

# The Christian Sabbath Examined, Proved, Applied, Chapter 3

## Christ's Teaching on the Sabbath

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Those who reject the binding nature of the sabbath ordinance for New Testament believers also appeal to the teachings of Jesus on the subject in support of their thesis. They argue that Christ relaxed or repealed the sabbath law because He regarded it as merely a ceremonial ordinance. But an examination of the relevant Scripture will prove that the anti-sabbatarian interpretation of Christ's teaching is misguided and unscriptural. The most important passage in the debate over the perpetuity of the Sabbath is recorded in Matthew 12:1-8.

At that time Jesus went through the grainfields on the Sabbath. And His disciples were hungry, and began to pluck heads of grain and to eat. And when the Pharisees saw it, they said to Him, "Look, Your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath!" But He said to them, "Have you not read what David did when he was hungry, he and those who were with him: how he entered the house of God and ate the showbread which was not lawful for him to eat, nor for those who were with him, but only for the priests? Or have you not read in the law that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple profane the Sabbath, and are blameless? Yet I say to you that in this place there is One greater than the temple. But if you had known what this means, 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the guiltless. For the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath."

This encounter with the Pharisees is also recorded by Mark (2:23-28) and Luke (6:1-5). The only significant statement omitted from Matthew's account is Christ's statement that "The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath" (Mk. 2:27). Those who believe that Christ is here relaxing the sabbath law for new covenant believers completely miss the point of this passage. Christ is not discussing how the sabbath ordinance is changed for the new dispensation; He is expounding how the Sabbath is to be observed by the Jews under the Mosaic law. The Mosaic administration (including the observance of the ceremonial laws) was in full force until the death of Christ; Jesus obeyed the Mosaic laws perfectly from His birth to His death. The idea that He permitted His disciples to violate the law of Moses *before* the types were fulfilled in His death is absurd. Christ was not relaxing the Sabbath but explaining its proper observance to the Pharisees who had perverted it with their legalistic additions. "The Jewish teachers had corrupted many of the commandments, by interpreting them more loosely than they were intended; a mistake which Christ discovered and rectified...in his sermon on the mount: but concerning the fourth commandment, they had erred in the other extreme, and interpreted it too strictly. Note, it is common for men of corrupt minds, by their zeal in rituals, and the external services of religion, to think to atone for the looseness of their morals."<sup>1</sup>

How do we know that Christ was explaining the proper observance of the Sabbath, rather than relaxing the sabbath law? First, if Christ was relaxing the old covenant sabbath ordinance, as some suppose, one would expect Christ to admit that His disciples had in fact transgressed the Sabbath. Then He would explain why it was now permissible to ignore its demands. But when confronted by the Pharisees, Christ argued that His disciples were completely innocent of any wrongdoing. Our Lord could argue that His disciples were innocent if they were only guilty of

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<sup>1</sup> Henry, *Commentary*, 5:163.

breaking the man-made additions, and not God's law itself. Second, if Christ was instituting *new*, more lax sabbath regulations, then the illustrations that He used to argue for His disciples' innocence would be of absolutely no use at all. Why? Because David and the Levitical priest were without question under the full authority of the fourth commandment as enunciated in the law of Moses. Christ's historical examples are only of use if He is explicating the fourth commandment of the decalogue and not some supposedly more lax new covenant version of it. Would anyone argue that King David and the Levitical priests were new covenant Christians ten centuries before the birth of Christ? If the Savior was arguing for the annulment of the fourth commandment, He would have been teaching that the fourth commandment did not even apply to the Old Testament believers. Such a notion is ludicrous.

In order to prove further that Christ was not modifying or lessening the existing sabbath law, a brief exposition of the passage is in order. The Pharisees were the enemies of Christ; thus they were continually looking for a reason to accuse, condemn, and destroy Him. They seized the opportunity when they observed His disciples walking through a grain field, plucking the heads of grain and rubbing off the chaff between their palms to eat. Suddenly they confronted Christ, accusing Him of allowing His disciples to break the Sabbath. How were they breaking it? According to rabbinical tradition, their innocent activity was defined as reaping and threshing grain! "According to the Mishna that man is guilty of sabbath desecration who on that day 'takes ears of grain equal to a lamb's mouthful.'"<sup>2</sup> "They based their whole case against the Lord and His disciples on the fact that He was allowing His disciples to transgress some of the merely traditional and anti-Scriptural thirty-nine 'Azoth' by 'reaping' (plucking the ears) and 'threshing' (rubbing them in their hands) on the sabbath day."<sup>3</sup> In the face of this false accusation based on the false legalism of the Pharisaical oral *traditions*, Christ set forth the true meaning of the Sabbath. His explanation of the Sabbath is an implicit condemnation of the Pharisees' interpretation of the fourth commandment and an explicit justification of His disciples' behavior. "Over against their restrictive traditions, He posited the perfect freedom of the authoritative Word of God."<sup>4</sup>

## 1. Acts of Necessity

If one includes a statement made by Christ which is not recorded by Matthew but by Mark (2:27), then Christ gives four reasons why He and His disciples were innocent. First, Christ argues that acts of necessity do not violate the sabbath law. The disciples were hungry and needed to eat. "Works necessary either for the upholding of our lives, or fitting us for sabbath

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<sup>2</sup> William Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1973), p. 511.

<sup>3</sup> Lee, p. 194. "How blind is superstition, that they could think that it was contrary to the will of God, that his people should fit themselves for the service of the sabbath by a moderate refreshment!... What a little thing do they carp at! Wherein was the sin? the plucking of a few ears of corn, and rubbing them, could hardly be called servile labour, especially not in the sense of commandment, which restrained not necessary labor, but such labor as took them off from the duties of the sabbath.... Hypocrites and formalists are always most zealous for little things in the law, or for their own additaments [additions] to it" (Matthew Poole, *Commentary on the Holy Bible* [Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1963], 3:53). The very fact that the Pharisees' accusation was not based on the Word of God but on human tradition refutes the notion that Christ was altering the fourth commandment. If the accusation is based upon unscriptural human tradition, then the response to it (as in the Sermon on the Mount) is a refutation of unscriptural human tradition.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

services, are lawful upon the sabbath day.”<sup>5</sup> He appeals to the historical example of David, who when fleeing for his life from Saul, ate the showbread which was not lawful to eat (12:4). In so doing they violated the ceremonial law which stated that the showbread was only for “Aaron and his sons” (Lev. 29:9). Christ refutes the Pharisees by a direct appeal to Scripture, by setting a parallel between David and his followers and Himself and His disciples. If David’s situation permitted him to violate a ceremonial provision without sin, then certainly Christ (David’s anti-type) and His disciples could violate the regulatory traditions of finite, sinful men without guilt. “When the mind of the law-giver and the intent and the end of the command is not contravened, the precept is not broken: for this is the ground of Christ’s defense. Not reading nor considering the Scripture, whereby the meaning of the law may be understood, is the cause of error and mistaking of duties. This is it he says [*sic*], *Have ye not read?*”<sup>6</sup>

Unfortunately, certain anti-sabbatarians have wrongly inferred from the example of the showbread that Christ was teaching that the Sabbath was ceremonial, and that for this reason it could be violated for necessity without incurring guilt. This interpretation has several problems and must be rejected. As noted, the parallel was not between the ceremonial law and the biblical sabbath law, but between the ceremonial law and the man-made traditions of the Pharisees. If the necessity of sustaining life allowed David’s men to eat the showbread, then certainly necessity permitted Christ’s disciples to ignore the rabbinic law. Furthermore (as noted above), the moral and perpetual nature of the Sabbath is taught throughout the Old Testament. An interpretation of Scripture which contradicts the clear and repeated teaching of other parts of God’s Word must be rejected. Christ was not teaching that under certain circumstances people can *actually* violate the Sabbath with impunity. His whole point was that certain activities that the Pharisees considered to be a violation were *not* a violation at all, but thoroughly lawful. Consequently, this passage does not teach that the Sabbath is ceremonial.

## 2. Religious Works

Christ’s second argument is that some types of work are permissible on the Sabbath. Using an example from the law, He argues that religious work is not a violation of the Sabbath. “The priests in the temple did a great deal of servile work on the sabbath day; killing, flaying, burning the sacrificed beasts, which in a common case would have been profaning the sabbath; and yet it was never reckoned any transgression of the fourth commandment, because the temple service required and justified it.”<sup>7</sup> “If all work on the sabbath profaned the sabbath, as the Pharisees maintained, the priests were guilty of continual profanation. The Saviour takes hold of the Pharisees’ own word, when He uses the term *profaned*. He lays hold of it for the purpose of showing them that they should be somewhat more cautious in throwing out charges of profanation.”<sup>8</sup> Some object and ask how plucking grain compares to the service of the temple. The answer lies in the fact that Christ and His disciples were spending the sabbath day preaching the gospel and healing the sick. The plucking of grain was necessitated by their pious activities and not by servile work or leisure. Thus, “Whatsoever bodily work is necessary for the

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<sup>5</sup> Poole, 3:53.

<sup>6</sup> David Dickson, *A Brief Exposition of the Evangel of Jesus Christ According to Matthew* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1981 [1647]), p. 159.

<sup>7</sup> Henry, *Commentary*, 5:164.

<sup>8</sup> James Morrison, *Practical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Matthew* (Minneapolis: Klock & Klock, 1981 [1884]), p. 198.

promoving [i.e., promoting] of the service and worship of God upon the Sabbath is not a breaking of the Sabbath.”<sup>9</sup> Christ strengthens His argument when He says, “Yet I say to you that in this place there is One greater than the temple” (12:6). If the priests could serve in the temple without guilt, then surely Christ’s disciples could serve the greater Temple—the Son of God—without guilt. God’s Son is infinitely greater than God’s house which is but a type and shadow.

### 3. Works of Mercy

Christ’s third argument is that “God prefers compliance with the spirit of his law, calling for humility, love and mercy, to mere observance of its outer form.”<sup>10</sup> Jesus quotes from Hosea 6:6, which teaches that God prefers mercy, kindness and love to our brethren before sacrifice—before the religious rituals that were part of Old Testament worship. If a man is on his way to the temple to sacrifice a goat and sees his brother drowning in a river, he must delay the sacrifice and save his brother. Christ teaches that the caring for and saving of human life are permissible—yes, even required—on the Sabbath. “What man is there among you who has one sheep, and if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will not lay hold of it and lift it out? Of how much more value then is a man than a sheep? Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath” (Mt. 12:11-12). The Pharisees’ problem was that they ignored the spirit of the law and focused their attention on the external: they loved ritual but lacked compassion. “Therefore the hunger which plagued the disciples of Jesus failed to kindle within the hearts of their critics any feeling of tenderness or eagerness to help.”<sup>11</sup> Instead of offering the disciples something to eat to enable them to serve and worship God more effectively on the Sabbath, the Pharisees merely condemned them. What hypocrites!

Anti-sabbatarians seize upon Christ’s reference to Hosea 6:6 as proof that the Sabbath is ceremonial, because they say that acts of mercy take precedence over strict observance. But it must once again be pointed out that the disciples did not actually break the Sabbath, for Christ’s disciples were *guiltless* (12:7). Christ was not making the point that the Sabbath is ceremonial and thus can be violated, but that the Pharisees did not understand the true meaning of the Scriptures. This point is brought out more clearly when a statement of Christ’s omitted from Matthew’s account but included in Mark’s is considered: “The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath” (Mk. 2:27). “The sabbath was instituted to be a blessing for man: to keep him healthy, to make him happy, and to render him holy. Man was not created to be the sabbath’s slave.”<sup>12</sup> The Pharisees had taken a law given for man’s benefit and turned it upside down. They made the Sabbath a legalistic burden, a maze of man-made regulations. They had become so obsessed with their own regulations that the true meaning of the Sabbath was lost. God ordained the Sabbath to be a day of true freedom, a day of rejoicing, a day of reflection upon God, a day of worship, and a day to serve and help one’s neighbor. The Sabbath was not

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<sup>9</sup> Dickson, p. 160. Alfred Edersheim argues that Christ’s first two reasons are both the same: *the service of God*. “The Sabbath-Law was not one merely of rest, but of rest for worship. The service of the Lord was the object in view. The priests worked on the Sabbath, because this service was the object of the Sabbath; and David was allowed to eat of the shewbread, not because there was danger to life from starvation, but because he pleaded that he was on the service of the Lord and needed this provision. The disciples, when following the Lord, were similarly on the service of the Lord; ministering to Him was more than ministering in the Temple, for He was greater than the Temple” (*Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981] 2:58).

<sup>10</sup> Dabney, 1:513.

<sup>11</sup> Hendriksen, *Matthew*, p. 514.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 514-15.

made to be a day of slavery to the arbitrary laws and regulations of man. “God did not require the Hebrews, nor anyone else, to keep it as a means of ascetic self-punishment, like the papist’s hair shirt, but he required them to keep it intelligently and from the heart, as an appointed and blessed means of grace.”<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, Jesus did not say that the Sabbath was made for the *Jews*, but that the Sabbath was made for *man*. “God made it for Adam in paradise, and renewed it to Israel on Mount Sinai. It was made for all mankind, not for the Jew only, but for the whole family of Adam.”<sup>14</sup> “The word ‘man’ is used in its generic sense—the race.”<sup>15</sup> Therefore, this passage, which is often quoted as a proof text against sabbatarianism, is actually sabbatarian to the core.

#### 4. Lord of the Sabbath

The conclusion and climax of Christ’s argument is His lordship over the Sabbath (Mt. 12:8). “The entire exposition regarding the Sabbath is given by Jesus as the Lord who has instituted the Sabbath, who *thus* knows what the Sabbath law involves. The emphasis is on *kurios* [Lord], but this does not imply that as Lord of the Sabbath Jesus can disregard the Sabbath, set it aside, do what he may please with it. As Lord of the Sabbath, who instituted it, he upholds it, he will tolerate no Pharisaical interference with its true purpose. It is thus that Jesus protects his disciples against the charge (*aitia*) that they are violating the Sabbath. As Lord of the Sabbath, he would be the first to condemn every violation. As Lord of the Sabbath, he is now condemning the Pharisees’ perversion of the Sabbath.”<sup>16</sup> It was the Pharisees, not Christ’s disciples, who were guilty of dishonoring the Sabbath. “For in rejecting the Word of the Lord of the Sabbath—both the written Word of the Old Testament which He had just quoted, and the incarnate Word of the New Testament Who had just quoted them—they themselves were desecrating the sabbath.”<sup>17</sup>

Some theologians and expositors, in keeping with their anti-sabbatarian presuppositions, have an altogether different interpretation of Christ’s words. They argue that Christ is telling the Pharisees that because of His supreme authority as Lord and Sovereign He had relaxed and discontinued the sabbath law for His disciples. The anti-sabbatarian interpretation suffers from a number of insurmountable exegetical difficulties.

First, it would be quite inconsistent on Christ’s part to tell the Jews that He had not come to destroy the law (Mt. 5:17) and then turn around and eliminate one of the ten commandments.

Second, if Christ had actually abrogated the sabbath law and allowed His disciples to break it at will, then why was the sabbath issue not brought up in His trial before the Sanhedrin? Why then was there no response when Jesus said to the Jews, “Which of you convicts Me of sin?” (Jn. 8:46).

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<sup>13</sup> Dabney, 1:516. Some have argued that the statement “the Sabbath was made for man” means that man can do whatever he pleases on that day. Such an argument contradicts the biblical teaching on the Sabbath and is totally absurd. God created the woman (Eve) for the man (Adam). Does this mean that a man can do with a woman as he pleases (such as commit murder, adultery, fornication, etc.)? Of course not. God created the earth for mankind. Does this mean that man can destroy and pillage the earth at will? No, not at all. In like manner God created the Sabbath for man, for his benefit. Yet man is still required to obey God’s revealed will regarding that day.

<sup>14</sup> J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: Mark* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1993), p. 29.

<sup>15</sup> Dabney, 1:516.

<sup>16</sup> R. C. H. Lenski, *Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel* (Minneapolis, Augsburg, 1943), p. 466.

<sup>17</sup> Lee, p. 195.

Third, if Jesus had altered the Sabbath for His disciples, why did He spend so much time explaining the meaning of the Sabbath, and justifying His disciples' behavior, using *Old Testament* examples?

Fourth, the New Testament teaches that the ceremonial types were rendered null by Christ's *death*; thus, to argue that Christ was here—before His death—repealing the Sabbath is premature. Fifth, Christ came to “fulfill all righteousness”; as the second Adam He submitted perfectly to the whole Mosaic law, including circumcision. One does not fulfill a law by breaking it! Sixth, Christ says that His disciples were innocent of breaking the Sabbath. If the disciples were innocent, then why would Christ need to make an excuse, saying He altered or relaxed the day? The fact that Christ declared His disciples innocent renders the anti-sabbatarian interpretation impossible, for it would have Christ contradicting Himself in the same sentence. “This explanation would represent the Saviour as stultifying himself by his own words, as we sometimes hear foolish and false children and servants do, when, being charged with an offense, they first deny it and then make an excuse for it. Were such an explanation wilfully urged for Christ's words, it would be profane.”<sup>18</sup> “In what sense now is the son of man Lord of the Sabbath day? Not surely to abolish it—that surely were a strange Lordship, especially just after saying that it was made or instituted [*egeneto*] for MAN—but to *own* it, to *interpret* it, to *preside over* it, and to *ennoble* it, by merging it in ‘the Lord's Day’ (Rev. 1:10).”<sup>19</sup> The disciples were guiltless *not* because Jesus abrogated the Sabbath, but because they rendered *obedience* to Christ, who instituted the Sabbath, and not to the Pharisees who perverted its true meaning.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Dabney, 1:518.

<sup>19</sup> David Brown, *The Four Gospels: A Commentary, Critical, Experimental, and Practical* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1976 [1864]), p. 70.

<sup>20</sup> “The Saviour's reasoning is in substance this: ‘These men, blamed by you Pharisees, are innocent. I saw them pluck and eat the grain. It is enough that I do not forbid them; for I am the Lord of this Sabbath day. This law is my day. I was the person who published it from the top of Mount Sinai, as the divine Angel of the covenant. It is my authority which sustains it. Hence, if I am satisfied with this act of these men, that is proof enough of their innocence’ (Dabney, 1:517). Other reasons to reject this anti-sabbatarian argument are that the pattern of six days of work and one day of rest is a creation ordinance and thus continues until the consummation. The Sabbath is part of the ten commandments and clearly has a moral-perpetual aspect.