

✿ The Sunday School ✿

BIBLE LESSON.

Abridged from Peloubet's Notes.

First Quarter, 1904.

JANUARY TO MARCH.

Lesson VIII.—February 21. Jesus and the Sabbath.—Matthew 12:1-13.

The lesson includes the parallels, Mark 2:23-3:5; Luke 6:1-10, compared with Luke 13:10-17, together with a brief review of the intervening events, and the call of Matthew, the question about fasting (Mark 2:13-38), and the healing at the pool of Bethesda (John 5:1-47).

GOLDEN TEXT.

It is lawful to do well on the Sabbath days.—Matt. 12:12.

EXPLANATORY.

We come now to a new phase of the work of Christ,—the rising tide of open opposition to him and to his teachings; and the way Jesus used this opposition so as to bring out new truths and principles, and to sweep away the false interpretations which encumbered and distorted the Word and the Law of God.

Not long after our last lesson Jesus called Matthew, the publican, to follow him. He, in his zeal to help and save his old friends and companions, gave a feast at which many publicans and sinners sat down with Jesus and his disciples. The Pharisees found fault with Jesus for eating with such people.

Again there came a complaint that Jesus did not fast as often as the Pharisees, and, therefore, was deficient in religious life.

After that their opposition took the form of criticizing Jesus' attitude toward the Sabbath.

1. THE FIRST RECORDED INSTANCE OF THIS,—THE HEALING OF THE WITHERED MAN AT THE POOL OF BETHESDA.—Jesus went up from Galilee to Jerusalem, to attend one of the three great annual festivals of the Jews, probably the Passover. Jesus, in passing around the city on the Sabbath saw a sick man in one of the five porches of the pool of Bethesda, and cured him of his infirmity so that he could take up his bed, and walk to his home. "For this cause did the Jews persecute Jesus, because he did these things on the Sabbath" (John 5). This may have led to the further criticisms after Jesus returned to Capernaum. At least it grew out of the same feelings, and the answer Jesus gave to the healing of the withered hand, in to-day's lesson, applies equally to this case.

II. THE SECOND OCCASION.—THE PLUCKING OF GRAIN BY THE DISCIPLES ON A SABBATH MORNING.—VS. 1-8. 1. THE FACTS. 1. AT THAT TIME, E. V., "At that season," during that part of his work in Galilee. It must have been during one of the harvest seasons in early summer. JESUS WENT ON THE SABBATH DAY THROUGH THE CORN, or grain. Better, fields of grain, wheat or barley. In Great Britain "wheat" is applied to wheat, rye, oats, and barley, but in Scotland it is generally restricted to oats. Jesus and his disciples were probably on their way to the morning service in the synagogue (see

v. 9) for his disciples were AN HUNGERED. "The rabbinical law allowed no eating on the Sabbath, except in case of sickness, prior to the morning prayers of the synagogue." AND BEGAN TO PLUCK THE EARS OF CORN. Luke adds, "rubbing them in their hands," in order to separate the kernel from the chaff. There was no road with fences, but a mere path through the fields of standing grain, so that they did not have to go out of their way.

2. THE CRITICISM OF THE PHARISEES. 2. BUT WHEN THE PHARISEES, who regarded themselves as the guardians of religion and morality. They seem to have been watching him less to learn what good he taught, what new light he had to give, than to find fault with him, in order to counteract his influence with the people. For his teachings and acts and character were a continual reproach of theirs, and an undermining of their influence. BEHOLD, THY DISCIPLES.

The narrative carefully avoids saying that Jesus plucked the grain and ate. He simply defended the right of his disciples to do so. Jesus had a perfect right not to pluck the grain, if thereby he could remove any obstacles in the way of success of his work. He gave the Pharisees no ground for a personal accusation against himself. THAT WHICH IS NOT LAWFUL TO DO UPON THE SABBATH DAY.

The act was lawful on any other day, being sanctioned both by custom and the Mosaic law (Deut. 23:25). But the fourth commandment forbade any work on the Sabbath, and the Pharisees had interpreted this law in a most mechanical way, making a great many special prohibitions, the violation of which they insisted was the breaking of the law. They said that reaping and threshing were work, and therefore forbidden, and "it was asserted that plucking corn ears was a kind of reaping, and rubbing them a kind of threshing."

3. THE TRUE LAW AS INTERPRETED BY JESUS. Christ replies to them by two examples from Scripture which illustrate the true principles of interpreting the law of the Sabbath. The examples are furnished by persons whom they regarded as peculiarly holy.

3. HAVE YE NOT READ, SO AS TO REMEMBER AND APPLY. The scribes were familiar with the story, but had not seen its meaning. WHAT DAVID DID, WHEN HE WAS AN HUNGERED. He and his men were suffering from want of food. The story is told in 1 Sam. 21:1-6.

4. HOW HE ENTERED INTO THE HOUSE OF GOD. The tabernacle then at Nob, a hill near Jerusalem. AND DID EAT THE SHOWBREAD. The showbread was the bread that was kept on the golden table in the Holy Place. WHICH WAS NOT LAWFUL FOR HIM TO EAT. BUT ONLY FOR THE PRIESTS (Lev. 24:5-9).

The Argument was that if David, to keep himself and his followers from suffering hunger, and to enable them to preserve their lives by escaping from Saul, could, without blame, break a ceremonial law in its form, while keeping it in spirit, it must be right so to interpret the Sabbath law as to allow his disciples to do so much work on the Sabbath as was necessary to satisfy their hunger.

5. OR HAVE YE NOT READ IN THE LAW (which makes the Sabbath the priest's busiest day of labor), HOW THAT ON THE SABBATH DAYS THE PRIESTS IN THE TEMPLE PROFANE THE SABBATH. By performing the whole temple service. "Not merely do the sacred history relate exceptional instances of necessity, but the law itself ordains labor on the Sabbath day as a duty." AND ARE BLAMELESS, because the law of a best good of man, his spiritual life and moral character, required that the priests should not keep the form of the commandments. This labor on the part of a few was essential to the true Sabbath-keeping by the many; and moreover, such labor really fulfilled the spirit of the Sabbath, even to the workers.

6. IN THIS PLACE IS ONE GREATER THAN THE TEMPLE. Jesus Christ himself.

7. IF YE HAD KNOWN WHAT THIS MEANETH. If you had understood the principle which underlies my defense of my disciples' conduct on the Sabbath; if you had not been denuded to the claims of mercy and humanity. I WILL HAVE MERCY, AND NOT SACRIFICE. What helps and blesses men rather than any forms of worship.

8. FOR THE SON OF MAN IS LORD EVEN OF THE SABBATH. We best understand this when we see it in connection with the words that precede it in Mark's account (2:27). The Sabbath was made for Man, and not Man for the Sabbath. Therefore the Son of man (Jesus as the representative of man) is Lord even of the Sabbath to make it serve the interests of man, and not let it bind him in fetters that prevents his highest good.

III. THE THIRD OCCASION.—HEALING OF THE WITHERED HAND ON THE SABBATH.—VS. 9-13. 1. THE FACTS. 9. HE WENT INTO THEIR SYNAGOGUE, to which he was probably going when the disciples plucked the grain. This fact shows one way in which Jesus kept the Sabbath.

10. A MAN WHICH HAD HIS HAND WITHERED. i. e. dried up in a deficient absorption of nutriment. Luke says it was his right hand. This would hinder him in earning a living.

2. THE CRITICISM OF THE PHARISEES. THEY

ASKED HIM, after watching for a while to see what he would do (Mark and Luke), SAYING, IS IT LAWFUL TO HEAL ON THE SABBATH? The question was still being discussed. Here was another opportunity for Jesus to explain his views about Sabbath-keeping. But the object of the Jews was THAT THEY MIGHT ACCUSE HIM, and thus bring him to trial for Sabbath-breaking, and both discredit his teaching and prevent him from continuing to teach.

3. THE TRUE LAW AS INTERPRETED BY JESUS. 11, 12. ONE SHEEP, AND IF IT FALL INTO A PIT, etc. Jesus appealed to their own interpretation of the Sabbath law, and then turned it against themselves by asking, HOW MUCH THEN IS A MAN BETTER (of more value) THAN A SHEEP? WHEREFORE, according to their own rules, IS IT LAWFUL TO DO WELL, to do good deeds, ON THE SABBATH?

13. THEN SAITH HE TO THE MAN. He did one of the good deeds it was lawful to do. "As the cure is wrought only by a word, the Pharisees have no ground of accusation; there has been no infraction of the letter of even their own regulations."

Note that the man was commanded to do what he could not do for himself. But he had faith, and obeyed. Then power was given to him to do the act.

Note that Jesus, while giving new light upon the Sabbath question, also frustrated the designs of his enemies by unnecessarily awakening prejudice against him.

SOME ANECDOTES OF BEECHER.

One April mail, Mr. Beecher found in his morning mail a letter containing only the words, April Fool. "Well! well!" he said; "I have received many a letter where a man forgot to sign his name; this is the first time I ever knew of a writer signing his name and forgetting to write a letter."

After I took the editorship of the Christian Union I urged Mr. Beecher to give his views on public questions through its columns. "As it is now," I said, "any interviewer who comes to you gets a column; and the public is as apt to get your views in any other paper as in your own."

"Yes," he said, "I am like the town pump; any one who will come and work the handle can carry off a pail of water."

On one occasion I argued for Calvinism that it had produced splendid characters. "Yes," Mr. Beecher replied, "Calvinism makes a few good men and destroys many mediocre men. It is like a churn; it makes good butter, but it throws away a lot of butter-milk."

Charles Sumner in the Senate and Thaddeus Stevens in the House were pressing the reconstruction measures for forcing universal suffrage in the South. In conversation with me Mr. Beecher thus diagnosed the situation: "The radicals are trying to drive the wedge into the leg butt end foremost; they will only split their beetle." They did; the solidified South and divided the republican party. If he had been preaching on reconstruction the figure would have flashed on him then, and he would have given it to his congregation from the pulpit.

Mr. Beecher was denouncing the inconsistency of church members; stopped; imagined an interlocutor calling him to account for exposing the sins of church members before the world; and thus replied: "Do you not suppose the world knows them better than I do? The world sees this church member in Wall street, as greedy, as rapacious, as eager as unscrupulous as his companions. He says to himself: Is that Christianity? I will go to church next Sunday and see what the minister says about this." He goes; and what is the minister saying? Instantly Mr. Beecher folded his arms upon his breast, held an imaginary cat purring comfortably, as he stroked it with the other hand, and continued, "The minister is saying, 'Poor pussy, poor pussy, poor pussy.' Mr. Beecher made his congregation laugh, not of a set purpose and never for the sake of the laugh, but because he himself saw, and made them see, those incongruities which are the essence of and often the most powerful of arguments.

—Rev. Lyman Abbott, in the October Atlantic.

First little girl.—My mother came to these springs because she had hay fever and rheumatism. What did yours come for?

Second little girl.—Cauls she had four grape machine dresses and six new hats. New Orleans Times-Democrat.

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