

# Lord of the Sabbath

Matthew 12:1-21

Few issues were as controversial in the ministry of Jesus as what He did on the Sabbath. He invites all who labor and are heavy laden to come to Him, find rest, and reject the taskmasters who would bind heavy burdens. He gives rest to soul and body, renewing His people through worship and Sabbath every week.

## Mercy Over Sacrifice

On the Sabbath, Jesus and His disciples walk through grainfields, get hungry, and pluck heads of grain to eat. The Pharisees confront Him for doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath—harvesting (vv. 1-2). It's interesting that this activity is in fact not unlawful. Hungry people were allowed to take grain from the corners of fields, gleanings from the harvest, and grapes from vineyards, so long as they didn't take a sickle into the field to actually harvest, which would be stealing (Lev. 19:9-11; Deut. 24:20-22). This required Israelites to live within their means and be generous: "you shall leave them for the poor and the stranger: I am the Lord our God" (Lev. 19:10). The Pharisees had studied the Sabbath laws and decided, contrary to the law of Moses, that all grain-plucking was the "work" of harvesting. But Jesus doesn't defend Himself on these grounds. Instead, He refers to what David did when he and his men ate the showbread that was in the tabernacle and sanctified only for the priests to eat (vv. 3-4; 1 Sam. 21:1-6). David was on the run for his life from Saul, and Ahimelech the priest faced a dilemma: does he protect what is reserved for the priests and part of the sacrificial worship of God, or give it in mercy to these starving men? Jesus asks another question: "Or have you not read in the law that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple profane the Sabbath, and are blameless? Yet I say to you that in this place there is One greater than the temple. But if you had known what this means, 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the guiltless. For the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath" (vv. 5-8). Priests "profane" the Sabbath by working on it but are blameless. Jesus puts Himself above them, saying He is greater than the temple and Lord even of the Sabbath. The only thing greater than the worship of God is God Himself, and it was God who rested on the seventh day "from all His work" (Gen. 2:2-3). The Sabbath is a creation ordinance, meaning it originates not in culture or tradition, but God's act of creation. From the first week of the world, every seven days this gift is given, and it took on a redemptive aspect after the exodus when God freed Israel from bondage (Deut. 5:12-15). Pharaoh made the Israelites into slaves who worked seven days a week, but God wanted His beloved people to rest, so He redeemed them. Jesus says if they understood 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice', they would not have condemned Him. But Yahweh really did require sacrifice, so why does He say that He didn't (cf. Matt. 9:12)? The question is "Why did He require it?" And the answer is "In order to show mercy." When sacrifice is unhelpful, unmerciful, disingenuous, or otherwise sinful, then God hates it (cf. Amos 5:21-24). He doesn't desire sacrifice like *that*. We must know the spirit behind the letter in order to serve the Lord who gave the law. You can know all the words but be unable to carry the tune. You can turn the Sabbath into an awful burden in the name of keeping the Sabbath.

## Giving Rest

The next conflict happens when Jesus goes into one of their synagogues (v. 9). A man is there who has a withered hand, and Jesus' opponents, eager to accuse Him, ask "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?" (v. 10). Jesus doesn't directly answer the question, but asks a question that reveals their twisted motivation: "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? Of how much more value then is a man than a sheep?"

# Lord of the Sabbath

Matthew 12:1-21

Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath” (vv. 11-12). The one time Scripture explicitly states that Jesus was angry occurs in Mark’s gospel at this point in the story: “And when He had looked around at them with anger, being grieved by the hardness of their hearts, He said to the man, ‘Stretch out your hand” (Mk. 3:5). If you would help your dog out of a hole on the Sabbath, how much more your neighbor? But again, Jesus isn’t breaking the Sabbath at all. The fourth commandment is one of two positive commands (“Honor your father and mother...): “Observe the Sabbath day, to keep it holy, as the Lord your God commanded you. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, 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 ox, nor your donkey, nor any of your cattle, nor your stranger who is within your gates, that your male servant and your female servant may rest as well as you” (Deut. 5:12-14). The bulk of this long command instructs us to give rest to whomever we can. Take the day off, and make sure your kids, servants, employees, productive animals, and foreigners who likely have less connections and wealth all get to rest. Jesus didn’t come to set aside one jot or tittle of the law, but to fulfill it, which is what happens when He heals the man with the withered hand: “And he stretched it out, and it was restored as whole as the other” (v. 13).

## Sabbath for All

“Then the Pharisees went out and plotted against Him, how they might destroy Him” (v. 14). When Saul heard that Ahimelech gave the showbread to David, he ordered Doeg the Edomite to slaughter 85 priests and the city of Nob including the families there (1 Sam. 22:18-19). The Pharisees are spiritual Edomites in league with Saul plotting against Jesus, the greater son of David, but it’s not time for Him to die yet. The plot causes Him to withdraw, and great multitudes follow and are healed (v. 15). Jesus warns them not to make Him famous because He doesn’t want an escalating conflict to interfere with the work until it’s time to bring justice to victory (vv. 16-20). The wounded and broken multitudes flock to Him who won’t break a bruised reed. As a result, “in His name Gentiles will trust” (v. 21). In the midst of threats on His life, Jesus is at rest in the Father focused on bringing healing and justice to the world. At end of Isaiah, he prophesies that all the Gentile nations and tongues will come to worship God: “It shall be that I will gather all nations and tongues; and they shall come and see My glory....And it shall come to pass that from one New Moon to another, and from one Sabbath to another, all flesh shall come to worship before Me,” says the Lord” (66:18, 23). Christ brought us out of bondage to sin and death and rose on the first day of the week, calling all the nations to trust in Him and find rest. Ever since His resurrection, Christians have been gathering on this day to worship, rest, and fellowship together: “This is the day the Lord has made; We will rejoice and be glad in it” (Ps. 118:24).