

Matthew 12:1-14 – Sabbath controversy takes center stage!

THEME: Conflict and final break of Jesus with the religious rulers.

Again let me call your attention to the movement in the Gospel of Matthew. If you miss it, you miss the message that is here. Matthew is not trying to give a biography of the life of Jesus, nor is he recording the events in chronological order. He presents Christ as King—He was born a King and gave what we call the Sermon on the Mount, which was the ethic of the Kingdom, the manifesto of the King. He demonstrated that He had the dynamic in the miracles He performed, then He sent out His apostles. The reaction was rejection! And then the King pronounced judgment on the cities.

Now there breaks out into the open a conflict between the Lord Jesus and the religious rulers of that day—the Pharisees in particular. Apparently, they were friendly to Him at first, but now they break with Him over the question of the Sabbath day.

We will see the Sabbath question in two places: on the outside in the field, then again on the inside in the synagogue.

Jesus Is Lord of the Sabbath

Mat 12:1 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.

We will see in this episode that Jesus asserts that He is Lord of the Sabbath day. But before we get involved in the sabbatic argument (which has been raging ever since!), let's look at the reason the disciples were pulling off and eating the grain. Why were they doing it? Because they were hungry. Why were they hungry? Because they were following Jesus. You remember that He had said to the young man who wanted to follow Him, "The foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man hath not where to lay his head" (Mat_8:20). And at this time, they were hungry. This is another reminder of the poverty that our Lord bore. And we will see Him defend His disciples' actions. This is where the break with the religious rulers came.

As the disciples plucked the grain and rubbed it in their hands, the Pharisees accused them of threshing the grain on the Sabbath day. Of course they were not breaking the Mosaic Law, as it permitted people to pull the grain (see Deu_23:24-25). If they had been cutting it with a sickle, they would have been harvesting. But the Pharisees had their own interpretation, and therefore they interpret the action as breaking the Law. – McGee

Mat 12:2-3 And when the Pharisees saw it, they said to Him, "Look, Your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath!" But He said to them, "Have you not read what David did when he was hungry, he and those who were with him:

Our Lord did not insist that they had not broken the Sabbath; He refused to argue the issue with them. He cited an incident in the life of David where he had definitely broken the Mosaic Law and was justified. His point was that the letter of the Law was not to be imposed when it wrought hardship upon one of God's servants. Obviously the disciples were hungry. It cost them something to follow Jesus.

We find the record of this in 1Sa_21:1-6. It was during the days of David's rejection as king while Saul was ruling. Likewise, the Lord Jesus was being rejected as King; His messianic claim had not been acknowledged. Now He takes care of His men—regardless of the Sabbath day observance. And David took care of his men although it meant breaking the Mosaic Law. - McGee

Mat 12:4-6 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? Or have you not read in the law that on the Sabbath the priests in

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the temple profane the Sabbath, and are blameless? Yet I say to you that in this place there is One greater than the temple.

The priests worked on the Sabbath day.

The Lord Jesus here claimed superiority over the most holy center of their religious life, which was the temple. As far as the Pharisees were concerned, He had blasphemed. Not only had He broken the Sabbath, but He had blasphemed. - McGee

What are the ramifications if the Lord actually broke the Sabbath?

Mat 12:7-8 But if you had known what this means, 'I DESIRE MERCY AND NOT SACRIFICE,' you would not have condemned the guiltless. For the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath."

"I will have mercy and not sacrifice" comes from Hos_6:6. Our Lord defends His men by saying that they did not break the Sabbath day. Why?

Believe me, He put His hand on the most sacred observance they had when He said that He was Lord of the Sabbath day. In the eyes of the Pharisees, He could make no greater claim. It certainly engendered their bitterness and their hatred.

Now we leave the fields where this encounter took place, and we go into the synagogue—but we are still faced with the same Sabbath question. – McGee

From the Biblical Illustrator

Christ arguing with the Pharisees

We should naturally wish to know how a Divine Being would argue with men. We should expect that His arguments would be clear, convincing, and unanswerable, and, consequently, of that kind best adapted to the subject. In such expectation we shall not be disappointed.

1. Against the opinions of the Pharisees respecting the Sabbath, our Saviour's first argument was taken from the example of David. David, by partaking of the shew-bread, had broken a positive law; but the disciples of Jesus had violated no law.
 2. The second argument is still more pointed. The priests in the temple service did not observe rest on the Sabbath; for, according to the strict letter of the law, their duties could not be performed without violating the Sabbath; yet no blame was attached to them.
 3. The third argument advances a step higher. God prefers the duties of humanity to positive commandments, when it is impossible to observe both these. Therefore, even if the plucking and eating of ears of corn on the Sabbath had been prohibited, the mercy of God would have overlooked it in a case of necessity.
 4. The fourth argument was, that the Sabbath was made for man; therefore it was lawful to do good on the Sabbath. Thus we see that, according to our Saviour, no act of necessity nor of mercy is a breach of the Sabbath. (J. Thomson, D. D.)
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Mat 12:9 Now when He had departed from there, He went into their synagogue.

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Notice that “he went into their synagogue”—not ours but theirs. He said something similar regarding the temple. At first it was God's temple, but He finally said, “Your house is left unto you desolate.”

When the Lord speaks of Calvary Baptist, does He say His church or their church? What can we do to make sure it stays His church?

Mat 12:10-11 And behold, there was a man who had a withered hand. And they asked Him, saying, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?"—that they might accuse Him. Then He said to them, "What man is there among you who has one sheep, and if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will not lay hold of it and lift it out?"

Was this man with the withered hand “planted” there, deliberately, by the Pharisees to trap Jesus into healing him? If so, then there are two important admissions on the part of the enemies of Jesus:

1. They admitted He had power to heal the sick. As we have seen, the enemies of Jesus never questioned His ability to perform miracles. You have to be two thousand years away from it and working in a musty library on a master's or doctor's degree before you can question His miracles. The Pharisees freely admitted that He had power to heal the sick. This is why they planted this man with the withered hand.
2. They acknowledged that when a helpless man was placed in His pathway, He was moved by compassion to heal him, even on the Sabbath day. What an admission!

Their question about the legality of healing on the Sabbath day was designed to trap Him. But Jesus actually trapped His enemies. They conceded that a sheep should be rescued on the Sabbath day—in fact, the Mosaic Law made allowances for that. – McGee

Where have we like Pharisees focused on the letter of the law and forgot about the compassion for our fellow man or woman? Notice, Jesus always moved with Love and Truth. I tend to focus on Truth and forget to always lead with Love like Jesus.

Mat 12:12-13 Of how much more value then is a man than a sheep? Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath." Then He said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." And he stretched it out, and it was restored as whole as the other.

Jesus healed the man on the Sabbath day. Did He break the Law? What is your answer? My answer is that He did not break the Law. - McGee

Mat 12:14 Then the Pharisees went out and plotted against Him, how they might destroy Him.

Up to this point the Pharisees had been friendly. They had wanted to hitch their wagon to His star and go with Him. But the Lord refused to go along with them, and they became His enemies. The break is made over the question of the Sabbath day, and the conflict comes out in the open. From here on these bloodhounds of hate get on His trail and never let up until they fold their arms beneath His cross. They begin now to plot His death, and they undoubtedly want to arrest Him at this time, but they are afraid of the crowds. - McGee