

## **“FOLLOWING THE KING - 29”**

### ***Matthew 12:1-14***

It's been a hard couple of chapters. We've read about the way in which Jesus has been commissioning his disciples, getting them ready to go out on the road and share the good news of the Kingdom of God with the people of the region around Galilee. We've read of Jesus' call to commitment, his command to get our priorities sorted out and his warning of the consequences of taking seriously what he has been teaching. We've read of the way in which John the Baptist has had to seek reassurance about his commitment to Jesus and we've seen just how hard Jesus can be on those who do not respond to his message of transformation as he has pronounced woe on the towns around Galilee.

Last week, though, as we looked at the last part of chapter 11, we saw that Jesus is actually wanting to make life less difficult for those who choose to follow him. His call to commitment will enable his followers to get more out of life and give them the opportunity to give over their cares and anxieties to him rather than trying to deal with them all on their own. He wants people to know “*rest for their souls*” and get the stresses and strains of life in a proper perspective. No doubt his first listeners were starting to feel a little more reassured about their decision to follow him.

We catch up with them at the beginning of chapter 12 taking a stroll through the fields on their way to the synagogue. It's the Sabbath day, so their activities are curtailed for the day – there's time to rest and to talk, to recharge the batteries ready for another week. And as they walk through the fields, the disciples are picking off the ears of corns and chewing on the grain. They're peckish – clearly not at starvation point, though – and snacking as they go. There's no problem with that: farmers were supposed to let people take corn from the edges of their patch if they needed to eat. You may remember the story of Ruth, who went “*gleaning*” in Boaz's fields, picking up the leftover grain as the reapers had passed by.

There was a problem, though, with doing that on the Sabbath. In the highly regulated world of the Pharisees – the people who set the rules for the Jewish people by interpreting the Law of Moses, and who enforced the rules with a mixture of fear, spiritual blackmail and complicated sanctions – in their world, picking the ears of corn was technically reaping. And reaping was one of the many, many activities that were forbidden on the Sabbath. The Law of Moses said that the Sabbath day should be kept as a day of rest and should be regarded as holy – which means set apart or different. But, as always, people wanted to know exactly what that meant, so over the generations all kinds of explanatory rules and regulations had grown up around the original law. Different circumstances meant new interpretations – as they still do. The Hasidic Jewish community near where we used to live in North London had had to cope with all kinds of new circumstances, so how does, for example, the discovery of electricity affect this? Well, you can't switch on any current on the Sabbath as that would be considered the same as lighting a fire – which is forbidden – but you can use a timer to switch the appliances on for you, provided you set the timer before the Sabbath. That's the kind of intricate regulation we're talking about.

Jesus finds the Pharisees' extra regulations frustrating and sees that they have really lost sight of the real point of the Law. They are concentrating on their own interpretation of it all at the expense of its true purpose. God gave his people the Law to enable them to live life more fully, to get the best out of life. The Ten Commandments, as we've said many times before, are like the Maker's Instructions, the bits you need to read and apply if you are to get the very best out of your new appliance. For whatever perfectly laudable reasons they may have had to start with, the Pharisees have turned the keeping of the Law into an end in itself. And Jesus points this out to them, quoting an example from the life of David, who had to break a regulation in order to keep his men from starvation, and reminding them of some words from the prophet Hosea.

And shortly afterwards, when Jesus and his group of followers arrive at the synagogue, there is an even starker illustration of the way in which the rules have started to get in the way of the reason for the Sabbath. A man with a withered hand is there and Jesus is about to heal him when the Pharisees intervene and ask him if he thinks it's OK to heal someone on the Sabbath. The answer, as they knew,

was that it was permitted, if the person was in danger of death. Clearly this man wasn't in danger of dying from his shrivelled hand, so it would have been against their regulations for Jesus to heal him. But Jesus points out that it's OK to get your sheep out of a ditch on the Sabbath – and surely doing good to a fellow human being is more acceptable than sorting out a sheep in a hole.

As he heals the man and defends his disciples' corn-snacking, Jesus shows once again that following him and the ways of the Kingdom of God is intended to make life better rather than more difficult and burdensome. The way of the Kingdom of God – which is the very heart of the message of this Kingly Messiah – is the way that God had intended all along. Listening to Jesus, taking seriously his teaching and following his lead will help people to get back to the life God originally planned for us all – a way of life that has been distorted and perverted by humanity's insistence that we know best. It's like trying to put together a piece of IKEA furniture – it's not always terribly straightforward, but it is a heck of a lot easier if you follow the instructions. Living God's way has its tensions and occasional difficulties, but it's a heck of a lot easier than trying to work it all out yourself. Taking on the yoke of Jesus means real commitment and putting him at the top of the agenda, but it's a heck of a lot easier than trying to follow other priorities.

The Sabbath day – a day of rest and relaxation, an oasis of calm in the midst of a sea of activity and anxiety – was originally intended to enhance life for God's people. It mirrored the rest that God took after finishing his creation and allowed people to re-charge their batteries and to remember their relationship with God. It gave opportunity for reflection and for meeting together to worship. It was a day that was to be "*holy*", meaning set apart, distinctive. That was God's way. But, as we've already noted, the Pharisees wanted to make very clear what you could and couldn't do, so over the centuries all these regulations had grown up around it. It had become oppressive and a burden to people.

What had happened was that the ritual – the sacrifice, if you like – had taken over and all the good seemed to have been sucked out of it. So you were seen to be good if you kept to all the rules, but not if you went out of your way to try and help someone, as Jesus does here. God's priorities have been reversed, and that's what the quotation from Hosea is all about. Jesus quotes the prophet as proclaiming God's words, "*I desire mercy not sacrifice*". God wants people to live in a way that demonstrates mercy – by which he means love, service and doing good – rather than slavishly following ritual.

If you look back into the Old Testament, you can see that God always wanted people to reflect his character of love and compassion, of selflessness and grace. The rituals were a way of helping them to do that. The call to love, to mercy, came long before there was any law to speak of. But God called his people to observe certain conventions – rituals, sacrifices – as a way not only of cementing that love in their life together, but also of showing that his people were distinctive. The conventions were ways of pledging commitment to God's ways, but they had become ends in themselves. The Pharisees and their like had invested so much in the ritual that they had largely lost sight of why they were doing any of it.

And now Jesus turns up, apparently cocking a snook at all these rules and regulations – which the Pharisees take as a sign of rebellion and a refusal to toe the line – but he's actually calling people back to the original purpose, reminding the Pharisees of the original reasons behind all these laws. Jesus is telling the people that God wants them to love one another, to show mercy to one another, to be free of the burdens with which they've saddled themselves as they have tried to work it all out for themselves.

It's still a problem today. Maybe it manifests itself in different ways. Maybe we find other kinds of ritual and "sacrifice" behind which to conceal the amazing and liberating love of God – but we still do it. For perfectly good reasons we set up schemes and programmes, regulations and constitutions which then take over and obscure the good stuff behind them. We draw up our theological models and set out our patterns of accepted behaviour, then forget the God who is the real reason for them all. It then becomes very easy to end up like the Pharisees – people who have a veneer of religiosity, but whose hearts have been hardened and whose relationship with God and with each other has atrophied.

In *The Message*, Eugene Peterson translates that quotation from Hosea as “*I prefer a flexible heart to an inflexible ritual*”. God wants people whose hearts are warmed and softened by love, rather than those whose whole approach has been to codify and regulate worship, witness and behaviour to the point of uselessness. Jesus calls to him those who share his tender heart of compassion and care rather than siding with the Pharisees’ attention to legalistic detail and loveless efficiency. This is part of the reason why the writer of the Letter To The Hebrews reminds us that we should keep our eyes focussed on Jesus, not on the things that hinder and entangle us. It’s what lies behind our own church’s statement that we are “*a church at the heart of the city with Christ at the heart of the church*”. May we never – personally or corporately – lose sight of Jesus and the reason for our allegiance to him. Once we start fussing about all the man-made rules and regulations, then we’ve really taken our eye off the ball and our call to be people of mercy has been forgotten. And we can express that in the way that we keep Sabbath – worshipping, relaxing and reminding ourselves of just what it’s all about.

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### **Questions for discussion**

1. How do you see Sundays (our "Sabbath")? Is it really a day of rest?
2. In what ways have we added rules and regulations to what God has given us? How could we get back to the basics?
3. Don't we need rules and regulations to make sure we don't stray too far from God's ways?
4. What do you understand by "*I desire mercy not sacrifice*"? How can we demonstrate that in our life as a church?
5. Is there anything that particularly strikes you about this passage?