

Matthew 12:1-14

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[0:00] about this passage and this sermon as Matt was about those announcements.! But if I tax my voice much more than this, all you'll hear is fits of coughing.

Will you please turn with me to Matthew chapter 12 as we continue walking with Jesus in the book of Matthew. Matthew, when last we walked with Christ in the book of Matthew, he ended chapter 11 saying, Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. And now in chapter 12, we see two episodes that begin on the day of rest, the Sabbath. And so this passage is about the Sabbath.

But it's not really about the Sabbath. See, it's about the Lord of the Sabbath, verse 8. It's about one greater than the temple, verse 6. And it ends in verse 14, not with a lesson about the Sabbath, but with a reaction.

[1:22] To Jesus. Yes, the Pharisees who are in this passage going to oppose Jesus do care about the Sabbath. Well, that's not what they're really angry about today.

And yes, Jesus does have something to say about the Sabbath, but that's not really his point today. See, the Pharisees don't like who Jesus is.

And so they are going to use the Sabbath as an opportunity to accuse him. And likewise, Jesus wants to show us who Jesus is.

And is going to use the Sabbath as an opportunity to reveal himself. And so it is my hope today that we would see Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith.

Our Sabbath rest. That we would react to him, not as his enemies did, but as grateful recipients of his merciful rest. So let us pray.

[2:30] Oh Lord, we ask as we follow the psalmist. Lord, that you would open our eyes. That we may behold wondrous things.

Out of your word. Lord, will you show us yourself. Amen. We pray this all in Christ's name.

Amen. Every good story starts with a setting. And Matthew is an excellent narrator and he begins in chapter 12, verse 1.

And says, At that time, Jesus went through the grain fields on the Sabbath. His disciples were hungry and they began to pluck heads of grain and to eat. When the Pharisees saw it, they said to him, Look, your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath.

To modern Western ears, this is a strange setting. What exactly is going on here? And what exactly is the problem?

[3:39] Let's ask three questions to set the stage. First, what is the Sabbath? Sabbath. That's not a word that most people use today.

You didn't grow up in the church. You may have never... Check.

There we go. If you've not grown up in the church, you may not have heard the word Sabbath used in a conversation in your life. Well, here is a brief history of the Sabbath.

The first Sabbath was God's own Sabbath. The Bible begins with God creating the heavens and the earth and everything in them in six days. And then the second chapter of the Bible begins, Genesis 2, with God's rest on the seventh day.

Genesis 2, 1 through 3 reads, Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them. And on the seventh day God finished his work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work that he had done.

[4:49] So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy. Because on it God rested from all his work that he had done in creation. And what we see

throughout Scripture is that the Lord wants his people, whom he made in his own image, to have that same rhythm as we mirror the one who made us.

And so when he gave his law in Exodus chapter 20, the Ten Commandments, the fourth of those Ten Commandments is the Sabbath. Exodus chapter 20, verses 8 through 11.

Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but on the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God.

On it you shall not do any work. You or your son or your daughter, your male servant or your female servant or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates.

For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.

[6:02] And so you see here that God has connected our Sabbath to his. He wants his people to rest because he rested.

That's why it says, four in six days the Lord made the heaven and the earth. What's implicit, I think, in this command is that he is inviting his people to join him in his rest.

But it is not simply, or not only, that the Lord is reminding us of creation in the Sabbath. There is more. It is also a time to remember God's salvation.

And that's why when he reminded Israel of the Sabbath command in Deuteronomy chapter five, he said this. Deuteronomy 5.12, observe the Sabbath day to keep it holy as the Lord your God commanded you.

That's what we've already seen. But then he says something different. He does not go back to creation. He goes to something else. He says, Deuteronomy 5.15, you shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm.

[7:14] Therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day. This is a picture of our salvation. And so the Sabbath is a time to rest from our work.

It is a time to reflect on God who he himself rests. It is a time to recall also his great salvation. That's what the Sabbath is. The second question about this setting is, who are the Pharisees?

The Pharisees were a prominent religious group within the land of Israel in the time of Christ. Now they are the villains in this narrative, but we would probably like them quite a bit.

See, they're the upstanding citizens. They're the ones who follow the rules. They're the ones who take the Bible very seriously. And they expect others to do the same.

The Pharisees would probably fit in well in many churches today, probably including this one. Let us keep that in mind as we walk through this passage.

[8:28] Third, why are the Pharisees upset? They said to Jesus, look, your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath.

To us, this looks like theft. They're walking through somebody else's field, taking their grain and eating it. You can't do that, right? But this was not theft.

The Lord had given the promised land to his people as a whole people. So travelers and the poor had the right not to go around harvesting other people's grains, something like that, that's not it, but to satisfy an immediate hunger so that the poor would not go hungry.

No one ever starved. Deuteronomy 23, the Lord says, if you go into your neighbor's vineyard, you may eat your fill of grapes, as many as you wish, but you shall not put any in your bag.

If you go into your neighbor's grain, you may pluck the ears with your hand, but you shall not put a sickle to your neighbor's standing grain. So everybody was obligated to help their less fortunate neighbors or sojourners.

[9:38] No one starved, and no one's fields were taken advantage of. It's a pretty good system. So the Pharisees were not worried about property rights here. Their accusation is that Christ's disciples are violating the restriction of work on the Sabbath.

And so what they're saying here is that picking some grain for a snack is the kind of work that God prohibits on the Sabbath. And they are trying to discredit Jesus with that.

To which you and I might say, oh, come on. Doesn't that work? How can you call that work? Well, who's to decide?

How do we know what constitutes work on the Sabbath? Well, the Pharisees had a handy guide. Where did they get it? Well, they kind of made it up themselves.

There was, Rob's going to put up here. This is from the Babylonian Talmud. What the Talmud is, is don't read, this is here not for you to read exactly.

[10:50] This is here to show you 39 regulations. The Talmud is a compilation of the oral instruction of the rabbis in the Hebrew people.

Now, this was compiled several hundred years after Christ. But it almost certainly reflects an earlier tradition that is very similar to what the Pharisees believed.

Now, this looks like a very long list of things that you're not allowed to do on the Sabbath. And that's correct. It's 40 minus one, which is a very Hebrew thing. But what you don't see here is that each of these 39 things also has a paragraph expansion, explanation of all the things, what constitutes winnowing, what constitutes reaping, what constitutes binding up into sheaves.

What are we to make of all this? But we already know that Jesus is about to rebuke them because he's always rebuking the Pharisees, right? But let's pretend for a moment that we don't know that. Doesn't it seem quite reasonable to hear the command, do no work on the Sabbath and then kind of figure out, you know, like here are the different things that are work and not do those?

[12:09] Doesn't that seem pretty reasonable? See, the issue here is not with finding practical ways to obey Scripture's commands.

The issue is the heart with which you follow God's word. Tell me, do you think it's likely that the Pharisees regularly patrolled the fields watching for people eating snacks on the Sabbath?

Me neither. Why were they there? What are they here for? It wasn't for love. They don't say, oh, you guys are hungry?

Well, I don't want you to practice Sabbath, but I also don't want you to be hungry, so here's some food that I've prepared. They're not here to help anybody out. They are here to accuse. This is, by the way, what Jesus hopes for in verse 7, we're about to get to, when he says that he desires mercy.

They were not here for love. They were here to accuse. And in the next scene, in verse 10, we're about to see that they are also going to try to lay a trap for him. Or at least they're going to try.

[13:31] They are using the Sabbath, which is a gift from God, as a weapon against Jesus. That's what's wrong.

They're looking to find fault. And as we said earlier, since prim and proper Pharisees would probably fit in in churches like ours, do we do the same?

We must turn to our hearts and ask, what is our attitude? Do we do the same thing that they're doing with sin?

When we see someone sin, do we use that information against them, perhaps as leverage? Do we hold it against them?

Do we shame them? Perhaps not outright, but we can do it subtly, can't we? Do we think better of ourselves when we see someone else fall into sin?

[14:41] Thank you, Lord, that I am not like that person. Jesus preached a whole parable about that. Or, when we see someone sin, do we see it as something to help them with?

Help them turn quickly to the Savior. Help them overcome it by the power of the Word and prayer and the Holy Spirit and discipleship. What is our attitude towards others in their sin?

Do we look with eyes to find fault? Or do we look with eyes to give aid? And second, not only do we have the same attitude with sin, but do we have the same attitude about our own opinions, right?

Here's this whole list of their opinions of what constitutes work. they believed that their way was the only way to observe the Sabbath.

They made this big list. Do we make big lists about our preferences and habits? Friends, this is a pretty homogenous church. Our normal practices, what's normal for this group of believers, might not be the only way to obey the scriptures.

[15:59] It's easy for us to look at a hyper-strict church, you know, the ones that say, you know, a woman's hemline must be no more than X inches above the ankle, you know, stuff like that, and say, hey, that's modern-day Phariseeism.

And that's right, right? But also, what about us? Do we do something similar? Maybe a little less explicit, but still similar?

As a congregation, as individuals? It's easy to see others' faults, but it is much harder to see the log in our own eyes.

Woe to us if we elevate our own opinions to the level of God's Word. What is the antidote to all this? The first thing Jesus gives them is a reality check. He basically says, you're not right. Look at verse 3 with me. He said to them, have you not read what David did when he was hungry?

[17:06] And those who were with him, 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. Or have you not read in the law how on the Sabbath the priests in the temple profane the Sabbath and are guiltless?

They claim that their rules come from the Bible. But Jesus gives them two examples from the Bible that show that they can't be reading the Bible right.

The first is King David in verses 3 and 4 here. This is a reference to 1 Samuel chapter 21. Briefly, what's going on here is that King Saul was trying unjustly to kill David, whom the prophet Samuel had anointed as the new king, and David had fled.

The priest, Ahimelech, whose name literally means brother or friend of the king, fed David, the true king, with the only food he had, the bread of the presence.

And according to Leviticus 24, this bread was for the priests, not for the king. Yet the Lord didn't condemn Ahimelech for showing David mercy or David for receiving it.

[18:28] The second example is in verse 5. Jesus says that the priests defile the Sabbath day and remain blameless.

Now, the priests had a job to do and that constitutes work, right? And so they ended up working on the Sabbath day.

If we look to things like Numbers 28, on the Sabbath day, two male lambs, a year old, without blemish, and two-tenths of an ephah of fine flour for a grain offering, mixed with oil and its drink offering, this is the burnt offering of every Sabbath besides the regular burnt offering and its drink offering.

This is what the priests have to do every Sabbath. That's work, right? That big list of things that the Pharisees prohibited in the Talmud, this breaks a number of those things.

binding the grain offering into sheaves, untying the knot of the animal sacrifices, slaughtering the lambs, butchery is work that is prohibited, kindling the fire for the burnt offering, transferring the wood to the altar, probably many more things constitute in their system work.

[19:40] The Lord has commanded the priests to observe the Sabbath, but he's also commanded them to work on the Sabbath. And Jesus says, this is not a conflict. He's not saying that the Pharisees are right about what constitutes work on the Sabbath.

He's saying that even if they were right, they'd still be wrong. Why? Because some things are more pressing on God's heart, things like mercy.

There is something greater than the bread's intended recipient. There is something greater than the priest's obligation to rest.

And in verse 6, he says, I tell you, something greater than the temple is here.

And if you had known what it means, I desire mercy and not sacrifice, you would not have condemned the guiltless. For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.

[20:54] This is such an interesting set of verses. We've already looked ahead to verse 7. The Pharisees weren't interested in showing any mercy. They didn't make any effort to help.

All they had to offer was condemnation. Nothing like the heart of God. But what is so interesting here are the two titles that surround verse 7. Something greater than the temple in verse 6.

And Lord of the Sabbath verse 8. When Jesus says something greater than the temple is here, they are standing in the middle of a grain field.

It's not like he's saying that the view or that the disciples or that the Pharisees are greater than the temple. The temple is the place God dwelt among his people.

Behind a great veil was the Holy of Holies where the very presence of God resided on earth. And something greater is here? There's only one thing greater than God's veiled presence.

[22:08] The angel said, Behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.

For unto you this day is born in the city of David a Savior who is Christ the Lord himself. Not veiled, revealed.

Not distant, present, not invisible, tangible. The word became flesh and dwelt among us and we have seen his glory.

The only thing in all the universe greater than the temple is God himself. and he says, I am here. And what does he say of himself?

He says that he is Lord of the Sabbath. Friends, there is only one Lord of the Sabbath. It is he who made it, the everlasting God. And what does he say to those who hate and accuse him?

[23:28] that he desires mercy. So much is that a part of his character that the Sabbath is a mercy from God to us, not a sacrifice to him.

And to prove that point he continues in verse 9. 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. Of course, the Pharisees had rules about medicine on the Sabbath.

[24:51] If someone's life was in danger, you could practice medicine on the Sabbath. But, if their life wasn't in immediate danger, they had to wait until the next day.

That was their rule. And again, using their own words, Jesus proves them wrong. Their own rules, which they've elevated to the same status as God's rules, they try to entrap Jesus, but again, he would show them the foolishness of their own ways.

We know historically that the Pharisees were in public debate at this time, during the second temple, with another religious group in Israel called the Essenes.

the Essenes said to pick a sheep out of a pit on the Sabbath. There were lots of intramural conversations at the time about things like this.

Now, the Pharisees said, hey, it's permissible to do that. I mean, after all, this is Dave saying it now, after all, I mean, how restful is it to be worried about your sheep all day on the Sabbath?

[26:00] Jesus takes the Pharisees own position and says, if you people think that it is lawful to rescue a sheep on the Sabbath, isn't it more important to heal a man?

that gets to this issue. Is the Sabbath for good? Is it a mercy to us?

Is God merciful to us or is it a sacrifice from us to God? No, it's a mercy to us. Then let us do good on it. And that's exactly what he does.

He heals the man because he desires, we have a God who desires to show mercy. Now, I am sure that we are all rooting against the Pharisees in Matthew's Gospel.

But we need to remember that the spirit of the Pharisees is contagious. It is a danger in the church in our hearts every day.

[27:06] That's why Paul wrote the book of Galatians. He was watching a church turn from the true gospel into legalism.

And since Pharisees would probably fit well into churches like ours, it's at this point before we get to verse 14 that I want to make sure that we aren't the Pharisees.

I want to pose some questions about our mindsets, our attitudes. ask yourself, am I quick to accuse, to find fault?

this afternoon we're going to vote on new members at Shoreline. Part of the Shoreline membership affirmation says, I will give others in this church the benefit of the doubt.

Are you doing that? Am I doing that? in your mind does rule keeping secure your place with God?

[28:25] does it maintain your place with God? In your spiritual life what are you most proud of?

Your holiness? Your service? Your accomplishments? Or in your spiritual life are you most proud of what Jesus Christ has done for you?

Maybe you're standing solidly on the gospel and these questions don't disrupt or dislodge you.

Excellent. Maybe you've started to stray from the rock that is the gospel of God's grace and they serve as a corrective.

Maybe you've not really considered those questions before. Whatever the answer is let us look to verse 14.

The Pharisees went out and conspired against him. How to destroy him? Let's continue a little bit into verse 15.

[29:43] Jesus aware of this withdrew from there.! Silenced by his arguments and shown up by his power and his mercy the Pharisees chose not to run to him.

Chose not to embrace him. Chose not to follow him. Chose not to find life in his name and how I hope that you find light and life in his name.

You see Jesus could have stayed right there and continued debating them into the ground. He's just embarrassing them over and over again.

Right? He could have called down fire from heaven on his enemies who plotted his destruction. But he chose to let them continue in their way.

He chose to permit them to advance their schemes against him. He chose to let them plot his destruction.

[31:03] Do not let this pass you by. in saying the son of man is lord of the sabbath a man walked among men and said I am the infinite eternal holy God.

And by healing on that sabbath he both proved that claim and showed that he was here not to destroy us but to love and to save us. And so intent was he to save us that he who created every molecule in your body by the word of his decree permitted evil men to plot his destruction in fact he ordained it because this story ends in chapter 27 with the Pharisees getting exactly what they want his destruction Jesus Christ hanging on a cross but this song's darkest note is also its most hopeful because it triggers an avalanche of grace and mercy it was not their will that was done it was his our sin against so great a

God was so great that no sacrifice we can offer could possibly cover it so the Lord the Lord of the Sabbath greater than the temple offered himself and the way he rescued was to allow himself to be nailed to that cross by evil men to stand in our place the destruction owed me owed you for my sin for your sin in my place condemned he stood he sealed my pardon with his blood hallelujah what a savior but of course this story doesn't end in chapter 27 the book of

Matthew has 28 chapters and in that last chapter when the women go to the savior's tomb they find the stone is rolled away a messenger meets them whose appearance Matthew says was like lightning and his clothing white as snow and his message he is not here he is risen lord of the sabbath indeed let's pray