

Jesus and the SABBATH

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INTRODUCTION

Thank you Gavriel for welcoming me to the pulpit tonight, to share the message from this week's parasha, about Yeshua and the Sabbath. We read Leviticus 25 tonight, the portion nicknamed Behar, which as happens in so many portions, derives from one of the first words in the text, verse 1, "The LORD then spoke to Moses at Mount Sinai", or in Hebrew, Behar Sinai, on Mt Sinai.

Now if I were giving this message in a church on a Sunday, which by the way will be happening soon enough, once a Jewish man wearing a kippah is introduced as the preacher, some in the church will get nervous, especially if they hear the phrase 'Mt Sinai' in his introductory comments. The immediate suspicion among many would be "Oh no, this guy didn't read Galatians and wants to get us 'under the Law.' Or "Oh no, another sermon trying to get me to live in a rule-book religion." Let me say, from the outset, the purpose of this talk is to focus us on Yeshua himself, to see what He did with this topic, and to see how often he would use the idea or the rules of the Jewish Sabbath to point people to himself. That, my friends, is tonight's purpose. Let's focus on the Yeshua of the Bible and see what we can learn as 21st Century people. Fair enough?

PARSHAT BEHAR: SETTING

I love rhythm. I enjoy a good beat on a drum set, and the commensurate pace of a song or the pace of a swimmer in the Olympics. Everything in life, including the delivery of this sermon, requires a pace, a rhythm. So when we read in Leviticus 23 that the Jewish people are to meet up with the Almighty on certain days during the year, I see it as his setting us a pace of life. God wanted Israel to have appointments each year AND the first rhythmic beat was the weekly Sabbath.

You here at the congregation well know the annual celebrations and gatherings of Passover, Shavuot (Pentecost) and Sukkot (Tabernacles) and other ceremonial times. Chapter 23 begins the list of appointments, when God wants to meet with us, however, with the weekly Sabbath. There is never any indication that the weekly Sabbath includes a weekly gathering like those in religion have standardized using worship meetings, with song services, prayers, public preaching and offerings. This would have been unknown to the Jewish hearers and to Moses 3,500 years ago. But that there is a weekly observance of Sabbath is clear from the text.

Chapter 24 includes laws about the Tabernacle worship, the laying out of bread for the weekly Sabbath and the use of oil for the menorah. Also two of the 10 commandments are reiterated: murder and blasphemy.

SABBATH FOR THE COMMUNITY

Then we arrive at our text tonight. The first command tonight is make sure the land has a Sabbath. Let it lie fallow and don't even pick the grapes in the 7th year. No tilling, no harvesting, no working the land. Leave it alone.

Then to amplify the mechanism of rest, God commands a 50th year, the year of Jubilee, to be added to the cycle. Thus not only the 49th year, but also the 50th year will be a time of rest. And not only for the land. During that year, all tribes are reconfigured. People return home to their tribal roots. And pro rata re-purchasing happens of crops and land. The command is "do not wrong each man his countryman." The root word of the verb is *yanah* meaning *oppress* or *tyrannize* as well.

וְלֹא תוֹנוּ אִישׁ אֶת-עֲמִיתוֹ

So Sabbath means that we are somehow corporately responsible to one another, to treat other people well, not to oppress or tyrannize, not to wrong other people, especially our own countrymen. Observing the Sabbath in this text does not mean that I alone am to rest from my work, in an individualized post-Enlightenment state of private religion. It means *we* are to rest, each week, each 7 years, and each 50 years. Sabbath shouts *community*.

Not only is it for the people of Israel, it's also for the male and female servants, for the cattle, for the strangers who reside with us. The place is to be shut for everyone! Have you seen this in operation in Israel? I missed the train, the 2:30 pm train a year ago in Caesarea, on a Friday afternoon, to return to Tel Aviv, because they all-- railroad workers, army soldiers, chefs—everyone took the night off, even the late afternoon to prepare for Shabbat. Cattle wouldn't have understood the spiritual truths of Sabbath, but their position with Israel required their participation in the weekly event.

TORAH USAGE

But before we carry on with more about our responsibilities or what else we can learn today, let's back up and see the biblical beginnings of Sabbath and also how Yeshua dealt with this.

The first use of the word is in Exodus, the 2nd book of Moses. I know, you wanted me to say Genesis. In Creation, God blessed the 7th day, but it wasn't titled 'Sabbath' until Exodus 16. There we read that God tells the Jewish people, who had just crossed the Red Sea, to bake and boil enough for a couple days on Friday because the next day would be a Sabbath. Obviously God meant that the kitchen would usually be closed to such work the next day. And manna was all we had to eat in those days.

PURPOSE OF SABBATH: TRUSTING GOD/ REST

Other instances of Sabbath and manna in Torah are the double supply on Fridays and commensurate penalty for stocking up on other days and for going out to get more on Saturday. In other words, stick to God's calendar and you will be right. And trust Him in all your days and all your ways.

There are two listings of the 10 Commandments (Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 4) God gives two different reasons for us to observe and remember the Sabbath: creation and the Exodus from Egypt. Each of those two reasons reminds us to trust God, who can create everything from nothing, and who can deliver hopelessly enslaved people after hundreds of years.

Think about trust on another level. Taking a day off each week is not usual worldwide. In China, in Sri Lanka, in so many locations to this day, people go to work all week. No one takes a day off. We in the US don't understand this because religionists who included Sabbath in their philosophy shaped our country. Think back to Egypt, where slaves worked every day. So when God told the Jewish people to take a day off each week, he was asking them to make a donation of 14% (1/7th) of their income. In other words, by not working one full day, they were not producing; they were not harvesting; they were not making money. So God was saying that Israel was to live on the 86% as if it were 100%. That's not new for those of you who are believers. God asks us to donate a percentage of our income to the poor and to the community of faith, and to live on the leftovers. Sometimes that's 90% and sometimes much less. No matter how much you donate, the reality is that the amount we are not making requires the same faith from us today.

So if there's a Torah lesson from the idea of Sabbath it's that we are designed to trust God in all our lives.

TIME TO CEASE

Before I go on, let me tell you what the word *Shabbat* literally means. Most of you would say *rest* and in a way that's true, but remember that the Bible says God rested on the 7th day. In our modern understanding, *rest* implies weariness and almost exhaustion. But God is never exhausted or weary. The Scripture says He does not grow weary, doesn't sleep, and doesn't slumber. (Psalm 121, Isa. 40). So the better definition would be *to cease from something* (usually your work).

Thus God ceased from his work, and other times we read of God putting an end to the wicked (Hosea 1.4, Isa. 13.11), or music stopping (Isa. 24.8) or the work of construction stopping in Nehemiah (6.3). But usually Sabbath means the 7th day of the week, what we call Saturday, and is used that way throughout the Bible.

The time to cease was for most all Israel, but the priests and those who served did not have the day off. They had to perform multitudes of sacrifices, which were more abundant on Shabbat than any other day. Also warriors had to continue to serve the military, especially after Israel lost a terrible war when some refused to 'work' on the Sabbath.

The rabbis argue (that's not news) about how long Adam and Eve were in the Garden, but if I read it correctly, the rest that was planned for our First Parents never reached fullness. God kicked us out of the Garden of Eden. "Yet God's judgment is tempered with mercy. In His grace, He immediately turns His attention to redeeming humanity, a subject that will occupy the rest of the Bible. Despite the absence

of an eternal Sabbath, God will institute a weekly Sabbath that reminds His people of Eden and simultaneously shows them the way back to life with God. There is yet hope!" (Rich Robinson, Christ in the Sabbath, p 26)

ANOTHER DAY AWAITS US

In fact, in the book of Genesis, we see a different 'ending' for the day later called 'Sabbath.' Most days end with the biblical phrase 'it was evening and morning,' but not for the 7th day. I believe that *in essence, "Sabbath" is the condition characterizing life in Eden.*

Had Adam and Eve not sinned, their life and fellowship with God would still be ongoing—if you will, an eternal Sabbath day. That's important to note, as the writer of Hebrews in the Newer Testament will emphasize that Sabbath which awaits the people of God. (Heb 4.9)

And in fact, that Adam and Eve were cast out of the Garden of Eden (Pleasure), there remains therefore a rest again, somewhere down the proverbial track for us all. Joni Mitchell wrote in her classic poem in 1970 entitled "Woodstock" that we have got to get ourselves 'back to the Garden.'

Excursus on modern work if you have time:¹

Then there are those who don't work at all, retirees, unemployed for various reasons, and the generally lazy people about whom the Proverbs has much to say.

But tonight we are speaking about the ordinary workweek prescribed in the Bible, working 6 days and taking the 7th off.

MODERN COMPONENTS

In modern days, to 'observe' Sabbath includes the food as on many Jewish holidays. They include the sweet Sabbath bread, Challah that more often than not is braided, as well as a sweet red wine, and the lighting of candles all on Friday evening. Also that night many will gather in synagogue services or simply stay home and sing songs (Z'mirot).

Then on the daytime on Saturday, again synagogue attendance fills many Jewish people's calendars, not only for one hour, but also for the whole day. Lunch together, study, a bit of rest, a third meal (Shalos s'eudot), and final prayers.

¹ Americans are catching on to the European style of workweek however. I read some website which reported this: Compressed workweeks - the delightful term human resources people use for putting in 40 hours in fewer than five days - are "a great way to provide employees the flexibility to meet the demands of work and life outside of work," says Lisa Horn, co-leader of the [Society for Human Resource Management](#) (SHRM) Workplace Flexibility Initiative and partnership with the [Families and Work Institute](#).

"A four-day workweek allows you to continue to contribute on the job while gaining the time to pursue a long-neglected avocation, to help care for the grandchildren or to simply enjoy the other parts of life," says Cali Williams Yost, chief executive and founder of [Flex+Strategy Group](#) in Madison, N.J.

Brooke Dixon, co-founder and chief executive of [Hourly.com](#), a site that matches job-seekers with employers, says "well above half our users are looking for something other than a traditional workweek."

People walk to synagogue within the half-mile range allowed since starting a fire, and thus driving a car, is not permitted.

During Sabbath, husbands and wives are encouraged to have marital relations on non-menstrual days. In fact, the Sabbath itself is represented as a queen. Each week when I was practicing Orthodox Judaism, I would attend to the mikveh, the ceremonial cleansing pool, and ready myself to meet Queen Sabbath.

Many families will have gatherings and their own special traditions of course, and many messianic congregations will encourage this as well.

RABBINIC CHALLENGES

Let's read Matthew chapter 12² and notice a fairly substantial conflict between Yeshua and the rabbis in leadership in his day. Back in the days of the creation of the Talmud, that is, first through 5th centuries, we discover some language that might help us in discovering what changes Yeshua would bring to the Jewish people. Understand this though, that throughout his life Yeshua would have been very comfortable in celebrating, honoring, observing and keeping the Sabbath. He went to synagogue normally, taught at times on Sabbath, and even enjoyed shared meals on the Sabbath.

But problems arose when the rabbis, who wrote the Talmud, from 220 AD onward, kept sealing holes in the story, in the Torah, in the legislation which came from their fathers and legal forbears. Basically they argued that what their leaders concluded had actually been given to Moses back in the evening on Mt Sinai. The written Torah was given by daytime; the Oral Law (Talmud) was given at night. Thus they argued that all the legislative regulations of the rabbis were divine. That's where Jesus disagreed with them. And in Matthew 11, he had just concluded this time of teaching with "My yoke is easy; my burden is light."

It appears that Yeshua broke the rabbinic rules on these occasions but he never broke the Torah's legislation. He authorized three things in the first story, the

² At that time Jesus went through the grain fields on the Sabbath, and His disciples became hungry and began to pick the heads of grain and eat. But when the Pharisees saw this, they said to Him, "Look, Your disciples do what is not lawful to do on a Sabbath." But He said to them, "Have you not read what David did when he became hungry, he and his companions, how he entered the house of God, and they ate the consecrated bread, which was not lawful for him to eat nor for those with him, but for the priests alone? Or have you not read in the Law, that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple break the Sabbath and are innocent? But I say to you that something greater than the temple is here. But if you had known what this means, 'I DESIRE COMPASSION, AND NOT A SACRIFICE,' you would not have condemned the innocent. For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath."

Departing from there, He went into their synagogue. And a man was there whose hand was withered. And they questioned Jesus, asking, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?" — so that they might accuse Him. And He said to them, "What man is there among you who has a sheep, and if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will he not take hold of it and lift it out? How much more valuable then is a man than a sheep! So then, it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath." Then He said to the man, "Stretch out your hand!" He stretched it out, and it was restored to normal, like the other. But the Pharisees went out and conspired against Him, as to how they might destroy Him. (Matt. 12.1-14)

one with the grain fields that were listed in the 39 types of forbidden work.³ Specifically they are 1) reaping, 2) threshing, and 3) winnowing. Yeshua appeals to contrary evidence, specifically from the Older Testament saying that King David did the same thing, without negative consequences. In other words, the true authorized legislation could not be Mosaic since David was guiltless long after Moses. And the bread he took was the bread about which we read earlier in tonight's reading.

His argument is that if David and his men (1 Samuel 21) were allowed to transgress what looks like the letter of the law, but was not a transgression because they had a need, then they ought to allow such in the case of Jesus, since he and his disciples also had a need. The Pharisees allowed for work to be done on the Sabbath if human life were endangered as must have been in the Davidic episode (thus Zeitlin, cited by Lachs; cf Cohn-Sherbok). Yeshua takes that further to allow for work to be done if someone considered a need, hence the eating of the grain, and he follows this with another argument, and uses a rabbinic method titled *kal vachomer*. Literally this means "light and weighty." It's a principle of biblical interpretation by which a conclusion is drawn from a minor premise to a more major or stricter one. We might use the phrase in English, "all the more so."

He amplifies that beyond the bread story, the priests had to work on the Sabbath, and double duty at times. ["Temple service takes precedence over the Sabbath" (*Sabb.* 132b).] Yeshua says *kal vachomer*, if that light rule is allowed, then the greater rule is to be followed as well. And since he is the greater Son of David, His appeal is actually an announcement of His own person. He says he is greater than the Temple. In other words, His real answer: you are not in charge. I am. What an explosive argument!

So as is typical of Yeshua, he gives a haggadic argument (David's story), a halachic argument (priests working), and draws some conclusions including the famous line: The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.⁴ But his conclusions splash us up onto the next story.

After this episode, Matthew tells us a story with the healing of the man with the withered hand. The story begins with a teaching moment, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?" And there is not one verse anywhere in the Bible where healing is illegal, but by convention, healing was not permitted unless a person's life was in imminent danger.

³ 1.Flaying 2.Tanning 3.Scraping hide 4.Marking hides 5.Cutting hide to shape 6.Writing two or more letters 7.Erasing two or more letters 8.Building 9.Demolishing 10.Extinguishing a fire 11.Kindling a fire 12.Putting the finishing touch on an object 13.Transporting an object between a private domain and the public domain, or for a distance of 4 cubits within the public domain. 14.Beating wool 15.Dyeing wool 16.Spining 17.Weaving 18.Making two loops 19.Weaving two threads 20.Separating two threads 21.Tying 22.Untying 23.Sewing stitches 24.Tearing 25.Trapping 26.Slaughtering 27.Sowing 28.Plowing 29.Reaping 30.Binding sheaves 31.Threshing 32.Winnowing 33.Selecting 34.Grinding 35.Sifting 36.Kneading 37.Baking 38.Shearing wool 39.Washing wool

⁴ From the Word Biblical Commentary: The Son of Man, ie, Jesus, is said here to be the "Lord of the sabbath" in the sense that he has the sovereign authority to decide what loyalty to the sabbath means (cf the freedom of a prophet concerning the law in Yebam 90b). This is obviously part of the larger fact, to which Matthew has already introduced the reader, that as the promised one, the Messiah, Jesus is the authoritative and definitive interpreter of the Torah.

Yeshua answers the questioning ones with another *kal vachomer* interpretation, saying if you would save an animal that falls into a pit,⁵ then surely people are more important than animals, and Yeshua instructs the man with the withered hand to trust Him and stretch out his own hand. The man does and is healed immediately.

Now I think sometimes Yeshua did these things to stir things up a bit. In other words, he could have healed the withered hand on Sunday or Tuesday if he wanted, but so that the people had to deal with his Lordship, he healed on the Sabbath.

He did the same with the man who was by the pool in John chapter 5. He heals the lame man and tells him to “take up your pallet and walk.”⁶ He could have healed the man on Tuesday or any other day, but his point was twofold: to heal the man and thus have mercy (Hosea 6.6) and to show the Jewish leadership that He was Lord of all. The Pharisees confronted the healed lame man about carrying on the Sabbath, one of the 39 types of work forbidden. He basically said, “You guys left me lying there 38 years. This guy healed me in a moment. You keep your religion; I’m going with the healer guy!”

Some of the Pharisees said that man was made for compliance with Torah, that God made Israel for Honoring the Sabbath. Yeshua said, “Nope.” He declared, “Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.” (Mark 2.27)

FINAL REMARKS

Some final remarks if I might.

1) I’ve never seen a verse in the Bible where worship and public gathering is associated with Sabbath, but that doesn’t mean that I hate gathering with believers or attending synagogue. What this means is that I choose to guard my family shutdown time and also want to leave room for community in my observation of Sabbath.

⁵ The Qumran community disallowed even this activity on the Sabbath (CD 11:13–14)

⁶ John 5.1 ¶ After these things there was a feast of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. ¶ Now there is in Jerusalem by the sheep *gate* a pool, which is called in Hebrew Bethesda, having five porticoes. In these lay a multitude of those who were sick, blind, lame, and withered, [waiting for the moving of the waters; for an angel of the Lord went down at certain seasons into the pool and stirred up the water; whoever then first, after the stirring up of the water, stepped in was made well from whatever disease with which he was afflicted.] A man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years.

When Jesus saw him lying *there*, and knew that he had already been a long time *in that condition*, He *said to him, “Do you wish to get well?” The sick man answered Him, “Sir, I have no man to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up, but while I am coming, another steps down before me.”

Jesus *said to him, “Get up, pick up your pallet and walk.” Immediately the man became well, and picked up his pallet and *began* to walk. Now it was the Sabbath on that day.

So the Jews were saying to the man who was cured, “It is the Sabbath, and it is not permissible for you to carry your pallet.”

But he answered them, “He who made me well was the one who said to me, ‘Pick up your pallet and walk.’”

2) The Bible tells me that some believers will honor and keep Sabbath as a special day and others will not. It also says that we are to let people do as they do as 'unto the Lord.' (Romans 14.6) People who observe a special day as well as those who do not have this charge: do what you do unto the Lord. That same idea was in our reading tonight, Leviticus 25.2 "When you come into the land which I shall give you, then the land shall have a Sabbath to the LORD." לַיהוָה

Whether we eat or drink, whether we observe a day or consider all days alike, the "unto the Lord" is the operative phrase. So it's not a matter of gaining points or earning a higher place in heaven, but a matter of honoring God and being personal with him in this regard.

3) No amount of biblical compliance will earn you greater proximity to the Almighty or cause you to abandon him. Any religion, which turns into a 'checklist religion', is a false system, which will eventuate into only one of two results, and neither is good. If you satisfy the requirements, you will be smug and self-considering. Your trust will be in yourself and your accomplishments. You will have earned God's favor. If you fail in satisfying those demands, you will feel condemned and thus far or at least further from the Almighty. Neither result—pride or condemnation—accomplishes grace.

4) I appreciate being allowed to weigh in on this subject with you. I hope you will continue to consider taking a rest day once each week, not twice or three times, and that you work the other 6 days. I hope you find deep times with Messiah in those Sabbath days and that your drum beat will keep you with Him in the rhythm of the heavens. It's all about trusting God, isn't it? And honoring the True Lord of the Sabbath.

MINISTRY TALK...

For a comprehensive biblical read of the subject, please pick up the book *Christ in the Sabbath* by Rich Robinson, now available on the resource table in the back.