

Rejecting Legalism

JESUS OFFERS MERCY, NOT RELIGIOUS RULES.

Matthew 12:1-14

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

Exploring Key Words

- A** The seventh day, set apart for rest and worship (Ex. 20:8-11). The Sabbath was a point of contention for Jesus and the Pharisees.
- B** Ancient roads often cut through vineyards and fields. The law allowed travelers to pluck some produce during a journey (Deut. 23:24-25).
- C** A Jewish religious sect known for its strict observance of the law. They were deeply committed to ritual purity and Jewish identity.
- D** According to the Pharisees’ traditions, the disciples were harvesting grain. This violated the command against working on the Sabbath.
- E** 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.
- F** The responsibilities of priests called for them to work on the Sabbath, but God held them “innocent” of the law.
- G** Jesus asserted His superiority over the temple and its rituals. Later, He called Himself “Lord of the Sabbath” (v. 8).
- H** Quoting Hosea 6:6, Jesus’s ultimate point was that God cares more about people than rituals. The Pharisees had failed to grasp this truth.
- I** A local Jewish house of worship. Synagogues took root during Judah’s exile following the destruction of the temple by the Babylonians.
- J** Many scholars believe the Pharisees used the man as “bait,” hoping to accuse Jesus.
- K** The implied answer to Jesus’s question was affirmative. He proved that the leaders would bend their own rules if necessary.
- L** Ironically, the Pharisees had no problem plotting Jesus’s death on the Sabbath.



Religious Rules (Matt. 12:1-2)

- As Jesus and His disciples passed through grainfields, His followers began to pick and eat some grain. This was allowed by the Mosaic law (Deut. 23:25).
- The Pharisees criticized Jesus's disciples for picking heads of grain on the Sabbath, a violation of their religious traditions. According to their interpretation, the disciples were "reaping," which they equated to working on the Sabbath.

Something Greater (Matt. 12:3-8)

- Jesus responded to the criticism of the Pharisees by citing examples from the Old Testament. In doing so, He used familiar examples to reveal how the religious leaders misunderstood—and even twisted—God's original intent for the law.
- Rebuking the Pharisees, Jesus taught that God is more concerned with our hearts than with our adherence to man-made, religious rituals. He also pointed to Himself as being greater than the temple and its priesthood.

Compassionate Response (Matt. 12:9-14)

- Upon reaching the local synagogue, Jesus encountered a man with a shriveled hand. He authenticated His claim to be Lord of the Sabbath by restoring the man's hand.
- Because Jesus threatened the traditions of the Pharisees, they began to plot how to kill Him.

Summary Statements

Jesus offers mercy, not religious rules.

- 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 rather than to adherence to man-made rules.
- We must seek to make our priorities and practices consistent with what God values most.

Memory Verse

Matthew 12:8

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.)



For additional commentary, see the Leader Guide or Adult Commentary, available for purchase at [goExploreTheBible.com](https://www.explorethebible.com).

ENGAGE

Bonus: What rules do you follow each day? Who establishes and enforces those rules?

- We love freedom. We don't like others telling us what to do, and we 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? (PSG, p. 107)

EXPLORE

RELIGIOUS RULES (MATT. 12:1-2)

Bonus: When you hear “Sabbath,” what comes to mind? Why?

- The Sabbath rest was a centerpiece in Judaism. But over time, religious leaders let their man-made ideas about the law twist what God actually intended.
- So, when the disciples picked grain from the field, the Pharisees accused them of violating the Sabbath. To them, picking grain was harvesting, while rubbing the grain to separate the kernel from the husk was threshing.
- The law allowed the disciples to take some of the grain (Deut. 23:25). But the Pharisees cared more about their own traditions than about God's law and His people.

What role should religious tradition play in the practice of our faith? (PSG, p. 110)

SOMETHING GREATER (MATT. 12:3-8)

Bonus: How do people let rules take priority over people? How can we avoid that?

- Jesus responded with an account from 1 Samuel 21, a story these experts of the law would have known well. A priest gave the Bread of the Presence to David and his men for their nourishment. Jesus was saying that some needs supersede ceremonial law. Showing mercy is more important than protecting traditions.
- The second illustration from the Old Testament involved the temple priests who offered daily sacrifices—even on the Sabbath. Yet, God declared them innocent of violating the Sabbath because they were doing what was necessary in the worship of Israel.
- Jesus concluded with a startling claim: “Something greater than the temple is here.” His authority superseded the authority and the traditions of the Pharisees. As the Son of God, Jesus is greater than man-made laws.

- Quoting Hosea 6:6, Jesus reiterated that God places compassion ahead of ritual. The Pharisees had condemned the innocent by focusing on rules. But Jesus had the authority to untangle their twisted Sabbath laws because He is “Lord of the Sabbath.”

What do these verses teach us about Jesus and His expectations of His followers? (PSG, p. 113)

COMPASSIONATE RESPONSE

(MATT. 12:9-14)

How might the authority of Jesus be perceived as a threat? (PSG, p. 115)

- Arriving at a local synagogue, Jesus encountered a man with a withered hand. Some scholars suggest that the religious leaders “planted” the man, hoping for a chance to accuse Jesus of breaking the law.
- Baiting Jesus, the Pharisees asked Him if it was legal to heal on the Sabbath. Jesus responded with a question of His own drawn from daily life: If their animal fell into a ditch on the Sabbath, would they pull it out or let it stay?
- The implied answer was “yes,” suggesting that the leaders’ Sabbath rules were based on what served them best. Jesus emphasized that people matter more than animals, so it was lawful to help them on the Sabbath.
- Jesus then commanded the man to stretch out his hand. When he did, his hand was restored. But the Pharisees were unmoved. Ironically, they spent part of their Sabbath plotting ways to kill Jesus.

Bonus: How do you discern what is “good” to do on a day of rest and what to avoid on a day of rest? What is the key to making that choice?

CHALLENGE

As a group, consider how adults can show mercy to someone going through a difficult time.

What might your group do to extend to this person the mercy they need? (PSG, p. 116)

Challenge adults to examine their lives this week to see how they are putting man-made traditions above Scripture.

How can you correct this problem? (PSG, p. 116)

FURTHER DISCUSSION



Scan here for additional discussion questions for this week's study.

BIBLE SKILL (PSG, P. 115)

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?***

Direct adults to complete the Bible Skill activity on page 115 of the PSG. After a few minutes, allow volunteers to share their findings and to discuss the question in the activity.

Remind adults that Jesus was confronted by the Pharisees, who were trying to trap Him. Lead a brief discussion of how Jesus's words asserted His authority, affirmed the Sabbath, and validated God's concern for relationships over rituals.

OBJECT LESSON: FRUIT

Show adults a piece of fruit and a slice of bread. Note that the fruit can remind us that God kept Adam and Eve from eating of the tree of life, while bread reminds us that Jesus defended His disciples when they picked grain on the Sabbath. Ask: ***In one story, eating was not okay, but in the other story it was. Why?*** Discuss responses.

Lead the group to discern the difference between God's rules and man-made traditions. Remind the group that the law allowed the disciples to pick the grain and eat it. Say: *It was their own pride and the man-made traditions of the Pharisees that blinded them to the truth.* Emphasize that Jesus brought the argument back to God's true intention for Scripture.

Challenge adults to examine their own lives, looking for areas where they might be letting their own interpretations of God's Word obscure how He is calling them to respond to Him.

DIG DEEPER

THE BREAD OF THE PRESENCE

Jesus responded to the Pharisees' criticism of His disciples by referencing David's actions in 1 Samuel 21. There, David and his men ate the Bread of the Presence, which Jesus said indicated God's concern for human need over rigid adherence to religious rituals.

The Bread of the Presence is first described in the instructions for the Tabernacle (Ex. 25:23-30). It consisted of twelve loaves made of fine flour, representing the twelve tribes of Israel. The loaves were placed on a gold table in the Holy Place before the Lord. They were arranged in two rows of six and were renewed weekly on the Sabbath (Lev. 24:5-9). The bread symbolized God's faithfulness in providing for His people.

While fleeing from Saul, David approached Ahimelech the priest and asked for food for himself and his men. Although the Bread of the Presence was reserved for priests, Ahimelech gave it to David because no other food was available. The priest correctly prioritized physical needs over the ceremonial restriction.

The theological themes of the Bread of the Presence find their ultimate fulfillment in Jesus. In John 6:35, He declared, "I am the bread of life. . . . No one who comes to me will ever be hungry, and no one who believes in

me will ever be thirsty again." Just as the Bread of the Presence symbolized God's provision and presence, Jesus offered Himself as the true sustainer of life. His incarnation, life, death, and resurrection embody God's ultimate provision for humanity, addressing our physical and spiritual needs.

Further, the Bread of the Presence points to the last supper and the institution of the Lord's Supper. During the Passover meal, Jesus took bread, blessed it, and gave it to His disciples, saying, "This is my body, which is given for you" (Luke 22:19). This act redefined the bread, creating a sacred symbol as believers participate in the new covenant of Jesus by remembering and honoring the sacrifice of His body and blood.

BONUS CONTENT



The Synagogue

The synagogue played a central role in the lives of first-century Jewish believers. Scan here to view a detailed reconstruction of a typical synagogue.