

24. The Lord of Sabbath and the apostles

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We've all used labels. We stick them on cans and manila folders so that we would know what's inside. But we often apply our own mental labels on people. Thus, there is a saying, "A first impression is a lasting impression," whether it is right or wrong.

None of the born-again Christians would like to be called as a legalist. But some Christians tend to act in their legalistic way without even realizing. They often make sure everybody, I mean everybody, follow what they want others do. If others don't follow, all of sudden, it is easy for them to label those people as someone really not of God.

It's easier to label homosexual people than to be a friend to a gay person who is confused and hurting inside, to show the way of salvation. It's easier to look down on the people who go through a divorce than to help the divorced. It's easier to argue against abortionists than to help an unwed mother with a baby. It's easier to complain about the broken welfare system than to help the poor.

In other words, it's easier to label than to love someone as Jesus does.

Does it mean that we should not be concerned about the right biblical doctrines or discard holiness and righteousness for the sake of inclusiveness and popularity? Absolutely not, that's what many heretics do. But it is to say that there is something wrong with applying labels before examining the contents.

The Pharisees and other religious leaders of Israel labeled Jesus as a law breaker who should be removed. They labeled Him without examining what the Lord was teaching, because what He taught was against the rules and regulations they set up for their own benefits, but not by God Himself. Upon this ground, Jesus and His critics fought their most intense and fierce battles.

A. THE LORD OF SABBATH

Matthew 12:1-8 At that time Jesus went through the grainfields on the Sabbath. And His disciples were hungry, and began to pluck heads of grain and to eat. And when the Pharisees saw it, they said to Him, "Look, Your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath!" But He said to them, "Have you not read what David did when he was hungry, he and those who were with him: how he entered the house of God and ate the showbread which was not lawful for him to eat, nor for those who were with him, but only for the priests? Or have you not read in the law that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple profane the Sabbath, and are blameless? Yet I say to you that in this place there is One greater than the temple. But if you had known what this means, 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the guiltless. For the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath."

What Jesus' disciples did was not against the Sabbath law of God. It was against the Pharisees' own rules and regulations. Jesus deliberately violated their Sabbath traditions on several occasions.

The Sabbath Day had become a crushing burden, a symbol of the grueling religious bondage that had captured their nation. Even in the modern Israel, the whole coun-

try literally comes to a screeching halt during the Sabbath day from 6 pm Friday evening till 6 pm Saturday evening.

By the time the Pharisees in Jesus' day inherited a simple commandment of "resting on the seventh day", God's merciful principle of rest had grown into a merciless tangle of rules. The legalists had succeeded in squeezing the joy out of God's gift to His people.

Picking and eating the heads of grain from someone's fields was not illegal and it was a way of God's welfare systems for the poor at that time. But doing it on the Sabbath Day was a "No, No" to the Pharisees.

Jesus did not argue with them. Instead, He took them right to the Word of God in 1 Sam. 21:1-6. While David and his men were fugitives from king Saul, they ate the loaves of bread that were for the only priests to eat. And would which Jew dare to condemn Israel's greatest king? "But He was God's anointed!" they might argue, yes, that was exactly what Jesus claimed for Himself. Not only was He God's Anointed, but He was also the Lord of the Sabbath. The Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath. God made the Sabbath for men, not men for the Sabbath.

Religion is made by men, not by God. God desires a relationship which comes from the heart, not religion which is nothing more than the self-made sacrifice of humanistic value. Somehow, in their minds, attending church a few times a year, being good and religious should appease God's heart enough for them to get some brownie points. How wrong they are according to the Bible!

By the way, Jehovah's Witness claims that Jesus had never claimed to be God. They have to eat their own words because of this phrase: "For the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath." Jesus is claiming His deity. God is the One who instituted the Sabbath on men. And Jesus is the Lord of the Sabbath, so Jesus is God. A simple and logical explanation.

B. LABELED BY THE PHARISEES

Mark 3:1-12 And He entered the synagogue again, and a man was there who had a withered hand. 2 So they watched Him closely, whether He would heal him on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse Him. 3 And He said to the man who had the withered hand, "Step forward." 4 Then He said to them, "Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?" But they kept silent. 5 And when He had looked around at them with anger, being grieved by the hardness of their hearts, He said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." And he stretched it out, and his hand was restored as whole as the other. 6 Then the Pharisees went out and immediately plotted with the Herodians against Him, how they might destroy Him. 7 But Jesus withdrew with His disciples to the sea. And a great multitude from Galilee followed Him, and from Judea 8 and Jerusalem and Idumea and beyond the Jordan; and those from Tyre and Sidon, a great multitude, when they heard how many things He was doing, came to Him. 9 So He told His disciples that a small boat should be kept ready for Him because of the multitude, lest they should crush Him. 10 For He healed many, so that as many as had afflictions pressed about Him to touch Him. 11 And the unclean spirits, whenever they saw Him, fell down before Him and cried out, saying, "You are the Son of God." 12 But He sternly warned them that they should not make Him known.

The question arises here: was this man with a withered hand planted there by the Pharisees purposely? I think the answer is absolutely yes. Actually, what they did was a compliment to the Lord Jesus. They knew that He was compassionate. They also knew that Jesus would heal this man on the Sabbath Day and break their tradition. They thought they had set up a perfect trap for Jesus.

Jesus told the man with a withered hand to stretch out his hand. He was telling him to do something that was impossible. The crippled man had two options: He could argue with Jesus why he could not and try to explain about his paralyzed condition. Or he could just stretch it out, as Jesus had commanded. By faith, he stretched it out and he was healed.

Jesus gives us many commands that we are unable to do in our own ways. We can either argue with Him or we can obey Him by faith. God never commands us without enabling us. I am a firm believer of the phrase, "Where God guides, God provides." It doesn't mean that the Lord drops a chest full of gold on our laps while we do nothing. It means that when the Lord gives us a command, He expects us to follow Him with a simple faith in Him, then, only then, He will start to provide us what we need to get the job done.

A good example is our church building. There was a time when we ran ahead of the Lord, only to be yanked back. A few years later, when the Lord gave us His permission to move ahead, Vantage West Credit Union didn't give us a call and beg us to get a construction loan from them. Our building team members had to work countless hours to prepare the right paperwork. We've been rejected by so many financial institutions in last 16 years that I cannot even count. But the Lord made it happen through His people's hard work as they obeyed.

Let's get back to the text. According to their Sabbath traditions, if a Jew cut his finger, he could stop the bleeding, but he could not put ointment on the cut. He could stop it from getting worse, but he wasn't allowed to make it better. Jesus knew that the Pharisees had passed a law prohibiting healing on the Sabbath except in the case of a life-or-death situation. How absurd and ridiculous can it be! But no one had the courage or the authority to challenge these religious leaders' ungodly rules and blatant abuse of power. That is, until Jesus Christ, the Lord of the Sabbath, came into town.

Our Lord's question in v4 was never answered by His enemies. They wouldn't answer Him, because they knew that they would incriminate themselves.

The Pharisees felt nothing but murderous hatred so much for Jesus, whom they considered a dangerous rule breaker that they united with the Herodians and started making plans to arrest Jesus and destroy Him, because once their authority got challenged, there would be more people to come against them. That threatened their social status, they didn't like it one bit.

The Herodians were not a religious party. They were a group of Jews who were sympathetic to king Herod and supported his rule. Most of the Jews, especially the Pharisees, despised Herod and obeyed his laws reluctantly. So it was surprising that the Pharisees, who were strict Jews, would join themselves with these politicians. Because they had a common enemy – Jesus.

But the crowd was attracted to Jesus more because of His miraculous works than His message. A typical shallow mindset.

Listen, there is always such a powerful lure to this type of religious legalism in the Christian life, because there is never a shortage of leaders who want to lead this way, and never a shortage of people who want to follow this way. But God wants us to have the Holy Spirit who writes the practical and uncompromising applications of His Word into our hearts, not the rules of men.

One of the reasons legalism does not die down is that it breeds through our pride and self-importance. When we label others inferior to us, it fans our ego which allows us to look down on others. It is no wonder why Jesus hated the legalistic attitude of the Pharisees and still hates any legalistic mentality.

Here is a tip for the ones who want to be above everyone else:

James 4:10 Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up. But I've never seen any legalist who is humble, because it is next to impossible to wash someone's feet while we are standing on our self-made pedestal.

C. THE CHOOSING OF THE TWELVE APOSTLES

Luke 6:12-16 Now it came to pass in those days that He went out to the mountain to pray, and continued all night in prayer to God. 13 And when it was day, He called His disciples to Himself; and from them He chose twelve whom He also named apostles: 14 Simon, whom He also named Peter, and Andrew his brother; James and John; Philip and Bartholomew; 15 Matthew and Thomas; James the son of Alphaeus, and Simon called the Zealot; 16 Judas the son of James, and Judas Iscariot who also became a traitor.

Jesus spent the whole night in prayer, because He was about to call His 12 apostles from among the many disciples who were following Him. A disciple is a learner, an apprentice. An apostle is a chosen messenger sent with a special commission. Jesus had many disciples but only twelve handpicked apostles. But these guys were not highly influential, well-educated, wealthy, or popular people. Even though they were a motley crew, they were selected by God and He would equip them with the power of the Holy Spirit.

Why did He pray all night? For one thing, He knew that opposition against Him was growing and would finally result in His crucifixion. So He prayed for strength as He faced the path ahead. Also, He wanted the Father's guidance as He selected His 12 apostles, because the future of the church rested with them. Keep in mind that one of the Twelve would betray Him, and Jesus knew who he was from the beginning.

Does it mean that Jesus made a mistake by choosing Judas? No, it shows His grace, mercy, and love toward the worst sinner. God's love has no bound and no limit. But the one who can receive God's love has the right to refuse it, but at the same time, he or she has the consequences of one's refusal.

Matthew 22:14 For many are called, but few are chosen.

While we study the four Gospels, some of us get confused with the different names of disciples:

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| 1) Peter – a.k.a. Simon | 2) Andrew | 3) James | 4) John | 5) Philip |
| 6) Bartholomew – a.k.a. Nathanael | 7) Thomas | 8) Matthew – a.k.a. Levi | | |
| 9) James, son of Alphaeus | 10) Thaddaeus – a.k.a. Judas, son of James | | | |
| 11) Simon the Zealot | 12) Judas Iscariot, the traitor | | | |

D. APPLICATIONS

1) Any rigid denominational rules and regulations outside of the Word of God is not of God. We need to be flexible within the Word of God and open to the Holy Spirit. Blessed are the flexible, for they shall not be broken.

2 Corinthians 3:17 Now the Lord is the Spirit; and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty.

2) Let's love others as Jesus did, then label them, if you still need to.