

Justice and Sabbath Laws

June 3 • Bible Study Guide 1

Bible Background • MATTHEW 12:1–14
Printed Text • MATTHEW 12:1–14 | Devotional Reading • PSALM 10

Aim for Change

By the end of this lesson, we will: **EXPLORE** Jesus’ approach to questions of how properly to observe the Sabbath; **AFFIRM** the importance of responding to human needs; and **IDENTIFY** ways believers can prioritize compassionate service over external religious obligations.

In Focus

Tasha walked by church every Sunday shortly after noon while the deacons finished giving out food from the food pantry. She was afraid to get in line or ask for help because she knew the rule: People who arrived by 12 noon received assistance from the pantry. Her quiet disappointment did not escape the notice of Doris, however. Doris had been working in the food pantry for about a month. She always saw Tasha and wanted to reach out to her, but she felt limited by the rule. This particular Sunday, Doris was overwhelmed with compassion. She knew she needed to do something to help Tasha. So she filled a box of groceries and gave it to Tasha along with a warm embrace.

Tears started to roll down Tasha’s cheek. She finally opened her mouth to say, “Thank you so much. I know the rules. I want to make it on time, but Sunday morning is the only time the state allows me to visit my children.” Doris looked at her with reassurance. “We are here to help.”

Jesus placed more of a priority on meeting human needs than on satisfying human rules. Have you ever challenged a human rule to help someone in need?

Keep in Mind

“But if ye had known what this meaneth, I will have mercy, and not sacrifice, ye would not have condemned the guiltless” ([Matthew 12:7](#)).

Words You Should Know

A. Corn (Mathew 12:1) *sporimos* (Gk.)—Sown fields, growing crops.

B. Mercy (v. 7) *eleos* (Gk.)—Kindness or goodwill toward the miserable or afflicted joined with a desire to help them.

Say It Correctly

Tyre. **TIE**-er.

Sidon. **SIGH**-don.

Abiathar. ah-**BYE**-ath-are.

KJV

Matthew 12:1 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?

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.

9 And when he was departed thence, he went into their synagogue:

10 And, behold, there was a man which had his hand withered. And they asked him, saying, Is it lawful to heal on the sabbath days? that they might accuse him.

11 And he said unto them, What man shall there be among you, that shall have one sheep, and if it fall into a pit on the sabbath day, will he not lay hold on it, and lift it out?

12 How much then is a man better than a sheep? Wherefore it is lawful to do well on the sabbath days.

13 Then saith he to the man, Stretch forth thine hand. And he stretched it forth; and it was restored whole, like as the other.

14 Then the Pharisees went out, and held a council against him, how they might destroy him.

NLT

Matthew 12:1 At about that time Jesus was walking through some grainfields on the Sabbath. His disciples were hungry, so they began breaking off some heads of grain and eating them.

2 But some Pharisees saw them do it and protested, "Look, your disciples are breaking the law by harvesting grain on the Sabbath."

3 Jesus said to them, "Haven't you read in the Scriptures what David did when he and his companions were hungry?"

4 He went into the house of God, and he and his companions broke the law by eating the sacred loaves of bread that only the priests are allowed to eat.

5 And haven't you read in the law of Moses that the priests on duty in the Temple may work on the Sabbath?"

6 I tell you, there is one here who is even greater than the Temple!

7 But you would not have condemned my innocent disciples if you knew the meaning of this Scripture: 'I want you to show mercy, not offer sacrifices.'

8 For the Son of Man is Lord, even over the Sabbath!"

9 Then Jesus went over to their synagogue,

10 where he noticed a man with a deformed hand. The Pharisees asked Jesus, "Does the law permit a person to work by healing on the Sabbath?" (They were hoping he would say yes, so they could bring charges against him.)

11 And he answered, "If you had a sheep that fell into a well on the Sabbath, wouldn't you work to pull it out? Of course you would.

12 And how much more valuable is a person than a sheep! Yes, the law permits a person to do good on the Sabbath."

13 Then he said to the man, "Hold out your hand." So the man held out his hand, and it was restored, just like

the other one!

14 Then the Pharisees called a meeting to plot how to kill Jesus.

The People, Places, and Times

Shewbread. This bread was a small round or oblong loaf. It was to be made every Sabbath and set near the lampstand and the altar of incense. At the end of the week the priests would eat this bread. The shewbread consisted of twelve loaves, which represented the twelve tribes of Israel. No one but the priests were permitted to eat this bread; however David and his men were given the old loaves by Ahimelech when they were on the run from Saul (**1 Samuel 21:1–7**).

Sabbath. The Jewish day of rest, based on God’s act of resting on the seventh day after creation. Its observance has been practiced by Jewish people from the time of Moses. Keeping the Sabbath was a very critical issue in separating Jews from Gentiles and maintaining purity. It was so important that the Jewish leaders created 39 laws to make sure they were not violating the Sabbath. Multiple laws governed what constituted work on the Sabbath, and these laws were hotly debated by the Pharisees and other religious groups in first-century Palestine.

What are the hotly debated issues in the church today?

Background

In the chapters prior to this passage, Jesus has instructed the twelve disciples about preaching about the kingdom to the Jews. After outlining their method and message, John’s disciples approach Jesus on whether He is the expected Messiah. Jesus responds and lets them know that His works speak for themselves. He is the Messiah and John was His forerunner. Furthermore, Jesus announces that those who do not believe in Him will face a worse judgment than the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah or Tyre and Sidon. Jesus then says a prayer of thanksgiving for God’s grace in revealing Himself to the disciples who are not wise and clever. Next comes an invitation to come to Jesus, and those who do will find rest for their souls.

This is significant because in the story that begins the next chapter, Jesus shows how His yoke is easy and His burden is light. This is true especially in relation to the traditions of the Pharisees. Their many religious traditions were burdensome, especially in regards to the Sabbath. Many ordinary things were considered to be violations of the Sabbath, including such things as lighting a lamp. Unfortunately, many of these extra laws often got in the way of actually obeying the law of God and showing love to others. Jesus shows how backwards this way of thinking and living really is.

What religious traditions can be burdensome for us in the 21st century?

At-A-Glance

1. Conflict on the Sabbath (**Matthew 12:1–8**)
2. Clarity on the Sabbath (vv. 9–13)
3. Conspiracy on the Sabbath (v. 14)

In Depth

1. Conflict on the Sabbath (**Matthew 12:1–8**)

Jesus’ disciples experienced one of the most basic human needs: hunger. In order to meet this need, they broke one of the Pharisees’ Sabbath-keeping rules, causing the Pharisees to question His disciples’ actions. Jesus responded by pointing out a similar situation that David and his friends faced when they were on the run from Saul. David and his men were hungry and the only bread available was the shewbread that was displayed in the tabernacle. This bread was holy and was not to be eaten by anyone except the priests—and only after new bread replaced it every week. Ahimelech the priest gave them this bread to meet their needs, showing that human

needs are more of a priority than keeping rules.

Why would God put meeting human needs above keeping rules?

2. Clarity on the Sabbath (vv. 9–13)

Jesus went a step further in meeting human needs by settling the debate on whether it was lawful to heal on the Sabbath; He healed the man with the withered hand. He gave them an example from everyday life to further back up His point. If they had a sheep that fell in a pit, they would help it up out of the pit on the Sabbath. Human life is obviously more valuable than animal life, so therefore the healing is valid. Jesus showed justice and mercy to the man with the withered hand by healing him on the Sabbath. It is right to do good no matter what day it is.

How can we ensure that human tradition is not hindering our pursuit of doing good?

3. Conspiracy on the Sabbath (v. 14)

Then the Pharisees began plotting how they would kill Jesus. They believed that strict observance of the Sabbath was a way to merit God's favor. Because of their generational history of breaking God's covenant and losing their blessings, they believed if the Jewish people stayed ceremonially pure, God would break the yoke of Roman oppression and give them their land again. They thought that keeping the Sabbath was a means to that end, so they devised many rules to get there. On top of that, they wanted to murder Jesus for undermining their rules, even though He was actually doing a good deed. This is religion that is twisted and deformed, and Jesus turned this concept on its head. The Sabbath was a means to attain the end of doing good and showing justice and mercy. This is what people need. Sabbath was not designed to oppress people, but to liberate them and set them free.

How have you seen something that was designed to liberate people twisted to oppress people?

Search the Scriptures

1. Why was it acceptable for David and his friends to eat the shewbread ([Matthew 12:3–4](#))?
2. Why did the Pharisees plot together to kill Jesus (v. 14)?

Discuss the Meaning

1. In this lesson we are confronted with the fact that Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath. How do we make Him Lord of the Sabbath and every other aspect of our lives?
2. How can we meet human needs in our daily lives? Are there any rules that keep us from loving others and showing mercy?

Lesson in Our Society

Many times in the Black church, we can get caught up in going from church activity to church activity and forget the purpose behind what we're doing. In the quick pace of a church calendar, we must remember the reason why we were created: to love God and to love people. This is a higher priority than Bible studies, choir practices, or church anniversaries. If our church activities keep us from seeking justice for the oppressed and loving our fellow man, then we have lost sight of God's higher purpose.

Jesus' words in this passage highlight the attitude we should have toward any of our religious traditions. The concern for human life is more important than the external trappings of religion. While the various aspects of worship are important, they are negated if we do not love our neighbor as ourselves. God desires relentless love and abounding compassion more than religious sacrifice.

In what way have you seen a church corporately display God's love and compassion?

Make It Happen

- List three ways you can make the Sabbath a time of seeking justice.
- As a class, brainstorm ways to help those who are oppressed because of religious traditions or prejudices.
- Create a list of things that are helpful in valuing human needs when it comes to the Sabbath.

Follow the Spirit

What God wants me to do:

Remember Your Thoughts

Special insights I have learned:

More Light on the Text

Matthew 12:1–14

An important mark that distinguished the Jews from non-Jews (often referred to as Gentiles), particularly during the times of Jesus, was the Sabbath. The Jews took Sabbath observance very seriously and the Pharisees were especially rigid about it. When the enemy attacked on the Sabbath in the days of the Maccabees during the period between the Old and New Testaments, the Jews let themselves be slaughtered—men, women, and children—rather than break the Sabbath by defending themselves (1 Maccabees 2:31–38). At a later time, Pompey was able to erect the earthworks that made his siege of Jerusalem successful because he did it on a Sabbath day. The Jews were ready to suffer rather than break the Sabbath. The passage today deals with two Sabbath controversies. The first section, 12:1–8, deals with the harvesting of grain on the Sabbath and the second section, 12:9–14, addresses the issue of healing on the Sabbath. These two issues essentially deal with where authority lies.

1 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. 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.

Here we see the Pharisees in their characteristic manner, following Jesus not to receive His help, but to spy on Him with the intention of getting Him into trouble. The disciples were hungry and their action was much in line with [Deuteronomy 23:24](#), “When you enter your neighbor’s vineyard, you may eat your fill of grapes, but you must not carry any away in a basket,” a humanitarian legislation intended to sustain the needy without giving them permission to pile up extras. But there was no mention of Sabbath in these cases. When the Pharisees saw Jesus’ disciples picking food to eat, they seized the opportunity and immediately accused them of harvesting grain on the Sabbath. They complained that Jesus’ disciples, with His implicit sanction, were doing what was “not lawful” (Gk. *exesti*, **EX-ess-ti**) to do on the Sabbath day. The Greek word here does not necessarily refer to the Law, but could be translated “is allowed or permitted.” The Pharisees saw the action of the disciples as an infringement on [Exodus 34:21](#), an injunction that demands the day of Sabbath to be a day of rest, and prohibits harvesting. They also interpreted it as a violation of the fourth commandment, which requires Sabbath observation ([Exodus 20:8–11](#)). Although the fourth commandment forbids the doing of “any work” on the Sabbath day, the question is, what constitutes “work”? The Pharisees spelled this out in minute detail in their regulations.

Jesus responded to the Pharisees by citing the case of David, who with the band of his hungry followers ate the shewbread (1 Samuel 21:1–6), which was only meant for the priests (v. 3). The common point between the incident Jesus cited and that of His disciples in Matthew 12:3–4 is satisfying the hunger of the followers of David and those of Christ, who is the Son of David. In citing this case, Jesus shows that love is the greatest law in the universe and supersedes all other regulations. Does this mean love requires that human needs be met, even if some legal technicalities have to be jettisoned in the process?

He further appeals to the Old Testament sacrifice where there is an explicit command that two lambs be offered every Sabbath (Numbers 28:9–10), so that Temple service takes precedence over Sabbath observance. Jesus draws attention to the fact that in the Law, it was prescribed that on every Sabbath, the priests should offer the sacrifice of two lambs as well as the normal daily offerings. Although the command does not specially mention the priests, since they were the only ones who could offer sacrifices, they would be the ones working on the Sabbath. As such, the mere fact that the priests performed work on the Sabbath—every Sabbath—should give cause for those who revered Scripture to think hard about what God meant the Sabbath to be and what people should do to keep it holy. They had too easily accepted views that made the Sabbath a burden and had overlooked the fact that Scripture did not fit into their pattern.

Jesus makes His main point in verse 6. There was someone now greater than the Temple. The True Temple, the meeting place between people and God, is Christ Himself. Since Jesus is greater than the Temple, then He must also be of more importance than the Sabbath. He quotes Hosea 6:6 to show that true religion consists of a right attitude rather than ritual acts (v. 7), thereby declaring that needy people who pluck grain to eat on the Sabbath are guiltless (Gk. *anaitios*, **ann-EYE-tee-oce**), which means without blame and innocent of a crime.

9 And when he was departed thence, he went into their synagogue: 10 And, behold, there was a man which had his hand withered. And they asked him, saying, Is it lawful to heal on the sabbath days? that they might accuse him. 11 And he said unto them, What man shall there be among you, that shall have one sheep, and if it fall into a pit on the sabbath day, will he not lay hold on it, and lift it out? 12 How much then is a man better than a sheep? Wherefore it is lawful to do well on the sabbath days. 13 Then saith he to the man, Stretch forth thine hand. And he stretched it forth; and it was restored whole, like as the other. 14 Then the Pharisees went out, and held a council against him, how they might destroy him.

The miracle in verses 9–14 is another item in Jesus' conflict with the Pharisees over proper Sabbath observance and what constitutes "work" on the Sabbath day. There was a man in the synagogue with his hand "withered" (Gk. *xeros*, **ksay-ROCE**), that is, literally "dried up," and they asked Jesus whether it was right to heal him on the Sabbath day (vv. 9–10). Though provoked by the presence of the disabled person, the question is general in form. Their purpose was to secure evidence against Jesus for violating the Sabbath, so as to accuse Him. For the Pharisees, complying with Sabbath regulations was more important than healing the person with the withered hand (he could seek healing on another day). The man's healing did not seem urgent because his life was not in danger.

In answer to their question, Jesus asked them whether it was proper to do good on the Sabbath, or to do evil. To clinch His point, He asked them if they would pull a sheep out of a pit on the Sabbath (v. 11). A man must definitely be more worth saving than a sheep. "Wherefore it is lawful to do well on Sabbath days" (v. 12). Jesus the Creator told the man to stretch his hand (v. 13). The man demonstrated his belief by his obedience, and his hand was restored "whole" (Gk. *hugies*, **hoo-gee-ACE**), which is also translated "healthy" and "sound." Unfortunately, the miracle was not compelling enough to make the Pharisees believe in Jesus. From their intransigence, it is evident that there is nothing more unreasonable than religious fanaticism. Perverted and legalistic piety does nothing but blind people. The miraculous healing of the man with the withered hand did not impress them. Rather, they were concerned with a violation, not of the commands of God, but of their own understanding and interpretation of what God's command required. They took counsel so that they could destroy Him, an expression that indicates a determination to explore all the possibilities. The Pharisees' council (Gk. *sumboulion*, **soom-BOW-lee-on**) was not necessarily a formal body that usually met; the word is used for advising bodies comprised of a variety of people, e.g., Pharisees, Herodians, elders, scribes. Their rejection of Christ was total and their opposition was so bitter that nothing less than Jesus' death for satisfy them, a curious reaction to a miracle of healing, and a curious action for men who were so keen on keeping the Sabbath lawfully.

Daily Bible Readings

MONDAY

David Eats the Bread of Presence
(1 Samuel 21:1–6)

TUESDAY

Lord Desires Mercy, Not Sacrifice
(Hosea 6:1–6)

WEDNESDAY

Plucking Grain
(Leviticus 19:9–10; Deuteronomy 23:25)

THURSDAY

The Sabbath is for Merciful Acts
(Luke 14:1–6)

FRIDAY

The Father and I Are Working
(John 5:9–18)

SATURDAY

Deliver Justice for the Oppressed
(Psalm 10:12–18)

SUNDAY

Meet Human Need on the Sabbath
(Matthew 12:1–14)