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Chasing After Shadows

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Series: Let God Be God

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INTO HIS LIKENESS RADIO

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John was determined to catch the guy he was sure had been prowling around his house, so he decided to set a trap. One evening, just as the sun was setting, he hid behind the bushes on the west side of his house and waited. For a time, it appeared that his wait was in vain. Then he decided to look one more time. Lo and behold, this time as he raised his head to look, he thought he saw something move just a few feet away. He jumped from behind the shrubs and began his pursuit. As he moved, so did the figure before him. Faster and faster he ran. Faster and faster the one he pursued ran as well. The race was on, and John was determined not to quit.

As he turned the corner at the end of the hill, it was getting darker and darker. The figure before him was barely distinguishable. Nearly out of breath, John mustered up every ounce of energy left in him and lunged at the outline of his enemy.

That lunge was his last, for as he threw himself at that barely visible figure just ahead, he threw himself over the cliff, falling helplessly to his death below. You say, "That's sad!" Yes, it is. But the saddest part of the story is this: he killed himself for nothing. Because, you see, that figure he was chasing was not a person at all. *John had been chasing his own shadow.* So the faster he ran, the faster it ran. No, there wasn't a trace of reality to what he was pursuing, but to him it was as real as life; so he gave his life to chasing after it. He died chasing after shadows.

It's not a new problem. Since the beginning of time, man has been chasing after shadows, looking at those things which were meant to be as outlines, foreshadowing what the Truth would one day look like and treating the shadows as truth itself.

Jesus had to contend with that problem throughout His entire ministry. For centuries God had painted on the canvas of time shadows of eternal truth. The Jews were instructed to look carefully at those shadows so they would recognize reality once it came. *Jesus was that reality.* But they became so enamored with the outline, that when the Truth arrived, they ignored Him completely and kept "chasing after shadows" instead.

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The result was inevitable. They missed the King of Glory. And the disease is contagious. That's why Paul spent so much of his time writing to the young church about the identical problem. They were clinging legalistically to the shadows, in many cases totally missing the reality itself.

Today's story shows how Jesus dealt with the problem. and it gives us some clues as to how Jesus in us will deal with that same problem today.

Our outline is:

- I- The Pharisees React
- II- The Master Responds
- III- The Issue Revealed

Our Scripture takes up where we left off in our last lesson from The Life of Christ in Stereo (¹Matthew 12, ²Mark 3, and ³Luke 6),

²Now ¹Jesus was then journeying by way of the grain fields on the Sabbath. ³And it came to pass [on the second First Sabbath] that he was walking through the grain fields, ¹and his disciples were hungry and began, ²as they went, to pluck the heads of grain ¹and to eat, ³rubbing them in their hands. ¹But when ³some of the Pharisees ¹saw it, they said to him, ²“Behold, why ¹are your disciples doing ²what is *not lawful* to do on a Sabbath?”

³And Jesus answering, said to them, ²“Did you never read ³even this, what David did ²when he had need and was hungry, he and those who were with him, how he went into the house of God, when Abiathar was the high priest, ³and took and ate *the showbread loaves*” ²(which is not lawful but for ³the priests alone) ²“and gave also to those who were with him? ¹Or have you not read in the law, how on the Sabbath the priests in the temple break the Sabbath and yet are guiltless? Now I say to you, that One greater than the temple is *here*. And if you had known what this means, *‘Mercy is what I desire and not sacrifice,’* you would not have condemned the guiltless.”

²And he said to them, “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath! So then the Son of man is *Lord* also of *the Sabbath*.”

(¹Matthew 12:1-8; ²Mark 2:23-28; ³Luke 6:1-5 TLOCIS)¹

³Then it came to pass on another Sabbath also, ¹after he

¹ The Life of Christ in Stereo: The Four Gospels Speak in Harmony; by Johnston M. Cheney; © 1969 Western Conservative Baptist Seminary, Portland, Oregon

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departed from that place, ³that he went ²again ¹into their synagogue ³ and taught; ¹and behold, there was a man there ³whose right hand was withered, and the scribes and the Pharisees were watching him to see if he would heal ²him on the Sabbath, that they might accuse him. ¹ And they asked him, saying, “Is it lawful to *heal* on the Sabbath?”

³ But he knew their thoughts, and said to the man with the withered hand, “Rise up, and stand before them.” And he rose up and stood. Then said Jesus to them, “I will ask you this, is it lawful on the Sabbath *to do good*—or to do evil? *To save life*—or to destroy it?” ² But they kept silent. ¹ And he said to them, “What man shall there be among you who shall have one sheep, and if it fall into a pit on the Sabbath he will not take hold of it and lift it out? Then how much more is a man worth than a *sheep*? Therefore it is *lawful* on the Sabbath *to do good*.”

³ And ²then looking around at them all with anger, being grieved at the hardness of their hearts, he said to the man, “Stretch out your hand.” And he stretched it out and his hand was restored ¹ as whole as the other. ³ But they were filled with madness, and began to consult with one another what they might do to Jesus. ² And the Pharisees went out and immediately ¹ held a council ² with the Herodians against him, how they might destroy him.

(¹Matthew 12:9-14; ²Mark 3:1-6; ³Luke 6:6-11 TLOCIS)

THE PHARISEES REACT

We have before us two incidents that the Pharisees couldn't handle. The only thing these two stories appear to have in common is that they both took place on the Sabbath. But a much deeper thread runs through the tapestry that is woven by the principles behind them. Their inclusion, back-to-back in Scripture, has a far deeper message for us. It is a message best understood by overlaying the one incident on top of the other.

The cast of characters continues to be: the Lord Jesus (the King of Glory come to earth), the disciples (the Master's team of committed, but not quite yet enlightened followers), and the Pharisees (Jesus' religious, but misguided enemies, who in the name of Judaism, were intent on destroying their own Messiah). As always, there are included in the story other incidental characters, but their presence only serves to highlight the obvious spiritual warfare that was now reaching a fevered pitch. The Pharisees had already determined, as we have seen in earlier

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passages, to find a way to embarrass and discredit the Master. Now they were openly admitting that their avowed goal was to find a way to destroy Him.

The battlefield they chose was one on which they felt quite confident—the Sabbath. It was here that the rabbinical law clearly set out so many incidental rules that the actual obeying of them all was virtually impossible. It was also clear that Jesus determined to break those rules in order to demonstrate the difference between the shadows and reality.

As we have discussed before, the Jewish authorities had, through the years, taken the principle of Sabbath rest and turned it into a maze of meaningless regulations. What had been intended by God for the glory of God and the good of man had now turned into a religious tradition that had no semblance of compassion, no hint of purpose and certainly nothing that would cause men to worship God. The Sabbath was not only not God-glorifying, it had become a stumbling block instead. These two incidents make that clear.

In the first case, the culprits were the disciples rather than the Lord Himself. The crime? They had been passing through (or literally, walking alongside) fields of standing grain. And as they did, the Scripture records that they, being hungry, *began to make a way, plucking the ears*. The phrase does not mean that they broke through the fields, thus breaking the stalks. It means that as they were walking by the fields, they began plucking the ears of grains. It was probably not corn, but rather some form of wheat or barley. The word “corn” used in some translations was a generic term, often used for several forms of cereal grasses grown in the Palestine area. If you will notice, you will find that the offense they were accused of was not that of wrongfully taking what was not theirs. According to Exodus 23, they had permission, if they were hungry, to eat of the stalks that grew by the way. No, the accusation was *that they had done it on the Sabbath*.

Now the law of the Sabbath, which was designed to portray the rest of God for the believer, had been so adulterated by the Jewish leaders that the original principle was no longer even visible. They had devised a cluster of shadows, and now were so busy chasing after shadows that they had forgotten what the law was for. Tradition had now been elevated to the place

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of Scripture; the shadow had been deified. For instance, “work” had now been classified into thirty-nine different categories and four of those categories included “reaping”, “winnowing”, “threshing” and “preparing a meal.” By their actions, then, the disciples had technically broken all four of those rules and were thus classified as law-breakers. To the rabbis, it was a grievous offense. To Jesus, it was a perfect picture of how that which was once a beautiful portrait had been made into a horrendous idol, an idol that had to be destroyed.

In the second instance, the accusation was aimed at Jesus Himself. He had the audacity to heal a man whose hand, either through an accident or a disease, had become withered or paralyzed. And He had the audacity to do it on the Sabbath. Again, the Jews had carefully written into their regulations hundreds of laws about what did and did not constitute work on the Sabbath. They had included what could and couldn't be done medically. If a life was in danger, such as a woman in childbirth, you could help. If a wall fell on someone, you could move the debris to see if the person was dead or alive. If they were alive, you could help them. If they were dead, you couldn't move the body until the following day. A fracture could not be attended to until the next day. You couldn't pour cold water on a sprain. If you cut yourself, you could put a plain bandage on, but not ointment.

God had designed, in eternity past, a picture book of divine etchings and had carefully drawn them on the tablets of the law so that the Jew could learn of the character of God. The Sabbath rest was one of those etchings. It was meant to teach man about the nature of God, the purpose of God, and the love of God. It taught man how God rested on the seventh day and thus drew attention to His creative powers. It taught man of the priorities of God and thus drew attention to the fact that man was not to live by bread alone. It drew attention to the coming Son of God, who would take our burdens and carry them by giving us His indwelling Spirit, thus allowing us to give Him the reins of our lives and rest. The Sabbath was never designed to make life more difficult, but rather more meaningful. But if you let man take the principles of God and turn them into a religious system, it will only be a short time until the principles are no longer even visible.

Jesus must have been grieved indeed to come to earth and

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see that not only had they lost the original beauty of the law, they had so adulterated it that it had become a woven net that, instead of setting men free to know God, actually bound them up until God could no longer be seen. So we have here two incidents that caused the Pharisees to react violently. Their man-made shadows had been invaded, and the fact that they had been invaded by God Himself made no difference. The fact that men who were doing the will of God were hungry made no difference. The fact that a man could not function because his hand was not whole did not matter. All that mattered was that this carpenter turned preacher was not doing things *their way*.

THE MASTER RESPONDS

Jesus now responds to His accusers; and, as always, He takes their petty arguments, holds them up in the light of Scripture and the arguments dissolve into nothingness. He turns to the Pharisees (who have accused the disciples of violating the Sabbath by eating the grain as they passed through the fields) and He says, “Let’s play Bible Trivia.” Question-1: “Have you ever read the story in the Old Testament where David went into the house of God and ate the showbread loaves and fed not only Himself, but those who were with Him as well? Or are you not familiar enough with the law to know that on the Sabbath, the priests in the temple disobey the Sabbath and yet are held guiltless? Oh, yes, and one more question: what does the Bible mean when it quotes Jehovah as saying, *‘Mercy is what I desire and not sacrifice?’* ”

These guys were not good at “trivia.” They didn’t have an answer especially when Jesus asked a question because His questions were such that the answers would frame His accusers. Jesus then ties together the meat of His response with one succinct statement, “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath! So then, the Son of man is Lord also of the Sabbath.”

Incident number two was answered with a question as well. Jesus, having been accused of having the audacity to heal a man on the Sabbath, asks the man He was about to heal to stand in their midst. He turns to His would-be attackers and quietly asks, “I will ask you this: is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do evil? To save life or to destroy it?”

There is, once again, no reply. They kept silent. So Jesus

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moves in for the kill. He asks another question. He asks, “What man shall there be among you who shall have one sheep and if it fall into a pit on the Sabbath he will not take hold of it and lift it out? Then how much more is a man worth than a sheep? Therefore, it is lawful on the Sabbath to do good.” The Master now judges the principle behind the law by the very behavior of the ones who are sitting in judgment. He asks what they would do if one of their sheep were to fall in a ditch. He knows the answer. So do they. “Then you have answered My question,” Jesus replies, “It is lawful to do good on the Sabbath, (unless, of course, sheep are more valuable to you than people.)”

It is at this point that Jesus displays anger. Righteous anger is a response to grief when the character of God has been assaulted or the results of sin have been demonstrated. Jesus was angry. God’s anger is not the temper out of control. It is not unreleased hostility finally vented. It is not the result of His rights being violated. God’s anger is His predetermined response to sin. And God got angry here. He said to the man, “Stretch out your hand!” The man did, and his hand was made whole. Immediately, they took counsel against Him. The Pharisees even formed an alliance with their enemies, the Herodians, for a common cause—to find a way to destroy the King of Glory.

THE ISSUE REVEALED

So there you have, superimposed on one another, two amazing confrontations between God and the religious establishment of that day. The surface issue in both cases was the Sabbath. The real issue in both cases was one of chasing after shadows. The Pharisees were not interested in spiritual transformation. They were interested in keeping the religious status quo. They were not seeking to grow into the likeness of God. They were seeking to protect their traditions even at the expense of asking God to leave their fellowship. They were more interested in keeping the Sabbath than they were in pleasing the God of the Sabbath or meeting the needs of the people for whom the God of the Sabbath was about to give His life. They had missed the entire point of man’s relationship with God. They missed the reality of eternity while chasing after shadows.

But the Holy Spirit did not include these two stories in the Scriptures just to give us a chance to laugh at the Pharisees, nor is it there to give us cause to scorn the law. God tells stories

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to demonstrate principles. God demonstrates principles to force His children to make a choice when faced with similar situations. Once we know where God stands, then we know how *God in us* will respond. Once we know that, our only choice is whether or not to let Him.

You say, “But the Sabbath is not a big problem in our day.” Perhaps not. But the Sabbath was not the root issue. The Sabbath was a convenient illustration for God to use to teach a principle. The principle is, “Don’t go chasing after shadows.” The reality has come. Don’t lose the meaning of the symbolism by falling captive to the traditions of men.

The problem is still with us. Today we call it “legalism.” Legalism interprets the Scripture through the eyes of tradition and elevates the “how” to a position equal to the “why”. Instead of focusing on the joy of baptism, for instance, and what it represents in God’s eyes, some focus on the means of baptism and make such an issue of the method that they totally obscure the portrait itself.

Worship is another example. Some say that true worshippers all worship a certain way: with music, without music; with instruments, without instruments; with memorized prayer, without memorized prayer. They claim either you worship their way or you haven’t worshipped. The experience with the woman at the well should have settled that once and for all. God is Spirit and those who worship Him are not those who worship Him a certain way, but all those, who, possessing the Holy Spirit, worship Him in Spirit and in Truth. It doesn’t say where. It doesn’t say how. Man has defined worship according to his own experience and, like the Pharisees, has then elevated *that definition* to the place of equality with Scripture. It’s called *adding to the Word of God*. It’s dangerous.

Still others say you must have some kind of extra-curricular experience to be truly spiritual (or in some cases, to be saved at all). Then they define that experience as one like “they” had (whoever “they” are). If “they” spoke in tongues, then that’s God’s new standard of spirituality. If “they” were healed, then only the healed were spiritual. If “they” stopped eating pork, then all pork eaters were suddenly condemned to second-class citizenship in their make-believe kingdom. Legalism is the cancerous infusion of tradition into the canon of Truth that nullifies the principles

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behind the Truth and replaces it with man's interpretation of the Truth. It sets man up as God and limits the Creator to the rules of the created. It is, in effect, the process of deifying the activity of chasing after shadows. And God is not at all impressed.

We must learn to stop chasing after shadows. We must stop quarreling and quibbling over things that are not the deciding factors in man's salvation and growth. We must come to accept others whose stand on surface issues are different from ours and learn to work together for the salvation of the lost and the building up of the body of Christ. But we must never compromise on the basics. That is where Satan so often draws the pendulum once again off dead center. He wants us either to become so dogmatic over lesser issues that we divide the church into little pieces, or he wants us to become so dramatically lax that we accept heresy as truth.

There are several major issues about which we must never compromise and from which we must never move. These are not shadows, these are absolutes. Solidify them in your heart. Put them in concrete. Never let anyone tell you that they can be negotiated. Absolute truths are undeniable, immovable and irreplaceable. Once you are certain of those things, you are in a better position to relax about the lesser issues. Let's just remind ourselves of four undeniable truths that must never be compromised.

1- Never move one inch from the reality of salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. If someone begins to put the Cross anywhere but in the foreground or add to it or take from it, then stop immediately and take issue. That is not true worship. Don't listen to "Jesus plus anything." He did it all. He paid the entire price for your sins and you were and are and ever will be unworthy of His love. Any deviation from that truth is incompatible with Scripture. Mark it.

2- The infallibility of the Word of God is another of life's absolutes. It cannot be moved. If the Word is not what it claims to be (every syllable God-breathed, never of private interpretation, always profitable for total transformation), then you and I have no basis on which to define truth. The Word of God is infallible and immutable. Never listen to anyone who denies its authority. If it is not perfect, then neither is its Author. To claim that it is imperfect is blasphemy.

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3- The reality of heaven and hell are absolutes. Either a man is saved or he is lost. Either you will spend eternity in heaven or in hell. No one can accept the Word as infallible and the Cross as essential and deny that fact. Satan loves to paint gray matter in between the saved and the lost. There is none. Scripture says there is a great gulf fixed between, and no one can cross that gulf.

4- The Kingdom of God is a spiritual kingdom. That is another bedrock truth. God did not come simply to change our circumstances, though He sometimes does. He came to change us into His likeness and to transform our spirits. Any gospel that ignores that truth ignores the reason Jesus came. He came to seek and to save those who were lost and to change those He saved into His image.

There are others, but hang tough on those. They cannot be refuted without denying the basic premises of the faith. But Beloved, don't split the Body of Christ or get at odds with your brothers in the faith over the traditions of men or the interpretations of men that their church or your church or any church has elevated to the place of infallibility. Give God room to work. Look behind the rules to the reality and beyond the pettiness to the principle. Please don't condemn your church for its traditions; honor them. But please don't condemn others for theirs. That's the key. Let's stop binding God and binding His body with unnecessary man-made strait-jackets. I believe that is the message the Master was desperately trying to communicate in these Sabbath-related stories.

The message was, "Don't go chasing after shadows." The Light has appeared, and when HE is lifted up, all the shadows ought to disappear.

So we ought to all be simply following Him and not chasing after shadows anymore.

To Jesus be praise and honor and glory forever. Amen.

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