

In the grain fields on the sabbath

3. The true meaning of the sabbath

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This short series of articles, based on the incident of the disciples being criticised for 'working' on the sabbath, is concluded by considering parallels with Ruth and with Isaiah 58, and by considering right and wrong attitudes to laws such as the sabbath laws.

WE FIND JESUS and his disciples making a path through the fields of barley. The evidence is that they were in the vicinity of Jerusalem, although obviously outside its walls.¹ One wonders if they were some five miles to the south, in the fields of Bethlehem, where Boaz had grown barley over 1,000 years earlier. It would be fitting if such were the case, for this parcel of ground could have been Christ's legally by inheritance. And when we think of reaping grain at the time of barley harvest, it is the story of Ruth and Boaz that springs to mind.

Parallels with Ruth

There are parallels between the two stories. Central to each is the theme of rest. The issue in Matthew 11 focuses around the sabbath and how it should be kept: "Come unto me . . . and I will give you rest" (v. 28). Compare these verses in Ruth:

"The LORD grant you that ye may *find rest*, each of you in the house of her husband" (1:9);

"Then Naomi her mother in law said unto her, My daughter, shall I not *seek rest* for thee, that it may be well with thee?" (3:1);

"Then said she, Sit still, my daughter, until thou know how the matter will fall: for the man will not be in *rest*, until he have finished the thing this day" (v. 18).

Another theme is that of faithfulness, with the disciples sticking close by Christ's side in a moment of trial. The same theme is borne out in Ruth:

"And Ruth said, Intreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee: for whither thou goest, I will go; and where

thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God" (1:16);

"And he [Boaz] said, Blessed be thou of the LORD, my daughter: for thou hast shewed more kindness in the latter end than at the beginning,

inasmuch as thou *followedst not young men*, whether poor or rich" (3:10).

Just as the disciples were loyal to Jesus, so Ruth was loyal to both Naomi and Boaz. Perhaps the most encouraging comparison is drawn from Naomi's comment on Boaz in 2:19: "And her mother in law said unto her, Where hast thou gleaned to day? and where wroughtest thou? blessed be he *that did take knowledge of thee*".

Boaz saw Ruth's faith. He saw her efforts to help provide for her mother-in-law. He was able to look past her Moabitishness and discern her true character. He acknowledged her faith and loyalty in generously providing for her needs. In this we see our Lord's dealings with his disciples. Their action, viewed as sin by the Pharisees, was recognised by Christ as something entirely different. Their loyalty was compared by Christ to the work of the priests in the temple. Our Lord could see past the legalistic externals and into their heart. He saw their heart and valued its response.

The same is true for us. Our Lord is not indifferent to our efforts for him, however humble they might be. Mark 12:43 records that the widow's two mites were valued by Jesus above all the abundance of the wealthy. He saw her efforts, feeble though they were, and acknowledged them. Earlier he said, "whosoever shall give to drink unto one of these little ones a cup of cold water only in the name of a disciple, verily I say unto you, he shall in no wise lose his reward" (Mt. 10:42). All our efforts for Christ, small though they may be, are recognised and acknowledged.

1. See [Apr. 2008, p. 63](#).

Work and the sabbath

Matthew 12:2 records that the Pharisees said to Jesus, "Behold, thy disciples do that which is not lawful to do upon the sabbath day". With what did they found fault? The fault lay in the fact that they had broken the sabbath; that they were eating was not of itself a problem. That they were eating in someone else's field was also acceptable; the law clearly allowed this: "When thou comest into the standing corn of thy neighbour, then thou mayest pluck the ears with thine hand; but thou shalt not move a sickle unto thy neighbour's standing corn" (Deut. 23:25).

What, then, was the problem? Luke 6:1 gives us a clue: "and his disciples plucked the ears of corn, and did eat, rubbing them in their hands". The charge against the disciples was that in plucking ears of grain and then rubbing them in their hands they had reaped and threshed, actions that were regarded as work and therefore illegal on the sabbath.

We might regard the interpretation of the Law by the Pharisees as being somewhat strained. We would scoff at the idea that rubbing grain in one's hand could actually constitute work. But the Pharisees would take us to Numbers 15, and show us a precedent where, in their eyes, this interpretation is upheld. Numbers 15:32-36 records that a man was condemned to death for picking up sticks on the sabbath:

"And while the children of Israel were in the wilderness, they found a man that gathered sticks upon the sabbath day. And they that found him gathering sticks brought him unto Moses and Aaron, and unto all the congregation. And they put him in ward, because it was not declared what should be done to him. And the LORD said unto Moses, The man shall be surely put to death: all the congregation shall stone him with stones without the camp. And all the congregation brought him without the camp, and stoned him with stones, and he died; as the LORD commanded Moses".

"There you go", the Pharisee would say, "the law concerning the sabbath has to be taken seriously—it's really a matter of life and death. It's not a law which one can take lightly. We need to be ruthless in the way we observe it. There is no leeway for error. If a man was killed for the simple act of picking up sticks, where do your disciples stand, who have harvested and threshed on the sabbath? They have shown blatant disregard for the principles of God. What are you going to do about it, Jesus?"

Our attitude to law

Where would we have stood in the face of such criticism? What would we have said if we had been in the place of Jesus? Would it have been on the lines of, "Yes, disciples, the Pharisees do have a point here. I know you have been loyal and faithful, and have followed me through thick and thin, but laws are laws. You should have known better. What you have done is wrong!?" There are two different ways in which we can view such things.

There is the negative approach, whereby we see rules and commands as an end in themselves. They set the boundaries of where we go and what we do, and so long as we stay within the boundaries we are safe. It is not for us to question, or find the reason for things; we merely obey. Consequently, our ability to keep rules is seen as a measure of our attachment to God. We must be loving God because we are enduring all this pain, and giving up all this pleasure, for Him. And so our righteousness is bound up in our ability to adhere to regulations, fostering an external approach and leaving the heart unchanged. The importance of understanding or following the principles of the Law is diminished, because all our actions can be guided by a codified set of laws. We either obey or we sin. Life is that simple.

The other view sees purpose and principles behind laws. They are not given merely so that man has a litmus test of his own righteousness. Rather, they are given to teach us about God, to show us His mind, to allow us to explore His character. The law is a schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, says Paul in Galatians 3:24. Our aim in studying the Law is not just to find out what we have to do, but also to find the lesson that law is teaching us. It is these lessons that teach us about God, about His character and purpose. And when we understand these principles, when we understand what God is like, our heart is changed, and we are driven, not by law, but by love.

Illustrated in Isaiah 58

These two approaches are illustrated in Isaiah 58, where God records how Israel kept the sabbath. The negative approach Israel adopted is set forth in verses 2-5: they fasted, and afflicted their souls (v. 3); they demonstrated abject humility in dressing in sackcloth, bowing down their head, and spreading ashes over their body (v. 5), not actions which we would lightly take. But because they failed to see the true significance of the sabbath, and became focused on externals rather than any

change of heart, their ritual observances were all in vain. Verse 4 shows how far their religion had degraded: "Behold, ye fast for strife and debate, and to smite with the fist of wickedness". The outward externals were a mere sham, hiding a corrupt character underneath.

It was no different in Luke 6. The Pharisees made a strong stand on the importance of keeping the sabbath, all the while seeking to persecute and kill Jesus. Their religion was hypocritical because it was built upon wrong foundations.

The true principles of the sabbath are set out in Isaiah 58:6,7: "Is not this the fast that I have chosen? to loose the bands of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, and to let the oppressed go free, and that ye break every yoke? Is it not to deal thy bread to the hungry, and that thou bring the poor that are cast out to thy house? when thou seest the naked, that thou cover him; and that thou hide not thyself from thine own flesh?".

The sabbath was not about going without, or afflicting oneself. It was all about helping those in need, looking out for others, cooperating and edifying. Yet nowhere in the Law does it say that Israel were required to feed the poor or clothe the naked on the sabbath. The actions Isaiah uses to describe what the sabbath was all about are not laws, they are principles. They are the things we do when we understand the reasons behind God's Law, when we understand the purpose and intent for which the Law was given.

And what was the great lesson of the sabbath? It taught Israel about the great rest to come, about the Millennium, when God's Kingdom is established on the earth, and when His saints are no longer burdened by sin and death; when the curses are lifted, and the saints are at one with God in mind, body and spirit. It points forward to a time of unity, peace and fellowship, when the trials and frustrations of this life are no more.

This is the great rest to which the sabbath pointed. Those who seek this rest and appreciate what God has done in extending it to us, endeavour to apply those same principles towards their brother and neighbour.

Isaiah 58 and Genesis 3

It is interesting to note the language Isaiah uses in verses 6 and 7:

"loose the bands of wickedness";

"when thou seest the naked, that thou cover him";

"hide not thyself from thine own flesh".

These phrases are reminiscent of Genesis 3. We have in Isaiah 58 a commentary on the first sabbath, when God's rest was interrupted by sin in the Garden of Eden.

In the early verses of Isaiah 58 we have the negative view of the sabbath that was adopted by Israel, the view typified by the word "fast", which is used seven times in verses 3-6. They saw God's law as being harsh and restrictive, a confining law which caused one to go without (fast), an impingement on freedom.

In Genesis 3 Eve was talked into viewing God's command in the same negative light; that God was keeping something from them, confining their enjoyment by commanding them not to eat of the tree in the midst of the garden. God's law was an imposition, a fast. Instead of realising that God had given them everything but a tree which was not good for them, Eve accepted the serpent's reasoning that God's law was detrimental to her wellbeing. She, like Israel, came to see God's law in a negative light, as a fast or imposition.

The attitude God enjoins Israel to pursue is the same as what He Himself exhibited on that fateful day, as the quotations from Isaiah 58 in [Table 1](#) show. In the next few verses in Isaiah 58 God outlines the fate of those who demonstrate

"to loose the bands of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens" (v. 6).	Adam and Eve were given hope when burdened by sin and the heavy sentence of death.
"when thou seest the naked, that thou cover him" (v. 7).	In Genesis 3:21 we read: "Unto Adam also and to his wife did the LORD God make coats of skins, and clothed them".
"that thou hide not thyself from thine own flesh" (v. 7).	In Genesis 3:9 we read that God called unto Adam, "Where art thou?". Adam and Eve could have been ignored and left to die. Adam's sin did not cause God to abandon him. The character of God is shown to be the very opposite of that which Adam and Eve had attributed to Him.

“Then shall thy light break forth as the morning” (v. 8).	Sin was revealed in the evening in the garden (Gen. 3:8).
“Then shalt thou call” (v. 9).	As opposed to God calling the hidden Adam.
“If thou take away from the <i>midst</i> of thee the yoke” (v. 9).	Contrast Adam and Eve, who were attracted to the tree in the <i>midst</i> of the garden.
“the putting forth of the finger” (v. 9).	Eve “took of the fruit thereof” (Gen. 3:6).
“thy God shall be with thee continually” (v. 11, LXX).	Contrast Adam and Eve, who were driven from God’s presence.
“and thou shalt be like a watered garden” (v. 11).	Like Eden, the garden from which they were driven.
“whose waters fail (literally, deceive) not” (v. 11).	Compare the serpent’s doctrine, which deceived.

in their own lives the true principles of the sabbath. Again we have allusions to Genesis 3, as shown in [Table 2](#), although here their condition is presented as a contrast.

If we accept this comparison we have an example of what God both did and valued on the sabbath. We have a benchmark from which to shape our own actions. Jesus’ words in John 5:17, “My Father worketh hitherto, and I work”, are given an extra dimension. Just as God worked to help the poor, the sick, the burdened and the afflicted, we also are instructed to do likewise. To do so is to keep the true spirit of the sabbath. It is encouraging when we see the true character of our Father revealed, when we understand the principles for which He stands, when we understand that He is not concerned with empty actions and hollow rituals, but rather the redemption of His people.

We can take great comfort from this: that we, in our hungry, distressed, burdened state, have not been passed by or ignored; we have not been given up. Rather, our Father has worked in the life of His Son, and continues to work now, to bring about our salvation. What a wonderful God we serve!

Summary

And so, in summary, let us look at what we have seen in this short series of articles:

- 1 We have looked at the attitude of the Pharisees, and seen how easy it is to fall into the trap of ritualistic observance. It is unwise simply to criticise them, subconsciously distancing

ourselves from their condemnation. We need to look inwardly, examine our own lives, and open our ear to the Word of God.

- 2 We have examined the background to this incident, and have seen how hypocritical the human mind can be, in that it is possible to be pursuing someone’s spiritual death while making an outward stand for ‘the principles of God’.
- 3 We have looked at the “rest” that Christ set before us, a rest which far outweighs anything this life has to offer, but the pursuit of which will give rise to condemnation from this world, causing suffering and persecution.
- 4 In examining the parallels with Ruth, we see our bridegroom, acknowledging the love and loyalty of his espoused bride, working tirelessly in order to procure her rest.
- 5 We have seen the two approaches that can be taken when examining God’s law, and have been encouraged when we have seen where His mind and His actions lie. How easy do we rest in our lives when we see our brethren growing sick, and falling down around us?

We know that, while our life in the Truth may be accompanied by trial and suffering, we will find peace and inner rest even now in the knowledge that God is with us, His promise secure. We can cast all our cares upon Him, for He cares for us (1 Pet 5:7). Our mind is at peace, knowing that God is with us for good. “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for Thou art with me: Thy rod and Thy staff they comfort me”.

(Concluded)