

THE RADICAL RABBI: "A RADICAL SNACK"

(Matthew 12:1-8)

10.18.20

INTRODUCTION

Last week, we talked about the opposition to Jesus by the religious leaders. One of the things we brought up was that these leaders prided themselves on the things they had done that, in their minds, made them holy and pleasing to God. One of those things was their extensive study and knowledge of the Scriptures - our Old Testament.

It was actually pretty amazing - some of them had memorized virtually the entire thing. Could you do that? I haven't done that. But we also pointed out that they were missing the greatest piece of that exercise - the application piece. Today we'll see another example of that. And the story that reflects that issue must have some importance for us today because it's found in three of the four gospels - Matthew, Mark and Luke. While we'll let Luke get us started, we'll actually be letting Matthew tell us most of the story while using Mark and Luke for "seasoning." But first **let's begin with a moment of prayer.**

TEXT

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 - Luke 6:1.

Now this is taking place in the wake of last week's confrontation between the religious leaders and Christ and is beginning to highlight a specific area of conflict - Christ's actions on the Sabbath vs. their definition of the Sabbath. Now Jesus has already begun making their religious blood boil by hanging out with sinners and having fellowship meals with them, forgiving sins and, worst of all, having the unmitigated gall to call God His "Father." Now we are witnessing another conflict as the animosity from the leadership ramps up. By the time Jesus arrived and began His ministry, Pharisaic tradition had created a list of 39 behaviors that were considered "unacceptable" when done on the Sabbath. We've already run across one of them - Christ's healing on the Sabbath when a man's life was not at stake. Now, while Jesus and His disciples are out walking on this particular Sabbath, some of them become hungry, and so some nearby grainfields were a handy way to have a little snack. Luke's account of this moment tells us what they were doing - picking, and then rubbing some heads of grain to remove the chaff, before finally being able to eat the kernels left behind. Now, when we think of the idea of "harvesting," which obviously resonates for many of us right now, we probably think of the huge machines we see working the fields these days. But, according to rabbinic tradition, what the disciples were doing was equally considered to be the work of harvesting because they viewed making this snack for themselves the equivalent of reaping, threshing, winnowing and even food prep. Therefore, these leaders, who apparently had time weighing heavy on their hands, were following Jesus and His crew as they moved on - and they were not happy when they saw what the disciples were doing.

When the Pharisees saw this, they said to Him, "Look! Your disciples are doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath" - Matthew 12:2.

You almost get a sense of those guys shouting, "Stop!" - very literally in the name of the law. While we might laugh a bit at that, the context was serious. It was the fourth commandment that God spoke to Moses that declared the Sabbath to be a special day: **"Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy" - God speaking, Exodus 20:8.** God's desire was that the Sabbath day be lived in a totally different way, completely unique and separate from any other day of the week. What did that look like? God gave them His answer: **"Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns" - God speaking, Exodus 20:9-10.** Everyday life was to come to a halt, a standstill. All was to be at rest. The Sabbath was meant to be an incredibly visible, even transparent expression of their relationship with God - able to be seen not only by Israelites but by foreigners as well. And as with all of His commandments, God took His Sabbath commandment seriously - to the point that it was actually a capital offense, punishable by death, to break His Sabbath.

But the problem was that the Pharisees had added to God's words with their own list of 39 "dos and don'ts" with which every observant Jew was expected to comply. But in so doing, they wound up valuing their own words over God's. For God had actually addressed what the disciples were doing in this instance through Moses: **"If you enter your neighbor's grainfield, you may pick kernels with your hands, but you must not put a sickle to their standing grain" - Moses, Deuteronomy 23:25.** And this is a great example of tradition gone crazy: they actually saw their traditions on a par with God's word. And then along comes Jesus. He didn't just disagree with their traditions; He "nuked" them: **"You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to human traditions... You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions!" - Jesus Christ, Mark 7:8-9.** Jesus angered them so much because He would not bow, or acknowledge, or in any way kowtow to their traditions. Pharisaic traditions meant nothing to Him - and He was not shy about saying so. But what the Pharisees and others were overlooking in this particular moment was that it was God who owned Israel's land and, if somebody needed a snack in the course of the day, then Israelites had the right to relieve their hunger when necessary.

So, Jesus gave them answer: **"Haven't you read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? [In the days of Abiathar the high priest] [David] 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 - Jesus Christ, Matthew 12:3-4 [Mark 2:26a].**

OK; some background: I Samuel 19-20 tell us that David was running away from King Saul of Israel, and for good reason: Saul was trying to kill him. He'd even thrown a spear at David - twice. David took the hint and got outta "Dodge." In the course of his getaway, I Samuel 21 tells us that David came to Nob, a village about two miles northeast of Jerusalem. This was also where the tabernacle was located at this time. David asked the priest if he had anything on hand for him and his men to eat. The priest replied that there

was nothing for them to eat - except holy bread which, under normal circumstances, had been consecrated and set aside for the priests only. Here was the deal: God had clarified that there were to be 12 loaves of bread baked every Sabbath - each one representing one of the 12 tribes of Israel - and placed on the table in the tabernacle, specifically to be eaten only by the priests. Yet because of David's need, the bread was given. And Jesus, starting His question with the words, "Haven't you read" implies essentially: "Guys, you should know this stuff; it's right in the Scriptures." But this is not a matter of their not physically reading a Scripture. It is all about them not understanding what God is intending.

But Jesus is also implying a difficult question for His opponents: Wasn't David their greatest king? And yet he took bread which had been meant only for the priests. So, doesn't that make David a Sabbath lawbreaker also?

He then goes on with a second example: ***"Or haven't you read in the Law that the priests on Sabbath duty in the temple desecrate the Sabbath and yet are innocent? I tell you that something greater than the temple is here" - Jesus Christ, Matthew 12:5-6.***

Jesus reminds the Pharisees and others that the priests in the OT were working on the Sabbath; in fact, they pulled "double duty" on the Sabbath due to a doubling of the required sacrifices: ***"On the Sabbath day, make an offering of two lambs a year old without defect, together with its drink offering and a grain offering of two-tenths of an ephah of the finest flour mixed with olive oil. This is the burnt offering for every Sabbath, in addition to the regular burnt offering and its drink offering" - God speaking, Numbers 28:9-10.*** This double sacrifice was meant as yet another confirmation of the specialness of God's Sabbath. Yet despite clearly working, the priests performing this duty were never considered to be sinning. Then, in a not-so-subtle reference to His divinity, Jesus remarks that something so much greater than the temple - not the building but the One for whom that building was intended - is now in their presence. By Christ coming to earth, God has brought his kingdom to earth. And Jesus? His role is the anointed one presenting that kingdom to the world. While the sacrifices performed in the temple were a foreshadowing of greater things to come, the arrival of Jesus signaled that God's greater, better thing had come; in fact, it was here - now! Jesus therefore had the authority to determine what was appropriate or inappropriate for the Sabbath.

He then continues: ***"If you had known what these words mean, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the innocent" - Jesus Christ, Matthew 12:7 (quoting Hosea 6:6).***

In other words, if the Pharisees had truly understood God's words through the prophet Hosea, they would not have accused the disciples of breaking the law of the Sabbath. And this really gets to the crux of Christ's presentation to His opponents. They had used their education and knowledge for two reasons:

- 1) To solidify their hold on power, and
- 2) To basically beat up the common people with their rules.

This made Jesus incredibly offended. And in that offense, He points out the two contrasting reasons why God's word was given:

- 1) To learn about God (information) so that they could
- 2) Love and serve God (relationship).

That was always the purpose of God's word. It was never meant to be a club that knowledgeable people used on others. It was meant to be a means by which people were able to learn and understand who and how God was, to see the love in His care and provision, to see the blessings found in obeying Him, and to find the underlying joy found in a life lived pleasing to Him. In other words, while the Pharisees used God's word to bludgeon, Jesus knew God's word was to bless.

So He brings up a verse from the OT prophet Hosea that more than anything addresses not the heads of His opponents but their hearts: ***"I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings"*** - ***God speaking, Hosea 6:6.***

The story of David eating bread meant exclusively for the priests is a great illustration of the mercy God had in mind. David had no legal right to eat that bread, but the priest recognized his human need - he was hungry and had no other means of satisfying that hunger. Observing mercy was more important than observing the letter of the law.

The Pharisees practiced religion - rules and regulations observed with the completely false hope that doing these things would make them pleasing and acceptable to God - but there was no love, no heart for God, no reflection of God, in any of what they were doing. It was power, position and prestige - period. In God's word through Hosea, the word "sacrifice" was basically being used as a way to summarize all the religious rituals that the Pharisees were so intent on observing and enforcing.

Instead, as Jesus is striving to communicate, God desires relationship - learning how to live for God. The ministry intended for the religious leaders was one where they took the blessings they had been given by God in terms of sound minds and educational opportunities to lovingly, with servant hearts grateful to God, come alongside the people and lead them into the relationship that God intended. That was mercy - seeing people where they were and providing them what they needed. The idea of "mercy" used here lent itself to the Hebrew word *hesed*, the Hebrew word for "steadfast love" - love that is both unending and unending. No judgment, no superiority. The role of spiritual shepherd was intended to be their calling to a nation of lost sheep.

And why was the idea of "mercy" so relevant in any conversation about the Sabbath? It was because the Sabbath itself was a picture of God's mercy, as he had explained to Moses and the nation of Israel: ***"Six days do your work, but on the seventh day do not work, so that your ox and your donkey may rest, and so that the slave born in your household and the foreigner living among you may be refreshed"*** - ***God speaking, Exodus 23:12.*** God was interested in the welfare of the whole person. And why not? He had created the whole person - physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually. His mercy took the whole person into account - including the creating of a Sabbath as, among other things, a day of rest, an opportunity to be renewed and refreshed for all the activities

of the coming week. And with none of their normal duties to fill their minds, they were also free to devote themselves totally to the worship of the One who had provided them such an opportunity.

And then Christ underscores the merciful context of the Sabbath; it is Mark who records this: ***"The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath" - Jesus Christ, Mark 2:27.*** The holiness that the Pharisees and their allies were so desperately seeking was going to be found not in their rules but rather in seeking to reflect God and His mercy by seeking to care for the people to whom they had been called to minister.

And finally: ***"For the Son of Man is Lord [even] of the Sabbath" - Jesus Christ, Matthew 12:8.*** If in fact the Sabbath, as all else, belonged to God, then Jesus, if in fact God's Son, had the authority to declare the true meaning of the Sabbath - and how it was rightly to be observed.

APPLICATION

This story basically has one overall focus, and it's found in one word, found in both testaments: "Mercy." Jesus said it this way: ***"Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful" - Jesus Christ, Luke 6:36.*** In other words, God's mercy is not simply about how He is but, from both testaments, that we are commanded to imitate God's mercy, that His compassion upon us will be reflected upon others.

And it is imitating God, reflecting God's mercy upon us to those around us, that is of critical importance, particularly in the day and age in which we live. Our world is one of almost unending animosity, conflict and confrontation. Against that backdrop, we are commanded to be merciful, even as God has been merciful to us. Mercy was and is to be our calling card to the world, and a totally unworldly way of connecting with those around us.

Why? Mercy reflects selflessness; our focus is outward instead of inward. Mercy reflects wanting the best for others. Mercy reflects ministering to others. Mercy proclaims an end game that our lives made other lives better - in circumstances, in spirit - than they would have been without our lives.

And mercy reflects genuine compassion for others - caring for others without judgment and without limit. That reflects Christ's mercy toward us. Nothing was more important to Him than showing mercy to those around Him, as a means of communicating the greatness of God's mercy. It was that mercy, that compassion for others, that placed Him on the cross. While we saw that as punishment, He saw it as joy - that those whom He loved that much might claim the mercy He showed on behalf of His Father.

Everybody know what a "red flag warning" is? According to the National Weather Service, a red flag warning "means warm temperatures, very low humidity, and stronger winds [that] are expected to combine to produce an increased risk of fire danger." In other words, these conditions increase the likelihood that forests and structures could burn right to the ground. Christian ministry has similar risks, and they all revolve around "mercy." If mercy is absent from our lives, we risk burning ministry right to the ground, and they

look like this:

- 1) If we EVER see ourselves as better than anybody else, we are missing the concept of mercy. We live in times that seem to be encapsulated by the phrase, "My side is better than your side. My perspective is better than you. I'm right; you're wrong. I'm better than you; you're worse than me." Our political climate has played a large part in that. Folks, our Christianity does NOT make us any better than anybody. What is better about us is Christ living and working in us. And Christ is living and working every moment to conform us into His image, for His glory. Our image, our glory means nothing. If for any reason we think of ourselves as better than other people, that's a red flag. We have become so determined as a society to label and demean somebody because they are liberal or conservative, Democrat or Republican, or however many issues show our differences. Folks, we ain't here to practice politics. We're here to practice "Christ." And practicing Christ means mercy, compassion, kindness, love. Not as a response but as a proactive, assertive lifestyle lived out for the sake, the honor and glory of Jesus Christ, and to minister in His name. Not restricted by political considerations but extended to anybody and everybody regardless of politics or persuasions or passions or anything else. Mercy reflects Christ.
- 2) If we EVER content ourselves with the outside presentation of how we are living - we go to church, we tithe, we pray, we attend Bible study - and think that's what makes us pleasing in God's sight, that is a red flag. Isaiah said it so well: ***[All our righteous acts are like filthy rags - Isaiah 64:6a.*** That's what the Pharisees did - contented themselves with outer shows of righteousness, while inside they were a mess! We go to church, we pray, we do Bible study, because of a desire to grow into Christ's image, losing satisfaction with our image in the process.

CONCLUSION

Mercy. That's what it's all about. Look around at the world. Do you feel compassion, tender-hearted affection - no matter who you're looking at? That's what Jesus feels. If you are not reflecting Christ's unlimited love for the world, then let's make that right. Let's pray!