

The Delusion of Control

Matthew 12:1-21

Introduction

“The relationship between the law and grace is one of the perennial theological challenges facing the church. Even in Bible-believing, gospel-preaching circles some preachers still unhelpfully confuse the relationship between the gospel and obedience. Of course, these topics aren’t easy, particularly in our post-Christian context” (Duncan).

- How does obedience relate to grace?

What about the law?: The Torah *generally* and commands in the Old Testament *particularly* or the NT commands?

- On the one hand the law can’t be bad (e.g., Jesus came to fulfill not abolish). God can’t command bad things. But misunderstanding and misapplying the law can be spiritually deadly. But if obedience doesn’t save me or earn me favor in God’s eyes, is it antithetical to grace? (e.g., forgive, works, i.e., obedience) antithetical to grace
- Two theological groups: **antinomians** (i.e., no law/commands) or **legalists** (i.e., salvation through law-keeping).
- We often mistakenly assume that antinomians overvalue grace while legalists overvalue the law. But in reality, both Jesus and Paul condemn antinomians for failing to understand grace—and legalists for failing to understand the law. Ultimately, neither understands the character of God as our loving and gracious heavenly Father” (Duncan).
- Today we see how the Pharisees **oppose Jesus** through their interpretation of the law and their legalistic application of tradition.

Managing Sin and Salvation: Like I’ve said before, we need to be careful when we look at the Pharisees (“sincere belief can be sincerely wrong”) not to be too quick to judge them when we, so often, have the same Pharisaical tendencies in our souls. They had developed a rigorous interpretation and application of the Biblical commands so as to **manage their sin and control their salvation**. They believed that they could, through **rigorous discipline** and **scrupulous obedience** *earn righteousness before God*.

- This is the danger of everything from legalism to self-help. When we think if we can just be better and try harder, then we can achieve salvation, bliss, joy, etc. We are trying to **control** our salvation. We are trying to play God. *Caveat: Trying hard is not bad. Being better is not bad.
- This leads us to compartmentalize and categorize sin (e.g., two lists). My sin is normal and excusable, their sin is abnormal and inexcusable (same with the natural sins of our heroes). This is one thing that contributes to the perpetuation of sins like racism (e.g. Ahmaud Aubery).

Self-Deception and Conspiracy Theories: Have you noticed a sudden proliferation of conspiracy theories? First, they’re not that new but it does seem the internet has increased our

exposure (e.g., “if it’s on the internet it’s true). I don’t want to get into all the specifics (but do “consider the source” if you thank Aunt Brenda who can’t even spell DNA has greater insight into epidemiology than scientists from virtually every public and private research group, then go ahead || I’m just amazed that someone could get the Republicans, Democrats, NBA, MLB, Public School System, airlines, casinos, and churches to agree on something #unity).

- My point is, why the sudden proliferation of conspiracy theories? Of course, there are cover ups and conspiracies but why the increase? Humans haven’t changed?
- I think conspiracy theories flourish when we question every authority but our own.
- We’re always criticizing others but never critiquing ourselves. We have a proliferation of social media with no self-awareness. There’s an insidious form of self-deception when we’re skeptical of everything but ourselves.
- And the world is big and scary and we feel like we need to have some control. So we develop these mechanisms of denial so we can salvage some form of self-preservation.
- If we can control the narrative then maybe we can control our fears, our anxieties, or our lives. **But we are never in control and were never meant to be.** Control is an illusion (or a delusion).
- Part of spiritual maturity means divesting ourselves of our control. We were never in control. God is the perfect, personal, creator, and sustainer of all things. He is God and we are not. Rather than try to control him, we are called to submit to him.

¹ At that time Jesus went through the grainfields on the Sabbath. His disciples were hungry, and they began to pluck heads of grain and to eat. ² But when the Pharisees saw it, they said to him, “Look, your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath.” ³ He said to them, “Have you not read what David did when he was hungry, and those who were with him: ⁴ how he entered the house of God and ate the bread of the Presence, which it was not lawful for him to eat nor for those who were with him, but only for the priests? ⁵ Or have you not read in the Law how on the Sabbath the priests in the temple profane the Sabbath and are guiltless? ⁶ I tell you, something greater than the temple is here. ⁷ And if you had known what this means, ‘I desire mercy, and not sacrifice,’ you would not have condemned the guiltless. ⁸ For the Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath.” ⁹ He went on from there and entered their synagogue. ¹⁰ And a man was there with a withered hand. And they asked him, “Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?”—so that they might accuse him. ¹¹ He said to them, “Which one of you who has a sheep, if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will not take hold of it and lift it out? ¹² Of how much more value is a man than a sheep! So it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.” ¹³ Then he said to the man, “Stretch out your hand.” And the man stretched it out, and it was restored, healthy like the other. ¹⁴ But the Pharisees went out and conspired against him, how to destroy him. ¹⁵ Jesus, aware of this, withdrew from there. And many followed him, and he healed them all ¹⁶ and ordered them not to make him known. ¹⁷ This was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah: ¹⁸ “Behold, my servant whom I have chosen, my beloved with whom my soul is well pleased. I will put my Spirit upon him, and he will proclaim justice to the Gentiles. ¹⁹ He will not quarrel or cry aloud, nor will anyone hear his voice in the streets; ²⁰ a bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not quench, until he brings justice to victory; ²¹ and in his name the Gentiles will hope.”

1. Who’s in Charge? (vv. 1-8)

¹ At that time Jesus went through the grainfields on the Sabbath. His disciples were hungry, and they began to pluck heads of grain and to eat. ² But when the Pharisees saw it, they said to him, “Look, your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath.” ³ He said to them, “Have you not read what David did when he was hungry, and those who were with him: ⁴ how he entered the house of God and ate the bread of the Presence, which it was not lawful for him to eat nor for those who were with him, but only for the priests? ⁵ Or have you not read in the Law how on the Sabbath the priests in the temple profane the Sabbath and are guiltless? ⁶ I tell you, something greater than the temple is here. ⁷ And if you had known what this means, ‘I desire mercy, and not sacrifice,’ you would not have condemned the guiltless. ⁸ For the Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath.”

The Situation: The Pharisees seem to be waiting for a “gotcha” moment. They need to prove that they are more righteous than Jesus. If they can just catch him breaking the Jewish law, they can show that he isn’t the good guy. ¹ At that time Jesus went through the grainfields on the Sabbath. His disciples were hungry, and they began to pluck heads of grain and to eat. ² But when the Pharisees saw it, they said to him, “Look, your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath.”

The Sabbath: There’s a lot that goes into the discussion of “Sabbath” and how to observe it. In fact, it’s still an ongoing discussion (e.g., Seventh-Day Adventists, Lord’s Day = Sabbath, what is work, what is rest, etc.). It is important to remember that this discussion of Sabbath comes immediately on the heels of Jesus’ invitation to come to him and find rest (11:28-30). Sabbath is an important Biblical concept. **God rested:**

- Created the world in six days and, on the seventh, he rested (Gen. 2:2-3). So, God set apart the seventh day (e.g., sanctified it, holified it because on it he rested).
- The observance of the “Sabbath day” is enshrined in the fourth commandment: ⁸ “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. ⁹ Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, ¹⁰ but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates. ¹¹ For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy” (Ex 20:8-11). Interestingly, Sabbath observance is “the most strongly emphasized” commandment and was held in great importance in Israel’s history.¹
- By the time of Jesus, various religious groups (e.g., Rabbies, Pharisees, ascetic communities) had started to develop interpretations and additional rules to create a “protective hedge” around Sabbath observance (e.g., don’t commit adultery, don’t be alone with a woman, don’t talk to a woman, don’t talk to anybody... how far do we want to take this?).
 - Here they are challenging this idea of “not working” on the Sabbath. What is work? Are the disciples working/harvesting because they pluck the heads of grain and eat them?

¹ “Σάββατον”, *NIDNTTE*, 220–28.

Jesus puts a Biblical-theological rhetorical beatdown on the Pharisees explaining why the disciples didn't violate the rules:

(1) He brings up the story of David from 1 Samuel 21. ³ He said to them, "Have you not read what David did when he was hungry, and those who were with him: ⁴ how he entered the house of God and ate the bread of the Presence, which it was not lawful for him to eat nor for those who were with him, but only for the priests? David was traveling with some men on a mission and came to the priest Ahimelech. He and his men were hungry and needed food. They asked for bread but the only bread available was the temple bread that was left out as an offering for God (cf. Ex 25:30). The bread was out for a week then *only* the priests could eat it. Yet David was allowed to violate this rule, and no one had a problem with it.

- David had the authority to override this regulation. And we know that Jesus is the greater David, the greater King that has come. If David had authority over the rules, Jesus has infinitely more authority!

(2) ⁵ Or have you not read in the Law how on the Sabbath the priests in the temple profane the Sabbath and are guiltless? ⁶ I tell you, something greater than the temple is here.

- No work is to be done on the Sabbath, yet the priests offer sacrifices (cf. Num 28:9-10) on the Sabbath and it isn't considered work.
- Even within the Sabbath, there is a type of work that is not only *allowed* but prescribed by God because it is in service to the temple. Priests "worked" to butcher/sacrifice but it isn't prohibited work.
- The disciples are guiltless. The Pharisees are finding fault where there is none!
- Jesus is far greater than the temple, he is God become flesh. We no longer meet God at the temple, but meet him face-to-face in Jesus.

(3) ⁷ And if you had known what this means, 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the guiltless. ⁸ For the Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath."

- A favorite quote of Jesus (Hos 6:6), used earlier in his discussion with Pharisees over his associations with sinners, explains the core of the Pharisaic problem. It's a problem the prophets identified long ago: **the rituals of righteousness are not an end in and of themselves. Righteousness is more than ritual.** They missed the forest through the trees. They missed the fundamental features of God's will because of their overly scrupulous interpretation of Sabbath-keeping.
 - Mercy is at the center of God's will ("love God, love others").
- It's quite a callout of Jesus to claim the Pharisees either don't know or don't understand the Torah as explained by the prophets.

Doing the Activity But Missing the Heart: The Pharisees were amazing at doing the religious rituals (sometimes even rightly) but missing the heart of God. We see this often today.

- Have you ever met a person who is scrupulous about attending church, praying, reading their Bible, but they have no evidence of spiritual fruit (e.g., love, joy, peace, patience, etc.). It's the same thing!

Lord of the Sabbath: ⁸ For the Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath.”

- Jesus is the Lawmaker, he is the Lord of the Sabbath. And he said to them, “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath” (Mk 2:27).
- They had a **backwards understanding** of the Sabbath because they didn’t understand who Jesus was. He has more authority than David, priests, temple, and the laws because he is the eternal prophet, priest, and king. He is the lawmaker.
- Jesus didn’t need to submit to the Sabbath, the Sabbath needed to submit to him.
 - The Pharisees saw their job as making Jesus obey their rules and missed that they would only find righteousness by submitting to him (e.g., making Mom and Dad play the rules for kids, e.g., watching Rated R movies).

Grace and Authority: Do you submit to God’s word? Or do you use God’s word to confirm what you already believe? If it never challenges you, then you are using it, not letting it transform you? E.g., I believe x, what Bible verse tells me that. We are like the pharisees when we try to maintain control of God rather than submitting to his control of our lives.

- This is the scary thing about salvation by grace. If it is really grace then we are completely dependent on God and he has the right to every part of our life.

2. What’s the Point? (vv. 9-14)

⁹ He went on from there and entered their synagogue. ¹⁰ And a man was there with a withered hand. And they asked him, “Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?”—so that they might accuse him. ¹¹ He said to them, “Which one of you who has a sheep, if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will not take hold of it and lift it out? ¹² Of how much more value is a man than a sheep! So it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.” ¹³ Then he said to the man, “Stretch out your hand.” And the man stretched it out, and it was restored, healthy like the other. ¹⁴ But the Pharisees went out and conspired against him, how to destroy him.

Situation: ⁹ He went on from there and entered their synagogue. ¹⁰ And a man was there with a withered hand. Pharisees had infiltrated the synagogue (e.g., “their”). They move from challenging his power but his protocol.

Trap Question: ¹⁰ And a man was there with a withered hand. And they asked him, “Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?”—so that they might accuse him. Pharisees want to get Jesus (“It’s a trap,” Akbar) Why do they want to get him? If he’s wrong, then his claims are wrong and that means his claims on them don’t exist. If he’s wrong, they are in control, not him.

Answer: Jesus answers the question with a question (i.e., hypothetical situation) himself. ¹¹ He said to them, “Which one of you who has a sheep, if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will not take hold of it and lift it out? ¹² Of how much more value is a man than a sheep! So it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.” The earliest Christians understood this (allowing good work on the sabbath). Some groups developed a view during this time not to heal (e.g., Qumran, Josephus, Talmud). But another group of Rabbis (presumably like the Pharisees) said it was okay to get your sheep out of a pit on the Sabbath.

Positive or Negative: When I ask, “What can’t I do?” I’m trying to find the minimum obedience required (e.g., Rabbinic two letter writing maximum). That’s not the point of God’s commands (a.k.a. “How can I squeak by”). At the end of the day, the Sabbath command is a positive command to “remember” and “keep it holy.” **Do good on the sabbath.**

Limits of the Law: The Torah is not ultimately a law book (though it contains laws) but a story of the lawgiver. God gives laws because people are sinful, to protect them from harm, to teach them to do good, and to lead them to trust in him because they cannot achieve righteousness on their own. **The Pharisees want laws to guarantee law-keeping to guarantee salvation** and miss the whole point of the law (e.g., speeding to get pregnant wife to the hospital).

- The law the Pharisees want to obey is good *when it is used correctly*. But they have asked the law to do what it cannot do (e.g., prohibition against murder does not produce love, prohibition against stealing does not prevent coveting, prohibition against adultery does not stop lust).
- Jesus has taken on their challenge and thrown it in their face, proving their approach is foolish and fatal. The law can curb sin and show us God’s design, it can even guide our actions but it cannot bring life. “More law does not produce more life” because, in our power, we can’t keep the law so it only convicts us of sin and produces death. We need the perfectly obedient messiah to fulfill the law and empower us to obey the commands of Christ.

Miss the Point: ¹³ Then he said to the man, “Stretch out your hand.” And the man stretched it out, and it was restored, healthy like the other. ¹⁴ But the Pharisees went out and conspired against him, how to destroy him. Pharisees added to the law, ignored exceptions, and missed the heart of the law. The Pharisees **went** beyond the OT regulations and looked down on everyone else who didn’t live up to their personal standard. Sabbath was meant to be a physical reminder of our dependence on and rest in God. Sabbath keeping is not a means to demonstrate my personal righteousness or to get God to reward my sacrifice. The Sabbath is meant to show that we owe everything to God, who provides for all our needs (Silva). But the Pharisees have flipped it from making them dependent on God to giving them independence from God. Sabbath is an invitation to rest, to pause, to dedicate time to listen to and worship God.

- “Jesus does not abolish the Sabbath... but he emphasizes that the Sabbath points to him and finds its fulfillment in him...” (Schreiner).
- Jesus, the New Testament authors, and the early church do not abolish Sabbath but see no interest in “detailed or ceremonial regulations concerning its observance” (Silva).
- Regular, outward, weekly rest is intended to mirror the inward rest we have in Christ/
- God has given us commands that are meant to bring us into communion with him and bring good to our neighbors. They don’t earn us righteousness or forgiveness but flow out of the righteousness and forgiveness given to us by Christ.

Backwards: What good is obedience if it’s backwards? If we think obedience earns us righteousness rather than flowing out of the righteousness we have in Christ. It sets us up for

hypocrisy and failure which is worse! Think about how many people have been damaged by legalists and hypocrites. The Pharisees designed a system that could only lead to self-righteousness and hypocrisy. I.e., I've had the bargain with God convo.

- We are like the Pharisees when we miss the point of God's gracious commands. When we try to obey them to earn God's favor, when we think believing more or working harder will get us his blessings. Inevitably we will fail to obey. Our discipline will falter and, worse, our hearts won't change. This leaves us with the same anxiety and loss of control.
- "We can drift from God with our Bibles open in front of us. Although we assume activities intended for growth in godliness — prayer, fellowship, Bible reading — are immune, we can still fail to bring God glory through them. This was the Pharisees problem. They searched the Scriptures, devoted their lives to obeying the Law of Moses but they missed the bright neon sign flashing "Messiah." They knew God's word but didn't recognize Jesus. I read a story the other day how a guy met a pretty girl on the Subway in New York and only realized later that it was Vanessa Hudgens (High School Musical). He was a huge fan! Imagine taking an interest in a famous movie star, knowing their biography, seeing their movies, and watching their interviews but not recognizing them right in front of you. We marvel at the blindness of the Pharisees, yet some of us have the same problem. We have the same problem when post inspiration scripture on instagram, read Christian books, and fill our schedule with church activities but don't abide in Jesus and glorify him in our hearts, when we seek information about God but never actually meet with God – when the knowledge we seek never gets into our hearts.
- **The law was never meant to save us, it was meant to drive us to our Savior.**

3. Where Do I Go? (vv. 15-21)

¹⁵ Jesus, aware of this, withdrew from there. And many followed him, and he healed them all ¹⁶ and ordered them not to make him known. ¹⁷ This was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah: ¹⁸ "Behold, my servant whom I have chosen, my beloved with whom my soul is well pleased. I will put my Spirit upon him, and he will proclaim justice to the Gentiles. ¹⁹ He will not quarrel or cry aloud, nor will anyone hear his voice in the streets; ²⁰ a bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not quench, until he brings justice to victory; ²¹ and in his name the Gentiles will hope."

Run to Jesus: Jesus is the perfect servant, loved by God. He bears the Spirit of God and brings justice. He shows gentleness and grace in the midst of a harsh and chaotic world. He is the hope of all people. He invites all of us who are burdened by trying to be good or keep it together, those of us who are "bruised reeds" and "smoldering wicks" (ready to be discarded by the world) to come to him.

- Jesus tells us to come to him (i.e., "come to me"). Go to Jesus for rest. The Sabbath doesn't give us rest, it takes us to Jesus who offers us rest.
 - Hustle culture happens even in our walk with God. Often, the urge to "hustle," whether in our walk with Christ or in life in general is a way to hide our deep desire to be self-sufficient and be in control.

- When we rest in God we recognize our complete dependence on him.
- We are like the Pharisees when we oppose Jesus by trying to work harder rather than trust him more and the consequences are disastrous to our souls.

Conclusion

When we misunderstand the purpose and point of the law and get it backwards we rob ourselves:

(1) We rob ourselves of the fuel of obedience

- Obedience is not intended to fuel faith, but faith is intended to fuel obedience. The power of God propels our obedience, our obedience doesn't earn the power of God.
- The reason your hard work exhausts you is because you can't sustain it in your own power. We need to be strengthened by God.

(2) We rob ourselves of rest.

- Too often we work when we should rest, we hustle when we should abide in Christ. We fret and worry when we should meditate on his goodness and grace. The gospel frees us from the fear that we have to do more to be OK.
- The crazy, backwards things about the Pharisees is that **they turned the Sabbath rest into an occasion for worry and work**. The Pharisees turned rest into a burden!
 - Many of us do this with the commands of God. **Not obligations but invitations** (e.g., prayer, evangelism, community, scripture, etc.). "Often, we assume that obedience conditions God's blessing: 'If I obey, God will bless me.' Obedience does not condition God's love, but is the sphere in which we enjoy God's love." (Duncan)
- **I want you to find in Jesus the rest your soul seeks which means stop trying to please God or earn his favor and instead enjoy God and rest in his love.** You are not in control, and that is a good thing.