NEW FOCUS

Sabbath-breaking : A Crime Worthy of Death?

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In Numbers chapter 15 an incident is recounted from Israel's wilderness wandering. It concerns a man who gathered sticks on the sabbath day, and the high cost of his actions.

Today, in Britain, we have completely erased capital punishment from the list of possible sentences for wrongdoing. The ultimate act of retribution, the death penalty, is no longer available to judges even for the most heinous of crimes.

Sabbath breaking

But in Old Testament Israel this was not the case. There were numerous crimes such as murder, adultery and idolatry that earned the punishment of death. However, there were also other crimes such as disobedience towards parents, gluttony, and sabbath-breaking that equally brought down the wrath of the executioner.

In our modern culture in which we have made a god of human rights, we find such a severe sanction excessive for what might be regarded as at worst, misdemeanours.

Yet often there is a spiritual lesson in the Old Testament rules that point to the real relevance of a severe judgement by God. Take for example the story of the man arrested for gathering firewood on the sabbath day. By working on the Sabbath this man was knowingly profaning God's appointed day of rest. This was in direct contradiction of God's law. It demonstrated a spirit of rebellion and contempt. For picking up sticks the man was condemned to die.

Some will consider the punishment too harsh. Few today, even amongst the strictest sabbatarians, would advocate such punishment. Yet here it is, as clear as you like, at the express command of God, 'The man shall be surely put to death: all the congregation shall stone him with stones without the camp.' (v 35).

A fearful crime

Why was the crime so serious and the punishment so severe? What

possible harm could the man do walking among the rocks and sand collecting a few bits of windblown kindling and some firewood? Why should God make such a sabbath rule anyway and hedge it around with such fearful sanctions?

Several answers are suggested:

The sabbath, being a day set aside for the worship of God, was dedicated to God and any other activity robbed and dishonoured God.

The sabbath rest was established by God at creation and set as a pattern for man's example.

A sabbath rest was for the good of the people, the creator recognising the benefit of one rest day in seven.

It was necessary to social cohesion for rules and regulations to be imposed and enforced among the wilderness people.

Now all these are true, and having once established the rules God also imposed the sanctions against those who breach them.

Out of the shadows and into the light

But there is more to this than meets the eye. Like so many Old Testament types and pictures there is a reality behind the sabbath day command that needs to be properly understood if we are to leave the shadow of typology and enjoy the light of full revelation.

What is the spiritual application that gives meaning to the peculiar circumstances of Numbers 15 and illuminates the true, New Testament significance of the sabbath day rest? The answer is found in Hebrews 4:9, 10. It states, 'There remaineth therefore a rest (or a keeping of a sabbath) to the people of God. For he that is entered into his rest, he also hath ceased from his own works, as God did from his.'

Those who interpret this verse as continuing the Old Testament sabbath are missing the whole point. By rigorously applying rules of conduct to keep one day in seven special we fail to discern the true meaning of scripture. Can we keep a day holy by what we do and what we do not do? Are we expected by God to keep one day in seven as a holy day? Sabbatarians tell us 'the Lord's day' (our Sunday) has replaced the Jewish Sabbath (our Saturday) as the New Testament equivalent to the Old Testament day of rest. But this is merely exchanging one shadow for another. God is not offended if we pick up sticks on a Sunday, dare I say, even if we have to do it with a crane.

The necessity of grace only

God is offended if we despise the sufficiency of grace. He is jealous for His glory when we attach our efforts to His mercy. God repudiates all idea of man working to secure divine pleasure. What is this to do with the stick gatherer? Everything. The seemingly innocuous act of gathering sticks struck at the very essence of God's Old Testament picture of Christian rest. Continuing to labour when all work should have stopped implied insufficiency in God's provision. It was the Old Testament equivalent of the Apostle Paul's anathemas in Galatians 1:6-9. An implicit denial of sovereign grace and the sufficiency of Christ's imputed righteousness. The man thought, work and rest; my effort and God's gift; God's part and mine.

The severity of the punishment against this man demonstrates just how serious God is about grace only. He will not tolerate mixing. He will not permit a mongrel salvation. He condemns every gesture of self-righteous impudence dressed up as good works and paraded as holy living. After all, having ceased from his works on the seventh day, God did not begin working again on Monday morning. Nor should we.

A rest that remains

The Christian's rest is rest from works salvation. It is accepting grace alone as the basis of our union with God. It is resting from all our works to find peace from God in the perfect obedience of our Great Representative, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Entering into our rest is neither entering heaven at death nor observing one day in seven. It is finding rest in Christ. It is ceasing from reliance on our works. And the man who picked up sticks? God was not going to let one self-centred Israelite spoil His beautiful sabbath picture of Christ.

Conformity and worry beads

Friend, do not ask, 'Is it alright to do this on a Sunday. Is it alright to do that?' Such questions reveal a failure to comprehend the true nature of Christian liberty in Christ. Taking a bus to church, buying a Sunday newspaper or cooking Sunday dinner do not render us guilty before God for breaching the fourth commandment. More importantly, it is not the opinion of another man on the question that ought to bind or free your conscience on any subject. We are taught by the Holy Spirit through the Word of Truth. Before our own Master, every one of us will stand and give account. And has not our Lord already declared, 'there is therefore now no condemnation'?

By nature man wants to do in order to please; to work in order to earn; to

contribute in order to enjoy. Christians do not lose this inclination upon conversion. Yet God has, by unconditional grace, bestowed all the righteousness we shall ever require, freely and liberally in Christ. Binding your conscience by conforming to man’s rules, maintaining your good reputation by toeing a party line or keeping friends by agreeing with their views may make for an easier pilgrimage in this life but it will blight your soul to a proper resting in Jesus Christ for all your righteousness. It will rob you of a clear conscience and deny you the privilege of enjoying Christian liberty before God.

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