

Matthew 12:1-21: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Matthew chapter 12 verses 1 to 21 He went on from there and entered their synagogues, 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? 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? Of how much more value is a man than a sheep? So it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath. Then he said to the man, Stretch out your hand. And the man stretched it out, and it was restored, healthy like the other.

But the Pharisees went out and conspired against him, how to destroy him. Jesus, aware of this, withdrew from there, and many followed him and he healed them all, and ordered them not to make him known.

This was to fulfil what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah. Behold my servant whom I have chosen, my beloved with whom my soul is well pleased. I will put my spirit upon him, and he will proclaim justice to the Gentiles.

[2 : 0 0] He will not quarrel or cry aloud, nor will anyone hear his voice in the streets. A bruised reed he will not break, and a smouldering wick he will not quench, until he brings justice to victory, and in his name the Gentiles will hope.

In the first half of Matthew chapter 12, there are two incidents that focus upon Jesus' relationship to the Sabbath. He demonstrates that, as he declared concerning himself at the end of the previous chapter, he is the one who gives rest, the true intent of the Sabbath.

And these Sabbath stories are easily misunderstood as Jesus presenting some technical, legal exceptions to the law, or simply trumping it. There is more going on here, however. Jesus is revealing the deeper intent of the law, and the place of the Sabbath within the larger structure of God's purpose.

Jesus is fulfilling the law, not merely trumping it. Jesus reveals that the Sabbath was given for rest, not as a burden upon people. The Sabbath is for giving relief to the burdened, whether by hunger or by ailment or infirmity.

People who are bearing heavy burdens should find rest on that day of the Sabbath. We should bear in mind here that the Sabbath played a very important part in Israel's identity.

[3 : 1 9] It was the great sign of the covenant at Sinai, as circumcision was of the covenant made with Abraham. If we compare Exodus chapter 31 with Genesis chapter 17, we can see many parallels between these two signs.

To violate the Sabbath was a very serious offence then. It was to violate the covenant itself. And Jesus challenges the practice, or rather the non-practice, of the Sabbath, the way that the Sabbath was made into a burden rather than a gift of rest that actually fulfilled its intent in the book of Exodus.

The disciples were permitted by the law to eat of the grain as they passed through a field. This was a general thing that was permitted to do as a result of the gleaning commandments. So the point of the Pharisees' objection was not that they were stealing some food that wasn't their own.

They had every right to eat of the food, for the most part. The issue was whether this constituted work on the Sabbath. And if it constituted work, they were breaking the law of the Sabbath.

And Jesus, in response, gives the examples of David and the priests. In 1 Samuel 21 verses 1 to 7, Now that's usually restricted to the priests.

[4 : 3 3] But Ahimelech the priest recognized that the law of the showbread existed for the good of God's people, not merely as an end in itself. And in those circumstances, the hunger of David and his men took precedence over rigorous adherence to the letter of the law.

Not because it was a breaking of the law and something that trumped the law, but because that was the actual intent of the law all the way along. It is also important that it was David for whom this was permitted.

We're not necessarily to presume that this would be the case for anyone who came along. Rather, Jesus is presenting himself to be the greater David who has the prerogative to determine in this sort of instance.

His men are like David's men. Likewise, they're also akin to the priests who have to do the work of Yahweh on the Sabbath, even though it involves labour that would be prohibited under other circumstances.

They're moving sacrifices around. They're doing particular tasks that in any other context, they would be prohibited. But within the context of the service of the tabernacle, it does not count as work.

[5 : 39] It does not count as a breaking of the Sabbath. Likewise, Jesus' disciples are committed to a divine ministry. And that divine ministry takes priority and it's not a violation of the Sabbath at all.

The work of the priests isn't counted as Sabbath-breaking work because it is in service of the temple. And now there's something greater than the temple here. Jesus himself.

Now just think how startling a claim this is, what it implies. The temple was the place where God was present with his people and the place where service to God was rendered.

And Christ is declaring that he is not just the greater David, but the greater temple. He is the site where God is present. And as his disciples follow and serve him, their activities are not a breaking, but a fulfilment of the intent of the Sabbath.

Once again, Jesus refers to Hosea 6, verse 6. God desires mercy, not sacrifice. And the contrast here is between law-keeping for its own sake and law-keeping that is truly ordered towards the fulfilment of God's will.

[6 : 48] The point of the law is not just to obey a rigorous set of commandments. It's to fulfil God's will. This is something that we've been seeing in the book of Matthew to this point, especially in the Sermon on the Mount.

Jesus is the one who fulfils the law. And the righteousness of his disciples exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees. The scribes and the Pharisees do not understand what it means that God desires mercy, not sacrifice.

They're focused upon rigorous adherence to the letter of the law, and yet they do not bring rest. They're not bringing God's peace. They're not the people who are fulfilling God's redemptive purpose, as Jesus teaches in the Sermon on the Mount that his disciples must do.

They are the ones who are bringing righteousness into relationships, healing to broken situations, and that's what the law always intended. The law of the Sabbath was not just about rigorous adherence to some principle of rest.

It was about giving rest to people. It was about entering into God's rest and bringing that rest to others. And Christ is a living Sabbath, a living rest giver.

[7 : 59] He's the one who goes through the land giving rest to people who are struggling under heavy burdens. He's the one who pulls out sheep from pits on the Sabbath.

He's coming to people who are laboring and are heavy laden, like the Israelites were in the land of Egypt. And he's giving them rest. He's a walking Sabbath. And his disciples are acting in service of him.

Now, as the Pharisees oppose him, as they oppose his giving of rest to people like the man with the withered hand, what they're doing is fundamentally opposing the Sabbath principle itself.

Now, they may think they're obeying the letter of the law, but they're undermining the very spirit of it. Christ is the one who gives the true rest that the Sabbath bears witness to.

He is the Lord of the Sabbath. Jesus directly responds to the challenge of his opponents by healing a man in the synagogue with a withered hand on the Sabbath. Again, he's giving rest on the Sabbath, which fulfills the intent and the commandment of the Sabbath.

[9 : 03] And he illustrates this with the example of a sheep that needs aid on the Sabbath day. Now, people are far more important than sheep, as Christ points out. But he's also acting as the good shepherd in this instant.

He's the one who replaces the false shepherds. The people of Israel are like sheep without a shepherd. And as God declares he will do in Ezekiel chapter 34, he has come in person in Jesus

Christ to seek out the lost sheep, to seek out the sheep that have been left as if sheep without a shepherd, that have been preyed upon by predatory shepherds who have been false and unfaithful. Jesus has come to rescue the sheep from the ditch and to bring them out and bring them into Sabbath rest. He is the one who declares the acceptable year of the Lord, the year of the Lord's favour, the Jubilee year, the great year of rest for God's people.

And the sheep in the ditch isn't enjoying the Sabbath rest that is God's gift to the animals. So it's the duty of the owner to relieve the sheep's distress and give him the rest that belongs to him.

Sabbath keeping is about giving rest, not laying heavy burdens on people. And all of this demonstrates the way that Christ describes himself and his yoke at the end of the previous chapter. [10:21] In healing a person with a withered hand, Jesus might also be referring back to an Old Testament narrative. In 1 Kings chapter 13, a man of God confronts the wicked King Jeroboam and declares that he's going to be judged.

And the king reaches out his hand to say seize him and his hand withers. And then the man of God heals that withered hand. There are similar themes playing here.

The people are trying to seize Christ and Christ's healing of a man with a withered hand might bring that biblical memory to mind. We might think about the story of Jeroboam, his rebellion, and the fact that here is the true heir of the Davidic kingdom.

And he is restoring, but also judging, the false rulers who are trying to seize him. Knowing that the Pharisees are seeking to destroy him, Jesus then withdraws from them.

And this is presented as a fulfilment of Isaiah chapter 42. Jesus is the humble and the gentle deliverer of the people. He's not concerned with proud assertion of his status, with flaunting his power, or with contentious argument, but with gracious action towards the weak, the vulnerable, the wounded, the oppressed, and the outsiders, such as the Gentiles.

[11:38] That is Christ's way of being. That's what marks him out. The reference to the Gentiles here anticipates the Great Commission, while the beginning of verse 18 looks back to chapters 1 to 4 of the book.

Jesus is the one who is the son, the servant, who has been chosen, the one who has been anointed with the Spirit of God. In all of his actions and words here then, Jesus is underlining the meaning of the words that end chapter 11.

Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Sabbath rest, true Sabbath rest. He is the Lord of the Sabbath, who is giving rest to a beleaguered and a troubled people who are labouring under these heavy burdens.

Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart. He is the one who is not going to break a bruised reed or quench a smouldering wick, and you will find rest for your souls.

Again, that Sabbath theme coming to the forefront. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light. Contrasted with the heavy legalistic burdens of those who desire sacrifice rather than mercy, Christ is the one who shows mercy to the lost and wounded and beleaguered sheep of the house of Israel.

[13:02] And while their shepherds will fleece them and seek to oppress them and pray upon them, Christ will bring them rest as the true Davidic shepherd. As the true temple, he is going to be the place where they find communion with God.

And as the one who fulfills all that his namesake Joshua anticipated, he will bring them into the greater promised land. A question to consider.

In Jesus' teaching in this chapter, he's exposing a fundamental perversion of the purpose of the law, where the law is made into a means of imposing burdens upon people rather than actually fulfilling the will of God and giving his sheep rest.

What are some ways in which we can pervert Christ's command in a similar way? And how can we avoid or overcome such errors?■■■■