Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

The Lord of the Sabbath
Scripture: Matthew 12:1-14
Code: 2290

Matthew 12 is our study this morning. I trust that God will bless you as richly as He has me in the preparation for our study this morning. Matthew 12 is a chapter that brings before us the full manifestation of the hatred of the leaders of Israel against our Lord. This is a milestone chapter in the gospel of Matthew; it focuses on the rejection of the Messiah. In many ways, this chapter is a turning point; the mounting, growing unbelief of Israel crystallizes in this chapter with rejection.

Really, in the first 21 verses, we see the rejection of Christ. Then, in the latter half of the chapter, we see the blasphemy that follows their rejection. As we come to chapter 13, our Lord begins to speak of an assembly of saints beyond the nation Israel; He turns away from them to another people. So this is a climactic chapter in Matthew's gospel - the King has been presented, and the King has been rejected. In chapter 13, then, there is a turning to something new apart from the nation Israel. The Kingdom will press on without them, and this becomes the theme of chapter 13.

We can see the rejection and the blasphemy coming ultimately. As we've moved through this gospel, it has been apparent to all of us that this has been a mounting thing. We knew, at the very beginning, when Jesus Christ was born and Herod moved to destroy Him, that He would not be accepted.

We saw it in chapter 3, when His forerunner, John the Baptist, confronted the Sadducees and Pharisees and called them 'a generation of vipers,' and warned them to flee from the wrath to come. We saw it in chapter 5, when the Lord confronted them and said, "Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you'll never enter My Kingdom," and then He proceeded in chapters 5-7 to destroy their confidence in their religion. He attacked them and in turn, they attacked Him. Finally, in chapter 9, we begin to see the movement; they accused Him of blasphemy in verse 3, of spending His time with tax collectors and sinners in verse 11, and in verse 34, they said that He was demon possessed.

Jesus confronted them, first of all, about their sin. They were unwilling to respond to His message of sin and salvation; they stayed hardened in their sin, and pretty soon, they hardened into total rejection, and finally, blasphemy. As we've seen also in chapter 11, there were several moving phases in their reaction toward Christ.

First, we discussed their reaction of doubt. Then, from doubt, we went to criticism; from criticism to indifference. And now, we come to open rejection, and ultimately, to blasphemy. Emmanuel, God

with us, has been in their midst, but they have remained coldly critical and indifferent, and now they are filled with rage, fury, anger, and hatred. As we approach this chapter and look at verse 14, they begin to plot His murder. This is a milestone chapter; the storm that ultimately leads to Calvary's cross is gathering on the horizon.

As this chapter begins by recording for us the crystallizing of their rejection, it does so by relating to us a very particular incident, and the key is in verse 1. "At that time, Jesus went on the Sabbath Day." This is a Sabbath Day issue. The crystallizing of their rejection of Christ occurred because He violated their Sabbath; that was the last straw. Because the Sabbath Day, to them, was the absolute epitome of their legalistic system. Everything in their legalistic system ultimately focused in on that one day, and when He violated their rabbinical traditions on the Sabbath, He was striking a blow at the heart of their system. That became the final straw that broke the camel's back, as it were.

The word 'Sabbath' is a very simple word, sabbaton. It basically means 'to cease,' and when there is a double beta (bb), or a double b, there is an intensifying of the word, so it means 'a complete cessation,' the stopping of something. Their Sabbath, then, was the day they stopped doing what they did on the other days. You'll remember when God created the world, it says, "On the seventh day, He rested." He ordained that that day would be a day of ceasing for Israel. In Exodus 20, God said to them, "Take the seventh day, the Sabbath, the day of ceasing, and keep it holy."

Although God rested on the seventh day, God did not command men prior to the Mosaic Law to rest on the seventh day; it was in the Mosaic Law that the requirement was first articulated. Then it became, in the Mosaic Law, a special, covenental sign between God and Israel. Listen carefully, because many misunderstand this. The Sabbath commandment is one of the Ten Commandments of Exodus 20; it is the only commandment that is a non-moral one, the only one that is a ceremonial command. It is the one of the Ten Commandments that was uniquely between God and Israel as a ceremonial rule; all the other nine are moral absolutes. The reason we know this for sure is because when you get to the New Testament, every other command is repeated. Every one of the Ten Commandments is repeated except the one regarding the Sabbath. It is not repeated in the New Testament because it was a unique covenental sign, much like circumcision was, between God and Israel.

At the time of Jesus and His disciples, the Sabbath was in fact the ceremonial law of God. It is not a binding law for the church, but it was for Israel. So the Lord would honor the Sabbath, as would His disciples, insofar as God intended it to be honored. But the Pharisees had added so many ridiculous things to the Sabbath that they would not honor. Even in truly honoring the Sabbath, they were in violation of some Pharisaic traditions, and this they could not tolerate. The Sabbath was the focus of all their religious activity and they had added so much stuff to it, that instead of it being a day of ceasing and a day of rest, it was a day of incredible burden.

I really believe that, back in chapter 11, when Jesus says, "Come to Me, all you who are weary and heavy-laden," the clearest illustration of that would have been the Sabbath observance. When they came to the seventh day of the week, or Saturday, as we know it, the laws, rules, and routines that they had to keep made it more difficult to rest than it was to work the other six days. There was more work trying to rest than there was work trying to work. Let me show you what I mean.

I can't even begin to tell you how many laws there were; we don't have the time in our lifetime. If you don't think that's true, just listen to this. In one section of the Talmud, and there are at least two such sections, but in one of them, there are 24 chapters listing all the Sabbath laws. One rabbi spent two and a half years trying to understand one of those chapters. If you just extrapolate that, there is a lifetime of one man just trying to figure out the stuff he was supposed to do on the Sabbath.

For example, you couldn't travel more than 3,000 feet from your house unless on Friday you had planted some food 3,000 feet away. Then, when you got there and had food there, that would become 'a home' because there was food there, and you could then go another 3,000 feet. Wherever there was a narrow street or an alley, if you put a rope, a wire, or a board across from the dwelling on one side to the dwelling on the other side, it created an entrance. Therefore, the street was turned into a home and you could go another 3,000 feet. Those are only two of more ways than I could count to go another 3,000 feet.

Things could be lifted up or put down only from and to certain places. You could lift something in a public place and put it down in a private place, or lift it up in a private place and put it down in a public place. You could lift it up in a wide place and put it in a legally free place, or lift it in a legally free place and put it down in a wide place. Rabbis, for years, tried to figure out what a 'wide place' was and what a 'legally free' place was. You could never carry a burden that weighed more than a dried fig, or you could carry something that weighed half a dried fig twice.

There was a long list of things you couldn't eat on the Sabbath, and forbidden food on that list could be consumed no larger than an olive. If you put half an olive in your mouth, but found out it was rotten, and spit it out, you couldn't put the other half in because your mouth had tasted it as if it was a whole olive. Since your mouth can't see anyway, you couldn't put in another good olive half.

If you threw an object in the air and caught it with your other hand, it was a violation of the Sabbath; if you caught it with the same hand, it was OK. If it was near the Sabbath and you reached out for your food, and the Sabbath overtook you, you had to drop your food before you drew your arm back or you'd be carrying a burden on the Sabbath. A tailor couldn't carry a needle on the Sabbath lest he would be tempted to sew something that ripped. A scribe couldn't carry his pen because he might write. A pupil couldn't carry his books because he might read. You couldn't examine anyone's clothing, because you might find an insect there and kill it.

Wool could not be dyed, nothing could be sold or bought, nothing could be washed, a letter could not be sent even if you put it in the hand of a heathen for delivery. No fire could be lit, and that's why today, even conservative and Orthodox Jews have a time switch on their lighting systems so that the lights go on automatically on the Sabbath. Cold water could be poured on warm, but warm water couldn't be poured on cold. An egg could not be boiled, even by laying it in the sun in the sand, which was common practice.

You couldn't take a bath for fear water would spill onto the floor and wash the floor as it fell off you. If there was a lit candle, you couldn't blow it out; chairs couldn't be moved because they tended to drag ruts across the ground, and that was a violation. A woman couldn't look in a glass, because she might see a gray hair and pluck it out. Jewelry couldn't be worn, because it weighed more than a dried fig. I suppose you could wear a dried fig, but it wouldn't be too attractive.

When it came to grain and food, I'm telling you, the laws went on and on. You couldn't carry more grain in your hand than would fit into a lamb's mouth. You couldn't leave a radish in salt because it would become a pickle. This is just a sampling of it. There were 24 chapters of this; the law goes on endlessly about wine, honey, milk, and spitting. For example, you could only to spit into a rag, not onto the ground, on the Sabbath. Who knows why all these things came to pass?

There were laws about writing, and about getting the dirt off your clothes; it was very intricate to get the dirt off your clothes without violating the Sabbath. You could only carry ink enough for two letters - not letters to people, but alphabetical letters. You could carry wax enough to fill a tiny hole. You could have a wad in your ear if you had an earache, but you couldn't have a false tooth in, because that was carrying a burden.

Here are 39 things that were commonly forbidden: sewing, plowing, reaping, binding sheaves, threshing, winnowing, sifting, grinding, sifting with a sieve, kneading, baking; shearing wool, washing wool, beating wool, dying wool, spinning wool, putting it in the weaver's loom; making two threads, weaving two threads, separating two threads, making a knot or undoing it, sewing two stitches, tearing in order to sew two stitches; catching deer or killing, skinning, salting it, preparing its skin, scraping off its hair, cutting it up; writing two letters, scraping in order to write two letters, building, pulling down, extinguishing or lighting fire, beating with a hammer, carrying a possession, and it goes on and on.

Do you know what the Sabbath was? A pain in the neck. It was impossible to rest; you couldn't do anything. No wonder they were laboring and heavy-laden, sick to death of the system that had been imposed on them by the legalists. The Sabbath was the focus of everything. Edersheim says that if a woman were to roll wheat to take away the husk, she would be guilty of sifting. If she were rubbing the ends of the stalk, she would be guilty of threshing. If she were cleaning what adheres to the side

of a stalk, she would be guilty of sifting. If she was bruising the stalk, she would be guilty of grinding. If she was throwing it up in her hands, she would be guilty of winnowing.

The people were under this incredible burden. Now you understand what it meant when Jesus said, "Come to me all you who labor and are heavy-laden, and I will give you rest." That's what the Sabbath was supposed to be, but as far as rest was concerned, it was a joke. So Jesus came along and paid absolutely no attention to any of that stuff, and it infuriated the religious leaders. This became the final act that crystallized their rejection. Let's look at the incident.

"At that time," and that means the same season as the rest of this text, in our Lord's Galilean ministry period; the time when He was moving through the villages of Galilee, healing, casting out demons, preaching the Gospel of the Kingdom. At that time, the time of the Galilean ministry. It doesn't necessarily identify a day; it is the word kairos, which means 'a season.' "At that time, Jesus went through the grain fields on the Sabbath."

We have a problem, because Jesus shouldn't be going places on the Sabbath; you couldn't go more than 3,000 feet. But He and His disciples are moving along, because God's law didn't say that, though the rabbinical law did. They are in violation of the Sabbath because they're traveling, literally, 'through the fields that are sewn,' through the grain fields. Some Bibles say 'corn fields' but they were probably wheat and barley fields. The grain was likely ripening because of what occurs in the incident in verse 1. If they were there in Galilee, in the Jordan Valley, that would mean that it was around April, nearing Passover season, perhaps, because that's when grain usually ripens there: in the spring. As you go east from there, the farther east you go, the later it is, until finally, at the eastern parts of that area, it doesn't ripen until August. But in the Jordan Valley, it would be around April. The harvest must have been very near.

The fields were everywhere; there weren't really any roads, only paths through fields. The grain was put in great long strips, and you actually walked down through the strips as you traveled on your journey. As you walked along, there would be grain on both sides, so the Lord and His Twelve are walking along.

The Lord had made a wonderful provision for the traveler in Israel in Deuteronomy 23:25. It says, "When you come into your neighbor's standing grain, you may pluck the heads with your hand, but you shall not use a sickle on your neighbor's standing grain." In other words, there weren't any restaurants or truck stops or McDonald's anywhere, so as you were moving along, you would get hungry. So the Lord provided, in Deuteronomy 23:25, within the nation of Israel, that you could take your hands and pluck some of the grain. They did this commonly. Some of you have lived on a farm and done this; maybe you'll take the head of the wheat or barley and roll it in your hands to clear the kernel out, then you throw it in the air and the chaff is blown away, and then, as if eating nuts, you eat the grain. The Lord made that provision in Deuteronomy.

So the disciples are moving along, and they began to be hungry. They began to pluck the ears of grain to eat, and that is exactly what Deuteronomy 23:25 said they had a right to do. They were not in violation of the Word of God at all. They were poor; they had left their livelihood to follow Jesus Christ and they lived by faith. They carried nothing but had to depend upon the laws of the land which permitted that, and the kindness and generosity of people who fed and cared for them. Jesus didn't restrain them, because they were in line with the Old Testament Scripture.

Luke expands the though of verse 1, and says, "And His disciples were hungry, and began to pluck heads of grain and to eat." So they were going through that process: pick it, rub it in your hands, separate it, throw it in the air, and eat what remains. In Exodus 34:21, the Old Testament forbids reaping on the Sabbath, but this is obviously not reaping. Reaping is going into the field and the whole business of harvesting grain, but the Pharisees had taken this concept of not reaping on the Sabbath and brought it down to that fine point. You couldn't even pull a handful of grain off. This became the incident that triggered their fury, because it occurred on the Sabbath.

They said a man could eat on the Sabbath if he were starving to death, and they had a hard time determining who was starving to death, because you actually had to be starving to death. That would be pretty arbitrary to determine, don't you think? "How long is this guy going to live? Well, he's definitely going to die today if we don't give him some food." But someone else thinks, "I think he can last an extra day, so let's wait." They even said that when a man was ill, you could stop him from dying but couldn't help him to get any better. They also said you could put a bandage on a man, but not a medicated one. In other words, you could keep the guy from dying but certainly couldn't make him better on the Sabbath. That was also a fine line.

So they had determined that this was reaping, and the Talmud says, "In case a woman rolls wheat to remove the husks, it is considered as sifting; if she rubs the heads of wheat, it is regarded as threshing; if she cleans off the side-adherence, it is sifting out fruit; if she bruises the ears, it is grinding; if she throws them up in her hand, it is winnowing." The Pharisees had made it a violation to do what they were doing, but that wasn't the spirit in which God had intended the reaping command in Exodus. That is the incident, now let's move to the indictment.

In verse 2, guess who is dogging Jesus' footsteps? They were taking a trip through a field somewhere, and hiding behind the grain are the Pharisees, just looking for something with which to accuse Him. And they saw it! "They said to Him, 'Look, Your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath!'" It's hair-splitting legalism, absolute asininity, with no purpose. They had buried God's law so deeply under a pile of legislative tradition that it was unbearable.

God intended the Sabbath to be rest, not excruciating hardship. These people had nothing; they traveled and lived by faith. They took a handful of grain, they didn't violate the heart of God. That's

why Peter says in Acts 15:10, "They bind burdens on people that are impossible for them to bear." That's why Jesus said in Matthew 23:4, "They have laws that are burdensome." No wonder the people sought rest, no wonder He said, "My yoke is easy and My burden is light." They understood what He meant.

Some people think that the Lord asks a lot; you ought to try Pharisaic Judaism - that is a heavy yoke. The yoke of Christ, even with the standards that He has, even with all that His lordship implies, isn't anything like this. So they indicted the Lord with their non-Mosaic traditions and distorted the intention and motive of God's Sabbath. We'll move from the incident to the indictment to the instruction in verse 3.

Listen to the Lord's answer. "But He said to them, 'Have you not read?'" That's sarcasm. In verse 5 He says, "Haven't you read the law?" Of course they had read the law! In verse 7, He says, "If you had known what this means." You see, He's saying, "You're just blockheads. Didn't you read this? Don't you know what it means?" The implication is that they don't know at all what it means, so the Lord instructs them with three biblical texts, or incidents, or principles, to show the true meaning of the Sabbath.

First of all, He says that Sabbath law was never intended to restrict needs of necessity. Secondly, it was never meant to restrict service to God. Thirdly, it was never meant to restrict acts of mercy. The Sabbath was to bring rest, not hardship; to reflect what the other nine commandments reflected: love toward God and toward your fellow man. That's what the Ten Commandments are all about. The first of the commandments talk about our love to God through loyalty, faithfulness, reverence, and holiness. The second group talks about love to our fellow man through respect, purity, unselfishness, truthfulness, and contentment.

That is why the whole of the Ten Commandments is summed up in this: you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, strength, and your neighbor as yourself. It is love to God and love to man, and that is what Paul says in Romans 13:8-10, that love is the fulfilling of the law. But the Pharisees didn't have a clue about love; they just suppressed people, intimidate them, piled burdens on them. They were legalistic functionaries, and loveless. But the law of God was to permit God and man to have an ongoing love relationship and to permit man and man to have an ongoing love relationship.

Therefore, first of all, law could never stand in the way of meeting people's needs; that's a very basic point. Look at His illustration. "Have you not read what David did?" When He picks David out, He's really got them, because David was their hero. He was it, number one in all popularity polls in Israel. "Have you not read what David did when he was hungry?"

You see, David was fleeing. He had been rejected by his people as king, and he was fleeing for his life. He was going south to Gibeah, as it says in I Samuel 21, and Saul was after him. He came to the land of Nob, just north of Jerusalem, where the tabernacle was. He didn't have any food and he and his men were very hungry. So he went in to Ahimelech, who was ministering in the place of Abiathar, the high priest, and told him that he was hungry. David even told a lie about what mission he was on, but he nonetheless told him that he was hungry. You know what they gave him to eat? The showbread from off the table in the tabernacle.

What was that? Every week, they baked 12 loaves of bread and each loaf was baked with six and a half pounds of flour; these were big, big loaves. They were put in two piles of six each, and represented the 12 tribes of Israel, and placed on the table. Every Sabbath, the loaves would be taken away and new ones put down. When the loaves were taken away, according to Leviticus 24:5-9, they were to be eaten by the priests and no one else. The word 'showbread' literally means 'the bread of presence,' or 'the continual bread,' and it was the representation of God's perpetual relationship to His people, and it was to be eaten only by the priests. It was sacred, never to touch the lips of a common person, even a person like David, because he wasn't a priest.

Still, David ate the showbread. I can't think of a parallel unless you went into the Catholic church and drank all the holy water because you were thirsty. They might get upset about that. But David and and his men ate the showbread. Verse 4. "David entered the house of God and ate the showbread which was not lawful for him to eat, nor for those who were with him, but only for the priests."

Why did God let him do this? Because God never invented any law that was intended to overrule human need. Ceremony takes a backseat to the meeting of a need. God not only allows necessity to overrule ritual, but the ritual in David's time, and in our Lord's time, had lost its meaning anyway, because the people were so unholy. God will even violate one of His own ceremonies, not moral laws, but ceremonial law if He has to to meet a need, because God is all about loving men and meeting their needs. The Pharisees didn't understand this, "That the Sabbath was made for man," so he could rest and have his needs met. Not man for the Sabbath. David violated the ceremonial law to meet the heart of God, which is to meet needs.

I think about that in the Old Testament in the case of divorce. God says, "If you commit adultery, you die." That's the law. Adultery was the only legitimate grounds for breaking up a marriage, because when you committed adultery, you died, and that broke up the marriage. But God was gracious, so He eased off the penalty of death and permitted divorce so that one person wasn't stuck with an incessantly adulterous partner corrupting and violating the relationship.

He permitted divorce only on the grounds of adultery; Jesus made that very clear in Matthew 5. In Deuteronomy 24, Moses gave them a bill of divorce for something less than adultery - for uncleanness, which is the word for excrement. This is doing foul, dirty stuff. Jesus says, "From the

beginning, it was never God's intention to have divorce at all, and certainly not to permit it for less than adultery, but because of the hardness of your hearts, He permitted it." Why? Because it is the heart of God, if need be, to overrule legislation if it takes that to meet need. This is something we have to think about.

In I Corinthians 7, Paul says, "I'm going to add something else. If you have an unbelieving partner, and that partner leaves, let him leave; you aren't in bondage." You say, "I thought the only cause for divorce was adultery." Yes, but God is adding to that this, saying, "I want to go beyond that. If an unbeliever doesn't want to live with you, let him go; you are free." Why? Because He wants you to experience peace - that is the heart of God.

Legislation has to fit into God's heart attitude, and the rules for the showbread had a reason, but the reason was not to prevent a man who was hungry from having something to eat. The law of reaping had a reason, but it certainly wasn't to prevent some hungry disciples and their Lord from taking a handful of grain. The Lord is saying to him, "If David can violate a divine law, then can one greater than David violate a rabbinic tradition to express the heart of God in meeting need?" Let's look at the second illustration in verse 5.

"Or have you not read in the law that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple profane the Sabbath, and are blameless?" What does that mean? Every Sabbath, all the priests, functioning on the Sabbath profaned the Sabbath because they worked. How? Because they lit fires. It was hard to have a sacrifice without a fire. They also killed animals; it is also difficult to keep a live animal on an altar without a fire. They had to light fires and kill animals. Do you know what they did after they killed the animal? Lifted it up and put it on the altar, and animals weighed more than a dried fig. They profaned the Sabbath all the time. Leviticus 24:8-9 and Numbers 28:9-10 say that they had to do this! The sacrifices on the Sabbath were even double sacrifices.

When I was a kid, we lived in Philadelphia in the days when people still thought Sunday was the Sabbath. We couldn't watch TV, or play catch in the yard, or read the paper. We had to come home and sit in our little Lord Fauntleroy suits all day in a chair. We couldn't read a book or do anything; we had to be 'holy.' We didn't go out of the house; we had to be sedate since it was supposed to be a day of rest. So we'd just sit there, and it got to where we didn't look forward to it. We'd sit there, and nothing ever happened.

The dear lady we lived with, Bowlie Keller, worked herself to a frazzle all day Saturday and half of Sunday to put dinner on. The people at the church were working in the Sunday School Department, and the preacher preached his heart out all day long. They were working as hard as they could, but no one ever said, "You shouldn't do that on the Sabbath," because we wanted to eat while we rested, so we didn't mind her making the meal, and we knew someone needed to do the work to preach and teach.

That's really what He's saying here: there was a service to God that actually violated the whole ceremonial law. The point is that God doesn't make rules that force themselves to be applied over against that which is a higher priority, and that is serving God. I work on Sundays, do you know that? I work every Sunday, but I've never been accused of violating the Lord's Day. Maybe someone, having heard this, will accuse me of that.

Look at verse 6. Here is a statement that must have knocked them over. "Yet I say to you that in this place there is One greater than the temple." Oh man. He has just said, "Tabernacle and temple rules are set aside, and right here is someone greater than the temple." Unless you were alive at that time, you couldn't understand what that meant to them. The temple was it, because God dwelt in the temple. He said, "I'm greater than the temple. If in the tabernacle, David could eat the showbread because ceremony does not overrule meeting needs; and if in the temple, the priests can violate and profane the Sabbath laws to do the service of God; if the tabernacle and the temple tolerate it, then I am allowed to do it as well because I'm greater than both of those things."

They knew the temple was greater than the tabernacle, but to hear someone say that He is greater than the temple was absolutely shocking. It was a claim to deity. It is really what it said in John 1:14, "We beheld His glory." He became flesh and dwelt among us; He is the temple of God. God dwelt in a tabernacle, then in a temple, but now, greater than a tabernacle or a temple, God dwells in the body of the living Lord Jesus Christ in their midst. It's a tremendous claim to deity. So if there are exceptions for the tabernacle and for the temple, there had better be exceptions for the true incarnation of God, the Lord Jesus Christ. He is more sacred than any house God has ever dwelt in. This is another one of those monumental claims to deity that Jesus makes.

Thirdly, He says that the law cannot stand in the way of showing mercy. Verse 7. "But if you had known what this means, 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the guiltless." He says, "You're condemning these guiltless disciples, and you wouldn't have done it if you had known what God really wanted - mercy, not ritual." The word 'sacrifice' embodies the whole ceremonial system. The whole ceremonial Sabbath system was only a shadow, a shell. What God really wants is a merciful heart, and God is merciful. If His people hunger, He wants them to be fed. It's a beautiful lesson the Lord gives, isn't it?

People think Christianity is rigid and hard. No, God has given us standards but doesn't want those to overrule meeting our needs, serving Him, or showing mercy. Kindness, self-sacrifice, and mercy are what God wants. I believe that God sometimes sets aside His prior laws for the sake of mercy. If you don't believe that, then ask yourself why you aren't dead, because you've sinned.

When God said that if you commit adultery, you die, then you should be dead if you've ever done that. But God has overruled that because He loves and shows mercy. There are times when God doesn't

want a divorce, but He lets an unbeliever leave because He wants you to have peace; He wants to meet that need in your life. Mercifully, in the case of ceremonial law, God would set aside that law altogether to reveal His heart. After all, ceremonial law is only a shadow. In the case of God's moral law, however, He would at times set aside only the immediate consequence of that law, again, to reveal His merciful heart. Let me add this, the key: only God has the right to exercise that prerogative when He sets aside His standard. You don't, and neither do I, but He does.

God wants an obedient heart, and the Pharisees were a million miles from that; He wanted mercy, but they didn't have a clue. But especially on the Sabbath, wouldn't that be the day, of all the days, that you would meet needs? Wouldn't you think the Sabbath, of all days, would be the day to serve the Lord? Here they were, walking along serving the Lord, preaching the Kingdom, reaching people, and they had to eat on the way. They were serving the Lord, but their needs had to be met. God wanted to be merciful to them, and wouldn't you think the Sabbath would be the perfect time for that? The whole point is to shock. They had indicted Him, but when He was done with His instruction, He had indicted them as hard-hearted, external legalists who didn't even know the heart of God. They were the violators of the Sabbath, because the Sabbath was for meeting needs, serving God, and showing mercy.

If they weren't already flat on their backs, this did it. Verse 8 says, "By the way, the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath." What a statement. "I initiated and will interpret it," is what He is saying. What a claim! Either He is a blasphemer, or He is God. This must have goaded them to madness. He says, "You are not in charge of the Sabbath; I am in charge of the Sabbath." That crystallized the issue. He would tolerate no Pharisaical perversion of His intended purpose for the Sabbath; it was His. He wrote it, He would interpret it, and He would fulfill it.

Do you know why we don't keep the Sabbath anymore? Because Jesus fulfilled it. Hebrews 4 says that because of Christ, we have entered into rest. What does that mean? The Sabbath was a figure, a picture, a shadow of rest, saying, "This is how it will be - a day of rest." God, through the Sabbath, was saying, "There is coming a rest." The Pharisees ruined that illustration, because if the Kingdom of God was like the Sabbath they had invented, who wants it?

They had destroyed it, so the Lord came along and said, "Come over here to My side if you're laboring and heavy-laden; My yoke is easy and My burden is light. You will find rest!" It's a time of mercy, meeting needs, and serving God. Jesus came and fulfilled that Sabbath, and that's why there is no more need for a shadow, an illustration, because we've entered the reality. That is why the New Testament says nothing about keeping the Sabbath.

Romans 14 says, "Some people want to keep the Sabbath and some don't. It's no big deal; if they want to, it's because the are doing it traditionally from their Judaism, don't offend them, let them go. If you don't want to do it, don't worry about it." That's why Paul says in Galatians 4 and Colossians 2,

"Don't let anyone impose upon you days or Sabbaths." We have the reality; the shadow is gone. Christ fulfilled it.

That's why He rose on the first day of the week. The disciples met together on the first day of the week (Acts 2:1), regularly breaking bread on the first day of the week (Acts 20:7), and they were to collect their offerings when they came together on the first day of the week (I Corinthians 16:1). Why? Because that was the day that commemorated and celebrated the resurrection. That's why we meet today, because it's resurrection day! It's the new covenant.

He closes with an illustration in verses 9-13. "Now when He had departed from there, He went into their synagogue." I love that! He is so confrontive; He doesn't steal away and say, "I hope they don't come after Me," He goes right into their synagogue to illustrate the lesson He just gave. There is a man there who had a paralyzed hand, and this man meant nothing to them until he became an opportunity to catch Jesus. "And they asked Him, saying, 'Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?' that they might accuse Him."

In the time under Judas Maccabeus, the time between the testaments, when the Greeks were dominating the people of Israel, there was one incident when the forces of Antiochas came against the Jews, I Maccabees records it. The text says, "They answered them not, neither cast they a stone at them, nor stopped the places where they lay hid; but said, 'Let us die all in our innocence: heaven and earth will testify for us, that ye put us to death wrongfully.' So they rose up against them in battle on the sabbath, and they slew them, with their wives and children and their cattle, to the number of a thousand people."

Antiochas and his men came against the Jews, but because it was the Sabbath, they wouldn't lift a finger to defend themselves, so 1,000 people were massacred. They were really serious about the Sabbath. It was ridiculous, but that's how they felt. On another occasion, when Pompey took Jerusalem, they came in a built siege mounds on the Sabbath because the Jews would just stand and watch, and not prevent anything, because it was the Sabbath. It was a life and death deal to them, because they believed that if they kept this, they would earn their way to the Kingdom. It's the way the cults are, you see; that's why they are so zealous.

The Lord just comes in the middle of this and horrifies their Sabbath. They said, "Is it lawful to heal this man?" First of all, that tells me that they believed that Jesus could heal, but it didn't phase them. Isn't that amazing how blind they were? They knew He could heal. Where did they think He got the power for that? We'll find out later in the chapter that they thought He got it from Satan. They ask if it's lawful to heal the man on the Sabbath. The reason they picked a man with a paralyzed hand is because it wasn't a life and death issue. Their laws said you could prevent someone from dying, but not make him any better. So a guy with a paralyzed hand has had it for a long time, and it's not life and death.

Verse 11. "Then He said to them, 'What man is there among you who has one sheep, and if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will not lay hold of it and lift it out?'" Now, this meant just one sheep out of a flock, one of many. Would this violate their Sabbath? It wouldn't because it was economics. This wasn't like the time of the Maccabees anymore; they weren't going to die. There wasn't quite the same heroism anymore, so they would figure out that if there were enough people, and each guy could lift a certain amount, they'd figure a way to get the sheep out of there.

William Henderson says, "It is safe to infer, perhaps, that the question asked by Jesus at the moment indicates to us that there was a particular legislation permitting this." We don't know what rabbinical sources it came from, but it must have been the case because Jesus uses it as an illustration. Wouldn't you rescue your sheep on the Sabbath? Verse 12. "Of how much more value, then, is a man than a sheep?" That's a simple question, but sheep were better than men to them.

Men meant nothing to them; they were very much like the Hindus in India today. They won't kill a fly because it is the incarnation of someone who is trying to get out of that karma. They won't kill a rat, a mouse, or a cow. Two-thirds of their food supply is eaten by those things, and that is why they have starvation problems. They let people die all over the place and don't help them, because it's their karma. They won't give money to beggars or help the destitute because they feel they must endure that suffering to earn their way to the next level. So cows are worth more to them than people; cows are sacred, for whatever reason. It's the same in Judaism, but not quite so religiously defined, and sheep were more important to them economically than people. Ethical conduct is the issue, and the Lord makes it very clear at the end of verse 12, "It is lawful to do good on the Sabbath."

By the way, Mark and Luke tell us that all the while He is talking, He has brought the man with the paralyzed hand and sat him in front of the entire synagogue, and it is very dramatic. He is confronting them and saying, "You tell me. You rescue a sheep; would you rescue a man? Is it lawful to do good on the Sabbath?" What can they say? If they say it is lawful to do good, then they are stuck. He would say that it would be good to heal the man. If they say it is not lawful to do good on the Sabbath, then what have they said? What is the alternative, evil? So He asks the question, but they don't want to answer, so they don't.

I think a chilling silence prevailed. Luke says, "The Lord read their thoughts and they were filled with fury." Mark says, "Jesus was grieved at their hard hearts." He was always compassionate. They didn't care if the man was healed; they were trapped. Verse 13. "Then He said to the man, 'Stretch out your hand.' And he stretched it out, and it was restored as whole as the other." Was that a good thing to do for that man? If there was ever any meaning in the Sabbath, wouldn't it be to do good? Sure. And to know to do good, and have the ability to do good, and not to do good is to do evil. If ever there was a time for blessing, it was the Sabbath.

So we go from the incident to the indictment to the instruction to the illustration to the insurrection. Verse 14. "Then the Pharisees went out and plotted against Him, how they might destroy Him." Why? Because He was good and they were evil, that's why.

Jesus connected the Sabbath with the heart of God - benevolence, mercy, kindness, goodness. That is the purpose of it all. Jesus came that we might enter into a relationship with God in which He pours out to us grace, goodness, mercy, kindness, peace, benevolence, and tenderness. The Pharisees had completely obliterated that illustration in the Sabbath. Jesus' lesson is very clear: we broke the ceremonial law to meet our need, but that is the heart of God. We broke a traditional law of not going more than so many feet to serve God; that is the heart of God. God wants mercy to be shown, not ritual. The only function that ceremony ever has is the illustration of a right attitude. If you corrupt the illustration without having the right attitude, you miss the whole purpose.

I'll close with two lessons. What does this say to an unbeliever? Today, there are people who are caught in systems of religion where they are trying, by their own works, to do what the Pharisees did: laws upon laws and rules upon rules. A Jewish man came to me last Sunday morning at the close of the service and said, "I'm Jewish, and this is my first time here. I am laboring and heavy-laden, and I want rest."

I don't know what system you're in; if you're trying to keep the law as a Jew, or if you're trying to keep the law of the Mormons, or the Jehovah's Witnesses, or the rules and regulations of Roman Catholicism that claim to get you into God's Kingdom, but if you know that in your heart, you're not there, and are tired of the toiling, look to God. He wants to give you rest. All these man-made systems do is bury the heart of God under a pile of legislation, and He wants to give you a yoke that is easy and a burden that is light.

Christians, isn't there a lightness and freedom in knowing Christ and walking in the power of His Spirit? Even though we commit ourselves to obedience to Him, it's lightness, not heaviness.

The second lesson is, Christians, why do you come here? Why do you worship? What's your purpose? Are you here because it's functional, because you think it is your duty? Are you just cranking it out? Having begun in the Spirit, are you going to be perfected in the flesh? Are you defining true spirituality in terms of a bunch of little things you do or don't do? Is your relationship to God function, rules, laws, or do you realize that those are only things to assist us? They can never stand in the way of meeting needs, serving God, and showing mercy, because they violate the heart of God.

Some Christians are so legalistic that they literally alienate other believers. The things they're legalistic about aren't even things God talks about in Scripture. Where is your heart toward God? Are you trapped in a bunch of rules, or do you know an easy yoke and a light burden? Let's pray.

Lord, You are so good. We know what we deserve, and You are so good and kind to pass by our transgressions, to set aside Your law at Your discretion for mercy's sake. We know You have given us principles; we seek to obey them. They are designed to reveal to us Your heart, never to stand in the way of its manifestation. Help us to have the sensitivity to walk in the Spirit, to know how to respond to Your ordinances with freedom and liberty that truly represent Your kind, merciful heart toward us. Lord, save people from systems that bury You under a pile of rules, for Christ's sake, Amen.

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