

## Matt. 12:1-14 - Lord of the Sabbath

Written by Tim Black

Sunday, 16 August 2009 13:00 - Last Updated Tuesday, 10 April 2018 14:46

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### Body

1.

**Works of Necessity Are Proper on the Sabbath vv. 1-8.** First, works of necessity are proper on the Sabbath

1.

**Need & act v. 1.** We see the disciples' need and act in v. 1—they were hungry, so they ate.

1.

### Text

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1 At that time Jesus went through the grainfields on the Sabbath. His disciples were hungry, and they began to pluck heads of grain and to eat.

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It may be difficult to imagine how you can eat wheat right out in the field. You can roll the head of wheat in your hands to separate the kernels from the chaff, then eat the kernels raw. Older translations speculate this grain was corn, which is easier to imagine eating right off the plant. If the way to this synagogue had been through my backyard, the disciples could

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have picked up some pecans and eaten them; if it had been through my parents' backyard, they could have picked some apples. Whatever kind of grain this was, you could eat it right there in the field.

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**Pharisees' criticism v. 2.** V. 2 tells us the Pharisees' criticism.

1.

### Text

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2 But when the Pharisees saw it, they said to him, "Look, your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath."

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Technically, the disciples were doing what is called "gleaning;" taking a very small amount of your neighbor's crop, which was allowed by the gleaning law in **Deut. 23:25**, where the principle was you could pluck their grain with your hand but not a sickle. You snack with your hand; you harvest with a sickle. Harvesting your neighbor's grain would be stealing, but gleaning is not.

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The Pharisees' reasoning was that harvesting on the Sabbath is wrong, and gleaning a lot is harvesting! But gleaning a little without permission is a snack for the hungry; gleaning a lot with the owner's permission is a merciful way of providing for the poor.

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The first year after graduating from college I didn't own a car, so I walked to work, and I discovered a patch of strawberries and blueberries in a power line cut just South of Covenant College. When I walked home I'd snack. One strawberry here, three blueberries there.

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That was very different from harvesting. I got some of the neighborhood kids together to harvest. When we went out to harvest we got ourselves ready. We had buckets, sunscreen, chaperones—the works. The disciples weren't harvesting. They were snacking.

**Jesus' reply vv. 3-8.** This should have satisfied the Pharisees' concern for the letter of the law, but their problem ran deeper. Their hearts were far from the law, and far from the Lord.

1.

**Example cases vv. 3-5.** The law's meaning is commonly settled by considering particular cases, so Jesus provides two from Scripture.

**David ate the showbread vv. 3-4.** First, David ate the showbread because he was hungry.

**Text**

3 He said to them, "Have you not read what David did when he was hungry, and those who were with him: 4 how he entered the house of God and ate the bread of the Presence, which it was not lawful for him to eat nor for those who were with him, but only for the priests?"

This account is found in 1 **Sam. 21**. **Lev. 24:5-9** says the bread of the Presence "is

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most holy to Aaron and his sons

," and

**Ex. 29:33**

says "

a stranger shall not eat of it.

" Yet the priest gave it to David and his men, not under compulsion, but to show mercy to their need. The exceptional case of necessity was not stated in the law, but it was implied. David was allowed to eat not because of his honor, but his hunger, which we can see from the fact that Uzziah was a king, but when in the pride of his heart Uzziah did what only a priest may do, he was struck with leprosy. (2 Chron. 26:16ff) But God did not punish David for eating this bread. This is because God is merciful toward our need. As Matthew Henry puts it, in Christ's kingdom "The greatest shall not have their lusts indulged, but the meanest shall have their wants considered."

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**Priests profane the Sabbath v. 5.** Second, the priests profane the Sabbath.

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**Text**

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5 Or have you not read in the Law how on the Sabbath the priests in the temple profane the Sabbath and are guiltless?

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The word "profane" here should be taken in its sense of "treating the holy as if it is common," rather than the sense of "breaking God's law." Christ does not mean the priests sinned, but that they did what others could not do on the Sabbath day—they worked on the Sabbath

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Matthew Henry explains this well. "*The priests in the temple* did a great deal of servile work on the sabbath day; killing, flaying, burning the sacrificed beasts, which in a common case would *have been*

*profaning the sabbath;*

and yet it was never reckoned any transgression of the fourth commandment, because the temple-service required and justified it. This intimates, that those labours are lawful on the sabbath day which are necessary, not only to the

*support of life*

, but to the

*service of the day;*

as tolling a bell to call the congregation together, travelling to church, and the like. Sabbath rest is to promote, not to hinder, sabbath worship."

When the OPC's general assembly considered the question of whether public transportation may be used to get to church, John Murray's maxim won the day: "Sabbath-keeping must not prevent church-going."

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**Argument vv. 6-8.** In addition to these example cases, Christ presents three compelling reasons in vv. 6-8.

### Text

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6 I tell you, something greater than the temple is here.

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7 And if you had known what this means, 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the guiltless.

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8 For the Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath."

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**Jesus is greater than temple v. 6.** First, works of necessity are proper because Christ is greater than the temple. Christ is greater than the temple, because He is not merely a type or shadow of the presence of God, but in Him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily.

" ( **Col. 2:9**

) The temple service of worship justified the priests' work on the Sabbath, so the worship of Christ, who is greater than the temple, must also justify His disciples' work on the Sabbath.

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**I desire mercy, not sacrifice v. 7.** Second, God says "I desire mercy, and not sacrifice." "Ceremonial duties must give way to moral,"

especially if the moral duty is necessary, or is merciful. Sabbath rest is both physical and spiritual, that we may worship God with both body and soul (Ex. 23:12), so physical resting should not prevent the spiritual rest of participating in worship. "

If your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off

" ( **Matt. 5:30**

), but if only an emergency surgery on Sunday will guarantee you will be able to lift holy hands in prayer, have the surgery.

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**Lord of the Sabbath v. 8.** A third reason is that Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath. "All things were created through Him and for Him.

" ( **Col. 1:16**

) Through Him God the Father established the Sabbath at creation, gave the Fourth Commandment at Sinai, and changed the day to Sunday by His resurrection. For these reasons Christ should be worshiped on the Sabbath, and all that is necessary to do so should be done. But what is more, if we worship Jesus as our merciful Savior from 10:45 to noon on Sunday

, then let us remember His mercy to sinners, and to the hungry, the rest of the day.

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**Works of Mercy Are Proper on the Sabbath vv. 9-14.** Not only works of necessity, but also works of mercy are proper on the Sabbath.

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**Location v. 9.** Works of mercy are proper because the merciful Christ is Lord. This is evident even in Matthew's passing comment about the next account's location. In v. 9 we read,

1.

### Text

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9 He went on from there and entered their synagogue.

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Jesus went into "their synagogue"--the synagogue of these Pharisees. Matthew Henry comments, "We must not, for the sake of private feuds and personal piques, draw back from public worship." Christ is Lord of the Sabbath; He is also Lord of the church. Do you run from His people, or do you follow Him?

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**Problem & question (trap) v. 10.** V. 10 presents the cripple's problem and the Pharisees' question.

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1.

### Text

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10 And a man was there with a withered hand. And they asked him, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?"- so that they might accuse him.

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**Problem.** Do you see the problem? The man was unable to work. He was in need of help. At the heart of mercy is helping someone in need who can't help themselves. Note that this man was in the synagogue, so most likely was there to worship. God commands us to "do good to all, and especially to those of the household of faith."

" (

### Gal. 6:10

) I remember seeing a man in Uganda arrive at church swinging himself on his hands and hips, because he cannot walk. Who knows how far he crawls on Sunday morning to worship His Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Is it lawful to go out of your way to help that man get to church?

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**Question.** The Pharisees should have been ashamed for asking the question they asked, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?"

" But they cared neither about the true intent of God's law, nor about the crippled man. They wanted to find a way to accuse Jesus.

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**Jesus' answer vv. 11-12.** In the first half of this passage the Pharisees sought to frighten Jesus away from His church; now they seek to throw Him out of it. But Jesus came to the synagogue, and He is Lord of the Sabbath, and Lord of the Church. So Jesus answers their sinful question by teaching them from God's word. The rabbis taught physicians could not heal on the Sabbath unless life was at stake, but God's word teaches that God heals on the Sabbath. True worship is not devoid of God's mercy toward us, and must never be devoid of



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our mercy toward others. " 6 Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? 7 Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh? 8 Then shall your light break forth like the dawn, and your **healing** shall quickly arise; your righteousness shall go before you; the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard.

" (

**Is. 58:6-8**

)

1.

**Example question: Would you rescue a sheep? v. 11.** Jesus asks the Pharisees a question.

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**Text**

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11 He said to them, "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?"

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Jesus may have had in mind **Ex. 23:4-5, Deut. 22:4, or Prov. 12:10.**

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**Ex. 23:4-5**

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4 If you meet your enemy's ox or his donkey going astray, you shall bring it back to him. 5 If you see the donkey of one who hates you lying down under its burden, you shall

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refrain from leaving him with it; you shall rescue it with him.

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## Deut. 22:4

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4 You shall not see your brother's donkey or his ox fallen down by the way and ignore them. You shall help him to lift them up again.

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## Prov. 12:10

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A righteous man has regard for the life of his beast.

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Jesus takes the principle of these passages and creates an example to which every Pharisee would have to admit, "Yes, I would do that." A sheep is useful for providing us with food and clothing, so it is of some value. If it falls into a pit, the sheep's life and its owner's property may be lost. This is clearly a situation where there is not only a need, but an emergency.

. Mercy is help given in dire distress.

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Taking hold of the sheep and lifting it out are specific acts that require effort. They are

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work. Yet they are good to do in an emergency.

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**Answer** v. 12 They are good to do because a man is worth more than a sheep.

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**Text**

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12 Of how much more value is a man than a sheep! So it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath."

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Christ drew out the general principle that "it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath," and leaves it for the Pharisees to decide whether healing is "to do good."

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**Man healed v. 13.** When Jesus sees one of His sheep in great need, in danger, in distress, what does He do? You see what He does in v. 13.

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**Text**

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13 Then he said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." And the man stretched it out, and it was restored, healthy like the other.

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**Healthy.** The word "healthy" means whole, sound, full of life again, fully capable of doing everything it was made to do.

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**Pharisees conspire to destroy v. 14.** The Pharisees should have recognized that Jesus had power that could only come from God, so Jesus should be worshiped, should be believed, should be followed. They should have recognized that Jesus' mercy to this man is a reason to rejoice in all of God's mercy to miserable sinners.

### Text

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14 But the Pharisees went out and conspired against him, how to destroy him.

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Christ healed, but we can seek to destroy. Christ's mercy triumphs over judgment, but our judgment can wish it could triumph over His mercy. Christ played a dirge for the Pharisees in this man's withered hand, and they did not mourn. Now He plays the flute for them by healing him, and they will not dance! They neither know the meaning of God's law, nor do they love the glory of God's grace. Our hearts can be as far from God's justice as they are from God's mercy.

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### Conclusion.

1.

But Jesus Christ is Lord. With the Father of mercies and the God of all comfort (2 Cor. 1:3) He is the merciful Lord of the Sabbath. This day is a day to rejoice that Christ shared in our sufferings, and a day to rejoice to share in His. To let that same mind be in us that was in Christ Jesus, in humility to count others better than ourselves, each of us looking not to our own interests, but to the interests of others, (Phil. 2:5, 3-4), offering our bodies as living sacrifices, in view of God's mercies. (Rom. 12:1)

2.

Do you know that today is a day of mercy? It is a day filled full of God's mercy. You hear about it in God's word, but does it follow you out the door? We must rest from our labor in order to worship God on the Sabbath—rest in order to worship. But Christ calls us to do good on the Sabbath in more ways than only to worship—visiting the sick, relieving the poor, helping in an emergency. These are works of mercy. The disciples were hungry, and the man was  
crippled

. Do you know someone who is hungry, or crippled, who not only needs—but could even learn for the first time—the saving mercy of God, if you give them a cup of cold water today in Jesus' name? Do not let your heart be cold to the hungry, and the crippled, on this Lord's Day. Your Savior, Jesus Christ—who has shown you mercy—is Lord of the Sabbath.

Matthew Henry, 164.

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