

**Condemnation Versus Compassion**  
**Matthew 12:1-8**  
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In Matthew 12, the narrative shifts from the indifference of the people of Israel to their Messiah to the opposition of the religious leaders of Israel to their Messiah. In Matthew 11, Jesus condemns the residents of the cities of Galilee for not repenting in light of His miracles and in Matthew 12, Jesus responds to a series of rhetorical attacks from the Pharisees.

These attacks are designed to protect their place as the teachers of Israel by discrediting Jesus. As their conspiracy grew (cf. Matthew 12:14), we find Jesus withdrawing His teaching from them by teaching in parables in Matthew. *“And the disciples came and said to Him, ‘Why do You speak to them in parables?’ Jesus answered them, ‘To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been granted’”* (Matthew 13:10-11).

The first attempt to discredit Jesus was to publicly accuse Him of allowing His disciples to break the commandment to keep the Sabbath holy.

**The accusation from the Pharisees about the Sabbath (12:1-2)**

The question of the Pharisees about the practice of Jesus’ disciples took place *“at that time,”* connecting Matthew 12:1-8 with the events of Matthew 11. This is important because Jesus had just called the crowds who were weary and heavy-laden to come to Him, for He is gentle and humble in heart.

Unlike the Pharisees who placed burdens upon the Jewish people (Matthew 23:4; Acts 15:10-11; Galatians 5:1), following Jesus and taking up His yoke was easy and light. The gospel of the kingdom brings freedom; the Pharisaical traditions brought bondage. Jesus gives rest for the soul but the Pharisees gave heavy burdens.

Matthew 12:1-2 follows this teaching of Jesus that contrasts His light yoke with the Pharisees’ yoke of heavy slavery with the story of the Pharisees criticizing the disciples for picking and eating grain on the Sabbath. This then is an immediate example of the burdens that the Pharisees put on the people of Israel, along with the growing desire by the Pharisees to oppose Jesus. This is the first time in Matthew that the Pharisees address Jesus directly (cf. Matthew 9:11, 34).

At issue was the “work” of the disciples in picking heads of grain on the Sabbath. The Pharisees obviously considered this act to be in violation of the commandment to “*Observe the sabbath day to keep it holy*” (Deuteronomy 5:12). But was this accusation true?

The Sabbath was a special commandment for the nation of Israel. It was specifically, the sign of the Mosaic covenant, “*So the sons of Israel shall observe the sabbath, to celebrate the sabbath throughout their generations as a perpetual covenant. It is a sign between Me and the sons of Israel forever; for in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, but on the seventh day He ceased from labor, and was refreshed*” (Exodus 31:16-17). This is similar to circumcision being the sign of the Abrahamic covenant (Genesis 17:10-11) and the Lord’s Supper being a sign of the New Covenant (1 Corinthians 11:25). To not keep the Sabbath holy was a serious charge and would render Jesus as unable to be the perfect, sinless sacrifice for our sin.

The Pharisees did not charge the disciples with wrongly stealing grain from someone else’s field. This practice of taking grain from another’s field was specifically permitted in the Law, “*When you enter your neighbor’s standing grain, then you may pluck the heads with your hand, but you shall not wield a sickle in your neighbor’s standing grain*” (Deuteronomy 23:25). The Law instructed portions of fields to be used in such a way, “*Now when you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very corners of your field, nor shall you gather the gleanings of your harvest*” (Leviticus 19:9).

Rather, the disciples were accused of violating the Sabbath by taking the grain. The Pharisees considered the picking heads of grain to be equivalent to the work of reaping a harvest. To eat the grain would also include threshing, or rubbing the husks together to separate the chaff from the grain, and winnowing, throwing the husks away (cf. Luke 6:1). The entire process was viewed as work by the Pharisees. As seen in Deuteronomy 23:25, plucking grain was different from harvesting grain with a sickle.

The Old Testament Law allows for the plucking of grain and does not address this as work that violates the commandment to keep the Sabbath holy. This was an extrapolation made by the Pharisees. This is at the heart of Phariseeism, that additional, man-made, provisions must be established in order to ensure the Jewish people would be protected from violating the Law.

The disciples of Jesus did not violate any Old Testament Law. They merely did what the Law actually provided for and the Law does not define this as breaking the Sabbath. The rabbinical traditions later in the Talmud would explicitly allow for what the disciples did (cf. B. *Bava Metsi'a* 92a). Therefore, this accusation by the Pharisees was unjust.

### **The argument from David about the bread (12:3-4)**

However, Jesus did not reply to the accusation by the Pharisees of breaking the Sabbath by addressing their interpretation of the Law. Rather, Jesus addressed them by using a rabbinical style of asking a question of their question. His purpose was not to examine their incorrect use of the Law, but instead was to make a more important point about Himself, namely that He, as the Son of David, should be given at least the same deference as David was. Just as David was being opposed by the leadership of Israel, now the Son of David was being opposed by the leadership of Israel.

Jesus begins His argument with the implicit perspective of the deficiency of the knowledge of the Scripture by stating, “*have you not read what David did when he was hungry.*” The story of David’s actions is found in 1 Samuel 21:1-6, where in fleeing Saul, he lies to the priest Ahimelech, resulting in all the priests of Nob being killed. This lie is not addressed by either the Old Testament or the Pharisees.

Jesus focused on the actions of David and his companions when they entered the tabernacle and ate the bread that only the priests had the right to eat. The Laws that govern the use of this consecrated bread are found in Exodus 25:30 and Leviticus 24:5-9. It is unclear if this Old Testament event happened on the Sabbath, but whether or not it did not diminish the point that Jesus made to the Pharisees.

David ate of the consecrated bread and was not condemned by either the Pharisees or the Old Testament, just as David also lied and was not condemned. If David and his companions were not condemned for doing what the Law prohibited, should not the disciples of Jesus not be condemned for doing what the Law actually allowed them to do?

Jesus’ argument was not that David was right in breaking the Law of God. Indeed, He directly states that David did that “*which was not lawful for him to eat nor for those with him, but for the priests alone.*” Jesus’ point was to compare their criticism of His disciples’ with their lack of criticism for David.

By comparing His disciples with David and his companions, Jesus is making the implicit point that He is greater than David and He, as the Son of God, is sovereign over all, including the Sabbath. Jesus will directly state His supremacy in the following verses, where He is greater than the temple and is the Lord of the Sabbath. If the Pharisees would recognize and appreciate who Jesus truly is, they would not have made this accusation.

Some have sought to use this passage in a manner that it was not intended and for what it does not say. This erroneous argument views the words of Jesus about David as allowing the commands of God to be set aside when there is a compelling reason to do so. In this case, the supposed compelling reason is hunger because both the disciples and the companions of David were hungry.

Certainly the disciples, and likely also the companions of David, were not near death in their hunger. Their hunger was more of an inconvenience. The text of Matthew 12:1-4 only states hunger as a reason for the desire to eat. It is not given as justification for David and his companions doing what was not lawful. The effect of this form of situational ethic is that the command of God becomes negated whenever someone believes they have a valid reason.

This approach to the Scripture is the essence of what the Pharisees did when Jesus said of them, "*and by this you invalidated the word of God for the sake of your tradition*" (Matthew 15:6). The Pharisees believed that they had a good reason to not help their father or mother because "*whatever I have that would help you has been given to God*" (Matthew 15:5), thus violating the commandment of God (Matthew 15:4).

Selfish people give lip service to the word of God until it calls them to do something that they think differently about. At times, general biblical principles such as "love" or "service" will be invoked in order to avoid a specific commandment of God. Our application of general principles must not lead us to sin against the expressed will of God.

In exceedingly rare circumstances, we could potentially encounter a situation where we believe that it is impossible to keep two competing expressed commandments of God. In such a case, other biblical principles can help us in making the best decision. However, it is highly unlikely that anyone will actually encounter such a dilemma. Normally, our temptation is driven by a desire to avoid some difficulty for ourselves by excusing our violation of the Lord's expressed will by unrighteously appealing to some compelling reason for our sin.

### **The argument from the priests about the temple (12:5-6)**

The second reason that Jesus used to defend His disciples from the false accusation of breaking the Law comes from the practice of the priests in their temple service. At issue was the work of the priests of changing the consecrated bread and the work of offering burnt offerings as specified by the Law (cf. Leviticus 24:8; Numbers 28:9-10). This would be a supposed violation of the Sabbath according to the interpretation of the Pharisees. This wrong understanding of the Law was addressed by Jesus when He said, *“have you not read in the Law...?”* The Pharisees should have understood this without Jesus explaining this to them.

Jesus states, *“that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple break the Sabbath and are innocent?”* He explicitly states that the priests are innocent because they only did what the Law instructed them to do. The Law that gave the Sabbath also gave the responsibility to the priests to do these tasks. Thus they did not violate the commandment to keep the Sabbath holy because it was possible to keep the Sabbath holy and do some activity on the Sabbath. This is an implicit criticism by Jesus regarding the misunderstanding of the traditions of the Pharisees regarding the Sabbath.

However, the point of emphasis was once again not the rightness of the act by certain Old Testament figures but rather who Jesus was. Jesus states this by saying, *“But I say to you that something greater than the temple is here.”* Just as the Messiah is greater than the greatest King ever, the Messiah is greater than the temple itself. Jesus would later say that *“something greater than Jonah is here”* (Matthew 12:41) and *“something greater than Solomon is here”* (Matthew 12:42).

The Pharisees were consumed with their interpretations of what constituted disobedience to the Law but overlooked the Lawgiver who now dwelt among them. The role of the temple and its sacrifices for sin would end with the perfect sacrifice of *“the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!”* (John 1:29). If Jesus is greater than the temple, then He is greater than the practices of the priests in the temple.

The Pharisees' accusations regarding the disciples of Jesus were inconsistent because they did not hold the priests to the same standards of obedience to their interpretations. Yet since Jesus is greater than even the temple and its authority over the Law regarding the priesthood, then Christ's disciples should likewise be not guilty like the priests since Jesus was greater than the temple.

## **The argument from the Scripture about the Sabbath (12:7-8)**

Once again, Jesus criticizes the Pharisees for their lack of understanding of the Scripture. This time He says they do not understand the meaning of Hosea 6:6, "*I DESIRE COMPASSION, AND NOT A SACRIFICE.*" Because they do not understand the Scripture, they condemn the innocent.

Jesus earlier had quoted this same verse from Hosea in response to the charge of the Pharisees that Jesus was eating with the tax collectors and sinners (Matthew 9:13). At that time, Jesus told them "*go and learn what this means: I DESIRE COMPASSION, AND NOT A SACRIFICE.*" Clearly, they failed to go and learn what Hosea 6:6 meant.

If they had understood that God desires compassion and not sacrifice, the Pharisees would have abandoned their system of condemnation that placed burdens on the Jewish people, who became "*weary and heavy-laden*" (Matthew 11:28). The Pharisees taught the Jews to sacrifice but neglected the more important aspects of the Old Testament. "*Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier provisions of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness; but these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others*" (Matthew 23:23).

The tradition of the Pharisees regarding the sacrifices of the Jewish people to the Old Testament was rooted in condemnation. They had erected their man-made regulations to protect the Jews from breaking the Law, and if these traditions were broken, their condemnation would follow. They were not humble and gentle, but were proud and judgmental. As a result, Jesus said they "*transgress the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition*" (Matthew 15:3).

God is often characterized as "*gracious and compassionate*" in the Old Testament (Exodus 34:6; Deuteronomy 4:31; 2 Chronicles 30:9; Nehemiah 9:17; Psalm 103:8; 111:4; 112:4; 116:5; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2). We should be compassionate because God is compassionate. "*So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty. For judgment will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment*" (James 2:12-13).

Not only were the Pharisees unrighteous in their judgment of the innocent, they were also quick to condemn. Condemnation should not characterize believers in Christ, for "*he who is forgiven little, loves little*" (Luke 7:47).

Jesus concludes by explaining why the disciples are innocent. The reason why the disciples of Jesus were innocent and should not have been condemned is given by Jesus in verse eight, *"For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath."* The Pharisees condemned the innocent because they failed to understand who Jesus really is. He is the *"Son of Man,"* a distinctly Messianic term, and He is *"Lord of the Sabbath."* Being Lord of the Sabbath equates Jesus with the One who gave the Sabbath, and thus the Law. *"There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the One who is able to save and to destroy; but who are you who judge your neighbor?"* (James 4:12).

The primary reason why the disciples were not guilty of breaking the Sabbath is because they were doing what the Lord of the Sabbath led them to do. Jesus is the authority over the Sabbath and if He approves of the behavior of His disciples, then no one can condemn them. It is secondary that they did not actually violate any specific Old Testament Law, but only the flawed interpretation of the Law by the Pharisees that erected their traditions over the Law itself. They were not the authority over the Sabbath, the Lord had authority over the Sabbath.

This concluding revelation by Jesus is consistent with each of the other arguments He made. Jesus is greater than David and if David and his companions were not condemned, neither should Jesus and His disciples be condemned. Jesus is greater than the temple and if the temple service by the priests did not break the Sabbath, then neither did the disciples of Jesus.

Because God is compassionate, we ought to be compassionate. Compassion was not descriptive of the Pharisees, and unfortunately is not descriptive of some professing believers today. When we understand that our Savior desires compassion, and not a sacrifice, we ought to be eager to practice the very compassion that He desires. *"For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him"* (John 3:17).

## **Conclusion**

Jesus possessed all authority (Matthew 11:27; 28:18). His authority was greater than that of King David, greater than the temple and greater than the authority the Sabbath had over the Jewish people. Jesus had the authority to end the temple sacrifice and end the whole Mosaic Law, including the Sabbath. As the perfect sacrifice, once for all, He ended the Old Testament system for all who believe in Him. *"For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes"* (Romans 10:4).