

Killing Religion

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[0 : 0 0] Just to add my welcome that Dan has made and we've all made to Daniel and Edmund and Thomas and those of you who are visiting we now open the Bible together to hear God's Word and if you want to follow along there's probably a Bible in front or behind you and it would be good to turn to Matthew 12 verses 1 to 14 that was read for us only once.

How wonderful that Dan wanted to read it again and then say the creed again. That's above and beyond and how glad we are for Dan's enthusiasm to repeat the liturgy.

If you're visiting with us I wonder what you made of the baptism service. These are very strong things. Come and tell me afterwards we said some very strong things to each other.

You know the last prayer that we prayed for Daniel, Edmund and Thomas said do not be ashamed to confess the faith of Christ's crucifixion. In other words it's easy to be ashamed of.

Fight bravely under his banner against sin, the world and the devil. Continue being Christ's faithful soldier and servant until your life's end. And then in that hymn we sang about battle shield and sword for the fight.

[1 : 2 3] I mean that's pretty strong stuff isn't it? I mean it's almost as though not everyone loves Jesus naturally. And that's a very good segue into this.

This passage is a very important passage for us on this baptism day. Because despite the fact that Jesus continues to do wonderful, lovely, gracious works and says the most lovely things, there is this increasing rejection of him.

In fact the very last verse, if you just look down on page 817, in verse 14 we find out the Pharisees who were religious lay and clergy went out and conspired together how to murder Jesus, to kill him. And the question is what could possibly drive these decent, upright, religious people to want to kill Jesus? These were good people.

They had been living their lives desperately trying to obey God's Ten Commandments and make sure everyone else did. But now they plot together to try and take away Jesus' life.

[2 : 3 6] This is not harmless and neutral. It's clear from our little passage here it has something to do with the Sabbath. That's at the heart of this passage. Not just because of what Jesus does on the Sabbath, but because of this astonishing claim he makes about himself in verse 12 where Jesus says the Sabbath belongs to me.

I am the Lord of the Sabbath. I'm what it's all about. And in all of the Gospels this has to be one of the most breathtaking claims of Jesus because you know the Sabbath is not a small thing.

If we go back to the opening of the Bible right at the start, to creation itself, the Bible opens where God creates the world in six days.

Day seven is different. Days one to six are all marked by a beginning and an ending, morning and evening. Day seven doesn't finish. It goes on.

There is no evening and morning and it opens the door for eternal life. The last act of creation God does on day six is he creates man and woman to be his image so that the first day for humanity is the Sabbath, a day of rest.

[3 : 4 9] I'm sorry to tell you all that because I know how much you love working so hard. But we were created for rest before we were created for work. God opens this day up to us and invites us to share his rest.

The word Sabbath just means seventh. It's the first thing in creation God sets apart as holy. And the picture of this day in chapter two is of man and woman enjoying God's creation, enjoying themselves and enjoying fellowship together and enjoying God's rest, this perfect enjoyment with God.

And rest in Bible terms doesn't mean just putting your feet up. It's God stepping back and looking at what he's made and saying, it's good, it's good, it's very good.

We no longer live in the garden. Later on in the Bible, God gives ten commandments to his people. And one of the commandments is the Sabbath commandment. One day in seven to remember who the creator is.

It's not you. One day to not be a cog in the machine. One day to be a creature and not an object of production and busyness.

[5 : 02] One day to turn away from the screens. Can you do that? One day to remind ourselves that the world does not need my anxious efforts to keep it spinning.

That he's in control. This is a Sabbath gift from God. That you and I were not slaves to our clocks or our commitments or to commerce. That we're completely free to be human beings in the presence of God.

That I'm not defined by my weariness and my work and all my agitation. But accepting from God's hand that I am a human. And I can rest in the fact that he has done the work for me.

One day to transfer my infatuation from building my life and building my image to God. Who creates and saves. And that my life and your life have eternal significance.

They're going on forever as we heard in the testimonies. Because we've been made in the image of God. And we are made to reflect the glory of God to each other. Just a little lower than angels.

Crowned with glory and honour.

[6 : 04] It's a day for that. So no wonder to the Jews and particularly to the Pharisees. This Sabbath day was sacrosanct. Did you know that a couple of hundred years before this.

When the Jews were attacked by other armies. If they were attacked on the Sabbath they never defended themselves. They would be slaughtered. Men, women and children. They chose to be slaughtered.

Rather than work on the Sabbath. We suffer before we break the Sabbath. And the concern of the Pharisees here in this passage. Is for what is lawful on the Sabbath.

This word lawful comes four times. And it's very difficult for us to feel what it means. Because there's nothing sacred or holy in our culture anymore.

And lawful when it's used by these men has to do with God. In our day lawful means legalising cannabis. Or changing the speed limit. To them this is about what heaven says is lawful.

[7 : 02] The connection of heaven and earth. Now admittedly they had added lots of rules. They'd gone through the Old Testament. Counted up all the different commands of God. Comes to 613 in case you're interested.

Dan has 1226. And they had 39 categories of work.

Because the Bible doesn't nail down all the details. And what work and what isn't. And we need to be very careful here. We've got to be careful not to caricature the Pharisees. Otherwise we're going to do what they're doing.

We're going to come away from this passage feeling better about ourselves. Because we're not as bad as they are. One more thing before we get into it. Jesus himself provokes this issue.

We left off chapter 11 last year. And if you look at the last three verses. Jesus says in verse 28.

Come to me. All who labour and are heavy laden. And I will give you rest.

[8 : 04] Sabbath word. Take my yoke upon you and learn free from me. For I am gentle and lowly in heart. And you will find the Sabbath rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy.

And my burden is light. In other words Jesus is saying. All the blessings that God had at creation for us. All the blessings of rest and eternity. Are in me.

So that this conflict we have in chapter 12 over the Sabbath. Is not about the fussy interpretation of laws and rules. It's not even that the Pharisees had made this into a legalistic burden.

That comes up later. The fundamental issue is about two completely contradictory views of who Jesus is. By saying this at the end of chapter 11.

What he's saying is quite dangerous. Because either Jesus can give us rest or he can't. Either he is God in the flesh or he's not. And if he's not. He ought to be resisted and rejected.

[9 : 03] So here we are. The beginning of chapter 12. Immediately after offering us rest. Very natural. We have two Sabbath episodes. One in which the disciples are in trouble. Caught by the Pharisees.

And the second one from verse 8. Verse 9 to the end. Jesus is trapped by the Pharisees. And both of them show who Jesus is. So I've got two points.

And the second point is much shorter than the second. For those of you who knew I say that to keep people. I just tell the truth. It's better to tell the truth. Always.

Firstly then. Jesus fulfills the Sabbath. Verses 1 to 8. Now we almost get a comedy beginning to this episode.

You know. There are the disciples and Jesus walking through the grain fields in verse 1 on the Sabbath. His disciples are hungry. Basic human need. So they take the grains of wheat. And they spread out and take the grains.

[10:01] And then the stalks. And then eat them. And there's nothing in the Old Testament to say you shouldn't do that. But it was against the rules and traditions of the Pharisees. Now if you notice at the end of verse 1.

That as soon as they begin to pluck the wheat of grain. The Pharisees instantly say to Jesus. Look. Your disciples are doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath. How did the Pharisees know that?

Were they following them along in the grain field? They must have been. Surely. I think it's funny. So they take some grain. And the Pharisees say this is a high crime.

And Jesus it's your fault. Now. At this point in the story. We ought to say to Jesus. You need to learn some Canadian ways here.

You need to de-escalate things. Be nice. Be peaceable here. Don't ramp things up Jesus. But he does.

[11:02] In fact he escalates the issue. Each of. He gives three answers. And each answer is brilliant. And it's gracious. And builds. And escalates. And gives an increasingly devastating view of who Jesus is to them.

So answer number one. Verses three to four. Jesus says. I'm greater than King David from the Old Testament. He takes them back to the big hungry episode.

From about a thousand years before. When the anointed king of David was on the run. And he and his men were very hungry. And they came to the priest. Asking for bread.

And the bread took the sacramental bread of the presence. Which was only lawful for the priests to eat. And because the priest recognized David's authority as the anointed king of God. It was the right thing to do.

Now think about this. This is an astounding argument. It only works if Jesus is greater than David. Because David stood in a category all of his own to Old Testament believers.

[11:59] But Jesus is not just equal with David. He's saying I'm greater. There's something greater than David here. That's why my disciples are eating on this Sabbath. We don't have time for this.

But it's a delicious irony. That David who is God's chosen king is being hunted down by the religious establishment. Even though he's God's chosen king.

And by the end of this passage the religious establishment are hunting Jesus' life to take it. But that's another sermon. So that's his first answer. I'm greater than David. Second, verses 5 to 6.

I'm greater than the temple. Have you not read in the law? On the Sabbath the priests in the temple profane the Sabbath and are guiltless. I tell you something great in the temple is here.

Now Jesus goes for the most holy thing in all of Israel. It's the temple. It's the place of connection between heaven and earth. This is where God had chosen his presence to dwell.

[13:00] Where God meets with his people through sacrifices. And particularly on this most holy day of the Sabbath. And the whole system of sacrifices and liturgies were appointed by God.

So that he might have communion and fellowship with his people. And the priests who did the sacrifices worked on the Sabbath. Like Dan and I.

Sometimes Dan works twice as hard as I do. I'm going to have to stop, aren't I?

Jesus says, Here in this grain field there is a place of greater fellowship and communion with God. Where God's presence comes closer than it ever did in the temple.

Where God makes himself accessible to his people more than he ever did in the temple. Heaven and earth are meeting. Not in Jerusalem where there are sacrifices. Right here where I'm standing.

[14:06] Because I'm greater than the temple. All the fullness of God dwells in me bodily. I've come as the one to whom the Sabbath and temple testify.

It's almost unimaginable. And it's hard to see how shocking this is. This is an unpardonable treason. It's the one thing that unites Jesus' enemies against him.

So later on in this gospel we find this is the thing they accuse him of and find him guilty of in trial. This is the thing they hurled him on the cross. That he dared to compare himself with the temple. He compares himself with David.

He says, I'm greater than the temple. And now thirdly, in verse 7 and 8, he says, The Sabbath is mine. Jesus goes on the front foot. Again he refers to the Old Testament, verse 7.

If you had known what this means, I desire mercy and not sacrifice, you would not have condemned the guiltless. They did know what that meant.

[15:03] They just didn't think they should do it. Because if they did it, they would miss out on one of their favorite pastimes and that is condemning the guiltless. Of course God gave the sacrifices and liturgies and rituals of the Old Testament.

But here's the problem. You can do those external rituals and your heart be a million miles away from God. We Anglicans are experts at this.

And God hates it. And the invariable sign that our hearts are far from God is that we are filled with self-righteousness and fast to condemn others, not wondering whether they are guilty or not, but simply because it makes us feel more safe and more superior.

This is a constant challenge for all believers. We fasten on to the externals. They're easier to grasp. They're much easier for us to control.

And it's easy to convince ourselves that these external things are really the important things. And after a while, you can do a pretty good job with the externals. Until, well, we don't really...

[16:10] You lose touch with God that way. It becomes a self-saving project. I just... You know, you can come week by week and sing the hymns with gusto and pray with loud amens and not have a milligram of compassion for the person sitting behind you or in front of you, let alone those people who are not here.

And then Jesus announces this most shocking claim. Verse 8. For the Son of Man, he says, is Lord of the Sabbath. The Sabbath is mine.

I am the one who will give you the rest of God. I'm Emmanuel. I'm God in the flesh. Come to me. Absolutely breathtaking. Sabbath was the climax of creation, the purpose of creation.

Jesus says we're created for him. All that comes into the rest and the good of God, he will give us. He will rescue us from the crushing weight of trying to make ourselves good enough for God and the crushing weight of knowing we're not good enough for God.

And Jesus says, come to me with all your sin, both of omission and commission, all your lostness and evil, and I will take them away and give you eternal rest in exchange.

[17:25] It's amazing. He is greater than David. He's greater than the temple. And the one standing in front of the Pharisees in that field is offering them all the things which they're so concerned about, the eternal rest of God.

But they've made their rules more precious than God himself. They've substituted their obedience for the grace of God. And it's not going to get them far. That's point one.

Jesus fulfills the Sabbath. And point two, very briefly, shows us how Jesus fulfills the Sabbath. Verses 9 to 14. So now it's on the same Sabbath, I believe.

And the Pharisees lay a trap for Jesus. They know he goes to the synagogue on the Sabbath. And we know from other Gospels that these Pharisees dragged this poor man who had a withered hand and thrust him in front of Jesus.

They want to use Jesus' humanity and compassion against him. They want to find a reason to accuse him. So they bring this man into the synagogue, verse 10.

[18:31] And they say loudly, Is it lawful? Is it godly? To do the work of healing on the Sabbath? This is a wonderful picture of pride and how the disease, once it grips you, leads you to astonishing lengths of hypocrisy.

They're so desperate to condemn Jesus that they manipulate the man. They think they're manipulating Jesus. They have to put an end to any suggestion that Jesus really could be God's son and offer them God's rest.

And so they want to trick him into working on the Sabbath. But if you just think about it a moment, their whole plan rests on two beliefs. One, their belief that Jesus has the power to be able to heal the man. And secondly, that Jesus has the compassion and will heal him.

Aha, we've got him. Now we'll prove he's a lawbreaker. This will be our final triumph. And Jesus' answer is just beautiful, verse 11 and 12. He says, Which one of you who has a sheep, if it falls into

a pit on the Sabbath, will not take hold of it and lift it out?

Of how much more value is a man than a sheep? It is lawful to do good on the Sabbath. Now on the surface, this is just, he's just calling them on their hypocrisy.

[19:46] He says, I know many of you have sheep. And, you know, if your sheep falls into a pit in a dangerous place and it's going to be damaged on the Sabbath, you're not going to wait a whole day to pull it out. You just reef down your hand. I mean, even from a financial point of view, you pull it out.

Nobody's going to think twice about pulling out a sheep. It's a perfectly good thing to do on the Sabbath. But he said, he says to them, You've so dehumanized and demonized this man and me, you're treating him worse than an animal.

It's amazing. And then he just simply speaks to the man. He says, stretch out your hand. And he does. And the stretching out of the hand and the restoration, it's complete and healthy and whole. It's a perfect picture of what Jesus has come to do. This is what the Sabbath is for. It's not for proving I'm right, but for restoration, for healing.

It's allowing God to work. And the restoration that happens in this man and in his hand is a small picture of the great restoration that Jesus has come to bring us, where he'll restore the full image of God to us in the great Sabbath.

[20:59] The Sabbath is doing good. Sabbath is for doing good. Not just general good. But Jesus says, it is for the restoring of my people by rescuing them from danger and death. And what is so clever about this, have you noticed which animal he chooses out of the Old Testament?

A sheep. Here he is in front of the religious leaders, the spiritual leaders, and they're so caught up in pride and justification, they've got no care over this poor man and you can't use his hand.

But Jesus has come as the good shepherd. He knows every sheep by name. His work is to restore us to the sheepfold, even when we dive over the cliff and entangle ourselves in prickles.

His job is to lead us by still waters, to restore our soul. And when we travel through the valley of the shadow of death, he will lead us and go beside us.

He will take us by the hand. And because he is our good shepherd, goodness and mercy shall follow us every day of our lives until he takes us to dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

[22:09] And the Pharisees are stunned into silence. And you think that the sheer kindness and brilliance of this answer might have some effect. Verse 14, they conspire against him how to destroy him.

And here I think is the richest irony of all in the passage, that by killing him, they will enable him to fulfill the Sabbath. In dying, Jesus brings that restoration that he's been speaking about that we so desperately need, the new creation.

This is what we celebrated in the baptisms this morning. He has lived the perfect life. He has died the perfect death. And as he dies, he takes on my pride and my hypocrisy and my disobedience and my lack of obedience.

All the times I've demonized and dehumanized other people and all the times it's happened to me.

And he takes it all into himself and he pays for it. And he says, it's finished.

And he says to God, the father, look on me and don't look on them. And God looks at us and he says, I see Jesus in you. And he looks at Jesus and he says, I see them and their sin in you.

[23:18] And when he looks at us through the eyes of Jesus Christ and through the lens of Jesus' death and resurrection, you know what he says? He says, it's good. It's good. It's very good. And that's the heart of Sabbath rest.

And our work is not to rest on what we're trying to do, but to rest on what he has done for us.

Because it's only through Jesus we have this true rest, the fulfillment of creation.

He alone can bring us that restoration that we lost in the garden. Amen.