

June 3, 2018

Lesson 1: Justice and Sabbath Laws

Scripture: Matthew 12:1-14

Context:

The summer series begins a new focus on justice in the New Testament. The first unit for the month of June focuses on how God is both just and merciful. The first text comes from the Gospel of Matthew and Jesus's understanding of the Sabbath laws and justice.

In this one of many instances where Jesus debates with the Pharisee, justice and mercy are read as the overriding virtues in any case dealing with the law. In chapters before this one like chapter eleven, Jesus deals with the Sabbath and the controversial understanding of what constitutes work and rest. In the text, we read that the disciples plucked from the wheat fields on the Sabbath as they were going on their journey. The decision to do so could be considered a breaking of Torah law.

The Pharisees notice the disciples and confront Jesus. An important note is that their perspective does not reflect all the Pharisees. The Mishnah, a collection of opinions from Jewish legal authorities published around 200 C.E., does not list "plucking" as one of the thirty-nine varieties of prohibited labor.¹ Instead, this sect of Pharisees would have been the extreme sabbatarians, who wrote texts such as *Jubilees*, in which the Sabbath could not even be violated to save a life.² Those who are speaking to Jesus are thus a small minority and not reflective of the entire Jewish community.

Jesus's response to them does not go straight to the interpretation of the text. Instead, Jesus references the story of David and his soldiers in which David ate holy bread and fed his hungry men.³ The story was told probably not as much for the opponents as it was for Jesus' disciples, who are on a mission for God.

Yet Jesus continues on to a more logical point for a non-Christian Jewish audience that there is something more important to this "breaking" of Torah law. Something that is even more important than the Sabbath and the physical temple are the people who go to temple. Quoting Hosea 6:6, Jesus' statement: "I want mercy and not sacrifice," suggests that God's demand for mercy outranks the temple and Sabbath requirements.⁴ The translation is that people are more important than the institution. The closing statement of the human one is Lord of the Sabbath points to the fact that Jesus is the one who is the ultimate interpreter of the law and the prophets; not humans.

The passage continues to something of an even grander nature when Jesus goes to a synagogue. Setting a trap for Jesus with questions about healing a man with a withered

¹ Douglas R.A. Hare, "Matthew," *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, (John Knox Press; Louisville, KY 1993), 131.

² Ibid., 131.

³ 1 Sam. 21:1-6; NRSV.

⁴ Hare, "Matthew," 132.

hand, the sabbatarians inquire about the law and if healing is allowed on the Lord's Day. Jesus knows their game at this point and makes an allusion to a sheep that falls into a pit. Does the shepherd or sabbatarian leave it there to die? No the sheep is pulled out. The same goes for humans who are in trouble on the Sabbath. Thus, Jesus heals the man with the withered hand.

The closing verse of the section ends with this group seeking to destroy Jesus. This is the first verse indicating that the hostility directed towards Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew will culminate in a violent death.⁵ This is to prepare the reader for the passion narrative and indicates not as much about the Sabbath, as it does about Jesus and his radical understanding of God's kingdom and justice.

Application:

At times, we have all struggled with the understanding of what laws are meant to do. Everyone knows that you need laws in order for any society to function. At their core, laws are meant to protect individuals and communities. They give structure and direction. They help a society flourish so that all are treated equal.

Yet at times, we can see how laws that at first seem to be a good thing can yield to negative interpretations that miss the point. In the case of today's text, we have the law we know as the commandment concerning the Sabbath. As one of the ten commandments God gave to the Israelites, observing the Sabbath was to be a holy day set aside for worshipping God and resting. In essence, it was a wonderful law intentionally designed for humans to rest just as the Creator rested in creating the earth.

However, some people took it too literally. They came up with rules and interpretations in which every movement and thought was examined to see if a person "worked" or violated the Sabbath. Even within the modern church this became an issue as the Puritan community used to also punish people for "working" on the Sabbath. A day that was meant to be set aside for resting and worshipping God became another day with rules and structures, sometimes more life-draining than life-giving.

How often do we do that in life or in our churches? At times we have all become attached to certain things or ideas that become so sacred that we sometimes protect them a little too fiercely. In most preacher circles, we call them the "sacred cows," those things that wise preachers would do well to seek to understand than try to blow off in that first year of a new appointment. Yet at times there does need to be a revisiting of interpretations or those things that we hold so dear. It is not so much for the sake of being difficult or stirring things up for fun, but in thinking about the next faithful step where God is leading us.

The law is meant to enhance people's lives where all are beneficiaries. If one group benefits from something, then it is not about the Kingdom of God as much as it is about certain people. Jesus's whole ministry was about enhancing all people's lives whether it was hungry disciples who had been out teaching or healing, or the sick man who could finally feel his fingers. Instead of seeing the wonder or awe at what God was doing through the lives of those people, the sabbatarians were more focused on the fact that it violated their interpretation of the law. They missed the goodness of God sitting right there in front of them with more time spent being mad and ticked off. How sad for

⁵ Ibid., 133.

them!

The text reminds us today that when Jesus came along, he turned the world upside down. Being a follower of Christ was about relationships and seeing people as people, not violators of the law. Being a follower of Jesus meant reexamining your understanding of the law and seeing if that was more important than loving the person who lived next door to you. Being a follower of Jesus meant seeing that laws were meant to give life to all and not just a minority (or majority) sect who missed the point about the inclusivity of our Lord.

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