

# Sermons on Matthew

## Greater Than the Temple

*Matthew 12:1-8*

*With Study Questions*

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## Greater Than the Temple

*Matthew 12:1-8*

**At that time Jesus went through the grainfields on the Sabbath. And His disciples were hungry, and began to pluck heads of grain and to eat.<sup>-2</sup> And when the Pharisees saw it, they said to Him, “Look, Your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath!”**

**<sup>-3</sup> But He said to them, “Have you not read what David did when he was hungry, he and those who were with him: <sup>-4</sup> how he entered the house of God and ate the showbread which was not lawful for him to eat, nor for those who were with him, but only for the priests? <sup>-5</sup> Or have you not read in the law that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple profane the Sabbath, and are blameless? <sup>-6</sup> Yet I say to you that in this place there is One greater than the temple. <sup>-7</sup> But if you had known what this means, ‘I desire mercy and not sacrifice,’ you would not have condemned the guiltless. <sup>-8</sup> For the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath.” (Matthew 12:1-8)**

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### **Ungodly Religious Scrutiny or ‘Righty-Tighty, Lefty-Loosey’**

Jesus and His followers, to this day, will often find themselves the recipients of inappropriate and undue moral scrutiny. The religious leaders who were contemporaries of Jesus had corrupted the law of God. When it came to certain commandments, like being faithful husbands or telling the truth, they were loose beyond reason (Matthew 5: 31-37). But concerning the fourth commandment, they thought they were more righteous than Jesus.

They had attached subsidiary laws to Sabbath keeping simply not found in Scripture. We must be careful to avoid this method of determining ethics.

Every word of God is pure; He is a shield to those who put their trust in Him. <sup>6</sup>Do not add to His words, lest He rebuke you, and you be found a liar. (Proverbs 30:5, 6)

Matthew Henry aptly states,

Note, those are no friends to Christ and his disciples, who make that to be unlawful which God has not made to be so.<sup>1</sup>

We must be careful to operate within the boundaries that God has determined and not, in the name of wisdom, seek to oblige boundaries upon others that God has not.

There have been times when I have chosen to rid my house of a television set. I have found that to be profitable at a number of levels. Seeking to morally oblige others in that direction would thrust me into the category of the person mentioned above.

## Evil Attacks

Jesus Christ the righteous (1 John 2:2) is here accused of countenancing the transgressions of His followers—“**...your disciples are breaking the Sabbath.**” (cf. Matthew 12:2b) So often, those who should hang their heads in shame and repentance at the Name of Christ instead go on the attack. Jesus has been, and will continue to be, accused throughout the gospel of Matthew of being in cahoots with the devil.

Christians should not be discouraged when they hold positions, moral or otherwise, viewed by the world as unscrupulous. It is the nature of the miscreant to call good evil and evil good (Isaiah 5:20). But what do we make of this accusation? And how are we to understand Jesus' apologetic of His disciples' behavior?

## Lawful Unlawfulness?

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<sup>1</sup>Henry, M. (1996, c1991). *Matthew Henry's commentary on the whole Bible : Complete and unabridged in one volume* (Mt 12:1). Peabody: Hendrickson.

**Sabbath the priests in the temple \_\_profane the Sabbath, and are blameless? <sup>-6-</sup> Yet I say to you that in this place there is \_\_One greater than the temple. (Matthew 12:3-6)**

## **Have You Not Read?**

Instead of running away from the Old Testament law, as so many wish to do today, Jesus appeals to it—"Have you not read. . .?" The problem is not the law; the problem was their ignorance of the law. But the audience of Jesus was very well acquainted with the words of the Old Testament. It was the basis of their accusation against Jesus and His supposed Sabbath breaking.

Implicit in the "have you not read" words of Jesus is "Do you not understand the Scriptures?" Speaking to those who have great pride in their knowledge of the Scriptures, Jesus continually rebuked their ignorance of them.

**Jesus answered and said to them, " \_You are \_\_mistaken,  
\_\_not knowing the Scriptures nor the power of God."  
(Matthew 22:29)**

But knowing the words contained in the Scriptures is quite different than understanding and embracing the meaning of the Scriptures. It is good to memorize the Word of God, but it is simply not enough to be able to rattle off memory verses. We must labor to know the meaning of the Scriptures. We must

**Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth. (2 Timothy 2:15--KJV)**

And as the present context bears out, it is especially shameful when those who have not rightly divided the word of God take it upon themselves to teach and admonish others in their ignorance.

**My brethren, \_\_let not many of you become teachers,  
\_\_knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment. (James 3:1)**

Clearly they did not understand the nature of the ceremonial law in the Old Testament.

## Biblical Ethics

Note that Jesus, the God-Man, makes His argument from Scripture; let us all follow suit. He cites David (1 Samuel 21:6) and the actions of the Old Covenant priests to demonstrate that the behavior of His disciples was appropriate.

David ate showbread (twelve rows of bread laid in two rows and displayed on the table of showbread before the Lord—Leviticus 24:5, 6) which was not lawful to eat, and the priests profaned the temple but were blameless! How did these people engage in unlawful and profane activities yet remain blameless? There are some ethics principles which need to be understood in order to make sense of this.

First is the ethic of *priority*. When on the horns of a mutually exclusive ethical dilemma, one is required to prioritize. If I find myself at the scene of an accident and I am required to jaywalk in order to save a person's life, I must prioritize. As I read the Scriptures, there is a greater obligation to preserve life than there is to avoid jaywalking so jaywalk I must.

During the recent natural disasters looting was a problem. But one must make the distinction between looting in order to exploit and benefit from another's misfortune and looting in order to merely survive.

***People do not despise a thief if he steals to satisfy himself when he is starving. (Proverbs 6:30)***

Of course, this person must make restitution when they are capable (Proverbs 6:31), but there seems to be an appropriate season for thievery. The Hebrew mid-wives (Exodus 1:15-20) and Rahab (Joshua 2; Hebrews 11:31; James 2:25) are extolled by God because they had the courage to deceive the unrighteous in order to protect the innocent. Keep in mind that this is not a license for dispensing with the commandments of God. It is a matter of choosing the weightier ethic over the lighter when there is no alternative.

Second, very closely attached to the ethic of priority, we have the ethic of *necessity*. If you have a donkey or an ox fall into a ditch on the Sabbath, it must be pulled out. Firemen, policemen, electric, water, and power all must continue to work at some level on the Sabbath. The above verse (Proverbs 6:30) acknowledges the mitigating culpability of a starving person when it comes to stealing in order to eat.

Third, we have the ethic of *mercy*. In verse seven Jesus will juxtapose mercy and sacrifice. God requires both mercy and sacrifice. But the starving person takes precedent over the requirement to sacrifice. God would not countenance children starving to death while the priest sacrifices the bull in their presence.

And finally, for the sake of our context, we have the ethic of *ministry*. For pastors, the Sabbath is anything but a day of rest where they cease from their normal employments. All of this works into Jesus' answer to the accusation of the Pharisees.

## David and the Priests

David and his men were hungry and in need of food (not to mention that at a certain level they had met the purification requirements—1 Samuel 21:4-6). Ahimelech the priest acknowledged the need and the priority to feed David and his men. Under normal circumstances this would have been, as Jesus said, unlawful. But Ahimelech saw the need, recognized the priority and was merciful.

Similarly the priests, if they were not doing the work of ministry, would certainly have profaned the temple with the amount of effort they put forth in their observance of the Mosaic Temple Liturgy. They worked hard all day long but were blameless because they labored in obedience to God's expressed and holy ministerial commands.

## Greater Than the Temple

But before this all simply becomes a lesson in ethics, we must acknowledge the explosive statement Jesus makes in verse 6: “...**in this place there is one greater than the temple.**” To the Jews (Jesus' audience in this discourse) the temple was the heart of their religion. In order to do justice to this passage we must understand that Jesus is not so much concerned with the system of ethics I just laid out. His audience probably understood that David's actions and the priests' actions were justified because David was God's anointed and the priests were serving God in their temple labors.

The point seems clear: if David is justified as God's anointed, and if the priests are justified because they labor in the temple, the servants of Jesus are more than justified in their behavior because they are serving one who is greater than David and greater than the Temple! What a dagger in

the heart of their empty religion. How utterly devastating to any Christless system of belief or religion which may have some form of godliness but a denial of true power (2 Timothy 3:5) — a power found only in the person of Christ and the atoning power of His death and resurrection (Ephesians 1:19-21).

Let us never think we have found true redemption through any structure of religion or system of thought that does not have as its chief end the proclamation and exaltation of Jesus Christ, the Lord of Glory (1 Corinthians 2:8).

**But if you had known what *this* means, '\_I desire mercy and not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the guiltless. <sup>-8-</sup> For the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath." (Matthew 12:7, 8)**

### **Desiring Mercy Over Sacrifice**

In their heard-heartedness they didn't understand what God desires. Jesus again quotes the Scriptures.

**For I desire \_mercy \_and \_not sacrifice, And the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings. (Hosea 6:6)  
Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, Ten thousand \_rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, \_The fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?  
<sup>8</sup>He has \_shown you, O man, what is good; And what does the Lord require of you But \_to do justly, To love \_mercy, And to walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6:7, 8)**

But did He not desire sacrifice? Certainly He commanded it over and over. The statement that God desires mercy not sacrifice can to be understood the way we might understand a spouse exhorting his or her mate by saying something like, "I don't want a room-mate, I want a husband or a wife." In this they are not asking their spouse to no longer room with them; they are defining their desire in terms of the priority and the heart of the relationship. It could be understood, "I desire mercy over sacrifice."

If our engagements with Christ leave us merciless, we have had no valuable engagement with Christ. This is so at the core of our faith that Jesus issues that warning that the merciless will himself not receive mercy (Matthew 6:15).

## **Lord of the Sabbath**

And finally Jesus declares Himself to be Lord of the Sabbath. The New Testament calls the Sabbath the Lord's Day (Revelation 1:10) for it has Christ as its aim. Contrary to the popular notion that Jesus has abrogated the Sabbath leaving us with only nine standing commandments, Jesus declares Himself to be the Master of it. What sense would it make that Jesus is Master over a dead ritual? And the fact that Jesus answered the Pharisees' accusation by citing proper and necessary exceptions to Sabbath keeping, rather than merely declaring it to be no longer in effect, argues for its perpetuity—*exception firmat regulam*: the exception confirms the rule. Jesus could have easily said, "There is no more Sabbath." That was not the case.

Let us not think this passage relinquishes God's people from a proper observance of the Sabbath where our actions and thoughts should be dedicated to the public and private exercises of the worship of God. But all the more, as with the other pure and enlightening commandments of God, a proper Sabbath keeping which has Christ as its objective should be desired more than gold (Psalm 19:9, 10).

## Questions for Study

1. How should people determine ethics (pages 2, 3)?
2. How should Christians expect to be attacked by the ungodly (page 3)?
3. Had the Pharisees not read the Scriptures? Explain (pages, 4, 5).
4. Discuss the biblical ethics laid out on pages 5 and 6.
5. Why was it acceptable for David and the priests to do that which was unlawful (page 6)?
6. What are the implications of Jesus' declaration that He was greater than the temple (pages 6, 7)?

7. What does God think of sacrifice apart from mercy (pages 7, 8)?
8. Is there still a Sabbath? What is its aim (page 8)?