

Introduction

It seems to me that the contemporary church is passing through a peculiar phase regarding worship. “Music wars” and a seeker sensitive emphasis that governs the structure of worship have led many churches to face the problem of superficiality and to seek solutions. They speak about liturgical renewal that includes having a Saturday evening worship service to free up Sunday for other things, and fresh baked bread to enliven communion. Preaching cannot go longer than twenty minutes and the first rule is to never deal with controversial subjects.

How the church of our day arrived at its present place is complicated, but I think we can identify three basic failures that lead the church down the wrong path. First, there is the failure to honor God in His sovereign majesty. Here our view of God is too small and a man-centeredness permeates the content of worship. Closely related is the failure to give preaching a primacy in worship, a primacy that properly appreciates the church’s place as the audience hearing the voice of God through divinely appointed, through frail, human instruments. Third, the idea of keeping the Sabbath day holy does not even appear on the radar screen of Christian duty. Here our view of worship is too small with a hasty superficiality governing our time for worship.

In light of these trends, Matthew 12.1-14 carries with it more than one level of importance. This text calls us to Sabbath keeping, and in doing so, it summons us to a day of worship. Today, we will cover verses 1-4 with the following outline: the general context, the specific situation, and the first reply.

1A. The general context

Because of the context, with no break between chapters 11 and 12, (cf. 12.1, “at that time”), this passage on the Sabbath helps us orient ourselves regarding Christian discipleship, so we can think more about how we learn from others and help others learn as a church. This text allows us to think more about living under the pleasant yoke of our Lord’s commandments in the time between His comings.

In light of Matthew 5.17 (and other historical-redemptive passages), here is a basic premise: whenever the Lord taught on the commandments, *He did so to teach us, the church*, how to live by them. Therefore, the Lord’s teaching about the Jewish Sabbath anticipates and grounds the Christian Sunday Sabbath. He tells us to think fulfillment not abrogation about the Law (Mat 5.17) and therefore we are to think fulfillment and not abrogation about the fourth law. When we think fulfillment about the Sabbath, the Christian Sunday Sabbath comes immediately into view. This way of thinking is similar to the fact that what the Lord taught the apostles about *their* mission before His resurrection informs us regarding *our* mission after His resurrection (cf. Mat 10 & 28).

Accordingly, my title for this section of Scripture is “The Pleasant Yoke of Sabbath Keeping.” The Sabbath is a case in point of the pleasant yoke of the law emphasized in Matthew 11.28-30. Undoubtedly, we have much to think about as Christians seeking to live under the authority of Christ (this is another opportunity to do that). Jesus, our prophet, teaches us how to apply the Sabbath as new covenant Christians. By means of the old wineskin Sabbath, Jesus anticipates the new wineskin Sabbath. He tells us how to obey *Him* on the day that belongs distinctively to *God*. Thus, He paved the way for the Christian Sabbath, which is another name for the Lord’s Day (cf. the WSC, QA 59, **Which day of the seven hath God appointed to be the weekly sabbath? A. From the beginning of the world to the resurrection of Christ, God appointed the seventh day of the week to be the weekly sabbath; and the first day of the week ever since, to continue to the end of the world, which is the Christian Sabbath [and in the NT called the Lord’s Day, WLC, 116]**).

2A. The specific situation

There are two accounts here about activity that occurs on the Sabbath. In the first, the disciples are *active* picking heads of grain, and in the second, the Lord Jesus is *active* healing a man with a withered hand. In both accounts, the Pharisees inquire about doing what is lawful on the Sabbath. Mosaic Law allowed picking and eating the grain of a field you did not own (Deut 23.24-25), so the complaint centers on the day that these things were done.

At that time Jesus went through the grainfields on the Sabbath. His disciples were hungry, and they began to pluck heads of grain and to eat. ² But when the Pharisees saw it, they said to him, "Look, your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath" (12.1-2).

He went on from there and entered their synagogue. ¹⁰ 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 (12.9-10).

These Pharisees charge the disciples with wrongdoing in the seemingly trivial matter of picking and eating grain, and they intend to accuse Jesus with wrongdoing with regard to the astounding matter of healing a man with a withered hand! On one hand, the Pharisees go over the top in pettiness (they complain about people eating due to hunger). On the other hand, the Pharisees exceed in callousness (they complain about the healing of the body). Actually, in both cases, the Pharisees accuse Jesus of wrongdoing (Behold, *your* disciples, v. 2 & in their intentions).

Thus, this interaction with the Pharisees is the situation in which our Lord explains the true spirit and intent of the fourth commandment. Similarly, Pharisaic thinking led the Lord to explain the true spirit and intent of the sixth, seventh, and ninth commandments in the Sermon on the Mount. Regarding all these commandments, Pharisaic misuse helps us understand what our Lord teaches about proper use (the Gospels record these explanations for the edification and life *of the church*; they make up one half of the church's NT).

For the Pharisees, picking grain and healing involve activity; they involve work instead of rest (not Sabbath, which means rest), so, they are unlawful works according to their standard. The Pharisees are truly picayunish and narrow (cf. extra-biblical materials indicate that the Pharisaic tradition viewed picking as harvesting, separating grain from stalk was threshing, blowing away the chaff was winnowing, and working the grain between the fingers was milling; all forms of forbidden work, doing that which is unlawful to do on the Sabbath).

Thus, Pharisaic complaining is the specific situation that conditions a number of replies from the Lord Jesus. We turn now to the first reply.

3A. The first reply

Jesus directs His listeners and us to an example from the life of David. ³ **He said to them, "Have you not read what David did when he was hungry, and those who were with him: ⁴ how he entered the house of God and ate the bread of the Presence, which it was not lawful for him to eat nor for those who were with him, but only for the priests?" (12.3-4, no? then go and do so).**

There is more here than first meets the eye because the incident in the life of David seems fundamentally unrelated to the Sabbath. Instead, the account is about his use of the consecrated bread (v. 4; 1 Sam 21.4-6 refers to "holy bread" and "bread of the Presence" per the Hebrew and the LXX). This bread had a symbolic function in the tabernacle where God manifested His presence. Thus, this was the bread "of God's face" or the bread of the Presence of God (hence the capitalization of Presence in the ESV translation). Notably, Jesus stresses the fact that it was unlawful for David and his companions to eat this bread; it was "only for the priests" to eat. We can thus begin to answer the question of verse 3 in this way: "you have read about David's action, you know the account in which he ate the bread that was *unlawful for him to eat* because the lawful use of that bread belonged to the priests, however, you do not understand." There is an element of sarcasm here and much to ponder. So, let us ask some key questions.

1B. How does the Lord view David's unlawful actions?

Although the point is compressed and implicit, David and his companions did not sin against the Lord of the Tabernacle even though they did something “unlawful.” There is evidently a multiple play on words here. The word “unlawful” has three different uses: the use in Pharisaic teaching, in standard OT teaching, and in the David case. The Pharisees charged Jesus and the disciples with doing that which is sinful. In standard OT teaching, if someone broke a divine law, like the law of the consecrated bread, that person sinned against the Lord. However, in the case of David and his companions, doing something “unlawful” was not sinful.

Pharisees about Jesus and the disciples – unlawful = sinful

OT about God’s laws and regulations – unlawful = sinful

Jesus on the David example – unlawful = not sinful

We know that the Lord Jesus views David’s conduct as not sinful for these reasons: a) Jesus is defending Himself (and His disciples) from the moral complaining of the Pharisees. He defends the “unlawful” actions as moral using their language. b) The parallel with verse 5 makes explicit what we detect is implicit. The opening word of the verse (or) coordinates the David example and the priest example. Thus, the priests profane the day, they do something unlawful, and they are guiltless (without guilt; innocent). This parallel clearly shows that in the play on the word “unlawful” (vs. 2, 4, 12), Jesus views the David example as something unlawful but not sinful. Thus, there is that which is unlawful in Pharisaic eyes, that which is unlawful and sinful in the OT, and that which is seemingly unlawful but not sinful. Thus, in the OT, we have that which is actually unlawful and sinful, and we have that which seems unlawful but is not sinful.

2B. How can David’s actions be unlawful but not sinful?

Now we should wonder how David’s actions can be unlawful but not sinful because all the laws of the OT (bread laws, dietary laws, civil laws, laws regarding sacrifices, and the Ten Laws) were commandments of God that required obedience. There were consequences for disobedience. The death penalty applied to what we might think of as trivial commands of God. For example, the Ark of the Covenant was not to be touched when transported. Even if it was falling to the ground and someone grabbed it to keep it from damage, the Lord punished that person with death (Num 4.15; 2 Sam 6.6-7). What I am getting at is this. The commands regarding the bread of the Presence were divine commands, and in the standard OT teaching, it was a sin if anyone other than a priest ate that bread. You cannot look at the minor laws and say, “Well, we can do whatever we want to do because that is just a ceremonial law.”

We need much wisdom to figure out what is going on here because to break even a ceremonial law is sinful. Cautiously and guardedly, we may say that the laws of the OT were general rules that had exceptions. Speaking of general rules with exceptions may not be the best way to put our fingers on the standard teaching, but it goes in the right direction. “You shall not kill” does not forbid killing in self-defense. “You shall not lie” does not forbid lying and deceiving in war. In the very context of the bread incident, David lied to the priest because Saul was at war against him. Perhaps, it is better to state simply that David’s actions appeared to be unlawful, but they were not sinful. Hence, we need to try to understand how it is that David and his companions “profaned the bread but were guiltless.”

1) They were hungry.

Jesus draws on the fact that in their flight from the sword of Saul, they were in need of food. They did not gather this bread like gathering plunder in war. They were in need. Therefore, the Lord teaches that a principle of necessity conditions the general rule of the consecrated bread. How can this be the case? Why does hunger provide an exception to the bread law? Obviously, it is extreme to say that anyone traveling on vacation that happened to pass by the Tabernacle at lunchtime, when they were hungry, could stop in and have a snack on that bread. No, it was only for the priests.

However, if this traveler were in need of food, would that make it okay for him to eat the consecrated bread? It seems that the answer is yes. We should fill out the picture. This bread law is a story all its own. Each week, the people gave bread as food for the priests (Lev 24.5-9).

Placing it before the Lord in the Tabernacle did two things at the same time. a) It was a reminder that the Lord provides for His people; the bread is *first His gift to His people*, and it became a form of thankful giving *by the people to the Lord*, and b) it was provision of food for the priests; every week the people provided for the priests who “lived of the gospel.” The whole point centered on God’s provision for the needs of His people, and through them, on His provision for the needs of the priests. David was without food and the priests had plenty of food. Surely, it would break the spirit and intent of the law regarding bread if people were to go hungry in a time of need while the nearby priests had plenty of food. Indeed, the priest shows love when he shares some of his food with someone in need. This is basic but there is more at stake. [this does not totally satisfy as an explanation]

2) They were holy

Jesus explains that if you have read the account, then you should be able to see why David and his companions were innocent in doing something unlawful. At first reading, the account may confound us: **Then David came to Nob to Ahimelech the priest. And Ahimelech came to meet David trembling and said to him, "Why are you alone, and no one with you?"** ² **And David said to Ahimelech the priest, "The king has charged me with a matter and said to me, 'Let no one know anything of the matter about which I send you, and with which I have charged you.' I have made an appointment with the young men for such and such a place** (1 Sam 21.1-2). David lied to Ahimelech, the priest, regarding a secret mission that he is pursuing. This is to explain why he comes to the priest alone; his companions are in hiding. This is apparently an act of deceit in war. Thus, David keeps his whereabouts and actions somewhat secret, and by this secrecy, he may protect Ahimelech (though it does not prevent Saul from killing the priest later for helping David, 1 Sam 22.6-19).

Another confounding fact in the account is the stipulation that David and his men must meet to allow them to eat the holy bread. They must “have kept themselves from women” (v. 4); this is not general as in staying pure; it refers to husband and wife relations. Without going into details of Exodus 19.15 and Leviticus 15, let me summarize by saying that having sexual relations was an act that made husband and wife ceremonially unclean. There is nothing sinful about sex *per se* just like there is nothing sinful about many other things that brought ceremonial uncleanness such as the bleeding of a woman in her menstrual cycle or the bleeding of someone because of a wound. Similarly, there is nothing inherently sinful about touching a dead person, touching the clothing of a dead person, or touching a person with leprosy, and so forth.

Sexual ceremonial cleanness was representative of the commitment to holiness of David and His followers. Nothing here suggests that sex is somehow dirty or wrong in itself. Actually, sex is elevated along with every other feature of life to a sacred status. These laws taught the fact that there is no sacred/secular compartmentalizing of life; every area of life is sacred and is thus lived before God. However, we are sinners so the law included cleansings by sacrifice. They pointed to the sacrifice of Christ as the ground of every aspect of life in the pursuit of holiness by God’s people.

3) They were “priests”

Add the fact that David is God’s anointed king in anticipation of the coming priest-king, and we discover that David and his followers eat the holy bread because they are in effect priests on a special mission by God’s anointing. They eat what is unlawful to eat and are innocent because of who they are as priests under God’s anointed priest-king, David who is on his way to the throne. They were hungry (as anyone might be hungry), they were holy (as the whole nation was to be (Ex 19.15), but the capstone point is the place of David in the history of redemption.

3B. How are David’s “unlawful” actions relevant to situation in the Gospels?

1) The basic need of food qualifies and defines the bread law and the Sabbath law. The true spirit and intent of these divine laws is not rigid and frozen in the letter of the law. To have people go hungry while the priests have plenty of holy bread contradicts the spirit of the bread law. To have people go hungry on the Lord’s Day contradicts the spirit of His day. What people do to supply the need of bread may appear unlawful in a literal way without being sinful. If you

give bread to David that belongs “only to the priests,” it appears that you violate the law, and it seems that “working” at picking and eating grain on a “no-work” day violates the law. Thus, the David example is relevant to Jesus and His disciples who conducted themselves on the Sabbath in a way that went against an overly literal and exaggerated Pharisaic interpretation of the law that missed its true spirit and intent.

2) The analogy of David and Christ qualifies and defines the bread law and the Sabbath law. The bread belongs to David because he is God’s anointed priest-king (on his way to the throne). The bread rightfully belongs to him because he is God’s priest in promise and anticipation. Therefore, his actions and the actions He promotes in his followers are not against the law; they are lawful in the historical-redemptive sense as promise and anticipation of Christ. Likewise, the Sabbath belongs to Christ because He is God’s anointed priest-king (on His way to the throne). The Sabbath rightfully belongs to Him. Therefore, His actions and the actions He promotes in His disciples are not against the law; they are lawful in the historical-redemptive sense of messianic fulfillment. If what you do on the Sabbath has the approval of the owner of the Sabbath, then your doings on the day of rest cannot be sinful.

Thus, Jesus faults the Pharisees in two ways. 1) They were definitely picayunish to squabble over the work of picking grain, eating grain, arranging bread, and eating bread on the Sabbath. The Pharisees held to a rigid legalism that failed to discern the relationship of the Sabbath to work, especially to work as it bears on the well-being of man in his basic need of food. They lost sight of the spiritual purpose of the Sabbath for man’s well being. Thus, they exaggerated the outward observance in an emphasis on rest that was primarily negative; inactivity on this day, what you are not to do was predominant in their thinking. It was as if abstaining from activity was somehow intrinsically holy. 2) They totally missed the fulfillment in Christ that was powerfully manifesting itself before their very eyes. They were the children in the market place that were not satisfied with how John brought in the kingdom or with how Jesus brought in the kingdom. Therefore, the Pharisees should understand that David and his followers anticipated Jesus and His disciples. They would not accuse Jesus of law breaking if they knew, understood, and believed the Holy Scriptures. There is a bite to these words to the learned authorities on the OT. As this kind of teaching penetrates their proud and rebellious consciences, they hate Christ and conspire to kill Him (cf. 12.14).

Conclusions

1) We must think of the Sabbath as a “feast” day

We are not to be picayunish regarding the new covenant Sabbath or Lord’s Day.

The Pharisees are an abiding negative example for us. We must think of the Lord’s Day in terms of God’s purpose for man’s well-being, especially with regard to the matters of eating and drinking. The Sabbath is a new covenant feast day, which means that it is a day of joy and celebration. Thus, the “work” that goes into food preparation, even if you make it simple with left “overs,” is not against the Sabbath, but defines its true spirit and intent.

2) We must think of the Lord’s Day in light of messianic fulfillment

David and his followers foreshadow Jesus and His disciples. Holy bread belongs to the priests and the Sabbath belongs to our great high priest. If we fix our eyes on the Lord Jesus and have His approval in our activities on His Sabbath Day, then our use of Sunday will honor Him and glorify our Father in heaven.

May we fall down before the majesty of our God to worship our Sabbath king on His holy day. To Him be the glory, now and forevermore, Amen.