

## JESUS AND THE SABBATH



*Luke 10:15 "When (Jesus) laid his hands on (the woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years), immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, 'There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day.'"*

So then, did Jesus break the Sabbath law or not? That is the question. And it seems to be a simple query. You know the various biblical stories in the Gospels that seem relevant. So, what do you think, did Jesus break the Sabbath?

In today's Gospel, for instance, Jesus heals a woman in the synagogue on the Sabbath, and the leader of the synagogue is indignant because Jesus has "worked" on the Sabbath, which is against the law. "Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy," say the Ten Commandments. "Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work – you, your son, or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns." The Scripture is clear, or is it, as Jesus asked the crowd today, "Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?"

On another occasion, a Pharisee accused Jesus' disciples of breaking the Sabbath by plucking grain from the fields because they were hungry as they walked through the countryside. "Six days you shall gather, but on the seventh day, which is a Sabbath, you shall not gather" (Ex. 16.26). Again, the Scripture is clear. To which on this occasion, Jesus famously responded that "the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath" (Mk. 2.27).

On another Sabbath, Jesus was in the synagogue where there was a man with a withered hand. We are told that the scribes and

the Pharisees were watching Jesus here to see whether he would cure on the Sabbath or not. Apparently, Jesus had developed a reputation for violating the Sabbath, and so they were watching so that they might find an accusation against him, we are told. Even though Jesus knew what they were thinking, he said to the man who had the withered hand, "Come and stand here." He got up and stood there. Then Jesus said to (the crowd), "I ask you, is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to destroy it?" After looking around at all of them, who apparently did not answer, Jesus said to (the man with a withered hand), "Stretch out your hand." He did so, and his hand was restored. Immediately after this, we are told that the Pharisees went out of the synagogue and conspired with the Herodians against Jesus, about how to destroy Jesus (Mk. 3.6). For again the Scripture is clear, "You shall keep the sabbath, because it is holy for you; everyone who profanes it shall be put to death . . . Six days shall work be done, but the seventh day is a sabbath of solemn rest, holy to the Lord; whoever does any work on the sabbath day shall be put to death" (Ex. 31.13-15). So, we shouldn't be particularly surprised by the response of the Pharisees and the Herodians.

Then there was the healing of the invalid at the Sheep Gate in Jerusalem. Jesus told invalid to take up his mat and walk, and he did. Therefore, the Jews started persecuting Jesus

because he was doing such things on the sabbath. But Jesus answered them, "My Father is still working, and I also am working." For this reason, the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him. The invalid also got in trouble for this healing for 'carrying his mat', which likewise was considered 'working.'

Then there was the blind beggar that Jesus healed by the Gate of Siloam, one of my favorite stories. The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask afterwards, "Is this not the (blind) man who used to sit and beg?" Some were saying, "It is he." Others were saying, "No, but it is someone like him." He kept saying, "I am the man." But they kept asking him, "Then how were your eyes opened?" He answered, "The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, "Go to Siloam and wash." Then I went and washed and received my sight."

So, the crowd brought the man who had been born blind to the Pharisees. Now it was a sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. So, the Pharisees also began to ask him how he had received his sight. He said to them, "(Jesus) put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see." Some of the Pharisees said, "This man (Jesus) is not from God, for he does not observe the sabbath." But others said, "How can a man who is a sinner perform such (miraculous) signs?" And they were divided among themselves. So, they said again to the blind man, "What do you

say about him? It was your eyes he opened." (The man who been born blind) said, "He is a prophet." Then the Jews did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight, so they called the parents of the man who had received his sight and asked them, "Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?" His parents answered, "We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; but we do not know how it is that now he sees, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself." His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jewish authorities.

So then in the end, did Jesus break the Sabbath law or not? That is the question. And it seems to be a simple one. I have rehearsed the various stories in the Gospels, and Jesus' responses. Were Jesus' replies satisfactory, or even exculpatory? So, what do you think?

If you are a Biblical literalist, you will have a difficult time answering that simple question easily. Because besides these various stories in which Jesus is reputed to be clearly breaking the Sabbath law, we have the verses in Matthew's Gospel (5:17-8) where Jesus is reported to say, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish (the law) but to fulfill (it). For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one dot, not one iota, will pass from the law until all is accomplished." So, in

Matthew's Gospel, a Gospel written to a Jewish audience at a time when the Jews were rejecting Jesus, there the author clearly states that Jesus respected the Law of Moses. But did he, or is this just a piece of evangelical propaganda on Matthew's part?

In the end, I suspect that how we answer that question about whether Jesus broke the Sabbath law or not, says more about us than about Jesus. If you are a law-and-order kind of person, if you like your religious doctrine clearly defined and your theological beliefs carefully chiseled in stone, where they are eternal and unchanging, then you will cling to that verse from Matthew's Gospel and declare that Jesus did NOT violate the Sabbath law, could not violate the Sabbath law, because he came to fulfill it. You will also need to do backward Biblical gymnastics to explain away the various stories as being more about Jesus breaking the 'traditional' interpretations of the Sabbath law of his day, and not breaking the Sabbath law itself. You might even suggest that Jesus fulfilled the Law's ultimate purpose, which maybe he did.

Others will simply declare that yes, yes, Jesus obviously broke the Sabbath. He was a religious radical in his day. He was a reformer, not a conformist. In the words of the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews "Jesus was the mediator of a new covenant." He wanted to shake things up and change how we live

our lives. Still, it is clear from the stories that the scribes and Pharisees, that the leaders of synagogues, the Herodians, and later the Sanhedrin, that all of them, those Jewish leaders of Jesus' day, all those who interpreted and explained the law of Moses for the people, they firmly believed that Jesus broke the Law. They were indignant about it; they conspired against him, and eventually they had him crucified.

So how we respond to the simple question about whether Jesus broke the Sabbath law may reveal ultimately whether we are 'conservative,' or 'liberal'; whether we are seeking to conserve the unchanging traditions and truths of our religion, where "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today, and forever," or whether we are seeking to 'liberate' ourselves and others from those manmade traditions and practices, where Jesus said "that you shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free!"

We have fought this fight again and again and again in the long history of the Church. The apostles themselves debated and were violently divided amongst themselves about whether to circumcise Gentiles, for instance, Gentiles who wanted to be a part of the Body of Christ. The conservatives boldly declared that the Mosaic Law is clear, and circumcision is necessary. "God said to Abraham, 'As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout all generations. This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you

and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised . . . and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you" (Gn. 17.9). The liberals, on the other hand, will declare that God was doing something new and inspired in the early Church, they will talk about circumcision of the heart --- and so it was that circumcision was no longer required for Christians.

Three hundred years ago, American patriots were arguing for democracy, a new and liberal idea against the conservatives who wanted to defend the traditional Biblical view of the Divine Right of Kings. Again, the Scriptures are clear. St. Paul himself wrote "Let every person be subject to the king, for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur damnation" (Romans 13:1-2).

Two hundred years ago, abolitionists were fighting against the clear Biblical acceptance of slavery, including specific Mosaic and Levitical laws establishing and governing that institution. One hundred years ago, suffragettes were fighting for women's rights against a traditional and biblical subjugation of women. Fifty years ago, it was racism, intermarriage, and segregation. Today it is human sexuality.



Again and again in the life of the church, we are caught in a struggle between what the scribes and Pharisees of our day declare to be the eternal and unchanging truths of our religion and those radical liberals who declare that God is doing something new, inspired by the Holy Spirit, and that we must trust, not the Scriptures, nor the traditions of men, nor our religious leaders at times, but we must trust our hearts.

So then, did Jesus break the Sabbath law or not? That is the question. And it seems to be a simple one. You have heard again the various biblical stories. So, what do you say?