

A Question & Answer Dialogue on . . .

The Sabbath

***** Do you believe Christians should observe the Sabbath today?**

As one of our basic, fundamental beliefs, the Association for Christian Development recognizes the seventh day of the week as the Sabbath of God. We believe it is God's will that Christians use this special day in a way that fulfills its purpose and intent.

***** But isn't the Sabbath "Jewish"?**

Many consider the Sabbath to be Jewish because of the emphasis the Jews have placed on keeping the Sabbath. The Sabbath was one of the special signs God gave the nation of Israel as a part of the Old Covenant (see Ex 31:16-17). But the Sabbath pre-dates the Jews. Jesus plainly taught that God had made the Sabbath for man (Mk 2:27). The Sabbath was created that first week – when man was made (Ge 2:1-3). God rested on the seventh day of the week, the Sabbath day, and sanctified it, set it apart for special or holy use (Ge 2:3, Ex 20:11). He is our example. And in the New Testament, Christ observed the Sabbath as our example (Lk 4:16; Jn 14:6-7; 1Jn 2:3-6). The apostles and New Testament Church observed the Sabbath, as even did Paul and the Gentiles (Acts 13:42-44; 17:2; 18:4). So the Sabbath is also a Christian institution and was the day of weekly worship for the early church well into the second century.

***** But isn't it impossible to perfectly keep the Sabbath because of its many restrictions? Didn't John say that even Christ broke the Sabbath?**

John 5:8-18 shows that Jesus was accused by the Pharisees for breaking the Sabbath. In other words, he did something that was contrary to their Sabbath rules and regulations (v. 16). In the same verse Jesus was accused of blasphemy against God (v. 18). On other occasions the Jews accused Christ and his disciples of other "unlawful deeds" (Mk 2:23-24; 3:2; Mt 12:1-14). Of course, Jesus never sinned against God's Ten Commandments (1Pe 2:21-22). If he had, he couldn't have been our Savior. Rather than Jesus "breaking God's law," the Jews were breaking God's Commandments by their human traditions (Mt 15:1-9). They were teaching commandments of men (v. 9). Their hearts were far from God (v 8).

***** Do you mean the Jews of Christ's day weren't really keeping the Sabbath properly?**

That's right. Over the years, the Jews added many regulations to the Sabbath. Many do's and don'ts. These were a result of their interpretations of the few verses regarding Sabbath observance given in the Old Testament. But without God's Spirit they lacked the spiritual understanding to properly interpret the Old Testament Scriptures. For example, because of a legalistic interpretation of Exodus 16, some figured it was a sin

to gather a little food on the Sabbath, even for daily sustenance. But if you'll read the entire chapter of Exodus 16 carefully, you'll be able to see that this occasion was a special and unique situation. God was testing the nation of Israel to see if they would obey him. God provided twice the amount of manna of Friday so they could rest on his Sabbath. They were told to remain in their dwellings on the Sabbath rather than gather manna. Some rebellious Israelites disobeyed God's clear instructions. They left their dwellings to gather manna on the Sabbath. Of course, no manna was to be found. They couldn't have gathered any food even if they wanted to. Jews evidently reasoned from this that the act of gathering any food on any Sabbath was strictly prohibited. In the day of Jesus they even considered the act of picking a stalk of grain to eat as "harvesting" on the Sabbath—a direct violation of Exodus 34:21. Christ set the record straight when challenged on the point (Mk 2:23-28).

Clearly, God is more concerned with attitude and motive than mere legalistic compliance. There is a spiritual reason and purpose behind the Sabbath command. Somehow it was being missed by the religious establishment of Christ's day. Lacking an understanding of the Sabbath's divine design, men made it into a religious artifact—a burden instead of a blessing.

***** But don't our actions reflect our attitude?**

Yes. That's a good point. If you know God's will and have an obedient attitude toward God, your actions will tend to be in harmony with God's will. But the Jews, lacking the attitude, spiritual understanding, and heart to obey, misunderstood God's intent for the Sabbath and looked to outwardly visible actions as evidence of righteousness.

***** For example?**

Notice the case of the man who picked up sticks on the Sabbath. It's recorded in Numbers 15:32-36. Many assume today that God was so upset with the man for the act of picking up a few little sticks that he had the hapless offender stoned to death. But read the text. Note that it nowhere says how many sticks were picked up—two or two thousand. It doesn't say how long or difficult the task was, nor if the "sticks" were small or large. And, most importantly, we don't know why the man did what he did. What was his motive behind the deed? The context can help clarify the situation. God had just given instruction regarding sins committed in ignorance and those that were presumptuous, knowledgeable, willful, rebellious sins. Compare verses 27-29 with verses 30-31. Note the difference in the way God dealt with the two types of sin. Then this story is inserted, probably to illustrate the distinction. Note that the stick-gatherer was not immediately killed for his deed. He was put in custody. The correct punishment was not evident and clear to Moses and the leaders. They appealed to God for his judgment. God, who knows men's hearts, sentenced the man to death. Obviously, the stick-gatherer was guilty and worthy of death. Why? Because of his simple deed? Or because of his attitude of willful rebellion (v 30-31)?

Another example of this is recorded in Jeremiah 17. The injunction against "carrying a burden out of your house on the Sabbath day" (v 22) was given in a specific context to deal with a specific problem. But rather than seeing the intent of the instructions, the Jews later added do's and don'ts about carrying "burdens." The act itself of carrying a burden on the Sabbath (as in the case of John 5 where the man Jesus healed picked up and carried his bedroll) was not so much the problem as was the reason, motive, and attitude. Note the context of Jeremiah 17. These burdens were being carried into the market places of Jerusalem (v 21, 24, 27). They were conducting business big time and working instead of resting and worshipping their Creator (v 22, 24). In attitude they were stiff-necked and rebellious toward God's laws and instructions (v 23). Nehemiah 10:31 and 13:15-22 give a similar account. The burdens spoken of are wares and products being sold and traded on the Sabbath as though it were an ordinary working day.

Many of the Jewish leaders, lacking God's Holy Spirit, missed the spiritual understanding of these scriptural examples. They wrongly interpreted these cases and built up a complicated, rigorous, physically-oriented list of deeds and acts which were considered "sin" and strictly prohibited. They were always concerned with what was "lawful" on the Sabbath day. Their approach to God's Sabbath was very legalistic. For instance, half a fig was all right since it could fit in the mouth and be classified as "eating" (which was "lawful"), but carrying a whole fig was considered a "burden" and prohibited as "labor," and therefore "unlawful."

The rabbis made the Sabbath an end in itself, rather than the intended means to an end. The multiplication of human imposed regulations, rather than preserving the Sabbath, destroyed it. And, such hair-splitting distinctions and rabbinical restrictions obviously led to a spirit of hypercritical fault-finding.

The Jews did not rightly interpret God's spiritual laws. They missed the point—the spiritual purpose of God's Sabbath and the intent behind the law. The way the Jews had interpreted these scriptures was contrary to God's original intent and purpose for the Sabbath, as Jesus plainly showed. Jesus came as the Son of his father Yahweh as our example to show us the way, to reveal the original intent of God's Sabbath command.

***** But since those Jews did not have God's Spirit motivating them, wasn't it necessary for them to come up with a detailed list of "do's and don'ts" for the Sabbath?**

Not at all. Those who feel that the Jews of Christ's day "rightly interpreted" Moses and were only doing what was necessary in drawing up a list of "do's and don'ts" to insure compliance with the law totally miss the point, as those Jews did. In Matthew 23, Christ sharply rebuked the Jewish leaders for their hypocrisy (v 13, 15) and for straining at a gnat while swallowing a camel (v 24). In their approach to the law, they omitted the "weightier matters" of judgment, mercy and faith (v 23). They looked to the external appearance of things rather than the heart (v 25-28). Christ exhorted them to judge righteous judgment (Jn 7:24). Missing the point of God's purpose for the Sabbath, they set out to legislate specifically how it should be kept.

***** Could you briefly explain what is God's purpose for the Sabbath?**

As Jesus taught, the Sabbath was made for man (Mk 2:27). The Sabbath was created when man was created (Ge 1-2). It was for all mankind, not just for Jews. It was for man's benefit, for his good. It was never intended to be a burden or impossible yoke. It was given to man for his physical and spiritual rest and rejuvenation. It's not a day of restrictive don'ts and can'ts. It's a positive day, not a negative one. It denotes rest, freedom, liberty. It is a day when you are free to serve and do good to others. A day to enjoy and delight in. A day for congregational worship of God, for fellowship with God and his family. A day free from the usual daily cares and worries, to spend with your God, your family, your brethren.

The Sabbath is a weekly memorial that we celebrate in honor of our Creator and Savior God. In the two versions of the Ten Commandments are given the two prime reasons for the Sabbath: Remember that God is the Creator of all (Ex 20); Remember that he is our Deliverer/Savior (Dt 5). These are the two great offices by which our God is known to us and the reason he is worthy of our obedience and worship. He is our Maker, our Father. He is also our Savior, having freed us from the slavery of sin and granted us eternal life in his kingdom.

***** What about watching TV on the Sabbath? And washing dishes, making your bed, things like that? Are these activities okay? Or are they sin?**

That sounds like a question some Pharisee might ask Jesus. What do you think is the right balance?

***** I get your point. But shouldn't the church—or my minister—decide these things for me? Advise me what to do?**

Why? How do you learn how to make decisions if you subcontract them out to others? To make wise decisions requires the application of values and principles. Our life is nothing but a series of decisions. Growth is learning how to make the better decisions in the constantly changing circumstances of life. You can't farm out that responsibility.

It's certainly not the church's job to legislate or to make decisions and judgments for people in matters of individual conscience and understanding. Rather, the ministry should teach people the spiritual principles of God's Word. Part of the individual's responsibility before his God is to study and understand God's will, pray and draw near to God for his guidance and wisdom.

***** But I'm fearful I'd make wrong decisions. I don't want to disobey God.**

The very fact you have that attitude is pleasing to God. Remember God is your loving Father. He's not a critical, negative, condemning God. He loves you. He wants to help you. He'll give you his Spirit and mind to lead you. Study Christ's teachings and examples. See how he observed the Sabbath of rest. Follow his example. This is how

we truly internalize the mind and way of God. A person can "conform" to legislated rules for a lifetime and yet never make the inward, internal changes that God is looking for. Just as muscles (or talents) must be used in order to be developed, we must ourselves exercise our minds—using judgment and wisdom and being guided by God's Word and his Holy Spirit—in making decisions relating to our daily Christian life.

***** One last question. When you say "Sabbath day" do you mean the seventh day of the week, or and "day of rest"?**

When Jesus said "the Sabbath" was made for man, he was referring to the seventh day of the week. Read Genesis 2:1-3 and Exodus 20:11. The Sabbath day is Saturday, the seventh day. Jesus never changed "the Sabbath" to another day. Nor does any man or church have that authority or prerogative.