

**Bethel AME Church**  
**Insights from the Rabbis 2**  
**Class Notes 12/13/20**

2. The Prophets on the Sabbath

We have seen what Torah has to say about the Sabbath and discovered that its primary command is to cease from work and rest, catch our breath, refresh ourselves, on the seventh day, Saturday. It is a commandment rooted in creation itself and must be observed not only by Israelites but also by foreigners (Gentiles) and even their animals. There is no mention at all of what most people assume the Sabbath is about: religious services. If we are to fully appreciate the value and meaning of the biblical Sabbath, we need to keep this firmly in mind.

Christians often look down on the “ritualistic legalism” of Torah while embracing the ethical and social justice message of the Prophets. What we have seen so far is that the Sabbath is not a religious ritual; it is a way of life. The prophets themselves actually connect Sabbath observance with social justice and are full of condemnation of those who violate the Sabbath. We have already seen in the Sabbath commandments in Torah that there is an element of social justice: all people, no matter what their social class or immigration status, are to partake equally of the Sabbath rest. The prophets elaborate on this idea.

Amos denounces those merchants who are impatient for the Sabbath to end so they can continue their predatory business dealings (Amos 8:4-6). They are supposed to be ceasing from work but instead are worrying about their lost profits, which come from their oppression of the poor. They have completely missed the point about what the Sabbath means. Isaiah says that keeping the Sabbath is a way of doing God’s righteous justice (Is. 56:1-2) and part of what it means to delight in the Lord (Is. 58:13-14). Jeremiah declares that keeping the Sabbath is essential for the continuation of the Davidic kingship while violating the Sabbath will bring destruction to Jerusalem (Jer. 17:19-27). Ignoring the Sabbath will lead to the breakup of the community. Ezekiel sees profaning the Sabbath as a desecration of God’s name (Ez. 20:12-14; 22:26). For Ezekiel, disregarding the Sabbath is as bad as bloodshed, idolatry, sexual misconduct, the oppression of immigrants and the poor, and other economic crimes (22:1-12).

Both Isaiah and Ezekiel look forward to the new age, the world to come when God’s salvation will be fully realized, as a time when the Sabbath will be faithfully observed even by non-Israelites (Is. 56:3-8; 66:23; Ez. 44:24; 45:17). “The foreigners who join themselves to the Lord, to love the name of the Lord, and to be his servants, all who keep the sabbath and do not profane it, these I will bring to my holy mountain and make them joyful in my house of prayer. For my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples” (Isaiah 56:6-7). Note that Jesus affirms this understanding of the Temple (Matt. 21:13). The universal application of this Law comes from the fact that it is part of creation, not simply the covenant with Israel.

So the distinction Christians make between moral and ritual laws simply doesn’t apply to the Sabbath (and I think in general is unhelpful, as we will see when we look at the

kosher laws). Keeping the Sabbath is a moral commandment because it is a reflection of the very nature of God and of God's covenant with humanity. It tells us something about what it means to be a human being in this world and establishes a unique way of life for a community that is supposed to be different from the world. As we will see, it is "training in righteousness" (2 Tim. 3:16).

### 3. Jesus on the Sabbath

While the Bible repeatedly stresses the importance of observing the Sabbath, it is very sparse on giving details of what that looks like, especially what it means to work. As we have seen, it is not designated specifically as a day of worship, although there are a couple of extra sacrifices prescribed for that day to mark its special nature (Num. 28:9-10). In the wilderness, people were prohibited from gathering and cooking manna on the Sabbath (Ex. 16:22-30). The prohibition on cooking seems to be behind the specific command not to light a fire in your home on the Sabbath (Ex. 35:3). Torah prohibits plowing and harvesting on the Sabbath (Ex. 34:21). And there is one story of a man caught gathering wood on the Sabbath who is sentenced to death (Num. 15:32-36). But that is all that Torah has to say by way of specifics.

Other biblical passages indicate some of the ways this came to be understood later on. Nehemiah warns people against buying and selling on the Sabbath and closes Jerusalem each Sabbath to prevent merchants from bringing their goods into the city (Neh. 10:31; 13:15-22). We have seen that Amos also presupposes a ban on commerce on the Sabbath (Amos 8:4-6). Jeremiah prohibits carrying a load on the Sabbath or bringing merchandise into the city, which also seems primarily to refer to conducting business (Jer. 17:21-22, 27). We note here the shift from an agricultural setting to an urban one. Rather than plowing and reaping, it speaks of buying and selling. The original commandments in Torah have been adapted for a new situation. Such ongoing interpretation and application of the Sabbath command continues to be necessary into our time.

So given the importance placed on the Sabbath by the Scriptures, it was necessary from very early on for there to be a clear definition of just what constituted "work." We see the discussions and debates on this key issue in some of the extra-biblical Jewish writings like the Dead Sea Scrolls. And we see this debate continuing in the New Testament, where Jesus is very much engaged with this issue. Which is what you would expect from a first century Jewish teacher who was calling people to faithfulness to the coming Kingdom of God, which as we have seen was to include Sabbath observance. Jesus is clearly involved in arguing with other Jews over the proper way to observe the Sabbath rest. But Jesus never overturned Sabbath observance. In fact, as we will see, he elevated its importance for his followers.

The gospels depict Jesus regularly attending synagogue on the Sabbath, often as a teacher (Matt. 12:9; Mark 1:21; 6:2; Luke 4:16; 6:6; 13:10). We see Paul doing the same thing (Acts 13:14-15, 44; 16:13; 17:2; 18:4). Jesus assumes his disciples will continue to be associated with the synagogue after he is gone (Mark 13:9; Luke 12:11). Although worship and religious activities were not part of the Sabbath commandment, since it was a day off from work, people were free to meet together for other purposes, including worship and religious instruction.

We also see Jesus' followers carefully observing the Sabbath at the time of his death, hurrying to get his body into a tomb before sundown and only coming back to anoint it with spices after Sabbath is over (Matt. 28:1; Mark 16:1; Luke 23:50-56). And Jesus presumes that his followers will continue to observe Sabbath travel restrictions even in times of crisis (Matt. 24:20). So the overall New Testament picture of Jesus and his early followers is one of faithful Sabbath observance, even in difficult circumstances.

That picture, then, must provide the background for how we understand the dispute stories that focus on observing the Sabbath. First is a story involving Jesus' disciples, who pick some heads of wheat to eat on a Sabbath because they are hungry (Matt. 12:1-8//Mark 2:23-28). Technically this is work, harvesting grain, and the Pharisees rightly question the propriety of their actions. Jesus defends their actions by pointing to two Scriptural examples. In the first, David asks the priest to break the Law and give him the Temple bread because he and his men are hungry, although this is not specifically a Sabbath violation (1 Sam. 21:1-6). In the second, Jesus says that the priests in the Temple do things on the Sabbath that technically violate its commands. He then quotes Hosea 6:6—"I desire mercy and not sacrifice." Here I think Jesus is not simply affirming a general principle that compassion for human need can override the demands of the Law at times. He is arguing like a rabbi, using a well-established principle of biblical interpretation, going from the lesser to the greater, "how much more." The unspoken logic of Jesus' quote is this: if mercy is greater than sacrifice, and priests are allowed to do work on the Sabbath in order to offer sacrifices, then performing an act of mercy on the Sabbath, even though technically work, should also be permitted. This is a brilliant example of rabbinic exegesis. That is part of what Jesus means when he goes on to say, "Something greater than the Temple is here" (Matt 12:6).

Finally, Jesus declares his Lordship over the Sabbath, asserting his own authority to interpret what it means to observe the Sabbath. The Sabbath for Jesus is the "Lord's Day." Central to his understanding is mercy, *chesed*, acts of loving-kindness, which we have seen are a crucial part of later rabbinic teaching as well. If he were abolishing the Sabbath, he would not declare his authority over it.

The rest of the disputes all have something to do with Jesus healing on the Sabbath (Matt. 12:9-13//Mark 3:1-5//Luke 6:6-10; Luke 13:10-17; 14:1-6; John 5:1-18; 7:21-24). ***This is the only action of Jesus that is criticized as a breach of Sabbath regulations.*** Again Jesus argues for compassion over a stricter interpretation of the Law. Interestingly, he does not make an argument here from Scripture but rather from common sense. "Which of you having a son or an ox fall into a well will not immediately pull him out on the Sabbath?" (Luke 14:5//Matt. 12:11). A peasant farmer barely eking out a subsistence living could ill afford to lose a valuable animal, let alone a son. Jesus assumes his audience, including the Pharisees, would agree with this assumption.

Yet we do know that in at least one Jewish group from that time, such an action was prohibited. A couple of the documents in the Dead Sea Scrolls, written by a separatist sect that thought the Pharisees were too liberal, address this very issue. "If [an animal] falls into a well or pit, one may not lift it out on the Sabbath. . . . Any living human who falls into a body of water or a cistern shall not be helped out with ladder, rope, or other

implement” (CD 11:13-16). That sounds pretty harsh. Another document clarifies this rule. “Let no one raise up an animal which has fallen into the water on the Sabbath day. But if it is a man who has fallen into the water on the Sabbath, one shall extend his garment to him to pull him out with it, but he shall not bear an implement on the Sabbath” (4Q265, fragment 7). Here this community makes a fine point of distinction between carrying a separate tool, like a ladder or a rope, which would constitute work, and using the garment you are wearing as a tool to rescue a human being.

These documents, which date from 150-200 years before the time of Jesus, indicate that such discussions were going on in the larger Jewish community as people tried to define just what constituted prohibited work and at the same time make allowances for basic human needs. Jesus fits squarely into the middle of this discussion about the proper way to observe the Sabbath rest. Jesus does not overturn Sabbath observance but he does reject overly-stringent rules that put an undue burden on ordinary human beings and prolong human suffering. Jesus authoritatively declares that acts of mercy to humans and animals—healing, feeding the hungry—are signs of the meaning of the Sabbath (Luke 13:16). They are what holiness looks like. “Work” cannot be so broadly defined that it prevents such acts of compassion.

Jesus sums up his attitude towards the Sabbath in a memorable statement: “The Sabbath was made for humans, not humans for the Sabbath” (Mark 2:27). Here Jesus points us back to the creation story (“was made”), as well as the subsequent affirmations in Torah that the Sabbath was for the benefit of humans (and animals!): “You shall do no work, you and your son and your daughter, your male slave and female slave, and your ox and your donkey and all your beasts and the resident alien who is within your gates so that your male and female slaves may rest like you” (Deut. 5:14). “Six days shall you do your work and on the seventh day you shall cease, so that your ox and your donkey may rest, and your slave and the resident alien catch their breath” (Ex. 23:12). Scripture makes it clear that the Sabbath was God’s gift to humans, a necessary respite from the hard labor of the rest of the week. Jesus also affirms the supreme value of the Sabbath, a value he finds in Torah itself. He is not overturning a burdensome ritual law. He is declaring the Sabbath to be God’s gracious gift to humanity.