

## SABBATH THOUGHT 2025-10-25—UNDERSTANDING NO WORK & NO SERVILE WORK

May God bless you on His Sabbath day!

Last week's Sabbath Thought was a discussion of how the weekly Sabbath and Day of Covering are distinct from the other holydays, at least in regard to "no work" and "no servile work." The former are what I called liberation days whereas the latter I referred to as judgment days. I did not focus on how to apply these statutes and realize I should have discussed it as well.

The Law of God defines agape love. Keeping the Law is the beginning of growing in that singular characteristic that IS God. It is composed of statutes, judgments, and testimonies. Together, the Law also establishes precepts (principles)—a way of *thinking*. The Law is more than "thou shalt" and "thou shalt not" rules it guides personal decisions and judgments because it does not address every possibility:

PSALM 19:8 **The [precepts] of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart: the commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes.**

The Law is fulfilled by obeying the specific statutes but also by applying its PRINCIPLES to guide the "thoughts and intents of the heart" (Heb. 4:12) in a humble striving to please God.

So, how does one understand the "no work" and "no servile work" statutes in last week's Sabbath Thought article? Like most things, they impact people differently. Folks in sub-Saharan Africa may still slaughter animals and prepare food over wood fires; very much like the ancient Israelites in the wilderness. People in northern climates typically do not prepare food from live animals and use modern stoves to cook on but they live in cold climates that many heat with wood, a situation that does not exist in tropical Africa.

Precepts are important. The Law is not only specific statutes; it is a way of THINKING, the result of which is agape love. This is critically important because it is the primary motive of God. For this reason, He describes the Law this way:

1 JOHN 5:2-3 By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and keep His commandments. 3 For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And **His commandments are not burdensome.**

The Law of God should never be a BURDEN. But do not confuse burden with inconvenience. So, the prohibition of food preparation on the weekly Sabbath was never meant to be burdensome. There are a few biblical instructions that help understand the differences in "no work" and "no servile work" where the Sabbath is distinct from the other holydays as a time of "no food preparation" beginning with:

EXODUS 35:2-3 "Work shall be done for six days, but the seventh day shall be a holy day for you, a Sabbath of rest to the LORD. Whoever does any work on it shall be put to death. 3 **You shall kindle no fire** throughout your dwellings on the Sabbath day."

If kindling a fire on the weekly Sabbath is forbidden, does that mean people cannot heat their home? Is cooking food forbidden? Why did God forbid kindling a fire on the Sabbath? What else is forbidden?

NUMBERS 15:32, 35 Now while the children of Israel were in the wilderness, they found a man **gathering sticks [foraging for wood] on the Sabbath day.** ... 35 Then the LORD said to Moses, “The man must surely be put to death; all the congregation shall **stone him** with stones outside the camp.”

EXODUS 16:23, 25 Then he [Moses] said to them, “This *is what* the LORD has said: ‘Tomorrow *is* a Sabbath rest, a holy Sabbath to the LORD. **Bake what you will bake today, and boil what you will boil; and lay up for yourselves all that remains, to be kept until morning.**’ ” ... 25 Then Moses said, “**Eat that [which remains] today,** for today *is* a Sabbath to the LORD; today you will not find it in the field.

Apparently, kindling a fire, gathering firewood, and cooking are all forbidden on the Sabbath. What, then, does God allow to satisfy the need for food?

MATTHEW 12:1-8 At that time Jesus went through the grainfields on the Sabbath. And **His disciples were hungry, and began to pluck heads of grain and to eat.** 2 And when the Pharisees saw *it*, they said to Him, “Look, **Your disciples are doing what is not lawful** to do on the Sabbath!” 3 But He said to them, “Have you not read what David did when he was hungry, he and those who were with him: 4 “how he entered the house of God and ate the showbread which was not lawful for him to eat, nor for those who were with him, but only for the priests? 5 “Or have you not read in the law that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple profane the Sabbath, and are blameless? 6 “Yet I say to you that in this place there is *One* greater than the temple. 7 “But if you had known what *this* means, ‘I desire **mercy and not sacrifice,**’ you would **not have condemned the guiltless.** 8 “For **the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath.**”

I suspect that Jesus deliberately led them into the field to bring this matter to light because there are several important principles here. Above all, mercy is greater than sacrifice. Mercy is compassion and God’s compassion permitted David and his followers to unlawfully eat the showbread and priests to work on the Sabbaths. Do you understand what Jesus said here? Even though they broke the Law, Jesus said they were GUILTLESS! They sinned and yet were SINLESS! Because Jesus Christ is Lord (Ruler) of the Sabbath, He established the Law in mercy and set compassion above law-keeping! This was not something new because He was quoting from 1 Samuel 15:22, Hosea 6:6, and Micah 6:6-8. When this transpired, the disciples did not say to Jesus, we are hungry so we are going into town to get something to eat and will see You in a couple of hours. Instead, they did what allowed them to continue in the presence of the Emanuel (“God with us”) who was Jesus Christ—their Teacher and Lord! Lastly, Jesus made it abundantly clear that those who condemn others will not be in the Kingdom<sup>1</sup>.

So, back to the question about “no work” and “no servile work,” the distinction being food preparation. No one can make enough rules to cover every situation, forcing everyone to keep the Law. The Pharisees tried this and became overlords. Keeping the Law is a matter of the “thoughts and intents of the heart” for each individual. David, the priests, and disciples were sinless because they were not being rebellious. They had physical needs that could not be met under the strict letter of the Law so God was merciful. But why did David do it if he knew it was unlawful for him to eat the

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<sup>1</sup> Matt. 23:33.

showbread? David meditated on God's Law day and night<sup>2</sup> so he understood the PRECEPTS (intentions) of the Law<sup>3</sup>. Bearing this in mind, notice other details about food preparation on the Sabbath:

EXODUS 16:4-5, 12, 23-26, 29-30 Then the LORD said to Moses, "Behold, I will rain bread [*manna*] from heaven for you. And the people shall go out and gather a certain quota every day, that I may test them, whether they will walk in My law or not. 5 "And it shall be on the sixth day that they shall prepare what they bring in, and it shall be twice as much as they gather daily." ... 12 "I have heard the complaints of the children of Israel. Speak to them, saying, 'At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall be filled with bread. And you shall know that I *am* the LORD your God.'" ... 23 Then he [*Moses*] said to them, "This *is what* the LORD has said: 'Tomorrow *is* a Sabbath rest, a holy Sabbath to the LORD. **Bake what you will bake today, and boil what you will boil; and lay up for yourselves all that remains, to be kept until morning.**' " 24 So they laid it up till morning, as Moses commanded; and it did not stink, nor were there any worms in it. 25 Then Moses said, "**Eat that [which remains] today**, for today *is* a Sabbath to the LORD; today you will not find it in the field. 26 "**Six days you shall gather it**, but on the seventh day, the Sabbath, there will be none." ... 29 "See! For the LORD has given you the Sabbath; therefore He gives you on the sixth day bread [*manna*] for two days. **Let every man remain in his place; let no man go out of his place on the seventh day.**" 30 So the people rested on the seventh day.

In those days, the diet of the ancient Israelites consisted of meat (quail) in the evening and bread (manna) in the morning. They were to bake or boil their food on the preparation day and lay aside the remainder of the food they prepared to consume on the Sabbath. Eating requires food, food must be prepared for cooking, cooking requires a fire, and fire requires wood.

But notice how God summarized the restrictions on Sabbath food preparation in verse 29: "**Let every man remain in his place; let no man go out of his place** on the seventh day." What does this have to do with food preparation? Much about cultures and languages has been lost or diluted over the last 2,000 years, but imagine just what was involved in preparing food.

First of all, God provided quail and manna but the people had to go outside the camp to find and gather them. It was not delivered to their tent doors so hundreds of thousands of people went out and wandered over a large area to collect them and bring it back. Realize also that the quail or manna nearest the camp was quickly gathered up so those in the rear had to forage farther and farther.

Next, the food had to be prepared. Every quail had to be killed, plucked, and butchered. It is a time-consuming and messy process. The feathers and innards also could not remain inside the camp. If left lying around, it not only attracted all kinds of unpleasant flies and critters but would produce a terrible, rotten odor. Imagine the quantity of feathers and innards from millions of quail every single day. Whether the quail were prepared inside the camp or outside, the offal had to be disposed of outside the camp where they likely buried it.

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<sup>2</sup> Ps. 1:2.

<sup>3</sup> Ps. 119:97-100.

Wood had to be collected for fires. Cutting wood is unbelievably arduous if it was even possible (how many owned an ax?). Without modern tools, dead trees are useless because they are too big to cut, too heavy to haul, and too long to burn in a small campfire. Instead, they must have gathered smaller branches. These would burn faster than larger logs, which meant more branches were needed. That likely required several trips for a single day's supply. A cart would help, but imagine the effort of hauling it over miles of rough ground and hills, even with service animals. Like the quail and manna, nearby wood would be quickly gathered up by the early workers so the distance increased for finding wood, especially if they were in the same place for days, weeks, or months. Millions of people can quickly clear a forest of dead branches. It would not be surprising if it took hours of foraging for the wood necessary for one day.

Next, a fire had to be kindled. It would be fairly simple if they used hot coals from the previous day or kept some in insulated leather bags (an ancient practice). But there were certainly occasions when new fires had to be started such as after fleeing Egypt or arriving at a new site. They did not have matches or lighters and starting a fire from scratch was arduous labor. I have used a bow and stick to start a fire as well as flint and steel. Both take a long time to heat tinder to ignition temperatures on a good day without rain or wind. While they likely had flint or chert, they would need to find new ones from time to time. This technique also requires making the tinder (thin shavings of wood or grass). Once the tinder is smoldering, careful attention is required to produce a flame that can be progressively fed with larger material. Starting a fire is not easy, which is why God forbid KINDLING a fire on the Sabbath! Today, I frequently burn huge piles of brush using a lighter and diesel fuel and it is going within seconds. Is that work? Perhaps, but it is nothing compared to kindling a fire with primitive tools. I firmly expect that God would never have made any commandment against kindling a fire if it was as easy as flipping a light switch, pushing an elevator button, or starting a car.

Only now is everything ready to cook the food, which was, by comparison, the easy part. Everything leading up to this required enormous effort and time outside the camp GATHERING the food, wood, and disposing of offal in order to finally cook the food. Now it is understandable why God told ancient Israel the two primary prohibitions on the Sabbath were not to kindle a fire and not to go outside the camp. It also is plain why one man was gathering wood on Sabbath. To prepare for TWO days was even more work than one. Overall, it is likely that many of the ancient Israelites spent much of every weekday simply feeding themselves and their families. God commanded that they stay in the camp and eat the remainder prepared on Friday so they could rest and spend time with God! Can anything pertaining to food preparation today compare to the level of effort in those days?

While on the topic of not traveling outside the camp, there was a prohibition against traveling farther than a 'Sabbath Journey' maintained by the Pharisees. This has been estimated to be the distance between the Mount of Olives and Jerusalem<sup>4</sup>, about 2/3 mile (1.2 km). It presents two problems, however. First, if someone went from Jerusalem to the Mount of Olives on the Sabbath to pray, he could not return until sundown. The other point is that there is nothing in the Law that limits the distance of

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<sup>4</sup> Acts 1:12.

travel on the Sabbath. This is manmade and I suspect was one of several such things that Jesus did not violate "lest we offend."<sup>5</sup>

I bring this up is BECAUSE there is no biblical restriction for Sabbath travel. However, does that mean it should be ignored? No. It is an example of situations that should receive some consideration, just like food preparation. Fellowship is an incredible blessing for those who are able to gather with brethren. Most travel on the Sabbath for that reason alone. Peaceably cruising past the beauty of this earth going to or from a Feast, especially in the fellowship of family or brethren can also be wonderful and uplifting. On the other hand, not so much if driving in congested Los Angeles traffic or on hazardous roads. I also want to raise awareness to those who would judge others that there are legitimate considerations for those who travel on the Sabbath or holydays including poor night vision, work obligations and available funds (usually at the Feast of Tabernacles), transporting other brethren, etc. At the very least, considering what travel is unnecessary on Sabbath and holydays is thinking in terms of agape love for God according to His Law.

I could make a list of the do's and don'ts I personally observe for food preparation on the Sabbath or travel on the holydays. However, they could not apply to everyone and some would find them too restrictive while others might see them as too liberal. That is why it is pointless to make up rules. Above all, making rules that are not in the Bible is a sin of adding to or taking away from the Word of God<sup>6</sup>! Aside from specific statutes, there are principles to guide us: 1) keeping the Law is love toward God; 2) Jesus said His commandments are NOT burdensome; 3) in rare cases where the Law is violated (knowingly or not), Jesus said people are guiltless (if they are humble and their thoughts and intents are right with God); and 4) judging or condemning others, especially when based upon traditions of men, can lead to death.

The Law is more than specific statutes because the entirety of it is the way God THINKS toward us. Learning, knowing, and practicing the Law teaches us the principles of God's ways:

ISAIAH 28:9-10 Whom shall he [God] **teach knowledge?** and whom shall he make to **understand doctrine?** *them that are weaned from the milk, and drawn from the breasts.*

10 For **precept must be upon precept, precept upon precept;** line upon line, line upon line; here a little, *and* there a little.

God did not say knowledge and understanding is memorizing specific statutes of the Law but building precept upon precept, which is growing in agape love because it is who He IS!

May God's grace and peace be upon you!

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<sup>5</sup> Matt. 17:27.

<sup>6</sup> Deut. 12:32; Rev. 22:19.