



Rejecting Legalism

JESUS OFFERS MERCY, NOT RELIGIOUS RULES.

MATTHEW 12:1-14

We love freedom. Seldom do we like it when someone tells us what to do. And so we often chafe against rules that limit our freedom. Most people who live in an orderly society follow the rules willingly. Occasionally, though, we may hear of situations that demand a rule or regulation be set aside. When established rules become burdensome or unreasonable, we often become angry at the system.

 What situation can you think of where laws and regulations were administered when mercy might have been a better approach?

UNDERSTAND **THE CONTEXT**

MATTHEW 12:1-50

Matthew 12 introduces a major turning point in the ministry of Jesus. While there had been minor grumblings of His opponents, chapter 12 introduces the first major confrontation between the Pharisees and Jesus. They even began to plot how they might kill Him (Matt. 12:14). The initial conflict in chapter 12 centered around rules related to the Sabbath observance. It involved two incidents where Jesus and His disciples acted outside the prescribed traditions of the Pharisees (vv. 1-14).

The religious leaders' opposition of Jesus went beyond Sabbath rules. They essentially opposed everything Jesus and His disciples did. This included Jesus's healing ministry. The Pharisees raised the issue of the source of Jesus's power to heal. Was it from God or from Satan? They accused Jesus of driving out demons by the power of Satan (v. 24).

Because of the escalating conflict, Jesus sometimes warned those whom He healed not to spread the news of their healing (v. 16). He recognized that further escalation of conflict with the religious leaders would lead too quickly to His arrest. At this point, the time had not yet arrived for His death; there was more work to be done.

Jesus pointed to the heart of the Pharisees' problem. They had substituted their traditions for a genuine relationship with God. The result of that lack of relationship clouded their judgment on everything about Jesus. Jesus declared that religious rule without a relationship with God leads to disaster (vv. 43-45).

Chapter 12 concludes with a brief glimpse of the reaction of Jesus's mother and siblings to Jesus. While His family relationship was important, Jesus expanded that relationship to include all who come to Him in faith.



Read Matthew 12:1-14 in your Bible. What key words or phrases describe the legalism promoted by the Pharisees? What words or phrases describe the mercy offered by Jesus?

EXPLORE **THE TEXT**

RELIGIOUS RULES (MATT. 12:1-2)

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.”**

VERSE 1

The two incidents of conflict in verses 1-14 took place on the ***Sabbath***. *Sabbath* comes from the Hebrew word *shabbat*, meaning ceasing, rest, or inactivity, and is based on God’s rest in Genesis 2:3. God commanded to the Israelite people to observe a day of Sabbath rest (Ex. 20:9-11).

Sabbath rest was a centerpiece in Judaism. But over time, religious leaders moved away from God’s intention for the Sabbath. They took great effort to make up the definitions of what could and couldn’t be done on the Sabbath day. For example, these leaders established rules that regulated how far a person could travel on the Sabbath. According to their tradition, one could travel around 3,000 feet, slightly more than a half mile. Jesus and His disciples obviously ignored those man-made traditions as they ***passed through the grainfields***.

Not only were they traveling on the Sabbath, but the disciples ***began to pick and eat some heads of grain***. This, too, was a violation of the traditions of Sabbath rest. Picking grain would be understood as harvesting the grain. Also, the disciples would need to rub the grain in their hands to separate the kernel from the husk. This would be interpreted as threshing and winnowing. Clearly, to the Pharisees, the disciples were breaking the Sabbath rules.

DID YOU KNOW?

First-century Jewish rabbis divided work into thirty-nine categories of labor that was prohibited on the Sabbath, with each category having hundreds of sub-categories.

VERSE 2

Notice that the Pharisees **saw** the disciples plucking and eating the grain. What were the Pharisees doing in the grainfields that allowed them to see this? Were they following them in order to gain incriminating evidence against Jesus? Throughout the Gospel narratives it seems the Pharisees were continually present, shadowing Jesus (see, for example, Luke 5:17).

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The Pharisees complained to Jesus that His disciples were doing what was **not lawful**. It is important to note that the disciples were not stealing grain, for the law allowed them to do this (see Deut. 23:25). The problem for the Pharisees was that the disciples' action violated their man-made traditions. But it wasn't a violation of God's commandment related to the Sabbath. God is dishonored when we put man-made traditions on the same level as His Word.

Typically, adherence to rules and regulations becomes more lax over time. This was not the case with the Jewish religious leaders after the Babylonian exile. They kept adding more layers of interpretation and application to the law of Moses. Keeping the Sabbath had become burdensome for people as they tried to follow the minutia of the traditions.



What role should religious tradition play in the practice of our faith?

SOMETHING GREATER (MATT. 12:3-8)

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.”

VERSES 3-4

Jesus began His defense of His disciples by asking the Pharisees, ***Haven’t you read*** the story of ***David*** entering ***the house of God*** to secure bread for his troops? This account is recorded in 1 Samuel 21:1-6. What Jesus was saying is this: “Aren’t you teachers of the law paying attention to what you teach?” With this question, He gave two examples from the Old Testament refuting the strict interpretation of Sabbath observance by the Pharisees.

The ***bread of the Presence*** (or shewbread) consisted of twelve loaves, one for each tribe of Israel, that were baked fresh every week and placed in the Holy Place of the Tabernacle (Ex. 25:30). The loaves that were replaced were to be eaten only by the ***priests***. But David and his men were given these loaves by the priest for their nourishment. By telling this story, Jesus was saying that some needs may supersede ceremonial law. In other words, hunger can be a priority over ritual.

VERSES 5

The second illustration from the Old Testament to which Jesus pointed was that of the priests ***in the temple*** who were required to perform the daily sacrifice of the lambs—even on the Sabbath. This involved killing animals and maintaining fire on the altar. Exodus 35:3 forbid the Israelites to build a fire on the Sabbath. Yet these priests were ***innocent*** in violating that regulation. They were doing what was necessary in the worship of Israel.

***By His very nature as the Son of God,
Jesus is greater than man-made laws.***

VERSE 6

Jesus concluded His two illustrations with a startling claim: ***something greater than the temple is here***. Jesus’s authority was greater than that of the temple. The implication was that His authority superseded the authority and the traditions of the Pharisees.

Such a statement would have greatly angered the religious leaders. It would have exposed the raw emotions of Jesus’s enemies

and contributed further to their hatred of Him. Yet, by His very nature as the Son of God, Jesus is greater than man-made laws. Jesus's argument was preparing the Pharisees for the conclusion in verse 8—Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath!

Jesus is greater than man-made laws.

VERSE 7

Jesus enforced His defense of the action of the disciples by pointing to the first part of Hosea 6:6: ***I desire mercy and not sacrifice.*** This is the second time in Matthew that Jesus quoted this verse (see also Matt. 9:13). Jesus reiterated that God places compassion ahead of ritual. For the Pharisees, ritual was more important than people. Because of their attitude, the Pharisees had ***condemned the innocent.*** The word *condemned* spoke of judging or pronouncing sentence against someone.

The word *innocent* is the same word Jesus used in verse 5 to speak of the priests carrying out their sacrificial duties on the Sabbath. Both the priests and the disciples were without guilt because God's will is mercy over religious ritual.

The term *sacrifice* entails the whole of the system of ceremonial law under the old covenant. Jesus wanted the Pharisees to know that God deals with mankind in mercy, and His desire is that people show mercy to others as well.

God's will is mercy over religious ritual.

VERSE 8

Jesus often spoke of Himself as the ***Son of Man***, a title that pointed to His humanity. This term, however, was used in Daniel 7 to speak of an exalted being to whom belonged glory and eternal dominion. Jesus used that term to refer to Himself throughout His earthly ministry. It speaks of Jesus as fully man and fully God.

As the Messiah, Jesus is also ***Lord of the Sabbath***. In saying this, Jesus was claiming that He was greater than the Sabbath. His authority preempts man-made laws. He has the authority to direct the way in which the Sabbath should be observed. This is because He is God.



What do these verses teach us about Jesus and His expectations of His followers?



KEY DOCTRINE: *The Lord's Day*

Activities on the Lord's Day should be commensurate with the Christian's conscience under the Lordship of Jesus Christ. (See Mark 2:27-28; John 4:21-24.)

COMPASSIONATE RESPONSE (MATT. 12:9-14)

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.

VERSES 9-10

Matthew records that Jesus was *moving on from there*. Plainly, Jesus and the disciples were traveling on the Sabbath in violation of the traditions of the rabbis. The exact destination is not revealed, but Jesus *entered their synagogue*. This likely would have been the synagogue of the Pharisees who had confronted Jesus and His disciples. Some scholars speculate that Jesus was aware of the presence of the man with the *shriveled hand* and planned to use his presence to give a real-life lesson on the meaning of Sabbath-keeping and to demonstrate His divine authority.

The Greek text of verse 10 includes the word that can be translated "behold" or "look" to point to the man with the shriveled hand. From this word of emphasis, the implication is that the man had been largely ignored by the worshipers in the synagogue.

But when Jesus and His critics showed up, suddenly the handi-capped man was center stage.

Evidently, the Pharisees had ignored Jesus's earlier statement that God desired mercy instead of ritual. Aware of this man, they chose to place their man-made rules over his needs. They baited Jesus with a question designed to trap Him: ***Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?*** They asked this ***in order to accuse him***. The word *accuse* means to charge, condemn, or critically judge. In fact, the English word "categorize" comes from the Greek word for *accuse*. The Pharisees wanted to "categorize" Jesus as a lawbreaker. Interestingly, in their question they implied that Jesus could heal the man.

The possibility of breaking Sabbath law arose from the fact that the man's shriveled hand was not a life-threatening malady; therefore, Jesus could have waited until the next day. If the man had been in grave danger of dying, the traditional interpretation of the law allowed for assisting on the Sabbath.

VERSE 11

In Mark's account of this incident (Mark 3:5), we are told that Jesus looked at His opponents with anger. He responded to their question with a question of His own. This was often the pattern with Jesus when a question was directed to Him.

His question involved an illustration from everyday life. As Jesus had done twice before (Matt. 6:26; 10:31), He contrasted the value of the life of an animal with the value of a human life. Through this illustration, Jesus contrasted the man-made rules of the Pharisees that permitted rescuing an animal on the Sabbath with the prohibition to heal a person on the Sabbath. In so doing, He exposed the inconsistency of the Pharisees.

VERSE 12

Jesus stated the obvious: ***a person is worth far more than a sheep***. In theory, every Pharisee would agree with that statement. In the reality of this situation, though, the Pharisees were so filled with hatred for Jesus that they would be more inclined to help the sheep and ignore the man who needed healing.

The response of Jesus is significant: ***it is lawful to do what is good on the Sabbath***. The statement was made in the present tense, meaning it is lawful, not just once, but every time.

VERSE 13

Jesus commanded the man to ***stretch out*** his ***hand***. The man might have initially held back, thinking he had no ability to stretch out his hand. But when he obeyed, his shriveled hand was ***restored*** and was ***as good as the other***. The word *good* parallels the idea of doing good on the Sabbath.

VERSE 14

The Pharisees were not convinced by Jesus's argument nor His miracle of healing. Instead, they moved to get rid of this upstart teacher. They ***plotted against him***. The implication is that they had already decided to get rid of Jesus; what remained was the ***how*** of doing it. The word ***kill*** also means "destroy." Their hatred was so great that they would rather destroy Jesus for breaking their traditions than allow mercy to be shown to a suffering person.



How might the authority of Jesus be perceived as a threat?





BIBLE SKILL: *Use other Scripture to help understand a Bible passage.*

Compare Mark 3:1-5 and Luke 6:6-10 to Matthew's account of the man with the shriveled hand in 12:9-14. Record any additional details you find in the parallel passages. How do the parallel passages help you get a broader picture of this scene?

APPLY THE TEXT

- + We should avoid judging others based on their adherence to a religious tradition or practice.
- + We should give greater attention to the condition of our heart than to adherence to man-made rules.
- + We must seek to make our priorities and practices consistent with what God values most.

 **Who in your Bible study group might be facing a difficult situation that could be eased by showing mercy? What might your group do to extend to this person the mercy they need?**

 **Consider how you may have put man-made rules and traditions above Scripture. How can you correct this problem?**

 **Memorize Matthew 12:8.**

Prayer Needs
