



“And he said unto them, The sabbath was made for man, and not man for the sabbath” (Mark 2:27).

The Focal Point of Concern

Central Truth: People are more important than religious ceremonies.

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Topic: Christ: Ministry of; Legalism.

God has given certain religious observances to help man in his spiritual life. The day of rest and worship to be observed each week is one of those institutions. But how important is it? Is the Christian bound by strict observance of Sabbath laws?

Jesus taught that people are more important than religious observances. Religious institutions, such as the Sabbath, are important, but they are less important than individual persons in spiritual need. A person is the most important thing in the world to God.

This week's study aims to teach that all institutions and requirements of religion are intended for man's good. Persons rather than rituals must occupy first place in Christian service. That truth is taught in a review of two occasions when Jesus was accused of breaking the Sabbath laws, and His response to the charge.

The lesson text sets forth two different concepts of religion. (1) The Pharisees saw religion as rituals. The best person, in their view was the one who performed the correct rituals in the most nearly perfect manner. (2) Jesus saw religion as service. He saw true religion and undefiled as being the expression of the love of God in meeting the needs of people. Each reader must determine the nature of his religion as he pursues this study.

I. THE PLACE OF RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS

The institutions of religion are those ordinances, rituals, ceremonies and

observances which are followed in the expression of a faith. They are the reflection of the doctrinal convictions held.

A. Origin — Some institutions of religion are ordained and established of God. Consider the issue of Sabbath observance. God rested from His creative work on the seventh day and hallowed it as a day of rest for mankind (Genesis 2:1-3). He put a command; “*Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy,*” as the fourth of the Ten Commandments. Jewish observance of the Sabbath was based on God's ceasing from His creative work on the seventh day (Exodus 20:8-11) and His redemption of the nation from Egyptian bondage (Deuteronomy 5:12-15). Man did not design the Sabbath; God instituted it. Divine institution of the Sabbath ordinance made it important and its observance imperative.

B. Importance — God enforces the observances of institutions of religion by disciplining those who neglect or pervert them. Anyone who defiled the Sabbath in ancient Israel was put to death (Exodus 31:13-17), for the Sabbath was a perpetual covenant between God and Israel. That law was strictly enforced for a long while in Hebrew history (Numbers 15:32-36).

God promised protection and great prosperity to Israel if she kept His law of the Sabbath, but destruction if she rejected it (Jeremiah 17:19-27). The Babylonian captivity of the Jews was a punishment for Sabbath-breaking and other sins. It lasted “*until the land had enjoyed her sabbaths*” (II Chronicles 36:21). Yes, the Sabbath was important in the purpose of God.

C. Purpose — God instituted religious observances for the good of man, not to be a burden to him. Jesus said, “*The sabbath was made for man, and not man for the sabbath*” (Mark 2:27). Man needs rest and refreshment from the burden of daily work. God gave him the Sabbath to help him be healthy and happy, as well as holy, that he might “delight himself in the LORD” (Isaiah 58:13, 14).

D. Abuse — God's divine ordinances may be abused by men. (1) Some abused the Sabbath ordinance by ignoring, it (Nehemiah 10:31; 13:15-22). They acted as if God had no set day of rest. (2) Others abused the Sabbath ordinance by misinterpreting it and legalizing it in the name of the Lord. The Jewish rabbis created thirty-nine different laws by which work was forbidden on the Sabbath, as if God's law was not enough. (Healthcare, for instance, was forbidden except when life was endangered. One could wash out his mouth with vinegar — a common remedy for toothache — provided he swallowed the vinegar; to spit it out constituted healing and was forbidden. One could bind a wound without medication, but to put medication on it would be an act of healing and a violation of the Sabbath.) Ignoring the Sabbath or misinterpreting the Sabbath is each an abuse of the

institution.

II. LIMITATIONS OF RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS

The institutions of the Christian religion are important in their God assigned place, but out of that place they become hindrances to the faith. As important as baptism, the Lord's Supper, worship services, etc., are understood to be, they must not be given any place other than that assigned of God.

A. The needs of people are more important than religious institutions.
Man should refrain from secular work on the Lord's Day; but if his observance of the day of rest and worship keeps him from helping a person who is in need, his religion is vain. To Jesus, the most important thing in the world is not the correct performance of religious ritual, but the meeting of human need in the love of God.

That truth was demonstrated when Jesus and His disciples were walking through the wheat or barley fields (called "corn" in the King James Version but meaning "sown fields"). They were hungry so they broke off heads of the ripened grain, rubbed them between their hands: to remove the seed from the husks, and ate. The Pharisees accused them of breaking the laws prohibiting work on the Sabbath day. The simple act of the disciples was interpreted as reaping, winnowing, threshing, and preparing a meal! The disciples had broken the Sabbath (in the rabbinic mind) and Jesus was guilty also because He had remained silent.

Jesus replied to the charge. He said that satisfaction of human hunger is more important than observing rituals of religion. He reminded the accusers how David and his men entered the tabernacle at Nob and ate the showbread that was placed before the Lord and reserved for the priests alone (I Samuel 21:1-6; Exodus 25:23-30; Leviticus 24:9). Yet, David was uncondemned. Why? The law of need is greater than the law of ceremony!

That does not mean one is free to break the moral law of God. It applies to ceremonial law instead. One is not permitted to rob an innocent party to provide food for one who is hungry, for instance, but he may break the laws of religious ceremony to meet such a need.

B. True worship of God is more important than religious institutions.
Jesus taught that the very priests of God who ministered in the temple of God broke the Sabbath laws requiring rest and inactivity (Matthew 12:5). They changed the showbread every Sabbath (I Chronicles 9:32). They offered sacrifices every Sabbath (Numbers 28:9, 10). How could they do such work and yet remain innocent of Sabbath violation? They were

innocent because their ministry of aiding people to worship God was more important than a strict observance of the letter of Sabbath observance. Worship is more important than ritual.

Sunday is often the most demanding day of the week for a Christian pastor. The day is filled with teaching, preaching, counseling, visiting, etc. Most pastors say they are more exhausted on Sunday night than at the end of any other day during the week. The emotional and spiritual demands upon one who is leading others in worship and study are greater than those of physical and manual labor. Does that mean the pastor violates the proper observance of the Lord's Day because he does not make it a day of inactivity and rest? Not at all. He is free from guilt because his work is helping people meet God in worship. Those illustrations underscore a great truth: The worship of God in spirit and in truth is more important than the correct observance of any religious ritual or the literal obedience of any religious observance.

C. The mercy of God is more important than any religious institution. Jesus said, "If ye had known what this meaneth, I will have mercy, and not sacrifice, ye would not have condemned the guiltless" (Matthew 12:7). The text is a quotation of Hosea 6:6. It means God is more concerned that mercy be shown than that correct ritual be performed.

The Pharisees insisted that correct observance of the Sabbath and other rituals of religion was the most important thing of all. Jesus said most important is the spirit of religion, not its outward form.

The prophet Isaiah wrote the words of God condemning people who crowded into God's house to go through the forms of their religion when their hearts were far from Him (Isaiah 1). Rituals will never substitute for reality in true religion.

D. Acts of helpfulness are more important than religious ceremonies. Jesus taught that truth in a synagogue, on the Sabbath day, when He healed a man who had a withered right hand.

The Pharisaic enemies of the Lord watched to see if He would heal the crippled man who was in attendance at synagogue worship that day. If so, they could accuse Him of breaking the Sabbath by doing an act of healing.

Jesus asked the man to stand up and come forward. All could see him. He called for them to have pity on that man as they would have pity on an animal that had fallen into a pit (Matthew 12:11, 12), reminding them that man is much more valuable than an animal. Then He told the man to reach forth his hand, and in so doing the man found that it was suddenly and miraculously restored. The enemies of the Lord immediately began to plot His death because (in their opinion) He had broken the Sabbath. (To them,

the Sabbath was more important than the crippled man!) Jesus had broken man's interpretation of God's law, but He had not broken God's law of mercy.

E. The authority of Jesus Christ is greater than the institutions of religion. He has authority to institute, continue, suspend, or cancel any religious observance because of His authority as the Son of God (Matthew 28:18; John 5:27). Jesus announced, “*The sabbath was made for man, and not man for the sabbath: Therefore the Son of Man is Lord also of the sabbath*” (Mark 2:27, 28).

This teaching should not be interpreted to mean that the institutions of religion (church, baptism, Lord's Supper, Sunday worship, etc.) are unimportant. They are very important because God instituted them. But they are not so important that one should observe them to the neglect of spiritual ministry in meeting spiritual need as he serves people in the name of God.

“The Focal Point of Concern” in the Christian life is to be the welfare of people. God is people-centered. The child of God must be people-centered, also. Any time obligation to the forms of religious expression interferes with the welfare of people, the forms of religion are in the wrong place. All institutions, observances, and requirements of religion are intended for the good of people and the glory of God.

Jesus condemned a priest and a Levite because they were so concerned about ceremonial defilement that they refused to help a poor man who had fallen under the brutality of robbers (Luke 10:30-37). Both the forms and the spirit of religious faith must mark the acts and attitudes of each Christian.

1. What is a “religions institution” in this lesson?
2. What two concepts of religion are set forth here?
3. Why was Sabbath observance so important to the Jews?
4. What problems had risen around it in Jesus' day?
5. What does Mark 2:27 mean?
6. What does Mark 2:28 mean?
7. In what way did Jesus “break” the Sabbath?
8. How does the “ox in the ditch” relate to the study?
9. What does the lesson teach about Sunday observance?
10. How can you put the truth of the lesson into practice this week?