

He Keeps on Keeping On

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They wanted to kill Jesus. Who wants that – to kill a holy healer?

Isn't that who we see in Jesus? The Son of Man healing the sick. The religious authorities, however, see a man who violates the Sabbath and, who teaches others to do the same. That, they believed, deserved death.

We need to understand the offense. Jesus healed on the Sabbath. He worked. He did not honor the Sabbath or keep it holy.

- That doesn't sound death-worthy to us, does it?
- Frankly, we all break the Sabbath in multiple ways throughout the year throughout our lives. And we don't think of that as a matter of life and death.

But in ancient Israel, according to their traditions, keeping Sabbath laws was about the life or death of the nation.

- Everything that mattered depended on honoring the Sabbath and keeping it holy, along with all the other commandments of Moses.
- By the time of Jesus those numbered 614.

To understand the urgency, let me ask you to conduct a thought experiment.

- Imagine Vladimir Putin's army threatening our capitol, not Kiev but Washington DC.
- Imagine Putin's army executing our civilians, executing our political leaders and sending the survivors to Russia;
- imagine Putin outlawing the church and taking control of every aspect of our national life.

That's what Israel had experienced, not in some thought experiment, but in history over hundreds of years.

- The first invasion was at the hand of the Assyrians in 701,
- then at the hands of the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar 100 years later.
- Jerusalem, the City of David, fell in 587.
- The Temple, the house of God, was razed to the ground.

It was catastrophic. Everything that mattered was laid to waste.

What did that have to do with honoring the Sabbath?

In the face of absolute destruction, they asked the obvious question: What went wrong? How could this happen to us, **the chosen people of God?**

We can imagine they looked for someone, anyone, to blame.

It was the prophets of Israel who pointed the finger at the nation itself. "People of God, we have done this to ourselves.

- We have disobeyed God.
- We have violated the Commandments.
- We have sinned against God and our neighbors.
- We have neglected justice in the land –
 - we mistreat the poor,
 - the widows,
 - the orphans and
 - the foreigners living in our midst.

Sin has consequences, they preached. And the national catastrophes, they insisted, were just that.

So, what do you do to heal a nation that has so thoroughly disobeyed God's commandments? **You call the nation to repent, to change the direction of their lives and obey God's will.**

Following the commandments would be the cure, the salvation of Israel. It was thought by the Pharisees that if for one day, just a single day, all of Israel was perfectly obedient to the Law, their obedience would trigger the Messianic age. Everything would be put to right if they would just obey the Laws of Moses.

Can you see Jesus' actions in that light?

- Every time Jesus broke the law,
- and led others to do the same,
- every time He disregarded the religious traditions that had been taught over hundreds of years,
- **He delayed the healing of the nation.** That's why the religious authorities hated Jesus.

And worse still: Jesus claimed a unique relation to God.

- He claimed that God was His father, uniquely so, making Him equal to God.
- In the 5th chapter of John, Jesus makes clear that is how He sees himself:
 - God is still working, He said,
 - and I am also working.
 - I don't do anything that God is not doing.
 - **And we are going to keep on doing, whether you receive us or not.**

Jesus is a defiant savior.

- He didn't come asking permission to do the work of God.
- He did not come to please religious people to gain their approval.
- When religious traditions, even those that were equated with the perfect will of God, clashed with Jesus' work, He chose God's work at every step.

I'm reminded of the Apostle Paul defending himself and his ministry to the Galatian church:

- "Am I now seeking human approval, or God's approval?"
- Or am I trying to please people?
- **If I were still pleasing people, I would not be a servant of Christ."**

I have to tell you that last verse cuts me to the heart.

- I was born to please people.
- Or maybe my parents raised me that way. I don't know.
- But either by nature or nurture, I have been a people pleaser all my life.
- I like to be liked.
- I am an approval seeking missile.

Let me tell you how that worked out for me in ministry. Pleasing people was my first strategy as a new pastor almost 40 years ago.

- Not consciously, of course, but I set out to please everyone in my church.
 - And for a while it worked.
 - They liked me, a lot.
 - But I couldn't keep it up.
 - It took me about a year to notice that I was so tired.

A wise elder told me once and kept telling me, "Carl, Rome wasn't built in a day."

- He meant that I should exercise patience with my new congregation.
- But I took him to mean, "Carl, stay with your people pleasing project; it will just take you longer than you think."
- And so, I marched on in my people pleasing mission.

In my second church, I figured out quickly that I couldn't please anybody there. It felt like the more and better they knew me, the less they liked me. That was just a few people honestly; but they were the only ones I could hear. Negative voices outperform their numbers, don't they?

In my third church I learned that I couldn't even please myself. I had no idea what I wanted.

It was in my fourth church that I learned the truth, when I really got it:

- You can't please everybody,
- especially when what people want is opposed to what other people want.
- If I pleased one person or group of people,
- I was bound to disappoint others, because they wanted incompatible outcomes.

Do you remember the 1974 Burger King jingle? "Hold the pickle, hold the lettuce, special orders don't upset us, all we ask is that you let us serve it your way. Have it your way, have it your way, have it your way at Burger King."

Did you know the song was updated last October? It's terrible, but it goes like this:
"Whopper, Whopper, Whopper, Whopper, Junior, Double, Triple Whopper, Impossible or Bacon Whopper, **I rule this day.**" I rule.

It doesn't work in the church, or anywhere else for that matter: We want different things. We want opposite things, incompatible outcomes. And we've come to believe that in order for me to rule my day, my way, I must also rule your day, my way. Pardon me for saying so, but that's crazy.

It has taken too long, but I have learned to live with other people's disappointment. It's not that I don't care; I do. But I can't give everyone what they want, so I make the most faithful choices that I can, given what I know at any given time.

I don't rule.

You don't rule.

We don't rule.

Jesus does and we follow Him in His way the best we can, whomever it might please or displease.

It's not easy to live in a Burger King world, is it? It's not easy to cooperate or to love our neighbors when everyone believes that they are entitled to rule the day. It's not easy being the church where people don't agree on what is best. It is especially hard to be the church if we think we can please everyone.

But people pleasing isn't our calling.

- Serving Jesus Christ is.
- Doing His work is.
- **And His work is the work of healing the world through love.**
 - It is the love that sacrifices so that others can live.
 - It is the love that puts others first so that they can be whole.

Have it my way? No thanks. I'll have whatever Jesus is having. It is the only way that will save us. Amen.