

What Did Jesus Say About the Sabbath?

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Often we hear that Jesus taught against the Sabbath as a day of rest. After all, he healed on the Sabbath, he defended his disciples for picking grain on the Sabbath. Every time the Pharisees challenged him about the rules of the Sabbath, he set them straight that “The Sabbath is made for man, not man for the Sabbath.” ([Mark 2:27](#))

I heard those teachings; I read the Pharisees’ criticism of his actions on the Sabbath and Jesus’ responses defending himself and his disciples. I was convinced that the Sabbath and all its rules had been done away with when Jesus came and taught us the New Covenant.

Then I read the original instructions for the Sabbath in the Old Testament. With that understanding, I re-read Jesus’ conversations with the Pharisees. I found that none of the Pharisees’ complaints about Jesus’ behavior on the Sabbath were actually in the Bible’s instructions. They had added their own directives onto God’s. I realized that Jesus’ responses to them were disputing their own teachings, but actually upheld the original instructions for the Sabbath. The debate was never about *whether* to keep the Sabbath, but rather about *how* to keep it.

So, what was Jesus saying about the Sabbath? To solve the riddle, we must first refer to God’s original instructions regarding the Sabbath, then review the basis for the teaching of the Pharisees. With that context, we can more clearly see what the rabbis’ complaints were and also understand Jesus’ responses.

God’s Instructions for the Sabbath

The most concise instructions are in [Leviticus 23:3](#):

“There are six days when you may work, but the seventh day is a day of sabbath rest, a day of sacred assembly. You are not to do any work; wherever you live, it is a sabbath to the Lord.”

These instructions are repeated, specified and illustrated over and over throughout the Old Testament and include:

- Set apart the seventh day of each week as a holy day – [Exodus 20:8-11](#), [31:13-16](#), [35:2](#), [Deut. 5:14](#), [Genesis 2:3](#)
- Rest from your work and producing/production – [Exodus 16:23-29](#), [Deut. 5:14-15](#)
- Refrain from pursuing your own interests – [Isaiah 58:13-14](#)
- Assemble with other believers – [Leviticus 23:3](#)
- Give an offering – [Numbers 28:9-10](#), [Nehemiah 10:32-33](#)
- Refrain from buying and selling / conducting commerce – [Jeremiah 17:19-27](#), [Amos 8:5](#), [Nehemiah 13:15-22](#)

While other instructions for keeping the Sabbath can be inferred from scripture, these are the most straightforward and foundational components.

The Rabbis’ Instructions for the Sabbath

In their quest to ensure Jewish people were keeping all of God’s instruction written by Moses in Exodus through Deuteronomy (the Torah), the Rabbis, Priests and Torah Teachers constructed very specific rules regarding how to keep the Bible’s instructions. In addition, they believed that God gave Moses additional instructions that were never written down, referred to as “Oral Torah.” After the destruction of Jerusalem and the second temple and the exiling of the Jews in 70 CE, both of these sets of rules were put to paper to help preserve the teachings, as well as to delineate how to keep those that include the temple, since there was no longer a temple. This writing is called the [Talmud](#).

In Jesus’ day (before 70 CE), these would have still been oral teachings, not included in the available Hebrew scrolls (what is called today the Old Testament). In the New Testament (also not available in Jesus’ day), these Oral Torah

instructions are referred to as “traditions.” Jesus repeatedly reprimands the Pharisees for “letting go of the commands of God and holding on to human traditions.” ([Mark 7:8](#)) [More references to human traditions.](#)

In the case of the Sabbath, Oral Torah spells out [39 categories](#) of activity prohibited on the Sabbath. To their credit, the Rabbis’ hearts were to keep God’s commands and teach others to do the same. While their basis and insights in establishing the 39 categories is commendable, it significantly added to God’s original instruction. Ironically, it was this type of teaching that increased the Jews’ struggle to keep the law; and these are the exact teachings that Jesus was referring to when he said in [Matthew 11:28-30](#):

“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

The word “yoke” in Jesus’ day did call to mind beasts of burden being bound together with a crossbar. However, it was also figurative of a rabbi’s interpretation of God’s instructions. Often an experienced beast would be yoked with an inexperienced one in order to train and guide the younger one. This was a picture of how the rabbis and Torah teachers taught the people. Each teacher had their own “yoke” of interpretation, loosely similar to what we think of as denominations. This is why Paul, a Torah observant Jew, says in [Acts 15:10](#):

“Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of Gentiles a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors have been able to bear?”

He’s speaking of the rabbinical yoke that added the Oral Torah and human traditions to God’s instructions. Compared to that, Jesus’ yoke of God’s pure instruction with no man-made additions was easy and light.

That context sheds a lot of light on Jesus’ responses to the Pharisees’ complaints about the Sabbath. With that, I looked into the five conversations recorded between Jesus and the other rabbis on the topic of the Sabbath.

Jesus’ Responses to the Pharisees

1. Picking Heads of Grain ([Matt. 12:1-8](#), [Mark 2:23-28](#), [Luke 6:1-5](#))

What did Jesus do?

“At that time Jesus went through the grainfields on the Sabbath. His disciples were hungry and began to pick some heads of grain and eat them.”

What was the Pharisees’ complaint?

“When the Pharisees saw this, they said to him, ‘Look! Your disciples are doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath.’”

One of the 39 categories of activity the Oral Torah prohibits on the Sabbath is “winnowing.” This would include separating chaff from grain as the disciples would’ve done to eat the heads of grain.

How did Jesus respond?

“He answered, ‘Haven’t you read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? ⁴ He entered the house of God, and he and his companions ate the consecrated bread—which was not lawful for them to do, but only for the priests. ⁵ Or haven’t you read in the Law that the priests on Sabbath duty in the temple desecrate the Sabbath and yet are innocent? ⁶ I tell you that something greater than the temple is here. ⁷ If you had known what these

words mean, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice,’ you would not have condemned the innocent.⁸ For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.”

Jesus really had a way with words, didn’t he? He speaks volumes in these four statements. The most obvious point he’s making is that the people from the Hebrew scriptures (Old Testament) that the Pharisees esteem (David and the Priests) went a lot further than winnowing when they were hungry. [They ate the holy Bread of Presence](#) that was to be constantly in the Holy Place of the Temple and eaten only by the Priests when it was replaced every Sabbath ([Leviticus 4:7-9](#)). Yet God did not consider them violating the Sabbath or the Bread of Presence.

Winnowing in order to eat when you’re hungry is not violating God’s Sabbath instructions. And neither the Sabbath nor the Holy Place is meant to deprive us of sustenance. Jesus was drawing the line between God’s instruction and what the Rabbis had added to them. (Furthermore beyond just keeping the Sabbath, Jesus infers that he is greater than the temple or the Holy Place, and in fact declares himself God by saying he is “Lord of the Sabbath.”)

This account shows Jesus upholding the Sabbath, yet exposing that what the rabbis had added was not Biblical.

2. Healing a Man’s Body ([John 7:21-24](#))

What did Jesus do?

Healed a man on the Sabbath.

What was the Pharisees’ complaint?

Healing on the Sabbath.

How did Jesus respond?

“²¹ Jesus said to them, ‘I did one miracle, and you are all amazed. ²² Yet, because Moses gave you circumcision (though actually it did not come from Moses, but from the patriarchs), you circumcise a boy on the Sabbath. ²³ Now if a boy can be circumcised on the Sabbath so that the law of Moses may not be broken, why are you angry with me for healing a man’s whole body on the Sabbath? ²⁴ Stop judging by mere appearances, but instead judge correctly.’”

Jesus is pointing out the hypocrisy of the Pharisee’s own rules. God had [instructed](#) the Israelites to circumcise newborn boys on their eighth day. If the eighth day fell on a Sabbath, they went ahead with the circumcision in order to keep the commandment. Circumcision set the Israelites apart from every other race. Keeping this and other commandments on the Sabbath was the right thing to do—Jesus agreed with that. He was using the same logic to explain why healing was also perfectly acceptable on the Sabbath -- a day for setting ourselves apart for God, a day when God desires to bless us.

3. Restoring a Shriveled Hand ([Matthew 12:9-14](#), [Mark 3:1-6](#), [Luke 6:6-11](#), [John 7:21-24](#))

What was the Pharisees’ complaint?

“Going on from that place, he went into their synagogue, ¹⁰ and a man with a shriveled hand was there. Looking for a reason to bring charges against Jesus, they asked him, ‘Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?’”

How did Jesus respond?

“¹¹ He said to them, ‘If any 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? ¹² How much more valuable is a person than a sheep! Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.’”

Jesus does not tell them that the Sabbath has been done away with. Again, he draws the line between God's instruction and what they've added.

Neither healing nor saving a life on the Sabbath are prohibited in God's original instructions for the exact reason Jesus gives the Pharisees. The Sabbath is not intended to deprive us of life and leave us to suffer. It is intended as a blessing that *brings* life. The Pharisees had added such oppressive rules to the original instructions, that they left no room for common sense in cases of life-giving acts of goodness on the Sabbath. This is what Jesus is teaching against.

What did Jesus do?

"¹³Then he said to the man, 'Stretch out your hand.' So he stretched it out and it was completely restored, just as sound as the other. ¹⁴But the Pharisees went out and plotted how they might kill Jesus."

If healing on the Sabbath was against God's instructions, the Pharisees would have been able to arrest Jesus right there. However, they could not arrest him based on Pharisaical law, because it was not God's law. Here, again, we see Jesus has kept the Sabbath as instructed by God.

4. Healing the Crippled Woman ([Luke 13:10-17](#))

What did Jesus do?

"On a Sabbath Jesus was teaching in one of the synagogues, ¹¹and a woman was there who had been crippled by a spirit for eighteen years. She was bent over and could not straighten up at all. ¹²When Jesus saw her, he called her forward and said to her, 'Woman, you are set free from your infirmity.' ¹³Then he put his hands on her, and immediately she straightened up and praised God."

What was the rabbis' complaint?

"¹⁴Indignant because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath, the synagogue leader said to the people, 'There are six days for work. So come and be healed on those days, not on the Sabbath.'"

One of the 39 rabbinic categories of activity prohibited on the Sabbath is "grinding," another is "mixing." In Jesus' day doctors and rabbis were often required to grind, mix or prepare medications for those who were ill. Therefore healing or remedying illness was prohibited except in life or death situations.

How did Jesus respond?

"¹⁵The Lord answered him, 'You hypocrites! Doesn't each of you on the Sabbath untie your ox or donkey from the stall and lead it out to give it water? ¹⁶Then should not this woman, a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan has kept bound for eighteen long years, be set free on the Sabbath day from what bound her?' ¹⁷When he said this, all his opponents were humiliated, but the people were delighted with all the wonderful things he was doing."

Jesus uses the rabbis' own rules to answer their complaint. While not included in the list of 39 categories of prohibited activity, the Talmud describes the law of "[Tza'ar ba'alei chayim](#)," meaning to prevent the suffering of animals. Feeding and watering your donkey on the Sabbath was permitted on this basis. Again, we see the rabbis' additional laws oppressing the people instead of bringing them life, as the Sabbath was meant to do. His opponents were humiliated because Jesus' logic exposed the flaws in their own system, and once again proved that he was keeping the Sabbath according to God's instructions and intent.

5. Healing at the Pool of Bethesda ([John 5:1-18](#))

What did Jesus do?

[“]² Now there is in Jerusalem near the Sheep Gate a pool, which in Aramaic is called Bethesda and which is surrounded by five covered colonnades. ³ Here a great number of disabled people used to lie—the blind, the lame, the paralyzed. ⁵ One who was there had been an invalid for thirty-eight years. ⁶ When Jesus saw him lying there and learned that he had been in this condition for a long time, he asked him, ‘Do you want to get well?’ ⁷ ‘Sir,’ the invalid replied, ‘I have no one to help me into the pool when the water is stirred. While I am trying to get in, someone else goes down ahead of me.’ Then Jesus said to him, ‘Get up! Pick up your mat and walk.’ ⁹ At once the man was cured; he picked up his mat and walked. The day on which this took place was a Sabbath.”

What were the rabbis' complaints?

“The Jewish leaders said to the man who had been healed, ‘It is the Sabbath; the law forbids you to carry your mat.’ ¹¹ But he replied, ‘The man who made me well said to me, “Pick up your mat and walk.”’ ¹² So they asked him, ‘Who is this fellow who told you to pick it up and walk?’ ¹³ The man who was healed had no idea who it was, for Jesus had slipped away into the crowd that was there. ¹⁴ Later Jesus found him at the temple and said to him, ‘See, you are well again. Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you.’ ¹⁵ The man went away and told the Jewish leaders that it was Jesus who had made him well. ¹⁶ So, because Jesus was doing these things on the Sabbath, the Jewish leaders began to persecute him.”

Again, we see the Jewish leaders more interested in why this man is breaking their laws than the fact that he was healed. We've explored their complaint with healing in general, but this time Jesus specifically tells the healed man, “Pick up your mat and walk,” something blatantly against the law of the Sabbath. Or is it? Nowhere in the Hebrew scriptures does it instruct us not to carry something on the Sabbath. Again, this is a law from the rabbinical 39 categories of activities prohibited on the Sabbath: [carrying or moving an object](#) beyond a certain distance.

Was Jesus telling this man to deliberately profane or ignore the Sabbath in order to demonstrate that the Sabbath was no longer valid? No, he was making a distinction between God's instructions and the rabbis'. Picking up a mat and walking is perfectly within the observance of the Sabbath. Conversely, he was freeing the man from both his physical and spiritual bondage, because that is the intention of the Sabbath (“made for man.”)

How did Jesus respond?

[“]¹⁷ In his defense Jesus said to them, ‘My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I too am working.’ ¹⁸ For this reason they tried all the more to kill him; not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God.”

Jesus was breaking the Rabbinical Sabbath laws, not God's. The type of work He does is setting people free from sin, from bondage in all its forms, bringing truth, understanding and life. This is God's work every day, and especially on the Sabbath. Indeed, while God rested on the seventh day of creation as an example of how life on earth would be ordered, He Himself does not rest on the Sabbath. If He were to rest, all life as we know it would self-destruct. “He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.” ([Col. 1:17](#)) This is why Jesus identifies himself as the Son of God in his response. He is doing the work of God on the Sabbath from a position of authority equal to God, while God asks man to set aside our work on the Sabbath and receive His life versus focusing on our own. Jesus uses this case to explain his identity and authority in God.

In each of these conversations, the debate is not about *whether* to keep the Sabbath, but *how*. Jesus upholds the original instructions of the Sabbath, and breaks down the rabbinical teaching – usually by pointing out their own

hypocrisy and contradiction. *They can't even abide by their own rules -- nor should they have to. They had made the Sabbath much more difficult than it really was.*

The Sabbath Gives Life, Not Takes It Away

The original instructions of the Sabbath lead us not into hunger, neglect of ourselves and others, prolonged illness or condemnation as the rabbinic law did, but just the opposite: joy, healing, building up ourselves and others, intimacy with God and abundant life. I can attest to this in my own observance of the Sabbath.

Jesus came that “we might have life and have it more abundantly” [\(John 10:10\)](#). Yet, he also said,

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. Therefore anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.” [Matthew 5:17-20](#)

The Sabbath is just one example of how God’s law brings abundant life. Instead of a day of don’ts and can’ts that the scribes and Pharisees had made it, Jesus showed us the true meaning and intent of the Sabbath -- a day to sit at his feet and receive his life, not depriving ourselves or others, but planning ahead to take a day in which we put away our own pursuits and pursue only God.

In all his comments regarding the Sabbath, Jesus was dividing truth from deception, separating God’s instructions from man’s. This is what we are required to do today: Read the instructions for ourselves and follow God’s leading instead of man’s.

Remember, the Pharisees were trying to catch Jesus in sin, so they could arrest him. Despite all of their scheming, testing and confronting him specifically about the Sabbath, they never found him at fault according to God’s instruction. All that he disputed about the Sabbath were the rabbinical teachings. If he had actually violated the instructions for the Sabbath, they would have been able to arrest him. They ended up arresting him on false charges, because Jesus kept the Sabbath as it was intended (and in fact all of the Old Testament’s instructions) and taught his followers to do likewise. [\(Mark 14:55-59\)](#).

If we call ourselves followers of Jesus, should we not follow his example of keeping the Sabbath holy? In fact the Bible promises blessings to Gentiles who do:

“And foreigners who bind themselves to the Lord to minister to him, to love the name of the Lord, and to be his servants, all who keep the Sabbath without desecrating it and who hold fast to my covenant—these I will bring to my holy mountain and give them joy in my house of prayer.” [Isaiah 56:6-7](#)