Farcical Pharisees and Silly Sabbaths [1]

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In the gospels, Jesus often gets into trouble with the Jewish leaders (Pharisees) for doing good deeds on the Sabbath. The purpose of telling these stories were to show that the Jewish leaders, at that point, had gotten so caught up in their laws and legalism that they could not look past it to do good. This was turning them into uncaring and unloving hypocrites. Most Christians can identify this lesson and the warning which they need to take away from it. But the Jewish leaders' fervour for keeping the Sabbath "holy" seems almost comical. Why were they so strict on it? In this article I am going to explain my theory for their strictness.

What is the Sabbath?

The Sabbath was the last day of the week—the seventh day. On this day God required the Israelites to rest and do no work. They were supposed to complete all the work which needed to be done before that, including buying and preparing food. Compared to the Western calendar, the Sabbath begins at sunset on Friday and ends at sunset on Saturday. This fact (together with the fact that Christians began gathering on Sundays because that was the day of the week when Jesus resurrected from the dead), is the reason why the West has a two-day weekend which stretches over Saturday and Sunday (and on which many people do not do work—at least not their normal job).

But the Sabbath was not simply a day in the week. It was a concept. This can be seen in Leviticus 25:1–7, which speaks about Sabbath *years*. These were special years and occurred ever seven years. On these years, agricultural lands were to lie fallow1. Related to all of this was also the regulations regarding the Year of Jubilee2. This was a very special year in which debts were cancelled and Israelites slaves [2] were set free.

In essence, the Sabbath is closely tied to the Jewish idea of Shalom ("peace"; joy, celebration and ultimate contentment) and was to remind the Israelites of the rest which Adam and Eve enjoyed in the Garden of Eden, and which can only be found in God. It cannot be completely attained while on earth, but there were weekly reminders that the Israelites would enjoy their ultimate Sabbath rest when God resurrects them from the dead. Then the Israelites would be truly free: their redemption from slavery in Egypt was only temporal, but would ultimately be fulfilled in being reunited with God3.

The Israelites: Breaking the Sabbath

The Sabbath was part of the Law which God gave to the Israelites through Moses. It was entrenched in both instances when it was given4. God later expounded on the Sabbath regulations in more detail in Exodus 31:14–18, 35:1–3 and Leviticus 23:3. People who were found to break the Sabbath in those early days were dealt with severely, as seen in Numbers 15:32–36. So from early on it was a big deal. God had given a commandment and expected full obedience to it.

However, as time went it, the Israelites began (starting in the book of Judges and continuing all the way through the books of Samuel and Kings) to break the Law. And, being almost the "least" of the

Ten Commandments, it was the easiest to neglect, break and forget.

We know this because when God was preparing to bring judgement on Israel and Judah, this was one thing which He mentioned through His prophets (while honour was reserved for those who did keep the Sabbath); see

- Jeremiah 17:19–27,
- Amos 8,
- Isaiah 58, and
- Isaiah 56:1–8

When God eventually exercised His divine judgement on the two questions through the various exiles, the judgement was perceived as extremely harsh to the people and it seems like God had abolished the very institutions which He had told them to keep sacred:

> He has laid waste his booth like a garden, laid in ruins his meeting place; the Lord has made Zion forget festival and Sabbath, and in his fierce indignation has spurned king and priest.
>
> Lamentations 2:6 (ESV)

The Jews: Keeping the Sabbath

Of course God's judgement was not absolute and He allowed the Jews to return to the Promised Lands (as the prophets had also foretold)[5]. When the Jews returned, there was renewed vigour and commitment to keep the Law. The Jews had seemingly learned their lesson and did not want to offend God like their forefathers had. We see an example of this renewed vigour—concerning the Sabbath in particular—in Nehemiah 10:31 and Nehemiah 13:15–22.

Over time the Jews developed a series of proxy laws which were stricter than the Law which they received through Moses. The idea was to make it more difficult to break the Laws which came through Moses (the breaking of which caused the Jews to be exiled by God). Over time the breaking of these proxy laws were dealt with almost as harshly as the breaking of the laws which they were supposed to protect. The Jewish leaders became very zealous in protecting these laws. The reasons were twofold: if the Jews kept the law, the won't be punished again like they were during the exile, and God would come and restore the Jews to its former glory.

Now, because the keeping of the Sabbath was almost the least of the Ten Commandments (in the sense that it can be mistaken as a "victimless crime"), it actually became vital to protect. The reason for this is that it could become a kind of "gateway sin": breaking it won't have any direct consequence, so the next sin will be easier to break. Before you know it, the entire nation is steeped in evil and debauchery! But then God will come and mete out judgement again, remembering all the way back to that first breaking of the Sabbath...

Jesus: Fulfilling the Sabbath

Given this background we can better understand the fervour with which the Jewish leaders attacked Jesus when He performed miracles on the Sabbath. There were six other days on which He could work, so there was no need to come pollute Israel with it now! But Jesus knew He had a limited time here on earth, and—more importantly—He was dealing with people who had real, immediate needs. A sub-group of that people who had a need was the Jewish leaders, who had to be made aware of their hypocrisy.

The great irony is of course that within Jesus was to be found the Sabbath-Shalom to which the Sabbath originally pointed. He gives rest to the weary (Matthew 11:25–30). Indeed Jesus alone is the one who can provide ultimate peace and rest (Hebrews 4:1–13). But as with much of what Jesus said,

it was different from what people were expecting; and not just the Jews of then, but it goes against the intuition of people today as well. People want immediate and temporal results. But the truth is that Christians, although already at peace through Jesus, are called upon to work hard, whether as missionaries, teachers, parents or however else God calls them. They are expected to work hard because the time is short (Matthew 9:37–38), but are promised eternal rest and joy (Revelation 14:13).

Conclusion

Over two millennia the Pharisees and Jewish leaders have been scorned and ridiculed for their strict adherence to the Sabbath laws. It is my theory that there were legitimate reasons for them to fear for keeping the Sabbath holy. However, the point was that they had become so entrenched in keeping their individual laws, that they had lost sight of the bigger picture. Indeed, they were no longer seeing the forest for the trees, because Jesus Himself was the long awaited Messiah, and if they could notice that—if people can notice it today—they will find their ultimate Sabbath rest.

- 1. This enforced a form of ley farming [3].
- 2. Leviticus 25:8–22.
- 3. Deuteronomy 5:15.
- 4. Deuteronomy 5:12–15 and Exodus 20:8–11.
- 5. 2 Chronicles 36:21 concludes the story of the kings of Judah by saying that God has evicted the Jews and that the land could lie fallow, catching up on the Sabbath rest which was due it.

Categories:

- Terminology & Concepts [4]

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