

*"For the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath." Matthew 12:8*

**SHOULD CHRISTIANS KEEP THE**

**SABBATH?**

**WHAT IT MEANS TO FOLLOW JESUS CHRIST**



# Should Christians keep the Sabbath?

## *What it means to follow Jesus Christ*

Are you surprised by this question? God commanded Israel to rest on the Sabbath because that is what He did. He created the heavens and the earth in six days, and then rested from His work on the seventh. Keeping the Sabbath is also one of the Ten Commandments God gave to Moses and even inscribed it on tablets of stone! Yet, from the beginning of Jesus' ministry, there were questions about the Sabbath, questions that continue to this day.

So, are Jesus' followers required to keep the Sabbath as a holy day of rest? Here are some of the differing opinions on the subject:

- Many say keeping the Sabbath is not a requirement for Jesus' disciples and that there is no commandment in the New Testament to do so.
- Some say the Sabbath is required as a day of rest and worship, and it should be observed on Saturday (the last day of the week). They point out that there is no statement in the New Testament that removes this ancient obligation to cease from our daily work.
- Others say yes, it is required, but, under Christ, the day has been moved from Saturday to Sunday (the first day of the week).

The New Testament gives no explicit commandment either to observe the Sabbath or not to observe it. There is some evidence the early church held its assemblies on the first day of the week<sup>1</sup>, but these assemblies are nowhere clearly linked to the Sabbath. In the absence of a direct statement, what should a Christian do?

## **The Purpose of the Sabbath**

Throughout the Old Testament, the Sabbath was to be a day of rest for everyone, including their servants and all their animals. All who were involved in any kind of labor for six days were to cease this labor on the seventh; they were to do no work.

*Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the LORD your God. In it you shall do no work: you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your male servant, nor your female*

<sup>1</sup> John 20:19; Acts 20:7; 1 Corinthians 16:2

"If you turn away your foot from the Sabbath, from doing your pleasure on My holy day, and call the Sabbath a delight, the holy day of the LORD honorable, and shall honor Him, not doing your own ways, nor finding your own pleasure, nor speaking your own words, then you shall delight yourself in the LORD."

~ Isaiah 58:13-14

*servant, nor your ox, nor your donkey, nor any of your cattle, nor your stranger who is within your gates, that your male servant and your female servant may rest as well as you. (Deuteronomy 5:13-14)*

God’s command seems clear and simple. This is different from what we today would call a day off. “No work” would seem to rule out doing all the things we weren’t able to do during the other six days, like running errands, cleaning out the garage, or performing tasks ordered by an employer.

So then, what did God want His people to do? Surprisingly, the Bible provides very little detail. We read that Israel was not to collect their daily food (“manna”), light fires, pick up sticks, or carry heavy loads<sup>2</sup> – but how does this apply to the twenty-first century? The words of the prophet Isaiah may be helpful:

*If you turn away your foot from the Sabbath, from **doing your pleasure** on My holy day, and call the Sabbath a delight, the holy day of the LORD honorable, and shall honor Him, **not doing your own ways, nor finding your own pleasure, nor speaking your own words**, then you shall delight yourself in the LORD... (Isaiah 58:13-14)*

This picture of the Sabbath day is far more than just a day of no work. It is a day to delight in God, to contemplate His ways, His works and His words. In Psalm 92 (entitled “A Song for the Sabbath day”), the singer exults in the works of God:

*God wants His people to delight in the Sabbath and rejoice in Him, and to refrain from self-centered indulgence.*

*It is good to **give thanks** to the LORD, and to **sing praises** to Your name, O Most High; To **declare** Your lovingkindness in the morning, and Your faithfulness every night, on an instrument of ten strings, on the lute, and on the harp, with harmonious sound. For You, LORD, have made me glad through Your work; I will triumph in the works of Your hands. (Psalm 92:1-4)*

This, then, is the spirit of the Sabbath day: set aside your own works; think about and delight in God’s works.

Consider how this law would affect an agricultural society. If you take a day off in harvest time to think about God’s works rather than the harvest, and it rains the next day, the result could be famine.

So the Sabbath law also taught Israel to rely on God to care for them as they honored Him.

2 Exodus 16:23-29; Numbers 15:32-36; Jeremiah 17:21-23

God did not give the Sabbath law to Israel as an end in itself. Its purpose was to turn their attention toward God and His works, to remind them that they were a special people chosen by Him, and to teach them of their total dependence on Him. They were to remember that their blessings came from God, not from their own efforts. It taught Israel about faith and God’s love.



### The Law Inadequate

The consistent testimony of the New Testament is that the Law of Moses could not make any one acceptable to God. In fact, the apostle Paul writes very boldly about the Jews of his day:

*Israel, pursuing the law of righteousness, has not attained to the law of righteousness. Why? Because they did not seek it by faith, but as it were, by the works of the law. For they stumbled at that stumbling stone. (Romans 9:31-32)*

The apostle is not disparaging the law of God in any way, only the Jews’ approach to it. They saw their rigorous obedience of the law as being the way to attain righteousness, that is, their acceptance by God. And therein lay the problem.

Earlier in this letter, the apostle wrote that the law is “holy and just and good” (Romans 7:12). The problem is not in the law, the problem is in us.

*What shall we say then? Is the law sin? Certainly not! On the contrary, I would not have known sin except through the law. (Romans 7:7)*

Under the Law of Moses it was impossible to be perfect – because men and women are weak, subject to deceit and dishonesty, and unable to live up to its standards. Its requirements made people powerfully aware of their imperfections, but offered no real remedy.

### Written on Stone...

After Moses came down from Mount Sinai,<sup>3</sup> he told the assembled Israelites about the laws God had revealed to him. The people responded, “All the words

3 You can read of this in Exodus 24:3-12.



which God has said we will do.” Then Moses wrote down the words of God and read them to the people. Again they promised, “All that the Lord has said we will do, and be obedient.” Thus, a covenant between God and His people was established, a pledge by the people to do all that God required of them.

Afterwards, God prepared tablets of stone on which He wrote a summary of His laws. We know this as the Ten Commandments. This seemed so wonderful and promising on the surface, but in fact, the very inscribing of God’s laws on stone would prove to be the root of their failure.

Just two months before, the Israelites had been slaves in Egypt. They responded to God’s law the way slaves respond to a taskmaster’s authority: “I will do whatever you command.”

In contrast to this slave-like approach to God’s law, when Jesus came he saw his service not as following orders, but as working joyfully alongside his Father!

*I delight to do Your will, O my God, and Your law is within my heart.  
(Psalm 40:8 quoted in Hebrews 10:5-7 in reference to Jesus)*

*Most assuredly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of himself, but what he sees the Father do; for whatever He does, the Son also does in like manner. (John 5:19)*

Something was lacking in the way Israel looked at God’s laws. Israel just could not understand what God really wanted from them:

*Now Moses called all Israel and said to them: ‘You have seen all that the LORD did before your eyes in the land of Egypt, to Pharaoh and to all his servants and to all his land– the great trials which your eyes have seen, the signs, and those great wonders. **Yet the LORD has not given you a heart to perceive and eyes to see and ears to hear, to this very day.**’ (Deuteronomy 29:2-4)*

### ...Or Written in the Heart?

Over six hundred years after Moses, the prophet Isaiah described Israel’s problem as “ever hearing, but never understanding” and “ever seeing, but never perceiving.” Seven centuries later, Jesus applied these words to the religious people of his day.<sup>4</sup>

Clearly, the failure of the people in Moses’ time was not unique; it hinted at a more universal problem, a problem which God promised to address through a new covenant:

<sup>4</sup> Isaiah 6:9, quoted by Jesus in Matthew 13:14.

*But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: **I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts;** and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. (Jeremiah 31:33)*

Here was a solution at last that would (pardon the pun) go to the heart of the matter. The apostle Paul writes of this:

*You are our epistle written in our hearts, known and read by all men; clearly you are an epistle of Christ, ministered by us, written not with ink but by the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of flesh, that is, of the heart. (2 Corinthians 3:2-3)*

The problem with the Law of Moses was not in the commandments themselves. The problem was that they were engraved in tablets of stone, not embedded in the hearts of the people. Simply trying to follow the commandments led only to death.

Still, the Law is God’s law. Jesus declared all of it to be in force, saying:

*Whoever therefore breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 5:19)*

Considering this principle, it is simply not credible that Jesus meant to abolish the Sabbath. Rather, as he did with every other commandment in the Law of Moses, he strengthened it by transforming it into a law of spirit, written in the hearts of his disciples.

### Sons or Slaves?

The Law of Moses gives two statements of the Sabbath commandment, which when taken together explain why it is important.

The account in Exodus relates the Sabbath to God’s rest after creation:

*For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it. (Exodus 20:11)*

In other words, “Do this because it’s what I did.” This is the only commandment among the ten that clearly taught Israel to be like God.

Adding to this, in Deuteronomy God links Sabbath observance to the Israelites’ escape from slavery in Egypt:

*And remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there by a mighty hand and by an outstretched arm; therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day. (Deuteronomy 5:15)*

That is to say, “I brought you out of Egypt where you were slaves; so, for one day a week, *don’t* be slaves.” The force of the Sabbath commandment is not that people need a rest once a week; it is that Israel should no longer be a nation of slaves:

*Speak also to the children of Israel, saying: ‘Surely My Sabbaths you shall keep, for it is a sign between Me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I am the LORD **who sanctifies you.**’ (Exodus 31:13)*

Many years later, the prophet Ezekiel tells Israel that the Sabbath was explicitly meant to mark them out as His holy people:

*Moreover I also gave them My Sabbaths, to be a sign between them and Me, that they might know that I am the LORD **who sanctifies them.** (Ezekiel 20:12)*

It makes sense, then, that God would judge Israel for disregarding His Sabbath. By so doing, they were denying Him. The Sabbath law, meant as a sign of their special standing with God, became, instead, a sign of their utter failure to honor Him:

*But if you will not heed Me to hallow the Sabbath day, such as not carrying a burden when entering the gates of Jerusalem on the Sabbath day, then I will kindle a fire in its gates, and it shall devour the palaces of Jerusalem, and it shall not be quenched. (Jeremiah 17:27)*

Over a century later, Nehemiah found the people in and near Jerusalem laboring and trading on the Sabbath. He reinstated the Sabbath rules.<sup>5</sup> Again, it is clear the law was not yet written in their hearts.

By the time of Jesus, the practice of the religious rulers (the Pharisees) was well established. They not only observed a rest every seventh day, but defined

<sup>5</sup> Nehemiah 13:15-22

exactly what activities would be banned and what would be allowed. The contrast between this approach and the simple statement of the law could not be clearer. The Pharisaic style of obedience was a matter of rules, rather than of obedience from the heart.

### Beyond the letter of the Law

Jesus stated clearly that he did not come to abolish the law but to fulfill it. The table below, based on Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7), gives a few examples from the law of Moses to show what God really intended.

Old Law	New Law	Difference
You shall not murder	Do not be angry without a cause; make peace with others before bringing your offerings to God	Reconcile with those who oppose or offend you.
You shall not commit adultery	Whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart	The desire is as bad as the deed, so control your thoughts.
You shall not swear falsely	Never take an oath at all. All you need to say is a simple ‘Yes’ or ‘No.’	Reference to God does not make a lie true. Always speak the truth.

Notice that in every case Jesus’ example cuts away all self-justification by highlighting the *intentions* of the heart, rather than outward actions.

Human judges focus on things that can be proven: did the defendant commit the crime? In contrast, Christ and his Father look on the heart. They ask, is your spirit right? Are you trying to be like God?

As legislation, the law of Christ is not terribly useful. No court among men could ever enforce laws against evil thoughts. However, a law written in the heart can direct moral behavior far more effectively than any external code.

Notice also, the reason given for loving your enemies is the same reason God gave Israel for keeping the Sabbath: it is what He does. It is very important that Jesus spoke of God’s actions in the present tense, though Moses spoke of God’s actions in the past. This change will be helpful in considering Jesus’ treatment of the Sabbath.



When Jesus came, working miracles on the Sabbath, the Pharisees were scandalized. Surely, they reasoned, Jesus, in his healing, was doing work just as certainly as any laborer. When they used a crippled man to entrap Jesus, he challenged them: “Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill?”<sup>6</sup>

This was no academic question; it was a matter of the whole purpose of the law, and the spirit of the Sabbath. Jesus’ explanation for his Sabbath observance was that even on the Sabbath God takes care of His people and, therefore, he must do the same. He emphasized this point by appealing to their simple human compassion:

*The Lord then answered him and said, ‘Hypocrite! Does not each one of you on the Sabbath loose his ox or donkey from the stall, and lead it away to water it?’ (Luke 13:15)*

The point of these healings, and the point of Jesus’ rebuke of his enemies, was that the Sabbath was not about Israel’s service to God; it was about their dependence on God and His provision for all their needs.

### Lord of the Sabbath

The Jews sought to kill Jesus because, in their view, he was flagrantly breaking the Sabbath. When they confronted him, his answer was calculated to upend their whole understanding of the Sabbath.

*But Jesus answered them, ‘My Father has been working until now, and I have been working.’ (John 5:17)*

This is an astonishing defense. God commanded Israel to rest on the Sabbath because that is what God did at Creation. Jesus explained that he did God’s work on the Sabbath because that is what God has been doing ever since.

In other words, Jesus changed the rationale for the Sabbath from an imitation of the actions of God long ago, to a reflection of the ongoing work of God now. In his teaching, Jesus transformed the Sabbath from a day of contemplating and appreciating God’s work, to a day of participating in that work. It is no longer a day of complete inaction, but a day of godly action.

Godly action can take on a surprising breadth. On one occasion, Jesus’ disciples are hungry and pluck off heads of grain to eat.<sup>7</sup> The Pharisees charge them with violating the Sabbath law, and Jesus defends them with a very bold line

<sup>6</sup> Mark 3:1-6

<sup>7</sup> See Matthew 12:1-8, which refers to the account described in 1 Samuel 21:1-6.



of reasoning. He compares them to David and his men, who, when they were escaping from King Saul, became very hungry. They entered the house of God and ate the holy bread, which was reserved for the priests alone.

Jesus implies that God never intended the Sabbath to be enforced to the point of starvation. Furthermore, David was the anointed of God,<sup>8</sup> and his companions were, therefore, like Jesus' disciples, in the service of God's anointed one.

What we must not miss here is Jesus' assertion that his disciples are in a position similar to the priests in the temple. He says that those who came with David were allowed to share in the meal of bread meant only for the priests. If the companions of David were accorded an honor reserved for priests, how much worthier are the disciples of Jesus, David's heir and Lord?

Jesus then points out that the priests are required to do the same kind of work on the Sabbath day as they do every other day:

*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. (Matthew 12:5-6)*

The priests work in the temple, but the work of the Son of God is greater than the priests' service. If they are exempt from the Sabbath law, should not the followers of God's Son be exempt?

Finally, Jesus asserts that he has the unique right to define the Sabbath law, "For the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath" (Matthew 12:8).

It is a breathtaking defense, all hanging on the identity of Jesus himself, which, of course, the Pharisees did not recognize!

## Which Day of Rest?

The phrase "Lord of the Sabbath" provides one final, important observation. The promised Savior is set out in the Bible as the coming King of this whole world.<sup>9</sup> In a letter to the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem, the writer argues that God's day of rest, His Sabbath, does not point back to the time of Creation, but forward to a future time.<sup>10</sup> This future day of rest is when Jesus will truly be "Lord of the Sabbath". Therefore God, His Son, and all those who follow God's Son continue to labor every day until that time of rest arrives!

<sup>8</sup> That is, the one God had specially selected for His service.

<sup>9</sup> For more information about this subject, see another booklet in this series: *Is a Better World Possible? A vision of the future world promised by God.*

<sup>10</sup> While it is not easy reading, you will find this in Hebrews 4:1-10. See also 1 Corinthians 15:20-26, 51-54.

## Not one day, but every day

When Jesus spoke about the Old Testament commandments, he didn't abolish them, he transformed them. We should not think, therefore, that the Sabbath was abolished by Christ, but rather, that it is being transformed by Christ.

There is no indication in the New Testament that the Sabbath, as a day without work of any kind, is required of Christians. Consider the Apostle Paul's comment:

*So let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths, which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ. (Colossians 2:16-17)*

"Let no one judge you" can only be read to mean that you are free to decide for yourself. The Apostle reiterates the view that the Sabbath observance is a matter of personal conscience:

*One person esteems one day above another; another esteems every day alike. Let each be fully convinced in his own mind. He who observes the day, observes it to the Lord; and he who does not observe the day, to the Lord he does not observe it. (Romans 14:5)*

How then can one honor the Lord by *not* observing the Sabbath as a special day? Paul gives a clue in this passage when he says, "another esteems every day." This is the challenge: can you spend *every day* as you would the Sabbath, not following your own ways, not seeking your own pleasure, not speaking your own words?

## The Law written in the heart

We come now to a practical point that may cause some discomfort to those who have followed the reasoning so far, but it is important to grasp how the law works when it is written in your heart.

In the first century the Church included many who were slaves. The Apostle Paul addressed the situation in which a disciple of Jesus is also a slave to an unbeliever:

*Bondservants, obey in all things your masters according to the flesh, not with eyeservice, as men-pleasers, but in sincerity of heart, fearing God. And whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord and not to men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance; for you serve the Lord Christ. (Colossians 3:22)*

Consider the position of a disciple who is a slave to an unbelieving master. Will that master allow his slave to rest on the Sabbath? Of course not! Would the

slave, laboring on the Sabbath in obedience to his master, be guilty of violating God's law? Paul says "no," if, like his Lord, he is busy with God's work. Therefore, Paul commands, "whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord." Your obedience, even to an unbelieving master, transforms your work by your cheerful and careful approach to the job, and your awareness of Christ's presence. By this command, even the slave is raised to the level of a priest in the temple. Even the most basic and humble work is supervised by the great Master, who blesses the labor and rewards His servants richly.

This is the practical outworking of Jesus' transformed law of the Sabbath. This law is suitable to the new priesthood of Christ and his disciples. It is, in brief, the New Testament form of the Sabbath Law. It can be a very difficult law to keep, especially when the boss comes around with one more thing he wants done by the end of the day! As the Sabbath did for the Jews, this law will clearly mark out Christ's people, if they do the works of God every day, because this is what their Lord does.

No longer is the Sabbath an external law, written in stone. Now it is written in the hearts of the faithful. No longer is it the commandment of God from the top of a burning mountain, but rather, the invitation of the Father to his children. No longer does the Sabbath look back at what God did at the beginning, it now looks forward, as the Father works now on a new creation.

The Sabbath law in the New Testament is a law for the new priesthood; it is an invitation to do everything, every day, for Jesus Christ and his Father. It is a day of rest—a cessation—from our own selfish works to delight in doing God's will every day. This is the real challenge of becoming a follower of Jesus Christ.

~ Jim Seagoe



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# THE SABBATH

**This is believed to be a day of rest to many religious people. Even if we do not follow the strict teaching of some Christian groups, there always seems to be a nagging feeling at the back of our minds that maybe we should be observing this day.**

If we read the beginning two chapters of the Bible, we are struck by the account where God Himself ceased His work on the seventh day, and then blessed that day and “sanctified it” or set it apart from the other days (Genesis 2:2-3). If He blessed and set apart this day, shouldn’t we follow God’s example? In fact, isn’t the Sabbath observance one of the Ten Commandments?

So, what should a Christian do?

This is the subject explored in this booklet, but be prepared to be challenged by Jesus’ own explanation of the Sabbath!