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AFFIRMING THE PRIORITY OF PEOPLE

Just how important are individuals? You can find a lot of differing opinions on that question. Most everyone will tell you that nothing is more important than a person. We even see behavior that reflects the importance that the world places on human life. You may recall the heroic effort to which the rescue workers went in trying to save lives in the earthquake in Mexico and in San Francisco. We know of situations where entire towns will turn out to look for a lost child. Why? Because we recognize the worth of a human life. On the other hand, we see situations in which thousands of people are murdered in political upheavals that say we have yet to learn the real value of people.

If you had to guess, how important do you think a person would be to God? The Psalmist asked that question: "When I consider Thy heavens . . . what is man that Thou art mindful of him?" Jesus told us that God's evaluation of who is important extends to "whosoever." (John 3:16)

Even though we tend to respond to the catastrophic and do heroic things, we also tend to get lulled into a sense of apathy regarding those close to us that need help. Sometimes we get so caught up in the routine of life that we miss seeing the opportunities to help. We sort of lose our sense of priority with regard to those that are hurting. Jesus ran into that very problem in His day. Usually these problems were with the religious leaders who were more concerned about the ritual of their religion than the reality of the God they claimed to worship. As a result they missed the substance of it all.

MARK 2:23-24 First of all, we should not be concerned about the disciples pulling the grain from someone else's field. The Law of Moses specifically allowed pulling the grain with the hand; however, you could not use a sickle on you neighbor's grain. The religious leaders were questioning only the observance of the Sabbath. By their definition, the disciples were harvesting and threshing the grain. Their exaggerated interpretation had many specific restrictions about what could or could not be done, how far one could walk, etc. Jesus answered their question with a question of His own regarding something that happen in the Old Testament.

MARK 2:25-26 By a strict interpretation of the law, what David had done broke the law of who could eat the shew bread. However, because David's actions were motivated by mercy and caring for his men in a time of real need, the act was overlooked. Not even the Pharisees would accuse David of being a law breaker in this case. I would seem to a reasonable person that what the disciples were doing was much less an infraction of a man made rule than what David did to a law that came from God. If they were willing to excuse David, then why were they so unwilling to excuse the disciples of Jesus?

MARK 2:27-28 The entire question is put into perspective by the statement that Jesus made regarding the Sabbath. The Sabbath was made for man and not man for the Sabbath. The Jews had enslaved themselves to the idea of the Sabbath and as such had made it a god. God, our Creator, Who instituted the Sabbath, did not intend that the Sabbath be a tyrant that people had to serve. On the other hand, we need to be careful that we do not swing the pendulum too far in the direction of not treating it as a special day. Some tend to treat the Sabbath in a "business as usual" fashion.

God instituted the Sabbath, making provision for people's needs. We can ignore our needs to have a day of rest and we will be the one to suffer for it. Both our mental and physical health will suffer if we do not take into account the need we have to withdraw from the routineness of life and take a break. Not only can we avoid some negative consequences, we can use this special day in a positive fashion to draw closer to God and seek to know His way and will for our lives. In doing so

we will be better able to access His wisdom and power and creativity in our lives.

MARK 3:1-6 Jesus observed the Sabbath by attending the local synagogue. He went there for a time of worship with the community of those who believed in the One True God. Some people have suggested that the Pharisees had brought the man with the withered hand to the synagogue that day to entrap Jesus for a supposed violation of the Sabbath. Regardless of why the man was there, he had a need. Jesus used the situation to teach that people are important. Jesus explained His actions before He healed the man's hand. He knew that the Jewish leaders were there to accuse Him, but he followed his own advice about "fear not." He knew and was teach all of us that it is more important to help a person in need than to worry about a detail of religious observance. If we truly value persons, then we will find a compulsion to help other, to relieve suffering, to feed the hungry, to heal the sick. Jesus could not get an answer from the Jews when he offered them alternatives of doing good or evil, saving life or killing. They had become hard hearted and caught up in the ritualistic observance of their religion rather practicing the principles. They had missed the mark of taking on the characteristics and nature of God.

We might well note that when the people there refused to answer Jesus they were in a position of knowing that He was right and yet they still resisted Him. When we know what is right and then go ahead and do the wrong thing it distresses and grieves God. Notice that such a reaction on their part produced anger on the part of Jesus.

With all the talk about what can be done on the Sabbath and what cannot, we might just overlook the fact that a significant miracle had happened that day. Jesus obviously thought that the priority that should be placed on people would be worth a miracle or two. If we are not seeing the power of God active in our lives today, then perhaps it is because we are letting "church work" get in the way of doing the "work of the church" which is ministering. We minister first of all to God in our worship and then, in His strength, we are to minister to the needs of people who are made in His image.