

Sermon – 13/02/2011 am

The Sabbath and Necessity

Study Text: Luke 6:1-5

John Murray was born in Scotland but went to the USA in 1924 to study for the ministry. He went on to become a professor of theology at Westminster Seminary where he valiantly upheld and taught Reformed doctrine. He held to the Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF) including the teaching about the Lord's Day.

From Genesis chapter 2 Murray understood that in six days God created the universe and on the seventh he rested. God blessed the seventh day and made it holy. 'Sabbath' means 'rest'. Murray wrote 'this institution is not the provision of fallen humanity but belongs to man as man. It has behind it the authority, wisdom and goodness of the Almighty Creator'. He quoted from the passage before us – 'the Son of Man is also Lord of the Sabbath'.

Murray returned to Scotland in 1927 planning to preach the gospel in the Presbyterian Church that sent him to the US. However, he was never ordained by this church. They accused him of laxity regarding the Sabbath. Murray had associated with a minister who allowed people to take communion when they had broken the Sabbath by traveling to church on public transport.

This particular church had ruled that members who used public transport to get to church 'ran in systematic disregard of the sacred day' and should be debarred from attendance at the Lord's Table'. This was the ruling of a church in the last century.

1. Sabbath Law Violated

In the first century Jesus was walking through a grain field (wheat or barley) on the Sabbath day – for the Jews this was Saturday. Luke writes that it happened 'on the second Sabbath after the first'. What he meant by this is not clear but it may be that it was during one of the feasts – Passover or Pentecost most probably. It may have been the second Sabbath associated with the festive season.

The disciples were with Jesus as he went, and they plucked some heads of grain as they went along. They rubbed these heads in their hands, blew off the chaff, and ate the grain because they were hungry. Jesus did not rebuke them but the Pharisees did. As always they were watching, and they protested. '*Why are you doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath*' they said (6:2). The disciples were guilty of picking fruit, threshing, winnowing and then preparing this food for eating – four Sabbath laws broken in one hit!

The Pharisees were legalists. They believed in righteousness that comes from keeping the law. Paul was a Pharisee who loved righteousness that is in the law. But when he met the risen Jesus he was totally changed. He no longer believed in his *own righteousness which is from the law but in that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith* (Philippians 3:9).

Jesus answered the self-righteous Pharisees on behalf of his disciples. He pointed to the Scriptures they thought they were enforcing. *Have you not even read* said Jesus (6:3)? Legalists are often quite selective in their reading of Scripture. They focus on outward things like food and dress and special days. Already the Pharisees had condemned Jesus' disciples for eating with tax collectors and sinners. Now they were condemning them for breaking the Sabbath.

2. Law Explained

Jesus reminded the Pharisees of what David did when he was hungry. David was the greatest king in the history of Israel. He was also a great man of God. He was greatly honoured by the Jews. ‘But what did he do when he was hungry’ Jesus asked them. He went to the house of God, took and ate of the showbread and also gave some to those who were with him (6:4). He ate bread that only the priest was allowed to eat.

David was running from King Saul at the time. He was hungry, as were his friends. He asked the priest for some food. The priest said the only bread in the place was the showbread. This was bread that was consecrated or made holy as an offering to the Lord and only priests were allowed to eat it. Nevertheless the priest gave some of this bread to David so he might satisfy his hunger. He needed strength to escape from Saul.

There is no mention that David took this bread on the Sabbath day. What then was the point of Jesus referring to this event? The point was that David did what was unlawful but was not rebuked. He was not condemned back then nor was he condemned by Jesus recounting the story. David ate consecrated bread because of necessity. He was not overthrowing the ceremonial law any more than Jesus was overthrowing the Sabbath. Basic human need must be taken into account when applying the law.

Jesus nowhere says or even indicates that he was doing away with the Sabbath. Some argue that Jesus reaffirmed all the other commands but not the Sabbath. That is a strange assertion because Jesus kept the Sabbath day holy. He went to the synagogue every Sabbath to join in worship. He reacted to the legalism of the Pharisees again and again but nowhere does he say that the Sabbath is finished. Like all the law, it is fulfilled in him.

The Sabbath is a holy day, a day God set apart as a day of rest, a day to remember our creator. In the New Testament the church began to meet for worship on Sunday. Christians not only remembered their creator but also their redeemer who rose from the dead on the first day of the week.

The Sabbath was meant to be a delight, and it is a delight to those who love the Lord their God with all their heart, all their soul, and all their mind. It is a delight to those who love the Lord Jesus Christ as their redeemer. Those who find the Lord’s Day and worship on the Lord’s Day boring need to examine their hearts.

Our Confession, and the confession which John Murray held dearly, says ‘the Sabbath is to be kept holy ... in the public and private exercises of his worship and in the duties of necessity and mercy (WCF 21). This is exactly what Jesus pointed out to the legalistic Jews. When a person is hungry is it not needful to pick fruit and eat it, even on the Sabbath? To pick fruit and sell it is of course altogether different.

A comment and then a question about this teaching.

Firstly, we note that the law that Jesus disciples were breaking was not actually Biblical. The Pharisees had detailed thousands of laws regarding the Sabbath including laws about reaping, threshing, and winnowing as we have seen (an amount less than the size of a dried fig could be threshed according to their law). We know these men were great hypocrites who not only made the laws but also found ways to get around the law themselves – especially if money was involved.

Still today we must be alert to those who make Sabbath laws that are not found in the Bible. The command to keep the Sabbath day holy is here in Scripture. It is just as valid today as it was when God gave it. It is just as valid as the other nine commands. But there is no law about traveling a

certain distance, or traveling on a bus or train on Sunday. Why do some think that others, with great effort, should drive all around the city to take them to church so that they do not break the Sabbath by getting a train or bus to go to church?

The question then arises ‘what is a work of necessity?’ We must be careful not to go down this track because Jesus didn’t and neither does our Confession. Suffice to say that a true believer knows what is necessary and what is not. A true believer will seek first the kingdom of God, knowing that God is our great provider (Matthew 6:33). *My God shall supply all your need according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus* (Philippians 4:13).

Those who think they have to work on the Lord’s Day to provide for their needs are not really trusting the Lord. Besides, I have not heard of anyone being put off because they decided not to work on the Lord’s Day. The Lord has given us six days in which to work and just one in which to rest and worship. Why do we feel the need to work on that one special day? Is it really a necessity?

3. Lawgiver Revealed

Jesus concluded with a powerful proposition. *The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath* (6:5). The Pharisees were acting as if they were lords of the Sabbath. Some people today act as they are lords of the Sabbath. I hope I am not acting as such!

Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath. In his gospel Mark tells us that Jesus also said at this time that the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath (Mark 2:27). God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, gave the Sabbath to mankind. The fourth commandment, like the other covenant commands, was given to the chosen people of God for their own good. Obey these and you will live they were told. (Actually the Sabbath command goes wider than this. It is a creation ordinance or command for all human beings. Six days work and one rest is written into the very fabric of creation).

Do not ignore the Sabbath day. Whoever you are, whether you are Christian or not, you will suffer if you, and those around you will suffer, if you try working seven days a week. As a believer you will suffer more because you will fail to attend worship. You will not find the rest for your soul that Jesus offers. Your soul will be starved and you will become weak. ‘Do this and you will’ said the prophets of God’s commands. ‘Those who love me will obey my commands’ said Jesus.

On the other hand do not become a legalist regarding the Sabbath or any other matter. Beware of making the Lord’s Day a burden for yourself and your family. Beware of sitting at home in the dark all Sunday afraid to turn on the light because this might be work, or to travel anywhere in case this is work.

Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath. If you love Jesus and are following him you will delight in this special or holy day that God has given. You will delight in worshipping him and in taking rest on the Lord’s Day.

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