

St Matthew

Chapter 12

Jesus and the Sabbath (12:1-14)

In Matthew 11:28 Jesus had promised “rest.” This would immediately bring the idea of “Sabbath” to the Jewish mind. But the rest that Jesus brings is much much different than the

Matthew 12 begins with controversy between Jesus and the Pharisees over the Sabbath laws and regulations. It is difficult for us to grasp the complexities and endless regulations which the Rabbis had put in place to “protect” the Sabbath. To aid us in discovering this context, here are some extended excerpts from Alfred Edersheim's *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*:

EXCERPTS FROM APPENDIX XVII.

THE ORDINANCES AND LAW OF THE SABBATH AS LAID DOWN IN THE MISHNAH AND THE JERUSALEM TALMUD.

The terribly exaggerated views of the Rabbis, and their endless, burdensome rules about the Sabbath may best be learned from a brief analysis of the *Mishnah*, as further explained and enlarged in the Jerusalem Talmud. For this purpose a brief analysis of what is, confessedly, one of the most difficult tractates may here be given....

Without discussing the possible and impossible questions about these *Erubin* raised by the most ingenious casuistry, let us see how Rabbinism taught Israel to observe its Sabbath. In not less than twenty-four chapters, matters are seriously discussed as of vital religious importance, which one would scarcely imagine a sane intellect would seriously entertain. Through 64½ folio columns in the Jerusalem, and 156 double pages of folio in the Babylon Talmud does the enumeration and discussion of possible cases, drag on, almost unrelieved even by Haggadah. The Talmud itself bears witness to this, when it speaks (no doubt exaggeratedly) of a certain Rabbi who had spent no less than two and a half years in the study of only one of those twenty-four chapters! And it further bears testimony to the unprofitableness of these endless discussions and determinations. The occasion of this is so curious and characteristic, that it might here find mention. The discussion was concerning a beast of burden. An ass might not be led out on the road with its covering on, unless such had been put on the animal previous to the Sabbath, but it was lawful to lead the animal about in this fashion in one's courtyard. The same rule applied to a packsaddle, provided it were not fastened on by girth and back-strap. Upon this one of the Rabbis is reported as bursting into the declaration that this formed part of those Sabbath Laws which

were like mountains suspended by a hair! And yet in all these wearisome details there is not a single trace of anything spiritual - not a word even to suggest higher thoughts of God's holy day and its observance.

The tractate on the Sabbath begins with regulations extending its provisions to the close of the Friday afternoon, so as to prevent the possibility of infringing the Sabbath itself, which commenced on the Friday evening. As the most common kind of labour would be that of carrying, this is the first point discussed. The Biblical Law forbade such labour in simple terms (Ex. xxxvi. 6; comp. Jer. xvii.22). But Rabbinism developed the prohibition into eight special ordinances, by first dividing 'the bearing of a burden' into two separate acts - lifting it up and putting it down - and then arguing, that it might be lifted up or put down from two different places, from a public into a private, or from a private into a public place. Here, of course, there are discussions as to what constituted a 'private place'; 'a public place'; 'a wide space,' which belongs neither to a special individual or to a community, such as the sea, a deep wide valley, or else the corner of a property leading out on the road or fields, and, lastly, a 'legally free place.' Again, a 'burden' meant, as the lowest standard of it, the weight of 'a dried fig.' But if 'half a fig' were carried at two different times - lifted or deposited from a private into a public place, or *vice versa* - were these two actions to be combined into one so as to constitute the sin of Sabbath desecration? And if so, under what conditions as to state of mind, locality, &c. ? And, lastly, how many different sins might one such act involve? To give an instance of the kind of questions that were generally discussed. the standard measure for forbidden food was the size of an

olive, just as that for carrying burdens was the weight of a fig. If a man swallowed forbidden food of the size of half an olive, rejected it, and again eaten of the size of half an olive, he would be guilty, because the palate had altogether tasted food to the size of a whole olive; but if one had deposited in another locality a burden of the weight of a half a fig, and removed it again, it involved no guilt, because the burden was altogether only of half a fig, nor even if the first half fig's burden had been burnt and then a second half fig introduced. Similarly, if an object that was intended to be worn or carried in front had slipped behind it involved no guilt, but if it had been intended to be worn or carried behind, and it slipped forward, this involved guilt, as involving labor.

Similar difficulties were discussed as to the reverse. Whether, if an object were thrown from a private into a public place, or the reverse. Whether, if an object was thrown into the air with the left, and caught again in the right hand, this involved sin, was a nice question, though there could be no doubt a man incurred guilt if he caught it with the same hand which it had been thrown, but he was not guilty if he caught it in his mouth, since, after being eaten, the object no longer existed, and hence catching with the mouth was as if it had been done by a second person. Again, if it rained, and the water which fell from the sky were carried, there was no sin in it; but if the rain had run down from a wall it would involve sin. If a person were in one place, and his hand filled with fruit stretched into another, and the Sabbath overtook him in this attitude, he would have to drop the fruit, since if he withdrew his full hand from one locality into another, he would be carrying a burden on the Sabbath.

It is needless to continue to analysis of this casuistry. All discussions to which we have referred turn only on the *first* of the legal canons in the tractate 'Sabbath.' They will show what a complicated machinery of merely external ordinances traditionalism set in motion; how utterly unspiritual the whole system was, and how it required no small amount of learning and ingenuity to avoid committing grievous sin. In what follows we shall only attempt to indicate the leading points in the Sabbath-legislation of the Rabbis.

The next two chapters in the tractate on the Sabbath discuss the manner in which food may be kept warm for the Sabbath, since no fire might be lighted. If the food had been partially cooked, or was such as would improve by increased heat, there would be temptation to attend to the fire, and this must be avoided. Hence

the oven was immediately before the Sabbath only to be heated with straw or chaff; if otherwise, the coals were to be removed or covered with ashes. Clothes ought not to be dried by the hot air of a stove. At any rate, care must be taken that neighbours do not see it. An egg may not be boiled by putting it near a hot kettle, nor in a cloth, nor sand heated by the sun. Cold water might be poured on warm, but not the reverse (at least such was the opinion of the school of Shammai), nor was it lawful to prepare either cold or warm compresses. Nay, a Rabbi went so far as to forbid throwing hot water over one's self, for fear of spreading the vapour, or of cleaning the floor thereby! A vessel might be put under a lamp to catch the falling sparks, but no water might be put into it, because it was not lawful to extinguish a light. Nor would it have been allowed on the Sabbath to put a vessel to receive the drops of oil that might fall from the lamp. Among many other questions raised was this: whether a parent might take his child in his arms. Happily Rabbinic literally went so far as not only to allow this, but even in the supposed case that the child might happen to have a stone in its hands, although this would involve the labour of carrying that stone! Similarly, it was declared lawful to lift seats, provided they had not, as it were, four steps, when they must be considered as ladders. But it was not allowed to draw along chairs, as this might produce a rut of cavity, although a little carriage might be moved, since the wheels would only compress the soil but not produce a cavity.

In the fifth chapter of the tractate we are supposed to begin the Sabbath morning....

Next, certain regulations are laid down to guide the Jew when dressing on the Sabbath morning, so as to prevent his breaking its rest. Hence he must be careful not to put on any dress which might become burdensome, nor to wear any ornament which he might put off and carry in his hand, for this would be a 'burden.' A woman must not wear such headgear as would require unloosing before taking a bath, nor go out with such ornaments as could be taken off in the street, such as a frontlet, unless it is attached to the cap, nor with a gold crown, nor with a necklace or nose-ring, nor with rings, nor have a pin in her dress. The reason for this prohibition of ornaments was, that in their vanity women might take them off to show them to their companions, and then, forgetful to the day, carry them, which would be a 'burden.' Women are also forbidden to look in the glass on the Sabbath, because they might discover a white hair and attempt to pull it out, which would be a grievous sin; but men ought not to use looking-glasses even on weekdays, because this was

undignified. A woman may walk about her own court, but not in the streets, with false hair. Similarly, a man was forbidden to wear on the Sabbath wooden shoes studded with nails, or only one shoe, as this would involve labour; nor was he to wear phylacteries nor amulets, unless, indeed, they had been made by competent persons (since they might lift them off in order to show the novelty). Similarly, it was forbidden to wear any part of a suit of armour. It was not lawful to scrape shoes, except perhaps with the back of a knife, but they might be touched with oil or water. Nor should sandals be softened with oil, because that would improve them. It was a very serious question, which led to much discussion, what should be done if the tie of a sandal had broken on the Sabbath. A plaster might be worn, provided its object was to prevent the wound from getting worse, not to heal it, for that would have been a work.

The seventh chapter of the tractate contains the most important part of the whole. It opens by laying down the principle that, if a person has either not known, or forgotten, the whole Sabbath law, all the breaches of it which he has committed during ever so many weeks are to be considered as only one error or one sin. If he has broken the Sabbath law by mistaking the day, every Sabbath thus profaned must be atoned for; but he has broken the law because he thought that what he did was permissible, then every separate infringement constitutes a separate sin, although labors which stand related as *species* to the *genus* are regarded as only one work. It follows, that guilt attaches to the state of mind rather than to the outward deed.

Next, forty less one chief or 'fathers' of work (*Aboth*) are enumerated, all of which are supposed to be forbidden in the Bible. They are: sowing, ploughing reaping, binding sheaves, threshing, winnowing, sifting (selecting), grinding, sifting in a sieve, kneading, baking; shearing the wool, washing it, beating it, dyeing it, spinning, putting it on the weaver's beam, making a knot, undoing a knot, sewing two stitches, tearing in order to sew two stitches; catching deer, killing; skinning, salting it, preparing its skin, scraping off its hair, cutting it up, writing two letters, scraping in order to write two letters; building, pulling down, extinguishing fire, lighting fire, beating with the hammer, and carrying from one possession into the other.

The number thirty-nine is said to represent the number of times that the word 'labour' occurs in the Biblical text, and all these *Aboth* or 'fathers' of work are

supposed to be connected with some work that had been done about the Tabernacle, or to be kindred to such work. Again, each of these principal works involved the prohibition of a number of others which were derived from them, and hence called their 'descendants' (*toledoth*). The thirty-nine principal works have been arranged in four groups: the first (1-11) referring to the preparation of bread; the second (12-24) to all connected with dress; the third (25-33) to all connected with writing; and the last (34-39) to all the work necessary for a private house. Another Rabbi derives the number thirty-nine (of these *Aboth*) from the numerical value of the initial word in Exod. xxxv. 1, although in so doing he has to change the last letter. Further explanations must here be added. If you scatter two seeds, you have been sowing. In general, the principle is laid down, that anything by which the ground may be benefited is to be considered a 'work' or 'labour,' even if it were to sweep away or to break up a cold of earth. Nay, to pluck a blade of grass was a sin. Similarly, it was sinful labour to do anything that would promote the ripening of fruits, such as to water, or even to remove a withered leaf. To pick fruit, or even to lift it from the ground, would be like reaping. If for example, a mushroom were cut, there would be twofold sin, since by the act of cutting, a new one would spring in its place. According to the Rabbis of Cæsarea, fishing, and all that put an end to life, must be ranked with harvesting.

In connection with the conduct of the disciples in rubbing the ears of corn on the Sabbath, it is interesting to know that all work connected with food would be classed as one of the *toledoth*, of binding into sheaves. If a woman were to roll wheat to take away this husks, she would be guilty of sifting with a sieve. If she were rubbing the ends of the stalks, she would be guilty of threshing. If she were cleaning what adheres to the side of a stalk, she would be guilty of sifting. If she were brushing the stalk, she would be guilty of grinding. If she were throwing it up in her hands, she would be guilty of winnowing.

Distinctions like the following are made: A radish may be dipped into salt, but not left in it too long, since this would be to make pickle. A new dress might be put on, irrespective of the danger that in so doing it might be torn. Mud on the dress might be crushed in the hand and shaken off, but the dress must not be rubbed (for fear of affecting the material). If a person took a bath, opinions are divided, whether the whole body should be dried at once, or limb after limb. If water had fallen on the dress, some allowed the dress to be shaken but

not wrung; other, to be wrung but not shaken. One Rabbi allowed to spit into the handkerchief, and that although it may necessitate the compressing of what had been whetted; but there is a grave discussion whether it was lawful to spit on the ground, and then to rub it with the foot, because thereby the earth may be scratched. It may, however, be done on stones. In the labour of grinding would be included such an act as crushing salt. To sweep, or to water the ground, would involve the same sin as beating out the corn. To lay on a plaster would be a grievous sin; to scratch out a big letter, leaving room for two small ones, would be a sin, but to write one big letter occupying the room of two small letters was no sin. To change one letter into another might imply a double sin. And so on through endless details!

As regarded other substances, the standard as to what constituted a burden was whether the thing could be turned to any practical use, however trifling. Thus, two horse's hairs might be made into a bird trap; a scrap of clean paper into a custom-house notice; a small piece of paper written upon might be converted into a wrapper for a small flagon. In all these cases, therefore, transport would involve sin. Similarly, ink sufficient to write two letters, wax enough to fill up a small hole, even a pebble with which you might aim at a little bird, or a small piece of broken earthenware with which you might stir the coals, would be 'burdens!'

Passing over the other chapters, which similarly illustrate what are supposed to be Biblical prohibitions of labour as defined in the thirty-nine *Aboth* and their *toledoth*, we come, in the sixteenth chapter of the tractate, to one of the most interesting parts, containing such Sabbath laws as, by their own admission, were imposed only by the Rabbis. These embrace: 1. Things forbidden, because they might lead to a transgression of the Biblical command; 2. such as are like the kind of labour supposed to be forbidden in the Bible; 3. Such as are regarded a sin compatible with the honour due to the Sabbath.

In the first class are included a number of regulations in case of a fire. All portions of Holy Scripture, whether in the original or translated, and the case in which they are laid; the phylacteries and their case, might be rescued from the flames. Of food or drink only what was needful for the Sabbath might be rescued; but if the food were in a cupboard or basket the whole might be carried out. Similarly, all utensils needed for the Sabbath meal, but of dress only what was absolutely necessary, might be saved, it being, however, provided,

that a person might put on a dress, save it, to go back and put on another, and so on. Again, anything in the house might be covered with skin so as to save it from the flames, or the spread of the flames might be arrested by piling up vessels. It was not lawful to ask a Gentile to extinguish the flame, but not duly to hinder him, if he did so. It was lawful to put a vessel over a lamp, to prevent the ceiling from catching fire; similarly, to throw a vessel over a scorpion, although on that point there is doubt. On the other hand, it is allowed, if a Gentile has lighted a lamp on the Sabbath, to make use of it, the fiction being, however, kept up that he did it for himself, and not for the Jew. By the same fiction the cattle may be watered, or, in fact, any other use made of his services.

Before passing from this, we should point out that it was directed that the Hagiographa should not be read except in the evening, since the daytime was to be devoted to more doctrinal studies. In the same connection it is added, that the study of the Mishnah is more important than that of the Bible, that of the Talmud being considered the most meritorious of all, as enabling one to understand all questions of right and wrong. Liturgical pieces, though containing the Name of God, might not be rescued from the flames. The Gospels, and the writings of Christians, or of heretics, might not be rescued. If it be asked what should be done with them on weekdays, the answer is, that the Names of God which they contain ought to be cut out, and then the books themselves burned. One of the Rabbis, however, would have had them burnt at once, indeed, he would rather have fled into an idolatrous temple than into a Christian church: 'for the idolaters deny God because they have not known Him, but the apostates are worse.' To them applied Ps. cxxxix. 21, and, if it was lawful to wash out in the waters of jealousy the Divine Name in order to restore peace, much more would it be lawful to burn such books, even though they contained the Divine Name, because they led to enmity between Israel and their Heavenly Father.

Another chapter of the tractate deals with the question of the various pieces of furniture - how far they may be moved and used. Thus, curtains, or a lid, may be regarded as furniture, and hence used. More interesting is the next chapter (xviii.), which deals with things forbidden by the Rabbis because they resemble those kinds of labour supposed to be interdicted in the Bible. Here it is declared lawful, for example, to remove quantities of straw or corn in order to make room for guests, or for an assembly of students, but the whole barn must not be emptied, because in so doing the floor

might be injured. Again, as regards animals, some assistance might be given if an animal was about to have its young, though not to the same amount as to a woman in childbirth, for whose sake the Sabbath might be desecrated. Lastly, all might be done on the holy day needful for circumcision. At the same time, every preparation possible for the service should be made the day before. The Mishnah proceeds to enter here on details not necessarily connected with the Sabbath law.

Chiefly from other tractates of the Talmud the following may here be added. It would break the Sabbath rest to climb a tree, to ride, to swim, to clap one's hands, to strike one's side, or to dance. All judicial acts, vows, and tilling were also prohibited on that day. It has already been noted that aid might be given or promised for a woman in her bed. But the Law went further. While it prohibited the application or use on the Sabbath of any remedies that would bring improvement or cure to the sick, 'all actual danger to life,' superseded the Sabbath law, but nothing short of that. Thus, to state an extreme case, if on the Sabbath a wall had fallen on a person, and it were doubtful whether he was under the ruins or not, whether he was alive or dead, a Jew or Gentile, it would be duty to clear away the rubbish sufficiently to find the body. If life were not extinct the labour would have to be continued; but if the person were dead nothing further

should be done to extricate the body. Similarly, a Rabbi allowed the use of remedies on the Sabbath in throat diseases, on the express ground that he regarded them as endangering life. On a similar principle a woman with child or a sick person was allowed to break even the fast of the Day of Atonement, while one who had a maniacal attack of morbid craving for food might on that sacred day have even unlawful food.

Such are the leading provisions by which Rabbiniism enlarged the simple Sabbath-law as expressed in the Bible, and, in its anxiety to ensure its most exact observance, changed the spiritual import of its rest into a complicated code of external and burdensome ordinances. Shall we then wonder at Christ's opposition to the Sabbath-ordinances of the Synagogue, or, on the other hand, at the teaching of Christ on this subject, and that of his most learned and most advanced contemporaries? And whence this difference unless Christ was the 'Teacher come from God,' Who spake as never before man had spoken?



Jesus and His Disciples Pick Grain on the Sabbath

So far Edersheim. We see from this study that the Sabbath laws stood in the center of Jewish piety, but such piety had departed far from the simplicity of the Lord's intended rest, especially the rest that Jesus would bring through the forgiveness of sins.

Jesus' light yoke and easy burden is here contrasted to the heavy burdens which the Pharisees and their laws laid on people's backs. But Jesus could not be yoked with such laws, He was the giver of these laws, "the Lord even of the Sabbath."

Thus Jesus teaches from the Scriptures about the Sabbath.

First He recounts the story of King David and His eating of the showbread from the temple, bread only permitted the priests, 1 Samuel 21:1-9.

Second, Jesus reminds them that the priests who serve in the temple to not profane the Sabbath [See Numbers 28:9; Leviticus 24:5]. Third, Jesus quotes for a second time [!] Hosea 6:6: "I desire mercy and not sacrifice." (See Matthew 9:13 and the notes on the same.)

All this explains who Jesus is, the Messiah, the Son of God, the greater Son of David. He is greater, indeed, than the temple. What a stunning thing for Jesus to say, and yet this is only the first of three "greater than" statements that Jesus will make in this chapter:

Matthew 12:6: "I say to you that in this place there is One greater than the temple."

Matthew 12:41: "...indeed a greater than Jonah is here."

Matthew 12:42: "...indeed a greater than Solomon is here."