

“Lord of the Sabbath” Matthew 12:1-8

When Jesus began His ministry in Galilee, people couldn't get enough of Him. They flocked to the places where He was preaching and hung on His every word. When He showed up somewhere, they would crowd around Him, hoping to see Him perform miracles or cast out demons. But it wasn't long before the religious leaders of Judaism realized that what He was doing and teaching were incompatible with their longstanding theological opinions and interpretations. So not only did they reject Him as Messiah and turn many of the people against Him, not only did they accuse Him of heresy and even blasphemy, they aggressively opposed Him and obsessively looked for opportunities to publicly humiliate Him.

One of the ways they tried to do this was by setting traps to see if they could catch Him saying something that contradicted God's Word or doing something that violated God's laws. Matthew 12 begins a series of encounters with these adversarial religious leaders, and it begins with an interesting story in **verse 1**. *At that time Jesus went through the grainfields on the Sabbath. His disciples were hungry, and they began to pluck heads of grain and to eat.*

It is important to note some of the specific details in this verse. First, this event occurred on the Sabbath, the seventh day of the week, which was the divinely designated day of rest.

Second, for whatever reason, the disciples were hungry. Matthew (who was there) doesn't deem it necessary to tell us *why* they were hungry, but the fact that they were hungry means that they probably picked several heads of grain, as opposed to one or two, to satisfy their hunger.

Third, it was perfectly normal and acceptable to pick grain from a farmer's field, while walking along the path. Deuteronomy prohibited farmers from harvesting the edges of their fields so that foreigners, orphans, and widows might have free and easy access to food (Deut. 24:19-22). What is more, the law also made provision for *anyone* who was hungry to eat from a neighbor's field.

But what turned this incident into *The Case of the Controversial Sabbath Snack* was how the Pharisees, who had apparently been watching them, *interpreted* what the disciples did. Look at **verse 2**. ² *But when the Pharisees saw it, they said to him, “Look, your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath.”*

As you know, the Sabbath was extremely important to the Jewish people. Sabbath observance was one of the three most important and distinctive badges of Jewish life, along with circumcision and the dietary laws. Thus, every Jew took the Sabbath seriously.

God gave the Sabbath as a day of rest. The fourth commandment specified that no work was to be performed on the Sabbath, so that the day would be kept holy—set apart to God. Every Jew knew this and knew the consequences in the Book of Numbers if someone violated this command. But as is the case with most biblical commands or theological issues, there was much discussion and debate within the Jewish community about the meaning of “work”. What constitutes “work” and where do you draw the line? It's a valid question, but there were a number of different interpretations.

For example, the book of Maccabees describes an event that took place in the inter-testamental period when Israel's enemy attacked on the Sabbath, and the Jews let themselves be slaughtered—men, women, and children—rather than break the Sabbath by

“working” to defend themselves (1 Macc. 2:31–38).

By the first century, with the emergence of various sects within Judaism, there were even more interpretations about the meaning of *work*, and how one should keep the command. The Pharisees, who were the strictest, most conservative sect in Judaism, naturally took a hardline stance. They developed an extensive set of laws that would apply to several real-life situations. For example, they wrote that if a tailor went out on the Sabbath with a needle accidentally stuck in his cloak, he was in violation of the command, and was therefore guilty of doing what was unlawful, and subject to punishment.

Besides what is written in the Torah (the first five Books of the Old Testament) the Pharisees added thirty-nine specific activities that were forbidden on the Sabbath, one of which was reaping, another threshing, another winnowing, and another preparing food. You can imagine, then, their surprise and delight when they saw Jesus’ disciples violate four of these thirty-nine rules right in front of their eyes. Look again at **verse 2**. ² *But when the Pharisees saw it, they said to him, “Look, your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath.”*

Please be aware that in Jesus’ day the term “*what is not lawful*” could refer to an explicit Old Testament command, or it could refer to an *interpretation* of an Old Testament command—what was called the oral law in the first century, and what was written in the Talmud and the Midrash.

As the Pharisees understood it, plucking the grain was reaping, rubbing it to separate the grain from the husks (which Luke tells us they did) was threshing, blowing away the husks was winnowing, and doing it all in the palm of one’s hand was food preparation (all food eaten on the Sabbath had to be prepared on the previous day) (Morris, PNTC). Therefore, the disciples had committed an egregious sin. They had labored, doing what was “not lawful” on the Sabbath.

And they directed their complaint against the One whom they felt was ultimately responsible for this sin—Jesus. So, Jesus responds, **verses 3-4**. ³ *He said to them, “Have you not read what David did when he was hungry, and those who were with him: ⁴ how he entered the house of God and ate the bread of the Presence, which it was not lawful for him to eat nor for those who were with him, but only for the priests?”*

Jesus did not try to argue with the Pharisees about their oral laws and traditions which, they believed, had the same authority as Scripture. He didn’t rebuke them for this error or ridicule them for their silly rules. Instead, he takes them back to Scripture. He says to them, “*Have you not read...?*” By the way, when Jesus preached the Sermon on the Mount He often said to the crowd, “*Have you not heard...?*” (5:21, 27, etc.). Most Galileans were illiterate in these days, and the only way they would have known the Scriptures was by hearing it being read. But He addresses the educated Pharisees differently. “*Have you not read...?*” Of course, they *had* read. They prided themselves on their ability to read and on their fastidious familiarity with Scripture. They also prided themselves on their commitment to uphold Scripture’s authority.

So, Jesus takes them to that authority to give an example of a Jewish hero who did something that was universally regarded as “unlawful,” but was not condemned for it. The hero was David, and the incident occurred when he was forced to suddenly flee from King Saul when he was trying to kill him (1 Sam. 21:1-7). Jesus says, **verses 3-4**. “*Have you not read what David did when he was hungry, and those who were with him: ⁴ how he entered the house of God and ate the bread of the Presence, which it was not lawful for him to eat*

nor for those who were with him, but only for the priests?"

The bread of the Presence (or the shewbread) were the twelve loaves of bread (representing the twelve tribes of Israel) that the priests who worked in the Tabernacle baked every Sabbath. After baking them, those twelve loaves were placed on the altar. The recipe for this bread and its manner of arrangement Sabbath after Sabbath are detailed in Leviticus (24:5–9), where it is specified that this bread “belongs to Aaron and his sons” (v. 9). Eating the holy loaves was a priestly prerogative. No one other than priests were permitted to eat it (Morris).

But Jesus reminds the Pharisees that David broke this law, and neither God nor the priests condemned him for it. He was considered guiltless, even though he did what was “unlawful”. It could even be argued that Ahimelech, the priest, served God’s purposes by feeding David and his men this sacred bread, because it was God’s provision for them to be sustained when their lives were in danger.

In using this example, Jesus not only wants to point out a valid exception to the rules, He wants to state the purpose of the law. The intent of the law is to serve God’s people, not for God’s people to serve the law.

Jesus goes on to give another example from Scripture to reinforce this principle. Look at **verse 5**. ***5 Or have you not read in the Law how on the Sabbath the priests in the temple profane the Sabbath and are guiltless?***

In the Jewish community the Temple was open on the Sabbath, and since it was a holy day there were even more temple rituals than on the other days of the week. Besides the normal daily offerings, the priests had to bake the twelve sacred loaves for the altar, and two additional lambs were sacrificed every Sabbath day. Since priests were the only ones who could bake these loaves and offer these sacrifices, this meant that the priests had to work even harder on the Sabbath.

Jesus is using irony when He says that the priests *profane* the Sabbath, a word that can also be translated “desecrate” (Moffatt). His sarcasm was not lost on the Pharisees, I assure you, for even they agreed that the work of priests on the Sabbath trumped the command that prohibited work. In fact, their esteemed book, the *Talmud*, stated that “the sacrificial service supersedes the Sabbath” (*Shab.* 132b).

In using these biblical examples of David doing something that was not lawful because of his hunger, and the priests doing something that was not lawful because of their God-given mandate to provide a greater benefit to His people, Jesus is forcing the Pharisees to think hard about what God meant the Sabbath to be and what people should do to keep it holy. They had too easily accepted views that made the Sabbath a burden and had overlooked the fact that Scripture did not fit into their pattern (Morris).

The Sabbath is a day for honoring God. It is a day for refreshment and replenishment, and a day for spiritual and physical renewal. The Pharisees erroneously believed that God is honored when His people meticulously abide by the rules, and so a successful Sabbath for them was making sure they abided by all the rules that ensured they didn’t cross the line into work. In other words, the Sabbath wasn’t serving them; they were serving the Sabbath. That’s a big difference!

But that’s not all Jesus wants to say to them about the Sabbath. He goes on to make an astounding declaration about His own identity in relation to the Sabbath. **Verse 6**. ***6 I tell you, something greater than the temple is here.***

Who instituted the temple system with all its ceremonies and sacrifices? God did.

Why did He do it? So His people could have a means by which they could be forgiven of their sins and be able to relate to Him. That was wonderful and gracious and kind of God to do this. But what God was doing for His people in the sending of Jesus far surpassed what He did in setting up the temple system. The daily, ritual sacrifices offered by the priests in the temple do not compare in significance with the coming of the Christ who provided a once-for-all sacrifice by giving His own life and shedding His own blood so that His people might be completely forgiven of their sins and have fellowship with God 24/7.

Jesus is asserting here that the Pharisees' real problem was that they didn't recognize that God's ultimate provision for their sin, for their rest, for their healing, for their wholeness was standing right in front of them. They didn't recognize that the Temple systems and sacrifices were only an imperfect, temporary solution to their sin problem, and that the perfect, permanent solution was Jesus. Which makes Him *greater* than the temple.

And as this relates to what the disciples did by picking and eating grain on the Sabbath, Jesus implies that if the guardians of the temple were guiltless on the Sabbath for the greater good of conducting priestly functions, how much more should Jesus and His disciples be considered guiltless when doing the work of God given to them? If David and his men were considered guiltless when they ate the forbidden, consecrated bread in order to satisfy their hunger, how much more should Jesus and His disciples be considered guiltless, since Jesus is far greater than David?

But there's more. Jesus states another rationale in **verse 7**, *7 And if you had known what this means, 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the guiltless.*

Once again, the Pharisees prided themselves on their knowledge of and commitment to the Scriptures, but Jesus asserts that they did not really know the Scriptures. They had read them, but they had not truly comprehended their meaning, otherwise they would have understood that mercy is far more pleasing to God than rule-keeping.

For the second time in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus quotes Hosea 6:6, which states, "I desire mercy not sacrifice." This doesn't mean that sacrifice is unimportant or displeasing to God. It simply means that sacrifice is not nearly as important as mercy. Mercy trumps sacrifice. Therefore, mercy and compassion ought to distinguish the people of God rather than the meticulous observance of outward regulations (Morris).

The Pharisees, because they had read Hosea and were familiar with this passage, should have known that God prioritizes compassion over rule-keeping. What is more, in their rush to condemn people who didn't obey their rules to their liking, they were revealing just how different from God they were, and just how ignorant they were of Him and His will. If compassion is so important to God, then compassion should have been important to them. It should have the driving force behind their actions and attitudes. Their condemning attitudes revealed hard hearts.

Finally, Jesus makes His definitive statement in **verse 8**, *8 For the Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath.* Lord (kurios) is used in the New Testament in a variety of ways, but here there can be no doubt that it refers to One who has supreme authority. Jesus is saying that He, the Son of Man, is sovereign over the Sabbath. And why not, if He is who He said He was? He invented the Sabbath, He instituted the Sabbath, He wrote the laws in the Torah about the Sabbath. Therefore, His interpretations about how the Sabbath is to be observed, and what activities are appropriate or not on the Sabbath, are the *correct* interpretations. So if He doesn't have a problem with the disciples picking and eating grain on the Sabbath, there

must not be a problem.

As the Lord of the Sabbath Jesus gives the true interpretation of the Sabbath's intent. And, as He stated in Mark's account of this same story, "*The Sabbath was made for man; not man for the Sabbath*" (Mark 2:27). This means that Sabbath activities are intended to *benefit* mankind, not *burden* mankind. They are intended to provide rest and refreshment, not add a load of guilt and shame. So if what the disciples did with the grain provided refreshment and renewed their strength, then the Sabbath's intent was accomplished.

By the way, I have no doubt that Matthew organized the contents of his Gospel so that this story would immediately follow Jesus' reference to the cumbersome yoke and the heavy load of the Scribes and Pharisees' rules and regulations. He said in **10:28-30**, *²⁸ Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.*"

As it relates to keeping the Sabbath, Jesus' yoke is easy in the sense that the Sabbath it to be a special day in which one's body and spirit are refreshed, renewed, and replenished. That can happen in a variety of ways that are pleasurable, meaningful, and satisfying. Jesus' burden is light in the sense that the only real rule for the Sabbath is to cease from work and rest. And that is not a hard rule to understand or follow, if one is, in fact, committed to the principle that the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath—that the Sabbath is supposed to serve man, not man serve the Sabbath.

We are going to continue next week, Lord willing, looking at another Sabbath story—a story about Jesus healing a man with a withered hand on the Sabbath (vv. 9-15). After that we are going to take a short break from our exposition of Matthew's Gospel to do a topical series on Sabbath keeping. We will be trying to answer the following questions:

- Why did God command a day of rest in the beginning?
- What is the meaning of the Fourth Commandment?
- Is Sabbath-keeping a transcultural and trans-covenantal obligation?
- How does the fourth Commandment apply to Christians in the New Covenant?
- Why has Sabbath-keeping virtually gone extinct in modern times?
- What does it mean to observe the Sabbath in the twenty-first century?

As we embark on this series I will be continually reminding you to keep an open mind and let the Scriptures shape our minds. I will confess to you from the start that my understanding of the Sabbath and my observance of the Sabbath has not been based on Scripture or even theological reflection, but on my church background (tradition) and on my culture. And that is not a good thing. It is not acceptable. So I am looking forward to this series in order to learn and grow in this area of my discipleship. I hope you will too.

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Main Idea: Since Jesus is the Lord of the Sabbath, He determines how it is to be observed.

The Disciples’ Controversial Sabbath Snack (1)

The Pharisees’ Serious Allegation (2)

Their motivation

Their interpretations of Sabbath keeping

Their rationale for the disciples’ “infraction”

Jesus’ Defense of His Disciples

His appeal to Scripture, not tradition (3-5)

David’s “violation” of the law (3-4)

He and his men were also hungry

He was not condemned

Priests’ “violation” of the law (5)

They *must* “work” on the Sabbath

They are not condemned for it

His argument from the lesser to the greater (6)

God sending Jesus is greater than God setting up the Temple

(Jesus is greater than David)

His interpretation of the Law—Mercy is better than sacrifice (7)

His declaration of authority over the Sabbath (8)

Application Questions
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After the Pharisees accused the disciples of doing what was “unlawful” on the Sabbath, Jesus defended their actions by citing Scripture (rather than by appealing to tradition or contemporary interpretations, or by making a theological argument). Why is this important? How can we, like Jesus, use Scripture in an appropriate, constructive way in our conversations with those who accuse or criticize us? How is Scripture used in an inappropriate, destructive way?

Jesus’ interpretation of what is appropriate behavior on the Sabbath was based on God’s purpose for creating the Sabbath—a day of rest, refreshment, and replenishment. Is this still a mandate for the Christian community? Why or why not?

Do you observe a day of rest each week? Why or why not? If you do, what are the benefits and blessings from doing so?