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MINISTRIES

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Is the Sabbath Commanded in the New Testament?

It is often asked, “If the Sabbath is so important, why isn’t it commanded in the New Testament?” God explicitly and repeatedly commanded his people to keep the Sabbath in the Old Testament. There’s no question that he wanted his people to keep the Sabbath at that time. But if it isn’t explicitly repeated in the New Testament, does that mean it is no longer relevant to Christians? Some have said yes. For instance, according to Christian pastor and theologian, John MacArthur:

There is never a command in the New Testament to keep the Sabbath. All Ten Commandments are repeated in the New Testament—some numerous times—except the fourth command. It is never repeated in the New Testament, not one single time. It was, in the midst of the moral law, a sign and a symbol to lead the people to rest and repentance. But when you come to the New Testament, there’s never a repeat of that command. The rest that the New Testament is concerned about is the rest that comes to the soul from hearing and believing the good news preached. That’s the rest the New Testament offers.

—John MacArthur, “Understanding the Sabbath,” *Grace to You*. www.gty.org

So, according to MacArthur, the commandment to keep the Sabbath is not repeated in the New Testament, and this is an indication that it no longer applies to us. The New Testament is not concerned with literal Sabbath rest, MacArthur says. In the New Testament, we are only to focus on embracing the spiritual rest that we now have in Christ.

What should we make of this objection to keeping the Sabbath? Does MacArthur have a point?

First, let’s grant the assumption that the New Testament does not repeat the command to keep the Sabbath. Would that mean it is irrelevant? Not at all.

A commandment does not have to be explicitly repeated in the New Testament to still apply to us. For instance, the Torah’s commandments against practicing necromancy, bestiality, and cross-dressing are nowhere explicitly repeated in the New Testament, but Christians generally agree that we should keep those commandments. Furthermore, why is it necessary for God to repeat himself? God prohibits cross-

dressing only once in all Scripture, while he repeated the Sabbath commandment numerous times. But does that mean that God didn't care about his people cross-dressing at later times when other commandments were being repeated? Of course not. It would be silly for someone in Jeremiah's time to argue, "Well, God repeated his command to keep the Sabbath (Jeremiah 17:24), so he must still want me to do that, but he has said nothing about cross-dressing since Moses, so I guess that doesn't matter to him anymore." Just because God doesn't repeat a command, that doesn't mean that he cares any less about it.

This argument that MacArthur and others use to dismiss the Sabbath is the same flawed logic that progressive "Christians" use to say that the law against homosexual practice is done away with. Progressive "Christians" argue that since Jesus never explicitly repeated the law against homosexual practices, that means it is no longer important. For instance, progressive "minister," Elder Don Eastman, writes the following:

By faith we live in Jesus Christ, not in Leviticus. To be sure, ethical concerns apply to all cultures and peoples in every age. Such concerns were ultimately reflected by Jesus Christ, **who said nothing about homosexuality**, but a great deal about love, justice, mercy and faith.

—Elder Don Eastman, "Homosexuality: Not a Sin, Not a Sickness Part II - What The Bible Does and Does Not Say..." *The Religious Institute*, www.religioustheology.org.

However, as Christians generally acknowledge, this argument from silence proves nothing. Jesus—or Yeshua, as he was known in the first century—was a Torah observant Jew who taught other Jews during his earthly ministry. Jews already knew that homosexual practice was a sin. Thus, the fact that Yeshua did not explicitly repeat the Torah's command against homosexual practice should not be surprising.

Similarly, we could say the same thing with respect to the Sabbath. There was no need for Yeshua to explicitly repeat the Sabbath commandment. Jews already knew that they *should* keep the Sabbath, even though there were disagreements about *how* it should be kept.

We will come back to that in a moment. But let's return to the argument that the New Testament does not repeat the Sabbath command. We've already seen that the New Testament's silence on the Sabbath does not mean that the Sabbath should not be kept. But there is one more point we need to make: the New Testament is *not* silent about the Sabbath! While Yeshua did not explicitly repeat the commandment to keep the Sabbath, he *did* reinforce it.

Look at what Yeshua says in Matthew 5:17-20:

Matthew 5:17-20

Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

So, Yeshua affirmed the ongoing validity of the Law and the Prophets—that is, the Hebrew Scriptures, or what is often called the Old Testament. "Fulfill" in this context means to "bring to full expression =

show it forth in its true meaning” (BDAG, πληρόω, 736). In other words, Yeshua came to teach and demonstrate how to live out the Hebrew Scriptures in accordance with God’s will. He said that not an iota or dot would pass away from the Law, the Torah, until heaven and earth pass away and all is accomplished (Matthew 5:18). That is to say, not a single law from the Torah will pass away until the end of the age and the arrival of the new heavens and new earth, when the present created universe passes away (2 Peter 3:7, 13; Revelation 21:1). Moreover, Yeshua admonished his followers to do and teach even the least of the Torah’s commandments (Matthew 5:19).

So, any commandment from the Torah that is not explicitly restated in the New Testament is nevertheless reaffirmed here. We are to keep “even the least” of the commandments. Not only that, but we must surpass the scribes and Pharisees in righteousness. In other words, our Torah observance must be better than their Torah observance. We surpass the scribes and Pharisees in righteousness by following Yeshua’s teachings and example on how to live out the Torah. That’s what the sermon on the mount is all about—Yeshua contrasting his correct interpretation of the Torah with the incorrect interpretations of the scribes and Pharisees.

Based on this passage, Christian scholar Michael Brown points out that Yeshua affirmed the Torah’s commandment against homosexual practice:

[W]hen Jesus said He was not abolishing the Law and the Prophets but rather fulfilling them, He clearly intended that this prohibition [against homosexual practice] would continue to stand as well.

—Michael Brown, *Can You Be Gay And Christian?: Responding With Love & Truth to Questions About Homosexuality* (Lake Mary, FL: FrontLine, 2014), 131

So, while Yeshua never explicitly repeated the commandment against homosexual practice, he still reinforced its validity in Matthew 5:17-20. The same logic applies to the Sabbath. While the commandment is not explicitly repeated, it is nevertheless reinforced. Yeshua affirmed the ongoing validity of the Sabbath by stating that he came not to abolish the Torah and Prophets but to fulfill them—that is, he came to teach us how to live out the Hebrew Scriptures properly. The entire Torah—all of God’s commandments—remains valid until the end of the age. And we are to keep even the least of the commandments.

What other ways does the New Testament reinforce the command to keep the Sabbath? We will mention a few.

First, remember how Yeshua said our righteousness, with regard to the Torah, must surpass that of the scribes and Pharisees (Matthew 5:20)? Well, Yeshua teaches us what that means with the Sabbath specifically. Yeshua taught what it means to keep the Sabbath properly, in contrast to the teachings of the Pharisees.

In Matthew 12, the Pharisees accused Yeshua’s disciples of breaking the Sabbath. Yeshua defended his disciples and said they were innocent of the Pharisees’ charges (Matthew 12:7). Moreover, Yeshua declared himself the lord of the Sabbath—that is, he is the rightful interpreter of the commandment. He criticized the Pharisees for their bad applications of the commandment and restored the Sabbath to its true application.

In Mark's account of this incident, Yeshua used this confrontation with the Pharisees to explain how God wanted the Sabbath to be kept from the beginning. He said:

Mark 2:27

[The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.](#)

By these words, Yeshua emphasized God's purpose for the Sabbath, which was to bless mankind with a day of rest. Why would Yeshua restore the true purpose of the Sabbath day if he intended to get rid of it? That doesn't make much sense. On the other hand, Yeshua's teaching on the Sabbath's original purpose is precisely what we would expect if he wanted his followers to keep it.

As Christian scholar Roy Gane writes:

Why would He restore something that He was about to do away with? That would make as much sense as remodeling a house before demolishing it!

—Roy E. Gane, "Is the Sabbath Part of the New Covenant?" *Reflections: The BRI Newsletter* (2010): 4-10

For more on the conflict between Yeshua and the Pharisees regarding the Sabbath, see our teaching, [Lord of the Sabbath](#).

Yeshua also appears to reinforce the Sabbath's validity in Matthew 24:20. He said:

Matthew 24:20

[Pray that your flight may not be in winter or on a Sabbath.](#)

Here we see Yeshua admonishing his followers to pray that they would not have to flee on the Sabbath during the coming tribulation. Again, if Yeshua came to do away with the Sabbath, why is he expressing concern over his followers' ability to keep the Sabbath in the future? If he did not expect them to be keeping the Sabbath, he wouldn't have said such a thing.

For more on the implications of Yeshua's statement in Matthew 24:20, see our teaching, [Fleeing on the Sabbath](#).

What about the apostles? Did they agree that we should continue to keep the Sabbath? The New Testament indicates that they did.

According to the book of Acts, the apostles continued to keep the Sabbath on the seventh day (Acts 13:13-52; 16:13; 17:2; 18:4). Luke records that it was Paul's "custom" to worship in the synagogue on the Sabbath, just like it was Yeshua's custom (Acts 17:2; cf. Luke 4:16).

Additionally, Acts 15:21 assumes that even Gentile believers would be keeping the Sabbath as they attend synagogue services to learn from the Torah:

Acts 15:21

[For from ancient generations Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him, for he is read every Sabbath in the synagogues."](#)

According to scholar F. F. Bruce:

This observation was perhaps intended to calm the apprehensions of the Pharisaic party in the Jerusalem church, in whose eyes it was especially important that the whole Torah should be taught among the Gentiles; **this**, said James, **was being attended to already in the synagogues.**

—F. F. Bruce, *New International Commentary: Acts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 312

Likewise, scholar Ajith Fernando writes:

James's concluding point in verse 21 was probably made to reassure the Christians who had come from the Pharisees and who wanted to see the Torah taught among the Gentiles. He says that this was happening in the synagogues in every city each Sabbath.

—Ajith Fernando, *The NIV Application Commentary: Acts* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 419

For more on Acts 15, see our teaching, [Acts 15: Obedience or Legalism?](#)

So, even though the Sabbath command is not explicitly repeated in the New Testament, it seems that it was just assumed that Christians would continue to keep it. Nothing that Yeshua or the apostles did indicates that they were getting rid of Sabbath observance.

But wait! There's more!

Peter reinforces the Sabbath when he tells his readers to be holy as God is holy (1 Peter 1:13-16). Peter's concept of holy conduct is based on Leviticus, which he quotes in 1 Peter 1:16. Leviticus 19:2 says, "[Be holy, for I the LORD \[YHWH\] am holy.](#)" The very next verse in Leviticus explains what holy conduct involves. It says, "[Every one of you shall revere his mother and his father, and you shall keep my Sabbaths](#)" (Leviticus 19:3).

For more on this passage in 1 Peter, see our teaching, [Life in Exile: Be Holy.](#)

The apostle James reinforces the Sabbath when he admonishes believers to be "[doers of the word](#)" (James 1:22). Since James equates the "word" with "law" (James 1:25)—that is, the Torah—we can see this as a direct instruction to Christians to obey the Torah, which includes the command to keep the Sabbath.

For more on this, see our teaching, [Be Doers of the Word: Does James Affirm the Torah's Validity?](#)

There are many places that the New Testament exhorts us to keep God's law or commandments (Matthew 19:17; John 14:15, 21; 15:10; 1 Corinthians 7:19; 1 John 2:3-4; 3:22-24; 5:2-3; Revelation 14:12). It can be reasonably assumed that all the New Testament's general exhortations to keep God's law or commandments include the command to keep the Sabbath. Why? Paul declares that "all Scripture" is profitable for training in righteousness (2 Timothy 3:16). When 2 Timothy was written, the "New Testament" that we know today had not yet been canonized. So, when Paul speaks of "Scripture," he specifically has in mind what we call *the Old Testament*, or the Hebrew Scriptures. To the New Testament authors, "Scripture" meant the Old Testament. That was their "Bible." God's

law/commandments would refer to those commandments in the Old Testament, which includes the Sabbath. Therefore, the command to keep the Sabbath is included in these New Testament exhortations.

In conclusion, while the Sabbath commandment is not explicitly repeated in the New Testament, that does not mean that it is done away with. There are several other commandments not repeated in the New Testament that Christians generally agree still apply. Nevertheless, the Sabbath *is* reinforced even if not explicitly repeated. Yeshua affirmed the ongoing validity of all the Torah's commandments in Matthew 5:17-20, which would include the Sabbath. Yeshua did explicitly teach *how* to keep the Sabbath properly in Matthew 12. Moreover, Yeshua's and the apostles' practices assume the Sabbath's ongoing validity. Finally, the apostles' affirmations of the Torah and God's commandments indirectly reinforce the Sabbath commandment.

So, is the Sabbath command done away with because it isn't explicitly repeated in the New Testament? Not at all. God's expectation that his people keep the Sabbath has not changed.

We pray you have been blessed by this teaching.

Remember, continue to test everything.

Shalom!

For more on this and other teachings, please visit us at www.testeverything.net

Shalom, and may Yahweh bless you in walking in the whole Word of God.

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