

May 14, 2017

“Adding to the Lord’s Commands”

Matthew 12:1-14

FCF: Doubting the sufficiency of God’s Word for our lives

PROPOSITION: (anchor) Since the Lord’s commands are truly good.
(magnet) We must adhere to but not add to them.

SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION:

Sometimes we need to leave well enough alone, especially when it’s already perfect. Imagine a grad student writing on Impressionist painters. He visits a museum displaying the works of Claude Monet - perhaps the “Lilies”. And the student says, “These flowers are too fuzzy. They need more focus and definition.” So he takes out his brush and goes to work. What would we say? “You fool. You’ve taken priceless art and added your worthless suggestions.”

Pretty ridiculous, right? Well, we are prone to do the same thing when we doubt the good sufficiency of God’s Word for our lives. We doubt it and then we make our additions to it.

SCRIPTURE READING: [Matthew 12:1-14](#)

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

SERMON INTRODUCTION:

All of the Lord’s commands are for our truest deepest good. They are an expression of the character and concerns, the priorities and purposes of the God in whose image we have been made. So there is a deep and profound fitted-ness to the law of God and the lives of men.

What is this text about? At one level, it’s about observing the Sabbath. This is a creation ordinance, woven into the fabric of the cosmos. It’s the fourth of the ten commandments ([READ Exodus 20:8-10a](#)). All days are the Lord’s but this one is to be His in a focused, heightened, special way. It’s to be a day of cessation from our regular work, a day of physical rest, love of neighbor, acts of mercy, and the worship of God. In many ways, to keep the Sabbath is an act of trust in God’s provision. And we do well to remember that the flourishing of any relationship demands the investment of our time. God, in His love for us, has given us this command.

So, at one level, this text is about the Sabbath. But, at another level, the Sabbath is really just the presenting issue here in the rising opposition to Jesus that we see in Matthew 12. The Jewish religious leaders are pushing back, especially as Jesus is speaking against their legalistic approach to the law. And what becomes clear is this. The Lord’s commands are truly good. And, since the Lord’s commands are truly good, we must adhere to but not add to them.

I have three points to make. First, our need to understand this temptation. Second, our need to be aware of the symptoms. And then, third, our need to submit to the Lord’s authority.

I. UNDERSTANDING THE TEMPTATION

First, we have the need to understand our temptation to add to God’s commands. Which means we need to know something of the cultural context here and the heart dynamics in play.

A) The Rules of the Time

Jesus is speaking in a first century Jewish context. That's worth keeping in mind

1. The Mishnah

Much of Jewish life was governed by oral traditions, rules created and passed on by the rabbis pertaining to the application of Old Testament law. These traditions were part of the Mishnah.

2. The Sabbath

The Mishnah listed 39 kinds of work forbidden on the Sabbath. One had to do with harvesting grain (or any activity resembling it). And another with healing in non-life threatening cases.

B) The Origins of the Rules

It was pretty exhaustive. Where did the impulse for such a listing of rules come from?

1. Likely good intentions

Surely, part of it was born of good intentions - a devotion to God and a concern for His people.

2. But gone awry

But there were other forces at work that caused this to go awry. Fear of the influence and pull of the world. And pride - the arrogant assumption man could improve on what God had declared.

Before we critique this, we ought to have some understanding of the dynamics at work.

Illustration:

We have a long record of good intentions gone awry. The introduction of kudzu in the South as an ornamental shade vine. Now it's all over our roadsides. The introduction of Asian Carp to clear algae and parasites from ponds. Now they're all over Kentucky and Barkley Lakes.

It might be worth asking a simple question here. "How's all that working for us?"

Application:

A similar question is demanded with the rules we Christians add to God's commands.

Jerram Barrs presses into this in his book, [Delighting in the Law of the Lord](#) ([READ quote](#)):

...Jesus tells us that any such rules will do nothing to make us genuinely holy or protect us from sin. Tattoos and ear-piercing, coloring one's hair, wearing it in spikes or ringlets, or any such external cultural practices will not hinder a person's spiritual growth or moral maturity, and avoiding these things will not help, simply because they all affect the outside of a person, rather than the heart. The same is true with rules about books, movies, music, and so on. Again, the rules we design for spiritual purity and maturity are legion, yet they have no spiritual value. In truth, they are spiritually damaging rather than spiritually helpful.

I want to come back to that later. But let me say this again. The Lord's commands are truly good. And so we must adhere to but not add to them. It's a temptation we need to understand.

II. AWARENESS OF THE SYMPTOMS

This is an ongoing problem. How then might we recognize the onset of the symptoms?

We catch glimpses in our text, especially in the collapse of love of God and love of neighbor.

A) Loss of Concern for Neighbor

Obviously, in the response of the Pharisees, we see a loss of concern for neighbor.

1. Case study

It's a case study. We have two accounts here, each relaying situations of need ([READ Matthew 12:1-2, 9-10](#)). The disciples are hungry. And this poor man at the local synagogue was crippled.

2. Lens of the Pharisees

What was the lens of the Pharisees? How did they see these situations? Not as opportunities for mercy but as violations of their rules. They were more concerned about external acts than the devotion of the heart. It was a failure to grasp the intent of the laws surrounding the Sabbath.

B) Loss of Devotion for God

So we see a loss of concern for neighbor. And, tied to that, a loss of devotion to God.

1. Resistance to Jesus

How? In their resistance to Jesus. Listen to the accusations they make against His disciples, to their attempt to ensnare Him at their synagogue. And then their determination to get rid of Him.

2. Service to a false god

And what was the root of all that? The worship and service of a false god. I know that sounds harsh. But that's what they'd done. They created a false god. And now they were defending it. "This is what God is like. These are the rules to obey. These are how He wants you to live."

Those are the symptoms - loss of concern for neighbor and loss of devotion to God.

Illustration:

It's very serious. It's what happens when we lose our way. Have you heard of the 2002 British invasion of Spain? It's true. Some Royal Marines got lost on a training exercise. Their intended target was Gibraltar, a British territory. But they actually stormed the beach of a nearby village in southern Spain. Fortunately, no one really noticed. So it wasn't a big deal. But what if it were two other nations involved? Say it was 2017 and it was Japan invading North Korea?

Application:

It's very serious when we lose our way, when we drift into this sort of legalism. We need to be aware of these symptoms - loss of concern for neighbor and loss of devotion for God.

Let me just say a few more things here. First, despite what we may think, manmade rules have absolutely no power to change us. None at all. Second, they obscure the testimony we are to give to the watching world of a transformed life - justice, mercy, and faithfulness. So they have no power to attract. And, third, they tend to just provoke our sinful hearts to rise and rebel.

That's not a winning combination. Again, the Lord's commands are truly good. We must adhere to but not add to them. And we need to be aware of the symptoms of this disease.

III. SUBMISSION TO THE LORD'S AUTHORITY

Which then brings me to the third point. We've seen something of the cause and course of the disease. What of its cure? Here we need to heed and submit to the Lord's authority.

A) Heed What He Says

To heed what He says. Listen to His defense of His disciples (**READ Matthew 12:3-8**).

1. Reminding them

Jesus reminds them of David - a time when he was on the run, in need, and ate bread intended only for the priests. Then He reminds them of the priests - working in fulfillment of their temple duties each Sabbath. And in neither case is there any violation of the larger intent of the law.

2. Astonishing claims

Then Jesus makes some astonishing claims. All that the temple was as the presence of God with His people, Jesus embodied. He presses harder, quoting from Hosea 6. How can He say all this? Because of who He is, the Lord of the Sabbath. Astonishing claims. Shocking to the Pharisees.

B) *Heed What He Shows*

We need to heed what He says. And then what He shows (**READ Matthew 12:11-13**).

1. The man's condition

Consider the man's condition. His hand was withered - shriveled and atrophied. A terrible state.

2. Astonishing healing

And with but a word from Jesus, he was healed. Astonishing teaching. And then this healing.

We have His declaration and demonstration. And so the need to submit to His authority.

Application:

We need to let what we hear and see here make an impression, to mold and shape us. We need to think this through. Who else could say these things? Who else could do these things?

The commands of the Lord are truly good. We must adhere to but not add to them.

CONCLUSION:

Of course, His commands could only be truly good and for our good because He himself is good. Which raises a question. Do we believe that? Do we trust that He is truly good?

Our struggle here reminds me of a scene from the musical, "Annie." Little orphan Annie finally gets her chance to escape the orphanage when Daddy Warbucks decides to borrow her for a week. Grace, his secretary, picks her up and brings her to the mansion. Annie is overwhelmed. She walks through the massive entryway and is amazed – immense floral displays, massive balconies, spiral staircases, stained-glass windows. Listen to this exchange (**READ quotes**):

Grace asks, "Well, Annie, what would you like to do first?" Still thinking of life at the orphanage, Annie looks around and replies, "Well, I could do the windows first, then the floors. That way if I drip..." Grace interrupts her. "Annie, you don't understand. You won't have to do any cleaning while you're with us. You're our guest." And it dawns on her. A smile comes over her face. "I think I'm going to like it here."

It's a great scene and a wonderful image. But it chiefly fails in one respect. Unlike Annie, the Christian is not brought in as a temporary guest in the household of God. No, we have been brought in as blood bought children - adopted, redeemed, and freed from bondage.

To the degree we hear and believe that, to the extent we trust and embrace that, we will let the Lord speak into and over our lives, hearing and heeding His commands. His commands are truly good. And, since they are truly good, we must adhere to but not add to them.

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