



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

Gospel of Matthew

“Lord of the Sabbath,” Matthew 12:1-8 – TRANSCRIPT

For the Scripture reading this morning, I want to read not only our brief passage in the Gospel of Matthew, but the six verses of 1 Samuel chapter 21 verses 1 through 6. So, if you have your Bibles, will you turn to the Old Testament book of 1 Samuel. I want to read at verse 1 of chapter 21. The incident and this entire section has to do with the life of David, and you will recognize, I’m sure, it’s context from that standpoint:

“Then came David to Nob to Ahimelech the priest: and Ahimelech was afraid at the meeting of David, and said unto him, ‘Why art thou alone, and no man with thee?’ And David said unto Ahimelech the priest, ‘The king hath commanded me a business, and hath said unto me, Let no man know any thing of the business whereabout I send thee, and what I have commanded thee: and I have appointed my servants to such and such a place. Now therefore what is under thine hand? give me five loaves of bread in mine hand, or what there is present.’ And the priest answered David, and said, ‘There is no common bread under mine hand, but there is hallowed bread; if the young men have kept themselves at least from women.’ And David answered the priest, and said unto him, ‘Of a truth

women have been kept from us about these three days, since I came out, and the vessels of the young men are holy, and the bread is in a manner common, yea, though it were sanctified this day in the vessel.’ So the priest gave him hallowed bread: for there was no bread there but the shewbread, that was taken from before the LORD, to put hot bread in the day when it was taken away.”

Now that incident is referred to in the passage that we are going to look at in the exposition that follows in a moment. And you will recognize it, as now we are going to Matthew chapter 12 and read the first 8 verses of this chapter. Matthew chapter 12 verse 1 through verse 8,

“At that time Jesus went on the sabbath day through the corn; and his disciples were hungry, and began to pluck the ears of corn and to eat. 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.’ But he said unto them, ‘Have ye not read what David did, when he was an hungred, and they that were with him; How he entered into the house of God, and did eat the shewbread, which was not lawful for him to eat, neither for them which were with him, but only for the priests? 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? But I say unto you, That in this place is one greater than the temple. But if ye had known what this meaneth, I will have mercy, and not sacrifice, ye would not have condemned the guiltless. For the Son of man is Lord even of the sabbath day.”

May God’s blessing rest upon his word. Let’s bow together in a word of prayer.

[Prayer] Again, our Father, we come to the Thee in the name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ asking Thy blessing upon us as we hear the ministry of the word of God, and as we ponder the great truths that are contained within it.

We thank Thee for our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, the God man, who came from the glory of heaven, and the glory that belonged to him as the second person of the great Trinity, and who came here in order to accomplish the work of redemption concerning which the whole Trinity had conversations in the ages past.

And we thank Thee, Lord, that this ministry was accomplished in accordance with the will of God. We praise Thee that thou art a sovereign God and not a frustrated deity.

And we thank Thee that Thou in Thy marvelous grace and love brought it to pass that today we are able to gather in a meeting such as this with the knowledge of God in our spirits, and we pray O God that through the ministry of Thy word Thou wilt continue to sanctify us and use us to bring honor and glory to Thy name.

We know that we are fruitless vessels in ourselves, that we cannot of ourselves do anything that would be pleasing to Thee or honoring to Thy name, apart from divine enablement, and so we pray, Lord, that Thou wilt work in our lives to that end if it should please Thee.

We thank Thee for everyone present here, and we pray, Lord, that the special needs that exist in the lives of the ones who are gathered here may be met through Thy word and through the ministry of the Spirit as he wields the word in our lives. We thank Thee for the illustration of this great event that we have been reading about in this chapter of the importance of the word of God.

We ask Thy blessing upon the continued ministry of the word wherever it is proclaimed on this, the Lord’s day.

We pray for our country. We again, ask, Lord that Thou wilt guide and direct us as a nation. We pray that the important decisions that are made at the polls are decisions

that will bring the most honor and glory to Thy name.¹ We leave these matters in Thy hands, confident, again, that Thou wilt arrange that Thy will shall be done.

We pray for the whole church of Jesus Christ today. Not only Believers Chapel with its needs, but the whole body of Jesus Christ. We pray that Thou wilt build up those who have put their faith and trust in Jesus Christ, and will strengthen them and use them.

Especially do we pray, Lord, for the ill. We ask that Thou wilt minister to them. And give them, Lord, in the midst of the trials and difficulties of life which we all face, the sense of Thy presence and of Thy sustaining hand.

We commit this meeting to you. We pray that Thy blessing may be upon us.

For Jesus’ sake. Amen.

[Message] One of the well-known commentators on the Gospel of Matthew has said, “In every man’s life, there are decisive moments, times and events on which the whole of life hinges.” I think all thoughtful men agree with that statement, and I think most of us would agree that in our lives there have been decisive moments. There have been times and events in which the whole of our life has hinged.

And when we think of the life of Jesus Christ, these times have become very evident to us, because there are certain outstanding events in his life that all can see are critical events. We think, of course, of the incarnation of the Son of God, which is one of the great events of the whole of the Bible. We think of his baptism and his temptation; of the agony in Gethsemane; perhaps of the Transfiguration; and preeminently of the death, burial and resurrection. And we look forward to one of the great events of the future, the Second Coming of Jesus Christ.

It is not often realized that in the 12th chapter of the Gospel of Matthew there is another critical event, one which for our Lord’s own personal history had special significance. Because, in the 12th chapter in this Gospel of Matthew, we see portrayed by

¹ This series of sermons on the Gospel of Matthew were given during the year 1976.

the evangelist the fateful and final decision of Jewish orthodoxy not, not to have anything more to do with Jesus of Nazareth, but rather to eliminate him. And so we have them saying at the conclusion of the events that they wanted to bring together a council that they might destroy him.

So this is a fateful chapter. It is a chapter in which we have the official and outward rejection of the Lord Jesus, after we have already had the personal and inward rejection manifested by the preceding chapter.

Now, it’s been two or three weeks since I’ve had the opportunity to say anything about Matthew in your presence, and you may have forgotten that one of the commentators has said that we should draw a heavy black line between chapter 11 verse 19 and chapter 11 verse 20, because it is there that we have a kind of continental divide in the Book of Matthew, and that the truth of the two sections of Matthew run into different oceans from that point.

And what he was trying to say was that at the conclusion of chapter 11 verse 19 it has become evident that there has become a personal, inward rejection of the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. Well, from that point on, the story of Matthew is the story of the outward official confirmation of that. It will run its course and reach its climax when our Lord hangs upon the cross and cries out, “My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?” That is the real conclusion of the decision that was made much earlier in the hearts of the men who were involved.

The incident that we are to look at, I would imagine—speaking as a teacher of the word—would probably be an incident that we would never chose as an isolated sermon. It is one of the values of expository preaching that you are forced to take up all of the passages of a book and not go through it picking the things that are easy to preach or perhaps are those we think convey to us the greatest blessings. And we are forced in our exposition of Matthew to handle this rather strange incident in which the disciples pass

through one of the corn fields, pluck some of the corn ears and begin to eat them, and are criticized by the Pharisees for it.

This incident raises some other questions, some of which we won’t deal with this morning, but we’ll deal with them next Sunday. It raises, for example, the question of the relationship between the ceremonial and the spiritual and moral aspects of the law of Moses; the relative importance of the ceremonial – the sacrifice and the offerings and the priesthood and things like that – as over against the spiritual and moral principles of the Old Testament.

It raises the question again of the greatness of the Son of God, and we have, again, one of our Lord’s most significant statements of his own nature and character. And then it raises the question of the relationship between the Jewish Sabbath and the Christian Lord’s Day, and we’ll save that question for next Sunday, the Lord willing.

And it raises the question—and I think this is very important—of what it means to read the Bible. I think we all think that we know what it means to read the Bible, but I’m not really sure that we know the sense in which our Lord would understand the phrase, to read the Bible. And we shall have something to say about that this morning.

The occasion of this incident is, I think, manifestly at the time of the message that our Lord has just given in the 11th chapter, because he begins the 12th chapter by saying, “At that time, Jesus went on the Sabbath day through the grain fields.” So this indicates a rather close connection between this incident and the preceding. Well, what in the preceding might have caused the evangelist to put this event in which we have contrasted the traditions of the Pharisees concerning the Sabbath and the teaching of the Bible concerning the Sabbath? What is there in the context that might have led him to introduce this event at this point and include it in his gospel?

Well Jesus had just said, “Come unto me ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn of me, for I am meek and lowly of

heart, and ye shall find rest unto your souls, for my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

Now what does he mean by that?

Well he means, we have seen, that his yoke is light and easy in comparison with the yoke of the Pharisees. Well, what was the yoke of the Pharisees? Well, the yoke of the Pharisees was not that they taught the Old Testament Scriptures as they are written in the Old Testament, but rather, that they taught the Old Testament Scriptures and then overlaid them with many, many, many regulations and rules which were not really Scriptural at all. They are the Traditions of the Fathers, but not necessarily the teaching of the word of God.

They are the burdens that the average people had to bear because the teaching of the word and the authoritative voice from God was the voice of the scribes and Pharisees, and so the yoke that was laid upon the people, which neither we nor our fathers were able to bear, to use Peter’s words, was not only the teaching of the Old Testament, but the Old Testament plus the traditions of the teachings of men.

Now we have a great deal of that day, because there are many things that are taught as if they were the word of God, but are not necessarily found in Holy Scripture. Well you can see, then, that our evangelist at this point is giving an illustration, and he will give another one of how the yoke of the Pharisees is to be thrown off if we truly interpret the Old Testament Scriptures. And that is what the Jesus does. He points out that the traditions, the regulations and rule imposed upon Israel which were not in the Old Testament were not necessarily to be followed.

Now the place of the Sabbath with the Jews is important. The Sabbath was peculiar to the Hebrews, and when God gave them the Sabbath in the Mosaic law, he reminded them of the fact that he gave it to them because when he created the earth in seven days, he accomplished the creation in six and rested on the Sabbath or seventh. And he sanctified that day as holy. That is, that day was set apart for the Lord.

Now in the creation of the Mosaic law and in the Ten Commandments, in the Fourth Commandment it is said that the children of Israel should remember the Sabbath day, that it was holy. And that they were, as other regulations pointed out, to treat it as a day of rest. It was a day in which they were to worship. It was a day in which they were to give God a place of their activities in life. In other words, it was a day in which they were not to work. It specifically stated that they should not work on the Sabbath day.

Now, the Sabbath was not kept when men didn’t work and rested. It was kept when men didn’t work and rested and set apart the Lord as the center of attention in all of their life and activity. The Sabbath, then, was very important and in other parts of the Old Testament, it is stated that the Sabbath was given to them because they were God’s redeemed people. So it has relationship not only to creation, but also to the redemption of the nation. It was a day that was to be observed by giving God first place in their lives.

The point at issue, then, has to do with this Sabbath. And one day, on the Sabbath, the Lord and his disciples were walking through the corn fields. Now this was a very common thing, and what is said here by Matthew is true to the customs of the time, because the paths upon which the people walked from one place to another often led through the fields. And men would walk down between the rows of the grain or between the stalks of the corn. And they were free, according to the Old Testament in Deuteronomy chapter 23 and verse 25 to take off of the grain that which was necessary for their own personal use.

If I were hungry, I had the freedom according to the Old Testament law to take of the corn and eat that which was necessary to sustain my life. Now, it was said that I should not bring a scythe into the fields of grain that were tilled by my neighbors, but I could take that which was necessary for my life. That was specifically stated in Deuteronomy chapter 23 and verse 25. So it is not a question of the legality of what they were doing, it was a question of the time at which they were doing it. They were doing it on the Sabbath day.

And so, the Pharisees, when they saw it, they said unto the Lord, “Behold, thy disciples do that which is not lawful to do upon the Sabbath day.” This incident reveals a great deal about the prosperity of the disciples and the king whom they served. What a strange sort of king that our Lord is, that he cannot even provide the material needs of his servants. Evidently, they were poor. They didn’t have to take any vow of poverty. It was their experience.

And if we may go by this, we may assume that our Lord also was hungry, and that he, too, felt what it was to have nothing. They did not really have anything, so this gives us a very interesting insight into the poverty and penury of our Lord and the disciples, that little apostolic band which was supported, we are told in Luke, by the gifts of some of the women. I think that it must have been true in those days as it was in this one. The women have all the money. And so, they were able to support the Lord and the apostolic band.

Well now, Moses’ self-appointed disciples, incidentally—not Moses, our Lord will point out—speak out of a little bit of casuistry. They say it’s not lawful to do what they were doing, and that raises the question, what is work? because they were obviously saying this was work. What is work?

Well now, the Pharisees, the scribes, and the Jewish teachers – the rabbinical authorities – had sought to go through the Old Testament and give the interpretation of many words of Scripture which to them would seem to be equivocal. For example, in connection with work on the Sabbath day, there were thirty-nine different actions that were forbidden on the Sabbath day. They were said by them to be work—not by the Bible—but said by them to be work.

Now they were attempting to do an honest thing: what is work? Because I’m sure that there would be people who would say, what I am doing is not work when it really is work. And so, they had to have some of these discussions about what is work; what does the word of God mean when it says, you shall not work. But unfortunately, as is so often

the case, instead of sticking as close to Scripture as possible, and having as few of these definitions as possible, they had overlaid it with the mass of tradition.

They had said, for example, that to reap is to work. Maimonides later on said that reaping is working, or to reap is to work. Now they also said that to take grain – and Luke adds that when they went through the fields and reached up and took an ear of corn, they rubbed it together, rubbed it in their hands in order to rub off the kernels of the grain – now that was said by them to be threshing. And then when they took the corn silk off from the kernel, that was winnowing. So you see, by simply taking the ear of corn and making it ready to eat, the disciples, according to the interpretation of the scribes and Pharisees, had reaped, they had threshed, they had winnowed; they had actually prepared a meal. And that was forbidden because it was work, according to their definition.

This was an implicit violation. They didn’t cite any Scripture. They simply said, “They are doing what it is unlawful to do.” So it is an implicit violation of the Old Testament; really a violation of their interpretations. Now this wouldn’t be so bad, I presume, if their intentions had been honorable. If they had just said, “We think that’s work. It’s not specifically stated in Scripture, but we think that the next time you do that, we’re going to bring you up before the council and have a little discussion with you.”

It’s evident, though, that they were following the disciples. They saw it. They must have been following the Lord. I imagine they had a committee which was designed to follow the Lord Jesus and the apostles, and they followed them everywhere in order that they might gain some means by which they could charge them with violation of the Old Testament. This shows you how much our Lord kept up the law of the Old Testament. They had been on his trail the whole time, and they could never find anything, any way in which he had truly violated the law of Moses. That’s an amazing accomplishment on our Lord’s part, and it is only an exhibition, really, of the sinless character of the Son of God.

But murder was in the hearts of these men. Because when these two incidents take place, they take a council together against him that they might destroy him, the 14th verse says. Not counsel him, not help him, not set him straight, but destroy him. They already hated Jesus Christ for the light that had been thrown upon their lives.

The response of the Lord is most interesting, and he does not speak of the traditions. He does not say to the men, “Now wait a minute, this is not work. Your traditions say it’s work, but it’s not really work.” He doesn’t say that. He gives an answer assuming their own grounds. And his answer is simply a citation from the word of God. Now, I just wonder how well we would have done in a similar circumstance.

I wonder if we would have been able to reach back into the Old Testament in 1 Samuel chapter 21 – that well-known passage [laughter] – and put it out and give its meaning in the light of this incident. And then I wonder if we would have been able to give the case of the priests who profaned the Sabbath day and yet are held blameless by the law itself.

Now I want to say just a word about this, because I think this is extremely important and illustrates for us what it really means to read the Bible. Now the case of David we have read in the Scripture reading. Remember, David was on a secret and official mission for King Saul. It was one of which he could not say anything to Ahimelech, but he was on a secret mission and a sacred mission because it was for the king.

Now, what’s the meaning of what happened? David and his men went to Ahimelech the priest and said we need bread. Ahimelech said, “We don’t have any bread. The only thing we have are the tables of showbread.” Now the tables of showbread were twelve loaves of bread which were placed in the Tabernacle every Sabbath day. They were left there for one week. They were changed the next Sabbath day. Now those loaves of bread were designed to represent the Nation Israel, the twelve loaves for the twelve tribes, and it represented also their fellowship with the Lord, for bread is

something that you feed upon. They were bread for God because he took delight in them, and then at the conclusion of the week, those twelve loaves of bread belonged only to the priests. Now, these were the loaves by which the priests lived, but they could not take them out until the Sabbath day.

So here is, then, something that is typical in its meaning. But, the fact that the priests were able to eat the bread at a particular time showed that the ceremonial and ritual is subordinate to the moral. And it is particularly so, because Ahimelech the priest recognized that David, on a mission from King Saul – and, incidentally, David was the king to be, already anointed as king at this time – he recognized that the preservation of the life of David had more significance spiritually than the requirements of the law of Moses that the bread should not be eaten by anyone but the priests.

In other words, our Lord refers to the incident, points out that even in the Scriptures themselves, we have indications of the relative significance of the ceremonial and cultic laws as over against the laws of right and wrong: mercy, things of necessity for the preservation of life. And in addition, if we remember that David the King is a type of our Lord Jesus – he is in rejection; he is seeking food; and he is fed by the priesthood – all of this has application to our Lord who is in rejection with his disciples, hungry and seeking food, on a secret mission from heaven.

Not so secret, really: the fulfillment of the purpose and plan of God for the redemption of man. And in the light of the action of the Old Testament in which a priest fed David, how much more should our Lord’s disciples be fed when he is carrying out the mission to whom David’s life pointed and to which the whole cultus pointed full of the ceremonies? An amazing use of the word of God.

I do not know of anything that illustrates more that the Lord Jesus had the word of God right on the tips of fingers. Now, incidentally, he had to learn the Bible in his human nature as you and I should study Scripture.

But not only does he give one reason why it was lawful for them to eat the bread, he states in the 5th verse, “O, have ye not read that in the law how that on the Sabbath days the priests in the Temple profaned the Sabbath and are blameless?” To what does he refer here? Why, he refers to the fact that on the Sabbath day, the priests engaged in a whole lot of activity.

For example, on the Sabbath day, there were a lot of offerings that had to be made. Two lambs were sacrificed, so they had to slay the lambs and carry out the ritual for the priestly sacrifice. Meal offerings had to be brought, and so they had to carry out the work necessary to accomplish a meal offering. Drink offerings also took place on that day, and so they had to carry out all of that activity.

As a matter of fact, the Sabbath day was a busy day for the priests. I guess they were like preachers who look forward to Sunday not as a day of rest but as a day of labor. Most preachers I know – I see some of you are smiling in the audience who have preached a good bit – you know that when Sunday night comes, that’s the time when the rest begins, not Sunday morning, after the day is over.

Now the priests carried on all of this labor in the Tabernacle which the priests and the Pharisees described as “work.” And yet the Lord Jesus said, they profane the Sabbath, and yet they are guiltless. Because you see, it’s alright to work in the interests of God. In other words, the activity that is for God that is an activity that is sanctified to his service takes precedence over the ceremonial and cultic laws, and the Old Testament teaches it itself.

The reason for this is obvious. The ceremonial and cultic is designed to point forward beyond itself. No ceremony is of any ultimate worth. All ceremonies picture realities which are more important than the ceremonies. When, for example, tonight, we sit at the Lord’s table and observe the Lord’s Supper, and we take the bread and we take the wine, the bread and the wine are not so important for us as the body and the blood of Christ. The body and the blood of Christ is the important thing. The ceremony is only

a means to the end. And so naturally, that which is real takes precedence over that which is unreal.

Now, I say this is a masterful use of the word, but there is more to it than that. I want you to notice how the Lord Jesus speaks to these scribes and Pharisees. In the 3rd verse he says unto them, “Have ye not read?” The 5th verse, “Or have ye not read?” The 7th verse, “If ye had known what this meaneth” and then cites a passage from the Old Testament.

Now what is he saying? He’s saying that the experts need defined learning, rather than rabbinical learning. But wait a minute, who were these experts? Well, we have some very curious notes from these experts. The tradition of the scribes and Pharisees find ultimate expression in the Massorettes. Now we all know, if we’ve done any study at all, that there was no group of men who have ever studied the Bible more minutely than the scribes and the Pharisees and their successors such as the Massorettes.

Why do you know they read the Old Testament, and they could even count the words of the Old Testament? They know that which is the “middle word” in all of the Bible—not the English translation; the Hebrew and Aramaic Old Testament. They know which is the central word. Furthermore, they know, of course, which is the central chapter. They know which word is the middle word in a half of the Bible. They know which is the quarter word. They read it that much. They constructed their own concordances. They went through counting the occurrences of words. Somebody had to do that, you know. They did that.

They not only knew that, they knew those words which were written with bigger sizes than others. They were marked out. There isn’t anything about the letter of the word that you could think of that they didn’t know. What’s the matter with them? Could you tell them they hadn’t read the word? Well that would be like saying to a professor of systematic theology and saying, “Have you read?” except worse. Have you read? Don’t you know what this means?

Very few of you ever come to me and spoken to me in that language. [Laughter] You could. You could, because there are many things I don’t know. But you don’t even do that with me, because most of you are afraid I’ll reply and bite off your head or something like that. [Laughter] There’s good tradition for that belief, too [boisterous, sustained laughter].

But, you see, what our Lord is saying to these men, of all men who have read it through, we not only have read it through, we have read it through many times. Just ask us anything about any word in the Old Testament. He said, haven’t you read, haven’t you read about this? You see, there is something more than just reading in order for it to be real reading.

Now what our Lord is saying, in effect, in order to truly read, we must understand. We don’t really read when we simply allow the words to pass under our eyes, the sentences to glide before our glasses. And when our souls flit over the word of holy Scripture the way a bird does over the landscape, that’s not reading according to our Lord. That’s what he’s saying. You might as well take the Bible. If you read it, simply to read the words, simply to get through a chapter—you don’t have a chapter to read today—and so you read the chapter and someone asks you what the chapter said afterward, and you say, “I’m not really sure. There was something about the creation, there.” That’s not reading the Bible.

Why you just as might well read it in Latin. Or, you might just as well take the Bible, turn it upside down and read it that way. If there is no understanding, there is no reading. That’s what he means. Have you never read? The priests lit the candlestick in the Tabernacle before they put the incense on the altar of incense because there needs to be illumination upon the divine activities if there is to be understanding, because understanding is what we need.

So when we come to the Bible, sit down before Bible and say I read this like I read the newspaper, wonder how the Aggies did yesterday, or wonder—well, I won’t

mention the Bears today—wonder how the Mustangs did. We don’t read the Bible like we read the newspaper. We don’t read the Bible like we read poetry, to be dazzled by the flashing poetry of some outstanding literateur.

When we come to the word of God, we come to a book in which the Lord God of the universe sits like a crowned monarch in the pages, and we listen for his voice, and we ponder until we understand – that’s why we read the Bible. And incidentally, we should use all the helps that we can, too. We don’t show the disrespect to God by refusing to be taught by living men. To refuse help from men who are taught in the word of God, and to fail to pay attention to the books that have been written on the Bible is to imply that there is a mistake somewhere in the economy of spiritual gifts and graces which is under the direction, incidentally, of the Holy Spirit.

There are some men who, as someone has said, accept only the light that comes through the crack in their own roof, and they’d prefer to remain in the dark than to see by another man’s candle. When you study the Bible, when you really read the Bible, you must understand, and anything that it takes to understand is legal.

I feel there is a great need for just such an exhortation as this. Last night at about 10 o’clock, I received a long distance call from a man who is a missionary. He is a missionary that we ourselves have been interested in ourselves, here, at Believers Chapel. He called me from Charleston, South Carolina and talked for about half an hour, and he didn’t want to charge his father-in-law with the long distance call, and so he was calling from a phone booth. And about every three, four, or five or ten minutes he would have to stop and put in another dollar and a half. He said he had ten dollars in quarters with him, and he intended to talk for that length of time, and he did. Fulfilled his prophecy [laughter].

He said that in Charleston, recently, he had been in a Christian bookstore, and the owner of the bookstore said he had to run out of town, but he had no one to run the bookstore. And so, Richard offered to run the bookstore for two days, and he did. And

he said these words to me. He said, “Doctor, I’m appalled at the Christian literature and the Christian materials that Christians in the United States are buying and devouring. He said the superficiality of what we are reading and listening to is amazing. I can’t wait to get back to Tunisia,” he said.

Now, I think there is a great deal of that in this country today. We are living in a day of superficiality, in which people think that to read the word is simply to read a chapter in the Bible. Our Lord’s illustration here should disabuse our minds here of that. In the reading of the Bible, incidentally, read all of the Bible, not simply the parts from which you get a blessing. But read the historical sections. You’ll be amazed at how much light there is in the historical sections of the word of God if you will read it with a view to understanding.

There is no greater picture of faith, for example, than the picture our Lord uses, for example, of the brazen serpent and the fiery serpents. And the picture of Israel, having been bitten by the fiery serpents, and turning to look at the brazen serpent on the pole, our Lord using that as an example of what true faith is—to look off to Christ, who on the cross died for the sins of sinners. What more beautiful expression can you have of faith? That’s what it is. Simply to look off from one’s self to the objective work of the cross at Calvary.

Why that picture of faith is so vivid that it’s a better description than many of the things written in the doctrinal section of the New Testament. And you’ll discover this, too, that those things that are the hardest to get at are often the greatest blessings.

Go in the British Museum, for example. The British Museum has some tremendous volumes. They have *Codex Alexandrinus* there, one of the great Old Testament and New Testament manuscripts. The *Codex Sinaiticus*, one of the great manuscripts, there. Now you can go in and get an ordinary book without any trouble at all. And then books that are a little more important you have to sign out with a little bit more care exercised over who takes the book out.

But when it comes to *Codex Sinaiticus* or *Alexandrinus* or some of the other materials, they’ll be there under lock and key. And when they’re out in the glass, they’ll only be out in the glass at certain times, and there’ll be some guard over there taking a good look at you to be sure that you don’t, as someone has said, blot out a letter by glancing at it.

You see, those books are valuable, and those books that are valuable are books that are most worthwhile. And the things in the Bible that are most worthwhile are the things that we must spend labor on. Now just sitting down at night, as I did last night, when all my studying was over, I said, well now I’ll read a chapter in the Bible. It was about the creation, incidentally. [Laughter]

Now then, let’s notice the refutation that the Lord Jesus gives in verses 6 through 8. He says, “But I say unto you, that in this place is one greater than the Temple.” Now in the original text, probably in the version that many of you use – because I hear you when your pages turn, and they don’t turn when mine turn here [laughter], and I know you’re praying that I’ll start using the New American Standard Bible. That’s alright, keep praying [more laughter]. Your prayers might be answered some day, you never can tell. Now your text probably reads something like this, “But I say unto you, That in this place is *something* greater than the Temple.” What is the meaning of some thing, here? Something greater than the Temple is here, he said.

Why, he refers to himself and the ministry that he has. The Messiah and his ministry, and his point is simply this: If the Sabbath law of the Old Testament was accommodated to the ministry of the priests as they carried out their priestly activities on the Sabbath and broke the Sabbath, but yet were guiltless. If the Sabbath law is regarded as inferior to the sanctuary law, how much more are these laws of the Old Testament regarding the Sabbath, subordinated to the ministry of someone who is even greater than the Tabernacle and the Temple?

They all were instrumentalities that pointed forward to the Lord Jesus. The Tabernacle pointed forward to him and his ministry. The Temple pointed forward to him and his ministry. And so everything that had to do with the Temple or Tabernacle in its services is subordinate to the one to whom they point, of course—the reality. Only work that is done with reference to God is worship and superior to the incidental regulations which were instrumentalities for the carrying out of the purpose of God.

And he points out that this is found in Scripture. If ye had known what this meaneth, I will have mercy, and not sacrifice.” Now he was not telling them that they shouldn’t bring the sacrifices. Bringing the sacrifices is fine. But when a person carried out the ministry properly, he not only carried out the ceremonies, but he also acted out the reality that was represented in him. So for example, if I brought a sin offering, but didn’t manifest faith in the God to whom the offering is offered. That sin offering is worthless.

If I had no faith in God and no love for him, and no obedience to the commands of the Old Testament – produced, incidentally, only by the work of the Holy Spirit – but if the reality was not there, then my sacrifices are worthless. If you come tonight and sit at the Lord’s table and take the bread and the wine, but there is no entering into the spiritual reality involved there, you may as well have stayed home. He will have mercy and not simply sacrifice. Now, Hosea taught that. That’s what that text’s origin is.

And finally he says, “For the Son of man is Lord of the Sabbath day.” In their plucking ears and eating, they were recognizing the Lordship of Jesus of Nazareth. And that’s right. For he is the Lord of the Sabbath.

Now here is the strange young Galilean peasant who claimed the prerogative which is a prerequisite, or the prerogative of deity. Here is the young man who takes the most sacred symbol of the life of the nation, the Sabbath, and says that he is greater than that. That’s an amazing claim. You have to put yourself into the place of a Hebrew to understand the tremendous claim that our Lord is making. When he says that he is

greater than the Temple, why that claim is a claim that can only be made by God. That’s why, incidentally, he’s greater than the Temple, because he is God – of whom as concerning the flesh, he’s the Son of David, the seed of David – but so far as his divine being is concerned, he is God.

He is greater than the Temple not only because he is God, but because there is a fuller revelation of truth in him. In the Temple, we have much that looks forward to the coming of the Redeemer. We have the blood of the sacrifices which points to the atonement of Christ. When the priests ministered in the Holy Place, there was the smoke of the incense that went up, but that’s not as great as the sweet savor that the Father found in the sufferings of the Savior as he carried out his work of obedience and redemption.

And when he cried out, “My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?” he was in the midst of his sufferings, and then when he cried, “It is finished!” not only did our Lord rejoice in the completion of the work, but the Father in heaven rejoiced in the completion of the work. And from that work there went up a sweet savor to God, and he was satisfied by the death of the Son. He’s greater than the Temple could ever be, and all of the other things that pertain to the ministry of God find their climax in the true Temple, our Lord Jesus, in whom we, as men, may worship God and truly God, because he is the God-man.

Now, of course, we ought to regard him as greater, too. “How amiable are Thy tabernacles, O Lord of Hosts,” The Psalmist said. Do you know why? Because he was speaking of the reality that lay behind that. They rejoiced in the Temple because they had some insight into what the Temple represented, that God now has fellowship with men, and that we may have fellowship with God through that which looks forward to the Redeemer to come. And if the Psalmist of the Old Testament says, “How amiable are Thy tabernacles O Lord,” how much more are we who have eternal redemption to be grateful to God for the true Temple, the Lord Jesus, in whom we have everlasting life?

The Jews used to like to say of the Temple in Jerusalem, “He that has never seen the Temple in Jerusalem has never seen a fine building.” And you can certainly say this, that he who has never seen that Jesus Christ is the true Temple, in whom man and God may have fellowship, has never known what it is to have divine experience.

Well, what a difference between the yoke of the Lord Jesus and the yoke of the Pharisees. They appeal to traditions, he appeals to truth. What a tremendous application this has to our family ties, our church ties, our business ties – they all come under the judgment of the word of God. They appeal to ritual, he appeals to reality, and a reality that can only be fulfilled through regeneration.

If you’re here this morning and you have never believed in our Lord Jesus, let me repeat the Gospel message concerning Christ. The Son of God has come, taken to himself human nature, and has offered to himself as a sacrifice for sin and for sinners, and that sacrifice has been accepted by the Father as sufficient for sinners. And if God, by the Holy Spirit, has brought home to your heart the conviction that you are a sinner, this is for you. And may the Holy Spirit work in your heart in effectual grace, bringing you to the knowledge of your own lost condition, your own perilous condition, headed for eternal judgment, and bring you to faith in him whom reality, the true Temple, is to know life eternal. May we stand for the benediction?

[Prayer] Again, Father, we are thankful to Thee for the marvelous truth found in the experiences of the apostles and our Lord. And O God, help us to become true readers of Holy Scripture, and give us, Lord, no satisfaction until the satisfaction of the reality of the things of Scripture are our experience.

Father, we pray for the lost in this auditorium, and we do ask that through the Holy Spirit Thou wilt bring conviction and conversion. Glorify Thyself in the salvation of men. Enlarge the body of Christ. Make the redeemed happy as the family grows.

Now may grace, mercy and peace go with us as we leave.

For Jesus’ sake. Amen.

