

“True Spirituality”

Matthew 12:1-14

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August 2, 2009

A few years ago I was in Jerusalem with a tour I was leading to the Holy Land. One of the great things about a tour like that is getting the chance to read the stories from the Bible in the place they actually happened. When we were in Jerusalem, one of the stories we read was the story of Pentecost Day and other stories of the early church. Acts 2:41 tells how 3000 people were added to the number of disciples in one day, baptized as believers in Jesus Christ. We were wondering how you would even physically do that, to organize so many people. We had one guy with us who was a real Presbyterian, Book-of-Order-kind of guy; he said, “I don’t know how they did it, but I just hope they got Session approval.

Sometimes, people are more concerned with the letter of the law rather than on what God is doing to save people. True spirituality, that is, an authentic relationship with the living God, is more than simply following the rules.

Matthew chapter twelve is about how Jesus backs up his claim to be God by what he says and what he does. You could say we have contrasting examples of false and true spirituality, and it has to do with how you respond to Jesus. He’s the touchstone.

After all, these events follow on chapter eleven, where Jesus invited his follows to leave the authority of the scribes and Pharisees and to follow him, because Jesus is the only one who can give rest for the soul. The scribes and Pharisees lay burdens on people that they can’t handle, and Jesus calls that into question. That’s why they challenge Jesus’ authority as a teacher of Israel. They try to discredit him, but that only discredits them. That tells me that Jesus alone is our model for true spirituality, for faith that really works.

Two Scenes

The story we read this morning takes place in two related scenes, in the grain field and the synagogue, and then the Pharisees response. In both cases, they are trying to catch Jesus breaking the Law so they can discredit him.

Jesus gives two speeches in response to their challenge. He says his opponents fail to understand the purpose in the Law, and they fail to understand God’s heart. In each of these stories, there’s a good use and a bad use of the Law.

In the first scene, the disciples were hungry, so they ate heads of wheat. The legalists just want to criticize them for violating a law.

In the second scene, Jesus restored full life to a man with a paralyzed hand. This time, the story ends on a more sinister note. And it is here that for the first time, Matthew says, Jesus’ opponents conspire to try and destroy him. They had crossed the line, and now they simply want to have him put to death. Of course, with their reaction, Jesus’

enemies fail to show mercy, and by doing that, they show they really don't understand the purpose of the Law at all, because at its heart, it's concerned about life.

Which means that from now on in Jesus' ministry, the pressure is on. The religious authorities raise the heat, and oppose him at every step. They have announced their intention to destroy him. And so later in chapter 12 they will accuse him of doing miracles by the power of Satan, and they will demand a sign to prove who he claims to be. Jesus takes off in order to escape their plans to kill him. That's what John told us would happen in his Gospel when he said,

“He came to his own, but his own did not receive him, but to all who did receive him, he gave power to become children of God.” (John 1:11-12)

I think that among other things, this passage tells us Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath, he's Lord of the Sanctuary, and he's Lord of the Scriptures. Let's look at each of these.

First, Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath

The bottom-line practices of faithful Jews were circumcision, following food laws, and observing the Sabbath. God gave the Sabbath law in the fourth commandment to “remember the Sabbath and keep it holy.” That means to set it aside for God and his service. People could work for six days, but on the seventh, they were supposed to rest. In fact, the word for Sabbath, *shabat*, means “cease.” So rest is to come to a stop from our normal activities.

The Lord gave two reasons for the command; one was because God worked for six days to create the world, and then stopped on the seventh. The second was because when they were slaves in Egypt, the Israelites could *never* stop working until the Lord rescued them and brought them out. You could say one reason has to do with creation, and the other with redemption, the two great themes of the Bible.

So, do we have to follow Old Testament Law today? After all, didn't Jesus come to free us from all that stuff? Well, in a way, yes! He fulfills the Law. He lets us know the purpose of the Law is to help us, not for us to have to support it.

The apostle Paul teaches the same thing in Colossians. He says we shouldn't be legalistic about following holy days. If they help us to learn about God or get time with him, then great. But we're supposed to live the spirit of the Law, not the letter of the Law, the purpose, not the outer package. So the Sabbath isn't for us a thing we better not break, but instead an offer to enter into the rest God always enjoys, a rest from anxious, compulsive work, and a time to do the good works of God. That's the right lifestyle for the Christ follower, someone who's entered into God's rest. Like it says in the book of Hebrews,

“There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; for anyone who enters God's rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from his. Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will fall by following their example of disobedience” (Hebrews 4:9-11).

Seems kind of silly, doesn't it, the Pharisees getting all bent out of shape over picking a few grains of wheat to eat on the Sabbath? There sure isn't anything about *that* in the Ten Commandments.

What's your Sabbath? I'm not real concerned whether you actually work on Sunday. Some of us *have* to work on Sunday, and if that's you, then do it as a service for the Lord. After all, the early church felt free as Christ-followers to move their celebration from the seventh day to the first day, to remember Jesus rising from the dead that day. But then find some time, whenever it is, to stop from the frantic pace, and to spend time with God. If you stop, you remember Jesus, he gives rest, because he's Lord of the Sabbath.

That leads me to Jesus' second claim:

Second, Jesus is Lord of the Scriptures.

I think we should remember, that wherever Scripture isn't clear, we are free to live by faith and our reason, and we can differ with each other. That's the case in a whole bunch of secondary issues. Scripture is very clear on the core issues, and we can't compromise on those. But there are always people that want to major on the minors, and have to spell out all the details that God hasn't spelled out. It's okay to have your preferences, but don't put those on the level of Scripture.

So the Pharisees came up with a list of almost forty things you weren't supposed to do on the Sabbath. One of them was reaping the harvest. They interpreted taking heads of grain from the stalks as work, so it was breaking the Law as far as they were concerned.

How does Jesus respond? He uses a couple different arguments. The first is remembering how David ate the bread of the sanctuary in 1 Samuel 21, and the instructions about the bread on the tabernacle. David's men took that bread, and ate it. Jesus says, Scripture doesn't condemn David for doing this. So why shouldn't his disciples be allowed to eat the grain on a Sabbath? There's no commandment anywhere about that, and Jesus is saying that he has the right to tell us what God's Word means.

Jesus' second argument is from the Law in general (Num. 28:9-10). He's saying that in a sense, the priests violated the Law every Sabbath by the work that they did. Of course the priests were not guilty, because the same Law that ruled on the Sabbath made them priests. The Law gave them the right to break the Law and to work at the altar. He's saying, "If they could do that, then of course I can, because I'm greater than the temple and the priests." Jesus is greater than the Law.

The whole point of the Law is this: mercy, or compassion for others. The spirit of the Law is life and peace with God.

You know what, this flows right out of Jesus' first claim: since he's Lord of the Sabbath, it means he can say what he wants about the Sabbath laws. Jesus is the Son of Man, the divine creator, the covenant-making God. And the Lord of the Sabbath has authority over Scripture, too.

Third, Jesus is Lord of the Sanctuary.

He's greater than the temple. The temple represented God's presence with his people, but Jesus was God with them in flesh and bone.

Jesus went into the synagogue and there was a man there with a paralyzed hand. The leaders were looking for a way to trap Jesus, and so they asked Him if it was permissible to heal on the Sabbath.

The thing was, the Jews believed it was okay to heal on the Sabbath as long as it was an emergency. But Jesus doesn't argue about whether the healing was necessary. He simply says, mercy means you answer the need. Then Jesus heals the man, and his miracle shows his authority that backs up his words. He really is the Lord of the Sabbath, Lord of Scripture, and Lord of the Sanctuary.

Only God can say how we are to worship him. That's why the first commandment says, "Worship God alone," and the second commandment says, "Do not make any idols." That means, *who* we worship, and *how* we worship. When Jesus says, "One greater than the temple is here," he's saying "I call the shots."

Now, let me ask you: who do you think has the right to decide what the Sabbath means? Who do you think has the right to say with complete authority what Scripture says? Who do you think has the right to receive our worship in the sanctuary? That's God alone. Jesus could not be making a bigger claim for himself.

His enemies understood that perfectly well. Verse fourteen says, "But the Pharisees went out and plotted how they might kill Jesus. It's not just a dispute over interpreting the Law any longer. It's all about the identity and authority of Jesus.

So, what's our take-away from the story this morning?

First, COMMIT yourself to the authority of Christ. He's the Lord of the Sabbath, and that means he's the sovereign Creator and Redeemer. And whatever you hear him saying to you, do it. Your faith shouldn't be in CPC, in a person, in a program, in our denomination, not in me, but in him alone. Let that inspire you to see him more clearly, to love him more daily, and to follow him more nearly, day by day.

Second, CURB your legalism. That means a self-righteous attitude. It's easy for us to fall into that if we're serious about our faith. Choose to not go down the path of thinking you are the final judge on what God thinks. Be careful, because what the Bible is clear about, we have to do. But legalism doesn't bring mercy, light and life. It kills.

Third, cultivate acts of mercy. When you get into a poisonous, hateful state of mind, it wrecks any spiritual sacrifice you might have made. Being close to Jesus means putting people ahead of our own preferences.

In verse 17, Matthew adds his commentary on the meaning of the story for this morning. He writes,

This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah:
 "Here is my servant whom I have chosen,
 the one I love, in whom I delight;

I will put my Spirit on him,
and he will proclaim justice to the nations.
He will not quarrel or cry out;
no one will hear his voice in the streets.
A bruised reed he will not break,
and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out,
till he leads justice to victory.
In his name the nations will put their hope." (Matthew 12:17-21)

Jesus claims a lot for himself—to be greater than the Temple. The main ways Israel got in touch with God were in the Sanctuary, in the Scripture, and on the Sabbath. Jesus trumps them all, and now he's how we get in touch with God. His way is to show mercy—not to snuff out a smoldering wick. Let's join him in his great work of mercy; that's true spirituality.