

# 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" (Matthew 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.

## PERSONAL PREPARATION

MATTHEW 12:1-8

### JESUS POINTS TO MERCY AS GREATER THAN SACRIFICE.

*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.”

#### 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.

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.

**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. Deuteronomy 23:25). Rabbis had prohibited plucking and eating grain as one of the thirty-nine actions that they defined as work on the Sabbath.<sup>1</sup> 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.

**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.

## PERSONAL PREPARATION

MATTHEW 12:9-14

### LOVING CARE TOWARD OTHERS FULFILLS THE LAW OF GOD.

*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.

#### 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 (Ephesians 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.

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.

**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 (Matthew 22:37-40).

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



**GROUP EXPERIENCE**



**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
<b>EXODUS 20:8-11</b>	
<b>EXODUS 20:12</b>	
<b>EXODUS 23:1-2</b>	

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?



**Key Concept:** Mercy and goodness outweigh ritual and law.



## HEAD

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

## PRAYING SCRIPTURE

Read Psalm 59. Sometimes people attack or question us when we respond in love to those whom others may think are unlovable. Ask the Holy Spirit to help you remain faithful to the spirit of God's law of love while staying true to Scripture.



## HEART

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

## PRAYER REQUESTS AND PRAISES



## HANDS

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

