

Lord's Day Do's and Don't's

2²³One Sabbath day [Jesus] was passing through the grain fields; and as his disciples walked along, they began to pick some heads of grain. ²⁴So the Pharisees said to him, Listen, why are [your disciples] doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath? ²⁵And he said to them, Did you never read what David did, when he was in need and was hungry, he and those who were with him? ²⁶When Abiathar was high priest, he entered into the house of God and ate the showbread, which it is not lawful to eat except for the priests—and he also gave [some] to those who were with him. ²⁷Then he said to them, The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath. ²⁸So the Son of man is Lord even of the Sabbath.

3 Again, [on another Sabbath,] he entered the synagogue; and there was a man with a shriveled hand. ²They watched him, [to see] whether [or not] he would heal him on the Sabbath day; so that they might accuse him. ³He said to the man who had the shriveled hand, Stand up. ⁴Then he said to them, Is it lawful to do good, or to do harm on the Sabbath day? to save a life, or to kill? But they kept silent. ⁵He looked around at them with anger, being deeply aggravated by the hardening of their heart, then he said to the man, Stretch out your hand. And he stretched it out, and his hand was restored. ⁶Then the Pharisees went out and immediately began plotting against him with the Herodians, as to how they might get rid of him. (Mk. 2:23-3:6)

Introduction

School is in recess for a week of Easter vacation, and you decide to take this opportunity for a brief family vacation to Washington, D.C. On Saturday morning you pack up the car and depart from Milwaukee; by early evening you arrive in Cleveland, Ohio, where you decide to spend the night at a local motel. Sunday morning comes and you search the phone book for a nearby church. Having found one, you get directions and off you go. On the way to church you stop off at a nearby restaurant for breakfast. After a good hearty meal you locate the church and worship the LORD with newfound brethren in Christ.

When you get back home and relate the details of your trip, some fellow Christians take exception to the fact that you ate at a restaurant on the LORD's Day. They say you have "desecrated the Sabbath." Are they right? The example presented here is very similar to the event related in Mark 2:23-28.

Because the Lord Jesus is the Lord of the Sabbath, we must look to Him for guidance as to how we should observe the LORD's Day.

I. Don't View the LORD's Day in a Legalistic Way (Mk. 2:23-28)

Jesus and His disciples were passing through a grain field on the Sabbath day; and His disciples, being hungry (as we learn from Matthew 12:1), picked some of the grain and ate it.

There was a certain sect of the Pharisees (the disciples of the Rabbi Shammai) who held to a very legalistic interpretation of the law—and they are the ones who take exception to what the disciples are doing; note that Luke 6:2 says, *“certain of the Pharisees”* objected to the disciples’ action. What is legalism? Legalism may take the form of adding to the law of God. An example of such legalism is Eve’s action in the Garden of Eden. Whereas the LORD had forbidden Adam and Eve to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen. 2:16-17), Eve says to the devil, *“with regard to the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, God has said, ‘You shall not eat of it, neither shall you touch it, or you will die’”* (Gen. 3:3.) Another form of legalism is expanding the law of God beyond its intended limits, as did the disciples of Shammai in particular and the Pharisees in general. The rabbis had composed a catalogue of 39 principal categories of work and each major category was subdivided into numerous minor categories (*The Gospel of Matthew*, William Hendriksen, p. 511.)

The latter form of legalism is what we meet with in the Pharisees’ objection to the disciples eating grain on the Sabbath day. In Luke’s account of this incident we read, *“One Sabbath Jesus was going through the grain fields, and his disciples began to pick some heads of grain, rub them in their hands and eat the kernels”* (Lk. 6:1.) Certain of the Pharisees viewed this as an act of labor—they viewed picking the grain as an act of reaping and rubbing off the husk as an act of threshing (Hendriksen, p. 511.) Consequently, they viewed the disciples’ action as a violation of the fourth commandment. Here was an artificial man-made application of the law of God where there was no divinely intended application.

The key to Jesus’ response to the Pharisees is His statement: *“the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.”* Because Jesus is the Lord of the Sabbath, we must look to Him for guidance as to how the LORD’s Day is to be observed. As Lord of the Sabbath, what guidance does our Lord Jesus give us concerning the observance of the LORD’s Day?

First, we find that Jesus honored the Sabbath and kept it holy. The commandment regarding the Sabbath is the 4th commandment of the moral law; and Jesus came to fulfill the law, not to destroy it, as He testifies, (note Matthew 5:17) *“Do not think that I came to abolish the law or the prophets; I came not to abolish, but to fulfill”* (Matt. 5:17.)

As part of the moral law, the Sabbath—or, New Testament era LORD’s Day—existed prior to the giving of the law to the Old Testament covenant nation at Mt. Sinai. It was set apart by God from the time of creation:

... on the seventh day God finished his work that he had made; and he rested on the seventh day from all his work that he had made. ³And God blessed the seventh day, and sanctified it; because in it he rested from all his work that God had created and made. (Gen. 2:2-3)

The Sabbath was observed by the people of God before the time of Israel. In the account of Cain and Abel bringing their offerings to the LORD, Genesis 4:3 literally reads that they brought their offerings “*at the end of days,*” referring to the end of the week, or the Old Testament Sabbath.

The observance of the Sabbath, or LORD’s Day, continues to have application beyond the time of the Old Testament era. Hebrews 4:9 may be read, “*there remains a Sabbath observance for the people of God*”—the Greek term, σαββατισμος, has the meaning, “Sabbath observance,” as well as, “Sabbath rest” (*A Greek and English Lexicon*, Arndt and Gingrich, p. 746.)

There are two ways in which the Sabbath (LORD’s Day) is to be honored. First, as Christians, we are to assemble with fellow believers in the public worship of God. On the seventh day Israel gathered together before the LORD, and Jesus went to the synagogue. On the first day of the week the church gathers together for worship, in keeping with the New Testament custom—the day of worship being changed because of the resurrection of Jesus occurring on the first day of the week. Second, as Christians, we are to rest from our every day work. The Christian employer, except for legitimate reasons supported by Scripture, has the obligation to close his business on the LORD’s Day, demonstrating that the LORD, not money, is the master whom he serves, this being in keeping with the fourth commandment:

Six days shall you labor, and do all your work; ¹⁰but the seventh day is a Sabbath to Jehovah your God: in it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your manservant, nor your maidservant, nor your cattle, nor your stranger who is within your gates. (Ex. 20:9-10)

As an example of the LORD honoring those who honor Him, consider the following case:

Tom was a fine Christian young man. One summer he bought an ice cream store from a man who was not a Christian. This man had always kept the store open on Sundays. He told Tom, “I have always sold more ice cream on Sunday than any other day in the week.” Tom decided that he would close his store on Sundays. He said, “I want to honor God in my business.” People thought that Tom’s business would fail. They knew that Sunday was the best day to sell ice cream. Then something happened. On Wednesdays most of the other stores closed for half a day, but Tom kept his store open. Soon he was doing more business on Wednesdays than he would have done on Sundays. Jesus said, “*If any man serve me, him will my Father honor*” (Jn. 12:26). (*Mrs. Knight’s Book of Illustrations*, p.214)

The Christian employee, whose work schedule, like that of the New Testament servant, is not a matter of his own discretion, should, if at all possible, request to be excused from work on the Lord’s Day.

A basic question for a Christian to ask with regard to the LORD's Day: "Is a given activity in which I am engaged a part of my everyday labor that should not intrude upon the sanctity of the LORD's Day?" If so, and if it is within his power to do so, the Christian should, by the grace of God, make the necessary changes to honor the LORD's Day.

Second, we find that Jesus permits works of necessity to be performed on the LORD's Day (Mk. 2:25.) We have a need to eat; to meet that need requires some preparation and clean up. We have a need to be protected; that requires an on-duty police force. We have a need to care for our health and the health of our family; that requires on-duty medical staff and necessary trips to the pharmacy. Another basic question for the Christian to ask with regard to the LORD's Day: "Is the need with which I am confronted a legitimate necessity that must be addressed?"

Third, we find that Jesus permits works of mercy on the LORD's Day. In the parallel passage of Matthew 12:11-12, we read of Jesus confronting the Pharisees with the question,

"If any one of you has a sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will you not take hold of it, and lift it out? ¹²How much more valuable is a man than a sheep! Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath day." (Matt. 12:11-12)

It is wrong to see a life in jeopardy and not render assistance. It is wrong to see suffering and not seek to alleviate it.

By His actions, our Lord Jesus teaches that we are to honor the Sabbath (LORD's Day), but we are not to view it in a legalistic way. We must bear in mind that the form of legalism that applies here is the expanding the law of God beyond its intended limits—adding artificial, man-made applications of the moral law where there is no divinely intended application. We must remember that, because He is the Lord of the Sabbath, we must look to Jesus for guidance as to how the LORD's Day is to be observed. We must remember, too, that because He is the Lord of the Sabbath, Jesus has the final authority to pronounce guilt or innocence in matters of controversy over proper Sabbath observance.

The Pharisees accused the disciples of breaking the law of God by violating proper Sabbath observance: *"the Pharisees, when they saw it, said to him, 'Look, your disciples are doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath'"* (Matt. 12:7.) But Jesus, with divine authority, declares His disciples to be guiltless in this matter. He says to the Pharisees, *"if you had known what this means, I desire mercy, and not sacrifice, you would not have condemned the guiltless"* (Matt. 12:7.) We do well to also bear in mind the admonition of the Apostle Paul: *"Who are you to judge someone else's servant? Before his own lord he either stands or falls. Indeed, he shall be made to stand; for the Lord has power to make him stand"* (Rom. 14:4.)

II. Do View the LORD's Day as a Time of Restoration (Mk. 3:1-6)

Luke tells us that on another Sabbath day our Lord attended the synagogue services—there He encountered this man with the shriveled hand (Lk. 6:6.) The Pharisees seize this opportunity to pose the question, “Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath day?” (Matt. 12:10.)

Observe the situation and Jesus' action. The man has nothing more than a shriveled hand; he is not really suffering and his life is certainly not in jeopardy. The Pharisees challenge Jesus to see if He will heal this man.

In response to their challenge Jesus **does not heal** him—rather **Jesus restores** him: *“Then [Jesus] said to the man, ‘Stretch out your hand.’ And he stretched it out; and it was completely restored, just as sound as the other”* (Matt. 12:13.) Note that the man's hand was restored to the original state and condition of vitality, health and usefulness. Note, too, that Jesus did so by merely speaking the word: *“[Jesus] said to the man, ‘Stretch out your hand.’ And he stretched it out.”* In the beginning, God called the creation into being by the awesome power of His word; here Jesus is restoring a minute part of the creation by the awesome power of His word—and He does so on the Sabbath.

Jesus takes this opportunity, presented by the case of the man with the shriveled hand, to demonstrate that He came to provide true Sabbath rest and restoration. Jesus gives true Sabbath rest. Having finished His work on the cross of Calvary, Jesus rested in the grave on the Sabbath, just as God His Father rested on the Sabbath after having completed His work of creation: *“on the seventh day God finished his work that he had made; and he rested on the seventh day from all his work that he had made”* (Gen. 2:2.) Jesus invites us to share in His rest: *“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest”* (Matt. 11:28.)—note that this invitation comes immediately after, and in the context of, the passages dealing with the Sabbath.

Jesus provides true Sabbath restoration. Jesus' bodily resurrection was the ultimate restoration to wholeness. His resurrection day has become the New Testament Sabbath, the New Testament symbol and foretaste of the eternal Sabbath rest and re-creation in the kingdom of God.

By His actions, our Lord Jesus teaches that we are to honor the Sabbath (LORD's Day), and we are to view it as a time of restoration—a time for rest, refreshment, and the enjoyment of God and His creation. We must appreciate the fact that the LORD not only rested from His work (Gen. 2:2), He also enjoyed His work: *“God saw everything that he had made, and it was very good”* (Gen. 1:31.) As the Psalmist testifies, *“Let the glory of Jehovah endure forever; let Jehovah rejoice in his works”* (Psl. 104:31.) Let us remember that the Lord pronounced His blessing upon the Sabbath day: *“God blessed the seventh day, and sanctified it; because in it*

he rested from all his work that God had created and made” (Gen. 2:3.) May the LORD enable us to enjoy that blessing in the way He intended.

Conclusion

Following our Lord’s example, we as Christians are to honor the LORD’s Day as much as we are able. But we are not to view the LORD’s Day in a legalistic way. Because He is the Lord of the Sabbath, we must look to Jesus for guidance as to how the Lord’s Day is to be observed. Because He is the Lord of the Sabbath, Jesus has the final authority to pronounce guilt or innocence in matters of Sabbath controversy.

Second, from our Lord’s example and activity, we learn that we are to view the Lord’s Day as a time of restoration—a time for rest, refreshment, and the enjoyment of God and His creation.