"Is it lawful?"
Interpretation and discernment in light of the Sabbath controversies

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The Sabbath controversies provide a microcosm of extended debates between Jesus and Jewish leaders, the Pharisees in particular. Although these passages are familiar, Christians reading them often presuppose the self-evident truth of Jesus's position(s) and the foolishness or even conniving legalism of the Pharisees. However, recognizing these debates as contentious sites of biblical interpretation and ethical discernment holds great potential. Not only does such a shift in perspective uncover underlying dynamics at play between Jesus and the Pharisees, but it also prompts readers to consider the ongoing complexity of holding together a commitment to interpret the Bible on one hand and to live a life of faithful discipleship on the other.

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Sabbath controversy in Matthew 12

Following on the heels of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7) and a series of accounts of Jesus's healing and teaching, Matthew 12 highlights the brewing conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees. In particular, on seeing his disciples eating grain, the Pharisees confront Jesus: "Look, your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the sabbath" (v. 2).[1] Jesus responds with two scriptural examples, leading to the climax: "I tell you, something greater than the temple is here. But if you had known what this means, 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the guiltless. For the Son of Man is lord of the sabbath" (vv. 5–8).

In case we missed it the first time, the next verses expand the controversy, this time with the Pharisees asking Jesus: "Is it lawful

to cure on the sabbath?" (v. 10). What had initially been a slightly pejorative nudge for Jesus to correct his disciples ("Look at what your disciples are doing") becomes a question to clarify and even challenge Jesus's interpretation ("*Is* it lawful . . .?"). The narrator's additional comment—"so that they might accuse him"—raises the stakes still further, while the end of the passage underscores the dire consequences of this debate: "But the Pharisees went out and conspired against him, how to destroy him" (vv. 10, 14).

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Whether in a university classroom, a Sunday school class, or someplace in between, Christians asked to describe Jesus and the Pharisees here give remarkably consistent responses. Where the Pharisees are interested in the letter of the law, Jesus reflects its spirit; where Pharisees add to the law, Jesus reveals its purpose; while Pharisees are legalistic, Jesus exhibits grace; and so on. The contrast is predictably stark, with good traits attributed to Jesus and bad ones sticking to the Pharisees like white on rice.

As Christians we have largely trained ourselves to simplify or even ignore the deeper issues at stake in such a passage by treating it not as an actual debate but as leading to a foregone conclusion. However, adopting the former perspective is not only more interesting but, in my view, more helpful for considering ethical discernment in our own day.

Sabbath in the law

The Pharisees' confrontation with Jesus stems from the interpretation of the Sabbath commandment found in the "ten words"—or Ten Commandments, as we typically refer to them (Exod. 20:8–11; Deut. 5:12–15).[2] Although the language here reflects the context of an ancient household, with "you" corresponding to the male patriarch (you, your son, your daughter, your slaves, your animals, etc.), Waldemar Janzen points out that observing the Sabbath underscores humanity's status as creatures, since "it is through work that humans are most tempted to arrogate to themselves a godlike control of the world."[3] While the commandment seems clear enough, its interpretation is less so. When the

Torah—the law—says not to work on the Sabbath, the necessary question becomes: *What is work*? For (Gentile) Christians, especially those who begin with a "law vs. grace" mentality, this may seem like a legalistic question. But for Jews (including Jesus, Paul, and most if not all New Testament writers), this was and remains a key question. If the law outlines God's will for this people, then such a debate is not superfluous but necessary.

Focusing on this question helps contemporary Christians recognize the overarching *positive* perspective of law that permeates both the Old Testament and Jesus's teaching in Matthew. While we often pit law and grace against each other, the liberation/salvation the Israelites experienced in the Exodus from Egypt preceded and provided the basis for the law; in other words, the law is not opposed to grace but a response to and even continuation of it.[4] The beginning of the Ten Commandments reflects this link between law and grace by filling up God's name—"I am who I am"—with meaning: "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt . . ." In the biblical period, following the law is the very basis of life, while rejecting it is the road to death and destruction (Deut. 30:11–20).

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So it should not be surprising (or forgotten!) that Jesus underscores the significance of the law at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount. In fact, the New Testament emphasis on discipleship builds on the longstanding expectation that Israel should walk (*halak*) after the LORD and not after other gods (Deut. 1:30–31; 4:3). In effect, when the Torah says not to work on the Sabbath, discerning what that means in practical, everyday life is not legalism but discipleship.

Sabbath in Isaiah

Discussion about the Sabbath is not limited to legal material, however, and Isaiah proves particularly striking. After an initial rejection of the contemporary practice of the Sabbath in light of sin (Isa. 1:13), Isaiah 56 reorients this element in an unexpected way. Although this passage might not sound strange to us, this

tends to be because we read it through a New Testament lens; of course foreigners can be included (contemporary Christians are, after all, Gentiles), and what is a eunuch anyway? But in its time this passage provided a fundamental reinterpretation and reorientation of the preceding tradition.

Within legal material, certain foreigners *were* excluded from the community (notably, Ammonites or Moabites until the tenth generation), and the sexually deformed eunuch in particular was inadmissible (Deut. 23:1–4). Isaiah 56, however, shifts the discussion by opening the community up to both groups, as long as they "keep my Sabbath . . . and hold fast my covenant" (Isa. 56:4, 6). This reorientation of Sabbath observance is expanded beautifully in Isaiah 58:6–14, which moves well beyond a debate of what should *not* be done on the Sabbath ("work"), to an active orientation of what *should* be carried out:

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> *Is not this the fast that I choose:*
> *to loose the bonds of injustice,*
> *to undo the thongs of the yoke,*
> *to let the oppressed go free,*
> *and to break every yoke?*
> *Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,*
> *and bring the homeless poor into your house;*
> *when you see the naked, to cover them,*
> *and not to hide yourself from your own kin? (Isa. 58:6–7)*

More than simply reorienting previous tradition, however, Isaiah here also enters into a contemporary debate reflected in other parts of Scripture. Most scholars see in Isaiah 56 and following a postexilic perspective, often described in shorthand as Third Isaiah. In other words, this section of the scroll may well be approximately contemporary with the events described in Ezra/Nehemiah, where marriage to foreigners is seen as such a significant problem that it leads to a mass divorce (Ezra 9–10; Nehemiah 13). Intriguingly, the latter passage even explicitly cites Deuteronomy 23 as the impetus for this decision (Neh. 13:1)![5]

What we see, then, is that the kind of debate described between Jesus and the Pharisees is woven into the very fabric of Scripture itself. Of course, the New Testament builds directly on the perspective of this latter section of Isaiah, where the justice elements from Isaiah 58 frame Jesus's ministry in Luke (4:16–30) and the parable of the sheep and the goats (Matt. 25:31–46). What's more, the account of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch, in which the latter reads an Isaiah scroll in his chariot, also plays directly on the connection. For anyone familiar with the Isaiah scroll, as the New Testament writers clearly were, the mention of Isaiah and the baptism of a *foreign eunuch* embodies the potential incorporation of such folks described (and explicitly linked to Sabbath) in Isaiah (Acts 8:26–40; cf. Isa. 56:3–7).[6] Thus, Jesus is not the first to insist on a positive view of Sabbath rather than to focus on what not to do; he is building on a strong emphasis already present in the prophetic corpus.

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Reconsidering the debate over the Sabbath: From legalism to discernment

Returning to Matthew and considering the Sabbath controversy in its broader context in the Gospel, we see it in a new light. Though the repeated refrain "You have heard it said . . . But I say . . ." is often portrayed as a series of opposites, the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount frames what follows as a hyperobservance rather than a rejection of law (Matt. 5:17–20). In a fashion similar to the rabbinic tendency to build a fence around the Torah (law), Jesus's teaching goes beyond the law to make its observance more stringent, ensuring that the law is not violated: if one does not get angry, one will not kill; and by not looking at other women, one will not commit adultery. When we recognize "an eye for an eye" as a provision that places a limitation on vengeance, the shift to "turn the other cheek" also represents an "even more so" in the same direction rather than a fundamental about-face.[7] As the Sermon on the Mount underscores, the law is not a bad thing in *either* Jesus's or Matthew's estimation.

Immediately following the discussion about Sabbath with the Pharisees, the narrator links Jesus's ongoing ministry with Isaiah 42:1–4, explicitly citing as "fulfilled" what lies implicit in the voice from heaven in both Jesus's baptism and transfiguration (3:17; 17:5): "Here is my servant, whom I have chosen, my beloved, with whom my soul is well pleased" (Matt. 12:18). This reference underscores the connection between Jesus's ministry and the prophets, already introduced in Jesus's own reference to Hosea 6:6: "But if you had known what this means, 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the guiltless" (Matt. 12:7–8).

Returning to where we began, we find that the Sabbath debate between Jesus and the Pharisees in Matthew 12 now looks somewhat different. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus consistently adds to and goes beyond the law. If extending the law represents legalism, then this term describes Jesus as well as the Pharisees. While neither party rejects the significance of the Sabbath, *both* are invested in scriptural interpretation; in fact, both parties recognize that ongoing interpretation is not problematic but *required*. Even the mode of argument—whether building a fence around the Torah in the Sermon on the Mount or moving "from the lesser to the greater" in the Sabbath debate (temple to something greater, sheep to a man)—resonates with rabbinic practice.[8]

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Although the consistent and heated debate between Jesus and the Pharisees has led Christians to judge the Pharisees negatively, the broader context of the New Testament suggests that we need a more nuanced perspective on this group. Despite their consistent disagreements, Jesus and the Pharisees actually manifest significant commonalities both in perspective and in method for understanding Scripture. For instance, unlike the Sadducees, the Pharisees believed in the resurrection, which Paul uses to full effect (Acts 23:6–10); they drew on the prophets, psalms, and other Scripture outside the "law" itself (Genesis through Deuteronomy); they emphasized the holiness of the "laity" beyond the priesthood; they depended on influence outside of the temple system;[9] and so on.

Furthermore, we do well to consistently remind ourselves that Pharisees (that is, "Christians" who remained Pharisaic Jews; see Acts 15:5) were among the earliest followers of Jesus, with Paul being the most prominent among them.[10]

In effect, the ethical debates in which the Pharisees and later rabbis engaged, later described as *halakah*, are roughly equivalent to what we might call theological or biblical ethics. Put another way, even as they disagreed with Jesus, the Pharisees were committed not to legalism but rather to following after God (discipleship!).[11] As many of us with a close sibling understand, it may well have been the extent of their shared commitments and perspectives that made the debates between Jesus and the Pharisees about areas of disagreement so heated.

All this is not to ignore significant differences. Jesus's tendency to claim divine interpretive authority without referring to his teachers disrupted governing norms. And certainly his claim that "something greater than the temple is here"—whether speaking of himself or the kingdom of heaven, so prominent in Matthew—would have been shocking. Furthermore, immediately preceding the discussion about the Sabbath, Jesus invites his listeners to "Come to me, . . . and I will give you rest. Take my yoke . . . For my yoke is easy and my burden is light" (Matt. 11:28–30). While observing the Sabbath represents a means of imitating God and celebrating divine action both in creation (Exod. 20:11) and the Exodus (Deut.5:15), here Jesus essentially identifies *himself* with the Sabbath.[12] Little wonder that the Pharisees were perturbed.

Reflections on ethical discernment in our day

On further reflection, we discover that the Pharisees' question in the Sabbath controversy passage sounds quite reasonable. Since within the New Testament what we call the Old Testament was referred to as the "law" or "the law and the prophets," in the first century a rough equivalent to the question "Is it lawful?" would be "Is it *biblical*?" In other words, the question whether such actions were appropriate was not a bad one but rather one that was and remains essential.

As we continue to debate the ethical demands of discipleship, we do well to consider our own interactions in light of Jesus's interaction with the Pharisees. In our day we experience, for lack

of better terms, both conservative and liberal impulses; some value Scripture highly and largely on its own, while others insist on its broader social and literary context; some insist on the true, singular reading of a passage or topic, while others focus on multiple possibilities. While *both* impulses are crucial, each can also become problematic. For instance, a "conservative" tendency to insist on the central significance of Scripture can lead to simply selecting and quoting specific biblical passages in isolation, assuming that they are self-evident or self-interpreting. Likewise, a "liberal" tendency to insist on setting can lead to discussions of historical context, social science, and human rights that end up subordinating Scripture or even leaving it behind in discussions of contemporary demands and questions.[13]

Whatever we make of the disagreement between Jesus and his interlocutors about the *answer* to the Pharisees' question, paying greater attention to the debate itself challenges both liberal and conservative perspectives. Where we might be tempted to leave behind the question "Is it *biblical?*," *both* Jesus and the Pharisees took this question very seriously. And where we might assume that the Bible has spoken and there is little more to be said, *both* Jesus and the Pharisees recognized the need for ongoing interpretation, and entered into the fray with gusto.

This passage suggests that we have much to learn as we wrestle with ethical conundrums in our day. While we often antagonize each other or assume that "the Bible" or "the Gospel" is on one side or another (usually my/our side), individuals and communities with a more conservative impulse and those with a more liberal one actually *need* each other, since both emphases contribute to contemporary discernment and avoid having either become a knee-jerk tendency.[14]

In the end, when we treat biblical discernment as a matter of identifying self-evident truths, whether in first-century Palestine or twenty-first-century North America, we do ourselves a great disservice. Scriptural interpretation was and continues to be a contested space. However, even as we disagree on the answer to a particular question of faithful living, we should also be willing to admit that often the other "side" is asking a key question or holds a significant insight. The Pharisees were *right* to ask Jesus, "Is this biblical?," a question that remains key for faithful ethical discern-

ment in our day too. But to our discomfort and amazement, in returning once again to our well-worn Scriptures (engaging Scripture is vital!), faithful interpretation may well be found in an unexpected reading of the received tradition (reinterpretation is required!).

Conclusion

At first glance the Sabbath controversies in Matthew seem clear-cut: the Pharisees legalistically and foolishly hold to the "letter of the law," where Jesus transcends it in the interests of justice and mercy. Neither could be further from the case. The Pharisees challenge Jesus with a key question: Is this *lawful* (*biblical*)? Does this accord with the will of God, known to us through Scripture (Torah)? Thoroughly grounded in Scripture and without rejecting the significance of the Sabbath, Jesus provides an interpretive response that intriguingly reorients the question being asked. Being disciples of this Messiah/Christ requires attention to both impulses, hyperattentiveness and dedication to Scripture along with the willingness to reinterpret the tradition. Neither is easy—but then again, who says following Jesus should be?

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Notes

[1] Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the NRSV.

[2] The Hebrew term for commandment does not appear here.

[3] Waldemar Janzen, *Exodus*, Believers Church Bible Commentary (Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 2000), 258–61.

[4] Janzen, *Exodus*, 250.

[5] This exclusion is particularly striking in light of the inclusion of Ruth, who is repeatedly identified as "the Moabite" (Ruth 2:2, 21; 4:5). While focusing on the *decision* of what to do about marriage to foreigners would suggest that Ezra/Nehemiah and Ruth contradict each other, both documents are fundamentally concerned with how to best follow Torah (law). In other words, *both* cases reflect contextual discernment of the ethical demands of Torah obedience, and perhaps most importantly, *both* sides of the debate, including their divergent conclusions, are included in sacred Scripture.

[6] Intriguingly, the Greek term "eunuch" (*eunoxos*) appears just six times in the New Testament, five in the short passage in Acts 8:26–40, and just twice in Isaiah—precisely in Isaiah 56:3–4.

[7] The account of the rape of Dinah and its aftermath in Genesis 34 provides a good example where "an eye for an eye" would have vastly limited bloodshed.
[8] The principle of *qal wehomer* (from weak to strong) is a well-recognized rabbinic interpretive technique. See mention of this element in a broader survey of "Jewish Hermeneutics in the First Century," by Richard N. Longenecker, in *Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 20.
[9] Pauline correspondence, which consistently refers to "saints" or "holy ones," reflects this ongoing concern (Rom. 1:7; 1 Cor. 1:2; 2 Cor. 1:1; etc.).
[10] It is also worth recognizing that, particularly following the sack of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple in 70 CE, the Pharisees competed with the Jesus movement for adherents. See Jacob Neusner, "The Pharisees: Jesus' Competition," in *Judaism in the Beginning of Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 45–61.
[11] Although contemporary Judaism traces its roots to the Pharisaic tradition, this group has long been disparaged in Christian tradition and culture. The term *pharisaical* in the online Merriam Webster's dictionary is "defined" as "marked by hypocritical censorious self-righteousness" (http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/pharisaical), and even prominent scholarly resources can reflect such stereotyped bias: "The term [*exestin*, 'lawful'] is used in relation to the Jewish Law and the exposition of the Pharisees, and the use of this legal formula is *typical of Jewish legalism*" (Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, and Gerhard Friedrich, eds., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 2 [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964–], 561; my italics).
[12] Bruce Chilton and Jacob Neusner, *Judaism in the New Testament: Practices and Beliefs* (London: Routledge, 1995), 135–44.
[13] For the crucial importance of ongoing biblical engagement within theologically diverse interpreting communities, see W. Derek Suderman, "Wrestling with Our Identity," *Canadian Mennonite* 17, no. 9 (April 29, 2013), 4–7; and W. Derek Suderman, "Wrestling with Violent Depictions of God: A Response to Eric Seibert's *Disturbing Divine Behavior*," *Direction* 40, no. 2 (Fall 2011): 156–61. Both articles are available in full online.
[14] For discussion of the need for an interpreting community in light of specific, complex issues (discerning lament and divine violence in the Bible respectively), see W. Derek Suderman, "The Cost of Losing Lament for the Community of Faith: On Brueggemann, Ecclesiology, and the Social Audience of Prayer," *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 6, no. 2 (Fall 2012): 212–17; and W. Derek Suderman, "Assyria the Ax, God the Lumberjack: Jeremiah 29, the Logic of the Prophets, and the Quest for a Non-Violent God," *Conrad Grebel Review* 32, no. 1 (Winter 2014): 61–66.

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