

## Matthew 12:1-8

**I. Verses 1-2** – At that time Jesus went through the grainfields on the Sabbath. His disciples were hungry, and they began to pluck heads of grain and to eat. But when the Pharisees saw it, they said to him, “Look, your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath.”

The fourth commandment reads as follows:

- ✓ Exodus 20:8-10 – Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work.

According to the Law, not even the smallest amount of physical labor could be performed on the seventh day (cf. Amos 8:4-5; Jer. 17:21-22; Ex. 34:21). On the seventh day, it was unlawful to gather sticks for a fire (Num. 15:32-36). It was unlawful on the seventh day to kindle a fire (presumably to cook a meal; Ex. 35:3). It was unlawful on the seventh day to gather and collect food or to prepare food.

- ✓ Exodus 16:23-30 – “Tomorrow is a day of solemn rest, a holy Sabbath to the LORD; bake what you will bake and boil what you will boil, and all that is left over lay aside to be kept till the morning... Six days you shall gather it [Manna], but on the seventh day, which is a Sabbath, there will be none.” On the seventh day some of the people went out to gather, but they found none. And the LORD said to Moses, “How long will you refuse to keep my commandments and my laws? See! The LORD has given you the Sabbath; therefore on the sixth day he gives you bread for two days. Remain each of you in his place; let no one go out of his place on the seventh day.” So the people rested on the seventh day.

The law did not list every single thing that was not lawful to do on the Sabbath. No doubt there were many unlawful things that were never specifically named. But the main point was that no work of any kind was to be done on the Sabbath. The Pharisees had identified thirty-nine different categories of work. It is true that they had definitely gone overboard in their attempt to guard against any breaking of the fourth commandment. But we cannot blame them entirely. The law forbade all work. But then what is it that constitutes work? In Jesus’ day, plucking heads of grain (as Jesus’ disciples were doing) had been officially identified as work (it was a form of reaping; Ex. 34:21), and so to pluck heads of grain on the Sabbath day was to break the Sabbath! In order to eat the grain, the disciples would also have to rub the grain out of the husks (which could be a form of threshing; Luke 6:1), and so this also was a violation of the Sabbath. Yes, the Pharisees had become highly legalistic in their Sabbath rules, but when it came to plucking grain on the Sabbath day, they couldn’t have been too far off the mark (especially in light of the examples from the Old Testament). Biblically, this was a gray area. So how will Jesus answer the Pharisees? How will He explain and justify the fact that His disciples are doing what is, debatably, not lawful to do on the Sabbath?

**II. Verses 3-4** – He said to them, “Have you not read what David did when he was hungry, 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?

The Tabernacle was divided into two rooms. There was the holy place and there was the Holy of Holies. In the Holy of Holies, there was only one piece of furniture – the Ark of the Covenant. But in the holy place there were three pieces of furniture. There was the altar of incense on the west side of the room next to the curtain that divided the holy place from the holy of holies, there was a lampstand on the south side of the room, and directly across from the lampstand on the north side of the room was a table. On this table there were twelve cakes of bread in two piles of six each, symbolizing the twelve tribes of Israel (Lev. 24:5-6). The light of the lampstand would shine on the “bread of the presence”, which symbolized the light of God’s favor shining on the people of Israel. On the other hand, the bread on the table symbolized Israel’s offering of itself to the Lord (Lev. 24:7). Every Sabbath day, the old bread would be removed from the table and replaced with twelve freshly baked cakes (Lev. 24:8). Since the bread that had been removed was holy, it was to be eaten *only* by the priests, and only in a holy place. The Law clearly stated:

- ✓ Leviticus 24:9 – It shall be *for Aaron and his sons*, and they shall eat it in a holy place, since it is for him a most holy portion out of the LORD’s food offerings.

But in 1 Samuel 21 we read how David, when he was fleeing for his life from King Saul, asked Ahimelech the priest for bread. Ahimelech responded: “I have no common bread on hand, but there is holy bread.” Ahimelech was uncomfortable. He knew that it was not lawful for David to eat the holy bread, and yet David had told him that he was on an urgent mission from the king himself. Ahimelech may have also known that David was next in line after Saul as the Lord’s anointed. And so in light of *who* David was, and in light of the *extreme urgency* of his circumstances and the *importance* of his mission, and in light of the fact that there was *no other food* available on such short notice, Ahimelech agreed to give David the bread *if only* he and his men were ritually pure (1 Sam. 21:4-5).

- ✓ 1 Samuel 21:6 – So the priest gave him the holy bread, for there was no bread there but the bread of the Presence.

So what do you think of that? Were Ahimelech and David guilty of breaking the Law? Jesus clearly states that it was “*not lawful*” for David and his men to eat the holy bread! “Have you not read what David did... how he entered the house of God and ate the bread of the Presence, *which it was not lawful for him to eat.*” And yet on the other hand, Jesus clearly assumes that David did not sin when he ate the holy bread. So what is Jesus saying? Is He admitting (at least for the sake of argument) that it is not lawful for His disciples to pluck heads of grain on the Sabbath, and yet claiming that just like David and his men, they somehow have the *right* to do what is unlawful? The Pharisees would have been quick to respond. Your disciples are not fleeing for their lives or on an especially urgent mission from the king. They are simply out for a leisurely Sabbath stroll! And who are *you* to compare yourself to David – who was the anointed of the Lord? David may have the right to eat holy bread under extreme circumstances, but what gives *your* disciples the *right* to break the Sabbath just because they’re feeling a little hungry?

**III. Verse 5** – Or have you not read in the Law how on the Sabbath the priests in the temple profane the Sabbath and are guiltless?

Once again, the point is clear, and the Pharisees would not have argued with the facts. The priests didn't just work on the Sabbath, they did *extra* work. Remember the fresh bread that was baked and then placed on the table in the Tabernacle every Sabbath? In addition to this, we also read:

- ✓ Numbers 28:9-10 – This is the burnt offering of every Sabbath, *besides* the regular burnt offering and its drink offering.

Based simply on the letter of the Law, Jesus can say in the most shocking terms that “the priests in the temple profane the Sabbath and are guiltless”! They *profane* the Sabbath, and yet they are *guiltless*! How can we explain this? It's very simple. They are guiltless because of *who* they are and because of *where* they serve – they are “*the priests who serve in the temple*”. So what is Jesus saying? Is He admitting (at least for the sake of argument) that His disciples are profaning the Sabbath, and yet claiming that just like the priests in the temple, they somehow have the *right* to profane the Sabbath and still remain guiltless? But once again, the Pharisees would have been quick to respond. What does plucking heads of grain to satisfy one's own hunger have to do with offering sacrifices to God in the temple? And who are you, and who are your disciples, to compare yourselves to the *priests who serve in the temple*? Of course, Jesus knew that the Pharisees would have these objections. That was the point. And so now instead of reasoning with the Pharisees, Jesus simply states a fact and proclaims the truth.

**IV. Verse 6** – I tell you, something greater than the temple is here.

*This* is the point that Jesus wants to make. This is the lesson that Jesus wants to teach us. The Pharisees are asking: Who are You to compare Yourself to David as the Lord's anointed? Who are You to compare Yourself to the priests who serve in the temple? And Jesus responds with this amazing declaration: “I tell you, something greater than the temple is here.” Something greater than the temple. Something greater than the priesthood. Something greater than David himself. Assuming (at least for the sake of argument) that plucking heads of grain on the Sabbath is an unlawful profaning of the Sabbath, Jesus tells the Pharisees that His disciples are not guilty of any sin – and this is because of who *Jesus* is\*. But then who *is* Jesus... that His disciples should be allowed to break the Sabbath just because they are feeling a little hungry as they stroll through the grain fields? *Even David* – *even the temple priests* – would never have got away with something like this. To answer this question, we need to take a *closer* look at the meaning of the Sabbath.

**V. The heart of the Sabbath commandment (the spirit of the law)**

The seventh day was to be a day of rest from all physical labor and work. *Why?* What was the special meaning and importance of this law for the people of God? What was the *spirit* of the fourth commandment that lay underneath the *letter* of the fourth commandment?

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\* In His messianic office as prophet, priest, and king (cf. “something greater than the temple”)

- ✓ Exodus 20:9-11 – Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work... **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.

When God's people rested on the seventh day it reminded them of God's rest, and of God's desire that they should *share* in His own (eternal) rest (Heb. 3-4). God created the world in six days, and ever since then, He has been resting (cf. Heb. 4:3). For God, the seventh day is unending. So when we enter into God's rest, the *main* point is not physical rest, but rather *spiritual* rest. Physical rest is the pointer to spiritual rest. The Sabbath rest was meant to remind Israel of the truth that they could not attain salvation through their own work and effort. The Sabbath rest reminded Israel that their obedience was to be motivated by grace, and not by the thought of earning something from God. The Sabbath rest reminded Israel that their relationship with God was not based on their own striving, but upon God's gracious salvation. And this is why the *Sabbath* was actually the *sign* of the *covenant*! The sign of God's covenant with Noah and his children was the rainbow. The sign of God's covenant with Abraham was circumcision. The sign of the New Covenant is Baptism and the Lord's Supper. But the sign of God's covenant relationship with Israel (the Mosaic Covenant) was the Sabbath.

- ✓ Exodus 31:13, 16, 18 (cf. Isaiah 56:1-8) – “**Above all** you shall keep my *Sabbaths*, for this is a **sign** between me and you throughout your generations... Therefore the people of Israel shall keep the *Sabbath*, observing the Sabbath throughout their generations, as a **covenant** forever....”

So what was the special connection between the Sabbath and God's covenant relationship with Israel? It's very simple. The weekly Sabbath rest was a constant reminder that Israel's covenant relationship with God was not based on their own efforts and striving, but upon God's gracious redemption and salvation.

- ✓ Deuteronomy 5:15 – You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. **Therefore** the LORD your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day.

This reason for keeping the Sabbath is really no different from the first. Every time Israel rested on the seventh day, it was a fresh reminder of the *permanent* rest that God had given to His people in the Promised Land of Canaan (Josh. 1:13). God had saved His people out of the hard labor of Egypt and brought them safely into the promised rest of Canaan. And yet the promised rest of Canaan was just a symbol and a type pointing the people forward to the *true rest* that would ultimately be found *in Christ* (Heb. 3:7-4:13). Does this sound familiar? Just before this passage (cf. v. 1 – “at that time”), Jesus called out: “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” We might almost hear Jesus saying: “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you the true Sabbath rest.”

What is this true Sabbath rest? It is the freedom from working to earn God's love and favor, and striving to know God by our own wisdom and understanding. It is the freedom *to* serve God as those who are motivated only by gratitude and love to God. Ultimately, it is the eternal rest of

those who no longer struggle with sin. And this rest is available only in Christ. Christ kept the law in our place. Christ suffered God's curse in our place. And so in Christ, we can enter into the rest foreshadowed by the Promised Land of Canaan. In Christ, we come to share in God's rest – which is pictured by His rest on the seventh day. In Christ, we experience the true meaning of Israel's weekly Sabbath – the true Sabbath rest. In Christ, then, the Sabbath is *fulfilled*. Now that the one greater than the temple is here, the lesser pointers are no longer needed. Yes, we may gather sticks on the Sabbath. Yes, we may kindle a fire on the Sabbath. Yes, we may prepare a meal on the Sabbath. Yes, we may gather manna on the Sabbath. Yes, we may pluck heads of grain on the Sabbath. Why? Because in Christ, we have *already* entered into the true Sabbath rest.

**VI. Verse 7** – And if you had known what this means, “I desire mercy, and not sacrifice,” you would not have condemned the guiltless.

Just as the temple priests were guiltless when they “profaned” the Sabbath, so also were Jesus' disciples. But Jesus' point is not that His disciples deserved to be shown mercy in light of their hunger. There is no reason to think that the disciples were famished or desperate for food. Here's the point: If the Pharisees had understood the difference between the *heart* of the law (things like mercy) and the *letter* of the law (things like sacrifice; Hos. 6:6), they would not have become so obsessed with the letter of the law that it kept them from seeing how that letter was fulfilled in Christ – who was Himself the true heart of the law! They would not have condemned the disciples for breaking the Sabbath because they would have recognized *in Jesus* the fulfillment of the Sabbath rest. In Jesus was the true rest to which their Sabbath had always been pointing. But they were blinded to these things by their constant attempts to use the law as a way of *earning* God's favor. So Jesus concludes now with these beautiful and amazing words:

**VII. Verse 8** – For the Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath.

Who is the lord of the Sabbath? Listen to what God says – whose name is Yahweh:

- ✓ Exodus 31:13 – You shall keep *my Sabbaths*... that you may know that ***I, the LORD*** [YAHWEH], sanctify you.
- ✓ Leviticus 19:3 – You shall keep *my Sabbaths: I am the LORD* [YAHWEH] your God.
- ✓ Leviticus 19:30 – You shall keep *my Sabbaths*... ***I am the LORD*** [YAHWEH].
- ✓ Exodus 16:23 – Tomorrow is a... holy Sabbath ***to the LORD*** [YAHWEH].
- ✓ Exodus 20:10 – The seventh day is a Sabbath ***to the LORD*** [YAHWEH] your God.
- ✓ Exodus 35:2 – On the seventh day you shall have a Sabbath of solemn rest, holy ***to the LORD*** [YAHWEH].

Yahweh is the only Lord of the Sabbath. And now, as He stands there in the midst of the grainfields, Jesus announces that *He is* the Lord of the Sabbath! God gave His people the Sabbath rest as a reminder that they could not attain salvation through their own work and effort. God gave His people the Sabbath rest as a reminder that their relationship with God was based only upon His gracious salvation. God gave His people the Sabbath rest as a reminder that their obedience was to be motivated only by thanksgiving and love. And then the Lord of the Sabbath came down to this earth so that He Himself might *be* our true Sabbath rest.

## Conclusion

When the Pharisees condemned the disciples for breaking the Sabbath, Jesus responded by drawing attention to *Himself*. *He* is *greater* than the temple... and so *He* is *lord* of the Sabbath. *He* is the fulfillment of the Sabbath. *He* is our Sabbath rest. Are we, then, at *rest in Him*? Have we ceased from the labor and the work of trying to establish *any* righteousness of our own (Rom. 10:3), and submitted ourselves completely to the righteousness of God – the righteousness that is by *faith alone* (Rom. 10:3; 9:30)?

- ✓ Romans 10:4-10 – For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes. For Moses writes about the righteousness that is based on the law, that the person who does the commandments shall live by them. But the righteousness based on faith says, “Do not say in your heart, ‘Who will ascend into heaven?’ ” (that is, to bring Christ down) or “ ‘Who will descend into the abyss?’ ” (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). But what does it say? “The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart” (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.”

As the ESV study notes say, “What God requires is not superhuman works but [simple] faith in the Gospel. We know this, don’t we? And yet we are constantly forgetting. To one degree or another every single one of us have been occupied with the labor of trying to establish a righteousness of our own – of working to deserve God’s love, of trying to keep ourselves in God’s good graces. This is a hopeless burden to carry. When we do this, we cut ourselves off from the full experience of that wonderful Sabbath rest which is ours through faith in Christ. And the more we strive to establish a righteousness of our own, the less we will find ourselves giving praise to God for His glorious grace. So then, are we always entering more and more *fully* into the rest that is ours through faith in Jesus Christ? Do we find that His praises are always *more and more* on our tongues? Do we find ourselves living in *joyful and grateful* obedience to the Lord as people who have *already* been declared righteous in Christ? How desperately we need to keep our eyes always fixed on Jesus, who is *greater* than the temple, who is *lord* of the Sabbath – and so also our true Sabbath rest.

One day, our experience of this rest will be perfect and complete. No more straining to establish a righteousness of our own – *never again*. No more fighting against sin – *ever, at all*. Just the blissful and joyful rest of living blamelessly in God’s presence and looking upon our Savior face to face.

- ✓ Revelation 14:13 – “Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on. Blessed indeed,” says the Spirit, “that they may rest from their labors!”
- ✓ Hebrews 4:9-10 – So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God, for whoever has entered God’s rest has also rested from his works as God did from his.
- ✓ Jude 24-25 – Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy, to the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen.

## Teaching our Children

- Q.** What did the Law forbid people to do on the Sabbath?  
A. See Scriptures under I. A.
- Q.** What were Jesus' disciples doing as they went through the grainfields, and why?  
A. Jesus' disciples were picking and "threshing" the grain because they were hungry.
- Q.** When the Pharisees accused Jesus' disciples of breaking the Sabbath, Jesus responded with two examples from the Old Testament. What example did Jesus give from the life of David?  
A. See Scripture under II. and the comments under II. B.
- Q.** What would the Pharisees think was wrong with this example?  
A. See II. D.
- Q.** What example did Jesus give from the life of the priests in the temple?  
A. See III., III. A., and III. B.
- Q.** What would the Pharisees think was wrong with this example?  
A. See III. D.
- Q.** How could Jesus "get away" with using these examples? How did Jesus answer the Pharisees?  
A. See IV. and IV. A.
- Q.** Who is Jesus, that his disciples should be allowed to break the Sabbath just because they are feeling a little hungry?  
A. Jesus is the fulfillment of the Sabbath. Jesus Himself is the true Sabbath rest!
- Q.** *How is* Jesus the fulfillment of the Sabbath. *How is* Jesus the true Sabbath rest?  
A. See Roman Numeral V.
- ✓ See Conclusion A., A. 1., and A. 2.
  - ✓ Talk about the ways that we fail to *experience* the rest that is ours through faith in Christ.
  - ✓ See Conclusion C.
  - ✓ Rejoice in the future, eternal *rest* of all God's children! (See Conclusion D.)