

The Greater Than Man

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[0 : 00] So we are back in our series looking at Matthew's Gospel, we're in chapter 12 here. If you summarized it, you'd have to say something like this, we learn something of the ugliness of just pure religion and the beauty of Jesus.

So let's just get stuck into it. It's a really interesting episode in the Gospels here. Bizarre, I think, from our perspective.

Like it seems like a petty thing. Jesus and the Pharisees, they're having this theological debate about the Sabbath, and at the end, the Pharisees are so put out by what Jesus says, they decide that we've got to kill him.

I mean, doesn't that just sound bizarre? Like what's going on? What's the big deal here? And just so you know, the Pharisees weren't in the habit of just knocking people off, that they didn't like.

These guys weren't like the Professor Snapes of the Bible or, you know, the ultra-nationalists like Red Dawn in Greece or the, who was in East Germany? The Stasi.

[1 : 09] You know, like this kind of secret police or something that no one liked. These were really well-respected religious professionals. Highly moral people, meticulous in their law-keeping.

And here, of course, is the problem. God gave his people the commandments. He gave his people the law. And the Pharisees were so committed to keeping these laws that they added a whole lot of other ones to it.

Around 600 extra rules that are not in the Bible. They're kind of written elsewhere. They added these 600 extra rules to make sure you didn't break the kind of the main ones.

For example, in order to make absolutely sure that you kept the Sabbath, the Lord's Day, the Holy Day, free from work, these guys came up with 39 different types of work that you couldn't do, prohibited activities.

So cooking, sewing, you couldn't start a fire, you couldn't put out a fire either, unless somebody was in mortal danger. You couldn't write more than two letters.

[2 : 28] Like, it was very, very specific. You couldn't climb trees. Because what if it was a fruit tree, and as you're climbing it, you broke one of the branches off? That would be technically harvesting.

So it was a very extensive list. And they were there to sort of, like, they weren't sort of jerks. They were just, they were kind of like shielding or fencing off these kind of core laws here.

And the Pharisees were really, really, really committed to them. Because they believed this is how you please God. And they were respected for their commitment to the minutiae of the law.

So the Pharisees were so committed to pleasing God, so committed to obeying the externals of religion, but they didn't recognize the Lord.

Their pure focus on religious observance made them blind. It's this terrible, it's sort of a tragedy and the irony of the passages that God they wanted to please was right there.

[3 : 38] It was right there. And the law had so blinded them that God they wanted to please, they actually wanted to kill. So let's dive into a few more details.

So the disciples and Jesus, they're walking through some fields, going somewhere. And I guess for like a snack, they're grabbing their heads of wheat.

And you kind of rub the heads to take the husks off. And then you've got this little snack, right, little heads of grain. And the Pharisees see them and they make Jesus aware. Somehow the Pharisees see them in a roundabout, right?

And they make Jesus aware that technically, because it was the Sabbath, they're harvesting. It's a no-no. So how does Jesus respond? He does a few things. First thing he does, he reminds them of the story of King David and 1 Samuel.

This is a great story. So let me remind you if you can't remember it, if you don't know it. So David has been enthroned the king. Well, no, he's been – God has said you're the king.
[4 : 44] The prophet says you're the king. But Saul is actually on the throne. And Saul really is very jealous of David. And so David's on the run because Saul wants to kill him.

So David's got his band of merry men. And they're sort of running around the countryside, sort of trying not to get killed. And they're really hungry. And there's like a Jewish kind of church. And they go into this church. And there's this special bread that only the priests are allowed to eat. And David sort of works with the priests there and gets the bread and eats it. And so the Bible tells the story about this incident. And the Pharisees would have known the story. And the thing is that when the story tells the situation, it never says it's a problem what David did, basically.

And what's Jesus' point here? What's Jesus' point? It's this. He's saying to the Pharisees, if it's okay for David to do something like that, break this little rule, then it's definitely okay for me to do it as well.

[5 : 46] Now, here's the shocking thing about this, okay? Is that argument only works if Jesus is saying he's greater than David. So it's sort of like if I said the queen, well, all the heads of state, when they go to Britain, they meet with the queen.

So they should meet with me as well. See, that's just stupid, right? That doesn't even work. But if I was somehow above the queen, then the argument would work.

I'd say, well, if they meet the queen, surely they should meet with me. So that's the point, right? He's saying he's greater than David. It's a scandalous thing to say. David was the greatest king the Jews ever knew. He's saying he's more significant than him. And then Jesus sort of digs a bit deeper here in verse 5, and he says the thing about priests working on the Sabbath. It's kind of like it's the Sabbath, but, you know, priests work. So come on, guys, think about it. And then he follows it up by saying something greater than the temple is here. He's talking about himself. And for the Pharisees, this is just madness.

This is crazy talk, blasphemous talk, because the temple represented the presence of God back in the days. And Jesus is saying, I'm greater than this temple. Why is he saying he's greater?

[6 : 53] Because he is the presence of God. And then Jesus doesn't stop. He keeps going. He keeps going. He comes back to the Sabbath thing, the issue that, you know, started this whole back and forth business.

And he goes, and anyways, I am the Lord of the Sabbath. This is finally and thirdly. Now, the Sabbath was the most, it was like the big distinguishing mark of Judaism back in the days. And the purpose of the Sabbath was not just to rejuvenate yourself so you could be more productive, you know, when you're getting paid. And it wasn't just like, have a good time. It was time to, you know, it was this day off.

It was enjoy your God. Enjoy the fruit of your labor that God has helped you produce. Enjoy the freedom you have in knowing that God loves and accepts you, that you're free from, like for us now, you know, it's, it's, it's, we enjoy the gospel.

We are free from slavery to objects and people and expectations. The Sabbath is also this picture of what our eternity with God looks like. You know, wherever life has diminished us, wherever life has broken us and robbed us, in eternity we will be eternally rested and joyfully remade and have peace with God.

[8 : 07] Like, it's fantastic. Like, it's brilliant. That sounds amazing, doesn't it? Jesus says, I'm the Lord of all of that. So this is really riling up the Pharisees.

They just can't believe these things he's saying. So what they do, and it's probably a week later, this is verses 9 to 13, it's like another Sabbath day, so it's probably a week later.

The Pharisees orchestrate a situation where they can catch Jesus doing another religiously naughty thing. And it's so awful and cynical, it's a horrible situation.

So Christ is in the temple, and they arrange a disabled man to be there, and they ask Jesus, so, knowing that Jesus is going to want to do something about this, so Jesus is okay, what are you going to do here?

What are you going to do? What are you going to do? Sabbath, what are you going to do? What are you going to do? Right? So it's illegal to give people sort of medical care on the Sabbath. Unless it was a life-death situation.

[9 : 09] This is not. So Jesus could have said to the guy, he said, listen, mate, to the disabled man, mate, just look, can you come back in a couple of days? This is not urgent.

You know, it won't be a big drama then. Honestly, I promise you I'll just get it sorted. But no, Jesus heals the man right then and there in front of everyone, because why should that man suffer another day? And the Pharisees decide Jesus must die because of this.

The hearts of the Pharisees are exposed here, aren't they? I mean, it's such an awful story. There is no hint of interest in caring for this man.

He's just this thing. He's this object to use to try and trap Jesus. The Gospel of Mark, which also relates to this story, notes that Jesus was very angry about what the Pharisees did here.

Why? Because the Sabbath was in part about restoration, about repairing our brokenness. And to heal on the Sabbath surely is doing exactly what the Sabbath is about.

[10 : 17] But these religious leaders were so concerned about their regulations being broken that they looked past, you know, the pain that this man was going through just to get worked up about rules.

Now, I should note, Jesus is not saying the law is bad or that the Sabbath shouldn't be kept. The laws of God are helpful to us. They show us sin in our life.

They guide us in a life in harmony with what God values. The core stuff, not all the bonus things. And what do we see that God values?

What do we know that God values? What comes out in the story that God values? God values people. And the religious folks back here, they whittle down the law to these manageable, tiny, little rules.

And for them, it's rules first, people second. That's what the story tells us, doesn't it? It shows us that rules first, rules, rules, rules, people second. It is just a fabulous example of missing the forest or the trees.

[11 : 27] You've probably heard of Eric Liddell. So you know the guy. We quote him about every three weeks. He's just got that one great line that people like to quote. So he was a fantastic athlete.

He played cricket and rugby and he was a sprinter in the early 20s in England. And he has that great line.

If you've seen Chariots of Fire, that's his story. He has that great line where somebody's saying, why are you running? Why don't you just keep running? Why don't you just go and do more churchy work, more Christian stuff?

And he says, God made me fast and when I run, I feel his pleasure in me. It's fantastic stuff, right? Anyway, so he competed in the 1924 Olympics and he was a Sabbath keeper, as we generally should be.

And in the 1924 Olympics, he wouldn't run in his best event, which was the sprint, the 100 meters, because it was held on a Sunday. So he entered the 400 meters, which is not his distance, but he ran and he won the gold to everyone's great surprise.

[12 : 36] Anyway, so that's nice. So put that over there for a moment. And after the Olympics, he became a missionary in China. And during the war, there was lots of drama and the UK was saying to all the people in the UK, you need to get out of the UK, get out of China, it's too dangerous to be there.

But he stayed, he was a missionary there. And he was put in an internment camp as a prisoner of war and he died there just a couple of months before the war ended. And during his internment, he was doing a lot of stuff, he was busy caring for people and he'd organized sports for all the youngins.

But never on a Sunday, never on a Sunday. Anyway, some kids, this is from his biography, some kids were playing hockey on a Sunday one day. And they said, can you referee the game?

He said, no, not on a Sunday. It's the Lord's Day. Anyway, they played anyway and it was a bit of a disaster. And in the biography, it says, the witnesses says that Eric, watching from a distance without a word to anyone, walked onto the field and refereed the game.

From the outside, it would appear that he broke the principle of a lifetime. He broke a principle that he gave up a medal, the Olympic medal for this principle.

[13 : 53] But he did it because this is what it looked like to be a follower of Jesus that day. And that camp was care for these kids rather than just keep this rule.

Okay, let's tie this all together. I'll talk about two things. What does it mean for us? What does it mean about you? What does it tell us about Jesus? What does it mean for us? What does it tell us about Jesus? Jesus says three things about himself.

He says, I'm greater than David. This was the greatest king the Jewish people ever knew. He goes, I'm the king. He's saying, I'm the king that David pointed to. Second thing he says, he says, I'm greater than the temple.

The temple, remember, represented the presence of God. Christ was the presence of God. If you're here and you're not a Christian, I want you to know this. This is very important. You cannot relegate Jesus to just a great teacher, a really good guy, a kind of a peaceful, hippie sort of like guy. He was God with flesh on. Come for us. This is why this story is also very sad.

[15:04] They were so interested, the Pharisees, in the temple rules, they missed God.

It's like falling in love with somebody's shadow when the real person is right there. They missed it because they were all about the rules.

So he's greater than David. He's greater than the temple. And he's the Lord of the Sabbath. He's the Lord of rest, of true heart rest. Now what does this passage tell us about religious hearts?

This is a temptation for us. It's this. We can take good things, things that God has given us, and make them into idols. Make them into the most precious of things.

For the Pharisees, treating these 600 rules, for them, these were the greatest of spiritual realities. And they couldn't see past them, and they missed God.

[16:09] And Jesus reminds us all here that what should distinguish Christians? What should distinguish us?

Should it be that we keep lots of rules? No, it should be compassion and mercy.

Those are the characteristics of those who follow Jesus. Folks, let me ask you this. Are there too many do's and don'ts in your life?

Because you could be missing Jesus because of all those do's and don'ts you're so committed to. Is your life all about try harder, do better? Are the do's and don'ts of faith the thing that gets your central attention?

You know the end result of a Christian life focused on just do's and don'ts? The end result. There's two ways that ends. Pride or just despair.

[17:14] Pride because you sort of think in your mind I've actually done this. I've achieved it today or this week or this year. I've pulled it off. I've been really great. It's pride or despair.

Because under the weight of the rules that you've imposed on yourself, you're just crushed by it. You're crushed by those things. Remember Matthew 11.

It was the passage just before this. It makes sense that these things are together. Here's what Jesus says just before all of this business went down here.

He said this. He says, Now, those burdens are many and varied.

But they can include burdened down by self-imposed rules. Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, are crushed under the weight of those things.

[18:22] And Jesus says, I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I'm gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.

For those of you here whose central ambition is keeping the rules and being a good person and being nice, you need to sit with this story today and these words of Jesus.

Because the rules are not the treasure. Jesus is the treasure. So Emma's going to come up now. And Emma's going to play for us just for a couple of minutes.

And Brenda's going to come up and pray for us. But during these few minutes that Emma's playing, I would ask that you pray. You can close your eyes.

You can do whatever you like. You can keep your eyes open. If you feel like, you can ask somebody to pray beside you. Whatever you want to do. But ask the Holy Spirit to speak into your heart and ask that question.

[19:33] Is my treasure Jesus? Or is my big focus, I've got to be nice. I've got to be good. Is it just rule keeping?

And ask God to forgive you and give you a vision of Him so that you might fall in love with Jesus.isk and