Lessons in Religious Liberty

Section 3 - Sabbath Observance


People found more fault with Jesus and His disciples about their way of keeping the Sabbath than with any other thing they did. There are six distinct instances recorded in Gospel history where they gave or took offense. In five of these, Jesus was the offender. In the remaining instance, His disciples were censured.

Jesus’ offenses were all alike. His crime? He performed works of healing on the Sabbath. He healed people afflicted with palsy, a withered hand, blindness, dropsy, and a poor woman who had suffered for eighteen years. On the other hand, the disciples caused offense by walking along a road through a cornfield and picking some ears of corn in order to satisfy their hunger. This was not theft. It was permitted by the law of Moses (Deut. 23:24-25). Nevertheless, in the judgment of the Pharisees, it was breaking the Sabbath. It was contrary to the command, “Thou shalt not work.” To pick some ears was reaping on a small scale, and to rub them was a type of threshing!

These offenses were considered quite serious when they were committed. From our vantage point, they seem very small. All of the transgressions of the Sabbath law that were charged against Jesus were works of mercy. And the one transgression the disciples committed was a work of necessity. Tolerating their work was a duty of mercy for others. So when the Pharisees condemned them, they had forgotten the divine word, “I will have mercy, and not sacrifice.” Truthfully, it is hard for us now to think that anyone could be serious who thought these actions were violations of the Sabbath, especially the harmless act of the Twelve. There is a slight degree of plausibility in the objection taken by the ruler of the synagogue to the miraculous cures performed on the seventh day: “There are six days in which work should be done; therefore come during them and get healed, and not on the Sabbath day” (Luke 13:14). The remark was especially credible with respect to the case which had provoked the anger of the dignitary of the synagogue. A woman had suffered for eighteen years. Surely she could endure it one more day and be healed on the next! But why should the disciples be blamed as Sabbath-breakers just because they helped themselves to a few ears of corn? To call such an act “working” was ridicu-
lous. The men who felt they were breaking the Sabbath must have been anxious to catch Jesus’ disciples in a fault.

We have no doubt that the Pharisees were looking for faults. And yet, we must admit that when they condemned this act, they were acting faithfully in line with their theoretical views and habits. Their judgment on the behavior of the Twelve was in keeping with their other traditions - like ceremonial washings, tithing mint and other garden herbs, and straining gnats out of their wine cups. Their habit, in all things, was to degrade God’s law by making up endless petty rules to improve its observance. But instead of accomplishing that purpose, they made the law seem corrupt and contemptible. There was no situation where this miserable study of petty differences was carried to greater lengths than in connection with the Fourth Commandment. Deviating from what was considered right or acceptable, they used their ingenuity to bring the most insignificant actions against labor. Consider our Lord’s report on the case of the animal that had fallen into a pit. It was considered to be lawful to lift it out - at least those who have been educated in rabbinical lore tell us this - but only if leaving it there until the Sabbath was over would threaten its life. When delay was not dangerous, the rule was to give the beast food that was sufficient for the day. And if there was water in the bottom of the pit, they would place straw and supports in it, so that it might not drown.

The Jews may have been very strict about abstaining from everything that had the slightest resemblance to work, but it is interesting to note that they were lax in other areas. So while they very carefully observed the law which prohibited cooking food on the Sabbath (Ex. 16:23), they did not make the holy day, by any means, a day of fasting. In fact, they considered it their duty to make the Sabbath a day of feasting and celebration (Neh. 8:10). Consider this example: A leading man among the Pharisees gave a Sabbath feast. Jesus performed a miracle there and was criticized for it. Numerous guests were at this feast. Jesus was probably invited, not because they made friendly overtures toward Him, but because they hoped to find something against Him regarding the Sabbath law. We read in Luke, “And it came about that when He (Jesus) went into the house of one of the leaders of the Pharisees on the Sabbath to eat bread, that they were watching Him closely” (Luke 14:1). They set a trap and hoped to catch Him whom they hated for no reason. For their efforts, they got something they didn’t bargain for: insightful, humbling conversation that was different from any they had probably ever heard before (Luke 14:7-24). By the time of Augustine (born in 354 A.D.), this habit of feasting was being abused. This is apparent from the description he gives of the way in which contemporary Jews celebrated their weekly holiday. He writes, “Today is the Sabbath, which the Jews at the present time keep in loose, luxurious ease, for they occupy their leisure in frivolity; and whereas God commanded a Sabbath, they spend it in those things which God forbids. Our rest is from
evil works, theirs is from good works; for it is better to plough than to dance. They rest from good work, they rest not from idle work” (*Enarratio in Psalmum 92*).

**The Wisdom of Jesus**

Let us leave the folly and precision of the scribes and Pharisees and turn to the wisdom of Jesus. It is revealed in the animated, deep, and yet majestic, simple replies that He made to the various charges of Sabbath-breaking that were brought against Him and His disciples. Before we consider these replies in detail, we will make this one general remark about them all. *Jesus does not call into question the obligation to keep the Sabbath law in any of His defenses.* He had no quarrel with His accusers on that point. His argument in this situation is entirely different from the one He used on the subjects of fasting and ceremonial washings. His position on fasting was this: Fasting is a voluntary matter, and people may fast or not as they are inclined. His position on purification was this: Ceremonial washings are, at best, of secondary importance. They are only outward signs of inward purity. As they are practiced now, they inevitably lead to ignoring spiritual purity altogether. Therefore, they must be neglected by all of those who are concerned for the great interests of morality. But with respect to the alleged violations of the Sabbath, Jesus took up this position: “If you could comprehend the truth, these acts which you condemn are not transgressions of the law in its spirit and principle.” The importance of the law was conceded, but the pharisaic interpretation of its meaning was rejected. An appeal was made from their meticulous code of regulations about Sabbath observance to the grand design and principle of the law. The right was maintained to examine all rules in the light of the principle and to reject or disregard those in which the principle had either been mistakenly applied, or lost sight of altogether (as in the case of the Pharisees).

**The Key to Christ’s Teaching on the Sabbath**

The key to all of Christ's teaching on the Sabbath lies in His conception of the *original design* of that divine institution. We find this conception expressed with pointedness and conciseness, in contrast to the Pharisees' idea of the Sabbath. Jesus spoke these words when He was defending His disciples: “The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath” (*Mark 2:27*). It was not a day taken from man by God with a demanding spirit, but a day given by God in mercy to man – God’s holiday to His subjects. All the legislation given to enforce its observance has as its purpose to insure that everyone really gets the benefit of the favor. No man should rob himself, and even less his fellow-creatures, of the gracious favor.

What is the difference between Christ's way of regarding the Sabbath and the Pharisees' way? It involves a difference in the spirit and the details of its observance. Take Christ's view and your principle becomes: “The best way to observe the Sabbath is that which is most conducive to man’s physical and spiritual well-being - in other words, that which is best for his body and for
his soul. In the light of this principle, you will keep the holy day in a spirit of intelligent joy and thankfulness to God the Creator for His gracious consideration toward His creatures.” Take the pharisaic view and your principle of observance becomes: “The one who keeps the Sabbath best is the one who goes to the greatest lengths to abstain from anything that can be construed as labor. The effect that this abstinence has for his well-being or for others is irrelevant.” In brief, we land in the silly, senseless minutiae of rabbinical legislation which sees in various behaviors a heinous offense against the Fourth Commandment and its Author. The behaviors can involve the disciples picking and rubbing the ears of corn, or the healed man who carried his bed home on his shoulders (John 5:10), or anyone who walked further than three-fourths of a mile on a Sabbath.

**Two Great Uses of the Sabbath**

There are two great general uses of a Sabbath observance that are regulated by the principle that the institution was made for man’s good: rest for the body, and worship for the comfort of the spirit. We should rest from labor on the divinely given holiday. And we should lift up our hearts in devout worship to Him who made all things in the beginning, and who continues to work, preserving the creation in being and well-being. We should worship Him whose tender compassion toward sinful people is great and surpasses our understanding. Both of these things are necessary for man’s best interest. Therefore, both are necessary elements of a worthy Sabbath observance.

On the other hand, the Sabbath was made for man. Therefore, the two general requirements of rest and worship may not be so pressed that they become hostile to man’s well-being. When this happens, it becomes self-destructive or mutually destructive. The rule, “Thou shalt rest,” must not be applied in such a way that it excludes all action and all work. Absolute inaction is not rest. Total abstinence from work of every kind would often be detrimental both to private and public well-being. Room must be made for acts of “necessity and mercy.” So, absolute and detailed legislation as to what are, and what are not, acts of necessity and mercy must be avoided. For these may vary for different people, times, and circumstances. People may honestly have a difference of opinion in the details but are perfectly loyal to the great broad principles of Sabbath sanctification. In a similar way, the rule, “Thou shalt worship,” must not be enforced in such a way that religious duties become irritating and burdensome - simply mechanical, legal service. Neither should man sacrifice the other great practical purpose of the Sabbath, namely, physical rest. People should not dictate to another what the means of worship should be any more than they should prescribe the amount of worship. For someone may find help to devotion in a means which would be a hindrance and a distraction to someone else.
Pharisaic legislation and practice over Sabbath observance were carried to superstitious and annoying excess only in the matter of cessation from work. The Sabbath mania was a monomania (an excessive interest in one thing). Those who were affected by it were consumed with one point: the strict enforcement of rest. This explains the unique character of all the charges that were brought against Christ and His disciples. It also explains His replies. The offenses committed were all works that were considered to be unlawful. All of Jesus’ defenses proved that the works done were not contrary to law when the law was interpreted in the light of the principle that the Sabbath was made for man. They were works of necessity or of mercy and, therefore, lawful on the Sabbath.

The Three Sources of Jesus’ Proofs
Jesus drew His proofs for this position from three sources: 1) Scripture history, 2) the everyday practice of the Pharisees, and 3) the providence of God. In defending His disciples, He referred to the case of David who ate the shewbread when he fled to the house of God from the court of King Saul (I Sam. 21:6). He also referenced the constant practice of the priests in doing work for the service of the temple on the Sabbath, such as offering double burnt offerings and removing stale shewbread from the holy place and replacing it with hot loaves. David’s case proved the general principle that necessity has no law. Hunger justified his act. It should have justified the act of the disciples, even in the eyes of the Pharisees. The practice of the priests demonstrated that work, in and of itself, is not contrary to the law of the Sabbath. Some works are not only lawful, but necessary on that day.

The argument Jesus used from common practice was well suited to silence fault-finding critics. It was also used to suggest the principle by which His own conduct could be defended. This was the essence of the argument: “You would lift an ox or an ass out of a pit on the Sabbath, wouldn’t you? Why? To save a life? Why then should I not heal a sick person for the same reason? Is a beast’s life of more value than that of a human being?” Or, again: “Would you hesitate to untie your ox or your ass from the stall on the day of rest, and lead him away to give him water?” (Luke 13:14-15). If not, why do you object to Me when I release a poor human victim from a bondage of eighteen years on the Sabbath so she can draw water out of the wells of salvation?” The argument is irresistible. The conclusion is inevitable. It is lawful, dutiful, most suitable, to do well on the Sabbath. How blind they must have been! Did such an obvious proposition need to be proved to them? How oblivious they were to the fact that love is the foundation and fulfillment of all the law. Therefore, no particular precept could ever be intended to suspend the operation of that divine principle!

The argument from providence that was used by Jesus on another occasion was designed to serve the same purpose as the others: to show the lawfulness of certain kinds of work on the day
“My Father is working until now, and I Myself am working” (John 5:17). The Son claimed the right to work because and as the Father worked on all the days of the week. The Father worked incessantly for beneficial, conservative purposes. He worked most holily, wisely, and powerfully preserving and governing all His creatures and all their actions. He was keeping the planets in their orbits, causing the sun to rise and shine, the winds to circulate in their courses, and the tides to ebb and flow on the seventh day just as on all the other six. So Jesus Christ, the Son of God, claimed the right to work, and did work - saving, restoring, healing. He was bringing fallen nature back to its pristine state, when God the Creator pronounced all things good, and rested. He was satisfied with the world He had brought into existence. These works of goodness, by Christ’s teaching, may always be done on the Sabbath: works of humanity, like those performed by a physician, or the teacher of neglected children, or of the philanthropist making his rounds among the poor and needy, or the Christian minister preaching the gospel of peace. And there are many others. People who are filled with love will readily think of them. But too many whose hearts are cold do not so much as dream about them. There is no law against these works of mercy and love except custom - crass, unloving, pharisaic custom.

**Lord of the Sabbath**

Our Lord spoke one other word on this subject. It carries great weight for Christians. But it had no apologetic value in the opinion of the Pharisees. To them, it must have seemed like an aggravation of the offense it was meant to excuse. We are referring to these words of Jesus: “For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath” (Matt. 12:8; Mark 2:28). He spoke these words when He was defending His disciples against the charge of Sabbath-breaking. This statement was remarkable. It was similar to the claim He made that He was greater than the temple. On the part of this meek and lowly One, it was an assertion of superhuman dignity. So it was not meant as an excuse to break the law of rest without cause or to do away with it altogether. This is evident from Mark’s account (Mark 2:27-28). Here, the words follow the proposition that the Sabbath was made for man. This proposition could not logically be used as a basis for repealing the Fourth Commandment. Rather, it is the most powerful argument for the continuation of the weekly rest. If the Sabbath had been just a burdensome restriction that had been imposed on people, we would have expected Him to do away with it, since He came to redeem mankind from all sorts of bondage. Was the Sabbath made for man - for man’s good? If so, then we should expect Christ’s function to be that of a repealer, but that of a universal philanthropic legislator. What had previously been the peculiar privilege of Israel, He would make into a common blessing for all mankind. For the Father sent His Son into the world to deliver people - truly deliver them - from the yoke of ordinances. However, He did not send His Son to cancel any of His gifts, which are all “irrevocable” (Rom. 11:29). Once given, they can never be withdrawn.
Then what does the lordship of Christ over the Sabbath signify? Simply this: An institution which is given as a favor to mankind rightly falls under the control of Him who is the King of grace and the administrator of divine mercy. He is the best judge as to how an institution should be observed. And He has the right to make certain that the favor is not turned into a burden, thereby contradicting the royal imperial law of love. The Son of Man has authority to cancel all man-made regulations that tend to go in this direction. He can even cancel all by-laws of the Mosaic code that show traces of legal rigidity and those which hide the good design of the Fourth Commandment of the Decalogue (Ten Commandments). As He exercises His prerogative as a Mediator, He may give the old institution a new name and alter the day of its celebration, so that it is invested with distinctively Christian associations compatible with the hearts of believers. In every detail of its observance, He also has the right to make it serve the great purposes of His incarnation.

This is why the Son of Man claimed to be the Lord of the Sabbath. Understood in this way, His claim was acknowledged by the church, which changed the weekly rest from the seventh day to the first. They had simply followed the way the Apostles had observed the Sabbath and were commemorating the joyful event of the resurrection of the Savior, which was nearer the heart of a believer than the old event of the creation. The early church called the first day by His name, the Lord’s Day. All Christians acknowledge that claim and look at the day in the light of God’s original design and of Christ’s teaching, example, and work. They try to observe it so as to keep the golden balance between the two extremes: the strictness of the Pharisees and the permissiveness of the Sadducees. On the one hand, God’s people recognize the good purposes that are served by the institution and do their best to make sure that these purposes are fully realized. On the other hand, they avoid the petty exactness that comes from an unhappy legalism. This causes many, especially the young, to stumble over the law as a rule that seems to them to be an unreasonable and arbitrary restriction. These same people also avoid the bad pharisaic habit of making over-confident judgments on difficult points of detail and on the conduct of those who do not think and act as they do.

We have been studying the lessons in free, yet holy, living that were given by our Lord to His disciples. We cannot end this chapter without adding a reflection that is applicable to all three of them. Through these lessons the Twelve were taught a virtue that was very necessary for the Apostles of a religion that was, in many respects, new. The virtue was this: the power to bear isolation and its consequences. When Peter and John appeared before the Sanhedrin, the rulers marveled at their boldness until they recognized that they had been the companions of Jesus the Nazarene. These religious leaders seem to have sensed that His followers were prepared for anything that required courage. They were right. The Apostles had strong nerves and were not easily discouraged. The lessons we have been considering help us to understand where they got...
their rare moral courage. For years, they had been accustomed to standing alone, disregarding the ways of the world until, finally, they could do what was right, ignoring human criticism, without effort, almost without thinking.