

Matthew 12:9-14

Introduction

Last week, we saw Jesus admit (at least for the sake of argument) that it was not lawful for His disciples to pluck heads of grain on the Sabbath (cf. the rules about gathering manna in Ex. 16:23-30). And yet He claims that just like David and his men (who ate holy bread, which was not lawful for them to eat), so His disciples also have the right to do what is unlawful. But, of course, 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*, and who are your disciples, to compare yourselves to David and his men? (David was the anointed of the Lord!)

And then again, Jesus appears to admit (at least for the sake of argument) that in their plucking heads of grain, His disciples are *profaning* the Sabbath. And yet He claims that just like the priests who profane the Sabbath as they serve in the temple, so also His disciples can profane the Sabbath and 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? And who are you, and who are your disciples, to compare yourselves to the *priests* who serve in the *temple*?

And so Jesus has the Pharisees right where He wants them as He now proclaims: "I tell you, something greater than the temple is here." How can Jesus' disciples unlawfully "profane" the Sabbath and yet not be guilty of any sin? – It is because of *who Jesus is*, as the one who is greater than the temple priests and greater than David himself. But then who *is* Jesus... that His disciples should be allowed to "break" the Sabbath just because they happen to feel 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. We have to remember now the spirit of the Old Testament Sabbath.

- ✓ 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.

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). The ultimate point of the Sabbath was not the physical rest of one day in seven (although physical rest is always important), but rather the spiritual rest that is permanent and unceasing! The Sabbath rest was meant to remind Israel of the truth that they could not attain salvation through their own work, and effort, and striving. And this is why the *Sabbath* was actually the *sign* of the *covenant*!

- ✓ 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...."

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 striving to keep the law, but upon God's gracious redemption and salvation. NOTE: I believe this explains why the Sabbath commandment (a temporary ceremonial law) is included in the Ten Commandments (which are otherwise moral and permanent).

- ✓ 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.

Every time Israel rested on the seventh day, it was a fresh reminder of the continuous rest that God had given to His people in the 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 rest of life in 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).

Matthew wants us to understand this whole discussion of the Sabbath in light of Jesus' invitation at the end of chapter eleven: "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you the true Sabbath rest. And so in Christ, we can enter into the rest foreshadowed by the Promised Land of Canaan. In Christ, we come to share spiritually in God's eternal 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 we may gather sticks on the Sabbath. Now we may kindle a fire on the Sabbath. We may prepare a meal on the Sabbath. We may gather manna on the Sabbath. We may pluck heads of grain on the Sabbath. Why? Because we have *already* entered into the true Sabbath rest.

So on the one hand, this rest is the *absence* of all human striving to gain acceptance and approval with God. And we saw last week that as Christians we need to constantly be experiencing more and more of this *rest* by faith. But there is more. This rest isn't just about what we don't do – it's also about the things we are commanded *to do*.

- I. Verses 9-10 – He went on from there and entered their synagogue. And a man was there with a withered hand. And they asked him, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?"— so that they might accuse him.

Matthew doesn't say so, but we can certainly assume that Jesus had enraged the Pharisees with His claims to be greater than the temple and lord of the Sabbath. It appears that Matthew wants us to picture these Pharisees now following Jesus from the grainfields into their synagogue (even though Luke tells us that these things happened "on another Sabbath" – Lk. 6:6). At the very least, I think we can assume that it's the same group of Pharisees in both stories. "He went on from there and entered *their* synagogue. And a man was there with a withered hand. And *they* asked him..." (cf. Mk. 2:27-3:2). After Jesus' claims to be greater than the temple and lord of the Sabbath, the Pharisees are really angry. Their whole purpose and agenda now is simply to

destroy Jesus (they want to find a reason to accuse Him [10] in order that they might destroy Him [14]).

It just so happened that there was a man with a withered hand in attendance at the Synagogue that Sabbath. And so Matthew has the Pharisees asking Jesus: “Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?” Now the Pharisees assumed that the biblical answer to this question was “no”, *except* in the case of life and death situations. “Whenever there is *doubt* whether life is in danger this *overrides* the Sabbath” (Yoma 8:6; quoted in Morris). Of course, when the Pharisees made this ruling, the primary thing they had in mind was not miraculous healings, but rather medical treatment by family members or professionals (cf. Carson). So once again, we might assume an element of truth in what the Pharisees are saying. If everyone with a non-life-threatening health problem went to be treated on the Sabbath as on every other day, there would be no rest for the physicians, and the physicians would be breaking the Sabbath!

- ✓ Mark 1:32-34 – That evening at sundown [once the Sabbath was officially over] they brought to him all who were sick or oppressed by demons. And the whole city was gathered together at the door.

If the whole city had come to Jesus Saturday morning, Jesus would have come to the end of what was supposed to be a day of rest, and been utterly *exhausted*. But the people’s health problems were not so desperate that they couldn’t wait until the Sabbath was over. So why *shouldn’t* they wait, and allow Jesus to observe the Sabbath as a day of rest in accordance with God’s command? In the same way, the man with the withered hand was clearly *not* in a life-threatening situation. Humanly speaking, there was absolutely no urgency whatsoever. So to satisfy the Pharisees, all Jesus needed to say was something like this: “I believe it is biblical to treat emergency cases on the Sabbath, but I believe all other cases, out of reverence for God’s Word and the Sabbath, can wait just a few hours more” (Bruner) But, of course, that’s not what Jesus said.

According to Mark and Luke, the Pharisees did not actually *speak* their question, but simply “watched Him, to see whether He would heal on the Sabbath” (Luke 6:7). But Jesus “knew their thoughts” (Luke 6:8), and so it was really the same thing as if they had asked Jesus directly: “Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?” Mark and Luke then tell us that Jesus responded to their unspoken question with a question of His own: “I ask you, is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to destroy it?” Now of course, the Pharisees were not suggesting that Jesus should harm the man with the withered hand or destroy his life – and I don’t believe this is what Jesus was implying! Remember, Jesus knew the Pharisees’ thoughts. He knew that they were looking for a reason to accuse Him, and to do harm to Him, and to *destroy* Him. So Jesus’ response to the Pharisees secret thoughts might run something like this: “You’re *hoping* I’ll heal this man on the Sabbath in order that you might accuse me and destroy me. Well, let me ask you, ‘which is *more* lawful: to do good or to do harm (like you want to do), to save life or to destroy it (like you are seeking to do)’” (cf. Carson). “You tell me which is more lawful, to plot and scheme destruction on the Sabbath or to heal a man on the Sabbath”? And so Jesus exposes the Pharisees’ hypocrisy.

What are the ways that *in our self-righteous zeal for God's Word*, we completely fail to grasp and understand the *true meaning* of God's Word? What are the ways that *in our self-righteous zeal for God's Word*, we actually become the very ones who are most guilty of *breaking* God's Word? In most cases, a self-righteous zeal for God's Word manifests itself in a legalistic, hyper-critical, and judgmental attitude, and the absence of true mercy and compassion. May we always remember that God said: "I desire mercy, and not sacrifice." It is good to be zealous for God's word, but that zeal must always be a humble zeal that trembles before God's Word.

II Verses 11-12a – He said to them, "Which one of you who has a sheep, if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will not take hold of it and lift it out? Of how much more value is a man than a sheep!"

Once again: mercy over sacrifice. Even the Pharisees themselves admit the priority of healing over the ceremonial duty of Sabbath observance when they themselves are willing to pull a sheep out of a pit on the Sabbath. If it is lawful to pull a sheep out of a pit on the Sabbath, how much more should it be lawful to heal a man on the Sabbath! And yet there is something else here. The problem isn't *so much* with what Jesus said, as with what He didn't say. Okay, so it is acceptable to heal a man on the Sabbath. But what are the *limits*? Certainly there must be some boundaries, some guidelines, some restrictions in order to safeguard and protect the Sabbath! Is it *always* acceptable to heal on the Sabbath? Would it be acceptable to spend the *entire* Sabbath day healing people? Can a man spend the entire Sabbath day treating people with minor coughs and colds? Would it be acceptable to spend every Sabbath day out patrolling the roads and fields looking for sheep that have fallen into pits in order to help pull them out? In the same way, would it be acceptable to spend every Sabbath day out making house calls? But what about *rest*? Isn't the seventh day for *rest*?

If we can detect in Jesus' words that healing a man on the Sabbath is lawful, what we *cannot* detect are *any* qualifications or restrictions. But if there are *zero* qualifications and *zero* restrictions to healing on the Sabbath, then haven't we just thrown out the baby with the bathwater? If there are no qualifications or restrictions, then a doctor is free to have office hours on the Sabbath from sunup to sundown for the treatment of non-emergencies – especially if he offers His services for free or at a discounted rate. But this would seem to be a clear case of breaking the Sabbath. Is this *really* what Jesus means to say? In His zeal to correct the Pharisees' legalistic approach to the Sabbath, has Jesus gone *too far* and actually jeopardized the Sabbath itself? It would seem that He has. But then Jesus leaves us without any doubt:

III. Verse 12b – So it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.

And while we nod our heads and agree, the Pharisees were shocked and appalled. This is as unrestricted, unqualified, and open-ended as we can get! It's not just lawful to *heal* on the Sabbath, it is lawful to *do good* on the Sabbath! That may sound nice and spiritual, but it opens a literal Pandora's Box. The fact is that there will *always* be some good to do on the Sabbath! We can *never* run out of good things to do on the Sabbath. And if there is *always* some good thing to do on the Sabbath, and if it is *always* lawful to do good on the Sabbath, then if he so desires, a person can work himself to exhaustion every Sabbath day doing good all day long. How in the

world is this *not* a breaking and a profaning of the Sabbath *rest*? Jesus answers this question in verse 13.

IV. Verse 13 – Then he said to the man, “Stretch out your hand.” And the man stretched it out, and it was restored, healthy like the other.

The point of this miracle of healing is not so much the man with the withered hand. We hear nothing about his faith. We hear nothing about how he responded to his healing. So what is the *point* of this miracle? What is the *meaning* of this miracle on the Sabbath? It’s *proof*. It’s proof of what Jesus said when He was in the grainfields debating with the Pharisees – He *is* greater than the temple, and He *is* therefore lord of the Sabbath (cf. 9:1-8). And as lord of the Sabbath (Yahweh in the flesh), Jesus has come to *be* the *fulfillment* of the Sabbath that He Himself gave to us. “Come to *me*, all who labor and are heavy laden, and *I* will give you *rest*.”

Conclusion

How can it possibly be lawful for a person to work himself to exhaustion every Sabbath day doing good all day long? Why is this not a profaning of the Sabbath rest? Because the Sabbath has been fulfilled in Christ. He *is* our Sabbath rest. Therefore, we are now completely *free* to do good of all kinds, and in all ways, all Sabbath long. Listen to how Jesus puts it in John chapter five:

✓ John 5:15-17 – The man went away and told the Jews that it was Jesus who had healed him. And this was why the Jews were persecuting Jesus, because he was doing these things on the Sabbath. But Jesus answered them, “My Father is working until now, and I am working.”

This is *new* – it’s a statement that we never hear in the Old Testament! Originally, Israel rested on the seventh day as a sign of God’s desire that they should share in His eternal rest.

✓ Hebrews 4:3 – [God’s] works were finished from the foundation of the world.

But now Jesus points out that even as God was resting, He was still working – even on the Sabbath! Not for one moment has God ever rested from the works of holding the universe together, and delivering and saving His people. And so as the one and only Son, Jesus now claims the right to *work* on the *Sabbath*, even as His *Father* is *working*! And Jesus calls all those who have entered into His rest to *work* along with Him (regardless of what day it is) in the constant doing of good. Are we free to watch a movie on the Sabbath? Are we free to go out to eat on the Sabbath (therefore causing others to work)? Are we free to mow the lawn on the Sabbath? Are we free to do our weekly grocery shopping on the Sabbath? Are we free to put in an extra day at the office on the Sabbath? Are we free to do laundry on the Sabbath? I believe that the assumed answer is yes. Of course, even here the principle remains that if you are *always* working, then you are not truly trusting God or honoring God with the time He has given you. And the principle of private and corporate worship also remains. But, of course, these things are not the *point*. The main point is that with the fulfillment of the Sabbath in Christ, we are now free to do as much *good* on the Sabbath *as we like* (regardless of what kind or amount of labor and work may ever be involved). But this work of doing good is never the heavy burden of

striving to merit something from God. Instead, it is the joyful and delightful work of those who are already *at rest* in Christ. So on the one hand, the true Sabbath rest is the blessed *absence* of all human striving. But on the other hand, the true Sabbath rest is the blessed freedom to spend our lives in the *work* of doing good every single day of every single week of our lives.

We sing in one of our hymns: “Turn my striving into works of grace.” Our prayer is not just that we would cease our human striving, but that we would *exchange* this striving for works of grace – the freedom to always do good without any thought of trying to insure God’s love or gain God’s favor. Here is the *heart* of the true Sabbath rest as it is fulfilled in Christ! The Apostle Paul says:

- ✓ Galatians 5:22-23 – The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; ***against such things there is no law.***

It is *always* lawful to bear the fruit of the Spirit *however*, and *wherever*, and *whenever* you would like to bear it – Sabbath or not! As those who are at rest in Christ, we have been set free to *work* without ceasing under a yoke that is *easy* and a burden that is *light*. We need to *feel* that all of our service, and all of our doing good, and all of our acts of kindness, and all of our obedience, and all of our working – that *all of it flows* from the perfect rest that we have been given in Christ. Not only this, but we need to remember that as our true Sabbath rest, Christ has set us free to spend our lives in the *work* of *doing good* every single day of every single week of our lives.

- ✓ Titus 2:14 – [Christ] gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are *zealous for good works*.
- ✓ Titus 3:1 – Be ready for every good work.
- ✓ Titus 3:14 – Let our people learn to devote themselves to good works.
- ✓ Titus 3:4-8 (cf. Eph. 2:8-10; Col. 1:10) – But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life. The saying is trustworthy, and I want you to insist on these things, so that those who have believed in God may be careful to devote themselves to good works.

Brothers and sisters, it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath. And you’re free to take that and run with it in any and every way that you may desire – all because of Christ, who is our Sabbath rest.

Teaching our Children

Q. Why did the Pharisees ask Jesus if it was lawful to heal on the Sabbath?

A. Because they wanted to find a reason to accuse and destroy Jesus.

Q. What did Jesus ask the Pharisees?

A. Jesus asked the Pharisees if it was lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to destroy it.

- ✓ Discuss with your children how the Pharisees were so self-righteously zealous to obey God's Word that they actually broke God's Word in one of the worst possible ways. Reflect on the ways that we can do the same thing (hyper-critical judgmentalism versus mercy).

- Q.** Would Jesus be breaking the Sabbath if He healed the man with the withered hand?
- A. No. (Even the Pharisees will lift a sheep out of a pit on the Sabbath)
- Q.** Jesus seems to assume that healing/doctoring is *always* lawful on the Sabbath, without any limitations or restrictions of any kind. What serious problems does this cause?
- A. If there are no limitations on treating sicknesses on the Sabbath, this will certainly lead to the breaking of the Sabbath *rest*. (See Scripture on page 3; think of house calls, office hours, etc.; compare the idea of patrolling for trapped sheep every Sabbath day)
- Q.** Jesus concluded: "So it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath". How does this cause even more "problems" for the Sabbath?
- A. There will *always* be some good thing to do on the Sabbath. Therefore, if it is *always* lawful to do good on the Sabbath, a person could work himself to exhaustion every Sabbath day doing good all day long.
- Q.** How can this *not* be a breaking and a profaning of the Sabbath rest?
- A. Review with your children the fact that Jesus is the fulfillment of the Sabbath rest. He is the true Sabbath rest. ("Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.")
- Q.** How did Jesus prove that He is lord (and fulfillment) of the Sabbath.
- A. Jesus healed the man with the withered hand!
- Q.** Last week we saw that our true Sabbath rest is the absence of all human striving to gain God's love and acceptance. This week we learn that the true Sabbath rest is *also* what?
- A. ~ As our true Sabbath rest, Christ sets us *free* to spend our lives in the *work of doing good* every single day of every single week of our lives.
- ~ When we are truly at rest in Christ, we can do good without the burden of trying to gain God's love and acceptance. Our rest should always lead to work!
- ~ Reflect on the Scriptures from Titus on page 6