

Jesus: Lord of the Sabbath

Scripture: Matthew 12

Code: BQ042114

The Sabbath Does Not Restrict Service to God

Or have you not read in the Law, that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple break the Sabbath, and are innocent? But I say to you, that something greater than the temple is here. (12:5–6)

Jesus did not have to explain what He meant by saying **that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple break the Sabbath**. The Pharisees had often **read in the Law** that priests not only were allowed but required to do many things on the Sabbath that otherwise would have violated God's **Law** of rest, not to mention rabbinic tradition.

In the performance of their duties in the Tabernacle and then the **temple**, the ministering **priests** had to light the altar fires, kill the sacrificial animals, and then lift up the carcasses and place them on the altar. Sacrifices on **the Sabbath** were, in fact, double sacrifices, requiring twice the work of the normal daily sacrifice (Num. 28:9–10; cf. Lev. 24:8–9).

The most legalistic Pharisee considered **the priests** who ministered **in the temple** as **innocent** of breaking **the Sabbath**, despite the fact that they worked twice as hard as they did on other days. Similarly, even the most legalistic Christian does not consider preaching, teaching Sunday school, leading a youth group, or any other such work as profaning the Lord's Day, despite the fact that those activities require a great deal of effort.

Jesus embarrassed and angered the Pharisees by pointing out the inconsistency of their legalistic thinking. But their anger turned to rage when Jesus then said, **But I say to you, that something greater than the temple is here**. Even if the Pharisees did not immediately understand that Jesus was referring to Himself, they were horrified-because *nothing*, other than God Himself, was greater than **the temple**. In our day it is difficult even for Jews, much less Gentiles, to grasp how highly the Jews of Jesus' day revered the Temple.

Because of His previous claims to deity (see, e.g., 9:2–6; 11:3–5, 25–27), the Pharisees probably realized Jesus was referring to Himself as being **greater than the temple** and therefore claiming to be God. A few moments later He removed all doubt in their minds about what He meant (12:8).

The Lord's immediate purpose, however, was not to *prove* His deity but to point out that, in light of that deity, He had the right to abrogate Sabbath regulations as He saw fit-immeasurably more than David had the right to violate the Tabernacle laws or the priests had to violate the Sabbath laws in serving in the Temple.

The Sabbath Does Not Restrict Acts of Mercy

But if you had known what this means, "I desire compassion, and not a sacrifice," you would not have condemned the innocent. For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath. (12:7–8)

Jesus' third point regarding the Sabbath was that its observance was never meant to restrict acts of mercy, as the Pharisees would have known had they understood and honored Scripture as they claimed.

If they **had known what** the Lord meant when He said, **I desire compassion, and not a sacrifice**, they **would not have condemned the innocent** for supposed Sabbath breaking. That one truth alone-a quotation of but one half of one verse from the book of Hosea (6:6a)-would have been sufficient to teach the Pharisees, and any sincere Jew, what God's primary desire was for His people.

Sacrifice here represents the entire Mosaic system of ritual and ceremony, which was always of secondary and temporary importance in God's plan. **Sacrifice** was never more than symbolic, a means pointing to God's gracious and future provision of what no man, and certainly no animal, could provide.

Observing the Sabbath was a kind of **sacrifice**, a symbolic service to the Lord in obedience to His command. It was a reminder of God's completion of creation and a shadow of the perfect rest His redeemed people look forward to in salvation and in heaven.

Even under the Old Covenant that required it, Sabbath observance was not a substitute for the heart righteousness and **compassion** that characterize God's faithful children. God is merciful, and He commands His people to be merciful.

God sometimes sets aside His laws for the sake of mercy. If He did not, none of us would be saved-or even born-because Adam and Eve would have been destroyed the moment they sinned. Not only that, but God has always shown mercy in enforcing the temporal penalties for breaking His laws.

The Lord's desire is not to condemn men for sin but to save them from it. He only condemns those who will not have His mercy (cf. 2 Pet. 3:9). And if righteous, holy God is supremely characterized by love and mercy-even to the extent of graciously setting aside the penalty for breaking some of His own laws for man's benefit-how much more are His still-sinful children obligated to reflect His

compassion?

Because the Sabbath was the Lord's special day under the Old Covenant, a faithful Jew should have been especially concerned to follow his Lord's example of **compassion** on that day. But because the Pharisees and most other Jews were far from God, they were also far from understanding His nature and His will. Jesus' instruction about God's purpose for the Sabbath further indicted the Pharisees' unbelief and hardness of heart. *They* were the true violators of the Sabbath, because they "invalidated the word of God for the sake of [their] tradition" (Matt. 15:6). Those who **condemned the innocent** stood condemned themselves. They did not refuse to do acts of mercy because of devotion to God's law but because of lack of compassion.

To substantiate His authority for saying what He had just said, Jesus added, **For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath**. That statement must have rendered the Pharisees speechless. What He had implied by "something greater than the temple" (12:6), He now made unambiguous. Jesus stood before them and claimed He was greater than God's Temple and greater than God's Sabbath. He was God, the **Son of Man**, the divine Messiah whom the Temple honored and the **Sabbath** served.

Because the **Lord of the Sabbath** had come, the shadow of His Sabbath rest was no longer needed or valid. The New Testament does not require Sabbath observance, but rather allows freedom as to whether or not *any* day is honored above others. The only requirement is that, whatever position is taken, it is taken for the purpose of glorifying the Lord (Rom. 14:5–6); and no believer has the right to impose his views in this regard on anyone else (Gal. 4:9–10; Col. 2:16).

From the days of the early church (Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 16:2), Christians have set aside Sunday, the first day of the week, as a special day of worship, fellowship, and giving offerings, because that is the day our Lord was raised from the dead. But the Lord's Day is not the "Christian Sabbath," as it was considered to be for many centuries and still is in some groups today.

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