

Jesus and the Sabbath

How well do you know the Ten Commandments? Do you remember which one number four is?

1. No other gods
2. Make no idols
3. Don't misuse the Name of Yahweh
4. *Remember the Sabbath Day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to Yahweh your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates. For in six days Yahweh made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them, but He rested on the seventh day. Therefore Yahweh blessed the Sabbath Day and made it holy.*

That's clear, with more detail than any of the other nine commandments. It's not that commandment four was hard to understand, but it seemed throughout Israel's history that it was hard to do. There was so much to do on the Sabbath: there were traders from other countries waiting at the gates of the city to do business, there was money to be made, there were things that 'had' to get done and there were always people that could be taken advantage of . . . so why stop doing all that for a day of rest?

Here are some passages from the Old Testament that tell what the Israelites did with commandment #4:

This is what Yahweh says: Be careful not to carry a load on the Sabbath day or bring it through the gates of Jerusalem. Do not bring a load out of your houses or do any work on the Sabbath, but keep the Sabbath day holy, as I commanded your forefathers. Yet they did not listen or pay attention; they were stiff-necked and would not listen . . . (Jer. 17:21-23)

Jeremiah goes on from there to describe the blessings that would come to Judah if they were careful to obey this. Then he concludes the section with this:

But if you do not obey Me to keep the Sabbath day holy by not carrying any load as you come through the gates of Jerusalem on the Sabbath day, then I will kindle an unquenchable fire in the gates of Jerusalem that will consume her fortresses. (v. 27)

Ezekiel also looked back at the history of Israel and saw how they had rebelled against this command:

. . . they rejected My decrees and desecrated My Sabbaths. For their hearts were devoted to their idols. (Ezekiel 20:16)

This is from Israel's wilderness wanderings -- in other words, right after they received the commands about the Sabbath day of rest from Moses, they became idolaters and rejected the righteous laws of God, including His commands regarding the Sabbath. In the verses that follow Ezekiel describes how the next generation, even though they knew that their parents had been kept out of the Promised Land for rebellion, they did the same thing in regard to the Sabbath -- again, this colorful word "desecrated" is

used to describe their actions. It is used again in Ezekiel 23:38 and Isaiah uses this word in his promise from God to those who choose to do right:

This is what Yahweh says: Maintain justice and do what is right . . . Blessed is the man who does this, the man who holds it fast, who keeps the Sabbath without desecrating it and keeps his hand from doing evil. (Is.56:1,2)

To desecrate means to treat something that is holy with disrespect or contempt. Other words that have similar meanings are 'profane', 'defile', 'violate' and 'pollute'. The charge against Israel here is not small. It's not like, "You failed to signal before making a right hand turn." This is strong language to communicate to God's chosen people how badly they have violated one of His commands.

It seems that many Israelites saw the Sabbath as an annoyance, something God had required of them which got in the way of making money. Here's Amos 8:4-6:

Hear this, you who trample the needy and do away with the poor of the land, saying, "When will the New Moon be over that we may sell grain and the Sabbath be ended that we may market wheat?" -- skimping the measure, boosting the price and cheating with dishonest scales, buying the poor with silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, selling even the sweepings with the wheat.

God's response is overpowering: "I will never forget anything they have done. Will not the land tremble for this, and all who live in it mourn?"

A partial fulfilment of this prophecy came in 2 Chronicles 36 - the very end of the book that describes the history of the kings of Judah. It says that God handed Israel over to the king of Babylon - Nebuchadnezzar and he . . .

... carried into exile to Babylon the remnant, who escaped from the sword, and they became servants to him and his sons until the kingdom of Persia came to power. The land enjoyed its sabbath rests; all the time of its desolation it rested, until the seventy years were completed in fulfillment of the word of the LORD spoken by Jeremiah.

The people ignored the commands of Yahweh their God, but God found a way to make sure they came to pass. The people were supposed to give the land a rest every seven years, a kind of Sabbath for the land, but they never did it. God gave the land its rest -- 70 years of it, while His people lived in exile in Babylon. This period of time was horrible for those who had lived in freedom in Judea. They were now living in a place with far different customs, a different religion, different expectations. They were strangers in a strange land, aliens far from their homeland.

But this period of exile, as hard as it was, changed the Jewish people in a positive way. Listen to these words from Nehemiah, the governor of Judah who returned to his homeland to oversee the rebuilding of the wall around Jerusalem. This is from the middle of Nehemiah 13:

In those days I saw men in Judah treading winepresses on the Sabbath and bringing in grain and loading it on donkeys, together with wine, grapes, figs and

all other kinds of loads. And they were bringing all this into Jerusalem on the Sabbath. Therefore I warned them against selling food on that day. Men from Tyre who lived in Jerusalem were bringing in fish and all kinds of merchandise and selling them in Jerusalem on the Sabbath to the people of Judah. I rebuked the nobles of Judah and said to them, "What is this wicked thing you are doing -- desecrating (there's that word again) the Sabbath day? Didn't your forefathers do the same things, so that our God brought all this calamity upon us and upon this city? Now you are stirring up more wrath against Israel by desecrating the Sabbath."

Just before I go on, notice that Nehemiah is pinning the whole exile, the destruction of the temple and the city of Jerusalem on the people's unwillingness to keep the Sabbath day holy -- or at least saying that that was a symptom of the rebellion against God that brought about their suffering. "Didn't your forefathers do the same things, so that our God brought all this calamity upon us?" In other words, "Don't you realize that the reason you've been in exile, that you've suffered the loss of your homes and your homeland for a couple of generations is because of what you're doing now? You're stirring up more wrath, more judgment against your people by doing the same thing again, by desecrating, defiling, God's Sabbath Day."

And now we continue with the passage from Nehemiah:

When evening shadows fell on the gates of Jerusalem before the Sabbath, I ordered the doors to be shut and not opened until the Sabbath was over. I stationed some of my own men at the gates so that no load could be brought in on the Sabbath Day. Once or twice the merchants and sellers of all kinds of goods spent the night outside Jerusalem. But I warned them and said, "Why do you spend the night by the wall? If you do this again, I will lay hands on you." From that time on they no longer came on the Sabbath. Then I commanded the Levites to purify themselves and go and guard the gates in order to keep the Sabbath day holy. (Neh 13:15-22)

As we saw a few weeks back, the Sabbath begins on Friday evening as the sun sets and continues until sunset on Saturday evening. So Nehemiah is watching as the shadows creep up to the city gates on a Friday evening and then orders that the doors be closed for the next 24 hours. Then he warns off the merchants who wait outside on the Friday evening, looking for a chance to do business before Saturday evening. And then Nehemiah institutionalizes the whole process by giving the Levites the responsibility of guarding the gates, letting no loads go through them.

And that changed the Jewish nation. From Nehemiah's day until Jesus' day, about 450 years, the Jews became Sabbath-keepers. They no longer neglected God's command to keep this day holy to the Lord. They no longer did business as usual on Friday evenings and Saturdays, but they observed the Sabbath, with prayers, with rituals, with reverence for God and a desire to honour Him.

One of the main contributors to this revival of Sabbath was a group called the Pharisees. They were the ancient *hasidim*, a term used by the rabbis to describe

those Jews who maintained the highest standard of religious observance and moral action. This group had its beginnings in the years after the exile, perhaps around 300 B.C., and had a prominent role in the Jewish revolt against the occupation of Antiochus IV of Syria in the second century B.C. They were rigorous in applying themselves to observing the law and to teaching others to do the same. They were the group that led the way in respecting God's law and in observing Sabbaths. But they were also the group that stood in the strongest opposition to Jesus. Why? Let's look:

One Sabbath day as Jesus was walking through some grainfields, His disciples broke off heads of wheat, rubbed off the husks in their hands, and ate the grains. But some Pharisees said, "You shouldn't be doing that! It's against the law to work by harvesting grain on the Sabbath." Jesus replied, "Haven't you ever read in the Scriptures what David did when he and his companions were hungry? He went into the house of God, ate the special bread reserved for the priests alone, and then gave some to his friends. That was breaking the law, too." And Jesus added, "I, the Son of Man, am master even of the Sabbath." On another Sabbath day, a man with a deformed right hand was in the synagogue while Jesus was teaching. The teachers of religious law and the Pharisees watched closely to see whether Jesus would heal the man on the Sabbath, because they were eager to find some legal charge to bring against Him. But Jesus knew their thoughts. He said to the man with the deformed hand, "Come and stand here where everyone can see." So the man came forward. Then Jesus said to His critics, "I have a question for you. Is it legal to do good deeds on the Sabbath, or is it a day for doing harm? Is this a day to save life or to destroy it?" He looked around at them one by one and then said to the man, "Reach out your hand." The man reached out his hand, and it became normal again! At this, the enemies of Jesus were wild with rage and began to discuss what to do with Him.

Two incidents dealing with Jesus and the Sabbath. In the first, His disciples are doing something that didn't really break any laws. In Deuteronomy 23:25 people are allowed to pick and eat when they're walking through the fields of others -- but not so much that you have to take it home with you, just a snack. But the Pharisees weren't objecting to that, but to the fact that they were picking and rubbing the husks off, which they said was exactly the same thing as harvesting and threshing. They had no concept of scale. It was the act itself that they took issue with and if a person were to pick something and eat it, their refinements of the law said that was harvesting and forbidden on the Sabbath.

But Jesus doesn't argue with them about that. He has a more important agenda and His agenda is to communicate that He is Lord of the Sabbath. "David did something illegal - something that broke the law - and it was okay, and now the Master of Sabbath is here and you complain?" He has just been teaching, in chapter 5, about the new order that He is bringing with Him, and telling people that you can't put new wine into old wineskins. It won't work to put the power and grace of the Kingdom of God into the wineskin of religious observance, of ceremony. And so He doesn't go

over the same ground here, but rather challenges the Pharisees to rethink their narrow interpretation, the law that would have them punishing King David. And He's saying something that's pretty obvious as well: Don't make people go hungry because of your interpretations of the law. Care more about the real needs of people than you do about your rules and regulations.

In the second story, we see that Jesus' opponents are both eager to bring Him down and furious when they can't. They watched Jesus to see if He would heal a man and were ready to judge Him if He did because they decided that healing was work. Jesus frames the issue in a different way: "Is it legal to do good on the Sabbath, or is this a day for causing harm? Is this a day to save a life, or do you see the Sabbath as a day of destruction?" They have no answer, He heals the man's deformity and they are, according to our text, "wild with rage". Why? Because Jesus has threatened their power base, the ability to control everyone around them with rules that they say are the law of God, but which are really the laws of a few men.

Jesus understood what these religious leaders did not. He understood that the intention of the Sabbath laws was for our good, that it was good for a nation of people who are living under God to take one day a week to rest from their labours and to honour God instead. Within that context there is no harm in grabbing a snack from a grain field or healing a man's hand. There is no reason not to do good on a day that is set aside for worship. But those who knew only the letter of the law ... and all the letters they had added, had no room for that understanding.

Let's take a few minutes to see how this applies to us:

1. There is a balance that we have to find between the law of God, His principles for living in a righteous way that brings honour to Him and peace to one another . . . and a legalism which confines everyone in a straightjacket of conforming to an endless list of rules. Do you worry about what you can do and can't do on a Sunday? Or do you embrace God's principle of setting aside a day in which to honour Him, to attend worship, to take time away from your usual work routine? In the latter case, you have submitted yourself to God's commandment without entering into legalism. I honestly believe there are some personalities which have a hard time getting this right. They know that there's a rule to follow and they just have to follow it to the letter, for fear of offending. But that view misses the intent of God's laws which are to help us build a righteous foundation for life which will bring blessing to us and to generations to come. Don't put other gods, fake things that you've made up, before the One True God, don't make idols and worship what you've made, honour your parents, don't covet or steal or kill. Don't commit adultery and don't give false testimony against your neighbour. When we live within these boundaries, there is great blessing for us, for our children, and for the whole society. When we respond to God's ways with humble acceptance and don't add a bunch of interpretive rules, we're blessed.

2. The second thing I want to draw out of this study is that we can become bound by our traditions, by the way we've always done things, by the comfort we feel with the total predictability of everything we do. These people who were becoming Jesus'

enemies loved their traditions and took them just as seriously as they took God's laws. Don't get bound up in old ways of doing things, in familiar patterns, to the point of treating those patterns as the only way that God operates in the world today. Jesus taught that new wine needed new wineskins because it would burst the old ones. My biggest fear in looing at a new place to meet is that we might have to alter some of our traditions, make new ones!

3. When Murray Moerman and I were pastoring at New Life in Burnaby, Murray used to describe our church as one that majored on the majors and minored on the minors. It's the art of "scale", determining which are the big issues worth fighting for and which are relatively smaller issues that we might just be able to agree to disagree about. I think that's an important principle from Jesus' example of responding to His critics -- He taught them about the bigger issues: "Is it legal to do good deeds on the Sabbath, or is it a day for doing harm?" Think about that before you answer, guys! Unfortunately, the Pharisees could never get over their own rules. Like bureaucrats that have rules they have written for others, they have to obey them to the letter themselves. And so the Pharisees missed the good intentions that God had for the Sabbath, a day for worship, for rest, for blessing others, for doing good. Let's not lose sight of the good things God has for us to do, the many ways in which we can bless and encourage the work of His Kingdom, because our focus has shifted to the small points of the law and debates about what they might mean.