

M. *Shabbat Shalom*

I began this course commenting on the confused nature of Christian thinking about Torah, about the Law of Moses. A few years ago as part of the incessant culture wars going on in America, a judge in Alabama surreptitiously installed a 5,200 pound granite monument of the Ten Commandments in the rotunda of the state judicial building. When the state had it removed, so-called evangelical Christians protested angrily. It struck me as odd that Christians, not Jews, were fighting for the Law of Moses, which supposedly no longer applies to us. And even more oddly, they were fighting for a set of laws which none of them actually try to observe in their entirety. Specifically I am referring to the commandment to keep the Sabbath. Despite Christian promoting of the Ten Commandments historically, very few Christians have ever actually observed the Sabbath as a day of rest. (We also ignore the prohibition of graven images, which technically would include this monument!)

Yet the Ten Commandments, however poorly applied in practice, have been central to Christianity from very early on. So much so that the ancient rabbis actually began to downplay their importance. The Talmud says that when the Jerusalem Temple was still standing it was customary to recite the Decalogue before the Shema in the daily morning service. (The AME liturgy reflects this ancient practice.) Yet the rabbis decided to remove it from the service. Why such a radical change?

In a discussion of the daily prayers, the Talmud records this statement: “R. Matna and R. Shmuel bar Nahman [third century] said: It would be proper to recite the Ten Commandments every day. And why don’t we? Because of the disputations of the heretics, lest they say: These alone were given to Moses at Sinai” (Jerusalem Talmud *Berakhot* 1:4; Babylonian Talmud *Berakhot* 12a). “Heretics” here almost certainly refers to Christians, who evidently were saying that only the Ten Commandments were of divine origin, thus rejecting the rest of the Law. So the Ten Commandments became associated more strongly with Christianity, while Judaism “demoted” them from their pride of place in the liturgy in order to emphasize the importance of the whole Law. (Again, this lends support to my theory that Christianity and Judaism defined themselves over against each other.)

Along the same lines, modern day Rabbi Norman Lamm argues that Christians rejected the ritual aspects of Judaism and only embraced its moral precepts as taught in the Ten Commandments (Lamm, *Leviticus*, p. 117). Lamm says that what Christians did was very modern: reducing religion to a “simple formula,” ten steps to success and happiness. “All of our Western culture is colored by Christianity, a religion which won its millions of converts by boiling down Judaism to its easiest regulations, by accepting the Ten Commandments—and even those not completely—and rejecting most of the rest of the Torah” (Lamm, *Exodus*, pp. 96-97). I think this is what many Christians believe about Jesus as well, that he came to set us free from the burdensome Law and give us an easier religion of grace and love.

To my mind that is utter nonsense. Rabbi Lamm here is working with a stereotype of Christian belief and practice, one that many Christians have embraced, but those Christians

who believe along with him that their faith is “easier” than Judaism must never have read the gospels. (Far too many Protestant Christians are content to understand their faith in terms of a couple of verses from Romans taken out of context). Rituals are relatively easy to perform and get right; moral precepts like loving your neighbor or your enemy, avoiding anger, not coveting material wealth and social status—those moral values are hard to live by, whether you are Jewish or Christian. As we have seen, Jesus and the rest of the New Testament wholeheartedly embrace the hardest parts of the Law, not the easiest. Christianity does not free us from the “burden” of the Law.

Yet the paradox exists that most Christians, like that Alabama judge, see the Ten Commandments as universal, binding moral teaching while viewing Sabbath observance as an unnecessary Jewish ritual. I would like to explore with you how the Jewish (and biblical) understanding of the Sabbath is much more than simply a religious ritual; it is *torah*—teaching or instruction in righteousness.

1. Torah on the Sabbath

First we will look at the main Scriptural passages that talk about the Sabbath. I have provided you with a somewhat ridiculously literal translation to help make clear some important points.

Genesis 2:2-3

And God completed on the seventh day the work which he had done and he stopped on the seventh day from all the work he had done. And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he had stopped from all the work that God created and did.

You will notice, if you are following along in another translation, that the word I have translated as “stopped” is usually rendered “rested.” Literally it is the verb *shabat*, from which we get “sabbath,” and its regular meaning is to stop or cease. To help us hear the text more clearly I have usually translated “sabbath” as “stopping day.”

Exodus 20:8-11

*Be mindful of the stopping day to make it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work but the seventh day is a sabbath to Yahweh your God. You shall do no work, you and your son and your daughter, your male slave and female slave, and your beast and the resident alien who is within your gates. **Because six days Yahweh made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them and he rested on the seventh day. That is why he blessed the stopping day and made it holy.***

This is the version of the commandment we are most familiar with, which God gave the people from Mount Sinai. It clearly refers to the Genesis creation story, but note that here the actual verb for “to rest” is used. “Remembering” in the Bible is more than simply having nice thoughts about something. It is being mindful of something so as to act in a certain way. When the insurrectionist on the cross asks Jesus to remember him, that is what

he means. As a good Jewish revolutionary (not “good thief”), he wants to be made part of Jesus’ coming kingdom. When Jesus tells his disciples, “Do this in remembrance of me,” he is saying, “Let my loving act of self-sacrifice that you share in this meal shape how you act in the world.” Being mindful of the Sabbath means being intentional about how you observe it.

Deuteronomy 5:12-15

*Guard the stopping day so as to make it holy, as Yahweh your God has instructed you. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath to Yahweh your God. You shall do no work, you and your son and your daughter, your male slave and female slave, and your ox and your donkey and all your beasts and the resident alien who is within your gates so that your male and female slaves may rest like you. **You shall be mindful that you were a slave in Egypt, and Yahweh brought you out from there with a strong hand and outstretched arm. That is why Yahweh your God has instructed you to guard the stopping day.***

This version of the commandment comes 40 years later as the Israelites are on the verge of entering the Promised Land. Moses gives a summary of the laws that were given earlier (when many of his audience were not alive) as well as his own sermonistic commentary on what their lives should be like in the land. But Moses is not simply repeating verbatim the earlier command. The rabbis were troubled by this, by the fact that Exodus says “remember” while Deuteronomy says “guard” or “keep.” They concluded that miraculously, when God issued the command, Moses was able to hear both words at the same time! That idea is reflected in the words of a song sung on Shabbat that we will look at shortly: *Lechah Dodi*. It says, “Keep and remember in a single utterance/The one God caused us to hear.” (The KJV and many other translations add the word “keep” to the Exodus version, which simply has the word “sanctify, make holy.”)

Notice here that the rationale for this commandment is also completely different. Exodus roots the Sabbath command in God the Creator, looking back to the creation story in Genesis, while here it is God the Redeemer, remembering God’s act of rescuing them from harsh, unending labor in Egypt. So not only are they to stop and rest but their slaves/servants are not to do the work for them, nor are they to make undocumented immigrants work without rest. Not even their animals are to be overworked. God’s saving purpose for the world encompasses all of creation, not just human beings. (We will talk about this more in the next section on the kosher laws.) Later in Leviticus (chs. 25-26) God will also issue a command for a sabbath year for the land itself. The whole of creation is to partake in God’s Sabbath rest. No exceptions. Not only are they to be intentional about the Sabbath, they are to guard it, protect its unique character, its holiness, and make sure that everyone else does so as well.

Exodus 31:12-17

*Yahweh said to Moses, “And you, speak to the Israelites, saying, ‘Nevertheless, my stopping days you are to guard, for that is a sign between me and you for your generations to know that I am Yahweh who makes you holy. And you shall guard the stopping day because it is holy for you. Anyone who treats it as ordinary surely shall be put to death, for whoever does work on it, that person shall be cut off from the midst of his people. Six days shall work be done and the seventh day is the sabbath of complete stopping, holy to Yahweh. Anyone doing work on the stopping day is surely to be put to death.’ The Israelites are to guard the stopping day in order to make the stopping day a covenant for the ages for their generations. **Between me and the Israelites it is a sign for the ages, for in six days Yahweh made the heavens and the earth and on the seventh day he stopped and caught his breath.**”*

This is the least well-known version, and perhaps in some ways the most interesting because of its context. It comes in the middle of the lengthy instructions God gives the people for the building of the Tabernacle, the home they are making for God in their midst. After detailing those instructions, God somewhat surprisingly gives this reiteration of the Sabbath commandment.

Notice several unique elements here:

- a. It is not only the day God has made holy, separate, set apart from ordinary use. It is also God’s people who are made holy through observance of that holy day.
- b. It stresses the seriousness of the command, and the harsh penalty for breaking it, not just death, but being cut off from the community. The Sabbath defines and gives shape to this community, its relationship to God and to each other (as indeed it did in ancient times and continues to do). Sabbath observance creates a community that is different from all others, a community that is holy. Observing the Sabbath is part of what it means to be in that community.
- c. It stresses the long lasting, enduring nature of this sign (“perpetual covenant” KJV, NRSV). The Sabbath is a sign of the covenant and a lesson in who God is. Rabbi Sacks makes the wonderful suggestion that in this third major statement of the Sabbath command, the focus is on Revelation, revealing something about God. So the three major versions of this commandment in Torah together encompass the three central biblical categories of Creation, Redemption, and Revelation. The Sabbath is connected to all aspects of God’s relationship with Israel and the world.
- d. Instead of saying that God rested on this day, it uses a verb, usually translated “refreshed,” that comes from the word for “breath.” God stopped and caught his breath, or perhaps breathed easy (see Ex. 23:12; I owe this brilliant translation to Robert Alter).

Why does God repeat this commandment at just this point in the narrative as he is giving instructions for building the Tabernacle? I think God is telling them in sharp, direct language that *even when they are doing God’s work, even when they are engaging in a*

mission for God, they are to stop and rest. They are not to allow the fact that they are doing something for God justify being overworked.

What does all this tell us about the Sabbath? And how are these biblical texts different from our usual Christian understanding of the Sabbath?

1. The Sabbath is the seventh day, Saturday. Not Sunday.
2. The Sabbath pattern is built into the very fabric of creation. It is not just a commandment for Israel. It tells us something about who God is as well as how we are supposed to live.
3. The Sabbath is a day of stopping, a day of ceasing from work, a day of rest and refreshment, of catching our breath. THERE IS NO MENTION OF WORSHIP OR RELIGIOUS ACTIVITIES. Why? Worship in Israel happened every day.
4. The Sabbath is holy, set apart and different from other days of the week, just like the people are to be set apart, different from all the other peoples in the world.
5. Ignoring the Sabbath can lead to an early death.

If we are going to talk in a biblical way about the Sabbath, rather than relying on our human traditions, this is where we need to start.

2. The Prophets on the Sabbath

We have seen what Torah has to say about the Sabbath and discovered that its primary command is to cease from work and rest, catch our breath, refresh ourselves, on the seventh day, Saturday. It is a commandment rooted in creation itself and must be observed not only by Israelites but also by foreigners (Gentiles) and even their animals. There is no mention at all of what most people assume the Sabbath is about: religious services. If we are to fully appreciate the value and meaning of the biblical Sabbath, we need to keep this firmly in mind.

Christians often look down on the “ritualistic legalism” of Torah while embracing the ethical and social justice message of the Prophets. What we have seen so far is that the Sabbath is not a religious ritual; it is a way of life. The prophets themselves actually connect Sabbath observance with social justice and are full of condemnation of those who violate the Sabbath. We have already seen in the Sabbath commandments in Torah that there is an element of social justice: all people, no matter what their social class or immigration status, are to partake equally of the Sabbath rest. The prophets elaborate on this idea.

Amos denounces those merchants who are impatient for the Sabbath to end so they can continue their predatory business dealings (Amos 8:4-6). They are supposed to be ceasing from work but instead are worrying about their lost profits, which come from their oppression of the poor. They have completely missed the point about what the Sabbath means. Isaiah says that keeping the Sabbath is a way of doing God’s righteous justice (Is. 56:1-2) and part of what it means to delight in the Lord (Is. 58:13-14). Jeremiah declares that keeping the Sabbath is essential for the continuation of the Davidic kingship while

violating the Sabbath will bring destruction to Jerusalem (Jer. 17:19-27). Ignoring the Sabbath will lead to the breakup of the community. Ezekiel sees profaning the Sabbath as a desecration of God's name (Ez. 20:12-14; 22:26). For Ezekiel, disregarding the Sabbath is as bad as bloodshed, idolatry, sexual misconduct, the oppression of immigrants and the poor, and other economic crimes (22:1-12).

Both Isaiah and Ezekiel look forward to the new age, the world to come when God's salvation will be fully realized, as a time when the Sabbath will be faithfully observed even by non-Israelites (Is. 56:3-8; 66:23; Ez. 44:24; 45:17). "The foreigners who join themselves to the Lord, to love the name of the Lord, and to be his servants, all who keep the sabbath and do not profane it, these I will bring to my holy mountain and make them joyful in my house of prayer. For my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples" (Isaiah 56:6-7). Note that Jesus affirms this understanding of the Temple (Matt. 21:13). The universal application of this Law comes from the fact that it is part of creation, not simply the covenant with Israel.

So the distinction Christians make between moral and ritual laws simply doesn't apply to the Sabbath (and I think in general is unhelpful, as we will see when we look at the kosher laws). Keeping the Sabbath is a moral commandment because it is a reflection of the very nature of God and of God's covenant with humanity. It tells us something about what it means to be a human being in this world and establishes a unique way of life for a community that is supposed to be different from the world. As we will see, it is "training in righteousness" (2 Tim. 3:16).

3. Jesus on the Sabbath

While the Bible repeatedly stresses the importance of observing the Sabbath, it is very sparse on giving details of what that looks like, especially what it means to work. As we have seen, it is not designated specifically as a day of worship, although there are a couple of extra sacrifices prescribed for that day to mark its special nature (Num. 28:9-10). In the wilderness, people were prohibited from gathering and cooking manna on the Sabbath (Ex. 16:22-30). The prohibition on cooking seems to be behind the specific command not to light a fire in your home on the Sabbath (Ex. 35:3). Torah prohibits plowing and harvesting on the Sabbath (Ex. 34:21). And there is one story of a man caught gathering wood on the Sabbath who is sentenced to death (Num. 15:32-36). But that is all that Torah has to say by way of specifics.

Other biblical passages indicate some of the ways this came to be understood later on. Nehemiah warns people against buying and selling on the Sabbath and closes Jerusalem each Sabbath to prevent merchants from bringing their goods into the city (Neh. 10:31; 13:15-22). We have seen that Amos also presupposes a ban on commerce on the Sabbath (Amos 8:4-6). Jeremiah prohibits carrying a load on the Sabbath or bringing merchandise into the city, which also seems primarily to refer to conducting business (Jer. 17:21-22, 27). We note here the shift from an agricultural setting to an urban one. Rather than plowing and reaping, it speaks of buying and selling. The original commandments in Torah

have been adapted for a new situation. Such ongoing interpretation and application of the Sabbath command continues to be necessary into our time.

So given the importance placed on the Sabbath by the Scriptures, it was necessary from very early on for there to be a clear definition of just what constituted “work.” We see the discussions and debates on this key issue in some of the extra-biblical Jewish writings like the Dead Sea Scrolls. And we see this debate continuing in the New Testament, where Jesus is very much engaged with this issue. Which is what you would expect from a first century Jewish teacher who was calling people to faithfulness to the coming Kingdom of God, which as we have seen was to include Sabbath observance. Jesus is clearly involved in arguing with other Jews over the proper way to observe the Sabbath rest. But Jesus never overturned Sabbath observance. In fact, as we will see, he elevated its importance for his followers.

The gospels depict Jesus regularly attending synagogue on the Sabbath, often as a teacher (Matt. 12:9; Mark 1:21; 6:2; Luke 4:16; 6:6; 13:10). We see Paul doing the same thing (Acts 13:14-15, 44; 16:13; 17:2; 18:4). Jesus assumes his disciples will continue to be associated with the synagogue after he is gone (Mark 13:9; Luke 12:11). Although worship and religious activities were not part of the Sabbath commandment, since it was a day off from work, people were free to meet together for other purposes, including worship and religious instruction.

We also see Jesus’ followers carefully observing the Sabbath at the time of his death, hurrying to get his body into a tomb before sundown and only coming back to anoint it with spices after Sabbath is over (Matt. 28:1; Mark 16:1; Luke 23:50-56). And Jesus presumes that his followers will continue to observe Sabbath travel restrictions even in times of crisis (Matt. 24:20). So the overall New Testament picture of Jesus and his early followers is one of faithful Sabbath observance, even in difficult circumstances.

That picture, then, must provide the background for how we understand the dispute stories that focus on observing the Sabbath. First is a story involving Jesus’ disciples, who pick some heads of wheat to eat on a Sabbath because they are hungry (Matt. 12:1-8//Mark 2:23-28). Technically this is work, harvesting grain, and the Pharisees rightly question the propriety of their actions. Jesus defends their actions by pointing to two Scriptural examples. In the first, David asks the priest to break the Law and give him the Temple bread because he and his men are hungry, although this is not specifically a Sabbath violation (1 Sam. 21:1-6). In the second, Jesus says that the priests in the Temple do things on the Sabbath that technically violate its commands. He then quotes Hosea 6:6—“I desire mercy and not sacrifice.” Here I think Jesus is not simply affirming a general principle that compassion for human need can override the demands of the Law at times. He is arguing like a rabbi, using a well-established principle of biblical interpretation, going from the lesser to the greater, “how much more.” The unspoken logic of Jesus’ quote is this: if mercy is greater than sacrifice, and priests are allowed to do work on the Sabbath in order to offer sacrifices, then performing an act of mercy on the Sabbath, even though technically work, should also be permitted. This is a brilliant example of rabbinic exegesis.

That is part of what Jesus means when he goes on to say, “Something greater than the Temple is here” (Matt 12:6).

Finally, Jesus declares his Lordship over the Sabbath, asserting his own authority to interpret what it means to observe the Sabbath. The Sabbath for Jesus is the “Lord’s Day.” Central to his understanding is mercy, *chesed*, acts of loving-kindness, which we have seen are a crucial part of later rabbinic teaching as well. If he were abolishing the Sabbath, he would not declare his authority over it.

The rest of the disputes all have something to do with Jesus healing on the Sabbath (Matt. 12:9-13//Mark 3:1-5//Luke 6:6-10; Luke 13:10-17; 14:1-6; John 5:1-18; 7:21-24).

This is the only action of Jesus that is criticized as a breach of Sabbath regulations.

Again Jesus argues for compassion over a stricter interpretation of the Law. Interestingly, he does not make an argument here from Scripture but rather from common sense. “Which of you having a son or an ox fall into a well will not immediately pull him out on the Sabbath?” (Luke 14:5//Matt. 12:11). A peasant farmer barely eking out a subsistence living could ill afford to lose a valuable animal, let alone a son. Jesus assumes his audience, including the Pharisees, would agree with this assumption.

Yet we do know that in at least one Jewish group from that time, such an action was prohibited. A couple of the documents in the Dead Sea Scrolls, written by a separatist sect that thought the Pharisees were too liberal, address this very issue. “If [an animal] falls into a well or pit, one may not lift it out on the Sabbath. . . . Any living human who falls into a body of water or a cistern shall not be helped out with ladder, rope, or other implement” (CD 11:13-16). That sounds pretty harsh. Another document clarifies this rule. “Let no one raise up an animal which has fallen into the water on the Sabbath day. But if it is a man who has fallen into the water on the Sabbath, one shall extend his garment to him to pull him out with it, but he shall not bear an implement on the Sabbath” (4Q265, fragment 7). Here this community makes a fine point of distinction between carrying a separate tool, like a ladder or a rope, which would constitute work, and using the garment you are wearing as a tool to rescue a human being.

These documents, which date from 150-200 years before the time of Jesus, indicate that such discussions were going on in the larger Jewish community as people tried to define just what constituted prohibited work and at the same time make allowances for basic human needs. Jesus fits squarely into the middle of this discussion about the proper way to observe the Sabbath rest. Jesus does not overturn Sabbath observance but he does reject overly-stringent rules that put an undue burden on ordinary human beings and prolong human suffering. Jesus authoritatively declares that acts of mercy to humans and animals—healing, feeding the hungry—are signs of the meaning of the Sabbath (Luke 13:16). They are what holiness looks like. “Work” cannot be so broadly defined that it prevents such acts of compassion.

Jesus sums up his attitude towards the Sabbath in a memorable statement: “The Sabbath was made for humans, not humans for the Sabbath” (Mark 2:27). Here Jesus points us back to the creation story (“was made”), as well as the subsequent affirmations in Torah that the Sabbath was for the benefit of humans (and animals!): “You shall do no

work, you and your son and your daughter, your male slave and female slave, and your ox and your donkey and all your beasts and the resident alien who is within your gates so that your male and female slaves may rest like you” (Deut. 5:14). “Six days shall you do your work and on the seventh day you shall cease, so that your ox and your donkey may rest, and your slave and the resident alien catch their breath” (Ex. 23:12). Scripture makes it clear that the Sabbath was God’s gift to humans, a necessary respite from the hard labor of the rest of the week. Jesus also affirms the supreme value of the Sabbath, a value he finds in Torah itself. He is not overturning a burdensome ritual law. He is declaring the Sabbath to be God’s gracious gift to humanity.

4. The Rabbis on the Sabbath

a. On Healing

The sense that we get from these multiple stories in the gospels is that it was well-accepted in Jesus’ day that acts of healing violated the Sabbath. But the odd thing is, nowhere else in any other Jewish source that has come down to us from that time is healing on the Sabbath declared to be wrong. Neither the Old Testament nor any Jewish literature closer to the time of Jesus prohibits healing on the Sabbath. Even a couple of hundred years after Jesus, when the rabbis identified thirty nine types of work prohibited on the Sabbath (*m. Shabbat* 7:2; *m. Beitzah* 5:2), in neither list is the act of healing an illness or treating a physical deformity prohibited.

Elsewhere in the Talmud, the issue of taking or giving medicine on the Sabbath does arise, and the rabbis’ attitude there is a kind of *via media*. Any type of food that one would normally eat during the week or any type of ointment that one would normally use is permitted for use on the Sabbath, even if it also has a medicinal effect. But other substances used only for medical purposes are prohibited. So a person may not apply vinegar to sore teeth on the Sabbath, but they may eat bread dipped in vinegar, and if it has a medicinal effect as well, all to the good. You may not apply wine or vinegar to a sore hip, but you can apply a soothing oil that you would normally use for your dry skin, and if it has a medicinal effect, fine. The text goes on to specify that one may not apply rose oil, because that was an expensive ointment which an ordinary person would not use on a daily basis. But the *Mishnah* goes on to comment: “The children of royalty may anoint their wounds with rose oil, since it is their practice to anoint themselves thus on weekdays. Rabbi Shimon said: all Israel are royal children” (*m. Shabbat* 14:3-4). So here we see the rabbis both trying to be respectful of the Sabbath but also applying the same compassion towards humans that Jesus advocates.

We find further light on this subject in a separate discussion about the absolute fast on Yom Kippur. After prohibiting any food or drink on Yom Kippur, the rabbis go on to make exceptions for small children. And a pregnant woman may be fed if necessary. And a sick person may be fed if a medical expert recommends it. And if no doctor is available, the person may be fed upon his own request. And a person who falls ill from hunger may be fed even non-kosher food! We saw in our discussion of Yom Kippur that it is a special kind

of Sabbath (Lev. 16:31), a “Sabbath of Sabbaths,” the holiest day of the year, and yet even here the rabbis clearly make room for some forms of healing practices on that day even though they technically break the rules about fasting.

In that same discussion, one last example not only allows for medical treatment but also establishes a fundamental rabbinic principle. “Moreover, Rabbi Matia ben Harash said: if one has a pain in his throat, they may drop medicine into his mouth on *Shabbat*, because there is a possibility of danger to human life and every potential danger to human life overrides *Shabbat*” (*m. Yoma* 8:5-6; 85b). Notice here that the healing is permitted because of the chance a person’s life is in danger. The laws pertaining to the Sabbath are suspended if a life is threatened. This principle, that concern for human life supersedes the Law, will eventually be applied to all the laws in Torah except three: defaming God’s name/idolatry, murder, and forbidden sexual relations. To save a life you can break almost any commandment.

Interestingly, in another discussion of this principle that you may override the Sabbath commandments to save a life, R. Shimon ben Mennasia comments on Ex. 31:14—“And you shall keep the Sabbath, for it is holy to you.” Emphasizing the phrase “to you,” he says, “Sabbath is handed over to you, but you are not handed over to the Sabbath” (*Mekhilta* 31:13). In the Talmud, R. Yonatan ben Yosef is quoted as saying something similar: “*Shabbat* is given into your hands but you are not given into its hands” (*Yoma* 85b). These rabbinic teachings from a couple of hundred years after the time of Jesus demonstrate that Jesus is not saying anything unique or wildly radical about the Sabbath, only establishing biblical priorities that are thoroughly in line with what other rabbis teach. The Sabbath is meant for human benefit, and human needs matter more than strict legalities.

So clearly, even in later rabbinic material, the prohibition of acts of healing on the Sabbath is not uniform or absolute, and takes into account the human situation. And in these passages that we have looked at, the focus is not on healing *per se* as a violation of the Sabbath, but on some sort of action, like preparing medicine, that might constitute work. Healing itself is not prohibited. So when in the course of healing someone Jesus simply speaks to or touches them, he is not performing a prohibited action of any type. The disputed issue in the gospels is the act of healing itself, not the physical actions that accompany the healing. Which strikes me as curious, given the lack of evidence that other Jews considered this to be a flagrant violation of the Sabbath. I can only conclude that there must have been some people, perhaps only a very few, who shared the harsh rigor of the Dead Sea community or who were looking for any way to criticize Jesus and so adopted a strict position on healing that was out of the mainstream of Jewish thought. Jesus easily silences their objections. By healing on the Sabbath, Jesus was not breaking the Law or criticizing “Judaism,” or teaching that we should not observe the Sabbath, but rather illustrating what the Sabbath should look like.

b. On Work

As we have seen, Torah gives very few details about what it means to rest on the Sabbath. So the rabbis looked closely at the Scriptures to see what they could discover. They noticed, as we have seen, that Torah makes a close connection between the Sabbath commands and the construction of the Tabernacle (Lev. 19:30; 26:2). The placement of Ex. 35:1-3 in the middle of the description of the tasks involved in that construction led them to conclude that it was precisely those tasks which constituted prohibited work, along with the few specifics we have seen in other parts of Torah. Based on that, they came up with thirty-nine actions that were prohibited (*m. Shabbat* 7:2; *m. Beitzah* 5:2).

Of course over time, and with the changes in civilization and how humans live their lives, questions constantly arose about what constitutes work on the Sabbath, and later rabbis would have to make legal rulings. In modern times, rabbinic authorities decided that turning on an electric switch or starting a car was akin to lighting a fire, and so those actions are prohibited. And to make sure you don't unintentionally violate the Law, the rabbis argue for what they call "putting a fence around Torah" (*m. Avot* 1:1), making sure that someone doesn't accidentally break one of the laws. So if business dealings and commerce are prohibited, then ideally you shouldn't handle money at all or talk or even think about your job. Because of this, Jewish synagogues don't take an offering in their services. The Sabbath itself is actually more like 25 hours long, to make sure you don't accidentally violate it, since people didn't know precisely when sunset occurred. This is literally "guarding" the Sabbath.

The strenuous nature of the activity is not the primary concern. Judaism understands the biblical concept of work to mean "creative tasks, constructive labor, craft," as illustrated in the building of the Tabernacle as well as God creating the world. Work involves the production, creation or transformation of an object. So you can handle, open, and close heavy books all day long on the Sabbath, but you can't strike a match. R. Heschel sums this up succinctly: "On the seventh day man has no right to tamper with God's world, to change the state of physical things" (*The Sabbath*, p. 31). For one day we are to leave everything alone and not mess with it.

c. On Rest

But the Sabbath is not simply about what you don't do. It is also very much about what you should do. R. Heschel comments: "The Sabbath is not for the sake of the weekdays; the weekdays are for the sake of the Sabbath. It is not an interlude but the climax of living." In other words, the Sabbath isn't just a day off from real life. It is a day for a different kind of life.

The ancient sages notice something odd about the wording of Genesis 2:2. "On the seventh day God finished his work." They ask, didn't God finish his work on the sixth day and rest on the seventh? That is how most of us usually understand this verse when we read it, but in fact that is not quite what it says. From this verse a rabbinic midrash suggests that there must have been some sort of work of creation on the seventh day. "After the six days of creation—what did the universe still lack? *Menuha* [rest]. Came the Sabbath, came *menuha*, and the universe was complete" (quoted in Heschel, p. 22). For the

rabbis, rest means more than simply ceasing to work. *Menuha* must be something real, positive, concrete; it took a special act of creation to bring it into being. “What was created therein? Tranquility, serenity, peace and repose” (*Bereshit Rabbah* 10:9). God, by resting on the Sabbath, brought that rest into being as an integral part of his creation.

The biblical concept of rest refers to a state of well-being and peace. Naomi prays for such a life, a life of *menuha*, for her daughters-in-law (Ruth 1:9). And David envisions the divine Shepherd leading the sheep beside the waters of *menuha* (Psalm 23:2). That is why the standard Jewish greeting on the Sabbath is “*shabbat shalom*,” the peace of the Sabbath be with you. Resting on the Sabbath is not simply foregoing certain activities. It means embracing another type of life, a God-given life of peace, contentment, and harmony with others and the world.

Because of this, the Sabbath is considered a foretaste of the world to come, a momentary glimpse of eternal life, God’s life. This is a common assertion throughout the rabbinic literature. “The Sabbath possesses a holiness like that of the world to come” (*Mekhilta* 31:13). “The world to come will be a day that is all *Shabbat*” (*Rosh Hashanah* 31a). Rabbi Heschel says that the Sabbath is a preview, a brief experience of eternity in time (pp. 73-76).

In connection with this idea, Rabbi Sacks offers a fascinating reflection on Isaiah 46:10, where God says, “I make known the end from the beginning.” He says that while the Sabbath was the last day of the week for God, it was the first day of the week for the newly created humans. In the Sabbath, God reveals to us the end at the beginning. “*The Sabbath is not simply a day of rest. It is an anticipation of ‘the end of history,’ the messianic age.... We do not strive to do; we are content to be. We are not permitted to manipulate the world; instead, we celebrate it as God’s supreme work of art. We are not allowed to exercise power or dominance over other human beings, nor even domestic animals. Rich and poor inhabit the Sabbath alike.... The Sabbath is a full dress rehearsal for an ideal society that has not yet come to pass.*” He says that by revealing to us the end from the beginning, God wanted us to know where we were heading, what the goal of all our labor is, “so that we would not lose our way in the wilderness of time” (*Exodus*, pp. 281-282).

The book of Hebrews sees the Sabbath in precisely these terms (Heb. 4). The book of Hebrews, which is really a sermon, not a letter, takes as its main text Psalm 95, which speaks of the wilderness generation of Israelites who were kept from entering the Promised Land because of their complaining and lack of trust. In verse 11, the Psalmist has God saying, “They shall never enter my rest (*menuha*).” This is not a literal quote from Torah; the original reference is to the Promised Land (Num. 14:20-23; Deut. 1:34-35), but now, centuries later, the Psalmist uses that as a way of talking about the life of loving care that God, who is both king and shepherd, has for his people (vv. 3, 7). We saw that Psalm 23 uses this same word *menuha* to speak of the life the shepherd provides for his sheep, a life of peaceful rest and refreshment.

The writer of Hebrews picks up on this and in a rabbinic-style *midrash* connects the psalmist’s use of the phrase “my rest” with Genesis 2:2, which refers to God’s Sabbath

rest. The unstated connection between the two passages that underlies both the Psalm and the book of Hebrews is Deuteronomy 12:9-10, where God speaks of the Promised Land as a place of rest (*menuha*). So from Torah to the Psalms to the book of Hebrews, God's promised inheritance for His faithful people, the end, the goal that we are heading for, is a place of Sabbath rest, a life of *shabbat shalom*. Christians continue to speak of the life to come in terms of the Promised Land, but because we have misunderstood the Sabbath as simply a Jewish religious ritual, we have lost this biblical understanding of the Sabbath as a piece of Heaven on earth.

5. Judaism on the Sabbath

So Judaism sees the Sabbath as a wonderful gift and blessing from God, a special day of rest and refreshment and joy and peace, a small taste of the world to come. I want to look briefly at some of the ways they celebrate it. *Shabbat* is welcomed on Friday night in two ways: by a service in the synagogue and a festive meal in the home. The traditional service welcomes the Sabbath using a number of Psalms that all contain the theme of God's kingship, declaring God's rule over all creation and celebrating God's power (Psalms 29, 95-99). It also includes the singing of a 16th century song, *Lechah Dodi*, which means, "Come, my beloved." Its chorus goes: "Come, my beloved, to meet the bride. Let us welcome the presence of the Sabbath." (At Temple Israel, while singing this song people turn to face the doorway to symbolically welcome *Shabbat*.) That song is based on an account in the Talmud, which tells us that "R. Hanina would wrap himself in his cloak and stand at sunset on Sabbath eve, saying, 'Come and we will go out to greet Queen *Shabbat*.' R. Yannai put on his cloak on Sabbath eve and said, 'Come, O bride, come, O bride.'" (*Shabbat* 119a) The Bible itself does not speak of the Sabbath as a bride. However, the Hebrew verb "to sanctify" also means "to marry," because the couple are sanctifying each other, setting themselves apart from the rest of the world (see our traditional wedding service that speaks of marriage as a "holy union" that involves "forsaking all others"). So medieval Jewish mystics understood Genesis 2:3, that God sanctified the seventh day, to suggest that God took *Shabbat* as his bride. *Lechah Dodi* takes its imagery from the Song of Songs, and it sees the coming of *Shabbat* as a promise of God's coming messianic redemption, which is also seen as a great marriage celebration. The New Testament speaks in similar imagery about the coming messianic age.

An aside on the Ugandan Jewish community: Abayudaya ("people of Judah"). Founded about 100 years ago by a local leader who had been at least nominally converted to Christianity by the British. But in his ongoing reading of the Bible he was especially drawn to Torah. He noticed that Christians had changed some of Torah: they did not observe the Sabbath on Saturday, for example. And he wanted to be circumcised. When he was told this would make him a Jew, he decided to become a Jew, all on his own. The small community he began has been through difficult times, especially during the reign of Idi Amin, who banned the practice of Judaism and destroyed their synagogues. All the Abayudaya could do was pray fervently, and they believe that their prayers were directly answered by God. Why? Because the day Idi Amin was deposed from office was the beginning day of Passover. God had once again delivered his people from the oppressive power of the tyrant.

Today the community has a dynamic rabbi who is also a member of the Ugandan Parliament. A remarkable man who, when told one of the perks of being a member of Parliament was a car, asked for an ambulance for his community to help save lives. The Abayudaya have built a hospital as well as two schools. Those schools are open to all, and have Christian and Muslim teachers and administrators, as well as Jewish ones. Their goal is mutual respect and cooperation among the different faiths. They have also created an

interfaith coffee growers cooperative for the economic benefit of all the communities. They are known as well for their religious music; one of their albums was nominated for a Grammy in 2005. To me the Abayudaya are a fascinating example of God's sense of humor, choosing the lowly in the eyes of the world to be a light to that world.

In addition to the Friday night service, Jews also hold *Shabbat* services on Saturday. But as we have seen, the main purpose of *Shabbat* is not worship but rest. It is customary to eat three festive meals on *Shabbat*, because *Shabbat* is always a feast day—fasting is prohibited. Following Isaiah 58:13, Judaism teaches that the Sabbath should be made a “delight” (in Hebrew, *oneg*, which is what at Temple Israel they call the festive time of food and Israeli dance after the Friday night service). *Shabbat* is a day of celebration.

In the home, *Shabbat* begins 18 minutes before sundown on Friday night with the lighting of (at least) two candles and the reciting of a blessing, an honor typically reserved for women. The father (or mother) blesses the children and usually Proverbs 31 is read or sung, expressing admiration and gratitude for the hard work of the wife. There are other blessings: over cups of wine, over the challah, and after the meal a special extended series of blessings to God for his gracious provision. It is a celebration and a thanksgiving.

The Friday night meal is a special time for family, and when I was in Israel a few years ago I heard stories from Jewish seminary students recalling those meals and relating some of their individual family traditions. They spoke of memorable songs and games and jokes that their families would share. I was especially moved by one young man who spoke about the importance of the personal affirmation he received each week when his father would give him his blessing at the meal. I cannot quite imagine how my life might have been different had I experienced such a thing.

The ancient rabbis added a third meal on *Shabbat* (normally people only ate two meals a day), late in the afternoon as the day was ending, called *Havdalah*, which means “separation.” It marks the end of the Sabbath and the transition to the new week. A special braided candle is lit, a container of fragrant spices is passed around for people to smell, and a cup of wine is filled to overflowing, symbolizing prosperity. A blessing is recited over each, and a song is sung invoking the prophet Elijah who will herald the coming of the Messiah. It is usually a simple meal but it is a feast for the senses and for the spirit. Some communities prolong the meal and the conversation well after dark out of a sense of reluctance to let *Shabbat* go.

So the Sabbath is not just about prohibitions, about what you can't do. *Shabbat* is about doing other things, “a day dedicated to the celebration of things that have value but no price” (Sacks, *Exodus*, p. 261), things like marriage and family, friends and community, Torah and God. It is a day where the concerns of the rest of the week are set aside. One should avoid talking about money or business matters and ideally not even think about your job. It is a day to engage in pleasurable activities, and the rabbis saw the Sabbath as the best day for married couples to have sex. It is a day for contemplation of the things that really matter in life and a day to just stop and rest. In the midst of a grim and demanding world, it is a day that should be a delight.

6. The Uniqueness of the Sabbath

The Sabbath is an institution unique to Judaism. No other ancient culture divided time into weeks. Paganism thought of time in reference to the cycles of nature: the movements of the heavenly bodies, the seasons of planting and harvesting. Only Israel established a seven-day week that did not correspond to anything in nature, because it points to a God who created and transcends nature.

Because we take the idea of a seven-day week for granted, we fail to recognize the radical nature of its teaching. The seven-day week comes from a completely different view of reality. Basing your understanding of the world on the recurring natural cycles leads to a philosophy where everything remains the same. Humans are riding an endless carousel that ultimately goes nowhere. The seven-day week is part of a worldview that sees us heading towards a goal. The Sabbath is different from all other days, the climactic end of the week, the goal that we are headed for. Paganism produced myths, timeless stories; Judaism produced history, stories that take place in time.

Pagan religions projected their idea of God onto physical objects or natural phenomena, the sun, moon and stars, storms and mountains, rivers and trees. They made idols, physical representations of the gods. But Israel's God was completely separate from such physical objects and could not be embodied in a spatial representation. Israel's God was identified with events in time: creation and redemption, the calling of Abraham, the giving of the Law. R. Heschel comments: "Judaism teaches us to be attached to *holiness in time*, to be attached to sacred events, to learn how to consecrate sanctuaries that emerge from the magnificent stream of the year. The Sabbaths are our great cathedrals; and our Holy of Holies is a shrine that neither the Romans nor the Germans were able to burn: a shrine that even apostasy cannot easily obliterate: the day of Atonement" (*Sabbath*, p. 8). They carried those cathedrals with them, even into Auschwitz. Humans can control certain aspects of the physical world but time is exclusively in the hands of God. The Sabbath teaches us to sanctify time itself because that is where God is to be encountered.

The Sabbath completes creation by filling it with sanctity and blessedness (Gen. 2:3). In the creation story, God declares the physical creation "good" but the Sabbath he blesses and declares "holy." Holiness and goodness are not the same thing. The goodness of creation is available to all humans, but holiness is available only to those who are in relationship with God, who are part of his covenant. The Sabbath is a witness to the Creator God who is separate from the created world and it calls those in covenant with that God also to declare their separation from that world once a week. (We saw that for Heschel, holiness did not just mean sitting in a monastic cell praying and reading Scripture. It meant marching with Dr. King to Montgomery.) Once a week we are to leave behind the cycles of the natural world and experience the holiness of eternity in time.

The Sabbath is a special sign of the covenant between God and Israel, but it is based on creation theology, not just the Law of Moses. Because the Sabbath is rooted in creation, it applies to all of creation, not just Jews. It is to be observed by foreigners residing in Israel and the animals as well (Ex. 20:10; Deut. 5:14) Even the land itself, the earth, is to have a

sabbath rest every seven years (Lev. 25:2-4). All of creation is to partake in the blessings of the Sabbath.

As we have seen, Torah also connects the Sabbath with God's redemption, God's liberation of his people from slavery, from oppressive endless work (Deut. 5:12-15). As such it was a radical idea in the ancient world, which mocked Jews for being lazy because they took a day off. It was a radical idea in an agricultural society where not tending to the fields and crops for a day was risky. And it is a radical idea in our world, where people are increasingly expected to be on-line and on-call 24/7.

In talking about the meaning of the Sabbath, Rabbi Sacks points out a striking aspect of the literary structure of Exodus. After giving the Law to Israel from Mount Sinai, God issues detailed instructions for building the Tabernacle (Exodus 25-40). The book ends with a long description of the Israelites following those instructions precisely. But sandwiched in between God's instructions and the actual building of the Tabernacle is the shocking incident of the Golden Calf, where Israel resorts to idolatry (Ex. 32). Many scholars have rightly pointed out that this literary sandwich structure contrasts true worship with false, the Tabernacle and the idol.

But Rabbi Sacks notices something additional. God has already given the Ten Commandments, including the commandment about the Sabbath. But immediately before the story of the Golden Calf (Ex. 31:12-17) and also immediately after (Ex. 35:1-3), the people are reminded of that one particular commandment. We saw that one important implication of this was that the Sabbath rest takes precedence even over doing God's work. But Rabbi Sacks also argues that this reminder frames the story to teach us that "*Shabbat* is the antidote to the Golden Calf" (*Exodus*, p. 261). *Shabbat* is the day we learn not to make an idol of gold, of the works of our hands, of the power of wealth, of created things.

Idolatry puts the creation, and created things, in the place of God. I want to highlight two aspects of this in our society: the idolatry of things and the idolatry of work. *Shabbat* is the antidote to both. Ever since Adam and Eve ate the mango in the garden, humans have been tempted to consume things, to grab hold of all the beautiful fruit in the world in the hope that it will satisfy our desires and make us like God, elevate our status and our sense of self worth. Our culture in particular pressures us to buy more and more stuff and to find personal satisfaction in shopping, what has been called "retail therapy." A good friend of mine used to say that advertising is actually reverse or negative therapy: it is designed to make you feel unhappy and discontented. Rabbi Sacks agrees: "*Through constant creation of dissatisfaction, the consumer society is in fact a highly sophisticated mechanism for the production and distribution of unhappiness. Shabbat is our refuge from...a consumer culture, [which is] the new religion*" (Sacks, *Exodus*, p. 261-2). The consumer culture is indeed an idolatrous religion that ultimately makes slaves of its followers.

Rabbi Sacks goes on to argue that, as we are increasingly finding out, the enslavement to consumerism is "*unsustainable, economically, environmentally and psychologically. The most important contribution of Shabbat to the late capitalist societies of the twenty-*

first century is that it reintroduces...the idea of limits. There are limits to our striving, our labours, our consumption of the earth's finite resources....Any culture that loses its sense of limits eventually self-destructs" (p. 262). As we will see when we talk about the kosher laws, one of the ways in which Torah is training in righteousness is that it imposes necessary limits on what humans can do with regard to the physical world that has been entrusted to us. As we have seen in recent months, plenty of people are unwilling to accept any limits on their behavior, even if it leads to serious illness and death. *Shabbat* teaches us to limit our attachment to things. *Shabbat* is the antidote to the prosperity gospel that is America's true religion, a false gospel that has infected even churches like Bethel.

Shabbat also declares a limit to our idolatry of work. In America, we are all defined and given social status by our jobs. First and foremost, people understand who we are on the basis of what we do for a living. People ask children: what do you want to be when you grow up? If a precocious child were to respond: "I want to be a loving servant to the poor," the questioning adult would be mystified. "No, no, that's not what I meant. I meant, what kind of a career do you want to have?" Children are pushed to be something as defined by a career, a job.

This notion is deeply ingrained in our culture, in our way of thinking about other people and about ourselves. Jobs define us, categorize us, give us social position and respect and meaning and if we lose our job, or even think we are in danger of losing it, we lose our self-confidence, our self-respect, our sense of who we are. People who lose jobs, even those who have more than enough to live on, often suffer severe depression. They have lost their sense of self and their anchor in life.

The prophet Isaiah warns about this idolatry of work: "Their land is full of silver and gold; there is no end to their treasures. Their land is full of horses; there is no end to their chariots. Their land is full of idols; they bow down to the work of their hands, to what their fingers have made" (Isa. 2:7-8). This is the cause, the prophet says, for God's judgment on the nation.

How often do we make an idol of our own work? How often do our jobs come first when it comes to making choices and establishing priorities in our lives? What do we miss out on in life because of our obsession with our jobs? Do we sacrifice our families, our children, our friends, even our mental and physical health because of our careers? The very quality of life that people think they are pursuing through their work gets lost because of their devotion to that work.

When I was growing up, we spoke of the clergy as "full-time Christian ministers," because they had a paid job doing ministry. They were "career Christians," professional servants of the Lord, and by inference, all the rest of us were second-class citizens in the church. People often go into the ministry just because they think that is the way to be serious about their faith. Those who aren't professional clergy usually don't see themselves as ministers at all. Earning money even defines for us what it means to be a minister of Christ. *Shabbat* teaches us that our existence and personal value as human beings and as

children of God cannot be defined or made dependent on our careers, even careers serving God.

Work, as Ecclesiastes 2:4-11 says, cannot give you ultimate meaning and purpose in life. Work is a good thing, a necessary thing, and we may achieve a certain level of satisfaction from our accomplishments. R. Heschel calls our attention to the first part of the Sabbath commandment: “*Six days you shall labor and do all your work*” (Ex. 20:9). He says that work is also one of God’s commandments. As we have seen, humans were placed in the Garden of Eden and given work to do (Gen. 2:15). Work, Heschel says, has a divine dignity, but the Sabbath teaches us how to live with a certain amount of independence from our need to work. “The faith of the Jew is not a way out of this world, but a way of being within and above this world” (*Sabbath*, p. 27). It is precisely that detachment from enslavement to work that constitutes the joyful gift of the Sabbath.

An ancient rabbinic commentary on Ex. 20:9 is insightful: “‘Six days shall you work.’ Now is it possible for someone to do their work in six days? The meaning is, rather, Rest as if all your work has been done. Alternatively, rest from thoughts of work” (*Mekhilta* 20:9). We can never really get all our work done in six days; it always remains incomplete. The Sabbath teaches us *that is okay*. The world depends on God, not on us, to keep going. Even the work we are doing for God must stop one day in seven.

7. Conclusions

a. Should Christians Observe the Sabbath?

We have seen that Jesus does not overturn Sabbath observance but rather emphasizes its importance as a God-given gift in creation itself to all humans. Jesus’ attitude towards Sabbath rules may be slightly less strict than some other Jews of his time, but he is not simply arguing that “anything goes” on the Sabbath. He only rejects stringent rules that put an undue burden on ordinary people and do not take into account human pain and suffering. We have seen that the later rabbis make similar concessions. The Sabbath was created by God for human benefit, for our good. In declaring himself Lord of the Sabbath, Jesus is affirming that acts of mercy, both to humans and animals, are part of the essence of Sabbath observance.

The early Christians kept the Sabbath as well, and at the end of the Sabbath, Saturday night, also had a meal and service celebrating the resurrection (Acts 20:7). Once Christianity turned its back on its Jewish roots, the Sunday celebration was all that was left. I would argue that it was Christians who later made what they called the “Sabbath” a legalistic burden on people, a grim, somber day of mind-numbing religious instruction where no levity was allowed. That misunderstanding of the Sabbath was one of the legacies of the Puritans in America that has kept the church from seeing the biblical purpose and value of the day. In my lifetime that false perspective has largely been abandoned by Christians, but nothing positive has been put in its place.

So I cannot see any biblical reason why Christians should not observe the Sabbath. It is mainly the anti-Judaism of our tradition that has deprived us of this gift from God.

We see this bias in the traditional interpretation of Colossians 2:16-17, where we find the only other use of the word “sabbath” in the NT. Literally it reads: “Therefore let no one judge you in eating and in drinking or in respect to a feast or a new moon or sabbaths, which are a shadow of the coming things. But the body of Christ.” (This last phrase hangs awkwardly in the text and there have been many creative ways to deal with it.) Despite the fact that some modern translations, like the NIV, translate this as “a Sabbath day,” the word in Greek is plural (KJV, NRSV, and many others). Once again the NIV has imported its Protestant anti-Jewish theology into the translation, handing people an anti-Sabbath proof text. But Paul does not say “the Sabbath” here, which he could easily have done if that is what he meant to say. The plural here has a much broader reference, especially when connected to the other two parallel phrases in the verse. The Old Testament regularly speaks of the Jewish feasts as sabbaths, especially the first and last days of a weekly festival (Lev. 16:31; 23:24, 23, 29). The Greek word for sabbath in the NT often means “a week,” and usually the word is in the plural as it is here (Matt. 28:1; Mark 16:2; John 20:1; 19; Acts 20:7). So the primary reference in Colossians is not to “the Sabbath,” but to various religious celebrations and feasts.

In the larger context of this discussion, Paul expresses two concerns. First he establishes that because of the cross and their baptism, Gentile followers of Jesus need not fear condemnation for their sinful lives in the past (Col 2:11-14). So he insists that they should not let others condemn them for their observance of special holidays. He never indicates whether the judgment is because they are not observing the holidays or because they are, but I think it much more likely that they are being criticized for their feasting, for their observing of these holidays. It is also not clear if those judgments are being made by people within the church or by non-Christians. Either way, the passage insists: don’t let people judge how you observe sabbaths and other religious feasts.

Second, Paul does not want them to be led astray by human traditions and worldly philosophies that are not in accordance with Christ. For Paul, the regulations and practices that people are trying to impose on the Colossians are human teachings and commandments (vv. 8, 22). If he were speaking here about the feasts outlined in Torah, including the Sabbath, then Paul would be flagrantly and inexplicably contradicting the Scripture, which clearly indicates that these are God’s commandments. Paul would also be contradicting Jesus himself, who not only observed those feasts but also assumed his disciples would as well, and who spoke specifically about the Sabbath as God’s gift to all humanity, Jew and Gentile alike.

Third, Paul is talking about what we think of as ascetic regulations, restrictions on what you can eat and drink (v. 21). That has nothing to do with the weekly Sabbath or any of the other Jewish feasts. The rabbis specifically prohibit fasting on the Sabbath, because it is out of character with the joyous nature of the day. So it is hard to connect what Paul says here with a condemnation of Sabbath observance. It is only the anti-Judaism of our tradition that has taught us to read Paul this way and then to use Paul not only to override the Old Testament but also the teaching and practice of Jesus.

What is significant to me about this whole chapter is the kind of language Paul uses to make his argument. Unlike other places where Paul discusses the relationship of Gentiles to the Law of Moses, here he does not engage in any discussion of Scripture at all. He uses strange phrases like “elementary principles of the cosmos” and “rulers and authorities” that seem to come more from esoteric Greek philosophical discussions than from Torah. Would Paul really refer to observing the Sabbath, Yom Kippur, Passover, or Pentecost as “empty deceit” that comes from the “elemental spiritual forces of the cosmos” (v. 8)? Is Paul really arguing here that spiritual disciplines like fasting have no value for the Christian?

I don’t think Paul is criticizing mainstream first-century Jewish practices here or arguing against Torah itself. I think he is speaking to Gentiles who more than likely have learned to observe the feasts in Torah from Jewish Christians. Others, who hold to esoteric Greek philosophical ideas such as ascetic practices, angel worship, and mystical visions (2:18), are criticizing those observances. Clearly there are people teaching certain types of religious piety and observance that Paul does not think fit with the gospel of Christ, but the specific circumstances are not clear. Biblical scholars continue to debate the precise nature of what they call the “Colossian heresy.” Perhaps his readers understood him better than we do two thousand years later. But Paul here is not overturning the observance of the Sabbath. To do that he would have to make a completely different type of argument.

b. Training in Righteousness

We have seen that the apostle Paul declares all Scripture to be useful for teaching and correction and for training in righteousness. The Sabbath is just such a discipline. It is training in a holy detachment from endless striving and labor. It teaches us a healthy perspective on wealth and money. It insists that we pay attention not just to our own needs but also to the needs of others, including foreigners, people not like us, and also including the non-human parts of creation.

And the Sabbath, like so much of Torah, teaches us limits. Limits to what we acquire and consume. We recognize our own limits: we can only do so much in this world and then we have to stop. By limiting what you can do in a given week, the Sabbath forces you to give up the illusion of being in control over you life. Can we give up one day a week and just STOP working ourselves to death?

For one day in seven stop trying to change the world and learn to be in harmony with it. For six days a week we act as stewards of the world, developing it, taking care of it, and using its resources to satisfy our human needs. But the Sabbath puts all that in perspective. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (1953) says, “Every Sabbath, return to God His universe, acknowledge the Lord your God, and remind yourself yet again that this universe is borrowed from God. Remember who is its Master, that this borrowed universe belongs to the Lord, and that He, not you, rules everything” (*Sefer Horev*, pp. 69-70).

The Sabbath has always been a countercultural, subversive institution that sets people apart from the way the world operates, the way it literally does business. Sabbath observance is part of the larger purpose of Torah to create a nation unlike others, a people who serve God, not Mammon.

Most importantly, the Sabbath is a day for rest and refreshment and rejuvenation of our lives. Rabbi Kerry Olitzky gives his personal testimony about the Sabbath: “Maybe it is middle age, but I can actually feel my body beginning to shut down as I make my way home each Friday afternoon in anticipation of Shabbat. I can push all week long—early mornings and late nights—but, come Friday, I am ready to completely unwind. It isn’t just the bodily rest that I crave: it is the deep spiritual nourishment the Sabbath provides. By separating myself from the frenzy of the world that surrounds me all week long, I can focus on the needs of my soul throughout Shabbat. It is an island away from the secular intrusions on my spiritual world” (*Jewish Holidays*, p. 115).

His co-author, Rabbi Daniel Judson, speaks about the different ways in which Jews choose to observe the Sabbath. Some follow a strict set of rules that greatly limit their activities, while others focus more generally on doing pleasurable things that they don’t have time for the rest of the week. He says he tries to combine both approaches. “I try to do things that bring me joy while simultaneously recognizing that withdrawing myself from daily activities frees me to experience inner peace in a profound way. Practically, I observe two primary rules to separate myself during Shabbat from my regular days. First, I do not spend any money. This keeps me away from movies, shopping malls, and restaurants. Second, I do not turn on my computer, which keeps me from the temptation to check e-mail, pay a bill online, or finish up that essay or lesson I am preparing... For some people it is almost incomprehensible to spend Friday night or Saturday not going out or working. Occasionally, when I see a listing for a concert or show, or I am invited to a friend’s party on a Friday night, I momentarily regret my decision not to participate in these activities on the Sabbath. *But, for me, the spiritual discipline of not spending money and not socializing in ways not related to the Sabbath provides me with benefits that transcend the transient joys of a party or a movie. In consistently observing the Sabbath, you can feel an ‘intuition of eternity,’ as Heschel calls it*” (*Jewish Holidays*, pp. 119-120). For Rabbi Judson, the discipline of the Sabbath creates for him an “island of peace.” This is the consistent testimony of Jews who observe the Sabbath.

Krister Stendahl, Swedish Lutheran pastor and NT scholar, urged people to develop a “holy envy,” a willingness to recognize elements in other religious traditions that you admire and wish could be reflected in your own faith. This study is a product of such holy envy.

Imagine what our lives would be like if one day a week we all did not use our phones or computers or televisions, if you could completely shut off all the noise of the world around us. If you did not do anything related to your job, not even think about it. If you did not engage in any kind of financial or commercial endeavors. If for 24 hours we stopped trying to get things done, trying to cross things off our to-do lists, and instead spent the time appreciating and enjoying what we have, our families and friends and church fellowships. If at brunch after Shabbat services you could sit around and talk with each other because you have nothing else to rush off to or get accomplished. If you could take a nap and not feel guilty about it.

I don't think this can be done simply as individuals deciding from time to time to take a day off, although it is certainly a healthy thing for individuals to do. But that solution reflects a typically modern Western perspective: we can do all this biblical stuff on our own. I think part of what makes the Sabbath work as it is supposed to, work as the Bible intended it to, is that a whole community is doing it together, because that is part of what the Sabbath is about. Israel was to be an alternative community, one not enslaved by the endless labor of Egypt. What kind of community might we create if we all shared in this *menuha*, in this Sabbath rest, in this *shabbat shalom*? What kind of witness to the world might that community be, a witness about its insane pursuit of wealth and the power and status that wealth confers, about its unrelenting demands for work and its belief that we find our value and identity as human beings in our work? What kind of light and salt might we become for the world if we were to keep the Sabbath holy?

And what kind of community might we need to be in order to create a world in which people at the lower end of the socio-economic scale are not forced into the burdensome enslavement of having to work two or three low-paying jobs just to feed and house their families? What kind of witness for social justice, for liveable wages, for decent working conditions, might this commandment be—that everyone, even the foreigners living in your midst, are to be allowed to keep the Sabbath? In following Jesus' example, what other acts of mercy and healing might we embrace as part of our Sabbath observance? How might the Sabbath become a day of restoration to wholeness, both for ourselves and for others?

I offer these reflections to you as a challenge and an opportunity, remembering the prophet's words: "If you hold back your foot on the Sabbath from following your own pursuits on my holy day; if you call the Sabbath a delight and the Lord's holy day honorable; if you honor it not by following your own ways or seeking your own interests, then you will delight in the Lord" (Is. 58:13-14).