

**Reading:** Matthew 12:1-14

**Theme:** Principles about Keeping the Lord's Day.

A few weeks ago, Siân and I went to Sudbury Hall in South Derbyshire and went to the Museum of Childhood there with our son and family. It was a fascinating place and an enjoyable time. One of the things that struck me was a model of Noah's Ark with loads of animals and the caption attached was "A *Sunday Toy*". All the toys of Victorians and many other generations before and after had to be put away on Sundays and the only toys to be played with were religious toys e.g. Noah's Ark!

Were they too strict? Is our keeping of Sunday - the Lord's day, the day we use in place of the Jewish Sabbath too lax and loose? Here are questions that have vexed Christians, churchgoers, those who want to please God by living aright for Him. It is so easy to become legalistic and have a list of dos and don'ts for a Sunday whether we see it as the Lord's day, the Sabbath or not. In our day and age, it seems the danger is that we can be too lax and do not keep the Lord's day as it could be kept. From the passage we read I hope we will get help for us in this area, some principles to apply to ourselves and lives to help us think through things in this area. To read further on this matter I commend "*Call the Sabbath a Delight*" by Walter Chantry (BOT) – its title taken from "*If you keep your feet from breaking the Sabbath and from doing as you please on my holy day, if you call the Sabbath a delight and the LORD's holy day honourable, and if you honour it by not going your own way and not doing as you please or speaking idle words*". (**Isaiah 58v13**)

So, let's look at this passage and see 3 principles or rather, 3 areas of work that are right and legitimate to be carried out on the Lord's day. They will not cover every instance or situation, perhaps they may cause us to examine our own lives, but if we are here to seek God and His ways, we should be willing and pleased to do such and work through God's word for God's word to work through and in us! I will

use as headings the principles of the works and then develop this as we look at the relevant sections in the passage.

### **1. Works of Necessity.** (v1-4)

Jesus shows that necessary works could be carried out on the Sabbath day. This discussion arose as He and His disciples were going through cornfields on a Sabbath day and His disciples were hungry. They began to pluck the ears of corn and eat them. Luke tells us that they plucked and rubbed the ears of corn in their hands to separate off the chaff and then ate the grains. This was allowable under OT law (Deuteronomy 23:25) and was not robbery, but was a provision for the hungry by the Lord and so taught kindness and sharing. The use of a sickle was not allowed, grain heads could only be plucked by hand and so prevent greed. The provision was for need not greed!

Near them, watching them like hawks, were some Pharisees. When they saw the disciples do this, they went up in the air - with anger, but I suspect mostly with glee – as they felt they had caught Jesus and His disciples out; that they could find fault and drive it home for their advantage. They accused the disciples to Jesus of doing that which was unlawful on the Sabbath.

Sadly, the Pharisees had robbed God's word of much of its force and power and were, more often than not, easy on people concerning sin - except in the area of the Sabbath, where they added and worked out many other rules and regulations. They had divided work into 39 main areas, then these were subdivided into many minor categories e.g. it is ok to carry furniture around the room, even rearrange a room on the Sabbath, but if you needed a chair for extra guests in the next room, you couldn't take it over the threshold of a room without it being work! Here the disciples' actions of plucking and rubbing corn are considered and deemed as being as threshing and this came into the category of work and therefore unlawful! To their legalistic, nit-picking minds, the disciples and therefore Jesus, were guilty of

breaking God's Law so they jump in to point this out to Jesus and those around!

Before we move on to see how Jesus deals with them and show the principle of the works of necessity, we can note something for our own benefit. Jesus' disciples were hungry - they did not have great material success or wealth. Jesus' service is not to be entered into for financial gain as He does not bribe people to follow Him! Also, consider that instead of being prepared to worship, the Pharisees came with a critical attitude to seek fault in others and did not have hearts prepared to see God for themselves. It is easy for anyone to find fault with anyone or anything else. We are not to apply man-made ideas, interpretation and laws to situations as tests of a person's correctness or if their lives are acceptable and kosher, for this is the basis of legalism - adding to God's word, making extra dos or don'ts. The Pharisees ignored the disciples' hunger. We must not ignore real needs even on Sabbath.

Jesus uses this OT story about David, which they would have known and read. The consecrated bread or showbread were 12 loaves set before the Lord every Sabbath and only the priests were allowed to eat it. Yet Abimelech the high priest realised that David and his unseen men had a need and he waived the ceremonial law and did that which was ceremonially unlawful and gave it to David and his men. Abimelech saw a greater law was in place - that of meeting the needs of others and keep the law of love towards them. The law of necessity says this can be done in a situation of need which cannot be ordinarily done. If the high priest could set aside a divinely ordained ceremonial provision when necessity demanded it, then surely the Lord Jesus Christ could set aside totally unwarranted man-made Sabbath regulations!

Jesus shows that works that meet need, works of necessity are permitted and are legitimate. The principle can be worked out in our

lives for necessities - not things we could have done previously, but were lax to do so and just put off until Sunday, but necessities which arise. It falls to us all to examine our hearts and lives. Moving on we see:

## **2. Works of Piety.** (v5-6)

This means we do works for God, for His service and for the benefit and service of His cause and people. Here Jesus points these bigoted Pharisees to the temple, the priests and the work they were involved in, but they were innocent of breaking the Sabbath. To be a priest was a hard, physical job - not just pottering about in the temple, but involved in killing, skinning, butchering up animals of various sizes, moving materials and the carcasses around the temple area, setting up this or that, washing this or that... They were very busy, doing much physical work and the Sabbath was no rest for them! Even with all their “work” they were not condemned, for they ministered to and for the Lord, in His service, for and on behalf of His people.

The principle here is that work done for God on the Sabbath is not a breaking of the Sabbath. A higher law is in place which demands that everything needed to make possible the correct worship of God by people be done and this modifies, restricts the literal interpretation of the regulation concerning Sabbath rest and observation. This meant works of piety for God, His service and people were allowed. The Pharisees did not bother with this and felt their traditions were broken.... Jesus told them that these disciples were with Him, were His servants, His workers and He was greater than the temple! If those who served at the temple were guiltless, surely His disciples who were in need of food - even though being with Jesus and in His service, then weren't they guiltless as they served the One who was God in a real human body?

This principle makes me feel better as I “*work*” on a Sunday, but it is to be a comfort to us all as we seek to serve God in various ways,

seek to come together to worship Him and we can put effort in getting here, to repairing a window, cleaning a mess to help the worship go on. Preachers can pay tolls, fares to travel to preach. We can do many things as we seek to serve the Lord and His people - even on a Sunday. We are to avoid unnecessary things - again it is for us to examine our own hearts and lives before God. I've read of a Christian carpenter of old, who would go to his workshop on a Sunday afternoon for couple of hours and make toys for children in need in the local orphanage and did so as part of his service for the Lord. He felt he couldn't preach or teach, so he gave practical service. Do we consider that a right use of the Lord's day? He did and it was a work of piety to him. Now we see:

### **3. Works of Mercy.** (v7-14)

To do works of mercy on the Sabbath is right and proper. Jesus confirms this by applying God's word correctly and by an example. In v7 Jesus quotes OT from Hosea 6:6. The Pharisees went through all sorts of rituals and worship; they were so careful to do this and that. Jesus says here in effect "*So what?*" Why do such things when they are all outward things, but their hearts, their true selves were not involved? They did them out of obligation, for there was no true love involved. They made the sacrifices, but did not have any reality of God in or about their lives; in fact, the reality of God did not affect their hearts and minds. God wanted mercy, kindness and love shown, but they could not be bothered with this. They were quick to condemn the disciples, but none of the Pharisees sought to help the disciples in their hunger and remove the need for them to pick the corn!

These Pharisees had hard, critical, judgemental hearts - which is wrong on all days, especially on the Sabbath day. They had no awareness or tenderness to the needs of others and no desire to help or to show mercy on innocent ones, ones who out of need had plucked and eaten this corn.

Jesus here taught of works of mercy and this was taught by the One who is not only Lord of heaven and earth, but the Lord of the Sabbath. Far from being subject to man-made traditions and rules, these disciples were under Jesus' rule and authority. Therefore, they had permission and freedom to pluck the corn! Jesus as Lord, the sovereign Lord, the One who gave the 10 Commandments, was applying the 4<sup>th</sup> commandment correctly as far from it being an oppressive thing, it is a commandment for the benefit of people. Jesus in Mark 2:27 says "*The Sabbath was made for man **not man for the Sabbath***" i.e. it is for people's benefit and well-being and not time of trial and hardship, a day for putting up dos and don'ts, but a day to enjoy the Lord and His goodness, His day to delight in, a day even to show works of mercy in, as well as a day to keep holy and worship God together as His people.

Jesus then went to the synagogue where these Pharisees seem to have been based. Jesus held the Sabbath as being primarily a day to meet with God and God's people at God's house - He doesn't cast it aside as if it did not matter, but went to the place of worship even with all the imperfect folk around Him and even with those antagonistic Pharisees there!

In that synagogue was a man with a shrivelled hand and the Pharisees questioned Jesus whether or not it was lawful to heal on the Sabbath. Two main schools of Jewish thought existed about this topic - the one said "Yes", while the other took a more hard-line and said "No" - unless it was to try and preserve a life that would not last until the next day without it. The Pharisees were trying to get Jesus into a religious squabble and so either side would have accused Him as being in the wrong!

Jesus questioned them about one of their sheep and it would have received the answer "*Of course we would pull it out. It would be*

*cruel and heartless to leave it there!*” They could have quoted Proverbs 12:10 *“A righteous man cares for the needs of his animal”*. Jesus answered **v12a**. They were to ponder what was worth more, what was more valuable - a person or sheep? Surely, there is no contest! Then why did they restrict the day of doing good, showing mercy on the Sabbath to dumb animals and not extend it to human beings created in God’s image? Help must be given as and when needed. Showing mercy and doing works of mercy are **always** right - so **v12b**.

Jesus calls the man to stretch out his hand - which would be a cruel thing to say from anyone else, but as the man attempts to do so, life, health, healing happens and his hand was stretched out, was completely restored. We are at liberty to do good, to do works of mercy 7 days a week. There are so many ways of doing good, showing mercy and these are not restricted to doing them on a Sunday alone.

These Pharisees had been exposed. Did they apologise and humble themselves, own they were wrong and trust in Jesus? Not at all. They are angry, bitter, frustrated and they team up to plot how to kill Jesus. Their hatred is becoming open opposition to Jesus. Even in the light of His miracle and His teaching, they despise Him and want Him out of the way. To achieve their ends, they team up with the worldly and ungodly Herodians (Mark 3:6). These ones spent a Sabbath in criticism, bitterness, scheming, fault finding, plotting and it ends with planning Jesus’ death. What men of God!!

Now what of us? Do we make a Sunday our delight or is it just another day which has religious aspects to it and at times that spoils us doing what **we** want? If we do not delight in the Lord’s day, it may be that we do not delight in the Lord of the Sabbath. Other things will crowd in and we may be far from wanting to rest in and worship the Lord of the Sabbath, but we will want to be doing any

and everything and may even use excuses of works of mercy, necessity and piety to cloak our true reasons! I know some people have health reasons; others have family reasons which sometimes prevent them from getting to church on Sundays. Have we considered what a privilege it is to have the freedom to meet together on a Sunday and worship God together? I know some can only get to one service a Sunday - family, health reasons, some for cultural reasons, but in the church we have the opportunity to meet together, sing God's praise and hear God's word twice on a Sunday and we can miss out on rich blessings and time together as God's family.

Perhaps we cannot delight in the Sabbath as we do not know or delight in the Lord of the Sabbath. It is not a case of doing or not doing on a Sunday, but a case of knowing the Lord Jesus and this affects how we view His day - the Lord's day and will affect what we will want to do or not do on it and influence our desire to keep it holy and worship Him. The most important thing is to know the Lord and then we will desire and try to do that which pleases Him, not just on a Sunday, but every day and make everyday holy and an opportunity to meet with Him and, whenever possible, meet with His people to learn of Him and worship and praise Him together.