

Chapter 41: The Lord of the Sabbath

Matthew 12:1–8

In the previous passage, Jesus promised rest to the souls of those who follow him. In part, Jesus was restoring the promise of Sabbath rest that God had given to his people in the Old Testament—a promise that had been twisted from a plowshare into a sword that the Pharisees turned against God’s people. More than restoring what God’s people had lost from its original purity, Jesus was revealing himself as the true fulfillment of the Sabbath rest that God’s people had never attained in its fullness. Here, we see Jesus wresting the Sabbath from its perversion in the hands of the Pharisees in order to usher his people into the rest for which their hearts longed. Here, our Savior declares that *Jesus is the Lord of the Sabbath*.

The Prohibitions of the Sabbath (Matt. 12:1–2)

It is difficult to know how closely the story in Matthew 12 follows after the scene in Matthew 11. Matthew’s transition, “at that time” (v. 1a), is a very general phrase (see Matt. 14:1).¹ Instead of understanding the flow of these two passages as chronologically sequential, it is better to see the thematic connection on the topic of *rest*. Jesus had just promised to give rest to those who came to him (Matt. 11:28–30), and now we read the basis for making such a claim: he is the Lord of the Sabbath (v. 8).² To clarify the nature of the rest that Jesus, the Lord of the Sabbath, gives to those who come to him, Jesus must put away misconceptions of the Sabbath that were common in his day.

In particular, Jesus wants to redirect our attention away from ceremonial questions about what may or may not be done on the Sabbath, in order to redirect our attention to the more substantive question of the *purpose* of the Sabbath. As Calvin writes, the question of ceremony stems from a legalism: “It is the invariable practice of hypocrites to allow themselves liberty in matters of the greatest consequence, and to pay close attention to ceremonial observances.”³ The Scriptures had declared that the Sabbath was to be a day where God’s people would learn how to delight in the Lord:

[13] “If you turn back your foot from the Sabbath, from doing your pleasure on my holy day, and call the Sabbath a delight and the holy day of the LORD honorable; if you honor it, not going your own ways, or seeking your own pleasure, or talking idly; [14] then you shall take delight in the LORD, and I will make you ride on the heights of the earth; I will feed

¹ Blomberg, *Matthew*, 195.

² France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 455.

³ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, 2:46.

you with the heritage of Jacob your father, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.” (Isa. 58:13–14)

The Pharisees, however, had taken away the emphasis on delight in the Lord and replaced it with a list of duties from the Lord. The day became more about what someone could *not* do than about what someone *could*—and would *want* to—do.

So, when Jesus’ disciples hungered and plucked grain to eat, the Pharisees complained to Jesus that their actions were unlawful (vv. 1–2). Lenski makes an interesting observation that Jesus himself did not pluck heads of grain, but only his disciples: “This gave Jesus the tactical advantage of defending others, not himself, and of compelling the Pharisees to raise the question about the real principle at issue: ‘Is it, or is it not, lawful?’ instead of passionately assailing his person.... This was wisdom and mastery.”⁴ Here, the question was not about whether the disciples could pluck grain from someone else’s field, since Deuteronomy 23:25 permitted picking grain from a neighbor’s field with your hands, but not with a tool for harvesting, like a scythe.⁵ Rather, the question was about whether this could be done on the Sabbath. How, then, should this question be answered?

The Pharisees sought to answer this question through a complex matrix of casuistic law. *Casuistry* refers to a process of applying general or unrelated laws to specific applications. Sometimes casuistry is good, as when we try to understand what is actually required of us in the Law (see WLC #102–148). The Pharisees thought they were doing good casuistry when they sought to apply the Sabbath commandment by asking endless questions about whether a certain action constituted *work*. In this case, the Pharisees judged the act of plucking grain as similar to a farmer’s harvesting his crop, and therefore constituting work, according to their casuistical reasoning.

The problem with this, as Jesus will explain, is that in all their reasoning they lost sight of the larger goal of the Sabbath. Calvin puts this well:

Now the only reason for keeping the Sabbath was, that the people, by sanctifying themselves to God, might be employed in true and spiritual worship; and next, that, being free from all worldly occupations, they might be more at liberty to attend the holy assemblies. The lawful observation of it, therefore, must have a reference to this object; for the Law ought to be interpreted according to the design of the Legislator.⁶

In this connection, we should remember that the actual Fourth Commandment does not command *rest* from labor as an end in itself. Rather, the only imperatives in the Fourth Commandment demand that we “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy” (Ex. 20:8). Resting from labor is not an end in itself, but only a means to the end of sanctifying the Sabbath day through worship. For the Pharisees, the question revolved around whether someone had sufficiently rested. For Jesus, the more important question was whether something interfered with worshiping and delighting in the Lord. Thus, the Pharisees focused on ceremonies, while Jesus focused on substance.

⁴ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 461.

⁵ Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 510.

⁶ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 2:47.

The Purpose of the Sabbath (Matt. 12:3–5)

Because Jesus interprets the Sabbath according to its purpose, and not according to its prohibitions, he recognizes the place of necessity or mercy—that is, Jesus has a place for meeting our own needs and the needs of others. He begins by reminding them of the story of 1 Samuel 21, when David and his men lawfully ate the bread of the Presence, which was reserved for priests alone (vv. 3–4). This story is not related to the Sabbath, although (as many commentators note) the previous week’s bread of the Presence would have been removed from the tabernacle and consumed on the Sabbath (Lev. 24:8). Instead, Jesus is reminding the Pharisees about a different ceremonial law—and, one not arrived at according to complicated casuistry, but by direct divine command (Lev. 24:9).⁷ By pointing to David’s case, Jesus proved that human need (especially human hunger) outweighed the ceremonial prohibitions.

Importantly, it wasn’t that David or the priest Ahimelech broke the ceremonial law, but that they recognized that the ceremonial law properly yielded to human need in that case. They did not break the law because they recognized, as Calvin writes, “the ceremonies of the Law are not violated where there is no infringement of godliness.”⁸ The point of forbidding any but priests to eat from the bread was to maintain the separation of God’s holy things from what was unclean. David’s men had been kept holy on their mission, so that Ahimelech was able to preserve God’s boundaries *and* human life by feeding that bread to David and his men (1 Sam. 21:4–6). Thus, David and Ahimelech focused on the *purpose* of the rule, rather than the *prohibition* of the rule. Thus, they weren’t breaking the rule, but properly applying it to their specific case. Their casuistry was accurate in a way that the Pharisees’ was not, since they understood the relative values of the rules. Here, Jesus is showing us the first purpose of the Sabbath: *mercy*.

In v. 5, Jesus raises another case to prove his point. As France points out, Jesus asks the Pharisees both times, “Haven’t you read?”, which “suggests that what Jesus is about to say should have been obvious to anyone familiar with the OT text, though in fact in all these cases there is a considerable element of creativity about the way Jesus applies the familiar text.”⁹ In this case, Jesus is not pointing to a single, exceptional situation, but the weekly goings-on of the temple: “Or have you not read in the Law how on the Sabbath the priests in the temple profane the Sabbath and are guiltless?” (v. 5). If the purpose of the Sabbath was the make *rest* from labor ultimate, then the extensive work done on the Sabbath by the priest would violate that law; however, “the duties of piety are in no degree inconsistent with each other....for when the Law enjoins men to abstain from their employments, it does not forbid them to perform the services of religion.”¹⁰ Lenski explains the significance of this seeming tension between the Four Commandment and the duties of the ceremonial law:

So the law itself shows that its ceremonial requirements are not absolute and he who makes them so contradicts that law itself. The ceremonial law is itself subservient to a higher law

⁷ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 462.

⁸ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 2:48.

⁹ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 458.

¹⁰ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 2:48–49.

and principle. It, indeed, required certain outward restrictions on labor in the old covenant, but it also required certain laborious ministrations in the Jewish Temple. Both were required, *yet not on their own account but only for the spiritual need of the people*. By the satisfying of *this* need a good and gracious God was honored and not by a lot of outward regulations and forms. These latter were the shell and no more.¹¹

Jesus is confronting the Pharisees' prioritization of the shell of the ceremonial duties surrounding the Sabbath above the ultimate purpose of the Sabbath: delighting in God. Here, Jesus is showing us the second purpose of the Sabbath: *worship*.

The Progression of the Sabbath (Matt. 12:6–8)

In v. 6, Jesus shifts from appealing to established caselaw to asserting something altogether new: “I tell you, something greater than the temple is here.” France makes sure we do not miss the significance of this claim:

It is hard to overestimate the shock value of this pronouncement....To threaten the temple, as Jeremiah had discovered long ago, was to commit unpardonable treason. As the story of Jesus unfolds, his negative attitude to the temple and its activities (21:12–16, 18–22; 23:38; 24:1–2) will become the central symbol of his challenge to the status quo (see 21:23–27) and the issue which above all will unite people against him. At his trial it will play a central role (26:60–61), and on the cross it will still be thrown against him (27:40).¹²

Even the order of Jesus' presentation heightens the offensive of Jesus' words to his audience: “The gradation thus is: 1) the Tabernacle (David), 2) the Temple, 3) something greater, i.e., the presence of the God-man himself, or whom both the Tabernacle and Temple were a symbol or a type.”¹³ Jesus has been moving from lesser to greater, and he concludes by pointing to the greatness of his own presence.

The Pharisees had lost sight of the merciful nature of the Sabbath, which gave freedom to God's people from the labors once per week so that even the lowest slave could be freed to worship. Thus, ensuring that people had food to eat (and, that their bodies were whole, as we will see in the next section) was in perfect consistency with the Sabbath.: “And if you had known what this means, ‘I desire mercy, and not sacrifice,’ you would not have condemned the guiltless” (v. 7). The Pharisees criticized Jesus' disciples because they focused on the prohibitions, not the purpose, of the Sabbath. Ultimately, an emphasis on the prohibitions leads us to lamely “imitate piety by outward signs, and yet pervert it by confining their laborious efforts to the carnal worship alone.”¹⁴ God is not interested in the outward conformity of our bodies, but the inward conformity of our hearts. The prohibitions

¹¹ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, 463.

¹² France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 460.

¹³ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, 464.

¹⁴ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 2:50.

are important insofar as they are the natural outworking of an inner purity for the heart, but they are useless when they become the chief measure of our holiness—and especially when they lead us to apply them to the harm of others.

Ultimately, all this leads Jesus to say something profound: “For the Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath” (v. 8). Lenski is spot-on when he writes, “this does not imply that as Lord of the Sabbath Jesus can disregard the Sabbath, set it aside, do what he may please with it. As Lord of the Sabbath, who instituted it, he upholds it, he will tolerate no Pharisaical interference with its true purpose.”¹⁵ Or, as Calvin writes, “they are mistaken, I think, who suppose that in this passage the Sabbath is entirely abolished; for Christ simply informs us what is the proper use of it.”¹⁶ Hagner also puts this well: “The religious restrictions elaborated by human beings into calcified codes of conduct often paradoxically fight the purposes of God.”¹⁷

Discussion Questions

1. How does this passage connect to the previous section (Matt. 11:28–30)? What significance does the theme of “rest” have for Jesus’ disciples and for us today? Why do so many conversations about the Sabbath obsess over the prohibitions of the Sabbath, related to “rest” from work? How does this focus on the prohibitions of the Sabbath lead us astray from the ultimate purposes of the Sabbath?
2. How does the story of how David and his men eat the bread of the Presence relate to the Sabbath? What does that story illustrate about God’s purposes of mercy for the Sabbath day? What does Jesus’ illustration about the work of the Levitical priests on the Sabbath illustrate about God’s purposes of worship for the Sabbath day? Does this mean that Jesus declared all work permissible on the Sabbath day? Why or why not?
3. What does Jesus mean when he declares that “something greater than the temple is here” (v. 6)? In v. 7, does Jesus mean that God cared nothing about sacrifice? If so, why did God command sacrifice in the Old Testament? If not, what exactly does Jesus mean by saying that God desires mercy, rather than sacrifice? What does it mean for Jesus to declare himself “lord of the Sabbath?”
4. What is your own background regarding the Sabbath? Was your experience of Sabbath characterized by fear and harshness, as you sought to avoid breaking its prohibitions? Or, was your experience of Sabbath characterized by laxity and looseness, as you disregarded what God commanded in the Sabbath? How does Jesus confront both of those misunderstandings of the Sabbath? How might you make progress in calling the Sabbath a delight (Isa. 58:13)?

¹⁵ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 466.

¹⁶ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 2:51.

¹⁷ Hagner, *Matthew 1 – 13*, 331.