

LORD OF THE SABBATH

CORE PASSAGE: MATTHEW 12:1-14

CONTEXT

People didn't know what to do with Jesus. In Matthew 11, even John the Baptist struggled with doubts about Jesus. Jesus lamented an unresponsive generation, yet to those who did accept Him, Jesus gave one of the greatest promises in Scripture: "Come to me . . . and I will give you rest" (Matt. 11:28). In Matthew 12, however, we see the religious leaders' misunderstanding of the heart of God. They mistook God's provision of the Sabbath to display God's goodness for the good itself.

KEY CONCEPT

Mercy and goodness outweigh ritual and law.

As you examine Matthew 12:1-14:

- Note that the law is a means to an end, not the end itself.
- Recognize that Jesus heals and restores because He is merciful and good.



TIMELINE

Jesus Heals a Leprous Man
(Matthew 8:1-4)

**SESSION STUDY: Jesus Teaches About and Heals
on the Sabbath (Matthew 12:1-14)**

Jesus Forgives and Heals a Paralyzed Man
(Matthew 9:1-8)

Jesus Delivers His Sermon on the Plain
(Luke 6:17-49)

Daily Readings

- Day 1:** Mark 2:23-3:6
- Day 2:** Matthew 12:1-21
- Day 3:** Matthew 12:22-50
- Day 4:** Matthew 13:1-23
- Day 5:** Matthew 13:24-58
- Day 6:** Psalm 59



Scan this QR code to access
this session's Scripture passages.

JESUS POINTS TO MERCY AS GREATER THAN SACRIFICE (MATTHEW 12:1-8).

Highlight each reference to the law or to another Old Testament passage.

1 At that time Jesus passed through the grainfields on the Sabbath. His disciples were hungry and began to pick and eat some heads of grain. **2** When the Pharisees saw this, they said to him, “See, your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath.” **3** He said to them, “Haven’t you read what David did when he and those who were with him were hungry: **4** how he entered the house of God, and they ate the bread of the Presence—which is not lawful for him or for those with him to eat, but only for the priests? **5** Or haven’t you read in the law that on Sabbath days the priests in the temple violate the Sabbath and are innocent? **6** I tell you that something greater than the temple is here. **7** If you had known what this means, I desire mercy and not sacrifice, you would not have condemned the innocent. **8** For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.”

In the busyness and non-stop action of traveling with and ministering with the Messiah, there came a time when Jesus’s disciples were hungry on the Sabbath. So Jesus let them eat. Some Pharisees watching nearby, who already didn’t like Jesus, seized the opportunity to “expose” His lawlessness for letting His disciples break the Sabbath. The Pharisees did exactly what many religious people today often do—they overlooked real people and their needs in favor of rigid human rules and regulations.

LEADER NOTE: In 1 Samuel 21, David and his men were running from Saul and were hungry. When they approached Ahimelech the priest at the tabernacle in Nob, he gave them the bread of the Presence, consecrated bread that only priests were supposed to eat by law (Lev. 24:5-9). Jesus was making the point that love of God and love of neighbor surpasses other laws. Other instances in Scripture where the law was broken for the well-being of God’s people was when the Hebrew midwives saved the Hebrew babies, lying that the babies were born too fast (Ex. 1:9), and when Rahab lied to save the Hebrew spies in Jericho (Josh. 2:5).

GOSPEL CONNECTION

God’s mercy allowed His Son, Jesus, to die on the cross for humanity’s sin. We have always missed the mark of God’s holy standards of the law. But through Christ, we are rescued from the penalty of death because of His love and goodness.

What is a modern-day example of someone who cares more about the letter of the law than the genuine needs of people?

The Pharisees were caught up on a technicality. Harvesting and threshing were prohibited on the Sabbath, but the disciples were only plucking enough to eat at the moment (cf. Deut. 23:25). Rabbis had prohibited plucking and eating grain as one of the thirty-nine actions that they defined as work on the Sabbath.¹ Jesus, as the Messiah, could have responded to their strict interpretation by declaring His authority and let that be that. Instead, Jesus used their complaint to expose a problem in their hearts—they did not understand the goodness of God that lay underneath His law. They saw regulations meant to restrict people where God gave loving guidelines intended to bless and give rest.

The laws, the rituals, and the sacrifices were never an end in themselves. God's people were never meant to look for salvation in religious rites. God's laws were meant to reveal God's character and draw the hearts of the people into loving communion with their Lord. Jesus clarified that God had never intended His people to strut around wielding Sabbath restrictions like a club to beat people when they stepped out of line. The rule was graciously given to motivate and encourage people toward the kind of life God created them to live: pleasant and joyful, with time for rest and worship.

LEADER NOTE: Are there areas in which the modern church has tended to be more like the Pharisees than like Jesus? We should read this passage as a cautionary tale against applying the laws of God without understanding the heart of God. We must continually ask ourselves, "Are my thoughts and actions consistent with God's character, or am I walking in my own wisdom and understanding?" Such questions can help us identify past errors to avoid future ones.

When have you or someone you know misunderstood or misapplied the heart behind one of God's commands?

BIBLICAL CONCEPT

LORD OF THE SABBATH: To claim to be Lord of the Sabbath was to claim to be Lord of the law. The only Lord of the law is the One who gave it—God Himself. In this passage, Jesus did not just tweak cultural norms; He claimed divine authority.

LOVING CARE TOWARD OTHERS FULFILLS THE LAW OF GOD (MATTHEW 12:9-14).

Underline words in the passage connected to law. Circle words in the passage connected to love.

9 Moving on from there, he entered their synagogue. **10** There he saw a man who had a shriveled hand, and in order to accuse him they asked him, “Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?” **11** He replied to them, “Who among you, if he had a sheep that fell into a pit on the Sabbath, wouldn’t take hold of it and lift it out? **12** A person is worth far more than a sheep; so it is lawful to do what is good on the Sabbath.” **13** Then he told the man, “Stretch out your hand.” So he stretched it out, and it was restored, as good as the other. **14** But the Pharisees went out and plotted against him, how they might kill him.

Jesus already exposed the fault in the Pharisees’ hearts and asserted His authority as Lord of the Sabbath. He already declared that the heart of God prefers mercy over sacrifice and real love over rigid religiosity. But Jesus did not just talk the talk. With lurking Pharisees, who were already fuming with anger, Jesus marched into the synagogue on the Sabbath and acted out the principle He had just taught for the benefit of a man who suffered and needed healing.

The Pharisees questioned Jesus and were hoping for another reason to condemn Him. Previously, they accused Jesus’s disciples breaking Sabbath laws. This time they watched to see if Jesus would dare to heal someone on the Sabbath. In one action, Jesus brought together His miraculous healing ministry and His prophetic condemnation of the religious leaders’ hard hearts. The man’s shriveled hand was made whole, and the Pharisees were madder than ever.

LEADER NOTE: To apply these principles without the wisdom of God’s Word and the guidance of His Spirit can lead to many errors. Many today are quick to overlook or outright reject the truth of God’s Word in the name of “love.” That is not what Jesus was doing here. Jesus was upholding the law in a way that intentionally resisted the Pharisees’ perversion of the law. Rejecting God’s commands—sinning—is never an act of love in reality. There must be a middle ground between becoming like the Pharisees and becoming lawless and willing to justify any behavior in the name of love and kindness. The answer is found in the person of Jesus, who is both perfectly loving and perfectly truthful, One who could declare both “Neither do I condemn you” and “Go, and from now on do not sin anymore” (see John 8:11).

What norms of ours might Jesus upset if He walked into one of our church services?

In this passage, you can almost feel the anger and disappointment of Jesus as He marveled at the spiritual numbness of the religious leaders. Jesus declared that they valued sheep more than they valued men made in the image of God. Jesus understood that the Sabbath was made for the good of man and the glory of God. He declared that doing good to a man in need is the thing that most glorifies God. And this was not just “kind of good”; Jesus said that His actions were lawful. He kept the law, the true heart of the law, by healing the man, and the Pharisees broke the law by caring more about their traditions than image-bearers. Jesus’s actions echoed His teaching that all the Law and the Prophets hang on the greatest commandments: love God and love your neighbor (Matt. 22:37-40).

LEADER NOTE: What might seem to us like merely debating the interpretation of the law was actually Jesus asserting a strong claim to be the Messiah. The Pharisees absolutely realized that Jesus’s words and actions were pointing to His messianic authority, and they were furious. According to them, Jesus’s behavior was heretical and blasphemous because they refused to believe He is the Messiah, and from that moment on, they plotted to kill Him.

How is God glorified when His people do good to those around them?



THEOLOGY CONNECTION

GOD IS MERCIFUL: Mercy refers to God's compassion and is often expressed in God's withholding something, such as punishment for sin (Eph. 2:4-5; Titus 3:5). Both mercy and grace are undeserved, meaning humanity can do nothing to earn God's mercy and grace. If one could, then it would no longer be the free gift of mercy or grace.

ARRIVAL

ENGAGE: As your group arrives, ask them to think of a time they broke the law because a higher priority made it necessary. Invite a few volunteers to share briefly their examples. Ask for a show of hands: “Have you ever broken or ignored a law because it was inconvenient or harmless? Have you ever broken a law, such as a speed limit, because you knew you could get away with it?”

CONTEXT

SAY: After commissioning the twelve disciples (Matt. 10:1-15; Mark 2:13-19), warning them of the trials to come and urging them to fear God as they ministered to people’s needs, Jesus continued teaching and preaching in towns and villages, calling the lost to come and find rest for their souls in Him (Matt. 11:28). Some of the things that burdened the people were all the religious “laws” imposed by Jewish tradition. Jesus’s interaction with the Pharisees in today’s passage would not be the only time Jesus would criticize the religious leaders for their oppression and hypocrisy (Matt. 23:4; Luke 11:46).

RECAP

ASK: As you prepared this week, did anything stand out as something you had never considered before?

SAY: Many of the religious laws enforced by the scribes and Pharisees were based on the Mosaic law but were man-made distortions of the laws God had given through Moses. In fact, strict obedience to their human laws had become more important for them than reflecting God’s mercy and grace. The disciples, since they followed Jesus and did not have a source of income, were within their rights to eat some heads of grain from the fields (Deut. 23:24-25), but the Pharisees accused them of breaking the Sabbath laws. Jesus, therefore, confronted the Pharisees about God’s desire for faithful love over stringent rule-keeping (see Hos. 6:6).



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GROUP ACTIVITY

Notes

CHART: Direct your group to page 74 in their Personal Study Guide (PSG), where they will find “The Letter and the Spirit.” Recreate the chart on a board in your room so you can record the group’s findings as they interact with Scripture.

The Letter and the Spirit

Read the passages below. Write down the law’s instructions in “The Letter” column. Write down the heart behind God’s law in “The Spirit” column.

THE LETTER	THE SPIRIT
EXODUS 20:8-11	
EXODUS 20:12	
EXODUS 23:1-2	

REVIEW: Pass out copies of **Psalm Item 9: The Sabbath** and briefly review it. Say: “The Sabbath laws were not supposed to be a burden or constant source of frustration for God’s people. But the Pharisees, who were devoted to following God’s laws, imposed strict interpretations of what was ‘unlawful,’ or considered ‘work,’ on the Sabbath. They focused on and added to the letter of the law but forgot the spirit of the law—God’s heart behind the laws He gave them.”

ENGAGE: Invite volunteers to read the verses listed on the chart: Exodus 20:8-11; 20:12; and 23:1-2. For each passage, lead the group to identify and record the letter of the laws and God’s intention behind the laws.

SAY: God gave each of these laws to Moses while he spent forty days on top of Mount Sinai. They are good laws that flowed out of God’s good character, and following them would help the Israelites prosper in the land. Yet not every circumstance fell neatly under a specific law, which was why Moses spent his days deliberating hard questions about the law (see Ex. 18:13-23). The spirit of



the law refers to the heart issue the law was meant to address. Jesus often called out the Pharisees for their strict adherence to the letter of the law while disregarding God's heart behind it.

READ: Invite volunteers to read aloud Matthew 12:1-14; Mark 7:9-13; and Matthew 26:59-61.

DISCUSS: The Pharisees accused Jesus of breaking the law of Moses, but on several occasions, Jesus pointed out their hypocrisy. Ask: "How did the Pharisees 'interpret' the law to forbid compassion on the Sabbath? To absolve themselves of responsibility to care for their aging parents? To manipulate false witnesses at Jesus's unlawful trial?"

DEBRIEF

Why do you suppose Jesus debated with the religious leaders before He healed the man on the Sabbath?

Why are motives and the heart so important to Jesus?

SUMMARIZE

Jesus was more concerned with His relationship with people than He was with following man-made religious dogma. His ability to remain true to His Father's will is an example we should follow rather than trying to criticize or conform to those who are not in agreement with us.

HEAD, HEART, HANDS

Walk the group through the Head, Heart, Hands section in the PSG (p. 75). If running short on time, specifically highlight the **Head** section in this week's study, inviting volunteers to share their responses to the question in this section.



HEAD: We must understand the intention and design of the commands of God. God gives laws to His people for their good. If a command of God is not bringing good to His people, then perhaps we have misunderstood His command, or we have a skewed view of what is good. We should look to Jesus as the One with the authority to show us the true intent of God's law.

Where might your thinking on God's commands need to move away from rigid religiosity toward life-giving love?



HEART: Love fulfills God's law. We obey the Lord when we serve others and reflect God's love for them. We can be certain that we are within God's will when we love His image-bearers well. If we find in ourselves a lack of love for others, we should ask God to stir us up to greater love.

What is one situation in your life right now in which you need to ask God for greater love toward others?



HANDS: Jesus both taught people about the heart of God's law and took action to demonstrate the heart of God's law. When Jesus healed the man in the synagogue, He displayed to all those watching the true love and mercy of God. Christians, as the body of Christ, are called to display the loving heart of God in the same way.

What is one way you can actively display the loving heart of God through your actions this week?

NEXT STEPS

Challenge the group to consider these actions as responses to this week's session.

- Spend at least ten minutes each day praying for your church, its spiritual leaders, its ministries, your upcoming worship service, and members whom you know are struggling.
- Consider speaking with one of your church's leaders about the reason for any elements of your worship services that you do not understand.
- Jesus showed compassion to the people He healed, whether they chose to follow Him or not. Consider helping someone this week without pre-judging how they should respond to your help.

Invite volunteers to share prayer needs for this week. Encourage them to record these in the space on page 75 in their PSG so they can pray for others throughout the week.

PRAYER REQUESTS AND PRAISES



PRAYING SCRIPTURE

CLOSE: Pray through Psalm 59:16-17 with your group. Thank God for His help as you deal with enemies who seek to malign or attack you because of your love for Him. Thank the Lord for and joyfully proclaim His faithful love.

References

1. Craig L. Blomberg, Matthew, The New American Commentary, vol. 22 (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), 196.