

# Lord of the Sabbath

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[ 0 : 00 ] According to Matthew on the 12th chapter, and we shall read out the 8th verse of the chapter, Matthew chapter 12, at verse 8, For the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath day.

Now we saw last Lord's Day evening, the impression made upon the multitude by the Lord Jesus Christ. We saw that they were amazed at his teaching because he spoke as one who had authority and not as a scribe.

They were very conscious of the majesty of the Savior, and they were conscious of the heavenliness of the message that he brought them.

And they went forth therefore under this great impression of astonishment and veneration, both for him and for his message.

Then we find that there was another side to the reaction. We find the Pharisees from the very outset standing over against the Lord in aversion, hostility and antagonism.

[ 1 : 20 ] It began on that day when the Lord healed the paralytic, and he said to him, Son, thy sins are forgiven thee.

And they said at once, this is blasphemy. Who can forgive sins but God only? And then the Lord compounded his own problem by laying so much emphasis in the Sermon on the Mount upon the correction of scribal and pharisaic teaching.

Because we found that at so many points, the Lord was contradicting the tradition. And that led to the deepening of the Saint Hagorius.

Now in the narrative of the Gospels, this 12th chapter of Matthew is of great significance because it marks the point of no return for the Pharisees and for the Lord.

We have the dispute in the chapter with regard to the question of the Sermon. And we find that its sequel is in verse 14, they held a council against him, how they might destroy him.

[ 2 : 43 ] And from that moment onwards, there is an open breach and there is open conflict between the Lord on the one side and the Pharisees on the other.

But I want tonight to look not at the mechanics of this narrative. I want to look at the teaching which Christ gives us here with regard to this whole question of the Sabbath.

And it is important as we take up this theme to remind ourselves of its relative importance and its relative unimportance. It may very well be that there are some in this audience tonight who have not been in this church before.

There may be some who have never been perhaps in any free church before. And all that they may know of this church and its witness is that it stands as few churches seem to do for the sanctity of the Lord's Day and for the bindingness still of the fourth commandment.

And you may very well labour under the impression that in every free church this is all that is preached. You may assume that here once again you have the same emphasis.

[ 4 : 02 ] Now I would hope that one can take up this kind of subject without being exposed to the charge of imbalance and distortion with regard to the proportion of biblical teaching and biblical doctrine.

I do not believe that the Sabbath is in itself one of the major emphases of Christianity.

And I do not therefore think it appropriate that every Lord's Day or every week or every month that it should stand with that kind of regularity in the forefront of our gospel preaching.

And yet at the same time it is a part of the revealed will of God. It is a part of the great and fundamental principles of conduct which the Lord has given to his church for that church's guidance.

And therefore if we are faithful to the biblical balance and if we observe the biblical propulsion then we shall not preach the Sabbath every Lord's Day.

[ 5 : 22 ] Nor on the other hand shall we pay no attention whatsoever to the teaching that we have on this great subject. It was quite noticeable last Lord's Day evening that the attendance here was greatly reduced because there was a certain counter-attraction to the public worship of the Christian church.

I don't bring this up tonight as my topic for that reason. But it does suggest that we have to ask ourselves again conscientiously before God.

How are we to spend the Lord's Day? And what is our relation to God? If during public worship we prefer to watch the World Cup or whatever rather than come to the public worship of the Christian church.

And I want tonight to look at what the Lord is setting before us in this chapter on this particular theme. On the whole question of the Sabbath day.

You will notice first of all that the teaching is cast primarily in a negative form. In other words it is cast in the form of a contradiction of a certain attitude which was prevalent in the Lord's own day.

[ 6 : 56 ] Christ is standing in rebuke and in contradiction and in condemnation over and against a certain kind of teaching.

Now it's very easy to assume that what the Lord is contradicting here is a principle of the validity still in the New Testament period of the Sabbath commandment, that fourth great principle of the Decalogue.

And if we were to ask tonight the vast majority of professing Christians what the Lord was condemning here. They would say he was condemning Sabbatarianism.

And they would mean by that that he was condemning those people who still said that the Sabbath was a part of God's will for the Christian church.

Now it seems to me that that is at the very least a very rash assumption. Because there are certain facts built into this whole narrative that suggest very strongly that what Christ is condemning is not the Sabbath and is not the fourth commandment at all.

[ 8 : 20 ] Let me remind you again of what we saw in the Sermon on the Mount with regard to Christ's position in relation to the law of the Old Testament.

Christ said to us very, very plainly, I have not come to destroy the law or the prophets. I have not come to abrogate it.

I have not come to deny it. I have not come to declare it invalid. I have not come to I have not come to abrogate the great principles. And that is not referring only to the great fundamental and universal principles of the law.

The Lord said categorically that not one jot or tittle of the law should pass until all were fulfilled. And so the Lord was saying I have not come to abrogate the great principles.

But he is saying furthermore I have not come to abrogate one jot or tittle of the law. I have not come to weaken its force or to lessen its authority.

[ 9 : 33 ] And what we have on the sabal principle is not something ceremonial. It is something embedded in the two great tables of the Decalogue.

The very heart of the Old Testament religion. The very heart of God's covenant with his people. And it is virtually impossible to believe that what Christ is doing at this moment having said that the law could never pass.

It is impossible to believe that he is at the same time in this chapter going on to abolish part of that law. It is impossible to believe that having said having claimed for the law in its every jot and tittle the authority and the inspiration of God in its every jot and tittle that he is then going on to abrogate one of its great ten principles.

And I would say at the very least that before we conclude that Christ is here condemning the fourth commandment we must have the strongest possible proof upon which to lay such a tremendous conclusion.

Let me draw your attention to something else. What kind of defense does the Lord offer for his disciples? They are going through the cornfields and they begin to pluck the ears of corn and they begin to eat.

[ 11 : 15 ] And the Pharisees come and the Pharisees condemn them and the Pharisees say that is against the law. Now what does Christ do by way of defense? Christ doesn't move in and say ah but that law has been abolished.

He doesn't move in and say yes but the fourth commandment is no longer valid. He doesn't move in and say to them yes but there is now no Sabbath because I've come to abolish the Sabbath. God that would have been the obvious defense for today's Christians. That's what men would say today in the Christian church. That is what men do say.

But that is not the defense of his disciples that Christ offers. He offers a completely different defense because to the Old Testament and he tells them that David behaved in a certain way. David went and ate the shore bread. He says again in the Old Testament the priests they were working on the Sabbath day and God found no fault with them.

[12:24] In other words Christ's argument is not at all that that law no longer exists. His argument is not that there is now no Sabbath.

His argument is not that there is now no fourth commandment but his argument is that the disciples' conduct is not a violation of that commandment.

We take the priests of the temple for example. There is no doubt whatsoever but in their days and in that economy the fourth commandment was binding.

And yet says Christ their conduct as they worked on the Lord's day their conduct was not an infringement of the commandment.

And that is Christ's approach here. His approach is to say not that commandment is no longer valid. His approach is to say the conduct of my disciples is not an infringement at all of that great principle.

[13:35] well I ask again what is the Lord condemning? He is not condemning the Sabbath. He is not abrogating the fourth commandment.

He is standing once again over human tradition. He is taking cognizance yet once more of this appalling reality in the history of the people of God that men will place their human teaching and their human authority alongside of the word of God and that they will place their human tradition even over and above that word of God.

And he is saying there is a great Sabbath principle that my disciples are not violating at all and there is a human Sabbath there is a traditional Sabbath there is a pharisaic Sabbath which they are violating and which I commend them for violating and which they have every right to violate because it is a human tradition that makes the word of God of none effect.

What kind of Sabbath was it? It was the Sabbath in which men imagined that we were able to glorify God on this particular day by observing a whole list of detailed negatives.

One could walk a certain distance but not further. One could cure a man in certain circumstances but not in others. One could eat the ears of corn in certain circumstances again but not in others.

[15:33] It was a legalistic Sabbath. It was a Sabbath out of proportion where the only thing that mattered as you weighed up a man and evaluated a man was does he work on the Lord's day and that was all.

It was a negative Sabbath. And perhaps above all it was an inhumane Sabbath. As we find in the sequel.

You couldn't heal this man with the injured hand. And it is that that Christ is condemning. I might say very well he's condemning not the Sabbath but he's condemning Sabbatarians.

And I'm not saying at all but that we have to face for ourselves that particular peril. That we take this one principle and that we make it the standard and the measure of a Christian.

And that our whole concern for ourselves and our church and our members is not to love God and to love their neighbors but as he worked on the Lord's day. And I would say that stands under God's condemnation.

[16:50] I would say again that there stands under God's condemnation a Sabbath of legalistic negatives. But I would say above all that there stands under God's condemnation a Sabbath of inhumanity, a Sabbath which is used as a pretext for the want of generosity and the want of compassion and the want of mercy.

That above all is what the Lord has condemned. Now then let me go through that more carefully and let's see what Christ goes on to do positively.

He goes on, I suggest, to bring out the great basic significance of the fourth commandment as over against the pharisaic interpretation.

What is the Sabbath? If it is not the pharisaic Sabbath, then what is it? Now Christ, I suggest, does two things.

First of all, he asserts his own authority over the Sabbath. The Son of man is Lord even of the Sabbath day.

[18:06] Now we're so familiar with it. We take it in our theological stride. And yet it's a tremendous statement because who was the Lord of the Sabbath.

God was the Lord of the Sabbath. Jehovah, the God of Israel, he was the Lord of the Sabbath. And here we have Christ making one of these astonishing claims again.

The Son of Man, I am the Lord of the Sabbath. I am Jehovah. I am God. You see, people ask us, where is the proof of the deity of Jesus Christ in the New Testament?

These doctrines that men according even to Prince Charles are constantly quarreling over these great dogmas. Where do we find them in the New Testament?

This dogma of the deity of Christ. And we would say, well, we find it in John chapter 1 and verse 1 where we told that the word was God.

[19:17] And of course, we find it there. That we find it in the most unlikely and in the most surprising places. This verse shows, even if it's doing it's own, it shows that Christ in his own judgment was the Lord even of the Sabbath day.

Now, you see, Christ doesn't say that now that he has come, he is abrogating the day. He's not the Lord of something that's been abrogated. He's not the Lord of something that's been cancelled. He's not the Lord of some obsolete institution. He is the Lord, surely, of something abiding, something valid, and something permanent, and something glorious.

He is the Lord of a precious institution for his own church and for his own people. He is saying to us, first of all, I am the Lord, that is what he's saying to me tonight, above all else, that's what he's asking you and asking me, do I accept that, that is Lord.

And then he's saying, I am not the Lord of something decadent. I am the Lord of this great permanent institution. I am the Lord of this Sabbath day.

[20:44] I am his master and I am the one who is to judge for my people how they are to live it. And Christ, him as stroke, abolishes the whole for a sake interpretation of that day.

You will find in the great Jewish documents still, the time of the Mishnah, we can still find the great accumulation of negatives, the accumulation of inhumane and uncompassionate rules.

And Christ blows them away and Christ says, I am the one who decides, not you rabbis, not you scribes, not you sabbatarians, not you hyper-orthodox, not you human tradition, but I will decide, I am the Lord of the sabbath day, and I will lay down the ground rules, and I will declare its significance, and I will show to you how you are to observe it.

So Christ, first of all, asserts his own authority over the sabbath, not as something decadent, or as something obsolete, but as something permanent, and something abiding.

And then Christ goes on to lay down what is the great basic principle that must guide us in our whole attitude to the Lord's day.

[22:13] Now I take this from the account that Mark gives us of this same incident. And Mark's assertion is that Christ went on then to say, the sabbath was made for man, and not man for the sabbath.

The son of man is lord of a permanent and an abiding sabbath. The son of man lays down the rules for the sabbath, and the son of man's fundamental rule for the sabbath is, the sabbath was made for man, and not man for the sabbath.

In other words, man was not the slave of the sabbath. Man was not going to suffer as a result of the sabbath.

The sabbath must not be interpreted inhumanly. The sabbath properly interpreted cannot possibly run counter to human interest because the sabbath was made for the benefit of man.

It was made for its good. What does the Lord say to us? He is saying to us, surely, that man needs the sabbath.

[23:34] It was made for man. It was made by God for man. It was made by the son of man for man. And it was made by God for man because in the judgment of God, man needed the sabbath.

He needed it on the physical level because I was man to leave in terms of the enough of him. In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread.

Well, we should ponder that. You see, the teaching there is not simply that by the sweat of her face we eat bread.

It's not simply that we earn the bread by the sweat of her brow. But it is that you eat it in the sweat of your brow.

In other words, you live under such pressure that you have hardly sufficient respite or sufficient time of work to eat the bread.

[ 24 : 43 ] The Lord's portrayal is of man with a perspiration pouring down his face. even as he eats because he's living a life of unmitigated labor.

Now it may be that for a moment, perhaps a brief moment in our Western society, that is not altogether true. It may very well be, although I think there's a tremendous amount of unjustified optimism that we stand on the threshold in this part of the world of a great new age of leisure. But one of the commonest fallacies and so much of our contemporary Western thinking is this, that we identify ourselves with the world and we forget that these terrible words of Genesis are still true for the vast majority of mankind, that they're still eating the prittums they can get and they're eating it in the misery of unmitigated and unremitting labour.

And it is in that context that we have the principle, man needs the sun, he needs the respite, he needs the rhythm of work and rest, he needs those few moments, this one day of cessation from labour even on the physical level one day when he does not eat with a perspiration running down his face, he needs that, he needs it on the spiritual level because he spends his week in the fellowship of and in converse with the things of this world, he spends his week in its drudgery, in its cares, in its enticements, under its pressures, exposed to its solicitations, blessings, and he needs this one week when he can look up, remembering that he's

God's image, one moment when he can look to the God he made, one day when he can listen to the glorious word of that God and to the comfort of that God and to the promises of that God, one day when he can stand in the fellowship of his brethren in the faith, one day when he can stand in the community of praise and worship and adoration and feed his soul and feed his soul not with bread but feed his soul with all his words that come out of the mouth of God.

[ 27 : 40 ] Now you may judge as you like of the Lord's teaching. You may say it's nonsense, you may say it interesting, you may say it's right, you may say it's wrong, I'm only saying for the moment that it is the Lord's teaching.

I am saying if we want to abolish the Sabbath then let us not claim the authority of Christ because Christ said man needed the Sabbath, needed it physically, needed it spiritually, above all man needed it, for preservation of himself from oppression and from bondage.

You remember in the Old Testament the phrasing of that great fourth commandment how it lays the obligation preeminently upon the master and forbade that master to require a servant to work.

That was the protection of those who were servants. of those who were employees. They were not allowed in that God-ordered society to insist that their servants should work.

And Christ is saying again man needed that. The servant needs protection from the avarice of his master and needs protection and needs protection from the avarice of his own soul.

[ 29 : 15 ] Man needs the Sabbath. It was made for man. Now you see the contemporary land sheet. Men take this great principle and they say Christ is Lord of the Sabbath.

and they go on the Sabbath is made for man therefore we abolish it. Though I cannot for the life of me see how the premise leads to the conclusion.

I cannot for the life of me see how you can argue from the principle that man needs the Sabbath. How can we argue from that to the conclusion let's abolish it?

surely if we need it we need it. Surely if we need it it's permanent. Surely if we need it we don't do away with it because in the judgment of the Son of Man who knew man's nature who knew humanness who knew human sorrow and human frailty who knew the human sin who had seen human oppression who had seen human degradation who had seen exploitation who had seen bondage and disabled man need the Sabbath.

And do we go on and say well because man needs the Sabbath let's abolish the Sabbath. Surely the exact opposite follows that precisely because Christ says that we need it.

[ 30 : 42 ] If that's what Christ says then it is by definition a permanent and inviolable ordinance of the Christian faith. I don't say that it is a logically demonstrable human need.

I don't say that I can show philosophically that man needs the Sabbath but I can show that in the teaching of Jesus Christ man needs the Sabbath that in the teaching of Christ you can't abolish the Sabbath because he's not the Lord of a decadent institution he is the Lord of something that man

needs and if we dispense with it then according to him we do so to our own great loss. Well man needs the Sabbath and because man needs it you can't abolish it. But then this great principle is true that the Sabbath is made for man then we cannot use the Sabbath principle to the injury or to the detriment or to the pain of man.

In other words something that is for man cannot be used to deny man what man means. Now what do I mean? There will be many moments on this whole narrative illustrates that. When there will be an apparent conflict between the Sabbath principle especially between its negative emphasis upon the cessation of labor there will be many moments when there will be an apparent conflict between that and the good of man.

[ 32 : 37 ] Now Christ is saying and I think we must pay the most careful attention to that I don't want my teaching distorted but Christ is saying to us that when there is a conflict between the Sabbath principle between the principle that we must not work when that principle conflicts with the good of our fellow man then it must yield to the good of our fellow man.

in other words the good of man will always have precedence over the negatives of this principle will always have precedence over the cessation of labor.

Now you see how that is borne out in this narrative itself. The disciples were going through the cornfields and they were hungry and the sabbath principle might be deemed to say to them you must not pluck the ears of corn because it's a sabbath day and there was a conflict and Christ says now when there is a conflict the negative yields to the great principle the sabbath is for man.

Now part of the glory of the teaching is this these men weren't dying of starvation perhaps weren't feeling even any serious discomfort and yet Christ says that the pain or the little discomfort they are feeling justifies the apparent abrogation of the prohibition thou shalt not work you see again Christ says the same thing in terms of the principle later on in verse 7 I will have mercy and not sacrifice or more directly I will have mercy and not liturgy you must never he says use the fact that it is the sabbath day to deny somebody an act of mercy or an act of charity the same thing applies in the incident which follows the man with the withered hand now that man had had that withered hand for long enough that man wasn't going to die the withered hand that man could easily leave the problem till tomorrow and yet

Christ is saying it is lawful to heal on the sabbath day because why because the healing was an act of mercy and again how do you define the act of mercy you don't define it in terms of will he survive will he not survive that's what the Pharisees did the Pharisees would have cured that man according to the Talmud if it could be shown that his life was in danger knows that Christ his life's not in danger but it is an act of mercy an act of sheer human kindness to heal and because it is that I am going to do it because you cannot allege against me my own institution which I gave to man for its benefit as an act of grace and mercy you can't allege that against me to prevent me showing mercy and doing good put it again in terms of another principle of

[ 36 : 35 ] Jonathan Edwards we we think we think acts of mercy as exceptions to the fourth commandment no Edward says they're not exceptions at all there is no better way to spend the sabbath than in acts of mercy in the relief of human loneliness and human misery it is lawful to do good it is lawful to be gracious it is lawful to be kind and to be generous on the Lord's day so you see the Lord's argument it's made for man therefore you don't abolish it it's made for man therefore if it ever appears to conflict with the well being of man you opt to concentrate upon the good of man now

I can't develop that further I want to ask another question and to do so very briefly how according to the New Testament did the church spend the Lord's day I am making the very considerable logical leap from the Sabbath to the Lord's day I leave that for the moment and I am asking how did the early church spend the Lord's day I think the great thing is to remind ourselves of the great motivating principle that lay behind the Lord's day you remember it was the first day of the week it was the day that they found the empty tomb it was the day of that tremendous declaration he is not here he is risen it was the day of the triumph of the resurrection of the exultation and of the vindication of Jesus it was the day when there was engraved indelibly and indelibly and immemorably upon the consciousness of the church there was engraven upon it the persuasion the

Lord is risen indeed and every Lord's day they were meeting around that now I think we tend to lose sight of that I think that we're very close to all the negatives what haven't we done today we haven't gone touring with our cars we haven't gone to work we haven't played football we haven't watched

television all the negatives now these I would say are quite indispensable and quite inseparable from the Sabbath principle but I would ask you and I would ask myself what part to the great fact that the Lord is risen indeed what part has that played in my Sabbath to what extent was my heart filled with doxology to what extent was my heart saying glory to God for our risen saviour because that's what the day was about and they met around that conviction how do you like that they met around that conviction well I think that

I would go beyond that they met with the risen saviour every Lord's day they came together and every Lord's day they preached the gospel and every Lord's day they sat at the Lord's table and every time they met Christ was with them whatever two earth they gather in my name I am there every time they preached every time they met in Christian fellowship every time they broke bread I am with you always to the end of the world the greatest peril facing us is that you and I can become content with a whole succession of Christless hours we can become content with churches which are spiritually empty with

Sabbath which are completely ordinary with gatherings from which Christ is absent and I think you and I want to ponder upon the utter monstrousness of that and that we want to realize that this place and this church tonight ought to be utterly and totally extraordinary that here tonight we have come to the church of the living God and to Jesus we have come to Jesus that we meet not only around convictions or around a liturgy but we meet around a person we meet with a person and I'm asking is that what's absent because it's not what we're seeking it's not what we're wanting and I'm asking wouldn't that be a delight that kind of sorrow when you and I met to give glory to God for our risen saviour when you and I met around the conviction of our risen saviour above all when you and I met with our risen saviour and if tonight that hasn't been our experience and our privilege then shall we pray that it may please

[ 43 : 01 ] God that never again shall we have an empty Christless hour but that every Lord's day we shall meet with him and that because we meet with him there shall be praise and doxology in our hearts and on our lips let us pray