

HEALING ON THE SABBATH

December 7, 2008
10th Sunday of Luke
Revision E

GOSPEL: Luke 13:10-17

Today’s Gospel lesson is not used at all in the West.

Table of Contents

Background: Jesus and the Sabbath Laws 308
 Gospel Lesson: Luke 13:10-17 311

Background: Jesus and the Sabbath Laws

The Mosaic Law concerning the Sabbath was very clear, specific and strict; and the Law had teeth in it. For example:

Mosaic Law	Reference
Complete rest was required.	Exodus 23:12, 31:15, 35:2
One could not even kindle a fire (to cook a meal).	Exodus 35:3
All cooking had to be done the day before.	Exodus 16:23-29
No gathering of wood for the day after the Sabbath was allowed either.	Numbers 15:32-36
This was one of the Ten Commandments.	Exodus 20:9-11, Deuteronomy 5:13-15
The death penalty was prescribed for anyone breaking the Sabbath.	Exodus 31:15, 35:2
One could not carry heavy loads or use pack animals to do so either. The day of rest applied to animals also.	Exodus 20:10, Deuteronomy 5:14, Jeremiah 17:21-22
One could not travel on the Sabbath but had to stay in one’s place and rest.	Exodus 16:29
Later this traveling restriction was limited to “a Sabbath day’s journey” of 2000 cubits ¹ (about half a mile).	Acts 1:12
No buying and selling were allowed on the Sabbath. Nehemiah locked the gates of Jerusalem to prevent Gentile vendors from selling on the Sabbath.	Nehemiah 10:31, 13:15-21

These Sabbath rules did not just appear suddenly with Moses. In ancient Babylon, even prior to Abraham, there was a Sabbath observance². It was not as strict as the Sabbath of the Mosaic Law and it was also tied to astrology. Other ancient countries had Sabbath traditions also. Thus, when the Lord commanded the Sabbath observation to remember how He created the world in six days and rested on the seventh (Exodus 31:15-17, 20:9-11), this was probably what other cultures commemorated also.

Copyright © Mark Kern 2008

¹ 2000 cubits is the distance between the Ark and the people as Israel traveled in the desert (Joshua 3:4) and also the limit of the pasturelands outside the Levitical cities (Numbers 35:4-5).

² Merrill F. Unger, *Unger’s Bible Dictionary*, Moody Press, Chicago, 1967, p. 939. The origin of the “Sabbath” went back to pre-Semitic days, and the name “Sabbath” is actually of Babylonian origin. This day was described on cuneiform tablets as “a day of rest for the soul”. In Accadian times (early Babylonian), the Sabbath was a day on which certain work was forbidden.

Tertullian described³ the gist of the Mosaic Law as having been given in embryo to Adam in the Garden of Eden, and that if Adam and Eve had obeyed it, they would not have fallen. Thus the Gentiles had the Law prior to Moses. This is reflected in the Sabbath laws of other cultures prior to Moses

But also tied in to the Sabbath observation was a recalling of the time Israel was being “worked to death” in Egypt (Deuteronomy 5:15). Thus the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath (Mark 2:27). This is very apparent from a careful re-reading of the original Sabbath commands where the whole point is complete rest (Exodus 23:12, 31:15-17, 35:2; Deuteronomy 5:14).

The Sabbath was more than just rest, however. It was also a holy day (Exodus 16:23, 20:11, 31:15), and a day of gladness (Numbers 10:10). On this day, the daily offering was doubled (four lambs versus two, see Numbers 28:3-15) and the showbread was set out in the Holy Place (Leviticus 24:8) before the Lord. The Sabbaths were also to be a sign (or omen) between Israel and God “that they might know that I am the Lord who sanctifies them” (Ezekiel 20:12, 20). Thus, there was to be a focus on the things of God and on doing good.

In the true spirit of the Sabbath, Jesus did a number of healings on the Sabbath. For example:

Healing	Reference
The paralytic (4 th Sunday of Pascha)	John 5:9
A man with a withered hand	Matthew 12:10, Mark 3:2, Luke 6:7
The man born blind (6 th Sunday of Pascha)	John 9:14
A woman’s hunchback (today’s Gospel)	Luke 13:14
A man with dropsy	Luke 14:3

When the Scribes and Pharisees criticized Jesus for these things – saying that He was working on the Sabbath – Jesus replied:

Work Allowed on the Sabbath	Reference
The priests work on the Sabbath in performing all the sacrifices.	Matthew 12:5
Circumcision is performed on the 8 th day, whether that day is a Sabbath or not.	John 7:22
The Jewish leaders will lead their animals to water on the Sabbath.	Luke 13:15
They will also pull their animals out of a hole on the Sabbath.	Luke 14:5
He also challenged them regarding Mosaic Law regulations for or against doing good on the Sabbath.	John 7:23, Mark 3:4, Luke 6:9
The bottom line was: He’s Lord of the Sabbath. He’s the One who gave the Law to Moses.	Matthew 12:8, Mark 2:28, Luke 6:5
Mercy, not sacrifice was to be the spirit of the Sabbath.	Matthew 12:7, Hosea 6:6

The paradoxical aspect of all this confrontation Jesus had with the Jewish leaders over the keeping of the Sabbath is that they thought they were upholding the letter of the Law while Jesus was merely doing good on the Sabbath, which is what the Sabbath was for. And Jesus is Lord of

³ Tertullian, Answer to the Jews, I, iii, 2.

the Sabbath (Matthew 12:6-8, Mark 2:27-28) for He gave the Sabbath Law to Moses and made the Sabbath for man.

John of Damascus stated⁴ that the Sabbath rest was made for people who were carnal and worldly. Since they did not devote their whole life to God, the Law bound them, with stiff penalties for disobedience, to devote a small part of their week to distraction from worldly things. Those people who did devote their whole life to God are noted as sometimes “breaking the Sabbath” in doing the Lord’s will.

“The seventh day is called the Sabbath and signifies rest. For in it God rested from all His works, as the divine Scripture says; and so the number of the days goes up to seven and then circles back again and begins at the first. This is the precious number with the Jews. God ordained that it should be held in honor, and that in no chance fashion but with the imposition of most heavy penalties for the transgression. And it was not in a simple fashion that He ordained this, but for certain reasons understood mystically by the spiritual and clear-sighted”.

“God, knowing the denseness of the Israelites and their carnal love and propensity towards material in everything, made this Law: (1) in order that the servant and the cattle should rest as it is written, for the righteous man regards the life of his beast. (2) In order that when they take their ease from the distraction of material things, they may gather together to God, spending the whole of the seventh day in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, the study of the divine Scriptures and resting in God”.

“For when the Law did not exist and there was no divinely inspired Scripture, the Sabbath was not consecrated to God. But when the Scripture was given by Moses, the Sabbath was consecrated to God in order that on it they, who do not dedicate their whole life to God, and who do not make their desire subservient to Him as though to a Father, may on that day discuss the purpose of the Sabbath. Thus they may abstract a small, truly a most insignificant, portion of their life for the service of God, and this from fear of the chastisements and punishments, which threaten transgressors. For the Law is not made for a righteous man but for the unrighteous. Moses was the first to endure fasting with God for forty days and again for another forty. Thus he afflicted himself with hunger on the Sabbaths, although the Law forbade self-affliction on the Sabbath. But if they should object that this took place before the Law, what will they say about Elijah the Tishbite who accomplished a journey of forty days on one meal? For he, by thus afflicting himself on the Sabbaths not only with hunger but also with the forty days’ journeying, broke the Sabbath. Yet God, Who gave the Law, was not angry with him but showed Himself to him on Horeb as a reward for his virtue. And what will they say about Daniel? Did he not spend three weeks without food? And again, did not all Israel circumcise the child on the Sabbath, if it happened to be the eighth day after birth? And do they not hold the great fast⁵, which the Law enjoins if it falls on the Sabbath? And further, do not the priests and the Levites profane the Sabbath in the works of the tabernacle and yet are held blameless? If an ox should fall into a pit on the Sabbath, he who pulls it out is blameless, while he who neglects to do so is condemned. And did not all the

⁴ John of Damascus, Exposition of the Orthodox Faith, IV, 23.

⁵ That is, the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 23:27-32)

Israelites surround the walls of Jericho, bearing the Ark of God for seven days, in which the Sabbath was included? The observance of the Sabbath was devised for the purpose of securing leisure to worship God in order that they might, both servant and beast of burden, devote a very small share to Him and be at rest. For the carnal that were still childish and in the bonds of the elements of the world, were unable to conceive of anything beyond the body and the letter”.

Gospel Lesson: Luke 13:10-17

The Gospel lesson took place in late 29 AD just before the Feast of the Dedication (i.e. Hanukkah or the Festival of Lights, John 10:22) and probably occurred in Perea on the Eastern side of the Jordan as Jesus was heading toward Jerusalem (Luke 13:22). Jesus had been teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath (Luke 13:10) and He used the occasion to give an important teaching on the Sabbath itself. There was a woman who had a severe hunchback or spinal injury such that she couldn't straighten her back (Luke 13:11). Jesus remarked that Satan had bound her like this for 18 years (Luke 13:16). This seems very similar to the affliction of the Patriarch Job by Satan, both in the destruction of his family and property (Job 1:9-22) and the destruction of his health (Job 2:4-10). It would seem like all health problems might be traceable to Satan in some way. For more discussion on this, see the Gospel lesson for the 6th Sunday of Luke.

Knowing that He would get a reaction, Jesus called the woman over to Him, laid His hands on her and said, “woman, you are loosed from your infirmity” (Luke 13:12). The Synagogue Ruler (equivalent today to the pastor of a church) rebuked Jesus publicly for doing work on the Sabbath (Luke 13:14). The Synagogue Ruler undoubtedly had the backing of the other attendants and council of the synagogue since Jesus' reply addressed a number of people (Luke 13:15). Jesus' reply compared the practice of the Synagogue Ruler and the others in caring for their animals on the Sabbath. The animals needed to be unbound from their stall and led to water; why couldn't a daughter of Abraham also be unbound? (Luke 13:15,16).

Jesus stated His reply very strongly as a confrontation, calling the Synagogue Ruler a hypocrite (Luke 13:15). The result was that the Synagogue Ruler and his attendants were put to shame while the multitude rejoiced for all the glorious things done by Jesus (Luke 13:17).

Cyril of Alexandria made⁶ three points in commenting on this:

1. God had commanded men to rest on the Sabbath. When Jesus gave rest to the crippled woman freeing her from diseases, and the Synagogue Ruler forbid it, plainly it was the Synagogue Ruler and not Jesus who was breaking the Law of the Sabbath.
2. Jesus did no manual labor in healing the woman. If the Synagogue Ruler wished to forbid labor of the mouth, does this mean that one can't sing Psalms or pray on the Sabbath either?
3. The Synagogue Ruler was not really angry on account of the Sabbath Law being broken, but because he saw Christ honored and worshipped as God. This was concealed in his heart and the Sabbath Law ruse was just a pretext. For this reason, he was most excellently convicted by the Lord and called a hypocrite.

⁶ Cyril of Alexandria, Commentary on the Gospel of St. Luke, Homily 97, Studion Publishers, Inc., 1983.

On another occasion about a year and a half earlier (early 28 AD) in Galilee, the Scribes and Pharisees criticized Jesus for munching on heads of grain that they picked as they walked through the grain fields (Mark 2:23-24). They had interpreted the Sabbath regulations as prohibiting work such as “harvesting grain”, even though the Law did not address such minutia as walking and munching.

Later that day in early 28 AD, when Jesus was in the synagogue, they watched Him closely so they would have witnesses against Him if He did any healing on the Sabbath (Mark 3:1-2). Knowing this, Jesus asked a man with a withered hand to step forward (Mark 3:3). Addressing the Scribes and Pharisees, He asked them: “Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?” But they kept silent. Looking around, He was grieved by the hardness of their hearts. So Jesus told the man to stretch out his hand and it was restored. The Pharisees then went out and began plotting with the Herodians (their enemies) on how they might destroy Jesus (Mark 3:4-6).

All this represents taking the Sabbath Law to an unmerciful, legalistic extreme. Christ had said, “For the Son of man is Lord of the Sabbath” speaking of Himself. Referring to our humanity, He said, “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath” (Mark 2:27-28, Luke 6:5). John Chrysostom commented⁷ as follows:

“Why then was he punished who was gathering sticks? (Numbers 15:32-36) If the laws were to be despised at the beginning, of course they would not be observed afterwards”.

“The Sabbath at first conferred many great benefits; for instance, it made them gentle towards those of their household, and humane; it taught them God’s providence and the creation; it trained them by degrees to abstain from wickedness, and disposed them to regard the things of the Spirit. Did Christ then repeal a thing so profitable? Far from it; no! He greatly enhanced it. For it was time for them to be trained in all things by the higher rules”.

Irenaeus stated⁸ that the Jewish leaders, in their desire to uphold their traditions, were unwilling to be subject to the Law of God, which prepared them for the coming of Christ.

“For not only by actual transgression did they set aside the Law of God, but they also set up their own law in opposition to it, which is termed, even to the present day, the pharisaical law. In this law they suppress certain things, add others, and interpret others, as they think proper, which their teachers use, each one in particular. Desiring to uphold these traditions, they were unwilling to be subject to the Law of God, which prepared them for the coming of Christ. They even blamed the Lord for healing on the Sabbath, which the Law did not prohibit. For they themselves, in one sense, performed acts of healing upon the Sabbath, when they circumcised a man on that day. But through tradition and the pharisaical Law, they did not blame themselves for transgressing the command of God, and for not keeping the commandment of the Law, which is the love of God”.

⁷ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Matthew, XXXIX, 3.

⁸ Irenaeus, Against Heresies, IV, 12.

Chrysostom also stated⁹ that Jesus had prepared the Jewish leaders for His healing on the Sabbath by driving the moneychangers and merchandisers out of the Temple. In all His doings, He was clarifying to them various aspects of the Law that He had given to Moses.

“Do you see their excessive malice, and how the benefits done to others incensed them more than reproofs? At one time He said that they made the Temple ‘a den of thieves’ (Mark 11:15-19), showing that what they sold was gotten by theft, pillage, and covetousness, and that they were rich through other men’s calamities; at another time, He called it ‘a house of merchandise’ (John 2:13-17), pointing to their shameless trafficking. Why did He do this? Since he was about to heal on the Sabbath, and to do many such things, which they thought were transgressions of the Law, in order that He might not seem to do this as though He had come to be some rival God and opponent of His Father, He took occasion to correct any such suspicion of theirs. One who had exhibited so much zeal for the House was not likely to oppose Him who was Lord of the House, and who was worshipped in it”.

Tertullian noted¹⁰ that there are distinctions of “work” on the Sabbath: God’s work and man’s work. Christ sought to clarify this distinction with the Jewish leaders and included a number of examples. As the “Lord of the Sabbath”, He could have annulled the Sabbath, since it was He that instituted it, but He didn’t since God’s work continues today.

“The Pharisees were in utter error concerning the Law of the Sabbath, not observing that its terms were conditional, when it commanded rest from labor, making certain distinctions of labor. For when it says, ‘In it you shall not do any work of yours’ (Exodus 20:10), by the word *yours*¹¹ it restricts the prohibition to human work — which everyone performs in his own employment or business — and not to divine work. Now the work of healing or preserving is not proper to man, but to God. So in the Law it says, ‘You shall not do any manner of work in it’ (Exodus 12:16 LXX), except what is to be done for any soul, that is to say, in the matter of delivering the soul¹²; because what is God’s work may be done for the salvation of the soul. When Christ wanted to initiate them into this meaning of the Law by the restoration of the withered hand, He asked, ‘Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good, or not? To save life, or to destroy it?’ (Luke 6:9) In order that He might remind them what works the Law of the Sabbath forbids and what it commands, He was called ‘Lord of the Sabbath’ (Luke 6:5), because He maintained the Sabbath as His own institution”.

“Even if He had annulled the Sabbath, He would have had the right to do so, as being its Lord, and as He who instituted it. But He did not utterly destroy it, in order that it might be plain that the Creator did not break the Sabbath, even at the time when the ark was carried around Jericho. That was really God’s work, which He had ordered for the sake of the lives of His servants when exposed to the perils of war”.

“He has in a certain place expressed an aversion of Sabbaths, by calling them *your Sabbaths* (Isaiah 1:13-14 LXX), reckoning them as men’s Sabbaths, not His own, because they were celebrated without the fear of God by a people

⁹ John Chrysostom, Homilies on John, XXIII, 2.

¹⁰ Tertullian, Five Books Against Marcion, II, ii, 4, 12.

¹¹ Tertullian connects this to the previous verse “all your work”.

¹² That is, saving life.

full of iniquities, and loving God ‘with the lip, not the heart’ (Isaiah 29:13). He put His own Sabbaths (those, that is, which were kept according to His prescription) in a different position. By the same prophet, in a later passage, He declared them to be ‘true, delightful, and inviolable’ (Isaiah 58:13, 56:2). Thus Christ did not at all rescind the Sabbath. He kept the Law, and did a work, which was beneficial to the life of His disciples, for He indulged them with the relief of food when they were hungry (Matthew 14:15-20), and cured the withered hand (Matthew 12:9-14). In each case, He stated, ‘I came not to destroy the Law, but to fulfill it’ (Matthew 5:17). He fulfilled the Law, while interpreting its condition. Moreover, He exhibited in a clear light the different kinds of work, while doing what the Law excuses from the sacredness of the Sabbath, while imparting to the Sabbath day itself an additional sanctity by His own action. In like manner, the prophet Elisha, on this day, restored to life the dead son of the Shunammite woman (2 Kings 4:32-37). It was *proper employment* for the Sabbaths of old to do good, to save life, not to destroy it; Christ introduced nothing new, which was not after the example, the gentleness and the mercy of the Creator. He fulfilled the prophetic announcement, ‘The weak hands are strengthened’, as were also ‘the feeble knees’ (Isaiah 35:3) of the two paralytics” (Mark 2:1-12, John 5:1-9).

Sometime during the 1st Century, Christians began meeting for worship on Sunday rather than Saturday, which was the traditional Sabbath. This was done to proclaim the Resurrection, which occurred on a Sunday, and also to distance themselves from the unrighteous Jews. The Apostle John refers to this in Revelation 1:10, where Revelation was written in about 95 AD. Ignatius of Antioch (107 AD) refers¹³ to the Lord’s Day having replaced the Sabbath as the time for worship. The Didache also refers¹⁴ to the Lord’s Day. Sunday was seen then as comparable to the eighth day of the Feast of Tabernacles. The Feast of Tabernacles represented the coming of the Kingdom of God in Glory and the eighth day of the feast – a Sabbath – represented the Feast as stretching into eternity. It was on this eighth day – the Great Day – that Jesus stood up and said, “If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water” (John 7:37-38). Where the living water refers to the Holy Spirit (John 7:39).

Taking the Sabbath as Christ meant it to be taken in our lives today, we as individuals often need healing on the Sabbath also. Our culture sometimes drives us to be workaholics where working harder or longer gives us the illusion that we will catch up. When demons try to bind us with this treadmill lifestyle, we should remember that the Sabbath Laws brought to mind how Israel was being “worked to death” by slavery in Egypt (Deuteronomy 5:15). We should also remember Jesus’ gentle rebuke to Martha, Lazarus’ sister, who had gotten into a workaholic state serving God: “One thing is needed, and Mary has chosen that good part (i.e. sitting at Jesus’ feet, hearing His Word) which will not be taken away from her” (Luke 10:41-42).

The Lord used as an example of the spirit of the Sabbath how the priests under the Old Covenant worked on the Sabbath (Matthew 12:5). This was hard work also: killing, gutting, and butchering animals one after another to prepare the peoples’ sacrifices. Yet the priests also had days off to spend time with their families; they didn’t have to work seven days per week. For

¹³ Ignatius of Antioch, Epistle to the Magnesians, 9:1.

¹⁴ The Didache, or the Teaching of the Twelve, from the late 1st or early 2nd Century, 14:1.

those of us that have to work on the Lord's Day, we should follow their example and plan for some time off on other days to devote to Sabbath type activities.