10-13-24

Numbers 15:32-36

An account like this tends to offend our modern sensibilities. After all, the guy was only picking up a couple sticks. How can that deserve the death penalty? Well, our modern sensibilities need to get over it. Our modern sensibilities have wondered far from God and His inherent righteousness. Yes, God is love; but not in the sappy permissive way we have come to think of love. God is merciful and He is a God of grace; we praise Him for that because otherwise we would have been done away with long ago. Along with these things, let us never forget that God is holy. Nothing that is contrary to His righteous character is acceptable to Him. Sin arouses His wrath and must be punished; He will not simply let it slide.

And that is, of course, where His great mercy and grace come in through the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Jesus suffered the wrath of God and the punishment we deserve. We must never down-play the horrible suffering Jesus endured; or the absolute justice of God: which is what we see in our reading for today.

This story obviously takes place during the period of time when the Israelites were in the desert, after their deliverance from Egypt but before they entered the Promised Land. They had received the Law as handed down through Moses. God was very specific in that Law that the people were to set aside the Sabbath day of rest. They were to do no work. As an example, they were specifically told that they were not even to start a fire; so there was certainly no need to be gathering wood.

It is important to grasp that the Sabbath day was to be a day of rest. It served two purposes: It is good for people to rest, and it was a seal of the Mosaic covenant. We all know that by Jesus’ day, the Sabbath had simply become a rule with a multitude of other man-made rules attached to it. The Sabbath became a burden. As we can see, a day of rest was for the benefit of our bodies. It gives us time to recuperate and time to heal from the wear and tear of a workweek. From this we can see why Jesus said, *“The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath.”* (Mk 2:27) A Sabbath day of rest was to be a time of refreshment, not a set of paralyzing restrictions.

The second purpose, being a seal of the Mosaic covenant, was even more important. God gives seals for His covenants. In the covenant He made with Abraham, God instituted the seal of circumcision. It was a sign in the flesh of the men; a change that was made. It foreshadowed the change that would be made in the hearts of both men and women when the new covenant was brought. In the new covenant in Jesus Christ, the seal is the indwelling Holy Spirit. He is the One who brings about the circumcision of the heart in both men and women.

The Pharisees of Jesus’ times focused on this man violating the Sabbath in that he was doing work; he was not resting. That is why they were constantly giving Jesus such a hard time about doing works on the Sabbath day. What the Pharisees missed was that the punishment this man received was less about not resting than it was about him violating the seal of the covenant that God had established.

And even more, it was the manner in which he was doing it. For this we need to check the context. The verses in Numbers immediately preceding this account say: *But the person who does anything defiantly, whether he is native or an alien, that one is blaspheming the Lord; and that person shall be cut off from among his people. Because he has despised the word of the Lord and has broken His commandment, that person shall be completely cut off; his guilt will be on him.’”*

The word “defiantly” translates a Hebrew idiom: with a high hand. It indicates something that is done arrogantly and shaking one’s fist at God. This amounts to blasphemy against God. Again, this is the all-powerful God of the universe; the only holy and righteous One. Yes, He does get to make the rules. But all the rules come from His holy character; they don’t come from capriciousness or wanting to be a killjoy. All of God’s rules and covenants are for our good and eternal well-being. To arrogantly defy them is to arrogantly defy God.

The result of this defiance is to be “*cut off from among his people*”; and “*that person shall be completely cut off*”. That means capital punishment, that means the death penalty. We see that in Exodus 31:15, *“For six days work may be done, but on the seventh day there is a sabbath of complete rest, holy to the Lord; whoever does any work on the sabbath day shall surely be put to death.”* The day of rest is holy to Yahweh; it is “set apart” to Yahweh. To act in defiance of this day set apart to God is to act in defiance of God Himself. Back in Numbers 15:31 it says “*his guilt will be on him*.” A person who acts in a defiant way will bear his guilt; he will suffer the punishment of what he has done.

Considering these verses that precede the account of the man gathering wood and the punishment decreed by God, we can see that he was acting in defiance of the Holy One. He didn’t care what God had to say about it, he was going to do as he pleased. Hopefully we learn from his example and refrain from defying God. At the same time we consider how much of the world is blatantly shaking its fist at God and realize how much work remains for us in spreading the Gospel.

It is important to see that the people who witnessed the Sabbath-breaker took the case to those who were in authority. This was not a case of mob rule or a lynching. Even with Moses and Aaron, there was still some question about what to do. It seems pretty clear from Exodus 31:15 that he was to be put to death. Perhaps they weren’t sure if gathering wood constituted a breaking of the law; or, perhaps they didn’t know how to carry out the death penalty since that hadn’t been part of the original law.

Once more, it is important to see that they didn’t jump to any rash decisions. They waited on an answer from the LORD. Each and every one of us needs to keep this in mind. It is so vital that we bring to the Lord any decisions we need to make. God gave a definite and clear answer to Moses. We might not get something that clear (or we might!); but when we take these things to Him He will guide us and work things out for the best.

God’s answer was direct; it began: *“The man shall surely be put to death”*. Or your translation might read something like “*The man must die*.” The words translated “*must die*” in the Hebrew indicate a violent death. And that is why God further stipulated the death to be by stoning. So the man bore his own guilt for high-handed offence against God and that guilt brought about a violent death. We are all guilty of high-handed offence against God; therefore when Jesus took the guilt of our offences upon Himself, He had to die a violent death.

Furthermore, the man was to be taken outside the camp to be stoned. There was not to be unrighteous blood on the earth in the camp. The camp of the Israelites was supposed to be a holy place. These people were consecrated to God as His own possession; evil was not to be among them. They took the lawless one outside the holy camp and spilled his blood on ground that was reserved for those who were unclean: the lepers and those with infections and issues of blood.

Once more, we see Jesus, taken outside the walls of Jerusalem; outside what was supposed to be the holy city. Although Jesus’ blood was more righteous than any other, it was shed as the blood of one who was unrighteous, as He took on all of our unrighteousness and sin and guilt.

The congregation did as they were told. You can imagine the effect it ought to have had on the congregation as they watched this man die a slow painful death. It should have reenforced the consequences of sin. It should have been a deterrent to keep them from committing the same sin. Perhaps it was for a while. But we know that the people of Israel had short memories; and so do we. We are blessed by the sacrificial death of our Lord Jesus, but we must never presume upon it. His death ought to goad us into a greater desire to be His servant.

Along with this account of God’s righteous wrath and justice, we must not forget His great mercy, lest we become legalists. Consider king David: He committed adulty with Bathsheba and then murdered her husband, Uriah. He also violated God’s command by taking a census of the people for his own vanity and without renumeration to God’s house. These sound pretty high-handed to me. Yet he did not suffer a violent death for his guilt. What was the difference? The difference was David’s heart-felt sorrow and repentance with regard to his sins. It was also that he turned straight to God and sought mercy; confessing his sins and offering no justification for them.

Another example is when God brought Israel to the border of the Promised Land at Kadesh. The twelve spies brought back a bad report about the land and most all of the nation of Israel rebelled against Yahweh. They completely rejected him and desired to turn back to Egypt. God should have wiped them out right then and there. But in His mercy and at the intersession of Moses, God simply denied them entrance to the Promised Land and sentenced them to the desert for the duration of that generation. He gave them a chance to repent. Even in the Old Testament, it is clear that salvation comes by faith and that God greatly desires to forgive His people.

Consider also that there are cases of breaking the Law without incurring guilt. Jesus gives two examples in Matthew 12. The first is David when he is running from king Saul. He and his men were hungry. David went to the tabernacle and asked Ahimelech the priest for the show bread that is in the holy place and is only for the priests. They incurred no guilt because they had a basic human need for food. Taking the bread was not rebellion. Also, there are the priests, who have extra sacrifices to offer on the Sabbath. They often work harder on the Sabbath than other days. Yet there was no guilt because they were glorifying God. It comes down to the heart; the motivation.

Of course, this brings us to Jesus. He had many interactions with the Pharisees and religious leaders over the Sabbath. Jesus performed miraculous healings on the Sabbath. Once He even commanded a paralytic to pick up his bed and carry it home on a Sabbath. The Pharisees considered all this to be work and condemned Jesus for it. As far as they were concerned, based on the story of the man gathering wood, Jesus deserved death. But once again, they misunderstood the Old Testament account. The problem was not simply the action of gathering wood, the problem was a high-handed rebellion against God.

When Jesus healed on the Sabbath, He was caring for a basic human need; the need for health. When He told the paralytic to walk and carry his bed, God was being glorified. When people saw him, they would know that this was truly the man who had been paralyzed and that he could not only walk, but carry things also. He had been completely healed by the grace of God. Jesus’ actions were not in rebellion; His motivation was pure.

Through the Mosaic covenant, God gave people a way to come to Him in peace and turn away His wrath. Some people, like the man who gathered wood on the Sabbath, chose to defy God and spurn His gracious offer. They bear their guilt and face the consequences on their own. We are now offered the new covenant in Jesus Christ. It is God’s offer of salvation and the satisfying of the wrath that we deserve. Some will choose to defy God and spurn His gracious offer. They will bear their own guilt and face the eternal consequences.

Prayer

You are gracious Lord, good and kind; longsuffering and merciful. How grateful we are that You are this way toward us. Your grace is such that You gave Your only begotten Son up to suffering Your wrath for the atonement of our sins and transgressions. Even our high-handed sins are wiped away by the blood of the lamb. You are worthy of grateful praise and we offer it.

Thank You Jesus, that during Your ministry on earth, You showed us the true depths of the Law. It is so much more that a set of regulations. It shows the great wisdom of the Father and His absolutely holy character. It tells us about You Lord Jesus; it is a testimony of Your great work of mercy and love.

Lord, we now ask for Your help. We know we falter and fail many times; but please keep us from high-handed sins, keep us from sins of arrogance and pride. Help us to worship You and not defy You; guide us into humility and not conceit. May we bless you with our lips and lives forever more.

In Jesus’ name we pray

Amen