

LEGALISTIC FAULTFINDING

(Matt 12:1-2)

As we follow the ministry of Christ, we see a rising hostility on the part of the religious leaders against Jesus. First, they had a major problem with Christ's claim to be able to forgive people (Mt. 9:1-8).

This was exacerbated by the fact that Jesus associated with tax collectors and sinners (Matt. 9:9-13). And then, as we see in Matthew 12, they had a major problem with Christ not having any regard for their legalistic Sabbath rules, claiming that He was Lord of the Sabbath, which absolutely inflamed them (Matt. 12:1-14).

There is a thematic play on words here in context. Jesus promised REST to all those who come to Him, as seen in Matthew 11:28-30. The Hebrew word translated as Sabbath means rest. God intended the Sabbath to be a time of rest, but the religious legalism of the Jews turned it into a burden. Jesus offers spiritual rest in contrast to Jewish legalism, which corrupted the Sabbath rest intended by God, as seen in Matthew 12:1-14.

Circumcision and the Sabbath were the two most significant covenant SIGNS to the Jews. To be a Jew was to be identified with circumcision and the Sabbath. Circumcision marked the Jews as the covenant people of God as the descendants of Abraham (cf. Gen. 17:9-14). Keeping the Sabbath was a sign that they were the covenant people of God as seen in the Mosaic Law (cf. Ex. 31:12-18).

Thus, the Sabbath was deadly serious in the eyes of the Jews, and they all knew that in the OT the penalty for breaking the Sabbath was the death penalty (cf. Ex. 35:2). Therefore, the rabbis tried to protect the sanctity of it by building "a wall of rules and regulations" around it. But this became their undoing.

The issue of Sabbath legalism became a MAJOR point of contention between Jesus and the religious leaders called the Pharisees. And the first occasion for this ongoing conflict over the Sabbath is seen in Matthew 12:1-8 (cf. Mk. 2:23-28; Lk. 6:1-5).

Matthew 12:1-2 (NKJV)

1 At that time Jesus went through the grainfields on the Sabbath. And His disciples were hungry, and began to pluck heads of grain and to eat.

2 And when the Pharisees saw it, they said to Him, “Look, Your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath!”

Here is the setting. Jesus and His disciples were passing through grainfields – probably either wheat or barley. It happened to be the Sabbath, and the disciples were hungry, and so they began to pluck a few heads of grain and eat them.

This was not stealing. The law instructed people to leave the edges of their fields so people passing by would have something to eat.

Deuteronomy 23:25 (NKJV)

25 When you come into your neighbor's standing grain, **you may pluck the heads with your hand**, but you shall not use a sickle on your neighbor's standing grain.

So the problem was not that they were eating out of these fields; the problem, according to the Pharisees, is that they were doing it on the Sabbath day.

The Pharisees were obviously dogging Christ's footsteps, looking for anything they could find to criticize and thereby discredit Him. They had a sinfully CRITICAL spirit.

Well, here they thought for sure that they had found something, saying, ***“Look, Your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath.”***

However, as we will see, Jesus NEVER ever broke the law (cf. Mt. 5:17-18). The disciples here were not actually guilty of breaking the law of Moses, but they were breaking the extra regulations of the rabbis.

The Pharisees and scribes saw the Sabbath as the sign of the Mosaic covenant, which they took very seriously – at least in a legalistic sense. To flaunt disobedience to the Sabbath in their minds was to desecrate the entire Mosaic Law. So, in order to protect it from being violated, they had added MANY other rules and regulations in addition to Scripture, which they saw as sort of a protective fence that would help guard against violating the Sabbath.

Here is a basic rule before God. Do not ADD to God's revelation. That results in manmade “legalism” and invariably results in serious error. God doesn't need any help in communicating, and to add regulations for holy living to what He has said inevitably results in burdensome legalism.

In the MacArthur Study Bible, in the concordance under BAPTISM, it has all sorts of headings. One of these is “Scriptures supporting infant baptism” with the reference of Prov. 30:6.

Proverbs 30:6 (NKJV)

6 Do not add to His words, Lest He rebuke you, and you be found a liar.

Any time we ADD legalistic rules to God’s Word, we make ourselves out to be a LIAR, and before God that is most serious. Some forms of professing Christianity ADD tradition; they ADD rituals, they ADD the apocrypha (etc.), and pretty soon everything is so corrupted that it is not according to the Word of God at all.

Jesus often rebuked the Pharisees for ADDING their traditions to the Word of God as legalistic requirements for the people to live by (cf. Mt. 5:43; 15:6).

What the law of Moses actually forbade was the harvesting of grain on the Sabbath (cf. Ex. 20:10; 34:21; Num. 15:32-36; Deut. 5:12-14). Harvesting is different than merely eating breakfast. But legalism takes it further than God ever intended. The Jewish rabbis had come up with 39 categories of work that were forbidden on the Sabbath, with all manner of subheadings under that.

Three of these categories were threshing (plucking the grain); harvesting (rubbing it in their hands); and then winnowing (separating the grain from the chaff by blowing the chaff away). There you have it - that is UNLAWFUL work on the Sabbath – that is according to Pharisaic thinking.

Footnote on the Sabbath

God rested on the 7th day of Creation week (Gen. 2:2). The word Sabbath means “rest” and is related to the Hebrew word for seven. It became one of the 10 commandments (Ex. 20:9-11). It served as a reminder of God’s covenant with Israel at Mount Sinai (cf. 31:12-17, Neh. 9:13-15). And it was a weekly reminder of the children of Israel’s deliverance from Egyptian bondage (Deut. 5:15).

However, Gentiles were never COMMANDED to keep the Sabbath. Nine out of the ten commandments are repeated in the NT in conjunction with the New Covenant, but not the Sabbath command. An abiding principle remains in terms of rest because Jesus said the Sabbath was made for the

good of man (cf. Mk. 2:27). But in the NT, in the early church, a transition took place from Saturday to Sunday. We are now in a new order, under a new covenant, and therefore the church began to assemble on Sunday in honor of the risen Christ instead of meeting on Saturday. We are under no legalistic obligation to keep the Sabbath (cf. Col. 2:16-17).

Colossians 2:16–17 (NKJV)

16 So let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths,

17 which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ.

Note 3 things about the Sabbath.

1. There was no command to keep it prior to the Mosaic Law.
2. This command was never given to the Gentiles.
3. It is specifically said to be a sign of God's covenant with Israel (Ex. 31:16-17).

A "legalistic" critical spirit plays God in that it places manmade rules and regulations on people that supposedly have the authority of God, but that is not true. Thus, it misrepresents God and places people into legalistic bondage. This is in contrast to the YOKE of Christ, which is light and brings rest to the soul!