

We discussed recently the relationship between the concepts of law and grace, and the need for proper interpretation. Our attitudes are vastly different depending on what we feel we live under. Though God's grace covers us, He still desires and expects obedience. We looked at Matthew 12.1-14 where Jesus went through the grain fields on the Sabbath. His disciples were hungry and began to pick some heads of grain and eat them. When the Pharisees accused the disciples of doing what was unlawful on the Sabbath, Jesus answered them by showing them what David did when he and his companions were hungry and ate consecrated bread from the house of God. He also brought up the fact that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple worked yet were not condemned. He reminded them of God's words 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' Afterwards he went into the synagogue and healed a man with a shriveled hand. But the Pharisees went out and plotted how they might kill Jesus.

Christ showed the Pharisees their own inconsistency in interpreting God's law by putting their own heroes on the stand to witness against them. In John 7.22-24, we read, '... you circumcise a man upon the Sabbath. If on the Sabbath a man receives circumcision, so that the law of Moses may not be broken, are you angry with me because on the Sabbath I made a man's whole body well? Do not judge by appearances, but judge with right judgment.' The act of circumcision was so precious to the Jews, but Christ indicates that according to their own manner of interpreting the law, the priests themselves are breaking the Sabbath. Does one law take precedence over the others? If so, then how are we to choose? The simple truth was that the act of circumcision was not breaking the Sabbath. The Jews did not believe this either, but condemned Jesus for a medical operation that obviously took much less actual work than did circumcision.

It is the last line of this passage that is the real crux of the whole matter. Christ wants us to 'judge with righteous judgment.' He says to penetrate beneath the surface of things, beneath the appearance of things, and interpret properly the law as God would want it to be applied; with love and mercy. We must not miss the point! God demands obedience, but it must be because there is the spirit of God within us! As we read in Romans 7.6 we are now serving not under the old written code but in the new life of the Spirit. God wants us to be able to operate from the basic principles that he instills within us.

In Matthew 15.1-9 some of the Pharisees and teachers of the law accused Jesus of breaking the tradition of the elders by not washing their hands before they ate. Jesus replied that they broke the command of God for the sake of their tradition by dedicating to the temple money that was needed by their parents to live. He claimed that they nullified the word of God for the sake of their tradition. They honored God with their lips only, and not their heart. Here the Pharisees admit that their concern is with the tradition of the elders, and not the will of God; they hold that tradition as higher than scripture! What they have done is to make a loophole in the law, by trying to weigh God's commands against each other. On the surface their giving looked more 'spiritual,' but we know that what God really wants is for us to help those that are helpless. Christ said that they had made the law of God meaningless by their own interpretation of it. They had totally missed the point of what God wanted the law to produce in us. How could they be so callous about their own parents? They had lost all concept of mercy and love.

Christ healed a man with a withered hand, which was an impoverishing affliction. How wonderful it would be for this man to be restored to meaningful life! But the chief interest of the Pharisees was to accuse Christ. Christ uses an example of their own actions for a helpless animal, and asks them why is it not good to heal on the Sabbath. Christ contrasts what they are doing with true goodness. We should do Good at all times. When is it wrong to have mercy, to feel love, to have sympathy for other people?

The last part of the passage is the real hard part to take. The Pharisees are in such opposition to something that is really Good that they immediately go out and counsel together to kill Jesus. Isn't it odd that by their interpretation it was wrong for him to heal a man physically of a great problem, but it was all right for them to plot to have a man murdered in direct violation of the law? We must separate what are the commands of God from our false interpretations of his word. We must pursue what God wants, what pleases Him. If we don't, we are in danger of becoming just what Christ was so vocal against. We must judge not on the surface, but with righteous judgment.

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