

SERMON - Sabbath Controversy - Luke 13:10-17, November 25, 2018

The third of the ten commandments instructs us to do no work on the sabbath and to keep this day holy. The sabbath *par excellence* was the weekly commemoration of the Exodus when Israel was liberated and freed from the Egyptians.

Our Lord purposely selects the sabbath as the ideal time to heal people of their infirmities. We know this because it is the Lord Himself who initiates every healing that He performs on the sabbath. Outside of the sabbath, those who are ill come to Him and request healing. The Pharisees and the Jews become enraged when Jesus heals on the sabbath. They consider that he is doing work on the sabbath and breaking the third commandment. The Lord calls their hypocrisy out on the carpet when He points out that killing in time of war is permitted on the sabbath, that a male child is always circumcised on the eighth day after being born, even if the eighth day should fall on the sabbath, and it was considered lawful to untie one's oxen or donkey and lead it to water on the sabbath. However, when Jesus does good and heals on the sabbath, it is considered unlawful. The leader of the synagogue, afraid to admonish Jesus directly, tells the people that there are six other days when a person can be healed. Have your healing done on those other days, but not on the sabbath. Jesus does not deliberately choose the sabbath day to heal in order to provoke the Pharisees and the Jews. There is a very profound and significant reason that Jesus heals on the sabbath, and it is in perfect accord with His mission as the messiah. Following the example of the prophets, Jesus performs a highly symbolic action in order to deliver a powerful message. First of all, when Jesus heals on the sabbath, He does not use the word "heal," but says that He has *liberated* and *freed* the person. In today's Gospel, Jesus does not say that He has healed the woman. What does the Lord say? The Lord says that he has liberated this woman whom Satan has bound for eighteen years. The mission of Jesus as the Messiah is to liberate God's people who are enslaved by Satan. Jesus is leading a new exodus. He is the messiah who has come to liberate Israel. This time it is not Pharaoh, but Satan, who holds God's people enslaved and "bound." The significance of the sabbath in our Savior's ministry fits perfectly with our Lord's jubilee mission, which according to Isaiah was "to proclaim release to the captives" and "to set at liberty those who are oppressed" (Luke 4:18). Our Lord's sabbath deeds, far from being dissonant with the sabbath, are in complete harmony with it, which is why He is the "Lord of the sabbath."

Brothers and sisters, we may be Christians and no longer bound by the ritual laws of the Old Testament. However, in the Orthodox Church, we have canon law, and we have rules, regulations and boundaries. For example, we have fasting rules which concern what we can or cannot eat and when we can or cannot eat it. Another example are the rules which exist concerning who we can or cannot marry and even when we can get married and when marriage is forbidden. There are a slew of complicated rules of liturgical instructions about how to conduct the divine services. We have rules about when funerals can and cannot be conducted. Rules and regulations in an of themselves are not evil. If we did not have some sort of guidance, there would be no order, but anarchy. However, it is very important for us to understand the reason we do things; the reasoning and purpose behind the rules, regulations and boundaries. Behind what we may naively reduce to describing as merely "rules" are the profound dogmas and teachings of God and how to apply those teachings in our lives. It may be considered good to obey a rule of the church because we have respect for the Bishop or the priest or our mother the Church. Respect is good, but understanding is infinitesimally greater. When we lack correct understanding, then we can easily misinterpret and despise the rule, and therefore choose to not follow the rule, to the detriment of our souls and our salvation. If the fishermen could be made wise and become the greatest apostles and leaders of the Church and expound the deepest and most profound dogmas of Christianity, then there is no excuse for ignorance or lack of understanding for any one of us. The Holy Spirit enlightens all,

but it takes work and effort on our part. The fisherman did not become great theologians through magic or overnight. It took years of struggling to follow Christ, repent of their sins, and clear their minds and hearts in order to receive the gifts of wisdom and understanding and to understand the depths of our holy faith. Orthodox Christianity and spirituality is not an academic discipline that we learn from a textbook in a classroom. Perhaps you have heard the expression “armchair theologian.” Orthodox Christianity is a way of life, and we become wise as serpents through practicing and living our faith. We can’t just read about it or hear about it, but we must *do* it. When Nathanael questioned Philip about Jesus, Philip didn’t just discuss it with him. He told Nathanael, “Come and see” (John 1:46). Likewise, Jesus tells us, don’t just read about Me or hear about Me, “Come and see.” When we understand Christ, then we are not confused by the boundaries and practical structure of our faith. All of these things become for us natural, clear and sensible. Remember the words of St. Peter the Apostle, “Always be prepared to make a defense to any one who calls you to account for the hope that is in you, yet do it with gentleness and reverence” (1 Peter 3:15).