

When Lording Over is a Good Thing

“Lording over” is a bad quality in people, especially pastors. Peter says to pastors, “Be shepherds of God’s flock...; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock” (1 Pet 5:2-3). But in our text Jesus is lording over 3 things and it’s a good thing because it leads to seeing Jesus as Lord over one particular thing virtually every Christian has trouble with.

In our text, we see Jesus lording over the Sabbath. The 3rd Commandment has a ceremonial/civil aspect to it and a moral/religious aspect. The part about doing no work on the Day of Rest was ceremonial; the part about finding rest in God’s Word is religious. The civil part is not written in the heart of man; the moral part is. The ceremonial part was to expose the sinfulness of mankind in general. The religious part the individual sinner. The ceremonial aspect was to serve the physical need of men for rest; the moral their spiritual need for forgiveness. The Pharisees made “Remember the Sabbath Day by keeping it holy” an end in itself. Their rabbis had added 39 categories of forbidden things to do on the Sabbath. Reaping, threshing, and grinding were on it. All 3 Gospel accounts have the picking of the grain, which would be reaping, and Luke tells you the disciples ground it in their hands to eat it.

Now this wasn’t forbidden by the OT, but Jesus didn’t correct them by saying it was only their manmade laws that made what they’re doing unlawful. He said, “The Sabbath was made for man not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath.” The Pharisees liked to quibble about this or that interpretation of the law or a ceremony. Jesus doesn’t go there. He handles this like He will handwashing in Mark 7. There His disciples are accosted for not living according to the traditions of the elders and eating their food with unwashed hands. He says His enemies have the whole matter turned inside out. Man wasn’t defiled by what food he took in but by what it is within fallen man already. Then Mark, again almost as an aside, says, “In saying this, Jesus declared all foods clean.”

Do you see where Jesus is going? He is lording Himself over what the Pharisees and therefore the common people felt was the real Lord; the Law. In Jesus, the Man who is God, the Sabbath Law, both it’s ceremonial side and it’s moral side are fulfilled, kept. In Matthew’s account, Jesus doesn’t just say, “My disciples didn’t sin because they only broke your wrong interpretation of the law.” No, He using a Greek word found only there in the NT, says they are guiltless, innocent. I’ve tired to do this with troubled people over the years. They come to burdened by this or that which really isn’t a sin and they refuse to be comforted by my explanations of how the law doesn’t really condemn them. I then say: Even if you had intentionally broke the dish, stole the money, or killed the person, there is forgiveness for that in Jesus.

Listen as Luther does this in a 1520 forerunner of our Catechism. “I believe that the forgiveness of sins exists in that selfsame community, and nowhere else; outside of that community nothing can help, no matter how many and great one’s good works might be, to accord one the forgiveness of sins. But within such a community nothing can bring harm, no matter how many, how large the sins, and how often one has sinned; this remains the reality wherever and as long as one remains in that same unique community [of the Church]” (Peters, *Creed*, 287).

If you’re listening that should startle you, but I’m not yet to the part which troubles virtually all Christians. This next part will set you up for it. The Pharisees prided themselves in their Biblical scholarship. Only in Mark’s account does Jesus cite “what David did...in the days of Abiathar the High Priest.” So? Read Mark 12:27 in Young’s Literal Translation. You’ll see how in the time before chapter and verse divisions people cited the Bible. Jesus in proving that the dead are raised says, “Have ye not read in the Book of Moses (at the Bush)...?” This references our Exodus 3 where the Lord appears to Moses in the burning bush. Again so what? Read 1 Sam. 21. The incident of David fleeing from the murderous King Saul didn’t happen in “days of Abiathar the high priest” but when Ahimelech was high priest. Abiathar became high priest when his father, Ahimelech, and all the others from the high priest’s family were slaughtered by Doeg the Edomite at the command of Saul for Ahimelech helping the fleeing David.

What gives? The only explanation I find is Edersheim who says we infer from Jesus’ words that Abiathar was co-joined in the priesthood with his father Ahimelech at that time (*Life and Times*, II, 52, fn. 3). This could be the case; in any case Jesus can’t be mistaken. But I think Jesus cites this incident in a unique way. Jesus is lording over how the Pharisees read the Bible. He is purposely tweaking them so that they would go back to that incident. Ahimelech was as good as dead the moment he helped the fleeing David. David says so when Abiathar arrived with the news that his whole family was slaughtered (1 Sam. 22:20-23). Now read what happens after Jesus’ next Sabbath controversy with the Pharisees in Mark 3, “Then the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the

Herodians how they might kill Jesus” (6). Jesus was as good as dead the moment He claimed to be Lord of the Sabbath in our text.

Think I’m going too far? “You ain’t seen nothing yet.” I was going to put in the bulletin an insert with Matthew’s, Mark’s, and Luke’s account of our text. Then you would see for yourself that while in all 3 Jesus declares Himself Lord of the Sabbath, only in Matthew does Jesus declare Himself “greater than the Temple.” And only in Luke do the Pharisees include Jesus in the wrongdoing. Matthew and Mark only accuse His disciples. But all 3 record the part about David entering God’s house, eating the consecrated bread of the Presence, and giving it to those who were with him. All 3 Gospels say that it was unlawful for any but the priests to eat, and not only did David eat it but he gave it to his companions.

Now you have to go back to 1 Sam. 21. Ahimelech’s problem is not so much with David eating that sacred Bread. Even though David wasn’t in the priestly line, he knew David was special for having killed Goliath. No, the high priest’s problem was with those who were with David. He enquires about the fitness of those with David. I’m not going to quote what Ahimelech asks because that will bring up too many issues for me to answer here. But David does what Jesus does here. He answers in an indirect way: “When I set out and the vessels of the young men were holy, though it was an ordinary journey; how much more then today will their vessels be holy?”

At last, we’re to the issue that troubles most Christians; at last we’re to the issue that the Reformation addressed in 1517: How could a sinful, fallen person be good enough before God? The church of Luther’s day addressed this question as Roman Catholicism still does today: By doing the best you can, by doing what is within your power to do, by the good works of the saints making up the difference, and by having sacramental grace from Christ’s sacrifice on the altar poured into you. Now what you *think* the Reformation answer is, is what Protestants believe. If you believe right enough, hard enough, long enough, you will be good enough. But in both cases, that of Catholic’s and Protestant’s, you’re left staring at your belly button. Is there enough grace in there, is there enough faith in there, is there enough good in there to make up for all the bad that even Jesus said was in there? You remember in Mark 7 Jesus says, “What comes out of a person is what defiles them. For it is from within, out of a person’s heart, that evil thoughts come—sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and ~~folly~~.”

What makes one good enough, sanctified enough, ~~hol~~ enough? Hear why the Lord says He gave the Sabbath: “I gave them My Sabbaths to be a sign between Me and them, so that they might know I am the Lord who sanctifies them” (Ezk 20:12). The Sabbath that the Pharisees thought if they kept they could be good enough was in reality a gift from the Lord to show them that only in resting in Him could anyone be good enough. In 1 Sam 21 David says the men are good enough to eat the sacred bread of the presence because they are on a special journey with him. Only in Mark does it say His disciples “make a way.” All 3 Gospels say they were going through the grainfields. Only Mark records they were making “a way.” Go back to 1 Sam. 21:5. David uses the same Greek word to describe his men. They are with him on “the way”; that’s why they are sanctified. What David literally says is, “they be sanctified today through being vessels of me.” The same sanctification they were to know from the Sabbath David’s men had with him and the disciples have being with Jesus on the way.

The One who is Lord of the Sabbath, Lord of the Temple, is Lord over not just your justification but your sanctification. The Lord doesn’t merely make you good enough. He makes you holy, guiltless, innocent. Through their connection with the forerunner of the Promised Seed, David, his men could eat the consecrated bread. You are baptized into the Promised Seed Himself. You are absolved by His Holy Name, you are bodied and blooded into His actual presence here on earth and yet, you’re still troubled about being good enough? That would be laughable if it weren’t so sad. Have you not read what Paul wrote to the much-troubled Corinthian congregations: “You are in Christ Jesus, who became for us the wisdom from God, namely, our righteousness and sanctification and redemption” (1 Cor. 1:30).

Jesus would be Lord not over just your life but your death, not only over your justification but your sanctification. Notice when attacked by the religious leaders of their day the disciples don’t say anything. Jesus does all the talking. The ultimate answer is they’re journeying “with Jesus.” What sanctifies them, what sanctifies us is not being good enough, trying enough, or believing enough but being with Jesus, the Lord over all. Amen.

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