

“The Lord of the Sabbath”
Sermon Series on *The King and His Kingdom*
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(Mt. 12:1-21)

Introduction.

When my kids were growing up they were very inquisitive, and they asked questions about “why?” all the time. If only they had asked me about predestination, or to explain the difference between infralapsarianism and supralapsarianism in Reformed theology, I’d be okay! But they asked questions like, “Why did God make mosquitoes?” and “Why aren’t there any dinosaurs anymore?” and “Why can’t I stay up as late as you do?”

A few years ago, I discovered a secret weapon! There’s a book out now entitled *Why Do Clocks Run Clockwise and Other Imponderables*. (I love that word “imponderable.”) This book now gives me a source so I’m no longer caught off guard. The book answers questions like:

- Why do golfers yell “Fore!” when they hit an errant shot?
- Why don’t people get goose bumps on their faces?
- Why do dogs walk around in a circle before they lie down?

Now I know the answers to those questions, so I’m ready for my grandchildren when they start asking “why?”

We humans have minds that ask “why?” on a regular basis. Sometimes the questions are born out of curiosity, like the questions of my kids or the questions I found in this book. However, there are other times when the questions we ask are born out of criticism and judgment, like the ones the Pharisees asked Jesus in our text today. In essence they were asking, “Why do you and your disciples do what is unlawful on the Sabbath?”

In the passage we’ve read this morning, the Pharisees came into conflict with Jesus, and the more they learned about Lord and His ministry, the more troubled they became. Eventually they decided to kill Him. Let’s take a closer look at why.

I. The Critical Question Regarding the Sabbath.

The critical question for the Pharisees revolved around the issue of ritual observance, and two incidents brought this question into focus. One had to do with picking the heads of grain as Jesus and His disciples walked through a field, and the other had to do with healing of a man with a withered hand on the Sabbath.

For the Pharisees, the issue was that they believed that what Jesus and His disciples were doing violated the Sabbath by “working” on it, and they believed these activities were prohibited in the Ten Commandments where it says, *“Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work”* (Ex. 20:8-10).

The activity of picking heads of grain was allowed for in the Old Testament law (Dt. 23:25), but the problem the Pharisees had was that the disciples were doing it on the Sabbath, and they interpreted this act as “reaping” or “harvesting.” In their minds reaping was work, and it was a violation of their traditional understanding of how a person should observe and keep the Sabbath holy.

In the case of the healing, in their concern for the legal detail of the law the Pharisees had forgotten why God created and established the Sabbath in the first place. It was intended for restoration. And the irony of all this is that here on the Sabbath Jesus restores a life while the Pharisees plot to take one. Which is more appropriate to do on the Lord’s Day? Or on any day for that matter?

I do believe that each of us needs to take a hard look at how we observe the Lord’s Day, because all too often we’ve become quite casual in how we observe this special day of the week which God established for the restoration of our souls. And I think in large measure you and I have sold out to the culture in many ways. Sunday should be different from all the other days of the week, and it grieves me to see how we have lost a sense of what it means to stop working and renew our spirits by walking with God and resting on the Sabbath. But that is another sermon we will take up at another time!

In the passage, here the problem with the Pharisees is that they failed to understand what the Sabbath was all about, and they added layer upon layer of regulations and requirements to what the Ten Commandments really said. For example, in Jesus’ day the religious teachers of the law came up with a list of 38 things that shouldn’t be done on the Sabbath, and these were recorded in what is known as the *Mishnah*. And the list included no reaping. Now, the Bible never said, “no reaping” in the Ten Commandments, and it certainly didn’t say you couldn’t pick the heads of grains when you’re walking through a field. This was simply the Pharisees’ interpretation of what the Commandments required.

If you go to Israel today and stay in a hotel, you’ll discover that many of them have special elevators for use on the Sabbath. If you get on a Sabbath elevator you’ll discover that it will only go up two floors. Two floors is the extent of the kind of travel an orthodox Jew is permitted to make on the Sabbath. Ironically, every two floors the elevator stops, and orthodox Jews get off and then get right back on again to ascend two more floors, two at a time. This way they avoid

breaking the Sabbath. Pretty legalistic if you ask me. This is the kind of mentality Jesus was up against with the Pharisees in His day.

In the second incident in our passage, the Pharisees saw a man with a withered hand, and they hoped to trap Jesus by asking Him whether it was lawful or not to heal on the Sabbath. They had seen enough of Jesus' compassion to guess that He would try to do it, and the Pharisees' rules for observing the Sabbath prohibited healing.

But Jesus explained to them that if according to their tradition it was lawful to get an ox out of the ditch, which their regulations allowed, then it should be even more acceptable to heal a sick person on the Sabbath. And he healed the man with the withered hand. If Jesus wanted to avoid controversy, He could have told the man simply to come back to meet Him the next day. But Jesus healed the man right then and there, and He ignited a firestorm. I think He wanted to make a point.

That's when the Pharisees decided they needed to kill Jesus. Isn't it sad how ugliness can creep into religion in the worst ways? Sometimes people think they're doing God a favor when in fact they're doing the most awful things, supposedly in God's name. People love a holy war, and whenever we try to co-opt God into our agenda it usually has devastating results. It sure did here.

II. The Difference Between Religion and Relationship.

I could talk about the answers Jesus gave to the criticism of the Pharisees in more detail, and we could explore how Christ's actions and answers give us insight into how you and I should observe Sabbath ourselves. But as I think about this text, I think the Holy Spirit wants me to go in a different direction. I sense that God wants me to talk about something else – about the difference between religion and relationship. Religion is about duty. Relationship is about love. Religion focuses on a list of rules, like the Pharisees did. Relationship focuses on a Person – Jesus Christ.

In his excellent book *King's Cross*, Tim Keller has written that in this encounter Jesus shows us that there are essentially two radically different spiritual paradigms that exist in the world. One tries to earn the favor of God by doing the right thing and keeping the law perfectly. The other focuses on a relationship of love that is born out of trust and gratitude. The first approach we could call **religion**. The second is centered on a **relationship**. The paradigm of religion is fundamentally *advice*. The paradigm of relationship begins and ends with *good news*. These are very different approaches to faith.¹

Most people in the world believe that if there's a God, you relate to Him by trying to be a good person. You do the things God wants you to do, and He'll reward you accordingly. Most religions are based on that principle. There's a

code of conduct that allows you to be accepted and grants you entry into the membership of the group. As a result, there are those who are “in,” and there are those who are “out.” If you perform, if you obey, then you’re accepted. If you don’t, then God doesn’t accept you, and you’re not allowed into the group. That’s how the Pharisees saw things. It was just that simple.

But Jesus proclaimed a gospel which looks at things in a very different way. He said there’s nothing we can do to earn God’s love and favor, and all our best efforts fall short and are tainted with sin. The result is we all need a Savior, and that’s why Christ came to save us. Jesus said, *“It’s not the healthy that need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners”* (Mk. 2:17). If you think you’ve got it all together, then you don’t need Jesus. However, if you know you’ve blown it and that you’re making a mess of your life apart from God, then there’s a place for you in His kingdom of grace.

When you’ve experienced that kind of love and acceptance, when you’ve tasted the forgiveness of God’s grace like that, it motivates you to live in a manner that wants to honor and bless the Lord. However, you no longer do it in order to earn His love and favor. Rather, you do it now to show your gratitude for what He’s already done for you in Christ. The motivation is entirely different, and so is the freedom a person experiences in a relationship of love.

Let me give you an example. Next month people will be celebrating Valentine’s Day. When my late wife Lorie was alive, often I gave her flowers on Valentine’s Day. She called it “flower power,” and she loved it. The reason I gave Lorie flowers on Valentine’s Day after we were married wasn’t to earn her love and convince her to marry me. She already declared all that when we took our vows at the Highland Presbyterian Church in New Castle, PA, in 1978. No, I gave Lorie flowers not to earn her love but to declare my love and to express my gratitude for all the ways she blessed my life. It was a way of saying “Thanks!” It was a way I could express my love for her. Do you see how that kind of idea can carry over into our relationship with God?

The purpose of religion was to assure you that you’re all right with God. We think if we just work hard enough, if we try to make God happy, then He’ll be nice to us and we’ll be okay. But the relationship God offers us in Christ says that Jesus has already done everything that is needed for us to be right with God, and His finished work on the cross settled the score once and for all. As a result, there’s nothing we can do to make God love us more or make Him love us less than He does right now. And the life of righteousness we now try to live we do so to express our love for Jesus, not to somehow win His approval.

One of my favorite movies of all time is *Chariots of Fire*. It’s based on the true story of two Olympians in the Paris Olympics of 1924. One of them, Eric Liddell, was a Christian, and he refused to run on the Sabbath. As a result, he lost the

opportunity to win a gold medal in a race he was favored to win. At one level, honoring God on the Sabbath was what the movie was about, but the movie also added another level, and it contrasted another runner by the name of Harold Abrahams with Eric Liddell. Abrahams and Liddell were both trying to win gold medals, but they were doing it for different reasons.

At one point in the film, Abrahams talks about the event in which he was competing, the 100 meter dash, and he says, “I’ve got ten seconds to justify my existence.” Liddell, on the other hand, simply wanted to please God who had already accepted him. That’s why he could say to his sister, “God made me fast, and when I run I feel His pleasure.” Harold Abrahams was weary, even when he rested, while Eric Liddell was “rested”, even when he ran. That’s because the work of self-justification will always wear you out whether that happens on a Sunday or another day of the week.

Tim Keller writes that Jesus lived the life you should have lived, and He died the death you should have died. If we rely on Jesus’ finished work, then you and I will know that God is satisfied with us. And in turn we’ll begin to learn to be satisfied with our own lives as well and to live more freely in Christ for Him.²

Conclusion.

How is God calling you to abandon religion and trying to earn God’s love and favor, and instead, out of gratitude, cultivate your relationship with Christ with a heart of love? What would it take for you to stop trying so hard and start trusting more in God’s love for you? Is it religion, or is it relationship for you? The proof is in your heart.

May God take us deeper into His great heart of love so we can be a church that is more about relationship than it is religion. This passage concludes with one of the great texts in the OT. It quotes Isaiah 42 which is the passage about God’s Messiah being someone who will not break a bruised reed or extinguish a flickering candle. In other words, the Messiah would be a person of compassion and sensitivity. Jesus was that kind of person, and you and I can be that same kind of person, too.

Let’s be sensitive to folks who have been hurt in life in some way. Let’s care for the downtrodden and not beat them up more than they already are. There are so many people in life who are limping along, simply trying to find their way. What can you and I do to help them and heal them – on Sunday or another other day this week for that matter? Jesus was the Lord of the Sabbath, and He calls us to join Him on His Sabbath work of grace today. Let’s do it. Amen.

¹ Tim Keller, *King’s Cross*, p. 39.

² *Ibid.*, p. 43.