

INTRODUCTION

A first grade teacher gave her class some popular sayings to complete. I got a good chuckle out of how they completed some of these popular proverbs:

Better to be safe than *punch a 5th grader*.

Don't bite the hand that *looks dirty*.

No news is *impossible*.

A miss is as good as a *Mr*.

You can't teach an old dog new *math*.

The pen is mightier than the *pigs*.

Where there's smoke there's *pollution*.

A penny saved is *not much*.

None as so blind as *Stevie Wonder*.

If at first you don't succeed *try new batteries*.

And my personal favorite: Laugh and the whole world laughs with you, cry and you *have to blow your nose*.

Now, I've got one for you: Rules are meant to be _____. If you said “broken,” then you knew the old saying. But in light of this message today, I want to change it to say: Rules (especially God's rules) are meant to be enjoyed.

In this message, we are going to look at God's rules, His Laws, His commandments in general. But we are also going to focus on one of God's rules—the Sabbath Day. Is Sunday the Sabbath Day? Are we as Christians to obey the Old Testament rules and regulations concerning the Sabbath, although the Jewish Sabbath was our Saturday? There is a lot of confusion about this issue.

Here's a true story to illustrate this confusion about the Sabbath. For many centuries, many Christians have believed Sunday is the Christian Sabbath and it is wrong to work, play, or do anything but worship and rest. There was a crisis years ago in Holland. Much of Holland is below sea level but the Dutch have reclaimed the land by constructing an ingenious system of dikes and canals (maybe that's where my family name originated) to hold back the seawater. On one particular Sunday, storms raised the water level to a dangerous height and the water threatened to overflow the dikes and flood a particular city, ruining the crops. Many residents went to the dikes to add sandbags but there were too few workers to stop the rising tide.

The local constable appealed to the local Dutch Reform Church for help. He knew there were hundreds of able-bodied men who could make the difference. He went to the church to persuade the members to come and help. The elders quickly met and decided it would be sinful to break the Sabbath rules by working on Sunday. The pastor appealed to the elders to change their minds and help with the work. He referred them to this passage we are going to read where Jesus broke the Sabbath rules of His day for the good of others. The reply of the chief elder is classic. He said, “I have always had a hard time accepting what Jesus did on the Sabbath, too!” It would be

funny if it were not so tragic. The town flooded and most of the crops were ruined—but many of the Christians felt pious because they hadn’t desecrated the Sabbath Day.

Let’s look at Luke 6:1-11 to answer the question: What *can* you do on the Sabbath?

One Sabbath Jesus was going through the grain fields and his disciples picked some heads of grain, rubbed them in their hands and ate the kernels. Some of the Pharisees asked, “Why are you doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?” Jesus answered them, “Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? He entered the house of God and taking the consecrated bread, he ate what is lawful only for priests to eat. And he also gave some to his companions.” Then Jesus said to them, “The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.”

On another Sabbath he went into the synagogue and was teaching, and a man with a shriveled right hand was there. The Pharisees and teachers of the law were looking for a reason to accuse Jesus so they watched him closely to see if he would heal on the Sabbath. But Jesus knew what they were thinking and said to the man with the shriveled hand, “Get up and stand in front of everyone.” So he got up and stood there. Then Jesus said to them, “I ask you, which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to destroy it?” He looked around at them all, and then said to the man, “Stretch out your hand.” He did so, and his hand was completely restored. But they were furious and began to discuss with one another what they might do to Jesus.”

This religious mafia, the Pharisees, followed Jesus around and kept a list of all the things He said or did wrong. Let’s look briefly at these two incidents from Jesus’ time, then we will spend some time talking about God’s commandments in general.

SCENE ONE: A horrifying harvest! (1-5)

Jesus and His disciples were walking through a wheat field and the disciples simply picked a few heads of grain, rubbed them in their palms until the husks were separated from the kernel and then popped the wheat seeds into their mouths and chewed them like gum before swallowing them. When the Pharisees saw this, they were horrified. They began to criticize Jesus and his disciples for desecrating the Sabbath day by “harvesting.”

Jesus almost always responded to criticism or a tough question by asking a question of His own. Did you notice the sarcasm? He asked these religious professionals, whose full-time jobs were to read, copy, and interpret the Old Testament: “Have you not read?” Jesus used the example of their hero, King David as an example of how they had made the Sabbath Day into a bunch of rigid rules God never intended. In 1 Samuel 21, David was fleeing from King Saul and he and his soldiers ate some of the consecrated bread reserved for priests only. Now, it’s important to note that Jesus’ example about David had *nothing* to do with the Sabbath Day; it was referring to another commandment of God but the principle is the same. That idea will come in handy a little later when we talk about God’s commands in general. Was Jesus guilty of breaking the Sabbath? No, the Old Testament never prohibited a person from picking and eating grain for personal hunger. Here’s the heart of the problem:

The Fourth Commandment simply stated, “Remember the Sabbath Day to keep it holy.” (Exodus 20:8) God was saying, “Work six days, but on the seventh, day don’t work—rest.” That’s what the word “Sabbath” means: Rest. But leave it to the religious legalists to turn rest into work. They “added on” so many man-made rules about the Sabbath, it was *work* just to try to keep the Sabbath!

The Talmud had 24 chapters devoted to what a good Jew could and could not do on the Sabbath rules, which never appear in the Torah. They couldn’t walk more than 3,000 feet from their homes but the Jews “home” could be any possession so some Jews filled their pockets with items from their homes, walked 3,000 feet and placed one of the items on the ground and declared that place to be “home” so they could walk another 3,000 feet.

The Rabbis added dozens of picky rules: You couldn’t take a bath lest some water splash on the floor, thus you’d be washing the floor. A Jewish sailor caught in a storm after sunset on Friday couldn’t touch the helm or raise or lower his sails; it was work. Even today in Jerusalem, an Orthodox Jew won’t push an elevator button (that’s work). So every hotel has a Sabbath elevator that slowly goes from floor to floor and the door automatically opens on each floor. When we are in Jerusalem I always warn our groups, “Don’t get on a Sabbath elevator—you’ll be stuck on it forever.” The modern hotels have automatic doors that open but on the Sabbath the electric eye is disabled because if an Orthodox Jew activates the electric eye, it is considered “lighting a fire.” The rules go on and on.

Jesus wasn’t rejecting God’s beautiful, simple Sabbath rule. He was rejecting the hundreds of man-made rules the Jews added to God’s law.

SCENE TWO: A hateful healing! (6-11)

Luke uses a second example on another Sabbath. Jesus was attending synagogue on the Sabbath and there was a man with a withered right hand. Dr. Luke is the only writer to point out it was the man’s right hand. In the Jewish mind, the right hand was a symbol of power and strength. It was used for greetings and to bestow blessing. The right hand was the “clean hand” meaning a good Jew always ate with his right hand. The left hand was used for bodily functions. With apologies to all you southpaws out there, the left hand was considered the “unclean hand.” Since this man’s right hand was withered, he was handicapped physically and psychologically. Jesus knew the S&Ps (scribes and Pharisees) were watching like hawks to see if He would heal on the Sabbath (another man-made prohibition). He didn’t hide his action. It was an in-your-face demonstration of His power. In fact, Mark tells us in the parallel passage Jesus looked at them “in anger and was deeply distressed by their stubborn hearts.” (Mark 3:5) Without touching the man, Jesus simply commands the man to “stretch out your hand.” When the man’s faith is combined with his obedience, healing occurs. Notice the Pharisees’ reaction: They were so poisoned by their rules and regulations they couldn’t even rejoice in the very presence of a miracle! What was their problem?

Jesus went right to the heart of the matter when He asked the million dollar question in verse 9, “Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to destroy it?” Obviously, these religious experts believed God’s laws were strict rules to be used to catch people doing something wrong. Their idea of God was identical to the concept some people have today. They thought God was some cosmic policeman who set down a bunch of rules and regulations just so He could wait and catch us breaking one. Then He would grab us and make us squirm like a worm in hot ashes and cry with glee, “I’ve got you now, you dirty, rotten sinner! You’ve broken my rules again, ha ha ha.”

Is that what God is like? Did He give us all these rules and laws to make our lives miserable? Not at all. Jesus makes it clear God loves us and He has given us these rules to save life and to do good. Let’s leave these two Sabbath scenes from 2,000 years ago and come back to the present. Let’s talk about how we are to relate to *all* of God’s commands. I want to share three important truths about God’s Commandments.

1. GOD’S COMMANDMENTS ARE FOR OUR BENEFIT, NOT OUR MISERY

In other words, God’s Commandments are meant to be a blessing *not* a burden. God gave us the Ten Commandments to make our lives better. It’s like sports. There has to be rules in order for everyone to enjoy the game. Let’s use an example most of us understand. There are clearly prescribed rules in a football game. Both teams agree to play by the same rules. There is a line of scrimmage that can’t be crossed until the ball is snapped. If one team decides they are going to ignore that rule and have their linebackers line in the offensive backfield right in front of the running backs ... flag! Off sides, they are penalized. An offense can throw only one forward pass per down and it must be thrown from behind the line of scrimmage. What if a team decides they don’t like that rule, so they throw several forward passes from beyond the line of scrimmage—flag! Penalty. Get the idea? If both sides agree to the rules and try to keep the rules, it makes the game fair and fun.

Every football field has sidelines. A football field is 100 yards long and 160 feet wide. If a ball carrier steps out of bounds, that’s where the play is stopped. I want you to think of these sidelines as God’s Commandments. God tells us He wants us to enjoy life but there are some boundaries we are *not* to cross over, it’s not to make us miserable, it’s to make life better. There are millions of people who do not recognize nor obey God’s clearly marked boundaries. They live their lives making up their own rules as they go. Their moral boundary sounds something like this: “If it feels good, do it.” or “You can do anything you want as long as you don’t get caught.” or “I don’t want anyone telling me what I can or can’t do.” They either have no moral boundaries or their own personal boundaries are extended far beyond God’s.

Could you imagine what a football game would be like without sidelines? Here’s a toss sweep and the running back keeps running toward the sidelines but he never turns upfield toward the goal. He just keeps running toward the side! How boring. It reminds me of the old game we used to play when I was a kid. It was called “Tackle the man with the ball.” There were no

boundaries, no goal line; you just tackled the guy with the ball. It wasn't much fun, especially if you were the one with the ball!

We all know people who don't recognize God's boundaries. But most of those folks don't come to church. But there are many who have made just the opposite mistake. Instead of using the sidelines 160 feet apart, they have moved the sidelines in where the hash marks are on the field. Could you imagine a college football game where all 22 players could only play in the narrow space between the hash marks? What a mess! Not much fun for either team.

That's what the Pharisees did during the day of Jesus. They narrowed the moral playing field so much that life wasn't very enjoyable. Then they became referees for everyone else. When someone went beyond their own little, tight boundary...flag! They penalized them. That's why they criticized Jesus' disciples for eating grain. That's why they were furious when Jesus healed on the Sabbath. Jesus was well within God's established boundaries but the Pharisees shrunk the moral boundaries to insure they didn't even get near to the edge. We have thousands of Christians today who have done exactly the same thing. They've ignored God's true sidelines and shrunk the field to suit their own narrow view of life. These people don't have much fun. They are legalists and self-appointed referees who are quick to throw a penalty flag when they see someone cross their narrow moral hash mark.

Ron Richie is a pastor in California who grew up in a very strict legalistic church. He was basically miserable until he discovered grace and the freedom we have in Christ. He writes:

"From my childhood, I was influenced by a kind of Christianity that majored on keeping the laws, rules, and traditions of man. This legalism required a great effort on my part and resulted in a bitter and joyless life because of the failures I suffered. For example a woman could wear rouge and perfume, but no lipstick. You could square dance, but not slow dance; you could milk cows on Sunday, but not wash your car; you could watch TV, but couldn't go to movies. When I was 15 I 'broke the law' by hitchhiking to a nearby town to watch my first movie, *The Yearling* starring Gregory Peck. I went into the theater with fear and trembling, looking around me as I walked in. I was so scared that I paid no attention to the plot and even to this day can't recall what it was about."

Is that what the Christian life is all about? You must be careful that you don't move God's moral boundaries outward but be careful that you don't let anyone shrink the field either.

Why *did* God give us rules in the first place? To make our lives safer and more enjoyable. When He gave the Ten Commandments, He was saying, "Help yourself to happiness." Enjoy your spouse but if you step over the moral boundary and commit adultery, you are going to mess up your life and many others! Enjoy your possessions, but if you covet and steal, you are going to lose your happiness and joy. God's rules weren't given to whip us into line but to help us live together with one another. That's why Jesus said in Mark 2:27, "Then he said to them, 'The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.'" God's laws are made for you—not against you. If you break God's rules, you are the one who suffers; if you obey them, you benefit. You see you really don't break God's Laws you are broken on them. A guy who jumps out of an airplane without a parachute doesn't defy the law of gravity; he only demonstrates it. He doesn't

break the law of gravity; he is broken on it! Here's a second statement about God's Commandments.

2. GOD'S COMMANDMENTS ARE UNDER THE LORDSHIP OF JESUS

When Jesus claimed He was Lord over the Sabbath in verse 5, He was claiming to be Lord over all the Old Testament Commandments. He didn't come to cancel the Old Testament law; He came to fulfill it. Every single Old Testament law must now be examined under the Lordship of Jesus. People often struggle when they read passages from Leviticus prescribing very strict dietary and personal hygienic laws. I am regularly asked why we "don't obey the Bible" and follow those rules. As New Testament Christians, we are no longer *bound* by the ceremonial and national laws Israel lived under. It is important you understand the difference between the Old and the New Testament:

a. In the OLD TESTAMENT, there were 613 Laws, but only a few principles

The Jewish rabbis declared there were 613 written Laws in the Torah. (The exact number of Hebrew letters in the Decalogue, by the way). Of these, 248 were positive (thou shalls) and 365 were negative (thou shall nots) A principle is a guiding concept directing your life toward fulfillment. Proverbs is full of many good principles but in the Old Testament time, Proverbs was not considered as authoritative as the Torah. When Jesus came, He established a new covenant, a New Testament. We are no longer living in the dispensation of the law; we are living in the age of grace. It's very important you make this distinction or you will be confused not only about the Sabbath, but about *every* Old Testament Law. Here's the main difference:

b. In the NEW TESTAMENT, there are two Laws and many principles

Now, if you are still struggling with trying to obey all 613 Old Testament laws, I've got good news for you. According to Jesus, all these rules and regulations can be summarized in only two Laws.

In Matthew 22:37-40 we read: "Jesus replied, 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments." Look at the word "hang." It is a literal translation of a word used for a door hinge. Just as a door hangs on its hinges, the Law and Prophets hang on the two hinges of love. What good is a door that can't open and close? What good are the Old Testament laws without the law of Love, expressed in two directions?

Consider the Ten Commandments, called the Decalogue (meaning "ten words"). Although there were ten commandments, they were grouped into two sections. The first four address a person's responsibility before God: 1) Don't have any other gods; 2) Don't worship any idol instead of God; 3) Don't use God's Holy name in vain; and 4) Remember the Sabbath Day to keep it holy. These first four Commandments can be summarized this way: Love God with all your being! Because when you truly love God, there will be no other gods or idols or profanity and you will want to observe God's Sabbath. The second group of commands addresses how we relate to

other people: 5) Honor your parents, 6) Don't kill; 7) Don't commit adultery; 8) Don't steal; 9) Don't lie; and 10) Don't covet the possessions of others. Every one of these commandments is summarized in this law: Love your neighbor as yourself. If you truly love your mate, adultery will not occur. If you love your neighbor, you won't steal from him.

The New Testament is full of helpful principles telling us how to love God and love each other. That's the difference between the Old and New Testament. Here's the final point about God's Commandments.

3. GOD'S COMMANDMENTS ALWAYS PRODUCE GOOD IN OUR LIVES

Jesus asked the question, "Which is better, to do good or evil on the Sabbath?" Then He answered His own question by doing something good; He healed the man with the withered hand. The religious referees cried "foul!" but He had done something good. God is good, all the time—and all the time, God is good! So when we follow His commands and principles the result is always good.

Now, let's focus back in on this idea of the Sabbath. Let's apply what we have learned. Here is the question: Do I have to obey the Jewish Sabbath laws? Based upon what we have learned, here is the clear answer:

a. Christians are not required to keep the Sabbath Law

Remember, the Sabbath is Saturday. If you are going to obey the Sabbath, you must also, for the same reason, obey all the Old Testament dietary regulations. And there are some Christian groups like the Seventh Day Adventists that try to be consistent in this area but I think they are wrong in their understanding. Then, many Christians say, "Well, for Christians, Sunday became our Sabbath Day." Throughout the years, many laws have been passed about Sunday. These are most often referred to as "blue laws" because they go back all the way to the Colonial Puritans. For instance, in Colonial New England, there were many Sunday laws forbidding any pleasure or leisure on Sunday. They also outlawed Christmas celebration and observances, too. One particular Massachusetts sea captain returned home from two years at sea. He returned home on Sunday and made the mistake of kissing his wife, which was against the law on Sunday. The sea captain spent the next six days in the stockade for desecrating the Sabbath!

While many Christians have believed Sunday is the Christian Sabbath, it is nowhere taught in the Word of God. For Christians to insist on making Sunday the Sabbath Day, they are narrowing God's sidelines. The only thing that ought to matter to us is what the New Testament has to say about this. Here is the definitive statement, and for me, the issue is settled. In Colossians 2:16-17 we read, "Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath Day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ."

Jesus is the reality. All these rules and regulations were just shadows of the coming Christ. When Jesus came, He set up an entirely new covenant. In fact, if you care to read all of Colossians 2, a few verses earlier, we are told Jesus "took these regulations away, nailing it to the cross."

(Colossians 2:14) For you to try to observe these Old Testament rules and regulations, you have to go to the cross of Jesus and tear them down and embrace them again but sadly, many misinformed people have done this. You may be asking, "If we aren't to keep Saturday as the Sabbath, and if Sunday isn't the Sabbath Day, do we just ignore the Sabbath rule?" Not at all, and again, the Word of God tells us how to truly observe the Sabbath.

b. Christians should observe the SABBATH PRINCIPLE

The Sabbath principle has a surface principle and a much deeper spiritual principle. Here's the surface principle: Everyone needs to take at least one day out of seven and devote it to worship and rest. Remember, the Rules of God were given so we could enjoy life, not as hyper-strict regulations to restrict us. God created the heavens and the earth in six days and then God rested for the seventh. Why? Did God get tired? No, God doesn't need rest or sleep. "He who watches over Israel neither slumbers or sleeps." (Psalm 121:4) If God didn't *need* the rest, *why* did He rest? To teach us a lesson: We need rest. The Sabbath principle is as old as creation, and was given long before the Old Testament law. As human beings, our Creator did not design us to work seven days a week. Our bodies and souls both need rest and taking one day off out every seven is good for us. Henry Ward Beecher said, "A world without a Sabbath would be like a man without a smile or like a summer without flowers. It is a joyous day of the week."

So, although one day is not more "holy" than another, we must follow the good principle of setting aside one day in seven for worship and rest. If you try to work seven days a week you will soon run yourself into an early grave.

There is also a spiritual Sabbath the New Testament talks about. In Hebrews 4:9-10 we read: "There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; for anyone who enters God's rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from his." What does that mean? There are millions of people who are still "working" to earn their salvation. They go to church, read the Bible, pray, help people and do good deeds all in the hope that one day God will look at them and declare them good enough to enter heaven. They haven't entered the Sabbath rest. The Bible says in Ephesians 2:8 "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith." Then it says, "not of works, so that no one can boast." You are not saved by works. You can only rest in the finished work of Jesus on the cross! That's the true Christian Sabbath. What *day* is the Christian Sabbath? Sunday ... Monday ... Tuesday ... Wednesday ... Thursday ... Friday ... Saturday! Every day and in every way we are resting from our own work to save ourselves. Some may ask, "Well does that mean that I don't *ever* have to work for Jesus?" Of course, we work like servants for our Master! The difference is this—and this is very important: In the Old Covenant they worked first and then rested. That's why the Sabbath was the last day of the week. For Christians, it is just the opposite; we rest first and then we work for Jesus (I think that's another reason why Sunday is the first day of the week). I learned a little poem in college I haven't forgotten after all these years:

*I cannot work my soul to save
That work my Lord has done.
But I will work like any slave
For the love of God's dear Son!*

CONCLUSION

I heard the funny story about a man who died and left all he had to his wife. She didn't know how much money they had but she went out and purchased a nice tombstone for her husband reading, “REST IN PEACE.” Once she started looking into their finances, she discovered her husband actually left them deep in debt. It made her so angry she scrounged up some more money to have three words added to his tombstone. After the additional words, it read, “REST IN PEACE ... ‘TILL I COME!” Oh dear friend, the good news is that you don't have to wait for a cemetery to rest in peace. You can find your Sabbath rest in Jesus today! He said, “Come unto me all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn of me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you shall find rest for your souls.” (Matthew 11:28-29)

If you are caught in a religion that is just a bunch of rules and regulations, get out of it! Stop living a counterfeit Christianity and allow Him to teach you about His Sabbath rest; not a day but a lifestyle of resting in Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior.

OUTLINE

SCENE ONE: A horrifying harvest! (1-5)

Problem: The Pharisees added to God’s simple Sabbath law.

SCENE TWO: A hateful healing! (6-11)

Problem: The Pharisees used God’s law to accuse people

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APPLICATION: GOD’S COMMANDMENTS:

1. ARE FOR OUR BENEFIT, NOT OUR MISERY

Then he said to them, “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.” *Mark 2:27*

2. ARE UNDER THE LORDSHIP OF JESUS

- a. OLD TESTAMENT: Many laws; few principles
- b. NEW TESTAMENT: Two laws; many principles

Jesus replied: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on to these two commandments.” *Matthew 22:37-40*

3. ALWAYS PRODUCE GOOD IN OUR LIVES

Example:

a. Christians are not required to keep the SABBATH LAW

Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ. *Colossians 2:16-17*

b. Christians should observe the SABBATH PRINCIPLE

There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; for anyone who enters God’s rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from his. *Hebrews 4:9-10*



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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes