

Law of Christ

Love and Freedom

The Sabbath controversy of Matthew 12:1-14 can teach us about law, love and the heart of God. The two incidents covered here speak to us about the purpose and limits of law and give simple guidance to us for the exercise of liberty. In our time, that of the new covenant, this is critically important since the only law we recognize is the “law of Christ.”¹ What is that and what does it mean?

Introduction

Early Matthew is exciting as we are introduced to the Messiah and His message. We see His popularity² and His power over everything that bows the soul of man, illness, forces of nature³, demons⁴ and guilt⁵, man’s greatest enemy. There is new teaching in the Sermon on the Mount with new authority, giving new hope to the people, who are “distressed and dispirited like sheep without a shepherd.”⁶ In this refreshing new teaching Jesus presented Himself as supreme authority, even over Scripture. Matthew 5 in the Sermon on the Mount is dedicated to establishing His authority with “I Myself say to you . . .” six times⁷ as He elevates His teaching over the requirements of the Law, not “to abolish but to fulfill.”⁸ He fills the Law with its intended meaning.

It is this elevation and fulfillment that eventually gets Him in trouble with the religious leaders of the time who become protective of their own authority and their own understanding of the Law. A new era is dawning, which Jesus teaches and embodies, an era in which He is central, an era in which the ‘law of Christ’ is to be predominant in God’s new order. The new era is to focus on character, on “fruit of the Spirit,” and on men and women becoming “imitators of Christ” as they are infused with the “divine nature.” This is God’s agenda in Christ, well hidden under the Law but now in the open⁹.

The religious leaders of Israel refused to be a part of the transition from old to new, yet in the foresight and power of God contributed to it by condemning Christ to the cross. Matthew tracks this transition as it turns from promise and hope to evil. The change of eras is the story of Matthew, a story that chronicles the struggle between the old and the new, between the era of Law and the era of the ‘law of Christ.’

Law vs. Christ

God’s heart on this has usually been misunderstood, historically and even now we continue to struggle with the parameters and limits of law and the priority of simple obedience to the Lord Jesus Christ. Law and religion have been the greatest enemies of God and goodness

¹ 1 Corinthians 9:21; Galatians 6:2

² Matt 4:23-25; 7:28-29; 8:1; 9:8, 26, 31, 35.

³ Matt 8:23-27

⁴ Matt 8:28-34; 9:32-34

⁵ Matthew 9:2-8, forgiving the sins of the paralytic.

⁶ Matthew 9:36 NASB

⁷ Matthew 5:22, 28, 32, 34, 39, 44.

⁸ Matthew 5:17

⁹ Colossians 1:26-27; Ephesians 3:5, 9-10.

since the Fall, which itself could be looked at as a religious act, in its worst sense. The first couple was, after all, trying to be like God, as they were deceived. Since then, usually by rule-keeping instead of rule-breaking, religion has been the best deception of the evil one to keep people from Christ in the first place and then to keep them from Christ to grow and learn to live by faith. Religion and rule-keeping as a basic philosophy of life and approach to God preempt and eliminate faith and love as that basic philosophy and approach the same way two objects cannot occupy the same space at the same time.

Let it be clear from the beginning that we are not talking about living a disciplined life as opposed to living a soft life with no guidelines. That would be a strategic distraction from the truth by the enemy of truth. In fact, as we will see, more discipline is needed to obey Christ as dictated by love in the need of the moment. This is what liberty requires. Rules and laws just cannot cover all the needs that may arise in life as we seek to follow the living Christ. Ours is to be a journey full of life and not the deadness and rigidity of preprogrammed rules that often fall short of what is necessary to fill a need in love. No, following Christ in liberty and love elevates the standard instead of lowering it.

Another point to clarify as we begin to look at this subject is how broadly the discussion about law and love can be applied to us as we seek to follow Christ in our own time. The conflict of Matthew 12 was about the Law as given to Moses, the Old Covenant under which God's people had lived for many generations, almost 1500 years. That must be kept clearly in mind as we try to understand the meaning of the two episodes we will be looking at. However, as we understand the basic meaning of the text about the first century conflict, we can see that there are many different kinds of laws in the general sense of the word, whether religious, civil or personal. These are all systems of regulating the way people live and are necessary in the absence of Christ.¹⁰ But, in the life of the Christian, to impose laws and rules in the place of Christ and the principle of love always brings disappointment and destruction. We can look at what is said about the Mosaic Law and *apply* this to law of any kind.¹¹

Placing personal law before simple devotion to Christ always results in sin and pain for self and others. This personal law¹² can be comprised of a collection of rules from parentage, civil and religious sources but must be left behind as one grows into his or her relationship with Christ, making Him their default rule for every situation in life. As He gradually becomes our law, we will find the life and peace that held such promise at our initial salvation but that is gradually subjugated to the expectations and implied and real condemnations of others as we settle into the Christian life. We must grow out of this to survive. The Sabbath controversy gives some insight into the principles and dangers of this divine life, one lived by the 'law of Christ,' a life so contrary to our nature and culture, even the culture of the Church.

¹⁰ 1 Timothy 1: 8-9.

¹¹ Paul seems to indicate this by the absence of the definite article in many places where the Law is being discussed. He wants us to think qualitatively about law in general as he discusses the greatest example of law, the Mosaic Law. This is not the place for a discussion about the use of the definite article with νόμος. Others have written on this. Our thinking on this should be evident from what has been said. Certainly Rom 6:14 and 15 fit this pattern, also 5:13 and 20, 7:7b and 8-9.

¹² Personal law is that set of codes, rules and expectations we have all developed in life as guidance and protection for ourselves. It is meant to bring us success and safety. This personal set of rules is somewhat different with each person, depending on the circumstances and people we have grown up with and the ways we have been expected to act and respond. Our personal law comes from many sources and reflects our own interpretation of life and what is necessary to survive and be successful. To keep it or not gives rise to personal condemnation and guilt or commendation and pride.

THE SABBATH CONTROVERSY

Introduction

Albeit an ancient conflict, its greatest expression is in the contrast and struggle between the Lord Jesus Christ Himself and the “law-keeping” of His time, with the religious establishment invested in it. The conflict between the Law and Christ is the principle drama of the life of the Lord Jesus, the principle drama of the gospels. All three of the synoptic writers include the two episodes that comprise the controversy¹³ and John also places great emphasis on the Sabbath and the struggle about it.¹⁴ However, Matthew probably speaks the most clearly and completely about this, writing to the Jewish people who would know the most about this conflict. The story of Matthew details this drama, as the messy transition of eras takes place. The law versus Christ conflict finds its specific expression in the controversy about the third commandment of the Mosaic Law, to do no work on the Sabbath, the seventh day.¹⁵ Jesus understands this commandment differently than the religious establishment.

These two episodes serve to put Jesus’ relationship with the religious leadership under a microscope and reveal the seminal issue between them. An Old Testament quotation, “I desire compassion and not a sacrifice” (Matthew 12:7), is key to revealing the heart of God about works and the priority of love, the real issues of law versus Christ. They couldn’t see Christ for the trees in the Law of Moses and the works it required and focused on. The forest of the love and character of God was lost in the details of service and sacrifice and the pride of human righteousness. This issue is the road that leads to the cross.

There were ominous signs all along,¹⁶ but after the excitement and hope of the early chapters (1-9) of Matthew, chapter 10 marks a transition and warning. In eleven the greatness of John the Baptist, notwithstanding his doubts or questions,¹⁷ contrasts the rejection of Christ by the crowds. Even though they keep coming for the signs, they do not repent and change. After a key parenthetical/editorial section in 11:25-30, we arrive at the key issue of Jesus’ ministry, the Sabbath controversy. After this everything becomes increasingly hostile, illustrated by the two sections that follow. The first is about the Gentiles receiving the gospel (12:14-21) and the second is the Pharisees’ accusation that Jesus was in league with Satan (12:22-32). The Sabbath controversy consists of two episodes in Matt 12:1-14 that serve as the turning point of Matthew’s presentation of the life of Christ.

The First Episode

The first episode begins with a Sabbath stroll through the grainfields of Galilee.¹⁸ It was near harvest and the heads of grain were already ripe. Jesus’ disciples were with Him and they “became hungry and began to pick the heads of grain and eat” (Matt 12:1). This would be like eating some raw breakfast cereal or bread, though it’s not clear what kind of grain it was.¹⁹ Maybe because they were “rubbing them in their hands” (Luke 6:1) to remove the chaff, the

¹³ Luke includes two other incidents of healing on the Sabbath, in 13:10-17 and 14:1-6, to be considered separately.

¹⁴ John 5:1-18; 7:22-23; 9:13-16 - two more Sabbath episodes of different consideration than the synoptics’.

¹⁵ Exodus 20:8-11 and Deuteronomy 6:12-15, “the seventh day . . . you shall not do any work.”

¹⁶ Matt 8:11-12; 9:1-6.

¹⁷ Matt 11:2-6 do not necessarily reach the level of doubt but certainly John’s need for reassurance is clear.

¹⁸ Galilee, because of Mark 2:13 and 3:7.

¹⁹ One of the great satisfactions of life is to pick an ear of corn in the hot summer sun and eat it right there. It doesn’t get any better than that!

Pharisees who were there began to accuse them of doing “what is not lawful to do on a Sabbath” (Matt 12:2). Jesus defends His disciples by countering with seven statements and insights that spell out the parameters of liberty and freedom and reveal the heart and love of God in a very powerful way. It’s not about rules and laws. It’s all about love – primarily God’s love for man but also, our love for one another.

Jesus appeals to the Scriptures, which the Pharisees knew, for insights and an Old Testament quotation that is only in Matthew. He also mixes in His own dramatic statements, which carry even more authority than the Scriptures.²⁰ First He tells about David “breaking the Law” by eating the bread from the Temple, which was only to be eaten by the priests. David knew the gracious nature of God as well as anyone ever has, Old or New Covenant, and he knew God was not really about rules but about love for man and what man needs. David, God’s anointed, and the men with him, needed something to eat and after all, it was just bread like any other bread, just in a different location and for a different purpose. This must have dislocated the self-righteous ears that were listening on this day.

The second of our Lord’s insights sees a practice built right into the Law that seems, on the surface, to contradict the Law. It is, however, “legal” liberty built right into the Law of Moses, revealing the truth about God that strict interpretation of law can never do. It is so obvious, it is easy to miss and only Matthew reports this insight for his Jewish listeners who were familiar with Temple service. The priests had to perform Temple duties on the Sabbath, thus doing work on the Sabbath! Not only was this not condemned, it was required!

Jesus follows, then, with the point the religious leaders missed all along – Himself. He is the trump factor in the conflict of law vs. liberty that we struggle with even today. It is really law vs. Christ. Jesus says, “Something greater than the temple is here,”²¹ referring to Himself. As the temple sanctified the activity inside it on the Sabbath, so Christ sanctifies everything done under his authority. His statement in verse 8 makes the same point, “The Son of man is Lord of the Sabbath.” He is the plumb line of liberty, the measure of what is straight and what is not, right and wrong. Law and rules are only very limited measures of right and wrong which apply only in certain limited circumstances and concerning only the surface realm of external practice and tradition. Our submission to the person of Jesus Christ as law serves to govern, not only practice, on a secondary level, but most importantly, also attitudes and thoughts, on the primary and most important internal level. It is this internal level of the heart where Christ rules through His Spirit and determines the thoughts, then the subsequent actions they produce.

This is where Jesus goes next in verse 7. He goes to the heart, to attitude. He refers to Hosea 6:6 to say that God’s desire, His heart, is for man to show compassion and mercy to one another. Religious, external duties are not the point and can even distract from what God is really after – compassion and mercy. “I desire compassion and not a sacrifice.”²² Had the Pharisees understood this about God and about the Law, they would have left Jesus’ disciples alone as they nibbled on the raw grain. In His commentary on this passage, Jesus used the same word, “innocent,” to describe His disciples as He used to describe the “innocent”²³ priests in the temple (cp. verses 5 and 7).

²⁰ Matthew chapter five is devoted to establishing this at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount.

²¹ Matt 12:6; There are two other times Jesus uses the comparison of “something greater than,” Matt 12:41-42 and Luke 11:31-32.

²² Matt 12:7; “Compassion,” *ἐλεος*, is emphasized by its primary position. The same Scripture is used by Matthew previously in 9:13 and expanded on here, in a typical Jewish literary pattern. Again, this phrase from Hosea is unique to Matthew’s gospel.

²³ *Ἀναταίος* is used in both places.

Jesus would say in Mark, “The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath” (Mark 2:27). The point is, again, that “God is love.” Religious practices are for man, because we need them, to meet our need, to show and to effect God’s love for man and to reveal the nature and character of God. When these practices, given by God, lose their purpose and come to be viewed as ends in themselves, they become a source of judgment and condemnation, actually causing damage where they were intended to be a blessing. This was the Pharisees’ mistake, making the Law an end in itself. It continues to be the error of Pharisees to this day.

We now have the two major points Jesus teaches here to guide our thinking and practice in matters of law and liberty. Christ Himself and love are to be our guides. These two principles must define the parameters and practice of liberty for us as they were intended to do for Jesus’ first century listeners. Jesus directed them to Himself by pointing out He was greater than the temple and “Lord of the Sabbath.” He also directed them to compassion and mercy, to love. These two, Christ and love, are difficult to separate, if they even should be separated. “God is love” and 1 John, also, goes a long way to make the case that you can’t have one without the other, eg. 1 John 4:7-8. God is the only source of true love.

Therefore Christ and love must be our prime directive in life, our guide(s) through the jungle. Even though we, under the new covenant, are not under law,²⁴ we are also not without law. The “law of Christ”²⁵ is now our law. As we look obediently to Him, we are following a Person and develop personal qualities or character, His character. We no longer follow mechanical laws about surface, external things that focus on what we can produce or achieve. These laws and rules will become our master instead of Christ and, through the condemnation they produce, will increase sin and distance us even further from our personal Savior.²⁶ The ‘law of Christ,’ on the other hand, is personal. The ‘law of Christ’²⁷ is actually a Person, it is Christ Himself. He is our law, our example, our guide, the One we obey. Our prime directive is to be like Him, the greatest and highest pattern for life possible. As we get to know Him, all this and more is generated within us through His Spirit, our source of life and character (Gal. 5:22-23).

²⁴ Rom 6:14. Without the definite article Paul extends the concept of law to refer to law, generally, all law.

²⁵ 1 Cor 9:21; Gal 6:2.

²⁶ We use the phrase in reference to salvation but few still think of Him as their personal Savior throughout life.

²⁷ There are several possible uses of the genitive (Χριστου) here, especially possessive, descriptive, producer or genitive of apposition (Wallace’s categories). These are closely related and have essentially the same effect. Possessive is too general. Normally with νομος the genitive modifier would indicate the source or kind of law in question, hence, producer or descriptive, e.g. law of Moses or law of faith (Rom 3:27). Other genitives of apposition, though, could include “law of sin” and “law of the Spirit of life” (Rom 7:23 and 8:2). The genitive here actually follows an adjective in the original, part of a predicate construction, which has interesting implications but which has little effect on the meaning of the genitive itself, as expressed in English translation. Christ as the law (genitive of apposition, making “Christ” a subset of “law” or the specific law in view) is preferred because of: 1) the context of 1 Cor 9:21, which demands the absence of a code, regardless of the source; 2) the centrality of Christ in the New Testament, e.g. Col 1:18 and Eph 1:10; 3) commands to “follow Him,” and, “Christ, who is our life” (Col 3:4). 4) Christ as our righteousness and sanctification (1 Cor 1:30); He never left a law except the command to love (John 13:34; 15:12, 17). Instead He offered Himself as the replacement for the Law (“I say to you” in Matt. 5, “I am’s” and “abide in Me” in John, etc). “Christ is the end (completion) of the law for righteousness” (Rom 10:4); 5) the simplicity of fulfillment, by love, Gal 6:2. The presence of the predicate adjective with the genitive, as mentioned above, is even more powerful, expressing submission to Christ as law being descriptive of Paul’s essential character and ours. Finally, our hearts and the Spirit compel us by “the love of Christ” (2 Cor 5:14) to put Him first above all else that is good, including every law, code or expectation. “Christ is all” (Col 3:11).

The Second Episode

The second episode of the Sabbath controversy changes setting from the grain fields to the local synagogue on “another Sabbath” (Luke 6:6). A man with a crippled hand served as the opportunity for the Pharisees to ask Jesus if it was lawful to heal on the Sabbath, hoping to catch Him in a conundrum between their strict interpretation and His compassion. Jesus would not play their game. There was no dilemma. Jesus knew what they were thinking²⁸ and countered with a bit of local color, unique to this gospel, which Matthew’s Jewish listeners would identify with. Appealing to common practice and common sense, He asks what would happen if one of them had a sheep that fell into a pit on the Sabbath, the day of rest? “Will he not take hold of it and lift it out?” (12:11) The obvious common and accepted reality of this kind of practice sets up Jesus’ logical transition and the conclusion to follow,²⁹ “How much more valuable then is a man than a sheep!” Again, as above, it’s all about love and the needs of man. Love sets the parameters of liberty. That was the whole point of the Sabbath, after all, according to Mark (2:27).

What follows is Jesus’ conclusion and answer to the apparent conundrum presented to him by the Pharisees. They had asked about healing on the Sabbath. Jesus went to the much deeper issue of defining the point of the Sabbath and the parameters of liberty, He said, “So then,³⁰ it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath” (12:12b). Doing good and showing love are the important things to God, not “sacrifice” (12:7, earlier here) or religious duty. We think it’s all about us, and what we do. With our living Father it’s all *for* us and it’s all about what *He* does. “The Sabbath (and other prescribed duties) was made for man . . .” Only Mark records Jesus’ anger as He looks around the synagogue at the Pharisees (Mark 3:5). He is grieved that they do not see the situation as it is, the priority of love over law. Their hearts were hard. They didn’t see that a human being was involved, that something good could be done, suffering relieved.

The tragedy of this legal blindness is even more dramatic when we realize that, not only was Jesus angry and grieved but that this is the only time in all four gospel accounts of His life that Jesus is said to have responded in anger to anything. Even the accounts of the Temple cleansings do not refer to anger. We usually infer anger in those accounts since it seems appropriate from our own experience but it must be read into the text, it isn’t actually there.

The significance of the Lord’s anger in this context is to further add to the magnitude of the Sabbath controversy. It isn’t just a disagreement over legal fine points. It is the heart of the new covenant Jesus was ushering in. It reveals the heart and character of God in a way so stunning we still have not fully grasped the meaning of it.

“After looking around at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart, He said to the man, ‘Stretch out your hand.’ And he stretched it out, and his hand was restored” (Mark 3:5). This dramatic command is given to us word for word by each of the synoptic writers. ‘In the face’ of the Pharisees, Jesus does “good on the Sabbath” and shows His love for the man by restoring his withered, dead hand to normal – from dead to living. Nothing has been the same since. From there the religious leaders “went out and conspired against Him” (12:14) and Matthew’s gospel becomes increasingly dark from this point on.

²⁸ Luke 6:8.

²⁹ Ουυ conjunction, not translated in NIV and obscured in NASB.

³⁰ Ωστε, indicating the result of the preceding logical progression. The full progression is only in Matthew.

Summary

The Sabbath conflict in Matthew serves as the pivotal point in his presentation of the life of Christ. The two episodes of this conflict present the differences between law and grace and they give us the principles that govern matters of liberty in this age of grace.

Christ Himself is the first principle governing matters of liberty. “Something greater than the temple is here” (12:6). Also, “the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath” (12:8). To obey Him “is better than sacrifice.”³¹ Obedience is what matters to God and is always the measure of what is right to do in any action, word spoken or attitude held.

There’s a subtle but huge difference between obedience and sacrifice, or merely external law-keeping. Obedience is a response to a living Person, while sacrifice or law only requires a response to an inanimate code or rule. At stake in the section we are considering is a point of departure, a crisis of the heart. Is it Christ or the code? The code is always full of good things, attractive things, things that seem right. That is not the point. Whether the code, the law, is religious, civil, parental or personal, it will be cold and condemning eventually, not protective and accepting, as it may promise. Only the ‘law of Christ’³² can motivate us out of love, acceptance and security. It is unconditional. Christ Himself is the first principle governing matters of law and liberty. He is the ‘law of Christ’. This means we follow Him.

The second principle is the ‘royal law’³³ of love. What would love do? This is much like the first principle since “God is love” but Jesus considers it separately for our instruction. Jesus quotes Hosea, “I desire compassion and not a sacrifice” (Hosea 6:6). He Himself says in 12:12, “How much more valuable then is a man than a sheep!” To do good to a fellow-creation is always legal and right, no matter what the code, the law, may say. Love not only “casts out fear,” (1 John 4:18) it also cleanses all things, makes them right to do. “But give that which is within as love.”³⁴ Let His love in us be our guide.

Conclusion

The law of Christ is . . . (from first paragraph)

Even today we are still trying to grasp the magnitude of the change that came with Christ. Worse may be when we are not trying to grasp the magnitude of this change. God has made all of His grace available to those who believe, there is no limit to it. To those “under grace”³⁵ and the ‘law of Christ’ “all things are lawful”³⁶ and should be judged in free will by Christ and love.

May the unlimited extent of the grace of God set us free! May the ‘law of Christ’ bring us to the “quiet waters” and green pastures”³⁷ our spirits long for. How appropriate that the Sabbath controversy, with its instruction about love and liberty, immediately follows chapter 11:28-30, “Come to Me and I will give you rest. . . . For My yoke is easy and My burden is light.”

³¹ 1 Samuel 15:22c

³² 1 Cor 9:21; Gal 6:2.

³³ James 2:8.

³⁴ This is with the understanding that one can only truly love if led and filled with the Holy Spirit.

³⁵ Romans 6:14

³⁶ 1 Cor 6:12; 10:23

³⁷ Psalm 23:2.