

Chapter 42: Doing Good on the Sabbath

Matthew 12:9–14

In the preceding sections, Jesus promised to give “rest” to his people (Matt. 11:28–30). Then, Jesus declared that he is the Lord of the Sabbath (Matt. 12:8). Thus, Jesus gave us a promise and a doctrine about God’s Sabbath rest for his people. Now, Jesus continues his teaching on the Sabbath with a word of application. Rather than giving us a complex list of do’s and don’t’s, Jesus simplifies God’s intentions for the Sabbath dramatically: *do good on the Sabbath*.

Doing What is Lawful (Matt. 12:9–10)

So, Jesus arrives at a synagogue where there is a man with a withered hand (vv. 9–10a). The word for “withered” (ξηράν; *xēran*) here is elsewhere used to describe something that is dried out, and therefore dead and unfruitful (Luke 23:31). It is possible, then, that this point is symbolically significant to portray Jesus’ arrival to heal the withered spirituality of his people. Later on, the verb form of this same word (ἐξηράνθη; *exēranthē*) will describe the fig tree that Jesus causes to be “withered away” as a symbol of judgment on spiritually fruitless Israel (Matt. 21:19). In this context, the Pharisees’ question is important: “Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?” (v. 10b). As Lenski observes, “We see how little impression Christ’s word regarding mercy has made on them, v. 7. They still ask only ... ‘is it lawful,’ and not, ‘is it merciful?’”¹ Once again, the Pharisees focus their attention on the prohibitions set down for the Sabbath rather than on the purpose of the Sabbath.

The particular edge to the Pharisees’ question (which they asked “so that they might accuse him”; v. 10c) emphasized the relative lack of urgency to heal this man. Jewish teaching recognized the permissibility of action in the case of a life-threatening emergency, and even if someone simply worried that the emergency might be life-threatening: “Whenever there is doubt whether life is in danger this overrides the Sabbath.”² In this case, however, this was a “disability that had probably not occurred recently and that in no way threatened the man’s life or health. If Jesus wished to help the man, he could obviously wait one day until the Sabbath had passed. The situation did not require immediate action.”³ If the only relevant question is whether something *had* to happen, then this man should not have been healed on this day.

Doing What is Good (Matt. 12:11–13)

¹ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 468.

² *Yoma* 8:6. Cited in Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 305.

³ Blomberg, *Matthew*, 197–98.

In response to the question of the Pharisees, Jesus asks his own question: “Which one of you who has a sheep, if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will not take hold of it and lift it out?” (v. 11). The ESV translates this as “a sheep,” but in the Greek there is a slightly greater emphasis on the singularity of this sheep: “one sheep” (πρόβατον ἓν; *probaton hen*). Commentators differ, however, on what to make of this single sheep. Does Jesus mean to speak about a situation where a man only owns this one sheep? Morris, for example, writes that Jesus “looks to the future possibility that one of his hearers who owned just one sheep would have it fall into a ditch on the Sabbath. It is his entire flock. What will he do? Will he not lay hold on the animal and haul it out?”⁴

In context, however, Jesus is emphasizing the relatively *low* (not high) value of the sheep in comparison to a human life (see v. 12). So, it seems more likely to me that Jesus is imagining someone who possesses many sheep, as Lenski argues: “for a whole flock one might do a great deal, but one lone sheep amounts to nothing. The argument is from the minor to the major, and thus the idea is to make the value of the sheep as low as possible.”⁵ In addition to the low value of a single sheep, the specific situation where the sheep has fallen into a pit is probably a situation where “the animal is to be thought of as trapped and therefore distressed rather than as in a situation which is considered to be immediately life threatening.”⁶ In other words, Jesus is asking about the least urgent situation possible: wouldn’t anyone still lift that sheep out of the pit?

In contrast to that low-urgency situation, Jesus then asks, “Of how much more value is a man than a sheep!” (v. 12a). By appealing to their own understanding, Jesus makes it “plain, therefore, that if any man should relieve the necessity of brethren, he did not, in any degree, violate the rest which the Lord has enjoined.”⁷ Now, once again, it is important to recognize that “Jesus challenges not the sabbath law itself but the interpretation of that law.”⁸ If one focuses only on the restrictions and prohibitions from working so that “rest” becomes ultimate, then Sabbath excludes caring for human beings who are of infinitely more value than a sheep.

In the previous passage, Jesus focused on need for *mercy* on the Sabbath. Here, Jesus goes further to urge *doing good*: “So it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath” (v. 12b). In part, Jesus is reframing the question: “The Pharisees had posited the alternative: ‘to do or not to do?’ And they answered, ‘No doing at all on the Sabbath.’ The moment the question is rightly put: ‘to do good or to do harm; to save a life or to kill’ (Mark 3:4; Luke 6:9); or, as Matthew has it: καλῶς ποιεῖν [*kalōs poiein*; ‘to do good’], to perform actions that have moral qualities, the question answers itself.”⁹ In addition to reframing the question, by this Jesus also indirectly indicts the Pharisees for doing evil by maintaining a standard that refuses to heal a man in distress.¹⁰ Could the Pharisees legitimately claim that their evil intentions in testing him were preferable on the Sabbath than Jesus’ good work in healing the man?¹¹ Jesus, then, immediately and “instantaneously“ heals the man: “It is also purely

⁴ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 306.

⁵ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 469.

⁶ Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 488.

⁷ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 2:53–54.

⁸ Hagner, *Matthew 1 - 13*, 334.

⁹ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 469.

¹⁰ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 2:54.

¹¹ Carson, “Matthew,” 328.

verbal, so that no visible ‘work’ is involved.”¹² No matter which direction the Pharisees approach this, Jesus has left them entirely without any charge to bring against Jesus.

What, though, does this principle mean for believers today?: “it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.” Obviously, this principle would forbid breaking God’s law on the Sabbath, but Jesus also shows how we must not omit any duties in caring for others.¹³ How far, though, does this principle go? France explains the significance of this principle well:

The corollary that “it is permissible to do good on the sabbath” goes far beyond the specific issue under discussion. Its very lack of specificity is in striking contrast to the rabbinic desire to leave nothing to individual judgment. As a guide to sabbath observance it could result in widely divergent practice, and it lends itself to use as a convenient self-justification for any chosen course of action. What especially distinguishes it from the rabbinic rulings, and indeed from most of the OT laws themselves, is that it is positive rather than prohibitive. Like Jesus’ version of the Golden Rule (7:12), it puts the onus on the individual to decide what is “good” and how it may or may not be squared with the equally “good” aim of the sabbath law, to provide a day of holiness and rest.¹⁴

Once again, Jesus is showing us that the law is spiritual (Rom. 7:14). It does not ultimately concern us with external do’s and don’t’s, but rather with an internal orientation toward loving God with our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and with loving our neighbor as ourselves.

With this principle in mind, the *rest* enjoined in the Fourth Commandment retains real significance, but not as an activity that is ultimate in itself. Rather, rest becomes the means to the end of worship and mercy. Along these lines, we should perhaps notice the particular example Jesus gives of the necessity of raising a sheep out of a pit. *Sheep* are frequently used as a metaphor for God’s people (e.g., Ps. 100), and the word “lift out” is the word that is elsewhere translated as “raise up”—the common word for Jesus’ resurrection from the dead. The Sabbath is closely connected with Jesus’ raising up his people from the pit of the grave. Indeed, so closely connected are these themes that Jesus’ resurrection forever subsequently changes Sabbath observance so that we celebrate the Sabbath every week on Sunday, the first day of the week, which we call “the Lord’s Day” (Rev. 1:10).

Doing What is Evil (Matt. 12:14)

After this, “the Pharisees went out and conspired against him, how to destroy him” (v. 14). Lenski brings out the irony of the Pharisees’ profound hypocrisy: “To heal on the Sabbath—a mortal crime; but to plot murder—a perfectly lawful act!”¹⁵ While the Pharisees opposed doing good on the Sabbath, they willingly engaged in doing evil to plot Jesus’ destruction. By this, Matthew perfectly demonstrates their depravity and wicked motives. They do not care about good on the Sabbath, for

¹² France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 465.

¹³ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 2:54.

¹⁴ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 465.

¹⁵ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 471.

they “pursue what is nothing more than a shadow of the righteousness of the Law...to stickle more about the form than about the substance.”¹⁶

Discussion Questions

1. What might the withered hand of the man in the synagogue symbolize (v. 10)? What does that tell us about the state of the Sabbath in Israel at this time? What are the Pharisees seeking when they ask Jesus whether it is “lawful to heal on the Sabbath” (v. 10)? Why do they put such emphasis on the lawfulness of activities on the Sabbath? How does this question conflict with what Jesus had told them in the preceding section (Matt. 12:1–8)?
2. What does Jesus illustrate by the story about the sheep in a pit? How does this relate to our own thinking about what we should and should not do on the Sabbath? By this illustration, does Jesus change or revoke the Sabbath law itself? If not, which doctrine of the Sabbath is he pushing against? What does Jesus mean when he tells us to “do good on the Sabbath” (v. 12)? How does this principle reshape your own thinking of Sabbath?
3. What do we learn about the Pharisees’ motives when from their reaction to Jesus’ healing (v. 14)? What do we learn about the genuineness and depth of the Pharisees’ spirituality from this reaction? Why do the Pharisees think themselves righteous in spite of the murder in their hearts? How might we convince ourselves of the same foolish lie when we “stickle more about the form than about the substance” (Calvin)?
4. How have you approached the Sabbath in the past? How have you thought about the Sabbath in the past? How does Jesus’ teaching about the Sabbath in these last few passages challenge your practices and your thinking? What are you doing now on the Sabbath that is not “good”? What are you omitting from the Sabbath that would be “good” for you to do? How has Jesus been teaching you to make progress in calling the Sabbath a delight (Isa. 58:13)?

¹⁶ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, 2:52.