Does God Change Standards? Reconciling the God of Numbers 15:32-36 with the God of Mark 2:23-28, Concerning the Sabbath

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Abstract

This article explores the relationship between Numbers 15:32-36 and Mark 2:23-28, concerning the Sabbath. It begins with a summary of God's design for the Sabbath. This helps readers understand the context in which the events take place. Understanding God's design for the Sabbath provides the key to reconciling these passages. The article concludes by pointing to the true fulfillment of the Sabbath, Jesus Christ.

Keywords: Sabbath, theology, Old Testament, New Testament

Introduction

God desires that His people recognize His design because it is His design for humanity that is best for them. This includes the Sabbath. However, it seems that God has given two different standards for the Sabbath. His punishment, or lack thereof, for breaking the Sabbath seems to be different in the New Testament than in the Old Testament. Therefore, a natural understanding from this is that the God of the Old Testament is different than the God of the New Testament. In Numbers 15:32-36, God tells the Israelites to put a man to death because he was gathering wood on the Sabbath. However, in Mark 2:23-28, Jesus' disciples were picking heads of grain and did not face any consequences for their actions. There seems to be a contradiction between these two stories. However, as one examines these passages, one will recognize that there is no

contradiction. It will be argued in this article that the two passages do not present a contradiction but a rejection and recognition of God's grace. This will be completed by first examining God's purpose for the Sabbath. Then, an analysis of Numbers 15:32-36 will be considered. Finally, a comparison of Numbers 15:32-36 and Mark 2:23-28 will be completed.

God's Purpose for the Sabbath

To understand the situation in Numbers 15:32-36 and Mark 2:23-28, one must understand God's purpose for the Sabbath. This is important as one considers the rejection of God's design in Numbers. The man's sin was more than simply gathering wood. It was a rejection of God's design for creation that was to be signified in Israel. To reject God's design was to reject God. Three aspects of God's design are given in Scripture.

God's Rest Pointed to Completeness in His Creation

God's rest on the seventh day was more than just a day where He did not do anything. God was giving humanity what they would need. Creation was to enjoy the joy and refreshment that would come from the rest found in the presence of God.[1] They were to be in a perfect relationship with the Lord. God's rest on the seventh day was a picture of the completeness of God's creation culminating in His creation of humanity. His work was complete and perfect. This was not something that happened on the seventh day but was never referenced again. Throughout Scripture, God's people were continually reminded of this rest. It would not only have implications for how humanity was to live in creation, but it pointed to something greater that awaited those who would trust in the Lord.[2]

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[1] Thomas R. Schreiner, *The King and His Beauty: A Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 7.

[2] John H. Sailhamer, *Genesis,* in The Expositor's Bible Commentary, ed. Tremper Longman III & David E. Garland, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2008), 71.

Another important aspect to recognize about the seventh day is that it is not the same as the other days. Kenneth Mathews is helpful here:

> First, there is no introductory formula ("then God said") because his creative word is not required. Second, this day does not have the usual closing refrain "evening" and "morning" to indicate its termination. Theologically, the absence of the refrain implies that creation was intended to enjoy a perpetual rest provided by God, although that rest was disrupted by human sin. Third, the seventh day is the only day of the week blessed and consecrated by God. Fourth, unlike the creation days, the number of the "seventh" day is repeated three times (twice more by the pronoun "it"). Fifth, the seventh day stands outside the paired days of creation, having no corresponding day in the foregoing creation week.[3]

God's rest on the seventh day was meant to be experienced by humanity continually. To miss this understanding is to miss God's design for the Sabbath. Since creation was to experience this Sabbath continually, any movement by God to speak of the Sabbath is to point to His original design for humanity. This foundational understanding is essential for understanding God's punishment for breaking the Sabbath. To break the Sabbath was to disregard God's design for humanity.

Humanity was to Enjoy the Completeness in the Lord

The Sabbath was meant for humanity to experience completeness in the Lord. What God accomplished in the entirety of creation formed a basis for His dealings and

[3] K. A. Mathews, *Genesis 1-11:26*, vol. 1A, in The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1996), 176.

relationship with His creatures.[4] This included His rest. The concept of this completeness extended to all parts of creation. Humanity was to live in a perfect relationship with their Creator. They were to enjoy His presence and the fruits of His creation. They were also to live in perfect relationships with one another. This included relationships with one another and relationships with other creatures. There was perfect harmony in God's creation among the creatures He created. Finally, humanity was to experience this completeness in their relationship with all of creation. This included the land and all other parts of creation. With God's design, humanity, along with all of creation, would experience His rest. This would be the blessing of God given to His people who would enjoy His presence perfectly in harmony with the rest of creation.

There was a specific way in which humanity was to enjoy this completeness of God's creation. They were to rule over creation. In Genesis 1:28, it says, "God blessed them; and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over every living thing that moves on the earth."[5] Living in this completeness involved humanity as an extension of God's rule by ruling over creation as His representatives. To do this in a way that honored God, humanity would need to rule in a way that recognized and honored His design.

Humanity Rejected This Completeness in the Fall

When one evaluates the current state of the world, one recognizes that there are many problems. Many evils are evident. This is a problem for Christians and non-Christians alike. All people are affected by hurt, pain, suffering, natural disasters, broken relationships, and various other difficulties. It is clear that humanity does not experience anything close to

[4] Andrew E. Steinmann, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary*, in Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, ed. David G. Firth, (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2019), 59.

[5] All Scripture is taken from the New American Standard Bible, 1995.

the rest God has designed humanity to experience. This causes humanity to ask questions about their own existence, the suffering experienced, and the meaning of life. There is a recognition that things are not the way they should be.

The reason is found in Genesis 3. Adam and Eve sinned against God, rejecting His design to go their own way. This rejection was a rejection of God Himself. They chose to follow what they thought was best instead of God's completeness of rest. God's design was meant to be a blessing to humanity. It would now be something that would escape humanity. They would continue to desire it, but it could not be found in their existence. God would bring judgment over every part of creation. It says in Genesis 3:16-19,

> To the woman He said, "I will greatly multiply your pain in childbirth, in pain you will bring forth children; yet your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you." Then to Adam He said, "Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten from the tree about which I commanded you, saying, 'you shall not eat from it'; cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. Both thorns and thistles it shall grow for you; and you will eat the plants of the field; by the sweat of your face you will eat bread, till you return to the ground, because from it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return."

Every aspect of God's creation that was to be experienced perfectly would now be the opposite of rest. Every relationship would be affected. Every part of creation would not be as God designed it to be. However, there was hope. God would do something to bring about the restoration of His design. In Genesis 3:15, God says when pronouncing the curse upon the serpent, "And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; He shall bruise you on the

head, and you shall bruise him on the heel." This announcement points to a day when God would bring about a seed from the woman who would bring judgment upon the serpent. It is with this background that a study of Numbers 15:32-36 can be completed.

God Provided an Example of this Completeness by Commanding Israel to Observe the Sabbath

When God calls Israel out of Egypt, they are led to Mt. Sinai. It is here that God gives them the stipulation of the covenant in Exodus 20:1-17. In particular, the Ten Commandments are given that present God's requirements for His covenant people. One of the commandments that is given is that they would honor the Sabbath day and, in doing so, would keep it holy. God gives them this commandment based on His order of creation. They are to observe the Sabbath because of God's rest on the seventh day. This was protection for Israel and for those who would be their servants. The key to this command is its connection to God's creation. He is the model for keeping the Sabbath.[6] This further points to the Sabbath as more than just a day. It is a rest that is built into the foundations of God's creation. It is something that is designed for His creation.

God's Grace Rejected Through Sabbath Breaking: An Exegesis of Numbers 15:32-36

Numbers 15:32-36 involves a man who is stoned to death because he is gathering wood on the Sabbath. The Israelites inquire of the Lord what they should do with the man. The Lord tells them to stone him to death. It is this incident that many critics use to criticize God's judgment, especially in light of Mark 2:23-28, where the disciples are not punished for plucking grain on the Sabbath. However, it is important to

[6] Douglas K. Stuart, *Exodus*, vol. 2, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2006), 459.

recognize that the man was not simply gathering wood. There was a deeper issue.

God's Picture of Restoration Disregarded by the Man

The problem in Numbers 15:32-36 can be understood better when one considers the context in which the incident occurs. It is placed between the story of the people refusing to enter the land God had promised (Num 14) and the rebellion of Korah (Num. 16). This man's rejection of the law took place in the middle of a series of rebellions.[7] Rebellion could not be tolerated. If God relaxed on rebellion, it would continue to happen in Israel. This would lead Israel down a road that would only result in destruction. God desired the best for His people. Punishing sin would go a long way in preventing further progression.

Israel was to represent God to the nations around them as a small version of what God was doing for the whole world. God had called the Israelites out of captivity in Egypt. They were to be His people and be a light to the nations around them. God gave them the Ten Commandments to set His standard for how they were to live, relate to Him, and relate to one another. One of the Ten Commandments was for the Israelites to keep the Sabbath. The reason for this command is tied to the seventh day of creation. It is because of God's grace that Israel is commanded to keep the Sabbath. God was providing a picture of His design through Israel. This was a type. It pointed to the true rest found in Jesus. Jesus would restore God's design, and those who follow Him would experience this rest.[8] What was given for Israel was a picture of what God was doing in bringing about the restoration of this rest that was originally His design.

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[7] David T. Lamb, *God Behaving Badly: Is the God of the Old Testament Angry, Sexist and Racist?* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2022), 130.

[8] Andrew David Naselli, "What Is a Biblical Theology of the Sabbath?" in *40 Questions about Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic, 2020), 265.

Israel would be a people who would picture this to the nations around them. To reject the Sabbath is to reject God's design. The man did more than simply gather wood. He rejected God's design.

Another aspect of the background of this passage should be considered. Numbers focuses on moving into the land of promise. They were to demonstrate faith in their Lord.[9] This faith would be an example to the nations around them. It would be a model for future generations. God had already promised that through Israel, He would bring about a blessing for all nations (Genesis 12). Everything Israel did was to point to the Lord and bring others to Him. How they obeyed the Lord would be an example for others. How they obeyed the Lord would also demonstrate their recognition of Him as their God. As they were moving into the land, they would encounter these other nations. Upon this recognition, they were to demonstrate their worship of Him through their obedience to His commands. If Israel did not obey God's commands, it would lead others to disobey as well. They would not fulfill their call. If God did not punish the man who broke the Sabbath, it would lead to further rebellion.

An Exegesis of Numbers 15:32-36

God had already told Israel that breaking the Sabbath was punishable by death (Exodus 31:15). This was not a new command. There is one passage where God specifically mentions something prohibited on the Sabbath. Israel was not to kindle a fire on the Sabbath: "You shall not kindle a fire in any of your dwellings on the sabbath day" (Exodus 35:3). The story of the man gathering wood breaks this command. It is here that some might say that he is only gathering wood but not kindling a fire. However, it must be noted that the man was gathering wood for a reason. He was planning on starting a fire.

[9] Gordon J. Wenham, *Numbers: An Introduction and Commentary*, in Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, ed. Donald J. Wiseman, (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1981), 44-45.

The man was demonstrating a premeditated breaking of God's law. He had every intention of breaking the law that God had given concerning the Sabbath. It was not simply gathering wood. As Wenham stated, "By collecting sticks the man was demonstrating his clear intention of lighting a fire on the sabbath."[10] Thus, the man was breaking God's law.

It is here that one might object and say that it was only a simple gathering of wood. Why would God punish someone so severely for only gathering wood? One must understand that God had just given to Israel a command for those who intentionally disregard the law of God: "But the person who does anything defiantly, whether he is native or an alien, that one is blaspheming the Lord; and that person shall be cut off from among his people. Because he has despised the word of the Lord and has broken His commandment, that person shall be completely cut off; his guilt will be on him" (Numbers 15:30-31). God distinguished between sins committed accidently and those that were clear demonstrations of a disregard for the Lord. As R. Dennis Cole has observed that this defiance, "raised their fist in defiance of God, and for this there was no means of sacrifice that could deliver them from judgment . . . but in the case of outright and deliberate rebellion, nothing could compensate for the people's sin . . . the sinner with the high had feels no guilt; therefore the offense is not sacrificially expiable."[11] This is the man's attitude. The word despised that is used in verse 31 can indicate that the man preferred His way over the Lord's. The word used is *bazah* which "can mean to prefer something more than the thing despised, or not to treat something with proper respect."[12] This is what the man demonstrates by gathering on the Sabbath. He has rejected God's law and, therefore, the covenant. He has chosen what he

[10] Gordon Wenham, *Numbers*, 148.

[11] R. Dennis Cole, *Numbers* in The New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishers, 2000), 252-53.

[12] Warren Baker and Eugene Carpenter, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary Old Testament* (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 2003), 125.

thinks is best and ignored God's command. This was not simply a neglect. It was a willful sin against the Lord.

God had called Israel out of servitude in Egypt, and by gathering on the Sabbath, the man was demonstrating a rejection of the deliverance God had given.[13] By working, the man disregarded the blessing God was giving to Israel, which was connected to God's blessing of rest provided in His creation. He was rejecting God's design just as Adam and Eve had rejected God's design. He was guilty of his sin. God's punishment was just because of his previous command not to gather on the Sabbath. This man's actions were a disregard for the Lord. To willingly break God's command in a premeditated way was to fail to recognize the character of the Lord who gave the commands. It was a failure to recognize that God was providing grace to Israel in giving them the Sabbath. It was also a failure to understand God's design for humanity.

God's Restoration of the Sabbath in Jesus

One can now examine how the New Testament pictures the Sabbath. It would be easy for skeptics to claim that God was unjust because He punishes the man in Numbers but does not bring judgment upon the disciples when they break the Sabbath. It would seem that God is giving two different standards. It would also seem that the God of the New Testament is different than the God of the Old Testament. However, an examination of teaching on the Sabbath will demonstrate this is not the case.

The Disciples Gathering on the Sabbath was not the Same as the Man's

In Mark 2:23-28, Jesus' disciples are walking along with Him when they are observed plucking heads of grain. The religious

[13] Jonathan Burnside, "What Shall We Do with the Sabbath-Gatherer? A Narrative Approach to a 'Hard Case' in Biblical Law (Numbers 15:32-36)," *Vetus Testamentum*, 60 (2010), 61.

leaders call out Jesus for allowing His disciples to do what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath. Jesus speaks up in their defense. This brings the question: why were Jesus' disciples allowed to pluck grain on the Sabbath, but the man was not allowed to gather wood? This question is answered by recognizing that what the disciples did was not the same as what the man did. Jesus tells the story of David when he ate the bread of the Presence (1 Samuel 21:1-6). In doing this, Jesus demonstrated that the basic principle of human need is greater than ceremonial law.[14] This provides a key difference between the man and the disciples. They were gathering for human need. The man was not gathering for human need.

Another point should be made concerning this incident in Mark. The religious leaders were pointing out the disciples' mistake based on their interpretation of the law. The scribes had developed thirty-nine different kinds of works that were not to be done on the Sabbath. One of which was reaping.[15] In their minds, the disciples were breaking this command. However, this was the command of the religious leaders and not God. They had taken their interpretation and equated it with the Lord's command. This also makes what the disciples did different than what the man did.

Restoration of God's Design for the Sabbath is in Jesus

Jesus does not end with defending His disciples. He uses it as an opportunity to teach about the Sabbath. Jesus reminds the religious leaders that God's intention for the Sabbath was for it to be a blessing. They had disregarded this blessing by placing a yoke upon the people that they could not bear. David Garland, quoting G. B. Caird and L. D. hurst, provides this clear picture: "God intended the Sabbath to be a gracious gift, a release from the necessity of seven-day toil, so that anyone who interprets

[14] James A. Brooks, *Mark*, in The New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishers, 1992), 66.

[15] Brooks, *Mark*, 65.

the Law as to make the Sabbath a burden, or to inhibit the free course of God's mercy, merely reveals his own ignorance of God and his purposes."[16] Anything that was placed upon the people as a burden disregarded God's design for rest that His people were to experience. The religious leaders committed the same disregard for God's design as the man did in Numbers.

Jesus then brings His teaching to a conclusion. It is Jesus who is Lord of the Sabbath (Mark 2:28). It was in Christ that the Sabbath would be restored. He is the true rest that humanity needs (Matthew 11:28). Through His work, he has provided this rest to those who would trust in Him for salvation.[17] Only in Christ can true rest be given. In Jesus, God's design is restored for all humanity.

The writer of Hebrews reminds his readers of this fact. Of particular concern is verses 9-10: "So there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God. For the one who has entered His rest has himself also rested from his works, as God did from His." Here, the writer connects the entire story. The rest promised is based on God's design for His creation. This rest is promised but not fully realized. Joshua pictured this rest when he brought the Israelites into the promised land. However, this was not realized: "For if Joshua had given them rest, He would not have spoken of another day after that."[18] This rest, then, is only found in Jesus. It is those who enter into the rest that experience it. This points to rest found when one trusts in Jesus for salvation. However, this is still not fully realized in the Christian life. This rest will one day be fully realized when a new heaven and new earth are present. It is an expectation for the

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[16] G. B. Caird and L. D. Hurse, *New Testament Theology* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994), 47 quoted in David Garland, *Mark* in The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998), 107.

[17] Daniel Lanzinger, "A Sabbath Rest for the People of God (Heb 4:9): Hebrews and Philo on the Seventh Day of Creation," *New Testament Studies*, 64 no. 1 (2018): 107.

[18] Hebrews 4:8.

future that is also a present reality.[19] This is only for those who are in Christ.

Summary of What Has Been Stated

As a way of conclusion, a connection between Numbers 15:32-36 and Mark 2:23-28 can be presented. God created the world and provided His rest as a blessing for all humanity. When humanity fell into sin, this rest would not be experienced any longer. In His pronouncement of judgment, God also promised to bring about a Seed who would crush the head of the Serpent (Genesis 3:15). When the Serpent's head was crushed, it would begin a restoration of God's original design. When God called Israel out of Egypt and gave them the Ten Commandments, he commanded that the Sabbath be observed. This was His grace extended, and a picture of what He was would accomplish through Israel by bringing about the Messiah. When the man gathered on the Sabbath, he intentionally broke God's command and disregarded His command. God brought punishment on him as a demonstration of the seriousness of his sin. By disregarding God's command, he was disregarding God. The reason this was so serious was that it was a rejection of what God was accomplishing through Israel. It was a breaking of the covenant which pointed to what God was going to accomplish for all nations (Genesis 12).

The disciples did not disregard God's command by plucking grain on the Sabbath. They broke an interpretation of the command that the religious leaders had provided. By placing this burden on the people, the religious leaders also disregarded God's design for the Sabbath. Jesus points them back to the true meaning of the Sabbath, which was fulfilled in Him through His death and resurrection. Numbers 15:32-36 and Mark 2:23-28 picture a God who extends His grace but brings judgment to those who reject the offer of His rest. Jesus would

[19] David L. Allen, *Hebrews*, The New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: B & H Publishing Group, 2010), 276.

take God's punishment upon Himself. By doing that, Jesus is able to give rest to those who trust in Him. The man rejected God's rest. Jesus provided God's rest. The disciples did not disregard God's rest; they were following the One who would provide God's rest.

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