

What Does the Bible Teach About the Sabbath?

(Compiled by Paul R. Blake from multiple sources)

I. IN SEARCH OF THE SABBATH

A. Sabbath (sæbæθ) (verb shavath) is the seventh day of the Hebrew calendar week, first mentioned in the Creation account - Gen. 2:2-3

1. Observation of Sabbath was one of the Ten Commandments (the fourth) - Ex. 20:8-11, 31:13-17; Neh. 13:19
2. Shmita - Hebrew: שמיטה, Strong's shemittah, literally "release," also called sabbatical year, is the seventh year of the seven-year agricultural cycle mandated by the Law for the Israel. The land is left to lie fallow and all agricultural activity, including plowing, planting, pruning and harvesting, is forbidden. Whatever fruits grow on their own during that year are deemed hefker (ownerless), not for the landowner but for the poor, the stranger, and the beasts of the field; these fruits may be picked by anyone.
3. When the year ended, all debts, except those of foreigners, were to be remitted - Deut. 15:1-11; a slave who had worked for six years was to go free in the seventh year - Lev. 25:39-55

B. A Sabbath (or day of rest) observation has been practiced worldwide since ancient days

1. Roman emperor Constantine the Great enacted the first civil law regarding Sunday observance in 321 AD. "On the venerable day of the sun let the magistrate and people residing in cities rest, and let all workshops be closed. In the country however, persons engaged in agricultural work may freely and lawfully continue their pursuits; because it often happens that another day is not so suitable for grain growing or for vine planting; lest by neglecting the proper moment for such operations the bounty of heaven should be lost."

2. Zoroastrianism, the Babylonian rest days: Sapattu
3. Buddhist rest day: Uposatha
4. Cherokee rest days or empty moon days, called "un-time" or "non-days"
5. Wicca - Esbat
6. Folk tradition in English is the use of Sabbath as a synonym of midnight-to-midnight Saturday (literally, Saturn's day in 14 languages).
7. In 38 other languages, the common name for this day in the seven-day week is a cognate of Sabbath. Sabbatini, Sabbadini, in Italian and other Mediterranean languages; Sabbatos in contemporary Greek, sâbotnichavi in Bulgarian
8. This speaks of a single origin - Gen. 2:3
9. Muslims replace Sabbath rest with jumu'ah. Also known as Friday prayer, jumu'ah is a congregational prayer (salat) held every Friday just after midday, in place of the otherwise daily (dhuhr) prayer; it commemorates the creation of Adam on the sixth day, glorifying the man on Friday, as opposed to glorifying God on the Sabbath
10. The Quran states: "When the call is proclaimed to prayer on Friday, hasten earnestly to the Remembrance of Allah, and leave off

business: That is best for you if ye but knew. When the prayer is ended, then disperse in the land" (62:9).

11. Sabbatical: From the Biblical sabbatical year came the modern concept of a sabbatical, a prolonged, often one-year, hiatus in the career of an individual

12. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) believes the Lord has commanded them to continue to observe the Sabbath. He has promised them that if they obey this commandment, they will receive "the fullness of the earth." They are taught that they should keep it a holy day and it should be reserved for holy activities. Founder Joseph Smith claimed revelation in 1831: "That thou mayest more fully keep thyself unspotted from the world, thou shalt go to the house of prayer and offer up thy sacraments upon my holy day; for verily this is a day appointed unto you to rest from your labors, and to pay thy devotions unto the Most High." (D&C 59:9-10)

II. ISRAEL MUST OBSERVE THE SABBATH

A. Ex. 20:8 - "Remember the Sabbath to keep it holy"

1. General authority, to be qualified by later instruction and examples
2. Sabbath is to rest from labor for a specific purpose - Ex. 20:9
3. From Creation, God commanded humankind to work
 - a. Gen. 2:15, 3:17-19
4. In the New Testament, God commanded humankind to work
 - a. Eph. 4:28; 2Thes. 3:10

B. God also commanded that one also rest; even the earth is to rest - Ex. 20:10

1. This rule is true not only for the wealthy, but for their children, common laborers, slaves, and even their animals. The poor could not claim necessity as an excuse to work on the Sabbath
2. God gave them manna for six days only each week - Ex. 16:23-26
3. One could not even gather firewood to keep warm on the Sabbath - Num. 15:32-36
4. God's intentions were not to punish man for violating the Sabbath, but to give him a day to rest himself and to honor his God

III. THE REASONING OF GOD IN ESTABLISHING THE SABBATH

A. Ex. 20:11 - It was the day God rested from His work of creation.

1. Humankind ought not go beyond God and do for himself things that God did not do for Himself.
2. If six days were enough for God to labor, and a day of rest was good for Him; therefore, the same is good for humankind created in God's image

B. The Sabbath demonstrated God's love for humankind.

1. God did not want man to wear himself out with incessant labor. He wanted man to have days of rest so as to be able to enjoy life and the fruit of his labors - Ecc. 2:22-24, 5:18
2. Jesus proved that the Sabbath is a manifestation of God's love when He healed on the Sabbath - Matt. 12:5-12; Mark 2:23-28; Luke 6:1-9

IV. NEW TESTAMENT CONTENTIONS OVER THE SABBATH

A. Matt. 12:1-8; Mark 2:23-28; Luke 6:1-5

1. Jesus walked through grain fields on Sabbath; disciples were plucking heads of grain and eating them
2. Not stealing as per Leviticus 19:9-10, but the effort expended by disciples plucking grain heads and rubbing out the grain seemed like working on the Sabbath to Pharisees
3. Jesus responded by citing the example of David and his men eating the bread of the Presence in 1 Samuel 21:1-7, not lawful for David and his men to eat according to Leviticus 24:5-9
4. Sabbath was made for man, not man for Sabbath
5. Jesus is Lord of Sabbath

B. Matt. 12:9-14; Mark 3:1-5; Luke 6:6-10

1. Same day and audience as before, according to Matthew
2. Man was present in the synagogue with withered hand
3. Jesus asked if it is lawful to do good on Sabbath
4. Gave an example of man lifting sheep out of pit on Sabbath; humans are more valuable than sheep
5. Told the man to stretch out hand, healed it; Pharisees took counsel to destroy Him

C. Luke 4:31-37

1. Jesus in a synagogue casting out a demon on Sabbath
2. No indication Pharisees are present; no contention, just amazement

D. Luke 13:10-17

1. Jesus was teaching in a synagogue; woman present, disabled 18 years, bent over; Jesus laid hands on her, freed her from disability
2. Ruler of synagogue angry: "six days to work, be healed on those days"
3. Jesus called him out on hypocrisy: "everyone makes sure animals get watered on Sabbath"
4. Woman bound by Satan 18 years now loosed on Sabbath; opponents of Jesus shamed

E. Luke 14:1-6

1. Jesus at house of a Pharisee on Sabbath; one there with dropsy; Jesus asks them if it is lawful to heal or not, then asked who among them has son or animal that falls into well on the Sabbath, will not pull them out
2. They did not answer Him; man was healed

F. John 5:1-18

1. Man at pool at Bethesda, invalid for 38 years, unable to be healed
2. Jesus healed him on a Sabbath day
3. John indicated that the Jews persecuted Jesus because He healed him on Sabbath day

G. John 7:21-24

1. Jesus spoke about healing of John 5; spoke of command to circumcise on eighth day, done even when eighth day is a Sabbath
2. Yet some were angry with Jesus for making a sick man whole
3. Need to judge with right judgment

H. John 9:1-41

1. Healed a man born blind on a Sabbath (v. 14); Pharisees certain that Jesus was a sinner because He "does not keep the Sabbath" (v. 16)
2. Denied that it could be an act of God because of it
3. What are we to learn from these accounts?

V. WHEN COMMANDS COLLIDE

- A. The basis of the challenge presented by Jesus' actions on the Sabbath involve the tension that often comes up over apparently conflicting commands of God
 1. God commanded, and Jesus never argues with this, that Israelites should rest on the Sabbath
 2. But God also commanded Israel to love their neighbor as themselves
 - a. Lev. 19:18
 3. God also commanded males to be circumcised on the eighth day (Lev. 12:3), and the eighth day will be a Sabbath day for 1 out of 7 children
 4. Therefore, what is to be done when God has commanded the Israelites to rest on the Sabbath but also to love their neighbor and to circumcise on the eighth day?
 5. Jesus expected them to "judge with right judgment"
- B. Discerning weightier matters of the law (not based on your opinion)
 1. Matt. 23:23 - "justice, mercy, and faithfulness" as the "weightier matters of the law"
 2. Therefore, even though one should be careful not to work on the Sabbath, if justice, mercy, or faithfulness demands an effort, then that effort must be expended
 3. In reality, Jews were already doing this: circumcising on the eighth day even when it was on a Sabbath, watering animals, being willing to take a man or an animal out of pit on Sabbath
- C. Moments of necessity, crisis, time and chance, and human limitation
 1. The one time when the Pharisees might have had a point involved the disciples plucking grain
 2. Jesus recognized this and appealed to necessity, David and his men eating the shew bread
 3. It is both a doctrinal fallacy and a logical fallacy to use the exception to make a rule
 4. It is false and sinful to use an emergency to justify laziness, willful neglect, or rebellion
 5. If the disciples had already prepared food but were plucking anyway, there was no justification, and Jesus Himself would have rebuked them
- D. The Pharisees' Perspective Problem
 1. The Pharisees were not condemned for wanting to rest on Sabbath, or carefully make sure that they do not violate Sabbath, or for highly esteeming God's law
 2. Instead, Pharisees are condemned because in so strictly legislating Sabbath, they missed the importance of commands of love and mercy

3. It takes a hardened, narrow-minded heart to get angry and hostile because someone uses God's power to help others on the Sabbath
- E. Learning on the Sabbath
1. Just as man not made for Sabbath, but Sabbath for man, commands are made for man, not men made for commands - Mark 2:27
 2. Be wise to the fact that NT commands may appear to be in conflict, just as they appeared to be in the OT
 3. We should never build so many hedges around NT commands that we create a Pharisee flavored Christianity
 4. Keep the commands, but never to the exclusion of what Jesus said were the weightier matters of the law: justice, mercy, faithfulness, love
 - a. Rom. 13:8-10
 - b. The commandments are expressions of the law of love. If keeping a command causes one to violate the law of love, he has failed to understand the command or its purpose.
 5. Judge with righteous judgment, not human pragmatism or interests
 - a. John 7:24
 6. Remember that a crisis is not a justification for religious libertinism
 - a. Jesus teaches that there are moments of necessity when a provision of law is superseded.
 - b. These situations can never be used to justify engaging in practices that God has not authorized in Scripture, regardless of whether there is an apparent necessity
 - c. Never "let us do evil that good may come"

VI. THE RELEVANCE OF THE SABBATH TODAY

- A. Is the fourth commandment still binding on God's children today?
1. Many want to say that the Sabbath day is still binding, but that Sunday is now the Sabbath. Not true, at least as they practice it. They need to keep all of the Sabbath law in order to be consistent
 2. Some insist that Saturday is still the Sabbath and must be observed: Seventh Day Adventists, Mormons, Eastern Orthodox
 3. The Ten Commandments as originally given were only for the nation of Israel - Ex. 34:27-28; Deut. 5:1-3
 - a. The covenant was made with Israel; it was never binding on righteous Gentiles in any dispensation - Acts 15:23-24, 28-29
- B. We are under a different, far better covenant
1. Heb. 8:6, 13, 10:9; Col. 2:13-17; Gal. 5:1-4
 2. The fourth commandment regarding remembering the Sabbath is not binding on anyone today
 3. At the same time, Paul respected the customs of the Jews to observe it as a day of rest to accommodate their tender consciences
 - a. 1Cor. 9:19-23; Rom. 14:5
- C. The first day of the week was never the Sabbath day.
1. Christians in the first century worshiped upon the first day of the week.
 2. Jesus arose from the dead on the first day of the week

- a. Matt. 28:1; Mark 16:2, 9; John 20:1
- 3. The day of Pentecost when the church was established was on the first day of the week, Sunday - Acts 2
- 4. The church ate Lord's Supper on the first day of the week - Acts 20:7
- 5. They took up the contribution on the first day of the week - 1Cor. 16:1-2
- 6. This isn't the Sabbath day, but the Lord's Day, a day that was made to honor the Savior and not the need for a day of rest for humankind
- D. Ultimately the Sabbath is symbolic for the rest of God's people in eternity.
 - 1. Heb. 4:9-11
 - 2. Today, we honor the Sabbath by working for the Lord every day in this world while waiting for the day of eternal rest in the world to come.