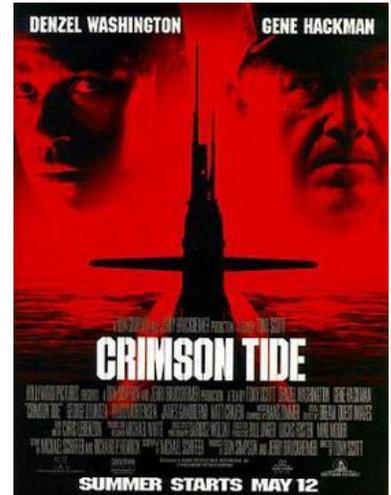


Failing by the Book
From the Series, Faith, Followers, and Failures”
By Phil Brainerd

Introduction

Back in 1995 there was a really interesting film called, “Crimson Tide”. The film involved a fictional incident on a nuclear submarine. The submarine carried intercontinental ballistic missiles with nuclear warheads. The captain of the sub was played by Gene Hackman. The executive officer, the second-in-command, played by Denzel Washington.



At one point in the movie, the ship received a message - It was a type of message the world doesn't want to hear. The message said that terrorists had taken over a Russian missile launch site. If the site wasn't destroyed, the terrorists could launch nuclear missiles anywhere in the world. So, the crew geared up to launch nuclear missiles into Russia to destroy that site.

However, there was a big problem: The message was slightly garbled. A few words were unclear. It might have said attack, or it might have said “prepare to attack”. The captain felt that the sub should go ahead and launch. The executive officer thought they should not. He reasoned that if the Russians saw a nuclear missile flying into their space, they might think they were under attack. It could start World War III.

What to do? The conflict became so bad there was a mutiny. Eventually, everything fell into the hands of one low-level officer. Depending on which side he took, he could start World War III, or he could prevent it.

As it turns out, the US Navy has a book of rules for conduct in a submarine. This low-level officer had just about memorized it. According to the rules as he read them, the answer was clear: He needed to side with the executive officer, in spite of the fact that it meant being disloyal to his captain - Who he served under for years. When he was questioned about his actions, he replied in this way: “What I did, I did by the book.” In other words, he followed the rules.

Rules

In life, there are rules. Sometimes, if you know the rules well and if you follow them closely, it will bring success. However, there are times when rules are debatable. If you follow those rules without question, you may find yourself failing.

Today, we're going to learn about some people who did just that: They failed by following the rules. Let's read about it.

The Connection

We're going to start with a connection.

12 At that time Jesus went through the grainfields on the Sabbath. His disciples were hungry and began to pick some heads of grain and eat them. 2 When the Pharisees saw this, they said to him, "Look! Your disciples are doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath." (Matthew 12:1-2)

So, Matthew starts us with a connection: "At that time..." What time was he talking about? Those who read the last article in this series will recall that we discussed one of the most famous quotes in the Bible:

Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.
(Matthew 11:28)

If you're going to talk about rest, a very logical next step is to talk about the Sabbath, because the Sabbath was created for rest. Let's talk about that for a bit. Anyone's who's read the first few chapters of Genesis knows that it says God created the world in six days, and then rested on the seventh.

1 Thus the heavens and the earth were completed in all their vast array.
2 By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work. 3 Then God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done. (Genesis 2:1-3)

Look at this. God worked. After he finished, "...he rested from all his work." Why did he do that? Is he like us? When we work, we expend effort. It wears us down, so we stop and rest. If we don't, we'll collapse.

Is God like that? Was he "plum tuckered out" after all that work? No. God is infinite. He never runs out of energy. He never wears down. He is never damaged – so, he never needs to heal. For him, resting is something different. To God, resting is a stoppage of one kind of energy, and the start of another. When he rested after the Creation, he stopped creating, and started reflecting. He started enjoying all the things he made.

If you've been around our church for any length of time, you know that humans have a very special status. We are made in the image of God. God created us to be like him.

The image has two parts. One part simply is. We are made in the image of God. We will always carry God's image. That never changes. This makes us very valuable. We are not like the animals - None of them have this image. We are the highest form of life on the planet.

The other part of the image can change and grow. We become more and more like God every time we choose to obey him.

One thing God does is rest. If we choose to rest the way he did, we become more like him. This is one of the things that shows how different we are than the animals. Animals hunt for food every day. They take no breaks. If we fail to take a break, we are no different than the lower life forms of this planet.

This is so important, that God included it in the Ten Commandments.

12 "Observe the Sabbath day by keeping it holy, as the Lord your God has commanded you. 13 Six days you shall labor and do all your work, 14 but the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God. (Deuteronomy 5:12-14(a))

Here we see the principle stated. This raises a question: Who is to participate?

On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your ox, your donkey or any of your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns, so that your male and female servants may rest, as you do. (v 14(b))

Everyone was supposed to participate:

Sons and daughters: It was not saying that one person gets to enjoy the Sabbath while their family takes care of them.

Male or female servant: It was not "I'm going to go and rest. All the rest of you – GET TO WORK!" The Sabbath, according to the Law, involved concern for people around you.

Everyone was to be given the privilege of a day off to rest. Even the animals were to get a break. Foreigners were to get a break as well. Everybody got a break.

After all this, God gives us yet one more reason to observe a Sabbath.

Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the Lord your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the Lord your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day. (v 15)

At one time, the people of Israel were slaves. Slaves never get a break. They are told to work, and they had better do it, or they get punished. Free people, on the other hand, choose

whether to work or not. God freed his chosen people from slavery in Egypt. He went to great trouble to do so, showing his mighty power. It would be a shame if people freed from slavery in one place chose to become virtual slaves in another. That's what happens when we fail to take a break.

Now, we could have multiple sessions on the Sabbath and why it's important. For now, let's summarize: The Sabbath involves a stoppage of work.

- Instead, it involves reflection.
- It is something God did.
 - If we do it, we become like him.
- It's for everybody.
- It should involve concern for the wellbeing of others.
 - It's not "Sabbath for me, but not for thee."

As a final point, we'll mention that most Christians do not observe the Sabbath the way the ancient Jewish people did - More about that in a bit. For now, let's move on to the next point.

II. The Problem

Now that we've seen the connection between the "rest" that Jesus offers to us and the Sabbath, and now that we understand the main purposes behind the Sabbath, let's get back to Matthew, we'll read on to see a problem.

At that time Jesus went through the grainfields on the Sabbath. His disciples were hungry and began to pick some heads of grain and eat them. When the Pharisees saw this, they said to him, "Look! Your disciples are doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath." (Matthew 12:1-2)

Back in the days of ancient Israel, there weren't many roads. The roads that did exist tended to wind around a lot, so it was common for people to take shortcuts through fields. If you didn't hurt anything, this was fine.

There's also an interesting provision in the law of Moses: There was to be concern for the poor and underprivileged. If you were a farmer (which was lots of people in those days), one of the ways you could help the poor was to allow them to enter your field and grab a bite.

The people who did this were on an honor system. They were not to go in with farming tools and baskets. They were to take only what they needed to eat for the moment. This means the followers of Jesus were totally within their rights to grab a handful of wheat when they got hungry.

According to all this, the disciples were walking through a field, which was totally legal. Then, they grabbed a handful of wheat, which was also totally legal. But then, the Pharisees came

along. They charged the disciples with breaking the law. On what basis did they make this charge? The disciples were doing this on the Sabbath. In the minds of the Pharisees, that made the disciples' actions illegal.

Why was that? Why did the Pharisees feel that way? Because of what I will call "The rule book." What was the "Rule Book?"

First, the "Rule Book" was not the Bible. When Moses gave the Law, one statement was very clear:

4 Now, Israel, hear the decrees and laws I am about to teach you. Follow them so that you may live and may go in and take possession of the land the Lord, the God of your ancestors, is giving you. 2 Do not add to what I command you and do not subtract from it, but keep the commands of the Lord your God that I give you. (Deuteronomy 4:1-2)

Look at this: Do not add to the clear commands of God. Do not subtract from the clear commands of God. We can understand that we should not subtract from God's commands. That's easy. However, why would someone want to add commands?

There are several reasons. First, some people add commands to the Word of God because they think it will help them to live a godly life. The first example was Eve in the garden of Eden. God told Adam and Eve that they should not eat from the tree of the knowledge of Good and Evil:

16 And the Lord God commanded the man, "You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; 17 but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die." (Genesis 2:16-17)

That seems straightforward: "You must not eat". If you go over a page to Genesis chapter 3, you'll see the story of the first temptation.

Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden?'" (Genesis 3:1)

The Serpent begins by questioning the only rule in the garden. Here's how Eve replied:

The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, but God did say, 'You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, (v2-3(a))

Good so far, but look at what comes next: "and you must not touch it, or you will die.' (v3(b))"

What is Eve doing here? She's adding to the clear command of God. God said, "you must not eat." He didn't say anything about touching. The Bible scholars in the crowd know how this came out, so let's ask a question: Did adding to God's clear command help Eve to live an obedient life? Answer: No.

Sadly, all throughout history, people have chosen to add things to God's clear commands. We have to understand: When people create rule books that add to the Word of God, those rules are NOT the Word of God. The rules created by people are not the Bible, and they have none of the authority of the Bible.

There are other reasons why people add to the clear commands of God. Others do it because they don't know or trust the God who gave the rules. That was the case with the rule book used by the Pharisees in the days of Jesus. Let me explain:

As we said earlier, the Sabbath was included in the Ten Commandments. Let's look at the first time someone failed to observe the Sabbath. This is also known as breaking the Sabbath. First, the people of Israel were given a warning: In the book of Numbers, chapter 15, the people are told what to do when someone accidentally breaks a law. In general, there was mercy shown to such individuals. However, then the people are told what is to happen when someone flagrantly breaks the law.

30 But anyone who sins defiantly, whether native-born or foreigner, blasphemes the Lord and must be cut off from the people of Israel. 31 Because they have despised the Lord's word and broken his commands, they must surely be cut off; their guilt remains on them. (Numbers 15:30-31)

This is serious. To be "cut off" means to die. Now, let's read on in the same chapter. This is the very next thing that happens:

While the Israelites were in the wilderness, a man was found gathering wood on the Sabbath day. Those who found him gathering wood brought him to Moses and Aaron and the whole assembly, and they kept him in custody, because it was not clear what should be done to him. (vs 32-34)

Picture this: Moses brings the law from God on some tablets. He brings the law from a mountain where people saw fire and smoke and all kinds of awesome things. One of the core laws said to observe the Sabbath. A short while later, someone decides that this doesn't apply to him. Others clearly think it applies to everyone, so he's arrested. This is a tough one, so Moses inquires of God. Here's what happened:

Then the Lord said to Moses, “The man must die. The whole assembly must stone him outside the camp.” So the assembly took him outside the camp and stoned him to death, as the Lord commanded Moses. (Numbers 15:35-36)

This is serious. A man was stoned to death for what some consider to be a trivial offense.

There are several ways that someone could respond to this. First, someone could say that God is good. If that’s the case, then surely, there’s a reason for this.

The opposite would be to say, “God is something less than good.” People who believe this would say he’s mean-spirited - He sends lightning bolts and other extreme punishment for trivial offenses.

Let’s look at the first assumption: God is good, so there must be a reason. God has just given the people of Israel the law. It’s full of rules and principles that were given to humankind for our good. It’s a set of laws that have helped civilizations run for over 3,000 years. First, Israel. Then, the countries that were affected by Christianity.

What would happen if the law was thrown out shortly after it was presented? Civilizations could not follow it. A short time after Moses gave the law, someone says, “Who cares what God says. I’m doing what I feel like.” People were watching. Just how serious was God about this new idea of law?

So, God was required to answer. His answer: ***He was very serious about his law.*** So, for this first case of flagrant disrespect, the penalty was extreme.

Now, note: This never happened again. The effect of this judgement probably stuck for a while. However, the problem occurred again at later times. In those cases, God showed mercy.

Here’s what God needed to communicate to the people of Israel and the world: His law is serious. It’s so serious that any flagrant violation should be met with the harshest penalties available. However, God is also merciful. Many times, he does not deal with lawbreakers as their sin deserves.

That’s the conclusion you would come to if you worked on the assumption that God is good. Now, what happens if you work on the assumption that God is less than good?

People who believe that would say: Because God is a mean-spirited being who might send lightning bolts for trivial infractions, you had better come up with ways to avoid the infractions. Otherwise, everyone is dead!

If you believe this, you start adding some distance to the commands, some buffers. This is called “Building a fence around the law.” One example of this happened with the Sabbath.

The law said people should not work. But, how do you define work? We don't want any lightning bolts, so it's time for some fences:

- Travel was work. So, you could only go a thousand steps on the Sabbath. That was called a "Sabbath's Day Journey."
- Fighting a war on the Sabbath was work. Therefore, the Jewish people did not defend themselves when the Romans came through in 60 B.C. The Romans just attacked on the Sabbath.
- Carrying things on the Sabbath was work. So, you couldn't carry anything heavier than a dried fig.

The list went on. By the time the ancient teachers were done, there were not just rule books, but chapters in rule books concerning Sabbath restrictions. This created some big problems. First, the creation of commands in addition to the Scriptures was in itself disobedience to the Scriptures. Next, by creating these rules, the ancient teachers actually obscured the true meaning of the Sabbath. The Sabbath was meant for rest and reflection - Reflection on things like the goodness of God and the way he showed it in the lives of the people. Instead, the Sabbath became a time of fear - Fear that any small infraction could bring serious punishment.

Jesus and His Followers

How did this all relate to Jesus and his disciples? Jesus and his disciples were travelling. Where did they start? Was it more than the steps allowed? Were the Pharisees counting? Of course, we could ask what the Pharisees were doing in the grain fields themselves, and how many steps they took. I wonder what kind of answer you would get. Because Jesus subjected himself to many of the traditions of the day, he likely stayed within the limits. So, that wasn't something that could be used as a charge. The Pharisees had to look elsewhere.

As they're watching the disciples, they see someone grab some grain. Guess what? That was **harvesting**. Harvesting was work. Harvesting involved swinging a sickle, also known as reaping. This was a much smaller amount of grain, and the disciples used their hands, but it would do for a charge. And so, the Pharisees say that the disciples of Jesus were doing something unlawful on the Sabbath. They were harvesting. And since Jesus was in charge, he was responsible.

Conclusion

So, what's the problem? As always, the problem was not Jesus and his followers. The problem was people who added to the clear commands of God. In doing so they confused all the people who lived in that day. They obscured the real meaning and the benefits of the Sabbath.

Worst of all, they missed the Lord of Glory. They dismissed Jesus as a mere lawbreaker - a criminal. They failed because they were following man-made rules and not the Word of God. ***They failed by following the book.*** They failed because the book they followed was not the Word of God.

What does that mean for us? It means we need to learn God's Word. We must know it well. We must understand that it is full of rules. However, the rules are meant for our benefit. They are given by a good God who loves us and who wants our best. We must not add to those rules. It does nothing to help us. It only shows that we don't really know the God who gave us the rules.

As I said earlier, this is a big topic. So, the next time we're together, we'll have a "Failing by the Rules, Part 2". In that session, we'll answer some important questions.

- What kind of rules are we talking about today? What kinds of rules have people added to God's Word?
- Why do we observe the Sabbath differently today than people did in ancient Israel? One of the first things early Christians did after the death of Christ was move the Sabbath from Saturday to Sunday. Why did they do that?

Come back, and you'll find out. Until then, let's try to live by the book. Only, live by the real book – the Word of God.

Thanks for reading! Here are some helpful links:

Trinity Church
www.TrinityTeaneck.org

Phil's Site
PhilBrainerd.com

To learn how to begin a new life with Jesus Christ, visit Billy Graham's site:
PeaceWithGod.net