

6. Resting in Christ (2Q 2016—Matthew)

Biblical material: Matt. 11:28–30; 12:1, 2; Luke 14:1–6; John 5:9–16; Matt. 12:9–14; Isa. 58:7–13.

Quotes

- A world without a Sabbath would be like a man without a smile, like summer without flowers, and like a homestead without a garden. It is the most joyous day of the week. *Henry Ward Beecher*
- God presents the Sabbath rest as a shelter we can enter. (Hebrews 4:1-11) *Charles R. Swindoll*
- The external observance of the Sabbath rest is a Jewish ceremonial ordinance and no longer binding on Christians. Sabbatarians surpass the Jews three times over in a crass and carnal Sabbatarian superstition. *John Calvin*
- Day of the Lord, as all our days should be! *Henry Wadsworth Longfellow*
- God himself took a day to rest in, and a good man’s grave is his Sabbath. *John Donne*

Questions

Why are Sabbath issues introduced here? What is the point being made? How does Jesus relate to religious hypocrisy? Why didn’t Jesus wait until after Sabbath—after all, this was hardly a life-and-death emergency? What does Jesus teach through these actions and what do we learn?

Bible summary

The true nature of the Sabbath is vividly demonstrated in the first half of Matthew 12—in contrast to the legalistic observance of the religious teachers of his day. Jesus invites all into his rest (Matt. 11:28–30). In another disagreement over Sabbath, Jesus pointedly asks, “Does the law allow healing on the Sabbath or not?” (Luke 14:3 FBV). John’s account of Jesus’ healing of the paralyzed man at the Pool of Bethesda shows how antagonistic the Jewish leaders were to healing on the Sabbath (John 5:9–16). Isa. 58:6-13 shows that true fasting and religious observance is about liberation and compassion, not legalistic requirements.

Comment

Instead of seeing Jesus and his attitude to the Sabbath as a blessing, the religious professionals see him as a law-breaker and a rebel. Jesus is confronted by incensed and offended religionists. Their belief structure is one based on what is lawful. That’s the first question “Are you allowed to...?” This is not legalism necessarily, but a stress on legality—the first point of reference is to ask what the law says. So the disciples’ action of simply picking and eating grain is to them a violation of Sabbath law. They see no farther than what they perceive to be a clear breaking of a holy law. Nothing more needs to be said. The law is beyond debate.

Theirs is a fatal logic. Since picking a head of grain is to be equated to reaping, and rubbing the grains between hands is the equivalent of threshing, the disciples are working on the Sabbath. They do not think to ask if this is real work. They would not

even dare to inquire why work on the Sabbath was prohibited by God in the first place. If they had done so, they might have decided that picking and eating a few ears of grain was not the same as manual labor. For why did God say not to work? Was it not so we could spend time with Him? The disciples were already with God in Christ, speaking and listening to him throughout the Sabbath day.

But this is not the absolutist logic of the Pharisees that demands point-by-legal-point observance. In his answer Jesus points to the higher “law” of fulfilling not legal requirements but rather fundamental principles, referring them to the actions of David and of the “work” done by priests on the Sabbath, concluding that “the Son of man is Lord of the Sabbath.” (Matt. 12:8 FBV).

The Pharisees, the self-proclaimed keepers of the law—already incensed—would hardly have taken such words easily. Jesus is claiming to be more important, and to supersede, the very temple—the shrine of the law. He even claims supremacy as Lord of the Sabbath. As the Sabbath’s Lord, he determines its purpose and relevance. And he tells us—it’s for us, not to please him!

It’s important to notice that Matthew says it is because of this very incident that they begin plotting to kill Jesus. Here we see the results of a false religious system that seeks to stay in power even at the cost of an innocent life. Because so much is invested in this systematized salvation-by-payment that the idea that God can freely forgive is condemned. For this is not the kind of God they want. Rather they want the contractual system they have developed, because then they can continue as they are. But Jesus weeps over them, for they will not come to him to be healed.

Ellen White Comments

The Saviour well knew that in healing on the Sabbath He would be regarded as a transgressor, but He did not hesitate to break down the wall of traditional requirements that barricaded the Sabbath. Jesus bade the afflicted man stand forth, and then asked, “Is it lawful to do good on the Sabbath days, or to do evil? to save life, or to kill?” It was a maxim among the Jews that a failure to do good, when one had opportunity, was to do evil; to neglect to save life was to kill. Thus Jesus met the rabbis on their own ground. {DA 286}

...the work of Christ in healing the sick did honor to the holy Sabbath. Jesus claimed equal rights with God in doing a work equally sacred and of the same character with that which engaged his Father in Heaven. But the Pharisees were still more incensed, because he had not only broken the law, according to their understanding, but added to this offense the heinous sin of declaring himself equal with God. Nothing but the interference of the people prevented the Jewish authorities from slaying him on the spot. {2SP 164}

Jesus wished to correct the false teachings of the Jews in regard to the Sabbath and also to impress his disciples with the fact that deeds of mercy were lawful on that day. In the matter of healing the withered hand he broke down the custom of the Jews, and left the fourth commandment standing as God had given it to the world. By this act he exalted the Sabbath, sweeping away the senseless restrictions that encumbered it. His act of mercy did honor to the day, while those who complained of him, were, by their many useless rites and ceremonies, themselves dishonoring the Sabbath. {2SP 199}