

Applying the Pleasant Sabbath Yoke (Mat 12.1-4 pt2)

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Introduction

I made the point last week that the contemporary church is facing a problem of superficiality and it is seeking solutions. However, one place it should go but fails to go for solutions is to the pleasant yoke of law keeping, especially to the pleasant yoke of Sabbath keeping. Too often, the idea of keeping the Sabbath day holy does not even appear on the radar screen of liturgical renewal and Christian duty. In light of this fact, 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 and to the best kind of spiritual renewal. Today, we will look again at verses 1-4 with an emphasis on application (“Applying the Pleasant Sabbath Yoke”). If we add the word application to each point of outline from last week, we have the outline for this message. We will cover applications from the general context, from the specific situation, and from the first reply.

1A. Applications from the general context

If we meditate on chapter 12 in terms of the general context, then we will discover a number of helpful and important applications; some we may have touched on slightly last time.

1) First, in its largest context, with Mat 5.17, resurrection day (Mat 28.1), and the Lord’s Day (Rev 1.10) in mind, we know that this passage on the Sabbath helps us orient ourselves regarding Christian discipleship. It therefore allows us to think more about living under the pleasant yoke of our Lord’s commandments in the time between His comings. 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 Lord’s Day, the first day of the week, which is the *Christian Sabbath*.

2) Second, the general context of Mat 11.28-30 in relation to 12.1-14 gives us another application. It adds the valuable fact that learning how to live by the Sabbath commandment *reeks with promise*. The duty to rest reeks with the promise of rest. The connection is such that we can use the precious words that end Matthew 11 as an overlay in relation to 12.1-14. This is similar to using a contemporary map as an overlay in relation to a map of ancient Israel; then we say, “Those boundaries fit within these boundaries.” Likewise, we can say, “The Sabbath law fits within the boundaries of the pleasant yoke of law keeping; therefore, Lord’s Day Sabbath observance reeks with promise.

The Sabbath overflows with assurances because the Lord promises rest *now* to those who take the yoke of the commandments in general and who take up the yoke of the fourth commandment in particular. Thus, Jesus in effect says, “Come to me all you that are heavy laden by Pharisaic law, sin, and guilt, and I will give you rest. Take my pleasant yoke of commandment and precept upon you, and I will give you soul rest, the best rest to the inner man of the heart. I will give this to you as you take the Christian Sabbath yoke upon you.” The world has many troubles, and it can be troubling to live in it. We face money problems, health problems, meanness problems, and sin problems of every kind. The solution is not to take matters into our own hands in any area. Peace of heart and rest of soul are ours on the pathway of our Lord’s commandments under the pleasant yoke of His Sabbath law.

The promise appears counterintuitive because we may wonder, for example, how we can have peace regarding our finances when we set a day aside for rest instead of work (“I’m going to make less money this way.”). What we have here is a subtext on how to seek God first in all things as the solution to the worry problem. We need to get our minds right; we need a day of meditation, worship, and spiritual renewal. We need the rest that Jesus promises issue by issue and week by week by living under the authority of His commandments. There is much here for

us to ponder, learn, and apply (we need a healthy mental outlook about the day, during the day, and from the day).

Rest is also the precise promise regarding what is *yet to come* at the end of history on earth for those who cling to Jesus-Messiah and to His accomplished work of redemption. Therefore, the “rest for your souls” that is promised to weekly Sabbath keeping deepens our hope of the supreme rest that will be ours in heaven. This day puts all the days of our lives into perspective. Week by week, we have the great privilege of discipleship learning in a context of rest with our risen Lord. Weekly, we lift our eyes to things above in a special way per God’s appointment. What a pity it is when Christians get lost in the things of this world, have excessive weeds growing where there should be spiritual fruit, and can do little about it because the way they structure their time does not have kingdom righteousness as the first priority. There are spiritual disciplines that we need in the Christian life; we need them to combat fruit-choking weeds. A spiritual discipline that reeks with promise is Christian Sabbath keeping.

3) If we combine the promise of rest of soul with the fact that Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath, then we have to draw out this important point. Namely, as Christian disciples how we orient ourselves to the Sabbath is a matter of personal relationship to the Lord Jesus (Come to *me*...*I* will give you... take *my* yoke upon *you* and learn from *me* for *I* am gentle). The old Sabbath transformed into the new Sabbath is *His* yoke. We learn of Him and from Him by means of His precepts. He is the risen Lord and we relate to Him personally through His word, prayer, the commandments in general, and the fourth commandment in particular. By faith, we know Him as our personal savior, and by obedience to Him personally, we deepen our walk with Him and come to know Him better and better. This privilege needs some fitting adjective to describe it: this is an *awesome* privilege! There is a subjective, experimental, existential, and thus personal relationship that we have with our risen Lord. What an awesome privilege to live before Him, to sense His presence, friendship, and fellowship because our lawgiver is also our patient teacher and humble priest who bore the penalty of our law breaking in our place.

2A. Applications from the specific situation

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).

The Pharisees charge Jesus and His disciples with wrongdoing in the matter of picking and eating grain. Consider some applications that arise from this situation.

1) The Pharisees are an abiding negative example of how not to think about and apply the Sabbath as Christians.

The Pharisees held to a rigid legalism that failed to discern the relationship of the Sabbath to work.

They lost sight of the spiritual purpose of the Sabbath for man’s well being.

They exaggerated the outward observance.

They emphasized rest in a way 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. This way of thinking about the Lord’s Day is one that we should avoid like the plague.

Opposition to Jesus grows because He exposes the Pharisees as ignorant of Scripture. Thus, we should not be ignorant of Scripture in parallel ways with the Pharisees.

2) All these negatives rebound in a positive direction by implication. 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*). Misuse is the backdrop for lawful use.

The Pharisees are truly picayunish and narrow, something that we should not be in our view of the Christian Sabbath. We have a warning here about being petty, harsh, picayunish, and narrow in how we view *other* people and accuse *them* of wrongdoing. The opposite is Christ-like

(we can think opposites one by one); living under His yoke is totally contrary to Pharisaic misuse.

Works of necessity qualify and define Sabbath lawfulness. One might break the law in a literal way without breaking its true spirit and intent. We should understand that the lawgiver defines His yoke in a way that makes it pleasant and restorative.

3A. Applications from the first reply

Here we need to review David's actions first before we draw out the applications.

1B. A key thing that we should understand is how David's actions could be unlawful but not sinful. There are three things that accumulate to fill out our understanding of this basic fact.

1) They were hungry.

A major concern regarding the bread of the Presence was God's provision for the needs of His people, and through them, 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 it does not totally satisfy as an explanation.

2) They were holy

A 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 includes husband and wife relations (cf. Ex 19.15). Having sexual relations was an act that made husband and wife *ceremonially* unclean. Sexual ceremonial cleanness was representative of the commitment to holiness of David and His followers and it signals that there is something special about his mission as he makes his way to the throne as God's anointed king.

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.

2B. Applications

1) The basic need of food qualifies and defines both 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.

2) The analogy of David and Christ qualifies and defines both 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.

3) The Sabbath commandment has flexibility and reasonableness in accommodating human necessity. His yoke is pleasant, human, and sensible. The Lord tells us elsewhere, "**The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath**" (Mk 2.27). Thus, man does not exist for the benefit of the Sabbath; the reverse is true, the Sabbath exists as a commandment of God as

something pleasant, for man's benefit. To benefit man, a principle of human need conditions our use of the Sabbath, especially the need to eat and drink. The Pharisaic "not lawful" was a wrong application of the commandment because it was not informed by the principle of necessity. Accordingly, the disciples of Jesus did not break the Sabbath because of their need for food.

Jesus uses this case to teach that matters of human need, especially with regard to our need of food, involve doing some things that seem unlawful on the Sabbath (in a literal way, they are unlawful because they involve work not rest, but they are not sinful).

4) In its true spirit and intent, the Christian Sabbath involves a fundamental commitment to holiness. The priest allows David and his men to have the bread of the Presence on the stipulation that they are ceremonially holy. Being followers of David, they are in effect priests. Likewise, as disciples of Christ, we are believer priests and the stipulation that we pursue holiness is basic (cf. 1 Pet 1.13-16; 2.9-10).

Thus, in whatever work you do on Sunday, you are guiltless *if the direction of your life reflects a commitment to holiness*. That means that you have no sacred-secular mindset. It means you do not think of the sexual relationship of husband and wife as something secular and not sacred. This case in point represents the fact that no area of life is secular, that we sin across the board of our lives, and we need what the ceremonial cleansings represent: we need the blood of Christ as the ground of our repentant walk in holiness. Thus, when you work for wages on the Lord's Day because of necessity and with a repentant heart of commitment to the Lord and to holiness, then you are guiltless. The same thing applies to other types of work, especially those that go into food preparation and cleaning up.

Of course, this commitment to holiness implies the opposite as well. Working for wages on the Lord's Day may be sinful. You may define necessity in the wrong way and from a wrong heart. You may suppress greed under a cloak of necessity. You may lack faith in God not trusting Him to give you what you need to live seven days by working only six days. You are guilty if you work on Sunday without true repentance of heart and deep commitment to holiness regarding the fourth commandment and all the commandments.

Obedience and disobedience to the fourth commandment is far beyond mere outward appearance. The mere fact that someone is going off to earn money on the Lord's Day does not tell us anything about that person's relationship to God. Accordingly, I cannot judge you regarding your Sunday work, nor can we judge each other. We are not to be censorious, which is unloving. What is critical is that we each judge our own hearts and actions to do our best to confine our work to six days and to remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy in the presence of our risen Lord Jesus, in a privileged personal relationship to Him. To this pattern of life, we have the promise of rest of soul; the pathway of the law is the way of stability, comfort, assurance, and marvelous peace.

I can say no more. Let us fall down before the majesty of our God in humble confession of our sins against His commandments, and in thankful dedication to our gentle and loving Lord Jesus.