

Unit II: Jesus and the Temple

A Question of Authority

DEVOTIONAL READING: Luke 13:10-17

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURES: Matthew 12:1-14; Mark 2:23-28; Luke 6:1-11

PRINT PASSAGE: Matthew 12:1-8

KEY VERSE

I say unto you, That in this place is one greater than the temple. (Matthew 12:6, KJV)

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“I tell you that something greater than the temple is here.” (Matthew 12:6, NIV)

Lesson Aims

As a result of experiencing this lesson, you should be able to do the following:

- Discern how Jesus’ teachings and actions help us see the limitations of rules and institutions.
- Assess your convictions of faith as they pertain to today’s laws and social norms.
- Interpret and implement Jesus’ guidance as it relates to expressions of religious observance in your church tradition.

*Key Terms

Eat (verse 1)—Greek: *esthió* (es-thee’-o): to partake of food; consume; dine; feed.

Hungry (verse 3)—Greek: *peinaó* (pi-nah’-o): to desire earnestly; needy; suffering want; “an hungred” (KJV).

Law (verse 5)—Greek: *nomos* (nom’-os): that which is assigned; usage; custom; general principle.

Lawful (verse 4)—Greek: *exesti* (ex’-es-tee): it is permitted, possible; permissible.

Sabbath (verse 1)—Greek: *sabbaton* (sab’-bat-on): the seventh day (of the week); sacred festival.

Sacrifice (verse 7)—Greek: *thusia* (thoo-see’-ah): an official offering (prescribed by God).

*(Word Study Supplement—Refer to page 2)



The Biblical Context

Commentators posit that Matthew wrote his account during the church's early period about AD 80. Its composition reflects a time period in which the church was experiencing growing pains due to internal conflicts and external pressures. Matthew writes about Jesus' life and ministry as a means to solve those conflicts and give explanation to those pressures. Matthew wrote to prove that Jesus was the Christ and the Jews' promised Messiah. To accomplish this task, Matthew quotes Old Testament prophecies multiple times to prove that Jesus Christ fulfilled them. Thus, he begins his account with a detailed description of Jesus' lineage, tracing Him back to Abraham and David to establish His right to be the Jewish king. In the first ten chapters of his gospel, Matthew introduces Jesus' person, principles, and power to the Jews, particularly the nation's religious leadership. Yet, instead of receiving Him, these leaders rebelled and rejected Him, setting the context for continuous conflict between them and Jesus, ultimately culminating with His death on the Cross. Matthew introduces this ongoing conflict in chapter 11 and continues in chapter 12. He concludes chapter 11 with Jesus' invitation to those wearied by the difficulties of life to accept Him. A significant cause of conflict and opposition to Jesus by the ultra-religious Pharisees was His deliberate violation of their Sabbath traditions. Chapter 12 opens with a description of one of these confrontations regarding this issue.

Introduction

The Sabbath is one of Judaism's most sacred religious institutions. The origin of the Sabbath is embedded in the Creation account recorded in Genesis 2. After God created the heavens and the earth in six days, He "rested" (Hebrew: *Shabat*)—meaning that He purposely stopped or ceased creating new things (see Genesis 2:2-3). God then blessed the seventh day and declared it holy. After choosing and preparing Israel spiritually to be His representatives in the world, God instituted and commanded them to observe the seventh day as a Shabbat, a day of rest underscored in the Ten Commandments (see Exodus 20:8-11). God intended the Sabbath to be a reminder of His creative activity and Israel's Exodus from Egypt. Because He sanctified this day, breaking the Sabbath was a serious matter, and His law demanded death for any who chose to ignore it (see Exodus 31:14-15). The "rest" God commanded was more than abstaining from work; it was also a time to communicate with Him and be renewed physically and spiritually. However, after Israel's exile in Babylon and the Temple rebuilding, the religious leadership studied the Mosaic Law to identify what kind of work was permissible on the Sabbath.

Consequently, detailed rules and regulations were developed, intended to help the people adhere to the command to keep the Sabbath. The result was that interpretations of what constituted work adhered to an elaborate

system of oral traditions to prevent breaking Mosaic Law, especially the Sabbath. Although their intentions were noteworthy, the outcome proved to be a burden for the Jewish people by Jesus' day. Their interpretations emphasized external obedience to the Law instead of cultivating a submissive and grateful attitude and love toward God that the Sabbath was intended to produce. Thus, the Sabbath became a primary issue between Jesus and the religious leadership—one where they watched Him for opportunities to

confront, accuse, and condemn Him for breaking it. One occasion was when Jesus' disciples picked and ate grain during the Sabbath. According to Pharisaic oral tradition, their action constituted work and a violation of the Sabbath. During this confrontation, Jesus emphasized the principle that God created the Sabbath for humanity and not as a yoke binding them to external legalistic restrictions.

ANALYSIS OF THE BIBLICAL TEXT

Misunderstanding the Sabbath (*Matthew 12:1-5*)

KJV

AT THAT time Jesus went on the sabbath day through the corn; and his disciples were an hungred, and began to pluck the ears of corn and to eat.

2 But when the Pharisees saw it, they said unto him, Behold, thy disciples do that which is not lawful to do upon the sabbath day.

3 But he said unto them, Have ye not read what David did, when he was an hungred, and they that were with him;

4 How he entered into the house of God, and did eat the shewbread, which was not lawful for him to eat, neither for them which were with him, but only for the priests?

5 Or have ye not read in the law, how that on the sabbath days the priests in the temple profane the sabbath, and are blameless?

NIV

AT THAT time Jesus went through the grainfields on the Sabbath. His disciples were hungry and began to pick some heads of grain and eat them.

2 When the Pharisees saw this, they said to him, "Look! Your disciples are doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath."

3 He answered, "Haven't you read what David did when he and his companions were hungry?"

4 "He entered the house of God, and he and his companions ate the consecrated bread—which was not lawful for them to do, but only for the priests.

5 "Or haven't you read in the Law that the priests on Sabbath duty in the temple desecrate the Sabbath and yet are innocent?"

Matthew 12 is the first recorded occurrence of a conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees in this gospel. The cause of their hostile opposition to and rejection of Jesus' person, message, and ministry was in part due to His different interpretation of the Mosaic Law. One the most controversial of these was Jesus' refusal to acknowledge and observe their rules regarding keeping the Sabbath, the context of their first recorded conflict with Him. The occasion was when Jesus and His disciples went through grainfields, and the disciples picked and ate some grain because they were hungry (**verse 1**). Although their action was permissible, doing so on the Sabbath was

considered work. The Pharisees immediately confronted Jesus by accusing the disciples of breaking the Sabbath law (**verse 2**). Over the years, this group added their interpretations of what constitutes work according to Sabbath law. Thus, according to them, Jesus' disciples' action amounted to reaping, threshing, and winnowing wheat—working on the Sabbath. The Pharisees focused on the *letter* of the Law instead of the *spirit* of the Law, which prioritized human needs above legalism. To illustrate this principle, Jesus used practical illustrations they would understand.

First, Jesus cited an incident in David's life while David was running from Saul to save his life (**verses 3-4**; see 1 Samuel 21:1-6). In this instance, David and those with him were hungry and ate bread in the tabernacle unlawfully because it was reserved for the priests' consumption. Jesus' point was that human needs should dictate exceptions to strict adherence to religious rules and the need to allow compassion and empathy to guide ministering to others. In Jesus' second illustration (**verse 5**), He pointed out that even the priests "work" on the Sabbath but are not held accountable for violating the Sabbath law because God commanded their duties and responsibilities, and they did not stop on the Sabbath (see Numbers 28:3-4). Thus, the priests "working" on the Sabbath was justified. Here, Jesus pointed out another significant principle—service to God, His people, and humanity must be prioritized and balanced with the Sabbath's purpose of honoring and glorifying Him. Although the Jewish Sabbath law does not bind Christians, the principles embodied in its proper observance are applicable to our lives. Consequently, believers are reminded that meeting human needs is a part of God's expectation for those professing Him and should guide our actions instead of concerns regarding adhering to ritualistic or legalistic religious rules. Second, there is the need to interpret what constitutes worshipping God from His perspective. Adoring God for who He is must always be balanced with service to Him by meeting others' needs.

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

How can honoring God and meeting needs be balanced, especially on the Christian Sabbath we call Sunday?

The Sabbath's Lord (Matthew 12:6-8)

KJV

6 But I say unto you, That in this place is one greater than the temple.

7 But if ye had known what this meaneth, I will have mercy, and not sacrifice, ye would not have condemned the guiltless.

8 For the Son of man is Lord even of the sabbath day.

NIV

6 "I tell you that something greater than the temple is here.

7 “If you had known what these words mean, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice,’ you would not have condemned the innocent.

8 “For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.”

Jesus’ questions in the previous verses established that the Sabbath law was not the most essential command among God’s other priorities. This principle was seen in the priests’ work that He commanded on the Sabbath and preempted their keeping it religiously. Consequently, Jesus’ disciples were not breaking God’s purpose for the Sabbath, but the Pharisees’ misguided concept of it instead. In **verse 6**, Jesus tells His critics that something greater than the Temple, referring to Himself, where the priests worked, is present. Thus, just as the priests were guiltless because they were obeying God, Jesus’ disciples were equally as guiltless because they were under His authority as the promised Messiah and could “work” on the Sabbath without condemnation for violating it. Jesus condemned the Pharisees for failing to grasp their spiritual responsibility to model the spirit of the Sabbath, which included showing mercy to God’s people instead of emphasizing religious rule keeping that exceeded God’s requirements in the Law (**verse 7**). **Verse 8** concludes Jesus’ rebuttal of the Pharisees’ accusation against His disciples for violating the Sabbath. Jesus declares that He, the Son of Man, is Lord of the Sabbath. As the Creator of all things, He is greater than and holds priority over the Law, including the Sabbath. The Sabbath’s purpose was to allow God’s people a day of physical rest and the opportunity to renew their relationship with Him through worship and spiritual reflection. The Pharisees made observing the Sabbath a burden and failed to realize an act of mercy on God’s part to allow a day of needed rest for humans and animals. Therefore, they should have promoted mercy and compassion instead of legalistic adherence to their interpretations.

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

How can the faith community be guilty of “legalizing” its opportunities to meet others’ needs?

A Closing Thought

The Sabbath was a gift from God prompted by His mercy and love for His people. He instituted it to memorialize His covenant with them and to provide the opportunity to refresh themselves physically, mentally, and spiritually through the cessation of physical labor and to worship Him. Although the Pharisees were misguided, it is important to note that their additional rules were an attempt to faithfully follow the Law given by God. However, during Jesus’ confrontation with them in Matthew 12:1-8, He taught that prioritizing human needs and God’s compassionate mercy over strict adherence to religious rules and regulations demonstrates the spirit of the Sabbath law God intended.

Your Life

Jesus' quote from Hosea 6:6 emphasized that God values acts of mercy above ritualistic sacrifice. Hence, emphasizing mercy and understanding in interpersonal relationships through acts of kindness, compassion, and forgiveness must characterize our interactions with others to meet a human need.

Your World!

When Jesus identified Himself as Lord of the Sabbath (Matthew 12:8), He declared His divine identity and authority over all that pertains to faith and service to Him. Therefore, believers must prioritize seeking His guidance and submitting to His authority to live out the spirit of the Sabbath and His Word daily.

Closing Prayer

Blessed Savior, we acknowledge You as Lord of the Sabbath and Your authority over everything that pertains to faith in You. Therefore, we desire that You guide and direct our interactions with others as we seek to minister to their needs with mercy and compassion as a perpetual demonstration of the spirit of the Sabbath that You intended. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Conclusion

(Preparing for Next Week's Lesson)

Next week's lesson explores how to reverence sacred spaces dedicated to worshipping God appropriately and reverently. Read John 2:13-25.

Home Daily Bible Readings

MONDAY, July 14	"God Gathers Outcasts to the Temple"	(Isaiah 56)
TUESDAY, July 15	"Unalloyed Worship"	(1 Timothy 2:1-8)
WEDNESDAY, July 16	"Guard Your Steps in God's House"	(Ecclesiastes 5:1-7)
THURSDAY, July 17	"God Doesn't Live in Human Shrines"	(Acts 17:22-34)
FRIDAY, July 18	"The False Security of Religious Posturing"	(Jeremiah 7:1-15)
SATURDAY, July 19	"The Lord Appears in the Temple"	(Malachi 3:1-6)
SUNDAY, July 20	"Zeal for God's House"	(John 2:13-25)

Notes
