

Sermon On the Mount Lesson 3 Article

The common use of the term “law” was in reference to the rabbinical, scribal traditions—the thousands of detailed and external requirements that obscured the revealed Word of God the traditions were supposed to interpret. Jesus sternly told the scribes and Pharisees that they “invalidated the word of God for the sake of [their] tradition” (Matt. 15:6). On the surface it seemed that the traditions made the law harder, but in reality they made it much easier, because observance was entirely external. Keeping the traditions demanded a great deal of effort, but it demanded no heart obedience and no faith in God.

God’s law had always required inward as well as outward obedience. “This people draw near with their words and honor Me with their lip service, but they remove their hearts far from Me, and their reverence for Me consists of tradition learned by rote” (Isa. 29:13). During the Exile and especially during the intertestamental period, the traditions were greatly multiplied and covered almost every conceivable activity a person could be involved in.

The rabbis looked through Scripture to find various commands and regulations, and to those they would add supplemental requirements. To the command not to work on the Sabbath they added the idea that carrying a burden was a form of work. They then faced the question of determining exactly what constituted a burden. They decided that a burden is food equal to the weight of a fig, enough wine for mixing in a goblet, milk enough for one swallow, honey enough to put on a wound, oil enough to anoint a small member of the body, water enough to moisten eyesalve, paper enough to write a customs house notice, ink enough to write two letters of the alphabet, reed enough to make a pen, and so on and on. To carry anything more than those prescribed amounts on the Sabbath was to break the law.

Since it was not possible to anticipate or provide for every contingency, much time was spent arguing about such things as whether a tailor committed a sin if he went out on the Sabbath with a needle stuck in his robe, or whether moving a lamp from one place in a room to another was permissible. Some strict interpreters believed that even wearing an artificial leg or using a crutch on the Sabbath constituted work and argued about whether or not a parent could lift a child on the Sabbath. They decided that to heal was work, but made exceptions for grave situations. But only enough treatment to keep the patient from getting worse was allowed; he could not be fully treated until after the Sabbath.

It was the keeping of such external minutia that had become the essence of religion for the scribes and Pharisees and for many other Jews as well. To the strict orthodox Jew of Jesus’ day the law was a plethora of extra-Scriptural rules and regulations.¹

¹ MacArthur, J. F., Jr. (1985). *Matthew*. MacArthur New Testament Commentary (253–254). Chicago: Moody Press.