

Lord of the Sabbath  
Matthew 12:1-16

After seeing such an undeniable miracle, how could anyone think that Jesus should be destroyed, should be killed? Now, it is true that Jesus would often take the sick and injured off to the side for healing, and just as often, as we see in verse 16, He would warn them not to tell anyone about what He had done for them. But in verse 13, Jesus performed a very public miracle, and in full view of those who opposed Him. For when Jesus told this man who had a withered hand to stretch it out, his hand was suddenly and obviously restored.

Now, there could be no misunderstanding about this. This was no conjuror's trick. Jesus openly and obviously demonstrated His power to heal, power that was much greater than any that the Old Testament prophets had possessed. And yet after seeing such power with their own eyes, verse 14 says that the Pharisees immediately began planning to destroy Jesus.

Why did they have such a hostile reaction? Strange as it may seem to us, it was because Jesus had performed this miracle on what they considered the wrong day of the week, doing what they considered to be work on the Sabbath.

But we have to give the Pharisees credit for their consistency, and for their seriousness about keeping God's Law. After all, at the beginning of this passage, they had also confronted Jesus' disciples for the same issue. For as they were walking through a field of corn, which is the word the King James Version uses for any kind of grain, the disciples were picking off some of the heads of grain, rubbing them together in their hands to remove the chaff, and snacking on the kernels. The Pharisees labeled this activity as work, and thus condemned Jesus' disciples for breaking the Fourth Commandment.

But nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, the Law of Moses itself draws a clear distinction between working and the sort of casual snacking the disciples were engaged in: "When you enter your neighbor's standing grain, then you may pluck the heads with your hand (you may have a snack), but you shall not wield a sickle in your neighbor's standing grain (you may not harvest someone else's crops)." That's what Deuteronomy 23:25 says, and the Pharisees should have known this.

So, why didn't Jesus quote this verse to them to settle the dispute? Because He didn't just want a "gotcha" moment to embarrass them or make Himself look good. No, He wanted to expose the dead roots not just of their ideas about the Sabbath, but of every part of their legalism. He wanted to show them that their attempt to erect an elaborate list of do's and don'ts in order to curry favor with God just couldn't work. And the first witness Jesus calls to testify against the Pharisees' legalism was none other than King David, who as Jesus points out in verse 4, ate the showbread, the Bread of the Presence.

Now, what was this showbread? Well, God first mentioned it to Moses in Exodus 25 when He told him how the Tabernacle should be built and furnished. One of the items in the Tabernacle was to be a wooden table, a little over 2 feet high, three feet long and 18 inches wide. It was to be plated with gold. In Leviticus 24, the Lord went on to explain that on this table every Sabbath day were to be placed 12 small loaves of bread, in two rows of six.

And Leviticus 24 also made clear what was to happen to the bread that was removed from the table every Sabbath day when fresh bread was put in its place: "It shall be for Aaron and his sons, and they shall eat it in a holy place; for it is most holy to him from the Lord's offerings by fire, his portion forever." In short, God had made it clear that only the priests were supposed to eat the showbread – and David was no priest.

But in I Samuel 21, we read about how David was on the run from King Saul, who was trying to kill him. Hungry and hurried, David asked the priests to let him and his companions eat the showbread, since that was all the food they had. And even though Jesus admits that it was not lawful for David to eat that consecrated bread, he got away with it – God did not condemn him, even for such an obvious breach of the Law of Moses.

And that's one big reason why legalism doesn't work – no matter how detailed and specific our codes of conduct might be, we can never predict every possible emergency, or foresee every possible need. For example, it's wrong to run a red light – but what if you're taking someone who is desperately ill to the hospital and there's no one coming the other way? Does it really make sense to sit there and wait for it to turn green? Just so, God's law prescribes a day of rest every week – but what if all the police officers and firefighters rested on the same day? Do we really think God wants our houses to be broken into or burned down every Sunday?

David's example thus proves that works of necessity are clearly allowed on the Sabbath. But so are works of piety, those related to the worship of God. As I like to tell folks, pastors are a bit like shift-workers – we do most of our teaching and counseling on evenings and weekends. It's when the rest of y'all are not working that we have our committee meetings and lead Bible studies and worship services, right? Just so, Jesus points out in verse 5 that the priests had to work on the Sabbath when the rest of the people were worshipping – but that didn't mean the priests were breaking the Sabbath.

But we find the clearest condemnation of the Pharisees' legalism in verse 10, as they pointed to the man with the withered hand. They wanted to accuse Jesus of Sabbath-breaking if he healed the man, believing as they did that such a healing would mean Jesus was working on that holy day of rest. But Jesus pointed out that none of them would hesitate to rescue one of their animals on the Sabbath if it were to fall into a pit – so how much more should they rejoice when a man, who was much more valuable in the eyes of God, was rescued from sickness or injury on the Lord's Day?

And so as the man stretched out his hand that was withered no more, Jesus made it abundantly clear that the Pharisees' legalism, their narrow view of the Sabbath that left no room even for works of necessity or piety or mercy, really made no sense at all. By His words and deeds, Jesus undermined all their carefully constructed rules and called all their elaborate regulations into question. Simply put, He dared to say they were wrong. It's no wonder that they wanted to kill Him.

But before we go too far down the familiar road of bashing the Pharisees, let's ask ourselves this question: how do we feel when our own opinions are called into question? How do we respond when Christian brothers and sisters challenge our habits or our preferences, pointing out how the Scriptures call our words and deeds into question?

Oh, we might not go so far as the murderous Pharisees. We might not mimic the "cancel culture," shouting down those who disagree with us, or trying to destroy their reputations. That would, after all, be tacky, and we Southerners know better than that. No, when we encounter an unpleasant person, or a distasteful idea, we know what to do – we say, "Bless your heart," and never go near them again.

But however polite we might be, are we really any more open to changing our minds than those Pharisees were? Are we any more interested in bringing our lives into line with what the Bible says, for example, about the Sabbath? Do we really think we should set aside this day to spend with the Lord, resting from all our work – except of course from the works of necessity, piety, and mercy? Or do we just turn the page, perhaps imagining that we know better than the Bible does, pretending that we really don't need a day off every week?

But just ignoring the Scriptures really isn't an option for us, any more than it was for the Pharisees. For Jesus didn't just use His Word and His miracles to show how wrong their opinions were. No, He asserted His authority in verse 8 in a dramatic way, insisting that "the Son of man is Lord even of the sabbath day."

So, yes, the Lord God established the Sabbath at the time of Creation, resting after His labor of creation. And the Lord God commanded His people in the Ten Commandments to keep the Sabbath day holy. But in claiming to be the Lord of the Sabbath, Jesus makes it clear that as the Son of God, He alone is able to interpret and explain not only this law but all the Law of God. And that means that, when you get right down to it, it really doesn't matter what any of us might think is right and wrong. The only thing that matters is what Jesus thinks.

And that also means that we just don't have an option where it comes to obeying Jesus. Don't even look at anyone else lustfully, He says. Don't hate your enemies, even those who are trying to cancel you and destroy your faith and your culture – love them and serve them and bless them and pray for them, He says. Die to yourself and take up your cross. That's what Jesus, the Son of Man and the Son of God says, no matter how little sense any of that may make to us.

Okay, so what does Jesus say about the Sabbath? Well, what did He tell these legalistic Pharisees, these men who were upset enough about what He said and did not only to disobey Him but to kill Him? Well, the one Scripture that He quoted to them in this passage wasn't from the story of David and the showbread. It wasn't even from what the Law of Moses said about the Sabbath. No, verse 7 comes from our responsive reading in Hosea, a passage that helps us understand why God gave us the gift of Sabbath in the first place.

For if we look closely at Hosea 6:6, we find what God really wants from us, and it isn't the sacrifice of burnt offerings. It isn't outward obedience even to the most rigorous set of ethical rules and regulations. No, what God really wants is mercy, and this is the word the King James Version uses to translate the Hebrew word "hesed." And that word, in turn, is used over and over throughout the Old Testament to describe God's faithful, unconditional covenant-keeping love for His people.

In short, what God really wants is for us to love Him and to love other people with all our heart. That's why God sent the prophets to convict us of our sin and to draw us back into a right relationship with Him. That's why God sent the Son of Man to die for us, to offer the only sacrifice necessary for our sins, to live on our behalf the perfectly obedient life that no form of legalism, no matter how carefully thought-out and rigorously observed can possibly accomplish.

And every Sabbath, we have an opportunity to put down everything else that we're doing – even good and helpful things – and do what Hosea urges us to do at the beginning of chapter 6: simply to draw near to the One Who will heal us and who will bind us up. For as we draw close to Christ by faith, we not only die with Him to all the fear and anxiety that we somehow have to measure up to a standard of holiness that is impossible for us to meet in our own strength. No, when we trust in Him we are also assured that we will be raised up with Him on the third day, rising not only to the hope of resurrected life in the world to come, but the hope of new life now – a life full of the Spirit of Christ, a life marked by purity not just of hand but of heart, a life of genuine mercy, genuine love not only for our friends but also for our enemies.

Yes, every Sabbath day, God invites us to draw close to Him in a special way, to share in His righteousness and to experience His mercy, His never-failing, unconditional self-sacrificial love. Why wouldn't we want to take a day off to spend with a God like that? Why wouldn't we want to draw nearer to Him each and every day?