

Matthew 12:1-14 – “Lord of the Sabbath”

I trust the book of Matthew has been an enjoyable and encouraging journey so far. We’ve seen some exciting things that Jesus has said and done. Miracles, healings, fabulous teachings. And yet, continuing on, we begin to see the growing opposition towards Jesus.

- Think about that for a minute. There were people that lived at the time of Jesus who rejected Him! They were more interested in serving themselves than the King of the universe.
- Have you gone through times in your life where you’ve been looked down upon or rejected because of your faith in Jesus? Well, you’re in good company. If they opposed Jesus, we should not be surprised or discouraged if we too are opposed by others.

So, throughout Chapter 12 we look at a number of attacks that come against Jesus.

- He’s attacked for His treatment of the Sabbath (12:1-14); He’s attacked on His Sovereignty and accused of working with Satan to cast out demons (12:22-30); He’s attacked by religious leaders who demanded a sign because of their unbelief of who Jesus was (12:38-42); and Jesus is attacked by His own people (family and friends) who began to think He was out of His mind and sought to restrain Him (12:46-50; Mark 3:21).
- Jesus is up against it. And because of this He’s going to be a little more provocative in what He does and says.
- So, in our passage today we’re going to be dealing with the Sabbath. What is the Sabbath, why was the Sabbath given, and how does this relate to us today.

1. A Sabbath Complaint – 12:1-8

12:1-2 - *At that time Jesus went through the grainfields on the Sabbath. And His disciples were hungry, and began to pluck heads of grain and to eat. ² And when the Pharisees saw it, they said to Him, “Look, Your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath!”*

‘At that time’ reminds us that Jesus is in the Galilee region where He’s been ministering and also rebuking some of the cities in that northern Galilee region for their apathy and lack of repentance. We saw that last time in Matthew 11.

And as He continues to move about that region, we see the opposition grow and become even more harsh. But this time it's stemming not just from apathy, it's stemming from animosity. Animosity from the religious leaders at Jesus overstepping their rules and authority.

They took issue when the disciples plucked heads of grain from a field on the Sabbath and began to eat.

Why was this such an issue to them? Notice they said, ***Look, Your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath!***

- Now it sounds like these Pharisees are just trying to be good God honoring people and just follow the law. But the problem was that this wasn't a legal issue according to God's Word, this was an interpretation issue according to man.

You see, they knew what the law said regarding the Sabbath. It said:

Exodus 20:8–11, *“Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. ⁹ Six days you shall labor and do all your work, ¹⁰ but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord your God. In it you shall do no work: you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your male servant, nor your female servant, nor your cattle, nor your stranger who is within your gates. ¹¹ For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it.”*

But the questions arose, what does it mean to do work on the Sabbath?

Additionally, it said in Exodus 16:29 they were not to travel on the Sabbath. And in Jeremiah 17:21-27 it spoke of not carrying a burden on the Sabbath.

How were they to know if they were breaking or fulfilling the Sabbath? Well, they came up with a number of interpretations as to what constituted travel, and what carrying a burden entailed, and what was considered work.

- There were about 613 commandments given by God in the Old Testament.
- The Jews made over 1500 rules or guidelines to help them observe this law.
- Regarding the Sabbath there were 39 types of prohibited work.
 - But again, none of these things were ever God's heart or God's desire for proper obedience. God desired people to worship Him faithfully and sincerely and to cut off anything not of Him. But these Pharisees complicated matters by adding their man-made traditions to the mix. Yet they were masters at cutting the corners in a way that suited them.

Here's some examples of what they would do:

1. Traveling on the Sabbath – they said you could not go longer than a thousand yards from your home (they called that a Sabbath day's journey). But they would tie a rope from their house and extend it down the street and would now say this whole area encompassed their home. So it extended their thousand yard range. Some would go out on Friday night before the Sabbath (remember, Sabbath was from sundown Friday to sundown Saturday) and would leave food up to 3/5 mile from their home. This again extended their travel range and allowed them to travel twice as far without technically breaking the Sabbath.
2. Carrying a burden – What was considered a burden? Carrying your jacket or a shirt was considered a burden. But wearing your jacket or shirt was permissible. So, if your house was on fire during a Sabbath, you couldn't just run in and grab all your things. But you could put on a number of layers of clothing and walk out wearing them all to preserve them. This would be allowed.
3. Working on the Sabbath – A man was not allowed to spit on the Sabbath because that spit could potentially hit some dirt and you would be guilty of plowing on the Sabbath. You could not swat at a fly because you would be guilty of hunting. A woman could not look in a mirror because if she sees a grey hair she may be tempted to pull it out and that would be harvesting.

The Sabbath became so restricting and worrisome of perhaps breaking the law that people would be almost afraid to breathe. But this was never what God intended. You're seeing here how oppressive religion and legalism can be. Again, these were not matters of the Mosaic law God gave, these were matters of just breaking their own man-made rules and interpretations of the Sabbath. This is why when we read in context what Jesus said in **Matthew 11:28-30** it has so much more meaning, *"Come to Me, all you 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."*

So, Jesus and His disciples are not doing anything wrong. In fact, it was permitted in the law that people could help themselves to grain from a neighboring field as long as they were not harvesting it with a sickle.

- **Deuteronomy 23:25**, *“When you come into your neighbor’s standing grain, you may pluck the heads with your hand, but you shall not use a sickle on your neighbor’s standing grain.”*

But this act by the disciples violated the Pharisees rules regarding working on the Sabbath. By plucking the grain they were harvesting. By rubbing it in their hand they were threshing. Blowing away the chaff would be winnowing. This whole act was preparing a meal, which typically was done the day before the Sabbath. This all went against their interpretation of what constituted working on the Sabbath.

So, Jesus brings up a little account from the Word to question them on this.

12:3-4 - *But He said to them, “Have you not read what David did when he was hungry, he and those who were with him: ⁴ how he entered the house of God and ate the showbread which was not lawful for him to eat, nor for those who were with him, but only for the priests?”*

What a great line: *Have you not read...* These were the experts in the law and the Word of God. If anyone has read this the Pharisees would be the ones that have. It’s as though Jesus is calling them out for their ignorance and putting them in their place for not acting differently regarding these matters.

- Before we get too judgmental on the Pharisees how often have we read the word and thought of the ‘other people’ that need to hear it. Or we read it out of ritual or tradition and fail to see how it speaks directly to us. Do we comprehend the Father’s heart behind His Word and allow it to change us?

So, Jesus, reminds them of this account with David in 1 Samuel 21:1-6 when he ate the showbread. Twelve loaves of bread were to be in the Tabernacle on the Table of Showbread. They represented the twelve tribes of Israel and the priests were able to partake of the bread to nourish them as they served. But it was for the priests only. Yet it was offered to David and his men and they ate it to sustain them.

- The point of this is that human need overrides religious rules. It’s better that a person is helped than have a temporary law protected.

12:5 - *Or have you not read in the law that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple profane the Sabbath, and are blameless?*

On the Sabbath offerings at the temple were doubled. So the work priests performed were greater on the Sabbath. If they were judged by the rules of the

Pharisees they would be guilty of profaning the temple and breaking the Sabbath! But they are blameless.

- And the temple was the holiest site for them. The very embodiment of the presence of God. If there was ever a place they would be sure not to break any of their laws it would be at the temple. But notice what Jesus says next...

12:6 - *Yet I say to you that in this place there is One greater than the temple.*

The most significant place to the Jew (the temple) paled in comparison to the very One that was standing before them. If only they comprehended the reality that the incarnate God was in their midst how their attitudes would have changed.

12:7-8 - *But if you had known what this means, 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the guiltless. ⁸ For the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath.*"

Jesus quotes from Hosea 6:6 to show that God's heart is love above law. Human need is to supersede rules and rituals.

The people in Hosea's day, as well as the Pharisees in Jesus' day, were more concerned with satisfying God through religious rituals, rather than having a genuine heart of worship for Him.

They missed the point of the law and instead used it to condemn others and prop themselves up as spiritual superstars.

- These are the same results of legalism. Legalism causes a person to rely on what they do to make them feel righteous. It causes a person to look with judgment on others when they're not performing in the same way and it feeds a person's pride.

"The Sabbath is a day for liberty and liberation—not legalism! To prove it, He does some 'work' of his own on the Sabbath, and heals a man with a shrivelled hand. It is this act of defiance that makes some Pharisees want to kill Him." ¹

When Jesus says He is ***Lord even of the Sabbath***, He is implying that He is the ultimate authority over these matters. He's not subject to any rules or regulations

¹ Knowles, A. (2001). *The Bible guide* (1st Augsburg books ed., p. 421). Augsburg.

of man, He's the One that calls the shots. He's not just Lord of the Sabbath, He's Lord over all! And we're to be in subjection to Him. He's our Sabbath rest.

- Have you made Him the Lord of your life? Are you at rest in Him today?

What's interesting is that Jesus brings up a lesson from a prophet (Hosea), the priests, and a king (David). Jesus came as Prophet, Priest and King to be all things to us and for us.

2.A Sabbath Critique – 12:9-14

12:9-10 - *Now when He had departed from there, He went into their synagogue. ¹⁰ And behold, there was a man who had a withered hand. And they asked Him, saying, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?"—that they might accuse Him.*

It almost seems like this was on the same Sabbath, but Luke's gospel lets us know that this another Sabbath. And as Jesus goes into the synagogue, most likely in Capernaum, there's a man there with a withered hand. And the Pharisees are there knowing that Jesus is going to want to do something about this, and they're ready to pounce.

- But I love this about Jesus. He's lived in a way where people know that He's going to show up with compassion for the one that is in need. The Pharisees are doing nothing for this man. He's a pawn for them to carry out their wicked plans. But Jesus sees a man that is in need, and He comes with grace and compassion to make this man well.
- I trust you recognize the goodness of our Saviour who doesn't overlook your situation. He doesn't deny you or pass you by. He's personable and wants you to be made well. Sometimes that will come by a physical healing, and at other times He wants us to know His grace is sufficient. In our weakness His strength is made perfect (2 Corinthians 12:9).

The Pharisees ask their question, ***Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?***

They had certain regulations for this sort of thing.

- If a person's life wasn't at risk, they couldn't do anything to promote healing on a Sabbath.
- If a man was cut and bleeding badly, they could bandage it up and stop the bleeding, but they couldn't put any balm on it that would speed up the healing.

- If you broke a bone, you could lay the person down, and make him comfortable but you couldn't set the bone to heal properly until after the Sabbath.

They had their rules, but they ask this to try and trap Jesus in doing something that went against their rules.

So Jesus asks a question in return.

12:11-12 - *Then He said to them, "What man is there among you who has one sheep, and if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will not lay hold of it and lift it out? ¹² Of how much more value then is a man than a sheep? Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath."*

In their own regulations they made an allowance for them to help their livestock out of a pit. This was their bread and butter; these were of great value to them. They made allowances that suited their own personal gain and did so at the exclusion of a human life.

- Jesus returns a question to them: *Is not man of more value than sheep?* And of course, the answer was obvious.
- Jesus is wanting to expose the religious leaders' double standard and hypocritical attitude.
- Their actions became skewed under this lens of legalism. Tradition and religious rituals will leave you cold and hard toward others. Jesus reminds us here again that people are of far more value than animals. And Jesus shows genuine care and love for this man despite the target it puts on His back.

But God's heart is always to do good. There's nothing in His commands that are meant to bring a heaviness or harm.

12:13 - *Then He said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." And he stretched it out, and it was restored as whole as the other.*

Now this is remarkable. This man has a withered hand, it's deformed; shriveled up. He can't move it! He doesn't look at Jesus and say, '*Umm, have you SEEN my hand??*' No it says simply that ***he stretched it out.***

Jesus could have just touched this man and given him a new hand. But instead Jesus calls this man to do something. He initiates an obedient action that leads to the miracle.

- You know, we can all come up with many excuses as to why we can't act upon what God has called us to. Ever done that? '*You want me to do what*

God? Have you seen me try that before? I can't do that? I don't have that kind of ability!

- But the great thing is God is not looking for your ability to do a work, He simply looking for your obedience. And with His calling comes His enabling.
- When God calls us to do something, or go somewhere, we never have to look at the obstacles. Do you think that we're going to be able to say something to God that He didn't realize? *'Oh, well thanks for bringing that to my attention, I'm not sure how I missed that?'* That's never going to be a reply from God!
- But realize something from this account, when God calls us to do something, He's not always going to remove the things holding us back first. He wants us to respond in obedience and trust, and as we do we begin to see the power and provision of God.

12:14 - *Then the Pharisees went out and plotted against Him, how they might destroy Him.*

These Pharisees were corrupt to the core. Instead of rejoicing at the fact that a man was miraculously healed, they are plotting out a murder.

A lot of good following rituals and traditions do. We need a heart transformation that comes through repentance and surrender to Jesus. Then we truly experience the freedom and rest that is found in Jesus.

It will profit you nothing if you're just going through the motions of Christianity without a heart of worship and devotion to Jesus. He's the One that makes you whole. Religion did nothing for this man, but Jesus changed everything for him. Don't mistake ritual for relationship.

Now these Pharisees weren't plotting to kill Jesus because of His take on the Sabbath, but rather because of His claim as being Lord of the Sabbath, and ultimately, Lord over all. They took issue with His claims of deity. And because of their denial of Him they're actually setting themselves up for their own destruction.

How are we to treat the Sabbath today?

- Though it's one of the longest instructions given in the 10 commandments, it's the only one not repeated in the New Testament.

- When the council met in Jerusalem to see what was required for Gentiles coming into the fold, they said in **Acts 15:10**, *"Now therefore, why do you test God by putting a yoke on the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear?"* And it was decided that they would just have Gentiles abstain from things polluted to idols, from sexual immorality, from things strangles and from blood. Nothing about the Sabbath!
- This was a covenant made between God and Israel to set them apart from the other nations.
- Sunday has not replaced the Sabbath or become the new Christian Sabbath. Sunday is the Lord's day and the day we choose to worship because it was on the first day of the week that Jesus rose from the dead and it was the day that the early church gathered and met together.
- Paul seems to specify that this is a day we're not to judge anyone else on (**Colossians 2:16–17**, *"So let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths, ¹⁷ which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ."*). If a Jew desires to observe it, great! If a person doesn't observe it in a legalistic way that's great too. **Romans 14:5**, *"One person esteems one day above another; another esteems every day alike. Let each be fully convinced in his own mind."*
- Jesus ultimately has fulfilled this Sabbath rest. He has completed the work for us. He cried out, *it is finished* on the cross. Though there is wisdom in taking a day to rest from physical work and your job, Jesus is to be our greater rest. **Hebrews 4:8–9**, *"For if Joshua had given them rest, then He would not afterward have spoken of another day. ⁹ There remains therefore a rest for the people of God."*

The world and the devil would have us work even while we rest. Jesus would have us rest, even while we work. That's how we can live out the Sabbath today. In all we do, rest in the work completed by Jesus, rest in the grace provided by Jesus, and experience the blessing of Sabbath.