

SESSION 11

Rejecting Legalism

MATTHEW 12:1-14

JESUS OFFERS MERCY, NOT RELIGIOUS RULES.



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 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.



1 At that time Jesus passed through the grainfields on the Sabbath. His disciples were hungry and began to **pick and eat** **A** some heads of grain. **2** When the **Pharisees** **B** saw this, they said to him, “See, your disciples are doing what is **not lawful** **C** to do on the Sabbath.” **3** He said to them, “Haven’t you read **what David did** **D** 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** **E** violate the Sabbath and are innocent? **6** I tell you that something **greater than the temple** **F** is here. **7** If you had known what this means, I desire **mercy** **G** and not sacrifice, you would not have condemned the innocent. **8** For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.” **9** Moving on from there, he entered their synagogue. **10** There he saw a man who had a **shriveled hand**, **H** 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**? **I** **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.

A. Ancient roads often cut through vineyards and fields. The law allowed travelers to pluck some produce during a journey (Deut. 23:24-25).

B. A prominent Jewish religious group known for strict observance of the law.

C. According to the Pharisees’ traditions, the disciples were harvesting grain. This violated the command against working on the Sabbath.

D. In 1 Samuel 21, David and his men ate the Bread of the Presence, which was reserved for the priests (see v. 4). Yet, God did not condemn him.

E. The responsibilities of priests called for them to work on the Sabbath, but God held them “innocent” of the law.

F. Jesus asserted His superiority over the temple and its rituals. Later, He called Himself “Lord of the Sabbath” (v. 8).

G. Quoting Hosea 6:6, Jesus’s point was that God cares more about people than rituals. The Pharisees had failed to grasp this truth.

H. Many scholars believe the Pharisees used the man as “bait,” hoping to accuse Jesus.

I. The implied answer to Jesus’s question was affirmative. He proved that the leaders would bend their own rules if necessary.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

1. Religious Rules

(Matt. 12:1-2)

We should avoid judging others based on their adherence to a religious tradition or practice.

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

2. Something Greater

(Matt. 12:3-8)

We should give greater attention to the condition of our heart than to adherence to man-made rules.

- **What can we learn from Jesus's response?**
- **What do these verses teach us about Jesus and His expectations of His followers?**

3. Compassionate Response

(Matt. 12:9-14)

We must seek to make our priorities and practices consistent with what God values most.

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

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.

Apply the Text

- **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?**

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.)

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?

TALK IT OUT

Focus on Matthew 12:8, considering why we still need this reminder today.

Jesus and His disciples passed through grainfields when the disciples began to pick and eat some grain. The Pharisees criticized them for picking heads of grain on the Sabbath because this violated their religious traditions. Jesus responded by citing examples from the Old Testament. He taught that God is more concerned with our hearts than with our adherence to man-made rituals. Jesus pointed to Himself as greater than the temple and its priesthood, and He proclaimed that He was “Lord of the Sabbath.”

What does it mean that Jesus is the “Lord of the Sabbath”? What are some of the practical implications?

Jesus made the point that people are more important than religious ritual; human need takes precedence over man-made traditions. Even more importantly was what Jesus revealed about Himself. One of the implications is that we are to evaluate all things in light of Jesus—not man-made traditions. When God’s revealed Word has the final say in determining His will, we avoid a legalistic approach to life.

Discuss how you can make sure Jesus and His Word take precedence over religious traditions in your life. Why do people confuse the two?

Place Matthew 12:8 on your phones and agree to memorize it together.

Prayer Requests / Notes

DAILY EXPLORATION



Day 1: Matthew 12:1-2

Identify why the Pharisees criticized Jesus's disciples.

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, they 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 ignored those man-made rules 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." Picking grain would be understood as harvesting. Rubbing the grain in their hands to separate the kernel from the husk would be interpreted as threshing and winnowing. The disciples' action violated the Pharisees' 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 does religious tradition play in the practice of your faith?



Day 2: Matthew 12:3-6

Compare Matthew 12:3-4 to 1 Samuel 21:1-6.

Jesus gave two examples from the Old Testament refuting the strict interpretation of Sabbath observance by the Pharisees. (See 1 Sam. 21:1-6.) The "bread of the Presence" 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.

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.

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 traditions of the Pharisees.

How should Jesus's authority impact the weight we give to church tradition?



Day 3: Matthew 12:7-8

Contemplate what it means that Jesus is “Lord of the Sabbath.”

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.” (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 *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.

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 you about Jesus and His expectations of you?



Day 4: Matthew 12:9-10

Note the motivation of the Pharisees.

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 in the previous verses. 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.

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.

What are some examples today of Christians valuing man-made rules over people?



Day 5: Matthew 12:11-14

Consider the implications of “it is lawful to do what is good on the Sabbath.”

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. He 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.” Jesus then 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 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 Jesus be perceived as a threat to some people?

APPLY THE TEXT

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

JOURNAL



THE PARABLES OF JESUS

- Perhaps the most distinctive style of Jesus’s teaching was His use of parables. Aside from His miracles, Jesus may be best known for the stories He told. For example, even individuals who are not familiar with church or the Bible might understand what it means to be a “Good Samaritan” or a “Prodigal Child.” Jesus’s parables have left an indelible mark on the church and the larger culture.

A parable has been defined as a comparison from nature or daily life designed to teach a spiritual truth. From the outset of His public ministry until the last days in Jerusalem, one comes across His timeless parables. Matthew’s word is appropriate at every juncture: “He told them many things in parables” (Matt. 13:3).

Parables and Teaching

Everyone loves a good story. Jesus developed stories from familiar images and ideas that reveal truth about the nature of God, prayer, spiritual values, stewardship, judgment, and the kingdom of God. He used parables as a teaching device with His disciples, antagonistic religious leaders, and ordinary people.

The Synoptic Gospels contain between fifty and sixty such stories. Add to that number ten brief stories found in John’s Gospel. Some of them are very brief, such as the parables of the pearl of great price, the leaven, and the hidden treasure. Some are full-length stories like the parables of the good Samaritan, the talents, the sower and the soils, the rich fool, and the prodigal son.



Parables and Daily Life

Jesus was the keenest of observers about daily life. He drew lessons from farmers sowing in the field, from village customs about weddings, from shepherds and sheep, from banquets, and so much more. Recall that His audiences often were simple, uneducated people such as fishermen, farmers, and villagers. They could grasp His lessons easily about an unjust judge or a friend who knocked on a neighbor’s door at midnight. Jesus used good storytelling to project divine truths about redemption, the kingdom of God, and ethical values.

There is a timelessness about these stories, as well as a haunting beauty. They always present some powerful lesson about God and His will for today. And they have the potential to open the doors for evangelism, especially with those who are not familiar with the Bible otherwise.

Parables of the Kingdom

Many of Jesus's parables deal with the arrival of the kingdom of God, a major message He sought to bring to Israel in His day. Matthew 13 is the great chapter on this theme. There, Jesus used a series of parables to proclaim the actions of God in His own ministry.

Parables on God's Nature

Some parables illustrate unforgettably the nature of God as Jesus came to reveal this essential truth. Speaking of the love of God to the Pharisees who were grumbling about tax gatherers and sinners around them, Jesus produced some memorable parables in Luke 15 that reflect God's love and compassion toward those who have lost their way or stand estranged from Him.

These parables of Jesus on the nature of God are excellent examples of His understanding of simple truths for daily living. For example, he related the shepherd's concern about a lost sheep, the peasant woman's loss of a coin, and the prodigal's lapse so terrible that he was feeding swine when "he came to his senses" (Luke 15:17). Again, these were topics and illustrations the common people could grasp and embrace. And, when necessary, the religious leaders of the day also realized that Jesus was condemning them and their brand of "faith" (Matt. 21:45-46).

Themes of the Parables

Though Jesus did not follow a consistent theme in His teachings through parables,

He did address some of the major subjects of His ministry through these stories. He dealt with the relation of the old covenant with the new covenant in parables of the barren fig tree and the great feast. His lessons on prayer were highlighted by the parables of the friend who knocked at midnight and the unjust judge. Stewardship was another important theme as portrayed by the stories of the unjust steward and the rich fool.

Jesus's solemn teachings on judgment come through His parables of the wise and foolish virgins and the talents. The parables of Jesus touch movingly on death and resurrection in His parable of the rich man and Lazarus, as well as the parable of the wicked husbandman.

Approaches to the Study of Parables

Contemporary Bible students strongly insist that Bible students who seek the message of Jesus through His parables must understand the setting of the story. It is also important to realize that the parable usually has one major lesson to teach. Using an allegorical approach to the study of parables is both inappropriate and inaccurate. Students of Scripture should seek one primary lesson from each parable.

Jesus's timeless reputation as a Teacher certainly comes from the substance and content of His inspired and authentic lessons. When we add the unique form of these lessons through the parables, we quickly affirm the conclusion of the centuries regarding Jesus's teaching: they "were astonished at his teaching, because he was teaching them like one who had authority" (Matt. 7:28-29).

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