

Expository Thoughts On Matthew - Matthew

12:1-13

by J.C. Ryle

Transcript

The one great subject which stands out prominently in this passage of Scripture is the Sabbath day. It is a subject on which strange opinions prevailed among the Jews in our Lord's time. The Pharisees had added to the teaching of Scripture about it, and overlaid the true character of the day with the traditions of men. It is a subject on which diverse opinions have often been held in the churches of Christ, and wide differences exist among men at the present time. Let us see what we may learn about it from our Lord's teaching in these verses. Let us learn in the first place, from this passage that our Lord Jesus Christ does not do away with the observance of a weekly Sabbath day, he neither does so here nor elsewhere in the four Gospels. We often find his opinion expressed about Jewish errors on the subject of the Sabbath; but we do not find a word to teach us that his disciples were not to keep a Sabbath at all. It is of much importance to observe this. The mistakes that have arisen from a superficial consideration of our Lord's sayings on the Sabbath question are neither few nor small; thousands have rushed to the hasty conclusion that Christians have nothing to do with the fourth commandment, and that it is no more binding on us than the Mosaic law about sacrifices. There is nothing in the New Testament to justify any such conclusion. The plain truth is that our Lord did not abolish the law of the weekly Sabbath: he only freed it from incorrect interpretations, and purified it from man made additions. He did not tear out of the decalogue the fourth commandment: he only stripped off the miserable traditions with which the Pharisees had incrustated the day, and by which they had made it not a blessing but a burden. He left the fourth commandment where he found it, a part of the eternal law of God, of which no jot or tittle, was ever to pass away. May we never forget this! Let us learn in the second place, from this passage that our Lord Jesus Christ allows all works of real necessity and mercy to be done on the Sabbath day. This is a principle which is abundantly established in the passage of Scripture we are now considering. We find our Lord justifying his disciples for plucking the ears of corn on a Sabbath. It was an act permitted in Scripture (i.e. Deuteronomy 23:25). They were an hungry and in need of food, therefore they were not to blame. We find him maintaining the lawfulness of healing a sick man on the Sabbath day. The man was suffering from disease and pain. In such a case it was no breach of God's commandment to afford relief. We ought never to rest from doing good. The arguments by which our Lord supports the lawfulness of any work of necessity and mercy on the Sabbath are striking and unanswerable. He reminds the Pharisees, who charge him and his disciples with breaking the law, how David and his men, for want of other food, had eaten the holy showbread out of the tabernacle. He reminds them how the priests in the temple are obliged to do work on the Sabbath by slaying animals and offering sacrifices. He reminds them how even a sheep would be helped out of a pit on the Sabbath, rather than allowed to suffer and die, by

any one of themselves Above all, he lays down the great principle that no ordinance of God is to be pressed so far as to make us neglect the plain duties of charity. "I will have mercy, and not sacrifice." The first table of the law is not to be so interpreted as to make us break the second; the fourth commandment is not to be so explained as to make us unkind and unmerciful to our neighbor. There is deep wisdom in all this. We are reminded of the saying, "Never man spake like man." In leaving the subject, let us beware that we are never tempted to take low views of the sanctity of the Christian Sabbath. Let us take care that we do not make our gracious Lord's teaching an excuse for Sabbath profanation. Let us not abuse the liberty which he has so clearly marked out for us, and pretend that we do things on the Sabbath from necessity and mercy, which in reality we do for our own selfish gratification. There is great reason for warning people on this point. The mistakes of the Pharisee about the Sabbath were in one direction; the mistakes of the Christian are in another. The Pharisee pretended to add to the holiness of the day; the Christian is too often disposed to take away from that holiness, and to keep the day in an idle, profane, irreverent manner. May we all watch our own conduct on this subject! Saving Christianity is closely bound up with Sabbath observance. May we never forget that our great aim should be to "keep the Sabbath holy." Works of necessity may be done: "It is lawful to do well, and show mercy;" but to give the Sabbath to idleness, pleasure-seeking, or the world, is utterly unlawful. It is contrary to the example of Christ, and a sin against a plain commandment of God.

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