

November 13, 2017

LORD OF THE SABBATH

Matthew 12:1-21

The Fourth Commandment is: *“Remember the Sabbath Day, and keep it holy!”* (Exodus 20:8) This Commandment has attached to it the rationale for it: *“Six days you shall labor and do your work. But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work – you, your son, or your daughter, your male and female servants, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them; but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the seventh day and consecrated it!”* (9-11) When the Ten Commandments are reiterated again in Deuteronomy Chapter Five, there is added the reminder: *“You were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath Day!”* (5:15)

There was no day of rest for the Hebrew people when they were slaves in Egypt. No other nation in the world had a “day of rest.” But for the Jews, the Sabbath had a double significance. 1) As the day of rest, it was to be a reminder of the time when there was no rest. That the Jews had such a day made them very distinct as a nation. This was part of their unique identity as a people of God, Yahweh. 2) Its second significance was the way it was meant to honor God. Their God rested on the Seventh Day, therefore *they* should rest on the Seventh Day. It was meant to be a holy time, a time for reflection, for meditation on what God had done for them. It was not meant to be just a day off. It was meant to be a day dedicated to faith only. This is why the statutes and ordinances concerning the Sabbath were so guarded by the Pharisees at the time of Christ. The Sabbath Law was wrapped fairly tightly with rules and regulations. To disobey these rules was, in some respects, a denial of God’s grace in their lives, a disrespect for the sanctity intended, and a desertion of God’s purposes. So you can see why the Pharisees would have been so extremely concerned about the breach of Sabbath law by Jesus and His disciples.

First of all, realize that what they did was not stealing. It was considered an act of hospitality on the part of the farmer to let travelers eat a little of what was growing. Travelers, however, were supposed to be reasonable. A little bit of grain here and there would not hurt their harvest. In fact, God would supposedly multiply the harvest of those who were so gracious. And...they were not to harvest every inch of their fields, but leave some for poor travelers. What *was* the infraction here, then? Well, though it was meant to be a day of rest, Christ and His disciples were traveling. So were the Pharisees, though, who seem to be watching Jesus’ every move now. This is not the problem, apparently. It was the plucking of grain, rubbing the wheat seeds in their hands to break off the chaff, and then eating the seeds....that was against the Sabbath law. They did some work! They had harvested! And Jesus claims an unmatched precedent in the life of David as His justification for breaking the rules.

Before I get to the real issue, here, which has to do with Jesus being the Christ, it seems relevant to ask a very important question: Is it ever right to break the law? The answer is, No! The law is not just the law! It is ***Law and Order!*** Laws are there for a purpose. They are for our protection. It is not just a matter of control, but of keeping things from going out of control. Laws help prevent chaos. Consider the purpose of a stop sign, or a traffic light, or a speed limit. The Bible says nothing about such things, but society’s need for them exists. We should obey these traffic laws for safety’s sake. They are there for our protection.

However...if a woman is in labor, or, someone is bleeding, it seems like there should be an exception to the traffic laws for the sake of the urgency of the need. Still, we need to remember that the safety of others is still important, and should be our priority. And that is the purpose of the law. There is no excuse for recklessness! And, nowadays, there are paramedics, usually only minutes away, who can speed their way to us – and they have sirens and flashing lights! Just always remember it is not just law, but Law and Order!

Jesus claims to be the exception to the Sabbath rules. The problem the Pharisees could justifiably have is, “What if dozens of others were to claim to be the exception to the rules?” The breakdown of order in society would snowball. In defense of the Pharisees, and with the issue of order in mind, they are not wrong. If Jesus was the Messiah, in their mind, He should preserve the Law! And preserve it well.

But Jesus sort of makes Himself equal to David when He cites David’s infraction with regard to the Bread of Presence, consecrated, set aside as holy, and intended only for the priests to eat. (The story is in 1 Samuel 21). Jesus is, in fact, greater than David, though the Pharisees don’t believe it. In verse 7, Jesus also quotes Hosea (6:6) and says the Pharisees need to learn what it means when Hosea says by the Spirit, “*I desire mercy and not sacrifice.*” In Mark (2:27), however, what Jesus says is that, “*The Sabbath was made for humanity, not humanity for the Sabbath!*” And though this is not a quote from the Scriptures, it is the spirit of the Law.

When laws are enforced without mercy, they become oppressive. Mercy, however, is better than sacrifice. And when laws are seen only as an end in themselves, and humanity as having to serve that end, rather than the laws serving humankind, again, they seem oppressive. The fact of the matter is that it is those who enforce the laws without mercy, and, who regard the law as an end in itself, rather than a means to an end, who make the laws seem oppressive. This describes the attitude of the Pharisees with respect to the Laws; especially in their attitude toward Jesus, whom they had begun to regard as a threat to *their* authority, ...as even undermining *them* as the high upholders of the Law!

And that leads to the real issue here. Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah. It doesn’t mean He can do whatever He wants to do, but that He is Lord...even of the Sabbath. He is not above the Law, but Lord of the Law. What does that mean? It means the Law is meant to serve Him, His purposes, His will, His existence! It is by this grace that He demands to be the exception to the Sabbath rules. And the Pharisees, who refuse to accept Jesus as the Messiah, will not let Him justify Himself in this regard. So His clash with them will never end!

What is the issue for us? The issue is Jesus’ Lordship, not the Law. Yes, if there are unjust laws, they need to be changed. And from a worldly point of view, undermining those laws we think are unjust seems justifiable. And we tend to think, “How else will the lawmakers become aware of the need for reform?” Passive resistance seems to work, though it may take more time, sometimes, to change things. Protests, demonstrations, petitions, etc. But to flaunt a disrespect for the law is neither right nor in the spirit of law and order that preserves society. Good examples of the efforts to change laws, I believe, were seen with respect to the laws that subjected people to the segregation of the races, the draft laws during the 60s and 70s, and the laws that prohibited the rights of all citizens to vote!

The laws I believe need changing today are the laws that have been taken too far, such as the right to freedom of speech extending to freedom of self-expression and the notion that that means pornography is okay. Also in need of change is the spirit of the law that seems to suggest that a separation of church and state should not allow a freedom of religious expression in public schools. Other countries

have laws that defend a particular religion at the exclusion of all others. In Saudi Arabia, if you are not a Muslim, you are an outlaw. It is considered a Muslim state by its lawmakers. And it can seem oppressive.

To us who are Christian, disobeying the Fourth Commandment should not be flaunted. No one gets persecuted in our country for not keeping the holiness aspect of the Sabbath. Too many see it only as a day of rest, though. No...actually, it is more of a day off from our regular jobs, and we can work around the house. It seems true for those who don't take it seriously that this Commandment is seen only as a suggestion. Keeping the Sabbath holy is considered to be an issue between an individual and God. And, yes, God will judge us primarily by our relationship to Christ. But the issue at stake for us is the *quality* of that relationship. If you never get together with God and God's people, what kind of relationship do you have with God? If Jesus is Lord in your life, and if Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath, shouldn't He be the Lord *in* our Sabbath?

"Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?" Ultimately that is what it all comes down to. Good works. Healing. Saving grace. It seems to be such a small thing to find fault, sometimes. In the grand scheme of things, the Sabbath was nothing compared to the miraculous healing that happened that day. And even though the man's hand could have been healed just as easily the next day, it was good to heal him today! Jesus was here, now. Do it!

This story gets to the very root of the Sabbath's true purpose...and that purpose is Jesus. Something greater than a day of rest was at stake. Something deeper, even, than its holiness. The man was made whole!!! He became able to observe the Sabbath...with the Pharisees (if he wanted). He became able to do good!

And for those with their eyes darting to and fro, watching suspiciously, waiting to see if they could accuse Jesus of something they knew He might do on a day when work was forbidden... He knew what they were thinking. He knew the darkness of their shallow hearts and the pathetic intentions of their scrutiny. And He knew He was Lord of the Sabbath as well. The Day was meant to serve God's purposes. And so it was meant to serve Jesus' purposes too. How blind were the Pharisees who were unwilling, and perhaps even unable to see the divine nature in Jesus? How could anyone who saw the man's hand restored right before their eyes even question the fact that Jesus is the Son of God? The power that restored the man's hand was moving in their midst...Not unlike the Spirit of God moving over the chaos of the sea in the very beginning. That power was so great that all the man had to do was stretch out his hand. It doesn't say that Jesus touched the hand. It doesn't say that Jesus even said, "Be healed!" Did Jesus even do anything...other than *will* the restoration of the man's hand? But...because there was healing, that meant that someone must have worked: Jesus. So...the Pharisees were filled with such fury that they began to plot very seriously against Jesus. No longer did they need to observe Jesus to see if He was anything special. They just knew there was something wrong.

Yeah! There was! Something was wrong with their whole attitude. With their systematic method of seeing everything as either right or wrong. Any truly ethical system would determine justice as what is best for the most people. The Pharisees had developed a system, however, that could not see the blessing if it didn't work according to their protocol. Meanwhile, there was a man whose hand had become whole!!!!

Ronald Reagan, our nation's 40th President, told the story once of the young boy who was slinging manure over his shoulder as fast as he could, thinking that, with all this manure, there must be a pony somewhere. And Reagan said that, like that boy, he was just looking for a pony in Washington, D.C. The

moral of the story is that the optimist doesn't just see the manure. He looks for the pony. Jesus was revealing a pony. The Pharisees saw only manure.

What happens on the Sabbath is not a waste! Though we may never see someone's withered hand restored, we will experience something good! We will experience grace, something that restores, something that saves. By neglecting the best purposes of the Sabbath we do harm. We may not think it will harm us to be absent from worship, but we just don't realize the harm our negative example may work in the lives of others who feel our absence, or, who witness our absence and then assume that if *you* are absent, it's all right if *I* am absent. We may think that nothing will be harmed by our lack of holiness in our lives, but we can't help but wonder how the absence of some literally hurts the church. And we may never realize that the way we become so good at finding fault in others does damage to not just us, and not just others, but to the working of the Holy Spirit in the church, in the congregation.

Important words to live by: *"Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption! Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you."* (Ephesians 4:29-31)

"Stretch out your hand," Jesus said. He did so, and his hand was restored! In the parallel story in Luke, Jesus said it *"after looking around at all of them."* He looked not just at the faces of the people present, He looked into their souls. He could see either an optimistic hope for the disabled man, or, He saw the demon of fault-finding. What would He see if He looked into *your* soul?

Once the Pharisees were gone, Jesus left the synagogue, people followed Him, and He healed all of them. Once the negativity is gone, the floodgates can open and grace can really begin to flow. And maybe even nonbelievers will have hope! As it says, *"And in His Name the Gentiles will hope!"* (Matthew 12:21)

Stretch out your hand in open welcome not with fingers pointing.

Stretch out your hand and by faith it will offer comfort.

Stretch out your hand and others will see you as a restored soul.

Stretch out your hand and touch others with love and kindness.

And stretch out your hand as Jesus did and you will heal; you will save lives; you will offer grace; and you will save souls!