

Numbers 15.32-36
28 March 2010

Our text is sobering. If picking up sticks on the Sabbath made this Israelite worthy of death; do not our transgressions of the fourth commandment make us worthy of death? Do, we, who see society and nominal Christians desecrate the Sabbath every week, allow ourselves to think that Sabbath desecration is no longer a sin? Or that even it is sin, God will not judge us with death? Paul teaches in I Corinthians 10.1 to 14, that the history of Israel in the wilderness was written for the admonition of the New Testament church. As the event recorded in Numbers 15, Israel in the Old Testament was the church who desecrated the Sabbath; her history is our history. How God dealt with sinners in her midst, He will also deal with impenitent sinners in our midst. We will not be stoned to death by others in the church for desecrating the Sabbath, but we will be excommunicated from the church for it, bearing the wrath of God unto all eternity, if we continue impenitently in our sins!

So, let us not say that this man's sin is small. Let us not say that we are glad to live in the New Testament, so that we can commit this sin without God's judgment. Let us not decide if we are going to desecrate the Sabbath, to do so privately, so that we need not bear the consequences. Rather, let us see from the text that God hates all Sabbath desecration; and positively, that the Sabbath must be kept holy unto God, in the way of doing which, we shall enjoy his blessing.

The theme is: ISRAEL STONING THE SABBATH DESECRATOR. First, we consider his presumptuous sin. Secondly, Israel's righteous intolerance. And thirdly, Jehovah's holy justice.

First, his presumptuous sin. The man, of whom our text speaks, desecrated the Sabbath Day by gathering sticks. Though the text does not say, it is assumed that that he picked up sticks to start a fire in order to cook a meal. And what he did broke the law of God. According to Exodus 16.23, which reads, "this is what the Lord hath said, tomorrow is the rest of the holy Sabbath unto the Lord; bake that which ye will bake to day, and seethe (boil) that ye will seethe; and that which remaineth over lay up for you to be kept until the morning". If they are to bake or boil they are to do it on the day before the Sabbath because the next day is the Sabbath and no baking or boiling are allowed on the Sabbath. Beloved, is this a small matter? Could he not even argue that it was a work of necessity – who does not need to eat on the Sabbath day?

Why is this a presumptuous sin? In the first place, God has classified this act as a presumptuous sin, which is a deliberate and willful act of rebellion. This is clear from the context. Numbers 15.17-31 sets forth God's law about the sin offering. In the case of the sin of omission, which is failing to what God requires and the sins of ignorance, God required the Israelite to bring offerings to make atonement, with the promise that these sins would be forgiven as seen in verse 26 and 28. But in verses 30 and 31, the law requires that if one sinned presumptuously, he must be cut off from his people, and

bear his sin, for there will be no atonement or covering for his sin. To sin presumptuously is literally, “to sin with one’s hand raised up or stretched out – it is a high-handed sin” It as it were, to raise one’s hand towards God, and to command Him to withhold the judgment, and to permit the sinner to do as he pleases. Our text follows punishment of a presumptuous sin as an example of a presumptuous sin and the judgement of God upon that sinner. In the second place, God has made his will about the Sabbath known to Israel. In the fourth commandment in Exodus 20.8 to 10, God forbade all work on the Sabbath day. And about this we also read in Exodus 32.2 to 3. And thus, that the man who gathered sticks on the Sabbath must have known that these laws and so his sin of picking up sticks was not ignorant, but willful and deliberate. In the third place, from the text itself, this sin is presumptuous is seen in how those who saw his sin dealt with it. They dealt with it as a very serious sin. They brought the man to Moses and Aaron for judgment. And God judged that this man is worthy of death. This sin is indeed very serious. In the first place, this man showed that the law of God did not matter to him. He knew God’s law but did not care about it. He knew the judgment which God pronounced on those who broke God’s law, but he was ready to put God to the test. Secondly, the sinner despised the Sabbath. God had given the Sabbath as a sign of the Covenant, as we read in Exodus 32.12-17. It was a reminder of being delivered from Egypt’s bondage and toil; it was a day to rejoice in being the people of God and to draw near to him in fellowship. Why was it wrong to pick up sticks and to start a fire on the Sabbath? The sin was not that he picked up some sticks but that he despised the spiritual rest of God, this salvation of God in Christ Jesus. By this, he revealed himself to be a worldly man. He deserved and still does deserved the death penalty. And if God considered this sin to be presumptuous, think of our desecration of the Sabbath as also presumptuous. Working on the Sabbath is destructive of diligent church attendance. Your homework and your graduate and post-graduate studies are to be set aside for the interest of keeping the Sabbath. To go for shopping on Orchard Road after the morning worship service cuts off the spiritual effect of the house of God and drowns the hope of the world to come. How then do we keep the Sabbath, which is the positive implication of the text? The entire day is to be given to the worship of God, the whole day is to be devoted to the Lord Jesus Christ – and this is the answer to that familiar question, “what are we to do on the Sabbath Day?” On that day, God intends that we be active – spiritual work is required. Doing nothing or being idle or sleeping in is not obedience to the Fourth commandment. Jesus showed this in John 5.15-17. He healed the lame man on the Sabbath and the Pharisees objected to this violation and He said, “my father worked hitherto (until now) and I work” The work to be done is spiritual exercises: both private and public. You are to read the Scriptures and meditate on it. Allowed are the works of necessity and of charity. Works of charity are good works of love for our neighbour especially for our fellow saints, contribute to the need of the poor, visit them in the old folks home or invite lonely saints over to your home for a meal. And on Sunday evenings, we can have delightful Christian fellowship can be enjoyed so that we don’t discuss politics, daily job routines, or the rising prices of the COE and housing or the many faults of the other members and leaders of the congregation. The stoning of the Sabbath desecrator is Israel’s righteous intolerance against sin.

Israel was intolerant to the seemingly small sin, she did not overlook or ignore this sin. This was true of the individual members of Israel who saw him commit this sin. How easy it would have been to turn the other way as if they did not see him or to argue that they were not in a position to judge because they were also sinner or to defend him in his motives, or even to join him in his act. But, they did not and they brought him to Moses for judgment and justice. At this point, the whole nation expressed its intolerance on this sin, when the Lord made known that this man must be stoned, verse 36. This intolerance of Israel was righteous. Righteous because they showed their hatred for sin, specifically the sin against the fourth commandment. Righteous because it showed a readiness to deal with the sinner according to God's will, visiting upon him the punishment which he deserved. And finally, righteous because it showed a desire to conform to God's law.

But why did not Israel overlook this sin? There are three reasons: firstly, this must have been a public sin for a number of people saw it. Defiance of God's law will reveal itself publicly; it's a matter of time. Those who do not truly love God's law and covenant are not ashamed to sin publicly. And such a public sin must be dealt with a public manner. Secondly, Israel loved God's law. Of course, they were sinners. They were guilty of breaking God's laws too. Who is not guilty? But in their hearts they loved God's law, God's covenant and God's honour they fought against this sin. Thirdly, Israel feared God's judgment. They had witnessed the evidence of his anger enough, through their journeys in the wilderness. And they knew that if they tolerated this sin, then, God would judge them all. And this righteous intolerance is lovely. Through this intolerance God was preserving in Israel his elect remnant from being destroyed. And He was causing them to live in obedience to His law by faith. How often, the story of Israel in the wilderness has been such – because of one sin, the whole nation sinned and therefore, judgment came upon them as a whole! And so this was welcome change that people in Israel stood up against sin and condemned it. Are we both as a congregation and as believers ready to show the same righteous intolerance for sin? Are you ready to rebuke the Sabbath desecrator in our midst? This does not mean that we stone them, nor is it necessary to go to the elders of the church. If we know someone who has desecrated the Sabbath in a way that is not public, we must go to the person personally and privately, with meekness and prayerfully, calling this to repentance. This is what our Lord told us to do in Matthew 18.15. But, we are not inclined to do it because we too do not keep the Sabbath perfectly holy in our hearts but that must not stop us from approaching our brother or sister. Instead, we must go confessing our sins to God in prayer, seeking forgiveness for our own sins. And we bring the promise of I John 1.9 to him. Only if the sin is public, do we bring this matter to the elders of the church, as the Israelite did. But are we ready to so that? Do we love Jehovah's covenant, and God's special day of the week that we minister that it be kept holy and judge those who do not? Parents, do you teach your children how to keep the Sabbath holy and punish them if they do not? Fellow believers, do you encourage one another to keep the Sabbath and admonish one another if they do not? Covenant Church, do

you support your elders when it was announced that they are working with a sinner in your midst who impenitently continues to sin against the fourth commandment? This is not the time to defend the sinner, or to fault the elders. Such is the time to manifest the righteous intolerance to sin. The stoning of the Sabbath desecrator is the manifestation of Jehovah's holy justice.

How was it revealed? Jehovah manifested his justice by pronouncing the death sentence upon the sinner – that is, death by stoning! Stoning in the Old Testament was the sign of God's curse being poured out upon the sinner. And one of one dying in his own sin and bearing the wrath of God. God manifested his justice by requiring Israel to carry out the death sentence. The entire congregation must testify against him, in order to make it plain that his sin was not a small matter or a matter of ignorance. And so, God in the day of judgment will, through Jesus Christ, testify to everyone that is condemned to hell of the greatness of his sin and the justice of God in sentencing him to hell. In carrying out this command of God, Israel had to do two things. Firstly she had to bring the sinner outside the camp to. That is, she had to excommunicate him, to set him apart from the people. He had no part in Israel and no part in the kingdom of God. By that act already, God was passing judgment on him, through Israel by saying that he was not truly an Israelite. Second, Israel was to stone him: to inflict upon him the evidence of God's everlasting curse. The severity of this punishment glorifies God. The sinner did not glorify God but dishonoured God by his sin. God will glorify himself through the punishment of sin. And He punishes sin because God is holy and he will not ignore sin neither can he have fellowship with sinner.

And by this stoning, what is God saying to us today? That in order for God to have fellowship with us, it must come in the way of his justice through death. Our sins demand our death. Our desecration of the Sabbath day demands our death. And even, if we were to die and bear our own guilt, we could never satisfy God's justice, and never become victorious to have fellowship with him. And therefore, that God might receive us into fellowship with him, God send his only begotten Son, Jesus Christ in our flesh. He caused him to bear the guilt of our sins, poured out on Christ the infinite horror of his wrath as Christ hung on the cross. God caused Christ, to be stoned, as it were for us; and then declared Christ to have borne God's wrath, and so ceased pouring out his wrath upon Christ, and raised him from the dead again. In the death and resurrection of Christ is found the only basis, for our enjoyment of covenant fellowship and rest with Jehovah. The next time, beloved, you are tempted to perform some seemingly small task on Sunday, remember what such sin required Christ to endure in your place. And spend your time meditating on the grace of God in Christ! Not only did Christ bore our punishments so that we are spared, but he also lives in our hearts and empowers us to keep the law anew. This alone explains how Israel could have dealt as she did with the sinner – only in the power of her Lord could she do it. So, by the power of the risen Lord, who lives in us, causes us to keep the Sabbath day holy – so look to him to receive that power! And the power of the risen Lord, who dwells in His church, is sufficient to cause the whole congregation to insist that the Sabbath be kept! In this power, we can

deal rightly with the impenitent sinner! And the power of the risen Lord, who dwells in each one of us, is sufficient to turn that sinner from Sabbath desecration to Sabbath keepers, in true repentance! And so we will desire to keep it rightly and will delight in spending time in covenant fellowship with God. For He had said in Isaiah 58.13, 14, "If thou turn away thy foot from the sabbath, *from* doing thy pleasure on my holy day; and call the sabbath a delight, the holy of the LORD, honourable; and shalt honour him, not doing thine own ways, nor finding thine own pleasure, nor speaking *thine own* words: 14 Then shalt thou delight thyself in the LORD; and I will cause thee to ride upon the high places of the earth, and feed thee with the heritage of Jacob thy father: for the mouth of the LORD hath spoken *it*". This is a promise of heavenly blessing of God's covenant. It is in the way of keeping the sabbath rightly, we experience already the covenant joy in this life which make us long for heaven all the more. This is the reason why God requires us to keep the Sabbath holy, as a sign of between Him and the church forever, that He will maintain and preserve His covenant with us in Jesus Christ. Amen.