

At that time Jesus went through the grainfields on the Sabbath, and His disciples became hungry and began to pick the heads of grain and eat. 2 But when the Pharisees saw this, they said to Him, “Look, Your disciples do what is not lawful to do on a Sabbath.” 3 But He said to them, “Have you not read what David did when he became hungry, he and his companions, 4 how he entered the house of God, and they ate the consecrated bread, which was not lawful for him to eat nor for those with him, but for the priests alone? 5 Or have you not read in the Law, that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple break the Sabbath and are innocent? 6 But I say to you that something greater than the temple is here. 7 But if you had known what this means, ‘I desire compassion, and not a sacrifice,’ you would not have condemned the innocent. 8 For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.”

9 And departing from there, He went into their synagogue. 10 And behold, a man was there whose hand was withered. And they questioned Jesus, saying, “Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?”—so that they might accuse Him. 11 And He said to them, “What man is there among you who has a sheep, and if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will not take hold of it

and lift it out? 12 How much more valuable then is a man than a sheep! So then, it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.” 13 Then He said to the man, “Stretch out your hand!” He stretched it out, and it was restored to normal, like the other. 14 But going out, the Pharisees took counsel together against Him, as to how they might destroy Him. (Matthew 12:1-14)

Matthew 12:8 is the core of this entire passage: the Son of Man, Jesus Christ, is Lord of the Sabbath. He has the right, and the authority, and the privilege, to define the Sabbath, limit the Sabbath, and direct our actions on the Sabbath.

This is such an important truth that Jesus made a point of taking over the Sabbath during His ministry. He never ceased His ministry activity on the Sabbath; in fact, He sometimes deliberately acts on the Sabbath in order to demonstrate His rights to use it as He wished. Matthew records this sole instance, but Luke records three different episodes of Jesus choosing to do His work on the Sabbath.

TRANSITION: The Sabbath day was very important within the life and the religion of Israel; in fact, the Sabbath is very important to Yahweh. So let's

take a moment and talk about the Sabbath day.

The word Sabbath is the Hebrew word *shabbat*, and means rest.

The first mention of the Sabbath is found in Exodus 16. When the Lord gave the people manna from heaven, He told them that they would gather it each morning for that particular day. If they tried to keep it overnight, it would spoil and be inedible. But on the sixth day they could gather enough for the Sabbath day as well, and it would not spoil.

The Sabbath becomes a command in **Exodus 20:8-11**, the fourth of the Ten Commandments. The people would do their work in six days, and were to rest from their work on the seventh day. Even animals were not to be used for work on the seventh day. Resting on the seventh day was not arbitrary, but based on God's creation of all things in six days, and then ceasing from His creative work on the seventh day. This passage is repeated in **Deuteronomy 5:12-15**, basing the Sabbath on Yahweh's deliverance of His people from slavery in Egypt; Sabbath keeping was the opposite of slavery.

Exodus 31:12-18 emphasizes the importance of the Sabbath by requiring the death of anyone who worked on the Sabbath. These verses establish the Sabbath as a perpetual covenant, and repeat that it is based on Yahweh's own rest on the seventh day of creation week.

Exodus 35:1-3 repeats the command to observe the Sabbath immediately before describing the building of the tabernacle. It was a reminder that while building the tabernacle was a sacred task, the Sabbath was more holy still.

The Sabbath day was the most common festival observed by the Jewish people. Observing the Sabbath was a requirement for being blessed by Yahweh.

TRANSITION: So we see that the Sabbath is very simply described in the Law. It is based first on God's own rest from creation, and also on the rest He gave His people from slavery in Egypt. It was not given to burden God's people, but to give them rest and time to focus their attention on Him. As profound as the Sabbath was, especially as a picture of the freedom from sin and eternal life we receive through Christ, it was a simple, humble, even easy day.

As Matthew 12 begins, Jesus is leading His disciples through fields of grain. They are hungry, and begin to pick the heads of grain and eat them. This is certainly possible, but it's not the most ideal way to eat grain. It certainly was not going to fill them up. They were just taking the edge off their hunger until they could have a full meal.

The Pharisees rebuked Jesus for what His disciples did. In response, He directs them to the Scriptures, twice.

“Have you not read what David did?” He asks. David, on the run from king Saul, went to the Tabernacle and spoke to Ahimelech the high priest, looking for food. Ahimelech gave David the showbread, which was reserved for the priests alone. (First Samuel 21).

“Have you not read in the Law that the priests in the Temple break the Sabbath?” Jesus asks. The priests killed animals, received money, carried wood for the altar, maintained fires, baked the showbread, lit the lamps, and on and on.

“To the Law and to the testimony!” the prophet Isaiah says. To the written Word of God! “If they do not speak according to this word, it is because they have no dawn.” (Isaiah 8:20). The Pharisees put their own traditions above the Law of God.

Jesus makes it clear that He is greater than the Temple and the Tabernacle. He is the Son of Man and the Word of God and the Lord of the Sabbath. He speaks the words of Hosea 6:6 as though He were speaking it for the first time:

They didn’t understand these words, or they never would have condemned Jesus’ disciples, who were innocent of any wrongdoing.

Jesus, the Son of Man, is Lord of the Sabbath. It was His right alone, and His privilege alone, to define the Sabbath, interpret it, and apply it as He wished. If the Jews had only accepted His claim, as did His disciples, there would have been no argument. But while they didn't understand the truth of the Sabbath, they did understand that even their corrupted Sabbath was foundational to their traditions. The fact that Jesus violated their traditions made Him, in their eyes, an enemy of Yahweh Himself.

TRANSITION: Jesus has made His primary point – the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath – but He has not yet demonstrated what that means in concrete, practical terms. So, He takes the confrontation to the next level.

Jesus goes into their synagogue, where there was a man with a withered hand. The Pharisees saw an opportunity to accuse Jesus of Sabbath-breaking, so they asked Him a question: “Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?”

Can we just stop for a moment? Jesus had performed so many miraculous healings that it was assumed that He could, and probably would, miraculously heal this poor man. They didn't expect Jesus to bring out bandages and ointments, or perform surgery. They knew that He would perform a miracle.

The Pharisees also knew that Jesus did these things by the power of God. We know that this is true because a Pharisee named Nicodemus said to Jesus,

The Pharisees did accuse Jesus of performing His miracles by the power of Satan, but that was a lie, and they knew it. Their hatred toward Jesus actually revealed a deep-seated hatred of Yahweh Himself.

Their question, “Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?”, is really the question, “Is it lawful for God to heal on the Sabbath?”, which is really the complaint, “How dare Yahweh violate our traditions!”

Just ponder the arrogance and demonic pride that comes so easily to human beings who insolently accuse GOD of unrighteousness!

Jesus asked them a question of His own: “What man is there among you who has a sheep, and if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will not take hold of it and lift it out?” It’s a rhetorical question; of course they would do this.

What kind of person would leave an innocent animal to suffer without food or water, or risk being stolen by thieves, or harmed by predators?

Is Jesus just trying to shame them? Perhaps. I think there might be more to His question, though.

The Dead Sea Scrolls, which were found in a number of jars on the north

side of the Dead Sea beginning in 1947, contained a scroll that described the restrictions of the Sabbath.

Now, here's a little information for you. The Dead Sea Scrolls, which were first discovered in 1947 in 12 caves located near the Dead Sea. Among the items found was a document from the first century B.C., which described the restrictions of the Sabbath. No one was to say a useless or foolish word. No one could lend anything to anyone, or make decisions about money. No one could talk about work, or walk in their fields. They could not eat or drink anything that had not been prepared beforehand. They could not wear dirty clothes, because carrying the dirt was work. No one could open a sealed jar, or wear perfume. You could not pick a pebble up off the floor, or wipe dust off a plate. You could not help an animal give birth, or – and this is where it gets interesting – *rescue an animal that had fallen into a pit.*

Jesus' question is not just a reasonable question. He is pointing out that the Pharisees would willingly violate one of their own Sabbath regulations.

Can I just say that this is always the way of human religion? All sorts of rules and regulations and stipulations are set up, and then most of the practitioners of that religion find various reasons to set aside whatever rules they find inconvenient. I know of one cultic group that required that its members never watch tv; of course, most members had a tv hidden in their

home.

“How much more valuable then is a man than a sheep!” Only human beings are created in the image of God. If animals deserve mercy and kindness – and they do – how much more mercy and kindness should be shown to those created in the very image of God?

TRANSITION: Jesus brings us straight to the principle of the Sabbath.

“So then,” to answer their question, “it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.” The Sabbath was made for the good of people, which also means that it was made for people to do good.

Jesus went on to practice what He preached; He did good to this crippled man. “Stretch out your hand,” He commands. The man stretches it out, and is miraculously healed. That Sabbath day of rest became a Sabbath day of rescue.

Only Jesus had the power to heal, after all. But every person in the synagogue that day had some ability to stretch out their hand to this man to do good for him. They could have encouraged him, blessed him with money or food or clothes, done some small thing that would ease his burden.

If this sounds familiar, you might be thinking of James 2.

Genuine faith prompts and energizes faithful living. It’s often plain and

simple, not nearly as spectacular as a miraculous healing. But it is the work of faith that stretches out the hand to someone in need and blesses them.

As far as the Pharisees were concerned, there was no worse day to do this than the Sabbath. In fact, Luke's Gospel records an episode where Jesus healed a woman in a synagogue on the Sabbath, and the synagogue leader complained:

The arrogance and hard-heartedness of religionists should take our breath away. What a sad, shrunken, feeble, wretched soul this man had!

Would you listen to Jesus? "It is lawful to do good on the Sabbath." In fact, it is good to do good on the Sabbath.

This is what Jesus wants them to understand in Matthew 12.

The Sabbath is a day for doing good, not a day for preventing good from being done. The Sabbath was made for doing good; refusing to do good on the Sabbath is actually a great evil!

Of course, the Pharisees would never agree; they defended their own traditions even when the Son of God Himself came to earth and set His people at liberty. Instead, the Pharisees left and began to talk about how they could destroy Jesus.

We see that the Sabbath was fulfilled in Jesus Christ, and took on a

significance far beyond the Law of God. It is not a day of rest that we earn by working the previous six days. It is a day of rest that is given to us by the grace of God, and received in faith. We are given spiritual rest in Christ in order to receive good as we stretch out our hands to Him for blessing. We are also given spiritual rest in order to do good, to stretch out our hands in Jesus' name to others.

In Christ we are given rest from the works of the Law, because Jesus Christ, the Lord of the Sabbath, fulfilled the Law on our behalf.

In Christ we are given rest from the sufferings and torments of life, not because every illness is healed, but because in Jesus Christ, the Lord of the Sabbath, life becomes more than the health of the body. Hope and peace is available to all in Jesus Christ, regardless of our physical circumstances.

In Christ we are given rest from the fear of death, because Jesus, the Lord of the Sabbath, rose from the dead in victory and glory, and promises to raise each and every one of His people.

Most of all, in Christ we are given rest from the unrelenting hostility with holy God that made us enemies and not children, because Jesus, the Lord of the Sabbath, has brought us into His rest.

Let's pray!