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Jesus and the Sabbath

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Chapter 1

The Wisdom of Jesus

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the New International Version.

Form criticism has suggested that the four Evangelists selected material from the Jesus tradition which would reflect upon the issues in the latter half of the first century A.D. If there is any truth in this suggestion— and we think there is— the Sabbath must have remained a live issue between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians despite the Council at Jerusalem about A. D. 49 (Acts 15). If the Sabbatarian appeals to this evidence, he cannot also use the classical argument of silence— for he cannot have it both ways.

One thing is clear. The report of what Jesus said and did in His Sabbath controversies with the Jews is true to the situation in which he lived. If the Evangelists were merely putting words in Jesus' mouth for apologetic purposes, those words would not be marked by the great restraint demanded by Jesus' unique situation. He stood at the transition of two ages. As the true Representative of Israel, He must fulfill Judaism; as the Savior of the Nations, He must sweep Judaism away. His example had to teach respect for the existing order until His hour had come, yet His teaching had to contain the elements which would cast the Mosaic order into oblivion. Nowhere would this be more difficult than with the sacred institution of the Sabbath. The way Jesus clothed His revolutionary teaching in tact and moderation was a marvelous exhibition of divine wisdom.

The words and deeds of Jesus were often like innocent-looking time bombs. Their revolutionary impact was not evident until after Pentecost. When the Holy Spirit brought those words and deeds to remembrance, their explosive effect was realized. For too long I also had read as bland statements Jesus' remarks about the Sabbath's being made for man and doing good on the Sabbath.

Moralistic Drive!

I have come to see Jesus' statements in the new light of Pentecost. There is good reason to believe that Stephen was the first to recognize the revolutionary impact of Christ's sayings, and for this he lost his life. Although the Gospels were probably written later than the Pauline Epistles, we know that Paul was familiar with the Jesus tradition. We can therefore assume that he was familiar with our Lord's Sabbath sayings. We shall argue that Paul understood what Jesus meant and faithfully reflected that in His three Sabbath passages— Romans 14:5, Galatians 4:10 and Colossians 2:16. If we read our Lord's sayings and reach conclusions which contradict His faithful apostle, we may need a pair of gospel glasses.

Lets us give an illustration of what we mean when we compare our Lord's sayings to time bombs which exploded after the resurrection and ascension. When the Pharisees criticized Jesus' disciples for not observing the ceremonial washings, Jesus said, "Don't you see that nothing that enters a man from the outside can make him 'unclean'? For it doesn't go into his heart but into his stomach, and then out of his body." Then Mark (or an early church redactor) adds this comment, which appears in the most reliable manuscripts: "In saying this, Jesus declared all foods 'clean'" (Mark 7:18, 19). It is clear that Jesus did not make Mark's editorial comment, for it is well known that even after Pentecost the Jewish Christians continued to observe the Mosaic food laws (Acts 10:14). Mark was probably written for a Gentile audience, and here Mark (or a very early redactor) drew from Jesus' saying the conclusion that Christians were not bound by the Mosaic food laws. There is no need to argue whether the editorial comment of Mark 7: 19 was original with Mark. It was the conclusion of the early church. Paul was probably thinking of Jesus' statement when he declared, "No food is unclean in itself. . . . All food is clean" (Rom. 14:14, 20).

The disciples did not at first understand that Jesus' saying contained a principle that would sweep away the Mosaic food regulations. Indeed, when Jesus actually spoke these words, it was not yet time to dispense with the Mosaic order. So Jesus' words of divine wisdom were calculated to have a delayed action. But when the time came, that action was absolutely devastating to the old order. This is how it was with our Lord's Sabbath sayings.

Chapter 2

The Sabbath Sayings of Jesus

One of Christ's main group of Sabbath sayings occurs in the context of debate over His disciple's plucking grain on the Sabbath. The incident is closely paralleled in the synoptic accounts:

At that time Jesus went through the grainfields on the Sabbath. His disciples were hungry and began to pick some heads of grain and eat them. When the Pharisees saw this, they said to Him, "Look! Your disciples are doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath."

He answered, "Haven't you read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? He entered the house of God, and he and his companions ate the consecrated bread— which was not lawful for them to do, but only for the priests. Or haven't you read in the Law that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple desecrate the day and yet are innocent? I tell you that One greater than the temple is here. If you had known what these words mean, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the innocent. For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath." – Matt. 12:1-8

One Sabbath Jesus was going through the grainfields, and as His disciples walked along, they began to pick some heads of grain. The Pharisees said to Him, "Look, why are they doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?"

He answered, "Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need? In the days of Abiathar the high priest, he entered the house of God and ate the consecrated bread, which is lawful only for priests to eat. And he also gave some to his companions."

Then He said to them, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath." – Mark 2:23-28.

One Sabbath Jesus was going through the grainfields, and His disciples began to pick some heads of grain, rub them in their hands and eat the kernels. Some of the Pharisees asked, "Why are You doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?"

Jesus answered them, "Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? He entered the house of God, and taking the consecrated bread, he ate what is lawful only for priests to eat. And he also gave some to his companions." Then Jesus said to them, "The Son of Man is also Lord of the Sabbath." – Luke 6:1-5.

We have combined these accounts in order to include everything our Lord said.

1. Just as the hunger of David and his men justified them in ignoring the regulations concerning the consecrated bread, so the hunger of Jesus' men justified them in ignoring the Sabbath regulations. Jesus thereby put Sabbath regulations in the same category as the sanctuary regulations - commonly called ceremonial laws. In both instances a simple case of hunger - for life was not at stake - took precedence over the regulations.

Surely our Lord would not say such a thing if a timeless ethical principle like chastity, honesty or the sanctity of human life were at stake. If a man is hungry, can he be excused for committing adultery, lying or murdering? Is it not true that the Christian spirit demands that Christ's followers undergo great personal suffering rather than flout inviolable moral principles? Obviously, observing Sabbath regulations should not be classed with keeping commandments which are easily classified as "moral."

2. Jesus pressed the case further by showing that priestly duties take precedence over the Sabbath. Just as the priests can desecrate the Sabbath in the course of their duties and remain "innocent," so, Christ's disciples can desecrate the Sabbath in the course of their duties and remain "innocent" (Matt. 12:5, 6).

When the New Testament community realized that every believer is a priest in the New Testament dispensation (1 Pet. 2:5) and that their entire life was to be lived in the discharge of their priestly duties, they began to realize that this gave them liberty to treat every day alike (Rom. 14:5).

3. Next our Lord proceeded to compare the Sabbath with the sacrificial law. He cited the words of the prophet Hosea, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice" (Matt. 9:13; Hosea 6:6). The analogy is clear. Just as Hosea rebuked Israel for not realizing that people and their needs are more important than ritual observances, so Jesus told His critics that people are more important than the Sabbath. Jesus thereby placed the Sabbath in the same category as ritual obligations. Paul therefore reflects our Lord's teaching when he includes the Sabbath with meats and drinks, festivals and new moons— Old Testament rituals which were shadows of Christ (Col. 2:16, 17; Ezek. 45:17). In Leviticus 23, also, the Sabbath is listed among "the appointed feasts of the Lord" (Lev. 23:2), and repeatedly throughout the prophets it is regarded as part of the great ritual system. In this matter, therefore, our Lord stood in the true prophetic succession.

4. Mark is the only Evangelist who includes the next saying, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath" (Mark 2:27). This saying belongs quite naturally to the flow of Jesus' argument. He had just asserted that people were more important than ritual observances ("I desire mercy, not sacrifice"). Now He asserts that the Sabbath must be held at the disposal of human needs since it was instituted to serve human needs.

Interestingly, there is evidence in Mark 2:27 that Jesus was citing a well-known rabbinical saying— as He also did when He stated the Golden Rule. At the time of the Maccabean wars (c. 180 B. C.), "fight or flight" was declared to be lawful on the Sabbath day if life was in danger. Rabbi Shim'on bMenasya's maxim became tradition: "The Sabbath is given over to you and not you to the Sabbath." 1 It seems likely, therefore,

that Jesus was simply throwing a well-known rabbinical saying back at the would-be guardians of the sacred tradition. The difference between Jesus' application of that saying and the rabbinical application was that while the rabbis granted an indulgence to break the Sabbath when life was in danger, Jesus was prepared to place no limits on this principle. The Sabbath regulations must be held subordinate to all human needs.

Sometimes this isolated statement in Mark 2:27 is understood to mean that Jesus was referring to the creation account in Genesis 2:2, 3. This may be true, although we suggest that the evidence is too slight to warrant a dogmatic assertion. But if we make such an application of the text, Jesus' statement assumes a dual meaning:

a. The Sabbath was made for Adam, the first man. This means that it was at his disposal, under his feet (Heb. 2:8), or that he was lord of the Sabbath as he was head of the woman (Eph. 5:22) and everything else in God's creation. It is also significant that although the Sabbath is mentioned in Genesis 2:2, 3, there is no mention that Sabbath regulations were imposed on Adam. Not until Moses do we find the imposition of Sabbath regulations. This placed Israel under the yoke of Mosaic regulations. Israel was not a lord of the Sabbath, but being "a child," was "no different than a slave... in slavery under the basic principles of the world" (Gal. 4:1, 3). But from the beginning this was not so.

b. The Sabbath was made for Christ, the Last Man. It is clear that this is the primary meaning of Mark 2:27 when we observe the statement, "The Sabbath was made for [the] man," is followed by the connective, "therefore," or, "So the Son of Man is even Lord of the Sabbath" (Mark 2:28). In other words, what conclusion does Jesus Himself draw from the prefacing statement, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath"? Does He say this means that the Sabbath regulations are binding on all men in all ages? No! He says it means that He, as the Representative Man, the new Adam, is Lord of the Sabbath. This is the grand summary of the entire argument. No one has a right to criticize Christ's disciples in the matter of Sabbath-keeping, because He is Lord over the Sabbath and He may bind or loose as He pleases.

Paul is faithful to the teaching of Christ when he asserts in Colossians that "all things [which included the Sabbath] were created by Him and for Him" (Col. 1:16). The Sabbath existed for his sake. Like all the great institutions of the Old Testament, it prefigured Him. Therefore Paul calls the Sabbath "a shadow of the things that were to come" (Col. 2:17). Just as Jesus disqualified the Pharisees from judging His people in the matter of Sabbath regulations, so Paul asserts the implications of Christ's Lordship in this new age when he declares:

Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. – Col. 2:16.

5. The same day that Jesus declared Lordship of the Sabbath, He went into a synagogue and healed a man with a shriveled hand.

He said to them, "If any of you has a sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will you not take hold of it and lift it out? How much more valuable is a man than a sheep! Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath." – Matt. 12: 1, 12

Just as it is lawful for Christ's disciples to perform their priestly duties on the Sabbath day, so it is lawful for them to do good works on the Sabbath day. The full impact of this simple statement becomes evident when it is realized that a Christian's entire life must be devoted to doing good. "Whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God" (1 Cor. 10:31).

Any work done for God's glory is proper to do on the Sabbath. Indeed, it is not lawful for a Christian to do anything but this, and what is not permissible on the Sabbath day is really not permissible on any day. The Christian calling is a lifelong vocation to a holy priesthood, which makes distinction of days irrelevant. So Paul declared that the strong in faith consider all days alike (Rom. 14:1-6).

6. The fact that Christ's declaration that it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath ends all distinction of days for the Christian is not only a conclusion drawn by Paul. This principle was announced by Christ Himself. When He was persecuted for healing on the Sabbath, He declared, "My Father is always at work to this very day, and I, too, am working" (John 5:17).

Here Jesus is saying that His Father makes no distinction of days, because He is engaged in helping man and carrying out His purposes every day. And since Jesus is united with the Father, He too carries on His mission every day. Whatever Christ did was for the salvation of man, and therefore it was as lawful for Him to do His work on the Sabbath as for God to do His work on the Sabbath.

As there was no real distinction of days for Christ, so it dawned on the primitive church that there was no real distinction of days for the man in Christ. Custom, convenience and common courtesy may dispose him to be as one under the law to those who are under the law (1 Cor. 9:20), but the holy priesthood of his Christian vocation makes all life, all work and all time sacred.

7. In another Sabbath controversy Jesus said:

"Yet, because Moses gave you circumcision (though actually it did not come from Moses, but from the patriarchs), you circumcise a child on the Sabbath. Now if a child can be circumcised on the Sabbath so that the law of Moses may not be broken, why are you angry with Me for healing the whole man on the Sabbath? Stop judging by mere appearances, and make a right judgment." – John 7:22-24

This statement is interesting because it relates the two signs of the two great covenants given to the Jews— circumcision as a sign of the Abrahamic covenant and the Sabbath as a sign of the Mosaic or Sinaitic covenant (Gen. 17:11; Exod. 31:16, 17). Evidently because the Abrahamic covenant came first, circumcision took precedence over the Sabbath. This would hardly have been the case if the Sabbath regulations were, as is sometimes claimed, a creation ordinance. For then the Sabbath regulations would have taken the precedence over circumcision. And if the more important sign has been done away in Christ, why would not the lesser sign also be done away? Christ Himself (and His Spirit) becomes the sign of the new covenant community (Isa. 7:14; Luke 2:34; 11:30; Rom. 8:9; Eph. 1:13; 4: 30).

8. One more saying of Christ remains to be considered. As He spoke about the impending crisis on Jerusalem and the world, He said:

"How dreadful it will be in those days for pregnant women and nursing mothers! Pray that your flight will not take place in winter or on the Sabbath" – Matt. 24:19, 20

Here Christ groups three factors which will make flight difficult— little children, wintery conditions and Sabbath days. God's people were therefore to pray that they not confront more hardships than they would be able to bear. Fleeing from Judea on the Sabbath would possibly be more difficult than fleeing in the winter. Jesus' statement does not imply that it would be improper to flee on the Sabbath any more than it would be improper to flee in the winter— for Jewish law permitted flight on the Sabbath if life was in danger. ² If one should indicate that Jesus' discourse is a dual prophecy which points to the end of the age as well as to the destruction of Judea, we would simply state that all features of a prophecy do not have to be applied apotelesmatically— for example, the prophecy of the virgin's child in Isaiah 7 has a local and a New Testament fulfillment. But obviously, all features of the primary fulfillment are not observed in the New Testament. So in Matthew 24 Christ is primarily talking about fleeing from Judea (Matt. 24:16), where there was a Jewish nation and a Sabbath-keeping culture. Jesus is really reiterating the principle of the Lord's Prayer, which says, "Let us not be put to the test, but deliver us from evil" (Matt. 6:13, Basic English). Matthew 24:20 is therefore no proof-text for any kind of Sabbath-keeping.

Notes and References

1. Quoted in Eduard Lohse, art. on the Sabbath in Gehard Friedrich, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament.*, tr. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1971), 7: 14.

2. See *ibid.*

Chapter 3

The Sabbath Deeds of Jesus

The Evangelists highlight a series of saving deeds which Jesus performed on the Sabbath. For instance, He delivered a man from demon possession (Luke 4:31-37), restored Simon's mother-in-law to health (Luke 4:38, 39), healed a shriveled hand (Matt. 12:9-13), freed the crippled woman (Luke 13:10-17), healed the paralytic (John 5:1-10) and gave sight to the blind (John 9:1-41). Jesus' critics were right when they said that he did not have to do such things on the Sabbath. If it could be reasonably assumed that life was in danger, Jewish law permitted healing ministrations on the Sabbath. But in most of these cases Jesus seemed to go out of His way to perform these miracles on the Sabbath. It was not that He was seeking a confrontation with the authorities, though His actions did bring Him in to serious conflict with religious conventions. But these were signs of His Messiahship.

A recurring theme in the Sabbath miracles is Jesus' right to liberate on the Sabbath day. A man is liberated from a demon, Simon's mother-in-law is liberated to serve ("She got up at once and began to wait on them"— Luke 4:39). The woman who had been bound by Satan for many years is set free, etc. In all these instances there is a deliberate attempt by Jesus to show the intimate relationship between the Sabbath and Himself as the great Liberator sent from God.

From the beginning of Israel's history the Sabbath was a day associated with the idea of liberation. It was the day on which Israel was to celebrate their liberation from Egypt (Deut. 5:15). The Sabbath was the perpetual sign that God was their Liberator, who set them apart to be His own special people (Exod. 31:16, 17; Ezek. 20:12). The day not only commemorated the creation of the Hebrew nation, but the creation of the whole world (Exod. 20:8-11). In the Sabbath the ideas that God is both Creator and Redeemer are joined. God is the kind of Liberator that He is because He is the Creator and Lord of the earth.

The Sabbath was the most important Jewish festival. In Leviticus 23 it heads the list of "the appointed feasts of the Lord." The Passover festival, the Feast of Pentecost, the Feast of Trumpets, the Day of Atonement and the Feast of Tabernacles all contained the Sabbatical idea and were therefore called "Sabbath of Sabbaths" in the Hebrew text (Lev. 23:32). And like the weekly Sabbath, all these festivals commemorated the great Exodus liberation.

The grandest festival of liberation was the year of Jubilee, which was supposed to take place every fifty years. On the eve of Jubilee all debts were supposed to be

released (Lev. 25). We say "supposed" because there is no record that the Jews observed this festival. To devote an entire year to liberation was too much for the Jews. Devoting a day to liberation every week was more within their reach. The weekly Sabbath was really a mini-Jubilee. On that day no servant could be required to work, for the Lord of creation had made a proclamation of liberty concerning every seventh day. But for the great year of liberation, those burdened with debts and bound by servitude would have to await the coming of the Messianic Liberator. At the end of the age God would act to usher in the eternal Sabbath and the great eschatological Jubilee. Thus, all these Sabbatical institutions not only commemorated Israel's liberation from Egypt, but they were shadows of the great liberation which God and His Messiah would bring at the end of the age.

This association between the Sabbath and the Jubilee is highlighted by Luke's account of Jesus' inaugural proclamation of the gospel at Nazareth. On the Sabbath day Jesus went into the synagogue:

And He stood up to read. The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to Him. Unrolling it, He found the place where it is written:

**"The Spirit of the Lord is on Me,
because He has anointed Me
to preach good news to the poor.
He has sent Me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."**

Then He rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on Him, and He said to them, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."— Luke 4:16-21

Scholars are agreed that "the year of the Lord's favor" is a reference to the Jubilee. Jesus was announcing the beginning of the great eschatological Jubilee in which the prisoners were to be released, the disinherited were to have their inheritances restored, the oppressed were to be released and all debts were to be forgiven. The Lord of creation was now acting in His Anointed One to make good this joyful announcement. Thus, Luke describes how Jesus went on to Capernaum and liberated the demon-possessed man on the Sabbath. By this and other mighty Sabbath deeds, Jesus made the connection between the Sabbath and His Person. His deeds were unmistakable signs that the One by whom the Sabbath existed (Col. 1:16) was in the midst of His people. The shadow was being taken up in Him who was the reality (Col. 2:17).

In his book, *From Sabbath to Sunday*, Samuele Bacchiocchi argues that Jesus performed these mighty deeds on the Sabbath in order to draw attention to "the redemptive function of the Sabbath" and to highlight its significance as a day to "experience God's salvation." 3 But this is surely turning things back to front. It is

foolish to suggest that Jesus came to glorify the Sabbath— as if He existed for its sake rather than the other way around. Paul, however, teaches that that which was written and engraved in stone had only a fading glory because it has been superseded by the greater glory of the Messianic age (2 Cor. 3:4-11).

The Jews did not need Jesus to draw their attention to the importance of the Sabbath. They had already glorified this sign and shadow to the extent that it was regarded as a reality in itself. The rabbis taught that the perfect keeping of the one Sabbath by Israel would bring the Messiah. *Judaism actually made the Sabbath its Christ, but the New Testament community makes Christ its Sabbath.*

It's significant that Matthew's account of Jesus' greatest Sabbath controversy and discourse is prefaced by our Lord's great invitation, "Come to Me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest" (Matt. 11:28). The entire sweep of the Gospels shows that the One to whom the Sabbath pointed has arrived. For old Israel, the Sabbath was the sign of being God's people (Exodus. 31:16, 17; Ezek. 20:12); for new Israel, Christ is the sign (Isa. 7:14; Luke 2:34; 11:30). For old Israel, rest was in a day (Exod. 20:8-11); for new Israel, rest is in a Person (Matt. 11:30). The old covenant says, "Remember the Sabbath day"; the new covenant says, "Do this in remembrance of Me" (Luke 22:19).

Surely Paul, who was familiar with the Jesus tradition, understood the real meaning of Jesus' Sabbath deeds when he declared that the Sabbath was a shadow of the great reality which is Jesus Christ. And it is certainly a prostitution of the gospel to use it to glorify and prop up an outmoded Sabbatarianism— as if the gospel exists for the purpose of serving the Sabbath and justifying a form of Christian Judaism.

Jesus' act of all acts was not done on the Sabbath but on the day before the Sabbath. According to the fourth Gospel, He cried, "It is finished," before he died (John 19:30). Since the Gospels constantly allude to the correspondence of the Christ story with the Old Testament history, it is difficult not to think that John is alluding to the creation story and to Genesis 2:1 in particular ("The heavens and the earth were finished"— Gen. 2:1, KJV). As the original sixth day saw the completion of the one creation before the original Sabbath (Gen. 2:2, 3), so the new creation was finished the day before the Jewish Sabbath.

The entire warp and woof of the New Testament shows that the great acts of the Old Testament (especially creation and the Exodus) have been recapitulated and summed up in Christ. God's great act in Christ is the new creation as well as the new Exodus. It is difficult to see how the institutions ordained to celebrate the old creation and the old exodus can be adequate to celebrate the new creation and the new exodus. All are agreed that the old Passover festival is inadequate to celebrate the new liberation in Christ. Then how can we say that the old Sabbath festival (Lev. 23:1-

3) is any more adequate than any of the other festivals with which it is inseparably associated throughout the Old Testament? This is evidently Paul's reasoning when he said that regulations concerning festivals, new moons and Sabbath have been canceled and are not to become matters over which Christians judge one another (Col. 2:14-17).

Since Christ has accomplished our liberation on the cross once-and-for-all (Heb 1:3; 9:8-12, 25-28) and He Himself becomes our Rest— for we are complete in Him (Col. 2:10, KJV) – would not this indicate that the Christian Sabbath is not a twenty-four hour, once-a-week event but a rest which is as permanent as Christ's work and as abiding as the fellowship of the living Christ? Thus, the writer to the Hebrews invites us to enter the real rest of which the Old Testament Sabbath was merely a shadow:

Now we who have believed enter that rest, just as God has said... There remains then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God, for anyone who enters God's rest also rests from his own work, just as God did rest from His. Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest. – Heb. 4:3, 9-11.

Notes and References

3. Samuele Bacchiocchi, *From Sabbath to Sunday: A Historical Investigation of the Rise of Sunday Observance in Early Christianity* (Rome: Pontifical Gregorian University Press, 1977), pp. 29, 36, 55, 73.

Chapter 4

The Law and Jesus

"Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them."— Matt. 5:17

This scripture is sometimes used to prove that some Old Testament regulations are still binding. But if this is what Jesus is really saying, the text proves too much, because the word "Law" in this passage embraces the entire law or five books of Moses. No Christian believes that every legal regulation of the Old Testament is still binding.

In order to understand what Jesus means by fulfilling the law and the prophets, let us first look at the relationship between these two parts of the Old Testament. The Old Testament word for law is *Torah*. The Torah was a teaching or an instruction in the right way. Rather than being a rigid and abstract rule, the Torah was a sign, a guide or a direction in the manner of life God required.

The Jews, however, always tended to reduce the Torah to a set of abstract (and sometimes absolute) rules— with many petty details. They thought that if they carried out every petty rule, they would discharge their obligations to God. The prophets, however, derided Israel's moral distortions, manifested in a preoccupation with religious externalism, and they directed the people's attention to the true essence of the Torah. This was a real righteousness of life exhibited in the proper treatment of their fellow men.

When Jesus arrived, Judaism had completely prostituted the true aim of the Torah. Although the Pharisees were preoccupied with carrying out the regulations of the written code, they had little love for God or man.

The teaching of Jesus was in the true prophetic succession. Like the prophets, He was wholly unimpressed with the righteousness of the good, religious people. Brushing aside the petty rule-book religion of the scribes and Pharisees, He showed the true meaning and demand of the law. To fulfill the law meant far more than carrying out a few regulations. At best, these were only signposts pointing to God's righteousness. In His Sermon on the Mount Jesus proceeded to radicalize and spiritualize the demands of the law until it was plain that man's total existence must be one of living righteousness. But even Christ's teaching could not unfold the full extent of the righteousness the Torah really intended. Jesus Himself became what the Torah and the prophets always wanted man to be. Christ's entire ministry was people-

directed. He came to seek and to save that which was lost. "Having loved His own ...He loved them unto the end" (John 13:1, KJV). "Though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, so that you through His poverty might become rich" (2 Cor. 8:9). He went about doing good. He came not to be served but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many. He loved His enemies and died for the ungodly. Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures. When He thus died on the cross, He fulfilled the righteousness of the law. What the law demands can really only be seen and understood in the light of its fulfillment in Christ.

The ethic demanded by Jesus and lived out by Jesus is an ethic directed toward people. "In everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets" (Matt. 7:12). In His Sabbath controversies Jesus showed that it was people and their needs which mattered, not Sabbath regulations. Of course, the Sabbath regulations were originally given to protect people. As we have seen, the Sabbath was a mini-Jubilee in which everyone was to be released from servitude. It was intended as a great humanitarian ordinance in Israel.

Jesus did not weaken what the Torah really intended in the ancient festivals. The kind of ethics He demanded is Jubilee ethics, not merely once every fifty years, nor even once a week, but in the totality of a Christian's existence. The regulations of the Torah were only signposts indicating the kind of life God's righteousness requires. For kindergarten Israel the Torah says, "Once every seven days, put aside your own concerns, stop pleasing yourself, remember your Liberator and act as if you were a liberated society." It was just too much to expect Israel to live the kind of life God had in mind. But in Jesus we see that the real aim and intention of the law is that we should not be enslaved to our concerns nor please ourselves at any time (Rom. 15:1-3) but that we should be totally open to God and disposed to the service of humanity—at no time withholding everything for ourselves.

The entire New Testament of Jesus Christ shows that the regulations of Moses were only rudimentary principles, mere playthings. While the Mosaic regulations demand a tithe of the increase, Jesus demands that we forsake everything to take up the gruesome instrument of self-denial and follow Him. Was Calvary only a tithe of God's love? Tithing is child's play. Giving our tenth is not the righteousness of the law. Moses said to refrain from eating leaven for seven days a year. Child's play! Jesus and His apostles show the true intention of this kindergarten regulation. We must be done with the leaven of hypocrisy, selfishness and malice for the whole of our lives (1 Cor. 5:6-8) Moses said to rejoice before the Lord seven days a year (Lev. 23). Child's play! In the New Testament, Jesus says that we must never cease to rejoice especially when we are suffering for His name (Phil. 4:4). So, all the regulations of the Torah are only hints and signposts toward what the righteousness of God demands from us every day. In Jesus all this becomes so plain. That is why His teaching is like the new wine which cannot be contained by the old wineskins. The New Testament

breaks through and discards the temporary regulations of the law, not in the interest of creating a lower standard of piety, but in order that God's people might be free to serve in the new way of the Spirit (Rom. 7:6).

The life and teaching of Jesus show that God makes these utterly radical demands upon us, not because He wants our service for Himself, but for the neighbor. Jesus shows us that God pours out Himself in a total sacrifice to bless humanity. In Jesus we see that God's law is completely oriented to the needs of people. The incarnation teaches us that God has totally cast His lot with needy humanity. The only way we can serve Him is to serve our neighbor. Jesus gives us only one picture of the final judgment, and there we are shown the question of who is saved or damned. All turns on one issue— how did the sheep or goats treat their fellow men? No wonder Paul could say that faith active in love is everything! (Gal. 5:6).

It is an utter prostitution of the teachings of Jesus to suggest that He was concerned with such things as where to worship, when to worship, food taboos and other childish regulatory rules. His sayings and His deeds sweep the cultic religion of Judaism away in order that the law and prophets might find their fulfillment in a truly catholic faith livable any time or any place. He does this, not by desacralizing times and places, but by asserting His Lordship over all time and space. To live the kind of life He calls us to live does not mean withdrawal from the world into some holy little enclave of time or space, but it means going out into the world to recklessly forget ourselves (especially our own piety) as we throw away everything we have in the service of human beings. This is life eternal— the keeping of the real Sabbath. Anything else is playacting.

Chapter 5

The Gospel Demands Grace for the Heretic as Well as the Sinner

God did not justify Calvinists in the sixteenth century. At least some Lutherans thought so, as Jan Laski soon discovered.

Jan Laski, a Polish Calvinist, had come to London in 1548 and had founded the first Presbyterian Church in England. In 1554, shortly after the ascension of "Bloody" Mary, Laski and part of his congregation left London to escape the Catholic wrath which followed her investiture.

They left in two Danish vessels bound for Copenhagen. But in Denmark there was no gospel for theological offenders. They were met by Lutheran officials who demanded they sign the Lutheran confession of faith before finding sanctuary in Denmark. As firm Calvinists, they declined.

Laski and his congregation then left Copenhagen for Wismar, Lübeck and Hamburg, only to find the same barrenness of spirit– the same demands and the same repulse. The Lutherans of Germany shed no tears over Mary's victims. They denounced them as heretics and the "devil's martyrs" for denying the real presence of Christ in the Supper. God's grace did not extend to the field of theology. After suffering the North Sea through most of the winter, the refugees at last found entry and humanity at Emden, then a seaport in the Netherlands. 1

Sixteenth-century theologians suffered from the delusion that one could not have Christian fellowship with a theological offender without thereby condoning his heresy. Luther made this clear after his 1529 meeting with Zwingli at Marburg:

Our adversaries acted in a very friendly manner and modestly toward us, more so than we thought they would... They desired fellowship... with us; but this, for the time being, we declined and could not grant. For, if we recognized them as brethren and sisters, we would be obliged to consent to their doctrine. 2

Luther forgot that God accepts us in spite of our faulty behavior and deficient theology.

The Reformation was willing to extend God's grace to the weaknesses of the flesh but not of the mind. On the question of theology the Reformers acted as if justification by faith had never been proclaimed. There was no gospel for a weak mind.

Man's perceived relationship with God will be mirrored in his relationship with other people. By making theology rather than Christ the meeting place between God and man, sixteenth-century Protestants made salvation a matter of denominational affiliation. God's grace was free only to the orthodox. The unwritten slogan was: Justification by grace through Lutheran or Calvinistic faith.

Orthodox Protestantism has never fully liberated itself from this schizophrenic view of God's grace. The result has been proclamation of two gospels— the gospel of justification by faith alone and the gospel of dogmatic purity.

The Reformation rejected perfectionism in the area of morals but tended to retain it in the field of theology. Having rejected the law as a standard of salvation, the Reformation reintroduced it in the form of orthodoxy. Theological perfection was made such a basic requirement that it virtually canceled the salvation of the heretic.

In spite of an evangelical ecclesiology, the Reformation advanced little beyond the Catholic principle of "outside the Church no salvation." In their dogmatics the Reformers developed the doctrine of the invisible church. They saw the church as the fellowship around Christ and realized that this fellowship extended beyond their own communities. And yet they contradicted this insight by refusing to extend the hand of fellowship outside their own "denominational" confines. The demand for theological perfection was the weed that choked the gospel seed of free grace.

In the matter of salvation the Reformers were unwilling to admit any talk of human works. They freely spoke of man's best works as no better than filthy rags. But man is reluctant to extend human weakness to his mind. That is why pride is the fundamental human sin. A person with theological ambitions would do well to heed the words of Paul in 1 Corinthians 13:9. As Karl Barth said, "There are none other than *little* theologians." 3

The Reformers tended to think that faulty theological formulations had the power to destroy the truth of salvation. For that reason they narrowed the scope of God's grace and burned the heretic.

The history of theology shows that Christian thinking was affected for years by the ancient view of the word as an instrument of magic. In antiquity a word was usually far more than a collection of sounds and syllables. A word was pregnant with power. Once spoken, it assumed a life of its own, dispensing good or evil. A blessing became a powerful charm against evil. A curse, once uttered, could shut the windows of heaven. The person who knew the right words was a man of tremendous influence.

This magical view of words is reflected in fairy tales. Doors are opened, treasures appear, frogs turn into princes, and fishes into maidens at the incantation of the magical phrase.

To many Christians theological formulations have had a similar power. The doors of heaven could be manipulated by the right phrase. Until recent times Christians have tended to think that God would shut the gates of heaven with a derisive laugh unless the shibboleth were uttered with a Lutheran, Calvinist or Catholic intonation. When the Catholics condemned Luther and the Lutherans damned the papacy, it was largely because each felt that the other party was employing false formulas, leading people to think that God would indeed admit them to life eternal on the basis of passwords that would eventually prove to be ineffective.

The Reformation made an enormous contribution through the rediscovery of the principle of justification through grace by faith alone. The weakness of the Protestant movement has been an unwillingness to explore the *implications* of the gospel as well as a lack of willingness to liberate the grace of God from the demands of dogmatic perfection. To the extent that it can be achieved, doctrinal purity is a great *practical* advantage to the Christian, but it must never become a new law which cancels the grace of God. To quote Karl Barth once more:

In Church history, to point out the sins, faults, and weaknesses of the scholastics and the mystics, Reformers and Papists, Lutherans and Reformed, rationalists and pietists, orthodox and liberals—even though these failings certainly dare not be overlooked or left unmentioned— cannot become a more urgent task than seeing and understanding them all in the light of the forgiveness of sins that is necessary and promised to us all. 4

Notes and References

1. See Will Durant, *The Story of civilization*, Vol. 6, *The Reformation— A History of European Civilization from Wyclif to Calvin: 1300-1564* (New York; Simon & Schuster, 1957), p. 599.
2. Ewald M. Plass, comp., *What Luther Says*, 3 vols. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1959), 3:1410
3. Karl Barth, *Evangelical Theology: An Introduction*, tr. Grover Foley (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1963), p. 77.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 94.

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