refreshed. When Christ healed, I believe the whole person was rejuvenated. He didn't just heal eyes, limbs or leprosy but regenerated the whole person making them ready to enter the Kingdom.

The future Kingdom (verses 15—21)

After healing the man with the withered hand word went out about what had happened and many followed Jesus. They didn't follow Him because they were believers but because they wanted to be healed or see what else He would do. According to verse 15 He healed them all. This is in contrast to today's "faith healers" who claim they are able to heal only if the one wanting healing has enough faith. Here Jesus healed them all without exception.

After healing them He told them not to tell anyone who He was. This was done to fulfill what the prophet Isaiah said in Isaiah 42. He will not quarrel nor cry out, He will come gently and quietly so as not to even disrupt a damaged reed nor extinguish a smoldering wick. However, that will all change after He has established justice on earth to all nations (or to the Gentiles). This will be at the establishment of the Kingdom that will happen at His Second Coming. It's from Isaiah that we get a clear picture of the supremacy of Israel and the blessing of the Gentiles (or nations) through Israel. Isaiah 42:6 shows how the covenant people (Israel, not the Church) will be a light to the Gentiles (Isaiah 49:6; 51:4; 60:1—3; Luke 2:32). This can only happen when Israel is God's covenant people. When Israel rejected God's plea for her to accept Jesus as their Messiah God declared her "lo-ammi" or "not My people." As long as Israel would obey God then He would be their God and they would be His people (Jeremiah 7:23). Leviticus 26 lists all the consequences Israel would experience if they turned away from God.

Israel today

God does not recognize any difference between Israel and the Gentiles when it comes to salvation. Individuals come to God through Christ and we are no longer dealt with as a nation (Ephesians 2:13—18). The Gentiles are now being blessed through Israel's fall instead of through Israel's rise as will happen in the Millennial Kingdom (Romans 11:11—15).

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