

In the Mishnah, Moed Order, Tractate Shabbath 7:2, thirty-nine classes of work are mentioned. They are:

. . . sowing, ploughing, reaping, binding sheaves, threshing, winnowing, cleansing crops, grinding, sifting, kneading, baking, shearing wool, washing or beating or dyeing it, spinning, weaving, making two loops, weaving two threads, separating two threads, tying a knot, loosening a knot, sewing two stitches, tearing in order to sew two stitches, hunting a gazelle, slaughtering or flaying or salting it or curing its skin, scraping it or cutting it up, writing two letters, erasing in order to write two letters, building, pulling down, putting out a fire, lighting a fire, striking with a hammer and taking out anything from one domain into another.

Many of these classes of work are occupationally related, and therefore properly come under the prohibition of the Fourth Commandment. However, the rabbis laid down a number of additional rules related to the general sense of work--any physical or mental exertion in order to accomplish some purpose--and they asserted that the things specified in these rules were also forbidden on the Sabbath!

For example, one of the most common kinds of work (general sense) is that of carrying. The Rabbis said that carrying anything that weighed less than one dried fig was permissible, but if it weighed more, it was a breaking of the Sabbath. If a house caught on fire on the Sabbath, the owner was not permitted to carry clothing out of the house to save it. But he was permitted to put on all the clothes that he could, up to eighteen items, because that would not be "carrying." On the one hand it was lawful to lift and move a chair; but on the other hand it was not lawful to drag or push a chair, since this might produce a rut, and that would be considered ploughing! Women were forbidden to look in the mirror on the Sabbath, because they might discover a white hair and attempt to pull it out, and that would be work! Picking a piece of fruit, even from the ground, was forbidden, since that was considered reaping. It was permitted to dip a radish into salt, but not to leave it in the salt too long, for that would be pickling. In the case of sick persons, "all actual danger to life" could be treated, but nothing short of that. It was forbidden to set broken bones, or to give emetics, or to perform any medical or surgical operation which was not essential to the preservation of life; or, in general, to use or apply any remedy to bring improvement or cure to the sick on the Sabbath. The Rabbis said that Jews were not to weed or cut off dead leaves or fruit, not to squeeze juice from fruit, not to pluck out hairs from a beard or a mustache, not to take anything out of storage, not to throw anything farther than 6 feet away, not to travel farther than 3,000 feet (a Sabbath day's journey), and, in case of a fire, not to try to save more food than would be sufficient for three meals.

These are only a few examples of the ways in which the Rabbis confused the two concepts of work, and enlarged the simple Sabbath law as expressed in the Bible.

In passing, it should be pointed out that the law of the Sabbath, as God originally gave it, permitted works of necessity and works of mercy.