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An Address by Mr. P. W. Heward,  
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How many have misused this narrative. They have implied, or even stated, that the Lord Jesus Christ approved of David in breaking God's arrangements as to shewbread, and that the Lord Jesus defended the thought that mercy was the important matter, and strict obedience quite secondary. Herein lies the common misinterpretation of the passage. Now this is a very serious matter, because if the common misinterpretation stands the Lord Jesus steps forward as one who cuts at the root of real obedience; and not only so, there would probably be a charge of caprice against God, for why should the eating of the shewbread be permissible, and yet Uzza, when he put forth his hand in a kindly way toward the ark, be struck dead? Therefore the point at issue is serious. It concerns the truthfulness of the Lord Jesus, and the whole of the character of God. If the usual interpretation is right, the very character of God is shorn of its glory, and the Lord Jesus Christ is made into an apologist for disobedience. This is no light matter, and we need grace to take a firm and very definite position regarding the solemn perversions of truth, which appear to have truth for their foundation. There can be no question as to that which the disciples were doing. They were plucking the ears of corn and eating. To pluck the ears of corn was one action, to eat involved a rubbing, that there might be the removal of the outside, this was another action. It was long held that the Pharisees regarded the rubbing as a "work", and therefore that the disciples were breaking the Pharisaic idea of the Sabbath by this work. But later investigation seems to show that the Pharisees' tradition went a step further. To pluck ears of corn at all was viewed by them as a work not allowed on the Sabbath.

This, therefore, was the charge against the disciples. The Lord Jesus to whom the appeal is made by these Pharisees, made sarcastically it is true, but nevertheless made, gives His wondrous and decisive verdict:- "Ye would not have condemned the guiltless". With regard to this action He definitely says "guiltless", indicating very clearly "The charge does not stand; the accusation is dismissed". The disciples were vindicated. The Lord approved of this simple mode of partaking of food when they had not the means for other arrangements. They were unlike their criticising Pharisees, who could enjoy their feasts, and who had very extraordinary arrangements to make Sabbath feasting permissible. They would, for example, deposit something on the day before in a house where they wished to feast, and then would almost regard it as part of their own residence. They would make certain other contrivances with strings and cords, I believe, in order to join up residences and allow a feast beyond their habitations on the Sabbath. In other words, with a refinement of casuistry they provided for their own comforts and luxuries, but they begrudged the disciples eating a little corn when they were hungry. The miserable superficial professionalism which shines forth in this connection is indeed its own condemnation, and the Lord showed Himself holily indignant against such iniquity. The charge against the disciples fell to the ground. They were NOT doing work. They were NOT breaking God's law. The Lord Jesus definitely says, "Guiltless". But, furthermore, He says "Guiltless" together with an allusion which brings Hosea 6 to our mind. There is always a fulness in His replies beyond all the questions asked. In Hosea 6 God speaks of the future of Israel. He also refers to their religious condition before that future. Their goodness was not abiding. And thus the prophets spoke words that were hewing and cutting down self-righteousness. God desired mercy and not sacrifice, and the

knowledge of God more than burnt offerings. Pharisees delighted in sacrifice, and there will be a restoration of such religiousness (Isa. 66 1-4). God will not reprove the people on the ground of omission as to these, for they will be continually before Him. but His words in Psalm 50 will apply "I will take no bullock out from thy herd ... All the beasts of the forest are Mine, and the cattle upon a thousand hills". Amid all religiousness it is easy to be so disobedient. "They (adds Hosea 6. 7) like Adam, transgressed the covenant; there they have dealt treacherously against Me". Often when Israel had sacrifices and burnt offerings, they had neither mercy nor knowledge of God. There was no real, deep, definite piety. "Like Adam": while they spoke of strict and ritualistic obedience, they themselves were disobedient and breaking God's covenant. Such is man! And the Lord Jesus, by alluding to that passage, impressed upon those criticizing that the guiltiness was in themselves, and not in the ones whom they condemned. Furthermore, He showed somewhat strikingly that with all their apparent generosity they were actually cruel to others. They had sacrifices, but they knew not to show mercy. They would wish a man to remain ill on the Sabbath day rather than be cured, though they would lift up their own ox out from the pit. They wished that the disciples should go hungry, but they would have their own feasts. They did not have mercy. They did not have knowledge of God, else if they had known His character and His mind, very different would their standpoint have been. Their case, therefore, was dismissed.

But Christ, as we have seen with joy, deals with many OTHER things in His precious and altogether wise answers. He asks, "Have ye not read what David did when he was an hungred, and they that were with him; how he went into the house of God, and did eat the shewbread, which was not lawful for him to eat?" Here Christ distinctly declares that David did an unlawful action.

The words, which have helped us much, namely, "Are guiltless" are not to be found here. David's action is not said to be right. The Lord expressly omits any hint that David's action was right. Why then is it brought forward? Let us observe that the Lord is answering a cruel criticism. David was in need, so were the disciples. David wanted food, so did the disciples. David in need of food received the shewbread, and thereby took that which did not belong to him, for he was not a priest. He did not take it in his own way, it was given to him by the priest, but the priest had no right to alter God's arrangement. Why then does the Lord Jesus bring this forward? Is it any argument to say when you are rebuked, Someone else does that which is equally bad? You know there are some, even among believers, or professing believers, who when told lovingly, but faithfully, of their failures, retort "But you do such and such actions", or "Someone else does so and so". They turn the subject in order to defend themselves by someone else, but a thousand someones else would give no justification for a single action of evil. This passage is misused and made the basis of a degraded morality, if it is misunderstood. It seems to allow a breaking of God's arrangement in order to save oneself. It seems to permit of the end justifying the means, and to approve of a lie to escape physical danger, but it is not so at all. Christ ~~was~~ was the Truth, and who spake as man never spake, did NOT justify the action of David, did not justify the action of the priest at Nob. Why then bring it forward? With a very wonderful reason. David was a king, and Christ alludes here to the king and the priests. Christ Himself was both King and Priest. David the king, on this occasion had not reached his kingdom. When in grave danger he sought from the priest the suspension of God's law, the alteration of God's law, and received from the priest this unauthorized alteration. Christ as the Greater than David, as the Greater than Ahimelech,

gave to His own disciples the suspension of MAN'S law. The argument is not a parallel, but a "much more". There are two forms of argument in Scripture. If this takes place, then that takes place, implies a parallel. But if David in physical need associated with the priest in modifying God's law, much more, yea with a wonderful contrast, should the Lord Jesus, the true King-Priest approve of His disciples altering man's unappointed and God-dishonouring law. If the Pharisees objected to His disciples eating that which was not prohibited except by man, how did they account for David's action on this occasion. The Lord Jesus leaves them in a dilemma. If they said David was right then they more than refuted themselves. If they said David was wrong, then they placed themselves in a measure of difficulty before the people, and not only so, - they marked out that which is, indeed, true, but which provided a basis for an attack on all their own appointments. And the Lord continues, "Have ye not read in the law how that on the Sabbath day the priests in the temple profane (make accessible, make as a common ordinary day, in some respects) the Sabbath, and are blameless. HERE the words come once more "And are blameless". The priests are blameless, the disciples are blameless. David is not blameless: the Lord's silence is remarkable in one case out of the three. And why were the priests blameless? They treated the Sabbath as a day on which they worked not with earthly work, but there were twice as many sacrifices to be killed, therefore they are busier on the Sabbath day, but blamelessly. Why? THE LORD had given appointment, and thus had marked out that this was not the forbidden work. "Six days shalt thou labour and do all THY work. The seventh is the Sabbath of the Lord thy God". It was not their work in which they were engaged, it was GOD'S work. They were blameless because they had a COMMANDMENT from God to offer these sacrifices on the Sabbath.

Therefore we have the three cases. The commandment of men broken, - right. The commandment of God, explained by Himself, and His application to suit a need, - right. The commandment of God broken in an emergency by man, - wrong. The first two cases are mentioned as blameless. The other case, not blameless, - brought forward for a special purpose, but David was not blameless. If we have the Lord's authority for an action, whatever others think, and however it seems to oppose arrangements, we have the precious privilege of resting upon the Lord's authority.

And now the Lord, in verse 6, emphasizes Himself. It is very remarkable that though He was the Meek and the Humble One, He again and again emphasized Himself in words which it would be impossible for a man however exalted. In speaking to Nicodemus the Lord declared Himself to be the Son of Man Who is in heaven, and in John 6 "I am the Living Bread Which came down from heaven", "If ye believe not that I am, ye shall die in your sins". Such expressions imply His Deity, and exalt and glorify His Name. And thus we have brought before us that the Lord Jesus claimed to be Greater than the temple. In the temple the priests had special arrangements and were blameless. "In Christ" His people have special arrangements and are blameless. Christ thus not only alluded to His disciples then, but looked onward to the time when His people should be recognised as in a new sphere, even in Himself. He thus anticipates the expression "In Christ", and refers to the fact that He would give fuller arrangements and definitely appoint His will for His blood-bought people. Therefore here He claims to be the Prophet like unto Moses, as well as the Great Priest and King, and then in verse 8 we read, "For the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath". Here then we see that the Lord gives them a climax answer. They object to the disciples plucking the ears of corn. He says to them first of all, You object to men breaking your arrangements, and yet treat the

matter very lightly when David broke God's arrangements. Probably the Lord also alludes to some special misinterpretation, and excuse they had for David's failure on that occasion. Then the Lord's second argument pressed home is this, - Spiritual work has not been prohibited. The work of a priestly family has not been prohibited. Work which is unto God has not been prohibited. And the Lord Jesus Christ saw in His disciples those who would be in Him as members of a priestly family, those who would be doing work unto the glory of God, and whose very eating and drinking were to be unto the glory of God. This is implied in what is stated. Then He gave the third argument showing first of all negatively that men had no right to object to breaking their traditional commandment, and then positively that God had special arrangements which would be manifested in due time. for His priests, and, thirdly, the Lord Jesus declared as we have seen His right, as the Prophet like Moses, to make whatever arrangement He pleased. This statement causes to shine out more remarkably the fact that He was made under the law, to redeem those who were under the law. Though He emphasized Himself as Lord of the Sabbath, He was the Obedient One throughout, and did not change the appointments until He could say "It is finished", and bring His people to a fresh sphere. But He rightly gives as the climax statement to those who attack His authority "The Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath-day". This too links on to the verse before, with the word "For". "If ye had known" the meaning of Scripture. We remember the words "Ye do not know the Scriptures, nor the power of God". "If thou hadst known, even thou, at least in this thy day". And so the passage reproves bare ritualism, and honours Christ. "If ye had known what this is, I wish for mercy and not sacrifice, ye would not have condemned the guiltless; for the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath day". Here the Lord Jesus sets Himself forth

as the One Who had a right to interpret the law. He is Lord of the Sabbath and He refuses to recognise their interpretations and traditions. They were not lords of the Sabbath. He denies their position. Moreover, as the Sabbath day is a reference to the future coming kingdom (Heb. 4. 9 marg.) the Lord hereby hints, not only that His people are a priestly family, but that they will share in the coming kingdom, <sup>and</sup> the coming glory. The Son of Man is Lord also of the Sabbath! One Greater than the temple, greater than all their traditions, and greater than themselves, the Lord of the Sabbath, the Only One to appoint and to arrange and to decide! These men condemned the guiltless because they claimed the Sabbath, and professed that it belonged to them. The Lord Jesus marks Himself out as one Who has a right, a right to decide, and thus He sweeps away all their traditions by claiming that He alone is Lord of the Sabbath. Hence we have in this wonderful passage the Lord's own answer to those who emphasized their opinions, and the Lord's own explanation of that which is arranged by God to meet special cases. Incidentally, therefore, and more than in passing, the Lord Jesus gives very much instruction as to His people, and their priestly position, and their future in the present dispensation. May it be ours, by grace, to enter into this passage, in the power of the Holy Spirit, and to seek to realise that when God appoints, to obey with love's devotedness, is to be guiltless; when God appoints, disobedience, however sincere and earnest we may be, is guilt. Oh for grace to walk worthily!

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