

Is Jesus Breaking the Sabbath?—John 5:18

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John 5:18 contains a statement not found in this form in any of the Gospels or other parts of the New Testament: “For this reason therefore the Jews were seeking all the more to kill Him, because He not only was breaking the Sabbath, but also was calling God His own Father, making Himself equal with God.” This statement is puzzling to some and seems to contradict other texts in the Gospels. Was Jesus breaking the law or not?

I. *The Context*

Jesus’ healing of the man at the pool of Bethesda (John 5:1-15) triggered a negative response by the Jews (John 5:16-18). They were not only hostile toward Him, but also attempted to kill Him. For them the immediate problem was the healing of a man on the Sabbath day, who had been sick for thirty-eight years, and Jesus’ command to this individual to pick up his bed or mat and walk. In the subsequent discussion with the Jews and as His defense Jesus pointed out that God was working on the Sabbath, at least to the extent that He was maintaining the universe. This was acknowledged by the rabbis. However, their problem was that Jesus claimed God to be His Father, not in the sense that Israel had a Father in heaven—which was acceptable—but in the sense that He had an intimate relationship with God surpassing all human relationships with the deity and that He was allowed to do what the heavenly Father did, which included to perform certain types of work on the Sabbath that were not allowed to humans.¹

Thereby the issue shifted from a perceived breaking of the law in reference to the Sabbath to an even more serious crime in Jewish eyes, namely blasphemy, and this is what verse 18 is concentrating on. Still the question remains to be answered, how should the statement that Jesus was breaking the Sabbath be understood?

II. *The Greek Term*

The Greek term translated “breaking” is *luō*. It can be rendered as “to loose,” “to untie,” “to release,” “to set free,” “to break,” “to set aside,” “to destroy,” or “to allow.” How should it be understood in this verse? Is Jesus setting the Sabbath free, breaking the Sabbath, or destroying the Sabbath?

The term is used six times in the Gospel of John. In John 1:27 and 11:44 it refers to untying sandals and wrappings. However, in John 2:19; 7:23; 10:35 it should be translated with the English terms “to destroy” and “to break.” The temple will be “destroyed,” but Scripture cannot be “broken.”

John 7:23 is quite important, because the text contains parallels to John 5:18: “If a man receives circumcision on the Sabbath so that the Law of Moses will not be broken, are you angry with Me because I made an entire man well on the Sabbath?” In both verses the Sabbath, the verb *luō*, and behind them the concept of the law and healing on the Sabbath occur. In this case the verb *luō* must be translated by the term “to break.” Therefore, John’s usage of this term seems to suggest that also in John 5:18 *luō* should be translated “to break.” Consequently, this text claims that Jesus broke the law.

III. *Jesus and the Law*

Yet this understanding seems to create a problem, because in other places Jesus cannot be charged with antinomianism. According to John 10:35 Jesus held that Scripture cannot be broken which would also include its law. In chapter 8:46 John reported that Jesus challenged His audience to convict Him of sin. Obviously they were not able to do that. He called his disciples to keep His commandments as He had kept His Father’s commandments (John 15:10). Thus, the Gospel of John makes it very clear that Jesus did not abolish the law.

A brief look at the Synoptic Gospels confirms that Jesus regarded the Ten Commandments as binding. In the Sermon on the Mount He stated that He had not come “to abolish the Law or the Prophets, “but to fulfill” (Matt. 5:17). The passage following this statement and dealing with the law shows that for Jesus the Ten Commandments were binding. He wanted the commandment to honor father and mother to be kept and not replaced by their traditions (Matt. 15:3-6; Mark 7:7-13). The Pharisees were told that divorce and polygamy are against God’s will (Matt. 19:2-9; Mark 10:7-9). The rich young ruler was challenged to keep the commandments (Matt. 19:16-19; Mark 10:19). Tithe should be given (Matt. 23:23). According to Matt. 24:20 He called His disciples to pray that their flight from Jerusalem would not have to take place on a Sabbath. Finally, Jesus’ prosecutors had a hard time to find any evidence against Him that would allow them to condemn Him (Matt. 26:59-60). The evidence is overwhelming that Jesus supported the law including the Sabbath.

IV. The Accusations Against Jesus

Therefore, it seems that the phrase “He was . . . breaking the Sabbath” is not a comment by the Gospel writer but an accusation of the Jews against Jesus. Two accusations were leveled against him: (1) Jesus broke the Sabbath, and (2) Jesus made himself equal with God. The first was wrong in any case. Jesus may have broken the Sabbath as some Jewish circles understood and interpreted it, but actually He did not break the Sabbath. Rather in His ministry He elevated the law to a new level and summarized it in the commandments of love toward God and the neighbor (Mark 12:28-34).

The second was most probably wrong too. Although Jesus claimed to be one with the father, He did not strive for equality with God in the way Satan did. Borchert notes: “Jesus did not claim to take the place of God or be an alternative to God, which is what the Jews meant by ‘making himself equal with God’. . . What Jesus, as the One and Only Son of God (1:14, 18) claimed was to be sent by God, in mission for God, doing the works of God, obedient to God, and bringing glory to God. That is not the role of one who displaces God but one who is a representative or emissary of God.”² Although Jesus was God, as John points out in many places, He remained subordinate to His heavenly Father. In verse 19 Jesus stated that “the Son can do nothing of Himself, unless it is something He sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, these things the Son also does in like manner.” This includes the ability to resurrect the dead and judge humanity (John 5:21-30).

Beasley-Murray seems also to understand the second part of John 5:18 as “Jewish objection to Jesus,”³ while Keener states: “The claim that Jesus annulled the law is not his but that of his opponents.”⁴ The Catholic scholar Moloney summarizes the issues well by saying: “The Greek verb translated by ‘was breaking’ (*elyen*) has a primary meaning of ‘loosened’ or ‘broke.’ However, it could also mean ‘did away with’ . . . If this were the meaning, ‘the Jews’ would be wrong. They are correct in suggesting that he broke their understanding of the Law. Jesus is not abolishing the Sabbath; he is reinterpreting it in terms of his relationship to the Father.”⁵

¹Cf. Gerald L. Borchert, *John 1-11*, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 2002), 235-236; George R. Beasley-Murray, *John*, Word Biblical Commentary 36, second edition (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1999), 74; F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel and Epistles of John* (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1983), 127.

²Borchert, 236; cf. Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1971), 310.

³Beasley-Murray, 74.

⁴Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, two volumes (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2003), 1:646.

⁵Francis J. Moloney, *The Gospel of John*, Sacra Pagina, Vol. 4 (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1998), 174.