

About Priorities

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Date: 16 August 2017

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[0 : 00] Well, let me welcome you to this Lunchtime Bible Talk, and if you haven't had lunch, there's still plenty left after the service.

Now, we are continuing this little series we began called The Kingdom Advancing. And the kingdom is not advancing without opposition, without hostility.

And today we come to a particular passage where Jesus clashes with the Pharisees, the religious authorities. So, on page 816, and we're reading Matthew chapter 12, and we're reading verses 1 to 14.

I think we started a little bit early, but starting early usually means you get finished early, which is, you know, as a former teacher, I always think that's a good thing. Anyway, chapter 12, verse 1.

But have you not read in the law how on the Sabbath the priests in the temple profane the Sabbath and are guiltless?

[1 : 38] I tell you, something greater than the temple is here. And if you had known what this means, I desire mercy and not sacrifice.

You would not have condemned the guiltless, for the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath. Jesus went on from there and entered their synagogue. And a man was there with a withered hand, and they asked him, Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse him?

He said to them, Which one of you has a sheep, if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will not take hold of it and lift it out? Of how much more value is a man than a sheep?

So it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath. Then he said to the man, Stretch out your hand. And the man stretched it out, and it was restored, healthy like the other.

But the Pharisees went out and conspired against him how to destroy him. Amen. This is the word of the Lord. Let's pray. God our Father, we pray that you will richly bless us as we turn aside these few moments from the good things and the bad things, from the ordinary business of our lives, and the time to listen to your word, the time to reflect on what you are saying to us, a time to allow that the light of your word to shine into our hearts and lives.

[3 : 09] We pray that may be the case today. We pray indeed that you will open our eyes, and that you will help us to see Jesus Christ, the living word, to whom the written word so fully and faithfully points.

And we ask this in his name. Amen. The story is told, it's probably apocryphal, about a young minister who went to a highland church.

This church was noted for its strictness, for its rules and regulations, particularly those surrounding Sunday, which of course they called Sabbath.

On the first Sunday there, the minister's wife went for a walk. And at the evening service, he was confronted by an elder who said to him in indignation, it's wrong to go for a walk on the Sabbath.

And the minister said, well, our Lord went for a walk on the Sabbath. Yes, replied the elder, but he wouldn't have got away with that here. Well, as I say, that story is probably apocryphal.

[4 : 17] It's a pity if it is, but it does suggest an attitude, the kind of attitude that Jesus himself was meeting in this chapter, relating to the Sabbath.

And one of the controversies, of course, among Christians is, what is the relationship of the Jewish Sabbath and the Christian Sunday? And theologically, it's very obvious why the Christians made Sunday the day, the special day, because that was the day of the new creation, the day when Jesus rose from the dead and opened the kingdom of heaven.

And through the generations, there have been different views, and there still are. I heard stories of my great-grandfather starting to shave on a Sunday, on a Saturday evening, and not completing it by the time the clock struck 12, and going to church with one half of his face shaven and one half not.

Today, of course, if you go into any town or city on a Sunday, it's absolutely like Saturday. Every business is open, every commercial life is going on, and I think it's very important that we don't get ourselves involved in nitpicking arguments about these kind of things, because the point about the Sunday, the point about the Sabbath, they were joyful days of liberation.

They were a reminder of a freedom from slavery and freedom from sin. And the problem with the old type of Sabbatarianism was that the day was extremely joyless and bleak.

[6 : 02] It doesn't mean, of course, that we have to go to the opposite extreme and make sure that Sunday is as like every other day of the week as possible. But it does mean the emphasis has to be on joyfulness, on salvation, not on legalism, and so on.

You see, the Sabbath, the Sabbath is linked with creation. The Lord rested on the seventh day. So let's look then at how we, at this passage.

And first of all, Jesus and the law, verses one to eight. His disciples were hungry, they began to pluck heads of grain and to eat.

This is a classic example of a burdensome law, a burdensome rule. Reaping was one of 39 types of work forbidden on the Sabbath.

And probably it's only 39 because the compilers of that legislation couldn't think of any more types. But the point is, to describe what the disciples did as reaping is really stretching it.

[7 : 11] After all, all they did was they plucked ears of corn. After all, it's no more different from taking these same ears if they were on a plate on the table. The point is, a burdensome legalism always leads to a judgmental attitude.

The problem with legalism is, it's always to do with externals. You can always tell about it, you can always tell how people dress, you can always tell about their activities.

What you cannot tell by looking at someone is the state of their heart. You cannot tell if they're walking with God. You cannot tell if they have humility and faith.

And that is the point. So, Jesus draws attention to various passages in the Old Testament. Now that's very important. These men, the Pharisees, were saying they were simply obeying what the Old Testament said.

No, they weren't in fact, because what they were doing was, they were taking the principles of the Old Testament and trying to apply them to every conceivable situation.

[8 : 20] The more rules you have, the more temptation there is to break them. I discovered that long ago, when I began my career as a young English teacher. The more rules and regulations you have, the more people will be tempted to break them.

It's always better to have a few simple rules which are understood and which can be obeyed. Anyway, this incident, David, in 1 Samuel 21, is actually not strictly relevant to this.

But Jesus is going to go behind the situation. The point is, David broke the letter of the law. David was exhausted.

David was very hungry. He broke the letter of the law, which was not lawful, verse 4, for those who were with him, but only for the priests.

The point Jesus is making is that David broke the letter of the law, but he was David, the Lord's anointed. And obviously, this is leading up to the claim, the greater than David is here.

[9 : 29] David broke the letter of the law, but David was showing that far more important the letter of the law was justice and compassion. Then Jesus and the temple.

Have you not read how on the Sunday the priests in the temple profane the Sabbath? The point is, obviously, the Levitical priests technically break the law on every Sabbath.

They work on the Sabbath. They offer sacrifices. They carry out the temple duties. I mean, you could say, you could say, ministers break this law every Sunday because they work on Sundays.

You know the old jive, ministers only work on Sundays and only part of the Sunday. Now, anyone who knows anything about ministry knows that is simply not true. But the point is, for, temple worship took precedence over the Sabbath.

The point is, the Sabbath was not an end in itself. God appointed the Sabbath so that his people could specially remember him. I think that's the point about Sunday worship.

[10 : 37] Now, people often say that since we worship God every day of our lives, what's the point of Sunday? Now, the point of Sunday when we meet together or even a time like this is that we focus that worship.

Of course, we worship God every day of our lives. Paul says, present your bodies a living sacrifice, which is your reasonable worship. You see, remember, worship is above all about a relationship with God.

C.S. Lewis said, if we worship God on the six days, the seventh day will almost follow automatically. But it's special occasions when we focus our worship.

just as we have in ordinary life, in ordinary relationships. If I say, because I love my wife all the year round, I can forget her birthday or our anniversary, you would reasonably think one of two things.

Either that it didn't matter or that I was a dull and romantic dog. You see, that is the point about worship. When we meet together, we are focusing the worship of the week.

[11 : 47] We are gathering under the sound of the word of God. And the point about the word of God and worship is the word of God teaches us how to worship God.

Worship in the Bible is never about our own ideas about what we like. It's about what God teaches us to do. And the third, I desire mercy and not sacrifice, is from the prophet Hosea.

Hosea is saying to people who are very, very scrupulous and punctilious about their worship, always there, always attending, that the more that the temple itself, the place where we meet, is also only provisional, something greater, verse 6, than the temple is here.

That's why John says in the book of Revelation, I saw no temple in the city. I used to hate it when I was a boy being told that going to heaven would be like being at church.

Now, I tell an 8-year-old boy that, and they're not going to want to go to heaven, are they? Particularly kind of lengthy services I used to have be forced to attend when I was a boy.

[13 : 07] Remember one spectacularly dull service, if you can be spectacularly dull. one man saying, this is the nearest heaven we'll get before we're actually there.

I thought, no thanks. And you can imagine my delight when I discovered that text in Revelation. I saw no temple in the city because the Lord God and the Lamb are there.

So you see what Jesus is saying. He's not saying, don't worship in the temple. He's not saying, neglect these means of grace. He is saying, see them for what they are, anticipations, not as ends in themselves.

I mean, after all, to change the picture, we are tuning our instruments here. We're not singing like the full choir will sing in the heavenly city.

And tuning instruments is not a happy experience. Remember, my son was allowed to play the trumpet. It was a hideous experience. And my son being my son did it very idly and then came home proudly after the exam and says, I've got a distinction.

[14 : 17] Surely an example of grace and undeserved favor. Anyway, the point is, all the, what is happening here is pointing beyond the temple, beyond the Sabbath, beyond the activities to Jesus himself.

And so we come verses 9 to, verses 9, the Jesus and priorities. Jesus went from there and entered their synagogue.

And notice verse 10, they asked him, is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath? Notice this was not a genuine question. This was not, Lord, we don't understand this.

Could you explain what this is about? No, that they might accuse him. That's the point. Their prejudice was now invincible.

And healing in the new age here. Now, the customary ruling was that healing was permitted if life was in danger. And I think even, even the days of rigid Sabbatarianism, people would have accepted the fact that he became very ill on the Sunday, needed to get a doctor.

[15 : 31] But, the point here, this man's life was not endangered. It was in a distressing condition, but he had an arm that was completely paralyzed.

The point is that Jesus is showing he is the Lord of the Sabbath. Someone greater than the temple, someone greater than the Sabbath.

And once again, the value of human beings. If you had a sheep, you would dig it out of the pit. Once again, human life is more significant than animal life.

The Bible actually tells us to care for and nurture animal life, but it never pretends that it's as important or significant as human life.

Humans are more significant than animals. Another example in the Gospels of that is when Jesus cast out the demons from the man at the Lake of Galilee, the demons went into the pigs which then plunged into the Sea of Galilee.

[16 : 33] People were more concerned about the loss of the pigs than they were joyful that the demon possessed man had been healed. So the true sense of priorities.

Jesus' care for people, Jesus' lordship over everything. It is lawful to do good on the Sabbath. Good in the Bible isn't just a vague word of approval.

Good means doing what God wants you to do. That's what it means to do good. When God created the world throughout Genesis 1 and 2, God saw and it was good.

So doing good is fulfilling the purpose for which God made us. And finally, verse 14, Jesus and prejudice. The Pharisees went out and conspired against him how to destroy him.

That shows exactly how they were ruthlessly opposed to the kingdom. This is a bit more than simply complaining.

[17 : 40] This is their response to Jesus and their failure to understand who he is. Earlier on, they had complained. Earlier on, they had criticized, but now the hatred has become murderous.

The Pharisees went out and conspired against him how to destroy him. And from this point in the Gospels, there is a steady move towards the cross. They are going to kill him.

So, ultimately, you see, he can't be neutral towards Jesus. Those who are neutral towards Jesus will ultimately end up condemning him because it's impossible to be neutral.

See, the focus is on Christ here. And the focus is on the two things that happen when we reject Christ.

On the one thing, we become, on the one hand, we become legalistic. We become more interested in our rules and regulations and stop caring about people.

[18 : 53] I'm not saying for a moment there only have to be rules and regulations. What I'm saying is that rules, regulations, and laws are there for the benefit of the community as a whole.

They are not and for the restraint of evil. But, when they become the end in themselves, I remember one reason reading a book by a well-known minister, I'm not going to mention the name, who said that he had often been at church meetings where people had wept about changing the translation of the Bible or using another hymn book.

And he came away thinking, I've never heard these people weeping about the lost, weeping about those who don't know the Lord. That's what happens when we become obsessed with detail.

We forget what it's all about. But secondly, in almost the opposite extreme, if we reject Jesus, we ultimately want to destroy him, ultimately want to get rid of him.

not necessarily by violence, we ought to get rid of him by suppressing the gospel in all kinds of ways, political correctness and all the kind of things we are surrounded with in this country.

[20 : 23] Because only Jesus, only his grace, only his power, only his love, can keep us from legalism, only his power, only his grace, can keep us from extremism.

And that is why this passage is included to tell us that when the kingdom advances, there are going to be those who oppose it.

And saying to us, making sure that we are not among those who oppose, but among those who rejoice and believe. Amen. Let's pray. Lord, God, we recognise in our own hearts the temptations to extremism, temptation to nitpick and be judgmental on the one hand, or to be totally lax and careless and unconcerned on the other.

Help us instead to look to Jesus. Help us to trust in him, to love him, to believe in him, and to follow him all the days of our lives. We ask that in his name.

Amen.