



FEED MY SHEEP

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Legalism and the Higher Law

In our study last month, we found David is fleeing King Saul. The deranged king is trying to kill David who only desired and tried to be a loyal and faithful servant. But Saul's several efforts of chucking a spear at David have convinced him that he must now permanently avoid the king. Saul represents the church in general in the age of Pentecost (from 33 A.D.). David represents those called to be overcomers in this age. The church always persecutes the overcomers. They call them heretics, outlaws and all sorts of other not-so-nice names. In many centuries the overcomers are persecuted to the point of death.

David has now fled to the town of Nob where the tabernacle had been erected and where numerous Levitical priests ministered in its service. David has fibbed in telling the high priest, Ahimelech, that he is on a secret mission for the king. But the truth is that David and his men are very hungry and that the showbread which has just been removed from the table of showbread in the tabernacle would go a long way in removing their hunger pangs. David said to Ahimelech:

1 Samuel 21:3 Now therefore what is under thine hand? give me five loaves of bread in mine hand, or what there is present.

We quoted the law last month to show that the showbread was for the priests. We left the question pending: Did David sin in demanding the showbread? And did Ahimelech sin by giving this bread to David and his men? Some astute readers have no doubt already made a mental connection between the five loaves in this story and the miracle of Jesus multiplying the five loaves. We have expounded on Jesus' miracle

of the loaves in a taped Bible study some years ago, and so we will not comment on it here.

But we do wish to elucidate a very important principle here when dealing with the law. It is the principle of the higher law. This incident of David and the showbread is recalled in three of the four gospels, which points up its importance for all believers. In Luke's account, this is the incident where Jesus and his disciples were walking on the sabbath day and some of the disciples picked some grain and began to munch on it as they went.

Luke 6:3 And Jesus answering them said, Have ye not read so much as this, what David did, when himself was an hungred, and they which were with him;

4 How he went into the house of God, and did take and eat the showbread, and gave also to them that were with him; which it is not lawful to eat but for the priests alone?

Despite David's attempt to tell the priest that it was no longer holy bread and therefore it was perfectly alright for it to be given to him, the words of Jesus confirm that it was unlawful for anyone except priests to eat it. But do not leap to any conclusions just yet. Let us review Mark's account.

Mark 2:24 And the Pharisees said unto him, Behold, why do they on the sabbath day that which is not lawful?

Here we have the Pharisees declaring that what the disciples did was unlawful. But what was it that

the Pharisees considered unlawful? It was the fact that our Lord's disciples picked some grain. According to the Pharisees, that was "work" and therefore they broke the law. However, *was that action unlawful?* The Pharisees would scream yes, and point to this law, the fourth commandment:

Exodus 20:8 Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy.

9 Six days shalt thou labour, and do all thy work:

10 But the seventh day is the sabbath of YHWH thy God: *in it* thou shalt not do any work, thou, nor thy son, nor thy daughter, thy manservant, nor thy maidservant, nor thy cattle, nor thy stranger that is within thy gates:

Pharisees would point to that commandment, and then they would refer us to this illustration in ...

Exodus 16:22 And it came to pass, *that on the sixth day they gathered twice as much bread, two omers for one man:* and all the rulers of the congregation came and told Moses.

Then the Pharisees would insist that the disciples broke the fourth commandment, as illustrated by Exodus 16, *and as interpreted by the Traditions of the Elders*, in which their *interpretations* declare that reaping is work and whoever plucks stalks of grain is reaping and whoever even *breaks* a stalk of grain is also reaping, etc. *ad infinitum* and to the tiniest detail of agriculture. Notice: Pharisees try to exert this all-encompassing (totalitarian) level of control over the people. How then did our Savior, the actual Author of the law, respond? First of all, He ignored their traditions. Then he went them even one better, as we will explain shortly.

Mark 2:25 And he said unto them, Have ye never read what David did, when he had need, and was an hungred, he, and they that were with him?

26 How he went into the house of God in the days of Abiathar the high priest, and did eat the showbread, which is not lawful to eat but for the priests, and gave also to them which were with him?

Incidentally, someone might point out that it was Abiathar's father, Ahimelech, who was the high priest when this incident happened. It is a peculiar fact that one can sometimes discern from little things like this

just how strong the faith is of some of the scholars who write the commentaries. For example, one commentator insisted that Mark must have had trouble remembering just who the high priest was and therefore made this error in the gospel.

But we believe that every word in the Bible is accurate and is inspired by God, and therefore this is not an error. I had to ponder this dilemma for a total of about ten seconds to reconcile it to my satisfaction. Because the usage of the phrase "in *the days of* Abiathar..." are speaking in general, they need not be literally accurate. The fact that Abiathar became the high priest in a day or two is close enough to qualify for "in the days of..." Remember that when Jesus spoke these words, it had been over a thousand years since the event, so "in the days of..." is certainly permissible by any standard of language. Most reasonable people would agree with that. The same incident is given in more detail in Matthew 12, and there we will find the great principle to which we alluded.

Matthew 12:1 At that time Jesus went on the sabbath day through the corn; and his disciples were an hungred, and began to pluck the ears of corn, and to eat.

2 But when the Pharisees saw *it*, they said unto him, Behold, thy disciples do that which is not lawful to do upon the sabbath day.

By the way, even if the disciples were not really breaking the sabbath, weren't they breaking the law against theft? No, because the law states in Deuteronomy 23:25 that you can pick a few stalks of grain for your immediate use. The idea is that you just can't bring in a sickle and start hacking away. Lawfully, this was not stealing. Continuing....

3 But he said unto them, Have ye not read what David did, when he was an hungred, and they that were with him;

4 How he entered into the house of God,

By the way, it was indeed also unlawful for a layman like David to enter into the Holy Place of the tabernacle, but when it says "the house of God" here, it includes the outer court, which is where David entered, not into the Holy Place.

4b...and did eat the showbread, which was not lawful for him to eat, neither for them which were with him, but only for the priests?

So initially, Jesus reiterates that it *was* against the ceremonial or ritual law for a non-priest to eat the showbread. Then Jesus answers the question of David's purported guilt by referring to the fact that when the tabernacle was superseded by the temple, (and even before that, of course), the priests performed a *huge* amount of work on the sabbath by butchering sacrifices. Jesus put it this way:

5 Or have ye not read in the law, how that on the sabbath days the priests in the temple profane the sabbath, and are blameless?

6 But I say unto you, That in this place is *one* greater than the temple.

Notice the progression here. Jesus makes reference to the tabernacle, then to the temple, then to Himself as the fulfillment of the type of both the tabernacle and the temple. Along with that progression is another: ...from the traditions to the ceremonial law to the fourth commandment itself—and then to the higher law.

Although the disciples had violated the rabbinical traditions, Jesus did not even deign that fact worthy of an answer. Instead, he pointed to the ceremonial law of showbread which David was violating, but—by citing the priests working on the sabbath and being held blameless, Jesus was pronouncing that David was blameless, just like the priests were blameless. Why? Because—and hear this well—it is clear from Jesus' own words that neither the ceremonial law, nor the sabbath commandment itself is absolute! Let that sink in.

Were David and his companions *literally* on the verge of death by starvation? Not hardly! But they were in need of food; there is no question about that. Consequently, we see that even *that* much need is sufficient cause to set aside the ceremonial law in favor of a higher law. And now Jesus states that higher law.

7 But if ye had known what *this* meaneth, I will have mercy, and not sacrifice, ye would not have condemned the guiltless.

Jesus is quoting Hosea 6:6 and is accusing the Pharisees of being ignorant of the very law of which they profess to be *the* experts. (Is there anything new under the sun in today's legal and religious systems?!)

Hosea 6:6 For I desired mercy, and not sacri-

fic; and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings.

Thus Jesus is exonerating his disciples, who merely broke the tradition of the rabbis. He is exonerating *them* by exonerating *David* who broke the ceremonial law by eating the showbread. That is what I meant by "He went them one better." He trumped their petty argument by going one level higher and showing that the ceremonial law is set aside in favor of the higher law of mercy.

Most astonishingly though, during the course of His illustration, Jesus went even higher than the ceremonial law. He showed that *even the fourth commandment is not absolute* because the priests profane the sabbath and are blameless!

I almost hesitate to leave that statement herein because I would not be surprised to get some scolding letters charging me with "doing away with the law." But I trust that most readers know me better than that. I am not doing away with the law any more than Jesus Himself did. If others want to argue about it, let them argue with Jesus. We are merely teaching that there are different levels of law, and that the higher law takes precedence. Next, Jesus must have really raised the ire of the Pharisees, those alleged experts and guardians of the law, when he made this side door reference to His deity.

8 For the Son of man is Lord even of the sabbath day.

The higher law holds that mercy is better than sacrifice! It is a higher law than the ritual ordinances. The higher law is the fulfillment of the law "love thy neighbor," which by the way, is found in that same book of Leviticus as the ceremonial law of showbread. (See Leviticus 19:18). Jesus summarized the whole law into its two highest principles when he gave the two greatest commandments: Love God and love your neighbor.

Mercy is better than sacrifice. What is mercy? Well, among other things, and as it applies in these examples that we have just seen in Scripture, mercy would include pity and sympathy for anyone in need. Mercy involves the necessity to act when there is a need, just as Christ Himself healed on the sabbath. Therefore, the Ahimelech was performing an act of mercy by giving David the showbread, and David was

not sinning by eating it.

I hope that we all will ponder this lesson well and give serious thought to, first, how it might apply in our own situations. Then, secondly, perhaps it will make us pause for reflection before mentally throwing stones at someone whom we *think* is “breaking the law.” For just perhaps, unknown to us from our limited perspective, there just might be a higher law at work which we cannot see. Therefore, let us be slow to pass judgment on others in our own minds. Would we not want the same consideration if the situation were reversed? —I. e., do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

We now continue where we left off. David was in the outer court of the tabernacle at Nob. He had just obtained the leftover showbread from Ahimelech the high priest. But now the plot thickens, because a vicious character now appears on the scene.

7 Now a certain man of the servants of Saul was there that day, detained before YHWH; and his name was Doeg, an Edomite, the chiefest of the herdmen that belonged to Saul.

A marginal rendering says Doeg was “the mightiest of the herdsmen.” It is not clear what this man was doing there or why he was detained, but since he is going to be an important character in the rest of this story, we need to provide some background. In the ancient East, the position of being the chief shepherd or chief herdsman was no small position. Kings and potentates had a considerable portion of their wealth stored on the hoof, so to speak; and therefore, to be the chief overseer of the herds was a very prominent position. Since the cattle represented wealth, that would make the chief herdsman the equivalent of the king’s treasurer.

Notice that Doeg is called the chiefest of the *herdmen*. Actually, the Hebrew word is the same one translated *shepherd*, as in Psalm 23: YHWH is my shepherd.” Some translations, like the New American Standard, actually call Doeg the chief *shepherd*, but I think the King James Version, the New King James Version and Young’s Literal Translation are correct here because in everything we have read about Saul, he is always associated with asses and cattle, not flocks of sheep.

We commented on the symbolism of that in pre-

vious issues (and in much greater depth on the tapes)—about how the ass (like wheat) is a symbol of Pentecost and how a Saul-type leader is one who does not have a *shepherd’s* heart. He has a *herdsman’s* heart. He wants to *drive cattle*; *beat* them, *push* them and *force* them to do what he thinks is right, rather than to lead them *gently by example*. So it seems altogether appropriate that Saul has a chief herdsman in this scene, not a chief shepherd. The story will bear this out in the harshness of Doeg.

Doeg, the treasurer, is identified as an Edomite. Edomites were the people descended from Jacob-Israel’s twin brother Esau (Genesis 25.) The Edomites have been the mortal enemies of the Israelites ever since the birthright fiasco in Genesis. One has to wonder: what was the king of Israel doing with an Edomite in such a high-ranking position? Back at the tabernacle at Nob, Doeg is secretly watching as ...

1 Samuel 21:8 And David said unto Ahimelech, And is there not here under thine hand spear or sword? for I have neither brought my sword nor my weapons with me, because the king’s business required haste.

David continues his cover story, lying through his teeth. David was rationalizing that his cover story would protect Ahimelech. The priest would innocently help David while being ignorant of the fact that he was at the top of Saul’s most wanted list.” In any case, David desperately needed a weapon.

9 And the priest said, The sword of Goliath the Philistine, whom thou slewest in the valley of Elah, behold, it is here wrapped in a cloth behind the ephod: if thou wilt take that, take it: for there is no other save that here. And David said, There is none like that; give it me.

David is now “armed and dangerous,” according to the government of Saul. Did David have the right to be *personally* armed? Or did that right only apply to the “National Guard,” which David formerly commanded for Saul? Hmmm... (*To be continued.*)

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