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September 14th: Habakkuk 2 & Matthew 12:1-21

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The vision of the downfall of the proud Babylonians. Sending out the twelve apostles. Jesus is the Lord of the Sabbath.

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Transcript

Habakkuk chapter 2. 1. Behold, his soul is puffed up, it is not upright within him, but the righteous shall live by his faith. 2. Moreover, wine is a traitor, an arrogant man who is never at rest. 3. His greed is as wide as Sheol, like death he has never enough.

4. He gathers for himself all nations, and collects as his own all peoples. 5. Shall not all these take up their taunt against him, with scoffing and riddles for him, and say, Woe to him who heaps up what is not his own, for how long, and loads himself with pledges? 6. Will not your debtors suddenly arise, and those awake, who will make you tremble? 7. Then you will be spoiled for them, because you have plundered many nations, all the remnants of the peoples shall plunder you. 8. For the blood of man, and violence to the earth, to cities, and all who dwell in them.

9. Woe to him who gets evil gain for his house, to set his nest on high, to be safe from the reach of harm. 10. You have devised shame for your house by cutting off many peoples.

You have forfeited your life. 11. For the stone will cry out from the wall, and the beam from the woodwork respond.

12. Woe to him who builds a town with blood, and founds a city on iniquity. 13.

Behold, is it not from the Lord of hosts that peoples labour merely for fire, and nations weary themselves for nothing? 14. For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea. 15.

Woe to him who makes his neighbours drink. You pour out your wrath and make them drunk, in order to gaze at their nakedness. 16.

You will have your fill of shame instead of glory. 17. Drink yourself, and show your uncircumcision.

18. The cup in the Lord's right hand will come around to you, and utter shame will come upon your glory. 19.

The violence done to Lebanon will overwhelm you, as will the destruction of the beasts that terrified them. 20. For the blood of man and violence to the earth, to cities, and all who dwell in them.

21. What prophet is an idol when its maker has shaped it? A metal image, a teacher of lies. 22.

For its maker trusts in his own creation when he makes speechless idols. 23. Woe to him who says to a wooden thing, Awake! to a silent stone, Arise! Can this teach? Behold it is overlaid with gold and silver, and there is no breath at all in it.

But the Lord is in his holy temple. Let all the earth keep silence before him. The book of Habakkuk has two key sections.

The first two chapters contain a dialogue between the prophet and the Lord, and the final chapter a prayer or psalm of the prophet. Habakkuk was distressed by the rise of the Babylonians, and the way in which it seemed as though the Lord was passively permitting the guilty to triumph over the righteous. In chapter 1 he made a complaint to the Lord, articulating his dismay at the Lord's apparent failure to act.

Such questions of theodicy continue to be at play in this second chapter, where the Lord speaks to Habakkuk's concerns. In chapter 1 the prophet addressed the Lord directly, but in verse 1 describes his situation, positioning himself as a watchman at his watchpost, waiting for the Lord's response to his complaint. The prophet is described as a watchman in places like Ezekiel chapter 3 verses 17-21 and 33 verses 1-9.

He scours the horizon, looking for approaching dangers, and warns the people concerning them. The prophet depended upon the word that he was given, and had to

wait to receive direction from the Lord. Some have suggested a possible dependence of these opening verses, upon Isaiah chapter 21 verses 6-8.

For thus the Lord said to me, Go set a watchman, let him announce what he sees. When he sees riders, horsemen in pairs, riders on donkeys, riders on camels, let him listen diligently, very diligently. Then he who saw cried out, Upon a watchtower I stand, O Lord, continually by day, and at my post I am stationed whole nights.

The case for a direct literary dependence is not especially strong, although there are certainly parallels between the two passages to be observed. When the word of the Lord comes in verse 2, Habakkuk is instructed to document and to disseminate the vision as an official message, making it plainly legible on tablets so that the messenger could run to proclaim it, to read it not to himself but as a public pronouncement, as Francis Anderson makes clear. We also need to consider what the vision that is to be written is.

Is it merely verse 4, verses 4 and 5, the rest of chapter 2, chapter 3 or even chapter 1 verses 5-11? From our reading of chapter 1 it seems unlikely that chapter 1 verses 5-11 would be the vision in question. The prayer of Habakkuk in chapter 3, while containing visionary elements, seems primarily to be Habakkuk's response to the vision, rather than the vision itself. It seems most likely that the vision concerns the rest of the chapter.

As Thomas Rennes notes, not that much need rest upon precisely what parts are directly included. He observes that verses 4 and 5 seem to constitute the core message, with the rest being exposition and application. If this is the case, then verses 6-20 would be involved by implication, even if they weren't the revelation more strictly considered.

While verse 3 is tricky to understand, and commentators differ in their renderings and interpretations of it, read in context it is not that difficult to discern its primary sense. It gives the reason for the immediate proclamation of verse 2. The Lord declares that there is an appointed time for the vision, following this by five terse statements concerning it. As Marvin Sweeney notes, in addition to referring to a festal occasion, an appointed time could refer to the time that an important event would take place, and O. Palmer Robertson observes that by the time of Daniel the terminology had clearly assumed eschatological connotations.

The meaning of the verb in the first of the five statements has been disputed. While traditionally commonly taken as breathe or pant, providing the sense of hastening, commentators increasingly now hold that the verb means to witness, yielding something like, he witnesses to the end, and he will not deceive. What, or who, exactly is it that witnesses to the end? Again, commentators hold various positions on this question.

Many, such as Robertson and Renz, take it to be referring to the vision itself. However, Anderson makes the case that the pronoun should be understood to refer to the Lord. He is the one whose arrival is expected, not merely the appointed time of the vision.

The vision or the coming of the Lord might seem at times to delay, but the Lord or the vision won't be late and the coming of them is sure. As Anderson remarks, the book of Hebrews uses this verse in a messianic manner, developing its meaning in a way that goes beyond while still being faithful to its original sense. In Hebrews chapter 10, verses 36 to 39 we read, The core of the vision is given to us in verse 4 and likely also in verse 5. Verse 4 presents us with the contrast between two kinds of persons, between the righteous person and the one who is not.

Traditionally the characterization of the wicked figure here has been seen to focus upon his soul, understanding that he is not the one who is not. Understanding the Hebrew term *nepesh* in a less physical sense. This is a very common sense that the term has in scripture.

However, given the use of the same term in the following verse in a more physical sense in reference to the wicked person's throat, commentators increasingly argue that it should be taken in the same sense here. A person's throat can be a metonym for various things associated with the sight of the throat. For breath, and hence life or even soul.

For swallowing, and hence appetite and even desire. For utterance, and hence speech. As the context has both false and proud speech in verse 3, for instance, and gluttony in verse 5, or the swallowing of the righteous in chapter 1 verse 13, the throat here could be understood in somewhat different ways.

Perhaps it refers to the boastful and perverse speech of the proud, or to the immoderate appetite of the devouring oppressor. Whatever understanding of the throat of the wicked we adopt, it should be coloured by the contrast that verse 4 draws between the righteous, who lives by his faith or faithfulness, and the wicked. Perhaps the contrast is between the restraint and delayed gratification of the righteous, as Renz suggests, as the righteous patiently wait for the fulfilment of the vision.

Alternatively, the contrast might be between the boastful speech of the wicked and the humble trust of the righteous in the word of the Lord. Much about the meaning of this text is debated, including the reference of the pronoun that is connected to the faith or faithfulness. Is it the reliability of the vision, the faithfulness of God, or the faith of the righteous person? Anderson, for instance, argues that the point is that the righteous will live by the faithfulness of God.

Renz helpfully notes that less is at stake in these debates than we might initially think, as these different senses are mutually implicative. He writes, the righteous will live because they faithfully cling to the reliability of the revelation given by a faithful God. Further debates concern whether it is the righteous by faith or faithfulness who shall live, underlining the means of the standing of the righteous person before God.

Or whether it is the righteous shall live by faithfulness, emphasising the means by which

the righteous endures. The latter seems to be correct, as the point of the verse is not the means by which someone becomes righteous before God. However, once again, theologically they cash out to much the same thing.

Perhaps a more significant question, at least at first glance, is that of whether we should read the text as referring to faith or to faithfulness. Given the prominence of this verse in New Testament treatments of the subject of justification, many Protestants in particular can be nervous about the possibility of compromising justification by faith alone, by the introduction of works through faithfulness. Renz rightly challenges the sharp division that some have been tempted to draw between faith and faithfulness here, as they are inseparably related.

The faithfulness should not be focused on good works, but upon a determined and continuing trust in the word of the Lord under pressure. It isn't merely the fundamental posture of trust, but the persistence in it that is in view. Of course, reading this verse on its own terms and in its own context, there is a strong argument to be made that the faithfulness in view should be understood in relationship to the Lord and his revelation, rather than to the human response.

What does it mean that the righteous will live by his faithfulness? Is the living primarily referring to the enjoyment of right standing before God, or to the manner of the righteous person's life, or, as Anderson suggests, to enduring through trial, surviving and receiving vindication? I find that the most convincing interpretation. Habakkuk 2, verse 4 is referenced in Romans 1, verses 16-17, in Galatians 3, verse 11, and in Hebrews 10, verse 38. Especially in Hebrews 10, which we looked at earlier, the sense of persistence in trust is very much in the foreground.

Discussion of New Testament uses of this verse are complicated by their use of the Septuagint and other Greek translations, with very loose and free rendering of the original Hebrew text, which may be theologically illuminating explorations of the meaning of the text without being at all accurate translations of the original text. As Wren's remarks, Paul might have observed in Habakkuk a double antithesis to genuine faith, both the arrogance of the proud and the shrinking back of those who fail to persevere in faith. Habakkuk 2, verse 4 was not only treated as a key verse by Christians.

Anderson, for instance, observes the way that Rabbi Simle in the 3rd century AD saw this verse as expressing the quintessence of true religion, the one law that encapsulated all others, an understanding quite consistent with Paul's uses of this verse in Romans and Galatians. Perhaps it would be helpful to read the New Testament uses of Habakkuk 2, verse 4 as akin to creative developments of a musical theme which explore its potential. Hebrews chapter 10 explores the eschatological and even messianic dimensions of the verse.

As in the case of Habakkuk, when the times look dark, the wicked seem to be flourishing, and the upright are hard-pressed, the righteous will be distinguished by an unwavering trust in the sure promise of a faithful God, by which they will receive final vindication. A more Christological variation on the theme might even be hinted at in Paul, with Jesus being the righteous one whose unwavering faithfulness leads to vindication, as both the example for and representative of his people. Some scholars have questioned the text of verse 5. The reference to wine as a traitor might recall Proverbs chapter 20, verse 1. Wine is a mocker, strong drink a brawler, and whoever is led astray by it is not wise.

However, many commentators have seen the reference to wine here as strange and jarring in the context. Some early renderings of this verse refer to wealth rather than to wine. The context seems to be condemning presumption and greed.

As Renz maintains, though, wine here could be seen as a poetic development of this condemnation. Wine betrays those given to it. Their greed and gluttony will be their literal downfall.

As intoxicated by their drinking of the wine, they can no longer stand. The image of drinking and becoming drunk upon wine might evoke a number of elements of scriptural imagery, the cup of the Lord's judgment on the nations, the bloodthirstiness of a violent nation, and gluttony and proud excess more generally. Is wine being personified as an arrogant man, similar to Proverbs chapter 20, verse 1, an understanding that the ESV seems to follow? Is the claim rather that wine betrays the arrogant man, which would certainly be true.

More likely, the reference to the arrogant man should not be directly connected to the wine. Rather, the claim is that wine is treacherous and that the arrogant man will not endure, contrasting the arrogant man with the righteous, who shall live. The wicked are compared to Sheol and death, with a cavernous and insatiable hunger for destruction, a gluttonous appetite that gorges itself on the nations.

The contrast, then, seems to be between the greed and arrogance of the Babylonians and the righteous, whose determined trust in the Lord's faithfulness and the certainty of the fulfillment of his word declared in his vision, will lead to their vindication and life. The rest of chapter 2 consists of a series of five oracles of woe. These should be connected with the vision that proceeds, unpacking the judgment that will fall upon the proud and voracious Babylonians, showing how their condemnation will proceed from their character.

The five woe sayings will be the words of the nations that the Babylonians have devoured, declaring her downfall. The increase of Babylon had been achieved through violence and injustice, and such gain could not long endure. Babylon's debt would soon have to be paid, and its violence returned upon its own head.

The more excessive its appetite for conquest and blood, the more Babylon accumulated creditors, who would rise up against her, demanding repayment for her transgressions. They would plunder Babylon, as she had once plundered them. The second saying concerns the treacherous prophet of evildoers.

They pursue evil in order to make their own dwelling secure, to be like the eagle, whose nest cannot be reached by predators. However, as they had built their house with wickedness and violence, the very stones and beams of their houses would bear witness against them, securing their condemnation. Babylon conceived of itself as a great building project, the construction of a vast empire and power structure.

We should naturally recall the story of Babel, which is important in the characterization of Babylon in the book of Daniel, for instance. However, the means of Babylon's building was iniquity and bloodshed. All such endeavors are doomed to futility by the Lord.

All of the efforts of a cruel people like the Babylonians will ultimately be utterly in vain. In the end, it is the purpose of the Lord which alone will prevail. Verse 14 recalls Isaiah chapter 11, verse 9. Babylon ministered the cup of wrath to the nations that it attacked, communicating a violent and degrading intoxication, by which these nations were stripped of their dignity and made to collapse in their drunkenness.

However, the cup of wrath would return to Babylon's own hand, and they would be forced to drink. We encounter the underlying imagery of this fourth woe in more overt form in Jeremiah chapter 25, verses 15 to 17. They shall drink and stagger and be crazed, because of the sword that I am sending among them.

So I took the cup from the Lord's hand, and made all the nations to whom the Lord sent me drink it. In that passage, after all of the other nations have drunk, the cup is placed in the hand of the king of Babylon, and he is made to drink. Babylon would suffer the same violence that it had inflicted upon others, not merely upon peoples, but also the violence that it had brought upon land and beast.

The final woe gets to the heart. In chapter 1, verse 11, the Babylonians were described as people who treated their own might as their god. This was illustrated in verse 16 of that chapter, in the fisherman who sacrificed to his nets and offered to his dragnets.

Babylon is given to and driven by the vanity and emptiness of idolatry, trusting in non-living images of its own creation and its own might. Yet there is no future for idols and their worshippers. They will all be put to shame.

The objects of Babylon's worship would be powerless to help them in the day of the Lord's judgment. Their idolatry would ultimately spell their doom. The only sure and firm reality worthy of trust is the Lord himself, the living God, unrivaled in the heavens.

Before him all of the earth must submit. The prophet may have been troubled by the rise

and the seeming triumphs of the wicked Babylonians, but he and his faithful compatriots must hold on to faith in a determined confidence in the steadfastness of the Lord and the certainty of his promise. Vaunting tyrants would be laid low, but the word of the Lord would ultimately endure.

A question to consider. Rereading Romans chapter 1 verses 16 to 17, Galatians chapter 3 verse 11 and Hebrews chapter 10 verses 36 to 39, in the light of Habakkuk and its original context and message, are there any dimensions of the message of these New Testament passages concerning Christ, the gospel and faithful believers that might come into clearer view? Matthew chapter 12 verses 1 to 21. Have you not read what David did when he was hungry, and those who were with him, how he entered the house of God and ate the bread of the presence, which was not lawful for him to eat, nor for those who were with him, but only for the priests? Or have you not read in the law how on the Sabbath the priests in the temple profane the Sabbath and are guiltless? I tell you something greater than the temple is here, and if you had known what this means, I desire mercy and not sacrifice.

You would not have condemned the guiltless, for the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath. He went on from there and entered their synagogue, 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? 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? Of how much more value is a man than a sheep? So it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath. Then he said to the man, Stretch out your hand.

And the man stretched it out, and it was restored, healthy like the other. But the Pharisees went out and conspired against him, how to destroy him. Jesus, aware of this, withdrew from there, and many followed him and he healed them all, and ordered them not to make him known.

This was to fulfil what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah. In the first half of Matthew chapter 12, there are two incidents that focus upon Jesus' relationship to the Sabbath. He demonstrates that as he declared concerning himself at the end of the previous chapter, he is the one who gives rest, the true intent of the Sabbath.

These Sabbath stories are easily misunderstood as Jesus presenting some technical legal exceptions to the law, or simply trumping it. There is more going on here, however. Jesus is revealing the deeper intent of the law, and the place of the Sabbath within the larger structure of God's purpose.

Jesus is fulfilling the law, not merely trumping it. Jesus reveals that the Sabbath was given for rest, not as a burden upon people. The Sabbath is for giving relief to the burdened, whether by hunger or by ailment or infirmity.

People who are bearing heavy burdens should find rest on that day of the Sabbath. We should bear in mind here that the Sabbath played a very important part in Israel's identity. It was the great sign of the covenant at Sinai, as circumcision was of the covenant made with Abraham.

If we compare Exodus chapter 31 with Genesis chapter 17, we can see many parallels between these two signs. To violate the Sabbath was a very serious offence then. It was to violate the covenant itself.

And Jesus challenges the practice, or rather the non-practice of the Sabbath, the way that the Sabbath was made into a burden, rather than a gift of rest that actually fulfilled its intent in the book of Exodus. The disciples were permitted by the law to eat of the grain as they passed through a field. This was a general thing that was permitted to do as a result of the gleaning commandments.

So the point of the Pharisees' objection was not that they were stealing some food that wasn't their own. They had every right to eat of the food, for the most part. The issue was whether this constituted work on the Sabbath.

And if it constituted work, they were breaking the law of the Sabbath. And Jesus, in response, gives the examples of David and the priests. In 1 Samuel 21 verses 1-7, David and his hungry men were permitted to eat of the showbread.

Now that's usually restricted to the priests, but Ahimelech the priest recognised that the law of the showbread existed for the good of God's people, not merely as an end in itself. And in those circumstances, the hunger of David and his men took precedence over rigorous adherence to the letter of the law. Not because it was a breaking of the law, and something that trumped the law, but because that was the actual intent of the law all the way along.

It is also important that it was David for whom this was permitted. We're not necessarily to presume that this would be the case for anyone who came along. Rather, Jesus is presenting himself to be the greater David, who has the prerogative to determine in this sort of instance.

His men are like David's men. Likewise, they're also akin to the priests, who have to do the work of Yahweh on the Sabbath, even though it involves labour that would be prohibited under other circumstances. They're moving sacrifices around, they're doing particular tasks that in any other context they would be prohibited.

But within the context of the service of the tabernacle, it does not count as work. It does not count as a breaking of the Sabbath. Likewise, Jesus' disciples are committed to a divine ministry, and that divine ministry takes priority, and it's not a violation of the Sabbath at all.

The work of the priests isn't counted as Sabbath-breaking work, because it is in service of the temple. And now there's something greater than the temple here, Jesus himself. Now just think how startling a claim this is, what it implies.

The temple was the place where God was present with his people, and the place where service to God was rendered. And Christ is declaring that he is not just the greater David, but the greater temple. He is the site where God is present, and as his disciples follow and serve him, their activities are not a breaking, but a fulfilment of the intent of the Sabbath.

Once again Jesus refers to Hosea 6, God desires mercy, not sacrifice. And the contrast here is between law-keeping for its own sake, and law-keeping that is truly ordered towards the fulfilment of God's will. The point of the law is not just to obey a rigorous set of commandments, it's to fulfil God's will.

This is something that we've been seeing in the book of Matthew to this point, especially in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus is the one who fulfils the law, and the righteousness of his disciples exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees. The scribes and the Pharisees do not understand what it means that God desires mercy, not sacrifice.

They're focused upon rigorous adherence to the letter of the law, and yet they do not bring rest. They're not bringing God's peace. They're not the people who are fulfilling God's redemptive purpose, as Jesus teaches in the Sermon on the Mount, that his disciples must do.

They are the ones who are bringing righteousness into relationships, healing to broken situations, and that's what the law always intended. The law of the Sabbath was not just about rigorous adherence to some principle of rest. It's about giving rest to people.

It's about entering into God's rest and bringing that rest to others. And Christ is a living Sabbath, a living rest-giver. He's the one who goes through the land giving rest to people who are struggling under heavy burdens.

He's the one who pulls out sheep from pits on the Sabbath. He's coming to people who are laboring and are heavy laden, like the Israelites were in the land of Egypt, and he's giving them rest. He's a walking Sabbath, and his disciples are acting in service of him.

Now as the Pharisees oppose him, as they oppose his giving of rest to people like the man with the withered hand, what they're doing is fundamentally opposing the Sabbath principle itself. Now they may think they're obeying the letter of the law, but they're undermining the very spirit of it. Christ is the one who gives the true rest that the Sabbath bears witness to.

He is the Lord of the Sabbath. Jesus directly responds to the challenge of his opponents by healing a man in the synagogue with a withered hand on the Sabbath. Again, he's

giving rest on the Sabbath, which fulfills the intent and the commandment of the Sabbath.

And he illustrates this with the example of a sheep that needs aid on the Sabbath day. Now, people are far more important than sheep, as Christ points out, but he's also acting as the good shepherd in this instant. He's the one who replaces the false shepherds.

The people of Israel are like sheep without a shepherd, and as God declares he will do in Ezekiel chapter 34, he has come in person in Jesus Christ to seek out the lost sheep, to seek out the sheep that have been left as if sheep without a shepherd, that have been preyed upon by predatory shepherds who have been false and unfaithful. Jesus has come to rescue the sheep from the ditch and to bring them out and bring them into Sabbath rest. He is the one who declares the acceptable year of the Lord, the year of the Lord's favour, the Jubilee year, the great year of rest for God's people.

And the sheep in the ditch isn't enjoying the Sabbath rest that is God's gift to the animals, so it's the duty of the owner to relieve the sheep's distress and give him the rest that belongs to him. Sabbath keeping is about giving rest, not laying heavy burdens on people. And all of this demonstrates the way that Christ describes himself on his yoke at the end of the previous chapter.

In healing a person with a withered hand, Jesus might also be referring back to an Old Testament narrative. In 1 Kings chapter 13, a man of God confronts the wicked King Jeroboam and declares that he's going to be judged, and the king reaches out his hand to say seize him and his hand withers. And then the man of God heals that withered hand.

There are similar themes playing here. The people are trying to seize Christ, and Christ's healing of a man with a withered hand might bring that biblical memory to mind. We might think about the story of Jeroboam, his rebellion, and the fact that here is the true heir of the Davidic kingdom.

And he is restoring but also judging the false rulers who are trying to seize him. Knowing that the Pharisees are seeking to destroy him, Jesus then withdraws from them. And this is presented as a fulfillment of Isaiah chapter 42.

Jesus is the humble and the gentle deliverer of the people. He's not concerned with proud assertion of his status, with flaunting his power, or with contentious argument, but with gracious action towards the weak, the vulnerable, the wounded, the oppressed, and the outsiders, such as the Gentiles. That is Christ's way of being.

That's what marks him out. The reference to the Gentiles here anticipates the Great Commission, while the beginning of verse 18 looks back to chapters 1 to 4 of the book. Jesus is the one who is the Son, the Servant who has been chosen, the one who has been

anointed with the Spirit of God.

In all of his actions and words here then, Jesus is underlining the meaning of the words that end chapter 11. Come to me all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Sabbath rest, true Sabbath rest.

He is the Lord of the Sabbath who is giving rest to a beleaguered and a troubled people who are labouring under these heavy burdens. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart. He is the one who is not going to break a bruised reed or quench a smouldering wick.

And you will find rest for your souls. Again that Sabbath theme coming to the forefront. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.

Contrasted with the heavy legalistic burdens of those who desire sacrifice rather than mercy, Christ is the one who shows mercy to the lost and wounded and beleaguered sheep of the house of Israel. And while their shepherds will fleece them and seek to oppress them and prey upon them, Christ will bring them rest as the true Davidic shepherd. As the true temple, he is going to be the place where they find communion with God.

And as the one who fulfills all that his namesake Joshua anticipated, he will bring them into the greater promised land. A question to consider. In Jesus' teaching in this chapter, he's exposing a fundamental perversion of the purpose of the law, where the law is made into a means of imposing burdens upon people, rather than actually fulfilling the will of God and giving his sheep rest.

What are some ways in which we can pervert Christ's command in a similar way, and how can we avoid or overcome such errors?