

Was the Sabbath part of Ceremonial – Temporary Law?

In Matthew 11:28-30, Jesus calls Himself the rest provider. “Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” Jesus then encourages His followers to take His yoke upon them. (Remember what Acts 15 and Galatians 5 call the Law: a yoke) Is Jesus contrasting Himself with the Law? Is He saying that true Sabbath rest is in Him? Is he saying that the way of relationship with Himself is the easy and restful way. Is He saying that resting in Him is the new yoke?

Is this mere speculative thinking? Is there any connection with this statement by Jesus and the Law, specifically the Sabbath?

Let’s study the context following Jesus’ statement. Notice the very next verses. Jesus’ discussion goes directly to the issue of the Sabbath. There can be no confusion as to what He was referring. Notice the following verses, and remember there were no chapter and verse separations in the original Scripture.

“At that time Jesus went through the grain fields on the Sabbath. And His disciples were hungry, and began to pluck heads of grain and to eat. And when the Pharisees saw it, they said to Him, “Look, Your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath!” But He said to them, “Have you not read what David did when he was hungry, he and those who were with him: how he entered the house of God and ate the showbread which was not lawful for him to eat, nor for those who were with him, but only for the priests? 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. But if you had known what this means, “I desire mercy and not sacrifice,” you would not have condemned the guiltless. For the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath. Mt. 12:1-8

Immediately after Jesus’ statement about taking His yoke of rest we find this statement. Jesus specifically sets up a Sabbath debate. Now some might argue that Jesus did not set this up, it was the religious leaders who set it up. But the use of the word “*time*” makes it clear that this debate was set up by Jesus. The word for time in the original Greek is the word “*chairo*” not “*chronos*.” The latter word refers to chronological time or ordinary course

of time. But the word “*chairo*s” is a word used for opportune time. It could more accurately be translated “at that moment of opportunity,” or “at that teachable moment.” Jesus leads his disciples through a grain field knowing their usual habit of eating grain when hungry to set up this teachable moment. It is in this context that Jesus responds to the religious leaders’ accusations with some fascinating teaching.

Notice the following points that Jesus makes as His disciples get stopped by the religious leaders for working on the Sabbath. This was not an infraction of the Mosaic code, only of some of the Rabbinic traditions, but it is interesting to see how Jesus answers the accusations.

First: He tells the story of David, anointed to be the next king of Israel, acquiring showbread to eat from the sanctuary. This was not a lawful thing to do, but since he was on king’s business he did so without being guilty.

Question: What type of law was David breaking? Was it the moral or ceremonial law? Was this law that David broke of the type of law that had eternal moral value, or was it of the category of temporary religious significance?

Answer: It was the temporary ceremonial law of course. David was not exempt from moral laws. We know that when he broke the seventh commandment and committed adultery with Bathsheba there was a severe penalty to pay.

Second: Notice in verse 5, Jesus reminds the Pharisees that the priests in the temple can break the Sabbath while doing their priestly duties. The priests have an exemption from the Sabbath law while carrying out religious functions.

Question: Under which category of commandments does this priestly office fall; religious ceremonial, or eternal moral?

Answer: The priestly system is clearly under the ceremonial system. It was part of the specific religious system of the Old Covenant.

Question: Were the priests exempt from the moral commands? Could they lie, cheat, steal, commit adultery?

Answer: No, of course they could not. Penalties for priests and their families were more severe.

Third: Jesus continues, “But if you had known what this means,

'I desire mercy and not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the guiltless." Mt. 12:7

Question: Is sacrifice eternal - moral, or temporary - ceremonial?

Answer: Clearly temporary ceremonial, while mercy is eternal. Jesus places Sabbath and sacrifice on the same level in His response to the religious leaders.

Conclusion: Jesus places Sabbath in the same category as the temporary religious laws that pointed forward to the cross. This parallels Jesus' statement to the Pharisees regarding healing on the Sabbath in John 7:22-23. Jesus reminds them that circumcisions can be performed on the Sabbath. In each example Jesus condones breaking of the Sabbath for the sake of ceremonial law. Therefore, the Sabbath observance cannot be an eternal moral law itself. Sabbath is ceremonial and temporary in nature. Never does Jesus place Sabbath observance in the moral category. Paul clarifies this in Colossians 2:16 and 17, where he clearly states that the food laws and Sabbath laws were a "shadow of things to come" while the "reality is Christ."

When we come to Christ by faith, we have found the true rest the ceremonial laws of the old covenant predicted.